

# THE THORN AND THE CARNATION

PART I

YAHYA AL-SINWAR



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**Yahya Al-Sinwar**

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In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.

The Book and the Author

The Book: Clove Thorns The Author: Yahya Ibrahim Al-Sinwar

A Palestinian from a family that migrated from the city of Ashkelon in 1948 to the Gaza Strip.

- Born in 1962 in Khan Yunis Refugee Camp.
- Earned a Bachelor's degree in Arabic Language and Literature from the Islamic University of Gaza, and was among the pioneers of the Islamic Resistance in Palestine.
- Imprisoned in early 1988, sentenced to life imprisonment, and has remained a prisoner in the occupation's jails since that date.
- Wrote this novel, 'Clove Thorns,' blending his memories and the story of his people, encompassing their pains and hopes. He made it the story of every Palestinian and all Palestinians, in a dramatic work with real events and mostly fictional characters, with some based on real people.
- The novel addresses most of the key milestones in Palestinian history since the setback of 1967 up to the early stages of the blessed Al-Aqsa Intifada.
- This novel was written in the darkness of captivity in the occupation's prisons in Palestine. Dozens strived to copy it and attempt to hide it from the eyes and tainted hands of the torturers, exerting tremendous effort in doing so, working like ants to bring it into the light, to be accessible to readers and perhaps to be depicted on screens, presenting a true picture of the reality in the Land of Isra.

## Author's Preface

This is not my personal story, nor is it the story of any particular individual, although all its events are real. Each event, or each set of events, pertains to this or that Palestinian. The only fiction in this work is its transformation into a novel revolving around specific characters, to fulfill the form and requirements of a novelistic work. Everything else is real; I have lived it, and much of it I have heard from the mouths of those who themselves, their families, and their neighbors have experienced it over decades on the beloved land of Palestine.

I dedicate this to those whose hearts cling to the land of Isra and Mi'raj, from the ocean to the Gulf, indeed, from ocean to ocean.

Yahya Ibrahim Al-Sinwar

Beersheba Prison, 2004

# Chapter One

The winter of 1967 was heavy, refusing to depart and competing with the spring trying to peek through with its bright, warm sun. The winter fought back with clouds gathering in the sky, and then the rain poured down heavily, flooding the simple homes in Al-Shati refugee camp in Gaza City. Streams ran through the camp's alleys, invading the homes and crowding the residents in their small rooms with floors lower than the nearby street level.

Time and again, the winter floodwaters surged into our small home's courtyard and then inside the house where our family had been living since settling down after migrating from the town of Faluja in the Occupied Territories in 1948. Each time, fear gripped me and my three brothers and sister, who were all older than me. My father and mother would rush to lift us off the ground, and my mother would hurriedly raise the bedding before the invading waters soaked it. Being the youngest, I would cling to my mother's neck alongside my infant sister, who was usually in her arms in such situations.

Often, I woke up at night to my mother's hands shifting me aside to place an aluminum pot or a large clay dish on her bed to catch the water droplets seeping through the crack in the tiled roof covering that small room. A pot here, a clay dish there, and a third container somewhere else. I would try to sleep again, sometimes succeeding, only to be awakened by the sound of water droplets hitting the accumulated water in that container rhythmically. When the container was full or nearly full, the water would splash around with each drop. My mother would then get up to replace the full container with a new one and go outside to empty it.

I was five years old, and on a morning during winter, when the spring sun was trying to reclaim its natural place and erase the traces of the winter's dark nightly assault on the camp, my seven-year-old brother, Mohammed, took my hand, and we walked through the camp's streets to its outskirts where an Egyptian army camp was stationed.

The Egyptian soldiers at that camp were very fond of us. One of them got to know us and called us by our names. Whenever we appeared, he would

shout, "Mohammed, Ahmad... come here..." So we would go to him and stand beside him, lowering our heads in anticipation of what he usually gave us. He would reach into the pocket of his military pants and pull out a piece of pistachio candy for each of us. We would grab our pieces and start devouring them eagerly. The soldier would pat our shoulders, stroke our heads, and tell us to go back home. Then we would start dragging our feet back through the camp's alleyways.

Winter eventually left after a long stay and severity, and the weather began to warm up wonderfully. The rain no longer ambushed us with its calamities. I thought a long time had passed since the wait for winter, and that it wouldn't return soon. However, I sensed an atmosphere of anxiety and confusion around me. Everyone at home was in a much worse state than those rainy nights. I couldn't comprehend what was happening, but it wasn't normal, not even on winter nights. My mother was filling all her containers with water and placing them in the courtyard. My father borrowed a pickaxe (Torriya) from the neighbors and began digging a large, long hole in the yard in front of our house, with some help from my brother Mahmoud, who was twelve at the time.

After they finished preparing the hole, my father started placing pieces of wood on it and then began covering it with zinc sheets that used to cover part of the courtyard like an arbor. I realized my father was in a quandary as he started looking for something and then I saw him begin to dismantle the kitchen door to cover that hole. But then I saw my mother and Mahmoud descending into the hole through an opening that hadn't yet been sealed. That's when I understood the work was finished. I dared to approach that opening and peered into the hole, finding what looked like a dark room underground. I didn't understand anything, but it was clear we were expecting something difficult and unusual, seemingly much harsher than those stormy rainy nights.

No one held my hand again to take me to the nearby Egyptian army camp for a bit of pistachio candy. My brother repeatedly refused to do so, a significant change for me and Mohammed, which I couldn't understand. Hassan, too, didn't know our secret. Perhaps he did, but he wasn't part of it. I didn't know why he hadn't joined us yesterday. However, my cousin

Ibrahim, who was about my age and lived in the house next door, was aware of the matter.

When Mohammed refused to go and take me with him, I went to my uncle's house to be with Ibrahim. I pushed the door open and entered the room where my uncle, whose facial features I could never recall, was sitting with a rifle in his hand, fixing it. I thought to myself that maybe I could do something similar with it. The rifle caught my attention, and I focused on it the entire time.

My uncle called me over and seated me beside him, placing the rifle on my hands. He started talking to me about it in a way I couldn't understand, then he patted my head and ushered me out of the room. I took Ibrahim with me, and we left the house, heading towards the outskirts of the camp to go to the nearby Egyptian army camp.

When we arrived, everything had changed. The soldier who used to wait for us and welcome us was not there. The situation was abnormal, as the Egyptian soldiers usually greeted us warmly. They yelled at us to go away and return to our mothers, so we turned back, dragging our disappointment behind us, having not received our share of the pistachio candy. I couldn't understand the changes that had occurred. The next day, my mother took some bedding from the house and laid it in the hole. She moved a couple of jugs of water and some food there, taking all of us down into the hole and sitting us there. Then my uncle's wife and her children, Hassan and Ibrahim, joined us. I was annoyed by the cramped space we were squeezed into without a reason I could comprehend. We had left our house, its rooms, courtyard, and the neighborhood streets to be placed here against our will. Every time I tried to leave or rush towards the opening, my mother would pull me back and seat me in my place. Occasionally, she would give me a piece of bread and a few olives.

As the sun began to set and the daylight faded, darkness grew in the hole we were sheltered in, and fear crept into our young hearts. We started to cry and push to get out, but my mother and uncle stopped us. They yelled, "Children, it's war out there! Don't you know what war means?" At that moment, I didn't know the meaning of war, but I understood it was something terrifyingly abnormal, dark, and suffocating.

Our attempts to leave and their efforts to stop us continued, and our cries grew louder, but their attempts to calm us were futile. Then Mahmoud said, "Should I bring the lamp, mother, to light it up?" ("Yama, should I get the light to turn it on?") She replied, "Yes, Mahmoud," but as he rushed to leave the trench, my mother's hand reached out to grab him, stopping him from leaving, saying, "Don't go out, Mahmoud" ("Don't go out, Yama").

My mother sat Mahmoud down and then went out to return with a kerosene lamp. She lit it, illuminating our space, bringing a sense of calm and tranquility. Overwhelmed by sleep, just like my siblings and cousins, I dozed off. My mother and my uncle's wife fought against sleep, but it overtook them. The next day was unremarkable; we spent almost the entire day in the trench. Our neighbor, teacher Aisha, constantly listened to the radio, making sure to stay close to the trench opening so the radio could receive transmission signals. She updated my mother and uncle's wife with the latest news, increasing the atmosphere of depression and sadness, reflecting on my mother and uncle's wife's ability to cater to our needs. Their hands seemed heavier on us as they asked for silence. The fiery statements from "Ahmed Said," the commentator on Voice of the Arabs from Cairo, about throwing the Jews into the sea and threats to the state of Israel, began to weaken and fade. In contrast, our dreams of returning to our homelands from which we were exiled began to crumble like the sand castles we used to build as children in the neighborhood. Our greatest wish was to return to the area we came from, for my uncle, who was enlisted in the Palestine Liberation Army, to return safely to his family, and for my father, who had left with the popular resistance, to return safely to us. With each new news bulletin that Mrs. Aisha listened to, the gloom and tension increased, leading to more prayers and hands raised to the sky, asking for safety and the return of my father and uncle. The sounds of explosions grew louder, closer, and more intense. My mother would occasionally leave the trench for a few minutes inside the house and then return with something for us to eat, cover ourselves with, or to reassure my uncle's wife about the fate of my grandfather, who insisted on staying in his room in the house, refusing to join us in the trench.

Initially, my grandfather hoped to return soon to our house and fields in Faluja, believing that the danger would be to the Jews who would be

crushed by the Arab armies. But after the new equation of the battle became clear, not in our favor as Arabs, he refused to descend into the trench, seeing no taste or value in life anymore. He wondered how long we would continue to hide and flee from our fate. "Death and life have become the same," he said.

Darkness fell again, and we sank into sleep, intermittently woken by increasingly loud explosions. The next morning, the explosions grew even louder. That day, nothing significant happened except for one incident: a large crowd of people surged in, shouting, "Spy! Spy!"

It was evident that the people were chasing the alleged spy, who had something like a wheeled vehicle or similar, and they believed he was somehow connected to the Jews. The explosions increased in frequency and intensity, getting closer and clearly starting to hit the western houses. With each new explosion, our terror and screams increased, despite attempts to calm us down. Every now and then, Aisha would approach the trench opening to listen to the news and inform my mother and uncle's wife of the latest updates. After several days like this, my mother could no longer go out to the house like she did in the first two days. Aisha listened to a news bulletin, and as she heard the news, she started crying and wailing. She collapsed, muttering that the Jews had occupied the country. A moment of silence ensued, broken by my little sister Mariam's scream of pain at what was happening, followed by our collective crying, echoing our mothers' tears.

The sound of bombing and explosions stopped, and we heard only occasional gunfire. As evening approached, the noise ceased, and silence prevailed. In the evening, the neighbors' voices grew louder as they began to emerge from the trenches where they had been hiding or from their homes where they had stayed all this time. Aisha went out to investigate and came back shortly, saying, "The war is over... come out..." My mother and uncle's wife came out first, then called us to join them. For the first time in days, we breathed fresh air, though it was tinged with the smell of gunpowder and the dust of nearby demolished houses. I managed to look around before my mother pulled me into the house, seeing the devastation all around us, with many of the neighbors' homes affected by the shelling.

Our house was fine, unharmed. Inside, my grandfather welcomed us, embracing and kissing each of us, muttering thanks to God for our safety and praying for the safe return of our fathers.

My uncle's wife and her children spent that night with us. My father and uncle did not return that night, and it seemed it would be a long time before they did. With the morning, life began to stir in the camp's alleys. Everyone was looking for their children, relatives, and neighbors to check on them and thank God for their safety, and to find out the fate of those whose homes had been hit and destroyed or partially damaged.

There were limited cases of death in the neighborhood since most people had fled to the beach, nearby orchards, or open spaces, or had taken refuge in the trenches they had dug. The occupation forces faced fierce resistance in one of the areas and withdrew, but soon after, a group of tanks and military jeeps waving Egyptian flags appeared. The resistance fighters, hopeful of support, emerged from their hiding places, firing into the air in celebration and gathered to welcome them. As the convoy approached, it opened heavy fire on the resistance fighters, killing many, and then raised the Israeli flag instead of the Egyptian flags on the tanks and vehicles.

People swarmed the nearby schools, which had been Egyptian army camps before the war, scavenging what remained. Some carried chairs, others tables, a third a bag of grains, a fourth kitchen utensils, and so on, rather than leaving these for the occupation soldiers. Some people, caught up in the chaos, looted nearby shops, taking goods and merchandise. Others focused on weapons and ammunition left in the camps. This state of chaos lasted several days, with everyone engrossed in their own concerns and interests. Just before noon one day, distant voices over loudspeakers in broken Arabic announced a curfew, warning that anyone leaving their home risked death. People began to stay indoors as military jeeps with loudspeakers circulated, announcing this and then ordering all men over 18 to gather at the nearby school, warning that anyone who disobeyed risked death.

My father and uncle had not returned, and my older brother Mahmoud was younger than 18. When my grandfather went out to head to the school, a soldier shouted at him to return home after seeing his old age and frailty, so

he left, confused and troubled. Soon after, large groups of occupation soldiers, armed with rifles, began storming the houses one by one, searching for men who had not gone to the school. When they found some, they shot them without hesitation.

The men of the neighborhood gathered in the nearby school where the soldiers seated them on the ground in tightly packed rows, with the soldiers surrounding them, rifles aimed at them. After all the men were assembled, a military jeep with a covered back arrived. A man in civilian clothes, clearly part of the occupation forces as the soldiers obeyed him noticeably, stepped out. He started ordering the men to stand up one by one and walk past the recently arrived jeep. As the men complied, a soldier signaled them to move. Occasionally, a horn (the "zamour") would sound as a man passed, and the soldiers would violently grab and drag him to a more heavily guarded area behind the school.

It became clear that those who caused the horn to sound were identified as dangerous and were thus seized. This process continued until the last man had passed. Those who passed without the horn sounding were seated on the other side of the courtyard.

When the task was complete, the man in civilian clothes, who introduced himself as "Abu Al-Deeb," an Israeli intelligence officer responsible for the area, addressed the seated men in heavily accented but understandable Arabic. He spoke at length about the new reality following the Arab defeat, expressing his desire for calm and order. He warned that anyone disrupting security would face execution or imprisonment, and he invited anyone needing services from the Israeli Defense Army to approach his office. After he finished speaking, he instructed the men to leave one by one, calmly and without chaos. The men began to leave the school for their homes, each feeling as if they had escaped certain death. About a hundred men from the neighborhood had been separated out by the soldiers.

The officer moved with the jeep he had arrived in to the courtyard where the selected men were gathered. He ordered them to stand up one by one and pass in front of the jeep again. Each time the horn sounded, the passing man was seized again and made to stand near a nearby wall, facing it, while the others sat at the edge of the courtyard.

Fifteen men were chosen from this group and lined up against the wall. The officer ordered several soldiers to aim their rifles at these men. The soldiers, kneeling, fired at them, causing them to fall in agony. The remaining men, sweating profusely, had their hands tied behind their backs, and their eyes blindfolded. They were then loaded onto a bus that headed towards the Egyptian border. The soldiers accompanying them ordered them to cross the border into Egypt, warning that anyone who hesitated or looked back would be shot to death.

## Chapter Two

Days passed, and there was no return or news of my father and uncle. My grandfather, mother, and uncle's wife left no stone unturned, asking everyone they could about them, to no avail. Our concern was shared by many neighbors, as many from the Palestine Liberation Army and the popular resistance were missing. The entire neighborhood, like other areas in the West Bank and Gaza, was in a state of despair, frustration, and chaos, with people unsure of what to do.

Every morning, my grandfather would take his cane and go out searching for his sons, asking everyone he met about them, until exhaustion overtook him. My mother and uncle's wife, who hadn't left our house since the end of the war, would sit near the door, anxiously waiting for any new information, their fears and anxieties over their husbands' unknown fate consuming them. My siblings, cousins, and I understood the situation well, but I was too young to fully comprehend what was happening around me. My mother and uncle's wife, preoccupied with their worries, paid us less attention, leaving my elder sister Fatima to provide us with food and ensure some necessary cleanliness.

One evening, as the sun set, the time for my grandfather's return from his daily search drew near. My mother opened the door, looking down the street for his arrival. Soon, my grandfather appeared, leaning heavily on his cane, barely able to carry himself, dragging his feet in a way that suggested the news he bore weighed heavily on him. My mother cried out to my elder brother Mahmoud to run and help him. Mahmoud rushed over and saw our grandfather's face covered in tears. Despite Mahmoud's attempts to coax words from him, our grandfather remained silent until they reached the door. Leaning against the wall, his legs no longer able to support him, he began to collapse as he stepped inside. My mother and uncle's wife rushed to catch him, anxiously asking him about the news. He was unable to speak or even move. Everyone in the house gathered around him as they helped him to his bed, waiting for any word that might escape his lips.

My mother gave my grandfather a clay jug, which he struggled to hold and lift. She helped him drink a few sips of water. His gaze focused more on my

uncle's wife, indicating that the news he had concerned my uncle rather than my father. The anxiety of my uncle's wife increased as she pleaded to know what had happened. When my grandfather's tears burst forth as he tried to compose himself, my uncle's wife understood what he couldn't say and screamed, asking if Mahmoud had died. My grandfather nodded confirmation, causing her wailing and screaming to intensify as she began to pull her hair out. My mother also started crying, but tried to console her as she repeated, "Mahmoud is dead." The children, including my cousins and siblings, wept while I stood frozen, not fully understanding what was happening. The sound of knocking at the door broke the heavy silence. Mahmoud went to see who it was and found a group of neighbors who had heard the crying and came to share in the sorrow. The room filled with people, their cries and wails echoing around.

As days passed, there was no news about the fate of my father. The last anyone had seen him, he was alive when the Jews occupied the city, withdrawing southward with a group of popular resistance fighters. After mourning my uncle, my grandfather resumed his search for news about my father's fate. With time, he came to the realization that all he could do was wait, losing hope of receiving any new information. The news, if any, would come on its own. Life had to move on, and everyone had to adapt to the new reality. Schools reopened, and my siblings, cousin, and I returned to school. My mother and uncle's wife would get us ready in the mornings. I stayed home with my infant sister and cousin Ibrahim. During the day, my grandfather would leave the house and sometimes return with a few vegetables, like tomatoes, a bunch of spinach, some potatoes, or eggplants, which my mother or uncle's wife would cook for our return from school.

Every morning, my mother or uncle's wife would carry clay water jugs and an iron water heater to line them up in a queue of similar items in front of the water tap installed by the relief agency in the neighborhood square. The water flowed for two or three hours a day, and those who reached their turn filled their containers; those who didn't had to wait until the next day or borrow some water from neighbors. Often, one of the neighbors who missed waking up early to place her container at the front of the line would try to steal a spot ahead of others, leading to arguments and physical altercations, sometimes even resulting in broken clay jugs. Near the tap,

the ground was covered with a layer of broken clay. When my brothers and the neighbor's children returned from school, they would play a game called "Seven Pieces" using pieces of broken pottery from the tap area. They would prepare seven circular pieces of varying sizes, placing the largest at the bottom and the smallest at the top. Using a cloth ball made from old socks obtained from the relief agency's biannual clothing distribution, the children split into two teams. One player would try to knock over the pottery stack from a distance. If they succeeded, the team members would run while a player from the opposing team, standing by the stack, tried to hit them with the ball. If they missed, they would wait for their team members to retrieve the ball, while the opponents attempted to restack the pottery. If they succeeded, they continued playing; if they failed, they fled to avoid being hit by the ball as it returned to the play area.

The girls, meanwhile, played a game called "Hojala," using a smooth piece of tile or stone and drawing three consecutive squares on the ground, each about a meter in length and width, with a circle at the top of the third square.

Every morning, my mother or uncle's wife would take the clay water jars and an iron water heater to join the queue in front of the water tap set up by the relief agency in the neighborhood square. The water flowed for a couple of hours each day, and those who got their turn filled their containers. If someone missed their turn, they had to wait till the next day or borrow water from neighbors. Often, a neighbor who missed waking up early to secure a spot in the line would try to sneak her container to the front, leading to arguments and physical altercations, sometimes even resulting in broken clay jugs. Near the tap, the ground was littered with shards of broken pottery. When my brothers and the neighbor's children returned from school, they played a game called "Seven Pieces" with pieces of pottery from the tap area. They made seven circular pieces of varying sizes, stacking them and trying to knock them down with a cloth ball. If successful, they would run while others tried to hit them with the ball.

Girls played a game called "Hojala," where they tossed a smooth stone into a square and hopped into it on one foot, moving the stone through

subsequent squares and a circle drawn on the ground. If they stepped on a line or fell, their turn ended.

Sometimes, boys played "Arabs and Jews," dividing into two teams and pretending to shoot each other with wooden sticks. Disputes often arose over who "shot" first, but usually, the stronger boys determined the team members and ensured the "Arab" team's victory. Once a month, my grandfather went to the relief center to collect supplies for our family and my uncle's family. He returned in the afternoon, followed by a cart pulled by a donkey, loaded with flour, cooking oil, and small bags of legumes. The neighborhood children would excitedly climb onto the cart until the driver shooed them away.

My mother occasionally took my infant sister, Mariam, to the relief agency's clinic at the edge of the camp for check-ups and weighing at the child and maternal care department. Many women gathered there with their children for examinations, sitting on long wooden benches or the floor, engaging in conversation.

Every woman at the clinic would share her problems and complaints with others, finding solace in realizing that their troubles were not less significant than hers. I often accompanied my mother on these visits to the clinic. Outside, street vendors would sell sweets to earn a living. I would tug at my mother's dress, pleading for her to buy me a piece of "namoura." Despite our financial constraints due to my father's absence and my grandfather's inability to work, our financial situation was relatively stable compared to other neighbors. I sometimes saw my mother with some money, although I didn't know its exact source. I remembered seeing gold bracelets on her wrists before the war, but never saw them again afterward. My uncle Saleh, who had a textile factory with a few machines he had brought from Egypt before the occupation, would visit us occasionally. He would give my mother some money and distribute coins to us and my cousins, enabling us to buy sweets from "Abu Jaber's" nearby store. His factory continued to operate after the occupation, producing fabric sold in the sector and later in the south of the West Bank. His financial support was crucial for our family.

My mother tried to refuse his money, but he would insist, arguing that if he didn't help, who would? She would eventually accept it, tears streaming

down her face as he gently chided her for crying every time.

My uncle's wife and children practically lived with us, sharing our meals and water. My grandfather asked my brother Mahmoud and cousin Hassan to demolish part of the wall separating our house from my uncle's, making it one large shared space while maintaining some privacy. My uncle's wife's family, despite their difficult situation, pressured her to remarry, arguing that since her husband had passed away, there was no reason for her to remain single. She resisted, fearing for her children's future, but they tried to convince her that her father-in-law and our family would care for them. They argued that she was still young with a future ahead and should not forgo the opportunity to remarry.

As time and years passed, our days and months continued in their course. During one of his visits, my uncle tried to give my mother some money, but she firmly refused to take it. Despite his efforts, he couldn't persuade her. Eventually, he convinced her by saying he didn't want to hire a new worker for cleaning and arranging tasks in his factory. Instead, he wanted to employ Mahmoud and Hassan, now young men, to work in the factory after school. He suggested that this money was an advance on their monthly wages. My mother agreed on the condition that they start working the following day. Mahmoud and Hassan began shouldering the responsibility of supporting the family. They would return from school at noon, leave their school bags, have lunch with the rest of us, and then head to the factory. My mother would give them long lectures on how to conduct themselves, work diligently, and keep the place clean. She would see them off and welcome them back in the evening like conquering heroes. My uncle continued to give my mother the same amount of money as before, as if it were the wages for Mahmoud and Hassan's work at his factory, where they didn't do much.

I often woke up at dawn to the sound of my grandfather making his usual supplications during his ablutions. I enjoyed listening to his sweet prayers and his recitation of Al-Fatiha and other verses from the Quran during the Fajr prayer. Over time, I almost memorized his supplications. My grandfather couldn't perform the Fajr prayer at the mosque due to the curfew still in effect at that time. Anyone caught outside risked being shot

by the occupation patrols roaming or lurking around the camp. The curfew was enforced daily from 7 PM to 5 AM. My grandfather usually performed the other prayers at the mosque unless prevented by urgent matters, such as fetching supplies or on days when the curfew was extended.

The mosque in our camp resembled a large room with a corrugated iron roof, a few windows, and a small minaret with stone steps leading up to it, where the muezzin would call to prayer. At the mosque's entrance, there was one restroom and several clay pitchers for ablution and drinking. The mosque's floor was covered with old and almost worn-out mats, and at the front, there was a small wooden pulpit with a few steps.

My grandfather often took me to the mosque before the noon prayer. Despite his slow pace and advanced age, over 70 years, I had to run to keep up with him. We would pray together before the call to prayer, and I would mimic his actions as best I could. Sheikh Hamed would check his watch before ascending the minaret to call to prayer, his voice resonating beautifully, which I found delightful.

After Sheikh Hamed finished the call, we would perform the Sunnah prayer. Only a few elderly men from the camp would join us for the Dhuhr prayer, with just me and one or two other children brought by their grandparents. It seemed my grandfather and mother had resigned themselves to the unknown fate of my father, mentioning him less frequently and realizing they had no choice but to wait.

The only significant change in our house was that my uncle's wife was compelled by her family to remarry, which wasn't easy. She would spend nights with her new husband, and my mother dutifully cared for them as she did for everyone else in our family. Though this couldn't replace the loss of a father and mother, it did provide some relief. The days continued to pass, with my grandfather performing his morning ablutions and prayers, and my mother waking up my siblings, cousins, and me for school.

My grandfather would go to the market, and my mother would start tidying up the house. I would sit beside my infant sister Mariam, fearing she might wake up and cry while my mother was busy. My grandfather would return

alone, and later my siblings and cousins would come back from school. My mother would then prepare lunch for us, which we would eat together.

Then, my mother would begin her usual admonitions to my brothers Mahmoud and Hassan before bidding them farewell at the doorstep as they headed to work at my uncle's factory. Meanwhile, we would go out to play 'Arabs and Jews' or 'Seven Tiles,' and the girls would play 'Hojala' until the evening approached, and Mahmoud and Hassan would return from the factory. Life continued in this routine manner without much change.

One evening, Mahmoud and Hassan didn't return from the factory as usual. They were late and arrived with my uncle Saleh. As usual, we gathered around him; he greeted each of us warmly and handed out some coins. Then he started talking to my mother about my aunt Fathiya. She had received a marriage proposal from a group of fabric traders from a small town in the Hebron district of the West Bank, known to my uncle. My mother said the decision was his, and as long as Fathiya and he were happy with the arrangement, it was blessed. My mother then left us with my uncle, who inquired about our schooling and other matters.

After a while, my mother returned with a pot of tea, which we shared with my uncle before he left. My mother tried to persuade him to stay overnight, but he declined, saying he needed to be home with his daughters. My mother prayed for his well-being as he left, promising to inform the group about the acceptance and notify us when they planned to visit for the proposal.

The next morning, after my grandfather had finished his prayers, we heard the announcements from military jeeps declaring a curfew until further notice, warning that anyone who violated it risked death. My mother told us that there would be no school that day and forbade us from leaving the house. We stayed indoors all day, and my mother would scold anyone who even approached the door, threatening to punish them if they tried to open it.

We heard the announcement repeatedly: "Curfew in effect." My siblings and cousins had to play inside the house, and on that day, my mother prepared 'bissara' for lunch, a dish made from crushed beans and dried

mallow. My siblings, cousins, and I sat studying in our schoolbooks while I looked on, flipping through their books. In the evening, we heard the loudspeakers again, reiterating the curfew and warning that anyone who disobeyed would be putting themselves in danger.

The next morning, shortly after my grandfather's prayers and supplications, the loudspeakers announced the end of the curfew from 5 AM. My mother woke everyone up and prepared them for school, and things went on as usual.

The new information that day was the reason behind the previous day's curfew. Someone had thrown a hand grenade at a patrol of the occupying forces. The explosion injured the soldiers in the jeep, who then began firing randomly at people, resulting in numerous injuries.

## Chapter Three

On Friday, my mother dressed us in the best clothes we had, which she had re-tailored from the items we received in our [UNRWA] aid package, in preparation for visiting my uncle's house to congratulate my aunt Fathiya on her upcoming engagement. We, the seven of us, accompanied her on a long walk beyond the camp boundaries, passing by the main roads patrolled by military and civilian jeeps carrying soldiers brandishing their guns at passersby. The walk was lengthy, but eventually, we reached Uncle Saleh's house, which was much better than ours – not roofed with tiles like our house, but with concrete, and its floors were tiled and electrified.

Mahmoud, my brother, knocked on the door, and it was opened by my cousin 'Warda,' who immediately recognized us and welcomed us warmly. Inside, Uncle Saleh, Aunt Fathiya, his wife, and their other daughter 'Suad' greeted us in the hallway.

Aunt Fathiya greeted and kissed each of us. My mother and siblings congratulated her on her engagement. As the adults conversed, we played and ran around. Before evening, we returned home. A few days later, after Mahmoud and Hassan returned from work, they informed my mother that Uncle Saleh had told them the group would come for Aunt Fathiya's marriage contract signing the next Friday.

Once again, my mother prepared us as she did the previous Friday. In the afternoon, we went to Uncle Saleh's house. Three cars arrived, carrying men and women. The guests entered the house, and everyone whispered about a young, fair-skinned man with a light mustache, the groom. The men sat in the living room with a red-turbaned sheikh in the middle, while the women gathered in another room. We kids were too busy playing, running around the rooms and outside, hanging around the cars. The men were occupied with the sheikh finalizing the marriage contract, and the women were busy with the bride, Aunt Fathiya. Unforgettably, we ate a lot of baklava that day, to the point where my mother worried we might get sick. They agreed to take the bride away.

Around a month later, in the deep darkness of the night, silence and stillness blanketed the impoverished homes of the camp. The only sounds were the

distant barking of a dog or the meowing of a cat searching for its kitten, which a boy had probably taken to raise in their home, hoping it would catch the mice that disturbed the family's peace. Despite the prevailing curfew and the potential dangers, Abu Hatem moved stealthily through the camp's narrow, intertwined alleys with the agility and quiet of a cat. At every new corner, he paused, cautiously looking out for any lurking or moving enemies. Once assured of the area's safety, he continued his smooth journey.

Abu Hatem, a tall, well-built man, covered his head with a keffiyeh, wrapping it around his face so that only his eyes were visible. He had been a sergeant in the Palestine Liberation Army during Egyptian rule in the Gaza Strip and had fought valiantly in the 1967 war. But what could he and a few brave souls do in an overwhelmingly losing battle? Abu Hatem knew his way around the camp streets. He paused briefly to inspect his surroundings, then headed towards a window of a house, tapping gently on the window frame - three taps, then one, followed by two. This was indeed real.

Abu Yusuf, standing by the window, whispered barely audibly, "Who's there?" Abu Hatem's voice whispered back, "It's Abu Hatem." Abu Yusuf muttered in disbelief, "It can't be (mish ma'qool)." But the reply came, "It's true, Abu Yusuf, it's true." "I'll open the door for you," Abu Yusuf murmured. Abu Hatem slipped inside as Abu Yusuf closed the door. They embraced each other warmly, with Abu Yusuf muttering, "It's unbelievable. Thank God you're safe, Abu Hatem."

Umm Yusuf, who had woken up and covered her head, came out of the room. She too approached, whispering her gratitude for Abu Hatem's safety, "Thank God you're safe, Abu Hatem. Please, come in." Abu Yusuf and Abu Hatem entered the room, and as Umm Yusuf started heading to the kitchen, Abu Hatem said, "Don't prepare any food, tea, or light the stove." Umm Yusuf turned in surprise, asking, "What's the matter, Abu Hatem? You've come to the house of the destitute?!" Abu Hatem smiled and whispered, "Bless you and your generosity, but I'm not hungry, and I don't want the sound of the stove to be heard (bless you and your kindness).

Umm Yusuf turned around and whispered, "Alright, I'll bring some bread and olives." Abu Hatem smiled and whispered back, "Okay, I know you wouldn't let me leave without eating something. That's fine, Umm Yusuf." Abu Yusuf

kept smiling as Abu Hatem and he began to whisper to each other. Abu Yusuf asked, "Where have you been? I thought you were either martyred or had gone to Egypt." Abu Hatem explained that he had been injured in the clashes near the central camps and managed to crawl to a vehicle where a Bedouin family found him. They treated his wounds, fed him, and kept him hidden until he recovered.

Umm Yusuf entered the room, whispering a greeting, which they returned. She placed a straw plate with a few loaves of bread and a dish of olives, alongside a clay water jug, then left the room to sit in the children's room by the kerosene lamp's light. It lit up the small, tile-roofed room as Abu Hatem and Abu Yusuf continued their hushed conversation, each putting his mouth close to the other's ear and then switching positions. Abu Yusuf asked, "Are any of the young men still alive?" Abu Hatem replied, "Yes, many are. I've personally seen Abu Maher in Khan Yunis, Abu Saqr in Rafah, and Abu Jihad in the central camps. We've agreed to resume the resistance anew."

Abu Yusuf, leaning closer, asked about "Al-Mukhtar". Abu Hatem whispered back that he had heard Al-Mukhtar was still alive, moving around the orchards east of Shuja'iyya and Zeitoun. He was trying to find him and might succeed in a few days. "The important thing," Abu Hatem said, "is that we must begin organizing our efforts so that resistance can simultaneously start in all areas of the Strip. The country is fine, Abu Yusuf. The youth are ready and waiting; they just need someone to arrange things and ignite the spark. We must all meet and plan our actions. Next Friday morning, 'Saleh Al-Mahmoud' will marry off his sister. The groom will take her to Hebron, leaving their house empty at night. I've arranged with Saleh to leave the key under the doorstep. A group of young men will gather there to plan our actions, and God willing, we'll start working as soon as possible. You know Saleh's house. We'll meet there next Friday after the evening prayer. Anyone who's delayed should knock on the window with the same taps."

During this, Abu Hatem had eaten a few bites of bread, each with an olive, insistently sucking on the pits in a way that showed his love for the house's owner and his longing for Umm Yusuf's food.

On Friday morning, we dressed in our best clothes and set off to Uncle Saleh's house. Despite our early arrival, we found his home bustling with

people and preparations for the wedding. We, the children, got busy playing, while my sisters and other girls engaged in drumming, singing, and dancing. Mahmoud and Hassan busied themselves arranging chairs and sprinkling water on the courtyard ground to keep the dust down. My mother, along with Uncle Saleh's wife and other women, were preoccupied with preparing the bride and arranging her suitcase of clothes. Uncle Saleh was running around, trying to manage a thousand tasks at once.

Soon after, several cars and a bus carrying the groom's family arrived. The vehicles stopped, and out stepped my aunt Fathiya's groom, Abdul-Fattah. The drumming and famous singing, but in a West Bank dialect, began as they approached the house. Uncle Saleh and a group of men came out to welcome them, with men greeting men and women greeting women warmly. The women entered the living room, while the men sat in the yard. Baklava was served on plates, with Mahmoud being the most active distributor. Red drinks were offered to the guests, and the sound of drumming and women singing echoed throughout. This went on for about an hour, with Uncle Saleh constantly talking to the groom and his father.

Then, Uncle Saleh went inside to get ready. The groom and his father stood at the door, and as the drumming and singing continued, Uncle Saleh reappeared, holding Aunt Fathiya by the arm. She was dressed in a white suit and veil, looking more beautiful than ever. They slowly walked to the door, where the groom took her arm, amidst the women's ululations. The couple walked towards one of the decorated cars, followed by everyone else. My mother stayed close to Uncle Saleh and his wife. The couple got into the car, and the rest of us, including the women, boarded the cars and the bus. My mother, looking for Mahmoud, shouted for him to return home with his siblings and stay with our grandfather. She would take his siblings with her and return the next day. Everything was ready at home, and she instructed Mahmoud to take care of our grandfather and cousins, lock the door before the curfew, and not open it until sunrise. Mahmoud nodded, understanding his role, as usual. Fatima was holding baby Mariam. My mother, Uncle Saleh's wife, my sisters, and his daughters got into one of the cars. Mahmoud then gathered us near our grandfather, who stood leaning on his cane.

After everyone had boarded the cars and Uncle Saleh and the groom's father had organized things, Uncle Saleh excused himself to go back and lock the house, asking them to wait a little. He hurried back to the house, took a bag from the kitchen, placed it in the guest room, and then locked the front door. He dropped something from his hand, bent down to pick it up, and secretly placed the house key under the doorstep before joining everyone in the car and driving off. The sounds of drumming and singing continued until they faded into the distance, and we returned home with our grandfather.

We arrived just before sunset, exhausted from a day filled with play, food, and joy. Mahmoud securely locked the door, and we fell into a deep sleep. The night enveloped Gaza in its dark curtain, and the streets were silent except for the occasional distant dog barking or a cat meowing, searching for its kitten snatched away by a child to be raised at home, hoping it would grow to catch the rats that troubled the family. Despite the curfew and the dangers posed by patrolling occupation forces, Abu Hatem skillfully navigated through the camp's narrow, tangled alleys. He was a tall, agile man, with his face mostly covered by a keffiyeh, revealing only his eyes. A sergeant in the Palestine Liberation Army during the Egyptian rule in the Gaza Strip, he had fought bravely in the '67 war.

That Friday, Abu Hatem and six other men quietly entered Uncle Saleh's house, retrieving the key hidden under the doorstep. They didn't turn on any lights until everyone was inside and the curtains and blankets were secured over the windows to prevent any light from escaping. Inside, they found the bag of food and sweets Uncle Saleh had left, and Abu Hatem muttered appreciatively about Saleh's generosity. They sat in a tight circle, whispering for hours into the night, taking turns to keep watch. As dawn approached, they left the house one by one, with Abu Hatem being the last. He locked the door, placed the key back under the doorstep, and they set off, reciting "And We have put before them a barrier and behind them a barrier and covered them, so they do not see."

I woke up to the sound of my grandfather praying Fajr. Mahmoud woke up early to take on the role of both parents, waking up his brothers Hassan and Mohammed, and our cousins Hassan and Ibrahim. He prepared breakfast for

them before they all headed off to school, leaving me and my grandfather alone at home.

On that day, my grandfather didn't go to the market, and he took me out to sit under the warm sunshine when it was high in the sky. After a while, he began to tell me about his youth and the country that was lost. Then he took out his small pouch, gave me a coin, and said, "Go buy yourself something and come back quickly." I rushed to Abu Khalil's shop, bought a few sweet and sour candies, and returned to my grandfather, popping one into my mouth. He asked me what I had bought, so I showed him and offered him one. He laughed heartily and said, "No, these are for you, my dear." I sat next to him, enjoying the sun and sucking on the candies.

As noon approached, my grandfather stood up, leaning on his cane, and said, "Come on, Ahmed, let's go to the mosque for the Dhuhr prayer." He held my hand, and we set off. At the mosque, my grandfather performed ablutions, and I mimicked him while he looked at me smilingly. Sheikh Hamed arrived and, smiling at my grandfather, said, "God willing, this boy will be religious." My grandfather murmured in agreement, "Insha'Allah (God willing)."

The days passed similarly, but I began to understand more about what was happening around me. The new development was the resurgence of the resistance. Every day, there were shootings at occupation patrols, grenade throwing, or explosive detonations. The occupying soldiers responded with extreme force and violence against unarmed civilians, shooting randomly, causing deaths and injuries. Then reinforcements would arrive, imposing curfews, and summoning men to the school where the soldiers would beat and humiliate them, and arrest some. These scenes, sounds, and actions repeated for several days. The resistance grew stronger and bolder, to the point where we would see masked men in kufiyas carrying English rifles or Carl Gustav guns, or grenades, roaming the camp's alleys, especially near evening.

It became normal for us, and we realized that the nightly curfew was just a farce that didn't fool us children, our mothers, or the simple folks. The resistance men would dominate the camp at night, making it impossible for the occupation patrols to enter its alleys. They stayed on the main streets, and with the break of dawn, the resistance men would disappear.

The summer break arrived, and my mother enrolled me in school. She bought me a pair of used shoes from the market's used shoe stalls. They were repainted to look new, and I loved their red color, as did my grandfather. My mother also made me a small school bag from old clothes, and I was all set for school. I was excited about everything I'd heard about school – the morning assembly, the classes, the teachers, and the breaks between lessons.

Just before the end of summer, a resistance fighter ambushed an occupation patrol in an alley overlooking the main street, throwing a grenade at their jeep. The explosion injured several soldiers, and the jeep crashed into a nearby wall. The injured soldiers' cries were followed by random gunfire, and reinforcements soon arrived, announcing a curfew over loudspeakers. People rushed into their homes, and soldiers stormed into houses on the camp's edges, beating men, women, and children brutally.

The loudspeakers called all men aged 18 to 60 to gather at the school, as usual. However, voices soon cried out, urging everyone not to leave their homes, as the resistance fighters filled the camp, ready to confront the soldiers. Only the men from houses on the camp's outskirts, which were easier for the soldiers to reach, left for the school. When the soldiers attempted to enter the camp, they were met with gunfire from the narrow, winding alleys and were forced to retreat. Those who had gone to the school were beaten and humiliated before being allowed to return home. The curfew lasted a full week, during which we subsisted on beans, lentils, and olives. Despite the fear, the food tasted better than anything we had since the occupation began, as we felt a sense of pride under the protection of the resistance's guns.

After the first two days of the curfew, people began to venture outside, sitting by their doorsteps in the narrow alleys deep within the camp, where the occupation forces couldn't easily reach them without being intercepted by the resistance fighters lurking in the camp's corners. I saw many resistance fighters, unrecognizable in their keffiyehs, armed and stationed behind walls and corners.

I noticed some of our neighbors sitting around a corner, drinking tea, smoking rolled cigarettes, and discussing their fears and feelings. They expressed a sense of dignity and pride, long suppressed by the occupation, but also

apprehension about the uncertain future. Would the situation remain the same, or would the camp be stormed by a large force, shelled, or even burned to the ground with its inhabitants inside? Opinions varied, but the dominant sentiment was the necessity to stand firm. The common refrain was, "What do we have to lose? We only have our chains and the UNRWA houses. Why fear?" Every conversation ended with the same conclusion: "A minute of living with dignity and pride is better than a thousand years of a miserable life under the boots of the occupation."

This wasn't only in our camp but in all camps across the Gaza Strip, in the streets of towns and villages, both in the West Bank and Gaza. The resistance began to gain momentum across the nation. Some were organized, but many were individual acts or local initiatives by the nation's free men. We started hearing about the remarkable resistance in the nearby Jabalia Camp, led by Abu Hatim. Dozens of young men and adults from the camp and neighboring areas had joined him, and the camp became known as "the Camp of Revolution" (Mukhayyam al-Thawra). The news spread like wildfire, increasing the happiness and morale of the people. As children, this even affected our games; the game of "Arabs and Jews" became a daily activity, with a prevailing rule that the Arabs would always triumph over their enemies.

## Chapter Four

Throughout the night, I was either preparing for school, talking about it, asking my siblings about various aspects of it, or dreaming about it, because tomorrow would be my first day. Before going to bed, I had gone to our small wardrobe and started trying on my clothes and my new shoes. When my mother saw me, she shouted, "What are you doing, Ahmad?" I replied softly, "I'm getting ready for school." She laughed and said, "There's still plenty of time before school in the morning."

In the early morning, I woke up to my grandfather's prayers and couldn't sleep afterward. As soon as my mother woke up, I jumped out of bed to get ready for school. After a while, she woke up my siblings and sent my brother Mahmoud to wake up my cousins in the other room, where they slept with my grandfather. My cousins got dressed, and my mother dressed me up as if I were going to my own wedding. She gave me a lot of advice, praising me for being smart, grown-up, and brave. Then she gave each of us a shilling, which was five agorot of the Israeli pound, and placed a piece of bread in our completely empty school bags.

My mother repeatedly instructed Mahmoud to take good care of me. Mohammed was in the third grade and at the same school as me, the Male Refugees Elementary School A. My sister Maha was in the fifth grade at the Female Refugees Elementary School B, and my brother Hassan was in the first grade of intermediate at the Male Refugees Intermediate School A. My sister Fatima was in the third grade of intermediate at the Female Refugees Intermediate School A. My brother Mahmoud was in the second year of high school at Carmel School. My cousin Ibrahim was in the second grade of primary at my school, and my cousin Hassan was in the first year of high school at Carmel School.

We all left the house together, with Mohammed holding one of my hands and my cousin Ibrahim the other, while my cloth school bag hung around my neck. We started our journey to the schools and eventually split up into different groups, with the three of us staying together.

The streets were bustling with boys and girls of all ages on their way to school. The boys wore a variety of colored and shaped clothes, while the

girls wore a uniform called "al-Murayyol," a blue and white striped fabric with each stripe being half a centimeter thick. They tied their hair with white ribbons, and what distinguished us boys were our closely shaven heads.

Upon entering the school, we found a very large courtyard with tall trees and many rooms around it. Near the entrance, there was a small garden with flowers and plants and a pond. My brother Mohammad started to acquaint me with the school; this is first grade A, this is B, and this is C, these are the second grade rooms, these are the third... This is the teachers' room, the principal's office, the canteen, the bathrooms, and the drinking fountains. The morning bell rang, and the teachers started to organize the student lines. The older students quickly formed their lines, but we, the new first graders, were gathered by the teachers who started calling our names. As each name was called, the child would stand to one side until we were divided into three groups, each led by a teacher.

Our teacher was an elderly sheikh wearing a robe and a fez, indicating he was an Azhar-educated scholar. We entered the first-grade classroom (A), where he began to arrange us by height, shortest first, into three groups with three people each. Three students sat on a wooden bench over a meter long and about twenty-five centimeters wide, with a board in front of us of the same length and about forty centimeters wide for our books and notebooks. Underneath was another plank where we placed our bags, all held together with wooden supports to form a single unit called a "bank."

There were three rows of these benches in the classroom, each row with about seven benches, and each bench sat three students. There was a space of about a meter and a half between each row. In the center of the room, in front of the benches, was the teacher's table and chair, and on the wall was a blackboard, which we called "al-loh".

Each of us sat in the middle of the bench assigned by our teacher, Sheikh Hassan, who introduced himself and got to know each of us one by one. We each said our names, and Sheikh Hassan would ask about our fathers, uncles, and grandfathers. He seemed to know everyone's family, which was evident when he made a special prayer for my father's safe return, knowing that my father was missing and his whereabouts unknown.

Soon, they brought us books, notebooks, pens, and erasers. Sheikh Hassan distributed these items to us. We each received a reading book with beautiful colored pictures and incomprehensible text, a math book, a part of the Quran, five notebooks, pencils, and an eraser. The notebooks, covered in green and red with the United Nations Education Department - UNESCO logo, were something new to us. Sheikh Hassan explained everything to us: "This is the reading book, this is the math book, keep three of the notebooks at home. We will use one for reading and one for math." He then beautifully wrote each of our names on our items with a black ink pen.

The school day ended, and Mohammad and my cousin Ibrahim took me back home. We each carried our cloth bags filled with stationery. As days passed, I began learning to read, write, and do arithmetic. I started memorizing short chapters of the Quran like the other students. We went to school together, played during the breaks, eating sandwiches made by our mother with thyme or ground pepper, and occasionally jam. Sometimes, we bought some labneh from the women sitting at the school gate, savoring its delicious tangy taste.

Back home, we would have lunch, then Mohammad and Hassan would head to Uncle Saleh's factory. Our time was divided between playing in the neighborhood and studying. In the evenings, we gathered around an upturned washing basin with a lamp in the middle. Each of us would place our book or notebook on it, bending over as we sat on the ground to complete our homework. My mother and the others who didn't study sat beside us, chatting.

As the weeks passed, the sound of loudspeakers announcing curfews became a regular occurrence, signaling that one of the freedom fighters had carried out an operation against the occupation forces, usually involving a grenade attack or a shooting at a patrol. A significant event that year was the martyrdom of our neighbor Abu Yousuf. He, along with two other young men, had set out to execute a mission against the occupation patrols. Their strategy involved one of the fighters throwing a grenade at the patrol that regularly passed through the main street at a specific time, then retreating in a way that made him visible to the soldiers. Abu Yousuf and another

fighter, armed with Carl Gustav rifles and grenades, lay in wait for the reinforcements that would pursue the first attacker. Unfortunately, they were ambushed unexpectedly from behind, and both Abu Yousuf and his comrade Ibrahim were martyred on the spot.

This time, the occupation forces did not impose a curfew on the camp. The entire camp, men and women, young and old, emerged from their homes, many grieving for Abu Yousuf. A majestic funeral procession was held, attended by all the camp's residents who chanted in solidarity with the martyr and Palestine. The crowd circled the camp several times with the coffins before burying the martyrs in the nearby cemetery.

That afternoon, my grandfather took me to a corner of our neighborhood where some men and elders gathered to talk and entertain themselves while discussing current events. The topic of the day was the martyrdom of Abu Yousuf and his companions. Everyone was astonished by the event, and there were discussions about the possibility of betrayal, as the attack came from an unexpected direction.

Days later, as the sun was setting and the usual curfew was about to begin, we were playing in the neighborhood when several masked and armed freedom fighters filled the area, each taking up positions at the ends of the alleys. Abu Hatem, one of the camp's notable men, arrived, dragging a man in a despicable and shameful state. Abu Hatem, armed with a bamboo stick and a rifle slung over his shoulder, stood over the man who tried to hide his face and cower as much as possible. We all stopped playing, and the neighborhood residents gathered around, watching the scene unfold.

In an eerie silence broken only by the commanding voice of Abu Hatem, the events unfolded in a dramatic and chilling manner. "People, you all know Abu Yousuf, the leader of the Popular Liberation Forces in the camp. You've heard of his heroics and operations that made us all proud and disciplined the occupiers. And you all know this despicable man," he gestured towards a figure, "a spy for the Jews, the one who monitored Abu Yousuf and informed the Israeli army about him."

The crowd murmured incoherently, their words unclear and inaudible. Abu Hatem, raising his stick high, demanded the traitor to confess before

everyone. Under the threat of further beatings, the man, crouching and shielding his head with his hands, admitted to betraying Abu Yousuf and his companions for a small sum of money, claiming he didn't know they would be killed. The crowd's anger erupted, cursing the traitor as Abu Hatem silenced them with a gesture.

"Listen, people! These Jews have occupied our land, driven us from our homes, killed our men, and violated our dignity. And yet, there are those among us ready to betray the very freedom fighters who risk their lives for us. What should be the punishment for a traitor who collaborates with the Jews?" The unanimous cry was for death.

Abu Hatem then took his rifle off his shoulder, aimed it at the spy's head, and as my mother covered my eyes, I struggled to see. But I heard the gunshots and the crowd's vengeful cries: "Death to the traitors! Death to the agents!"

The next day, fueled by the martyrs' blood, the freedom fighters ambushed an occupation patrol. As the jeep arrived, they hurled grenades and showered it with bullets, killing and injuring several soldiers before they could even retaliate. The occupation forces sent massive reinforcements, surrounding the area and brutally dragging people out of their homes. The men were lined up against a wall, guns pointed at their heads, as the beatings and humiliations continued relentlessly.

The intelligence officer responsible for the area arrived and began a meticulous inspection of the men, calling them one by one to his car. With his car door open, he interrogated each man under the threat of rifles pointed at them, bombarding them with questions in hopes of unearthing any information about the freedom fighters.

Days later, when the curfew was finally lifted, we resumed our school routine. During a break, I ventured to the restrooms where I found boys climbing a wall to peek at the nearby preparatory school where my brother Hasan studied. Joining them, I saw older students, much taller and seemingly more mature than myself.

That day, on our way home amidst hundreds of students, I spotted my cousin Hasan at a distance. Between us was a throng of pupils. To my shock,

I saw him raise his hand to his mouth, appearing to smoke a cigarette. I tightened my grip on the hands of my brother Mahmood and cousin Ibrahim, who looked at me puzzled. Pointing towards Hasan, they failed to understand my concern. By the time they noticed, Hasan had disposed of the cigarette, and we had reached our destination. Opting for silence, I feared his retaliation.

Back home, seizing a moment alone with my mother, I whispered, "I saw cousin Hasan smoking!" She looked at me sharply, dismissing my claim as a mistake or illusion, and instructed me not to mention it to anyone. That evening, I noticed her quietly confronting Hasan, but their conversation remained inaudible to me.

Days later, Mahmood informed my mother that Hasan had skipped school that day. I saw the confusion on her face, wondering how to address this new challenge. The situation with Hasan remained an unsolved puzzle in our household.

I witnessed my mother speaking intensely with my grandfather, calling cousin Hasan over for a stern talk. Despite Hasan's attempts to defend himself, they threatened to tie him to a post in the yard and beat him if he skipped school again. Days later, my mother found cigarettes and some money in Hasan's pants. She presented them to my grandfather, who was astonished and wondered how Hasan got the money. When Hasan was called to explain, he faltered under my mother's interrogation, unable to justify his actions.

My grandfather, weakened by age and worry, couldn't do much. My mother took charge, interrogating Hasan, who initially tried to dodge the questions. When faced with the evidence, Hasan admitted to stealing the money from my grandfather's purse. Outraged, my mother and grandfather decided to tie him to the post as punishment. My grandfather, upon realizing Hasan had taken half of the family's expenses, weakly instructed to tie him up.

My mother looked at my grandfather, seeking confirmation. He nodded affirmatively, his eyes glancing at us, indicating that it was essential for us children to see the consequences of such actions. The message was clear:

wrongdoing must be met with appropriate discipline to set an example for the younger generation.

My mother tied Hasan to the post while lamenting her and Hasan's misfortune. "Oh, the tragedy of you, the son of a martyr! Do you understand what a martyr is, Hasan? Your father was a martyr, and you steal half of what's in your grandfather's purse? Half of our family's living expenses, Hasan! Shame on you," she cried out in despair.

Then, she shouted at all of us, commanding us to go inside the room. Without hesitation, we all obeyed.

That night, a curfew was imposed not only by the occupying forces outside but also by my mother within our home. She forbade us from leaving the room all night, except for emergencies, and forced us to go to bed early. The atmosphere was heavy with a mix of disappointment and discipline, a stark reminder of the consequences of wrong choices.

## Chapter Five

My aunt Fathiya and her husband paid us a visit. My mother received my aunt with kisses and longing, and Aunt Fathiya began to kiss each of us in turn. While my mother prepared the guest bedding, she called out to Grandfather Abu Ibrahim to welcome the visitors. Grandfather emerged from his room to greet Aunt Fathiya's husband, who brought a straw basket filled with several paper bags, which he handed to my mother.

Fatima prepared tea, and they all enjoyed it together. Then, Aunt Fathiya's husband excused himself to go to Uncle Saleh's house, leaving Aunt Fathiya to stay with us for the night. He promised to return the next day to accompany her back. Despite Grandfather's insistence that he stay with us, he politely declined, citing some urgent matters to attend to.

After he left, Grandfather returned to his room, and my mother, Aunt Fathiya, and we children gathered around her. My mother brought out the basket and started unpacking its contents. Inside one of the bags were large, red apples the likes of which we had never seen or tasted before. Another bag contained unfamiliar fruit, which I later learned was peaches, and the third had pieces of dried milk.

Looking at Aunt Fathiya, my mother said, "You shouldn't have troubled yourself, Fathiya." Tears welled up in Aunt Fathiya's eyes as she responded, "I wish I could do more to help you, my dear sister." She explained that her husband's financial situation was good, for which she was thankful. My mother then washed the fruits and handed about half of the apples and peaches to Mahmoud, instructing him to take them to Grandfather and our cousins in the other room.

Mother and Aunt Fathiya chatted late into the night, with us children joyfully surrounding them. Aunt Fathiya's husband, Abdul Fattah, went to Uncle Saleh's house, where they spent the night discussing the situation in the Hebron area, the city, and the surrounding towns and villages. Abdul Fattah had completed his high school studies a few years earlier and was helping his father in farming and sheep breeding. He was considering going abroad for university studies in Jordan or Saudi Arabia.

Uncle Saleh was curious about the resistance, the fighters, people's living conditions, and their morale during the three years since the Israeli occupation.

Since the occupation of Hebron, large groups of tourists began flocking to the city, particularly to visit the Ibrahimi Mosque, believed by Jews to hold historical significance for them. This influx of tourists sparked an economic revival in Hebron. Many local merchants seized the opportunity, opening their stores to offer various goods to the visitors, often at high prices. They even sold oak galls, which foreigners considered sacred from the land of Abraham.

The economic boom didn't stop with the tourists; Jews also came to Hebron to shop for various items, contributing further to the city's economic vitality. Notably, the Israeli soldiers maintained a respectful distance from the locals, seemingly following a request from the city's mayor, Sheikh Ja'abari. He had met with Israeli leaders, including Moshe Dayan, after the occupation, urging them to ensure their soldiers did not violate the people's honor or property. The leaders, recognizing the importance of this, advised their soldiers to minimize interaction with the locals.

The residents of Hebron, still reeling from the shock of the Six-Day War defeat, were largely fearful of the occupation and the Jews. Jews could roam the city without encountering resistance or hostility, as the people, fearing repercussions, would prevent any acts of aggression against them.

Despite the prevalent fear and caution, occasional resistance activities occurred. These were sporadic and included sniping or throwing grenades at Israeli patrols on the city's outskirts or in surrounding villages. While Israeli forces frequently entered many areas, some fighters living in the mountains and caves engaged in guerrilla warfare against the patrols, causing injuries and, on rare occasions, fatalities. These fighters would then retreat to the rugged terrain, which was unfamiliar and daunting to the Israeli forces. Among these resistance fighters, one named "Abu Sharar" became particularly notorious, haunting the occupying soldiers in the area.

The Fatah movement was attempting to organize resistance activities in Hebron and its surrounding areas, but successes were limited. The Israeli forces were quick to arrest groups that either initiated resistance efforts or were in their early stages. The focus of the locals on their daily lives and economic activities seemed to impede the resistance from becoming a significant and widespread phenomenon in the region.

However, a series of political protests organized mainly by Fatah supporters, particularly among students, began emerging in the city. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) also attempted to initiate activities. Given the limited success in armed resistance, the focus shifted more towards political activism, social initiatives, and community engagement.

During the discussions between my uncle and Abdel Fattah, my uncle was keen to understand the differences between the situations in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In Gaza, the Popular Liberation Forces, consisting of officers and fighters from the disbanded Palestine Liberation Army post-1967 war, were the primary resistance group. Despite Israeli forces achieving some success in assassinating leaders and infiltrating deeper into Gaza, resistance groups, including Fatah and PFLP, maintained a reasonably high level of activity.

Days after my aunt's visit, a rumor spread in the neighborhood about a young woman's body found in the Mishat area. The body was discovered, and rumors circulated that she was an informant killed on that suspicion. While no one dared to openly challenge this narrative or inquire into the details, whispers and murmurs suggested she might not have been an informant. Some speculated that individuals posing as resistance fighters took advantage of her, violated her, and then killed her to avoid exposure, falsely labeling her as an informant. This incident highlighted the intensified efforts by Israeli intelligence to infiltrate the Palestinian community, exploiting vulnerabilities like poverty and need to recruit informants who could provide information on resistance fighters and their activities.

The occupation forces carried out large-scale arrests of men and young adults, transferring them to the Saraya building, the intelligence headquarters. There, they were greeted by a large number of soldiers who beat, slapped, and kicked them. Their eyes were blindfolded, and they were

made to stand with their faces against the wall, hands tied behind their backs, for long hours in the rain and severe cold, shivering from cold, anticipation, or fear. Soldiers stood behind them, taking turns on patrols, kicking and hitting anyone who leaned against the wall or moved right or left. In a nearby room, a number of Shin Bet officers (as it was called at the time) sat in a well-lit, air-conditioned room. They summoned the men one by one, seated them on chairs in front of them, and lifted the blindfolds, bombarding them with thousands of questions about their work, hometown, family, brothers, each of their neighbors, and about resistance fighters. They hurled hundreds of insults and curses, some of the foulest and most vulgar language imaginable, breaking the Arabic language they spoke. Sometimes they would hit, other times they would joke, alternating between intimidation and enticement in search of any information the men might have or any readiness among them to cooperate, or any weakness that could be exploited to force them to collaborate against their people.

Some of the men were seething with anger and helplessness in the face of this humiliation, but what could they do? Any action would only lead to more humiliation and oppression. Some burst out in rage, wanting to attack the scum, only to find their hands tied behind their backs and facing even more degradation. Others tried to get through the crisis as best as they could, wishing to live peacefully, neither with nor against them, nor with or against the resistance, just wanting to live and provide for their families. A few sold their souls cheaply to the occupiers, beginning to provide all the information they knew about the resistance and its men, agreeing to deal with them.

The situation of the resistance in the Gaza Strip was noticeably stronger than in the West Bank, primarily due to the presence of a battalion of fighters called the Palestine Liberation Army, established as a military force by the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Arab regimes at the time had pushed for its creation to alleviate their responsibility towards Palestine. With the 1967 war, this army partly disbanded; some were martyred, and others, the majority, left the sector for Egypt or were deported there. Some stayed in Gaza and formed the Popular Liberation Forces, initiating the resistance. Then, some groups and cells from Fatah and the Popular

Front began operating in the sector, increasingly present, especially in the refugee camp areas.

One day, while we were in the morning line-up at school, a great commotion arose, followed by loud chants of "With our souls, with our blood, we will redeem you, Palestine! With our souls, with our blood, we will redeem you, Palestine!" Schools emptied, and students from different schools joined together in a crowd, echoing the chants and cries. Everyone was in great joy and overwhelming happiness, as that day coincided with the Day of Dignity when Palestinian fedayeen in Jordan successfully repelled an Israeli attack on the Jordanian front. The demonstrations roamed the streets of the camp, chanting slogans and waving flags, before eventually dispersing as we returned to our homes. Everyone felt the utmost pride and dignity. After the setback of 1967, what people commonly referred to according to the official Arab regime's terminology, this was the first victory over the Israeli occupation army. From among the fedayeen groups camping on the eastern bank of the Jordan River in the Karama area, some had started carrying out cross-border fedayeen operations.

That afternoon, as usual, I sat with my grandfather in the square near the corner of our house, where the men of the neighborhood gathered to talk. They were all extremely elated, and words like the Palestinian revolution and the name of the National Liberation Movement (Fatah) started to resonate. It was clear that Fatah was beginning to take a leading position in the Palestinian national movement and resistance to the occupation. That day, I heard some men say, "Uncle, true words don't plow the land; only its bulls do. We used to rely on the Arab armies and were defeated. But the first time we fight ourselves, we win, despite our limited means and weak arms," and all the men nodded in agreement, supporting this sentiment. In the following days, the pace of fedayeen operations inside the occupied territories in the West Bank and Gaza increased. As my mother always used to say, "The spirit of men revives men." It seemed as if the victory of the Battle of Karama had rekindled many souls with hope and readiness.

It appears that the intelligence of the occupation had gathered information indicating that many of the operations happening in Gaza originated from Al-Shati Camp. Consequently, a curfew was imposed on our camp. This

time, the curfew lasted much longer, exceeding three weeks and even a month, and our conditions in the camp worsened significantly. The camp had been under curfew for a month.

Life continued as usual just tens of meters away in the city. The noon call to prayer rose from the minarets of the mosques in Gaza. Al-Abbas Mosque, located on the main street of the city, Omar Al-Mukhtar Street, saw a number of men and young adults gathering to perform the prayer.

After completing their prayers, a confident young man in his early twenties stood before them. He praised Allah, blessed His Prophet, and then began addressing the people, stirring in them strength and chivalry towards their brothers in Al-Shati Camp, where a curfew had been imposed for a month. An elder asked, "What can we do, my son?" The young man replied that they could at least hold a solidarity demonstration. The congregants in the mosque exited, chanting and praising, with some carrying the young man on their shoulders, chanting, "With our souls, with our blood, we will redeem you, Palestine... We are all Palestine, migrants and citizens."

People began joining the large demonstration, and the city streets near the camp were close by. Occupation soldiers' vehicles monitored the situation from a distance, prepared for emergencies but without intervening. The demonstration dispersed, and everyone felt they had done something their conscience demanded. The next morning, loudspeakers announced the end of the curfew in the camp, allowing life to return to normal.

In the morning, we lined up in the school yard. After some light physical exercises and a morning speech delivered by one of the students from atop the stone stairs in front of the line-up, we proceeded one class after another to the milk kiosk, a closed area on three sides with stone walls, roofed with zinc sheets. On its cement platform stood several large tables, behind which four men in blue overalls and white caps stood. We entered the kiosk in a line, supervised by our teachers. The men handed us one by one iron cups filled with milk, after giving each of us a fish oil pill, instructing us to swallow it and then drink the hot milk.

We drank the milk and threw the cups into a large pot of boiling water, then left our queue for our classrooms. All students in all UNRWA schools drank

milk and fish oil on different days. We detested fish oil with a blind hatred. Teachers watched us to ensure we didn't discard those small pills, forcing us to take them and urging us to drink the milk quickly and go to our classes.

Fish oil is very beneficial, but the hot milk is just okay, with the best part being the warmth of the cup. When you hold it in your tiny hands, which are almost frozen in the severe cold, you typically feel as though your hands have become part of your body again after having felt detached.

On one of those days, the weather was extremely cold and stormy, and most of us got wet from the rain on our way to school. After we had our milk, we entered our classroom and sat at our desks, shivering. Our teacher, Sheikh Ali, entered and seemed to realize that we were not in a state to study, read, or understand. He wanted to make us laugh, so he said, "Children, imagine if the sky were raining rice and meat right now!" There was a commotion in the class, and we forgot about the cold and wetness as we heard about rice and meat. We started talking chaotically, "I will eat only the meat... I love rice... I... I."

Sheikh Ali let us indulge in our playful fantasies of rice and meat for a few minutes. Then he shouted at us, "Quiet, you and him! May God make it rain locusts to bite you all at once!" He then instructed us, "Take out your reading book, open it to Lesson Twenty. Read, Ahmad." I opened my water-soaked book and began reading, shivering from the cold. Sheikh Ali's lips muttered, "There is no power or strength except through Allah... Indeed, to Allah we belong and to Him we shall return. You must learn so you can become 'humans' (meaning civilized or educated people)."

## Chapter Six

My aunt Fathiya lives in the village of Surif in the Hebron district, a Palestinian village like all the others in our homeland that fell under occupation in 1967. It bore its share of estrangement and destruction as punishment for its role in the resistance prior to the occupation, and in the battles preceding 1948. Being a border village located on the Green Line, it lies between the territories occupied in 1948 and those that remained under Jordanian rule until 1967.

Shortly after the occupation, patrols approached the village and entered it, roaming around like most other Palestinian villages throughout the West Bank. The residents live in small, modest, yet beautiful stone houses among olive, fig, grape, and almond trees. They raise livestock and poultry, earning their livelihood, and are thankful to Allah for His countless blessings. The men of the village, known for their chivalry and masculinity, wear traditional Palestinian rural attire. You would see a man strutting with his stick, watching his sheep graze on the hillside, and the modest women are known for their character, their clothes, and their head coverings.

My aunt didn't feel much difference after moving from Gaza to Surif, except for the rural and agricultural environment. The nature of the people, their customs, and the purity of their souls were the same, although the local dialect was slightly different, but not vastly so. She quickly adapted to life there. Her husband, Abdul Fattah, had completed his secondary education at Tariq bin Ziyad School in Hebron. In Surif, like all the surrounding villages, there was no secondary school, so those who wanted to complete their secondary education had to study in Hebron. Abdul Fattah's studies in Hebron made him well-acquainted with the city and its happenings, and he had many friends from the city and other villages who studied with him at that school. Aunt Fathiya was blessed with a son whom she named Abdul Rahim. My mother couldn't travel to Hebron to congratulate my aunt on her new baby and settled for going to my uncle's house to congratulate him. She asked him to extend her congratulations to Fathiya when he visited her and apologize on her behalf, as she was aware of our financial situation and the family's circumstances.

My aunt Fathiya's husband, Abdul Fattah, was preparing to study at the University of Jordan, Faculty of Sharia, but his father's severe illness led him to postpone his plans. Later, his father's death made him abandon the idea of university education altogether. He decided to take over his father's business, dealing in fabrics, in addition to managing the family-owned land. He consoled himself over his uncompleted education by facilitating his brother Abdul Rahman's education, who was in his second year of high school at Tariq bin Ziyad School in Hebron. Like most surrounding villages, Surif had no secondary school, so those wishing to complete their education had to go to Hebron. Abdul Fattah's education in Hebron had given him a good understanding of the city and its events, and he had many friends from the city and other villages who had studied with him.

Abdul Fattah often stood on the roof of their house, pointing westward to the ruins of 'Alyn, where the Holy Jihad fighters had camped before the 1967 occupation. He told how the villagers had provided them with whatever they needed. He recounted an incident where a local from Surif, Mohammad Abdul Wahab "Al-Qadi", while grazing his sheep in a nearby area called 'Snaheen', spotted a convoy of Jews coming from Beit Shemesh to Etzion. He informed the mujahideen, who quickly set up an ambush in an area called 'Dahr Al-Hajja'. When the convoy arrived, they attacked and killed all of them, 35 officers, soldiers, and doctors. This incident filled the Jews with hatred towards Surif, and when the 1967 occupation occurred, the Jews bombarded Surif with artillery, destroying many homes, driven solely by vengeance for that incident.

Through his work and connections in Hebron, Abdul Fattah developed a vast network of relationships with its merchants and businesspeople. In their gatherings and meetings, they would have long discussions and detailed dialogues about everything. They would sit in one of those stores, huddled around a heater, the coals glowing inside, sipping tea and talking about the resistance and the occupation. These incidents always reflected a disbelief among these segments of the population in the feasibility of resistance and the practical benefits that could come from it, fearing more harm than good. Their primary concern was to improve their standard of living, economic gain, and wealth development. The prevailing belief was that all the Arab armies combined had failed to stand against the Israeli army, so

how could groups of fedayeen with their simple weapons and limited capabilities stand a chance?

Abdul Fattah did not dare to openly contradict their opinions, but he listened to them and tried to discuss the matters objectively and logically. In the end, the gathering would disperse after having sat for an hour or so, sipping tea, often ending with someone saying, "What do we have to do with this matter? Leave the creation to the Creator, and God will bring what is best." They spoke in the distinctive Hebron dialect, elongating certain letters more than others.

In these gatherings and circles, Abdul Fattah, my aunt's husband, became acquainted with "Abu Ali", who seemed more convinced about the necessity of doing something about the cause. He believed that even if the resistance wasn't effective in liberating the homeland or repelling the occupation, it was undoubtedly a fulfillment of the national duty at the very least.

Abdul Fattah and Abu Ali often walked the streets of Hebron during Abdul Fattah's visits there, or in Surif when Abu Ali came to visit. They would engage in conversations about the occupation, the necessity of resisting it, and the importance of not just accepting the status quo or focusing solely on making money, developing wealth, and building homes. Since their thoughts were similar, their friendship grew stronger. One day, Abu Ali confided in Abdul Fattah, saying that he couldn't remain idle without doing the minimum of his duty. Abdul Fattah asked what he planned to do. Would he look for a weapon to attack an occupation patrol and then flee to live with wanted men like Abu Sharar and other mujahideen fighters? Abu Ali replied that this wasn't his aspiration. Instead, he wanted to organize the resistance into a phenomenon, a movement, an organization. He planned to travel to Jordan and present his idea to Fatah there, knowing that Fatah, especially after the victory in the Battle of Karamah, had gained significant status and would likely welcome his idea and provide assistance.

Abdul Fattah praised the idea and assured Abu Ali to take the utmost precautions. He told Abu Ali that he could consider him a full partner in all his steps. They agreed that Abu Ali would travel alone, covering his trip with a business pretext to avoid drawing attention.

Jordan, at this time after the victory in Karamah, was wholly under the influence of the resistance. The refugee camps were filled with celebrations of victory. Everyone was chanting in praise of the fedayeen and praying for the Palestinian National Liberation Movement, the name behind that victory. It was not difficult for someone like Abu Ali to quickly find the leadership of the fedayeen action there and agree with them to start organizing military cells for Fatah in all areas of the West Bank. He would be provided with money and weapons to establish and train these cells for armed resistance.

After visiting some relatives and conducting some business transactions in Jordan as a cover for his official mission, Abu Ali returned to the West Bank. There, he began his contacts with many of his acquaintances, especially the youth, in various cities of the West Bank.

Abu Ali organized individuals into the ranks of the Fatah movement, asking each of them to recruit two or three trusted friends ready for armed action against the occupation. This network spread across cities from the northernmost part of the West Bank to Hebron and even some villages and towns. Whenever Abdul Fattah found someone he knew and trusted, he presented them with the proposition, and it was usually met with acceptance and agreement. He asked them to form a cell and agreed to contact them soon.

The task of gathering weapons was entrusted to Abdul Fattah, whose business activities served as an excellent cover for this operation. Within a short period, cells began to form, carrying out simple operations like throwing hand grenades at military patrol vehicles, shooting at them, or attempting long-range sniper attacks on such targets. As is usual in resistance work, one of the cells encountered an operational failure, leading to the arrest of its members. Under severe interrogation, some began confessing, leading to more arrests, eventually reaching Abu Ali. He was captured and subjected to intense interrogation in the dungeons of Hebron prison. Abu Ali showed great resilience and refused to confess even the simplest things that some of the young men, deceived during the interrogation, had admitted.

The Israeli intelligence arrested Abdul Fattah after investigating Abu Ali's relationships and friendships. They conducted a thorough search of his house, accompanied by much destruction and damage to everything in their path, including furniture and household items. During this ordeal, my aunt and her young son Abdul Rahim also suffered some abuse. Abdul Fattah was taken to Hebron prison and subjected to severe interrogation and torture, as they questioned him about his relationship with Abu Ali and tried to convince him that Abu Ali had confessed everything. However, Abdul Fattah continued to deny the allegations. Consequently, he was sentenced to six months of administrative detention without any charges, while Abu Ali received a five-year sentence based on the confessions obtained from some of the young men who weren't resilient enough to withstand the interrogation ordeal.

This marked the beginning of my aunt's journey into a new world — the world of prisons. She started visiting her husband once a month. On the day of the visit, she would wake up early, prepare her child, and set off, carrying him in her arms until she reached the village center.

From there, she would take one of the few cars passing through the village to Hebron. Upon arrival, she would walk a long distance to reach the building (the headquarters of Hebron prison and the military governor's office). There, she would find hundreds of people who had come to visit their sons and relatives in prison. Standing among the women in line, she would hold her identity card, hoping her turn would come in this batch of visitors. Sometimes, the guards would announce that the batch was complete, and she would have to wait for the next one.

Reaching a small opening in the wall, she would hand her ID card to the guard behind the wall for verification and registration. Then she would be allowed into the women's section, where a woman would conduct a provocative search. My aunt would contain her anger, not wanting to lose the opportunity to visit Abdul Rahim, who was undoubtedly eagerly awaiting her and their son, Abdul Rahim. She knew there was no point in getting upset over the demeaning treatment by the contemptible soldier.

After the search, the visitors were gathered in a room and then led through long corridors and dimly lit hallways to the visitation area. There was a wall

with window-like openings covered with iron mesh. Behind each window stood a prisoner, and the visitors would search for their relatives among them. When they found them, they would rush to the window, tears in the eyes of a father who could see his child through the bars but couldn't embrace or play with him. Tears also flowed from the eyes of wives or mothers seeing their husbands or sons behind bars, not knowing what they endured within those merciless walls.

Before the visitors could recover from the fatigue of travel, waiting, and the humiliating search, and before they could fully inquire about the well-being of their husbands, sons, and relatives, the guards would start clapping, shouting that the visit was over. They would begin pulling the prisoners away behind the iron doors. The visitors would be pushed out of the visitation area. My aunt's husband would try to hold back his tears, not wanting the guard to see them and take pleasure in his misery. He would gather his emotions, encouraging his wife that the ordeal would soon be over, just five more months. He would ask her to take care of Abdul Rahim, their home, and to convey his greetings to family and neighbors. She would wipe her tears with the edge of her white embroidered headscarf, assuring him, "Don't worry, just stay strong. Take care."

In the alleys, neighborhoods, villages, and camps, new groups and cells were forming across the cities, villages, and ruins of the West Bank. Young men were heading to the valleys and behind the towering mountains to train with the weapons they had recently acquired or found hidden by their fathers or grandfathers for years. They were ready to start the upcoming confrontation, eagerly awaiting the encounter with the enemy, despite their limited and simple weaponry and their lack of adequate experience. Yet, their youthful spirits were boiling with fervor.

In that shop, where Abdul Fattah, my aunt's husband, and Abu Ali used to meet with a number of traders during the cold days, sipping tea, they discussed the news of the fighting, the imprisonment of Abdul Fattah and Abu Ali, the futility of their actions, and how they wasted a significant period of their lives. One of them calculated the days Abdul Fattah would spend in prison, remarking that he used to earn three Israeli shekels per day

in his business, which meant a loss of at least five hundred shekels, not to mention the humiliation and devaluation of himself and his family.

The poor economic situation of most people, which Israel's leaders saw as a potential driver for more people to join the resistance (or "sabotage activities"), along with their need for labor to build the nascent state, led them to consider gradually opening up employment opportunities for the local population, with strict security screening. Indeed, they announced this, and passport and permit offices began to receive applications from men seeking work permits in the territories occupied in 1948. This decision sparked intense debate among various segments of the Palestinian population.

In our neighborhood square, where men gathered, and despite my grandfather's illness and old age, he still attended these daily meetings where this matter was discussed. People were divided in their opinions. Some were vehemently opposed, asking how we could allow ourselves to build the enemy's state and strengthen its foundations while their soldiers trained and prepared for war against our people and nation. Some viewed working for Israel as a form of betrayal. However, the realists among them recognized that reality had imposed itself, and Israel's existence wouldn't be affected by hundreds or thousands of workers refraining from employment there.

The reality was that there were homes in need of basic necessities like bread and milk for children, which were hard to come by. Therefore, working in Israel, despite its difficulties and bitterness, was seen by some as a national duty to support the resilience of our people in their camps and villages, rather than forcing them to leave due to hardship.

In the shop in Hebron, the acceptance of work in Israel was more commonplace. The people there understood the economic aspects much better, viewing it as a numbers game. Opening up job opportunities for the people was seen as a way to economically flourish the country, which would raise its standard in various fields and strengthen the residents' resolve to stay on their land until Allah decreed a practical change.

However, resistance fighters, especially in refugee camps like the Beach Camp, saw this as a crime. They began collecting information about those who obtained work permits, gathering these permits from workers and destroying them after explaining the dangers and how it contradicted national allegiance. Sometimes, the permit holder would be hit with a cane on the forehead, slapped on the face, or harshly reprimanded.

One of these workers, trying to resist handing over his permit, would point to his eight children behind him, who often went hungry because the aid provided by the UNRWA was insufficient. He would plead with the resistance fighters who wanted to take his permit to consider his situation and allow him to keep it and work. But they would insist on taking the permit, tears in their eyes as they witnessed the vast contradiction between the bitter reality with its needs and requirements and the ceiling of national aspirations. They might discuss this among themselves after tearing up the man's permit, feeling embarrassed and conflicted about the situation.

## Chapter Seven

As the weeks leading up to my brother Mahmoud's Tawjihi (high school final) exams approached, a state of emergency was declared in our house. Whenever someone raised their voice, my mother would scold them, demanding silence to provide Mahmoud with a conducive study environment. If one of us ran around or made noise, we would get reprimanded. On those nights, we would huddle around an overturned washing basin to study, and any minor disturbance would result in a slap on the back of the head, a pinch, or a tug of the ear, as maintaining quiet for Mahmoud's study was paramount.

Our exams concluded, but Mahmoud's Tawjihi exams were still about a month away. Despite our exams being over, the state of emergency at home remained until Mahmoud's exams were completed, which we anticipated more than the end of the occupation itself. On the last day of Mahmoud's exams, we welcomed him home with a noisy celebration, expressing all the emotions we had suppressed for nearly two months. The house was filled with noise and laughter as we all jumped on Mahmoud, playfully hitting and teasing him. My mother tried to maintain a stern face, telling us to leave Mahmoud alone, but she couldn't hide her wide smile.

When our results were announced, all of us had passed except for our cousin Hassan, who failed his second year of high school. Another state of emergency was declared on the day of the Tawjihi results. When Mahmoud returned home with a radiant face, bursting with joy, he announced his score: 92%. A tear of relief rolled down my mother's cheek, followed by her jubilant ululation. We again burst into celebration, acknowledging that Mahmoud's success and excellence were a triumph for us all, as each of us had contributed to his journey.

My mother went to the kitchen to prepare a special treat, mixing fenugreek with flour and sugar to make Halwa, a traditional sweet. Mahmoud took it to the neighborhood oven to bake. When he returned, we didn't wait for my mother to serve it on plates; we all reached in, snatching pieces as she playfully waved her hand, pretending to slap our hands away but never

actually doing so. She managed to save some plates for neighbors and relatives who came to congratulate us.

My grandfather's health had severely declined, and it was evident that his time with us was limited. He rarely left his room and could no longer attend the daily meetings in the neighborhood square. Hassan's failure in school seemed to have added to his worries, and he no longer participated in our family events. Nevertheless, we all gathered around him, trying to cheer him up.

Mahmoud had to wait for the summer break and a whole year after completing his high school to join a university in Egypt. It was an ideal opportunity for him to earn some money for his upcoming expenses. The idea of working inside the 1948-occupied territories was completely rejected, so he had to continue working in my uncle's factory and look for additional jobs to save enough for his studies.

After much thought, Mahmoud and my mother decided that he would stop working at my uncle's factory. Instead, my brothers Hassan and Mohammed would work there, allowing Mahmoud to focus on a more lucrative and serious job.

Mahmoud's new business idea didn't require significant capital. He decided to set up a vegetable stall at the edge of the local vegetable market. This small venture required only a few shekels to start and promised modest earnings. However, saving consistently over the year could accumulate a reasonable sum for his future studies.

Indeed, my mother would wake Mahmoud up early every morning just as dawn broke and the curfew was lifted. He would head to the city's wholesale market with three or four shekels to buy whatever vegetables were available. He would then return to his stall, arrange the vegetables, and begin selling them. By noon, he would gather any unsold vegetables to bring home for our mother to use. Every day, they would save a portion of the day's earnings—twenty piastres or a quarter of a shekel—as savings.

The daytime curfews recurred periodically. However, since the neighbors needed the vegetables Mahmoud bought, his business did not suffer during these curfews. His stall would move to our house, and in the narrow alleys

of the neighborhood, he could deliver produce to the neighbors without fear of the occupation soldiers. The soldiers were hesitant to enter the camp, fearing ambushes set up by the resistance fighters and guerrillas.

As the resistance and guerrilla activities continued to grow, the military commanders realized the challenges posed by the crowded camps and narrow alleys. They contemplated carving broad streets through the camps to divide them into manageable quarters for easier control and sweeping.

One day, a curfew was imposed on the camp, and a large force of soldiers arrived, almost as if it were a new occupation. Some soldiers carried buckets of red paint and brushes. On some house walls, they marked large red X's; on others, they drew vertical lines after taking measurements, followed by small X's. Notifications were handed to the owners of these marked houses, stating that the houses with large X's would be demolished entirely. The sections indicated by the small X's in houses with vertical lines would be partially demolished. With each notification delivered, there were cries, curses, and wailing as people wondered where they would go with their children, wives, and husbands, facing the prospect of being on the streets again.

Fortunately for us, none of the streets planned for construction affected our house, as no marks were made on it. It became apparent that our house would now face a wide street instead of the narrow alley, unlike our neighbor's house, which was set for complete demolition.

It indeed seemed to be a stroke of luck for my brother Mahmoud. Had our house or a portion of it been demolished, the money Mahmoud had saved for his studies in Egypt wouldn't have been enough to repair our home, and he wouldn't have been able to leave the sector and leave us on the street. But, as my mother often said, Allah favored him and her, the downtrodden one.

Days later, bulldozers accompanied by a large military force arrived and announced the mandatory evacuation of the houses marked for demolition. The bulldozers began to demolish the houses ruthlessly, crushing them like a monster grinding the bones of its prey, breaking the hearts of hundreds of men, women, and children who found themselves in the streets once again.

The bulldozers continued their relentless work in the camp, and with each pass, another man would collapse, a woman would fall after pulling her hair and slapping her cheeks in despair, or a man would be beaten brutally by soldiers for trying to block the bulldozer from demolishing the roof sheltering his children. By evening, hundreds of tragedies had unfolded, and people were left to tend to each other's wounds. My uncle's house, being empty since his wife's marriage, was temporarily offered by my mother to two neighboring families to stay in until they figured out their next steps. We were showered with words of gratitude and praise for our help.

The following day, representatives from the Red Cross arrived to assess the situation and gather data. The next day, housing officials from the UNRWA came to collect information and informed the people that they would be rehoused in new buildings constructed by the agency in different areas. This news was received as a great relief, a blessing from heaven.

People bombarded the officials with questions about when and where they would be rehoused and the specifics of the process. While the officials didn't have clear answers, it didn't take long before families began moving into their new homes built in the same sector or in the city of El-Arish, as Israel had occupied the entire Sinai in 1967. The two families staying in my uncle's house left during this period, each receiving a new home.

The opening of work opportunities in the territories occupied in 1948 caused significant turmoil among the people. However, the dire need of many to provide for their children and maintain their dignity in decent homes with doors that close and walls that shield their privacy compelled them to seek work in the occupied territories.

The necessity for education, medicine, and coping with the high cost of living proved to be stronger than any opposition to working in Israel. This led to a gradual acceptance and normalization of such work. The stream of life revived the desire to continue living and to improve life standards. Parents were focused on ensuring a better life and future for their children, and this need gradually made working in Israel a common practice, beyond the control of the resistance fighters to prevent or stop.

After the streets were expanded and job opportunities in Israel opened up, coupled with the fierce war waged by the Israeli intelligence and army against the resistance, there was a noticeable sense of relief. Curfews were lifted more frequently in the mornings to allow workers to leave early for their jobs in places like Haifa and Jaffa, traveling hours from the West Bank and Gaza. It became evident that the living standards of families whose heads worked in Israel were gradually improving. Within a short period, one could see noticeable changes in the neighborhood – people raising the roofs of their houses from tiles to zinc sheets, enhancing the walls, installing sturdy doors, and buying cement and coarse sand from the beach mixed with shells to pave their house floors.

Our house, despite being one of the best in the neighborhood before the war, began to look modest compared to the improved houses of our neighbors. Some neighbors, unable to afford significant changes, resorted to using large pieces of nylon to cover their tile roofs. They would secure the nylon with wooden strips nailed down, preventing it from sliding off. This project, although not costly, offered a reasonable solution to the problem of rainwater leaking into the rooms.

After discussing with Mahmoud, my mother decided to add nylon to our house's roof. Mahmoud purchased the necessary materials and borrowed tools from a neighbor. My brothers Hassan and Mohammed helped him with the installation. This improvement was a remarkable development in our lives during the winter, as we could now sleep comfortably without the worry of water leaks, the sound of droplets, or the spray splashing on our faces and beds.

As a third-grade student, our school had a routine visit from the agency's doctor who would check the health conditions of the students. If he found any student showing clear signs of malnutrition or poor physical development, he would note their names. These students would later receive cards allowing them to eat once at the health center's nutrition center, run by the UNRWA in the camp. During one of these visits, the doctor noted my name, and I knew I would be receiving a nutrition card. When I received it, I was overjoyed.

I took the card home and excitedly told my siblings. Fatima, however, was extremely upset and tried to snatch the card from me, insisting that we weren't poor. I called out to my mother, who reassured Fatima that there was no shame in receiving the nutrition card. We were refugees, and it was natural for one of the children to get the card. We were already dependent on the agency for housing, schooling, and healthcare. When our houses were demolished, it was the agency that provided us with new homes. Reluctantly, Fatima let go of the card, still unconvinced.

Every day, during or after school hours, hundreds of boys and girls would go to the nutrition center. We would stand in a long line, enter one by one after much jostling and quarreling, and then be silent because the director of the center would sit behind a desk. He would take the card from each of us, cross out the number and date, hand back the card, and give us a small loaf of bread. Another worker would then give us a tray with several compartments, each containing a different type of food, including fruits or pudding.

We would take our trays to the dining hall, sit at tables with chairs, and devour the delicious food. After eating, we would throw the trays through the kitchen window for washing and exit through a designated door. At this exit, a staff member would search us to ensure we hadn't taken any food out, as it was meant to be consumed inside for health reasons. Those caught trying to sneak food out would have it confiscated and thrown away as a lesson to eat their food inside.

Ibrahim, my best friend, and I were always together. One Tuesday, which was kofta day, Ibrahim came with me to the nutrition center. We had agreed that I would sneak half of my bread stuffed with kofta for him in a small nylon bag I had brought.

I sat at the table, Ibrahim expectantly waiting for me at the exit. With deft and cautious movements, I stuffed half my bread with a portion of my kofta, tucking it into a nylon bag, then stealthily sliding it into my pants. After consuming the rest of my meal, I stood up, carefully adjusting my trousers to avoid any suspicion during the inspection. I tossed my plate through the kitchen window and approached the door, where Mrs. Aisha stood for the inspection. Raising my arms above my head, I played the role of an obedient

boy as she conducted a swift search. Cleared, I stepped outside, scanning for Ibrahim while reaching into my trousers to retrieve the half loaf.

Just as I got hold of it, I saw them – about thirty boys from a troublesome family living near the health center, whom we dubbed "the Heksos." They charged towards me, intent on snatching the sandwich from my grasp. Without a second thought, I bolted, pumping my legs as fast as they could carry me. After a considerable distance, I glanced back to ensure they had given up the chase. But in that brief moment of distraction, a large stone hurled from one of them struck me directly in the eye. The world went dark before me, the bread slipping from my grasp and hitting the dirt-covered ground. Clutching my ration card, I continued to sprint, shouting for my mother, until I reached our home. My mother, gripped by panic, lifted my hand from my eye to assess the damage, then cried out in despair, "Oh no, his eye is gone!"

She grabbed her headscarf, alternately carrying and dragging me by the hand as we raced to the UNRWA clinic. Upon arrival, we headed straight to the ophthalmology room, staffed by a specialist nurse. However, my mother's frantic state had caused her to forget the essential nutrition card, a prerequisite for any treatment at the clinic. Despite her pleas and desperate attempts to explain the situation, the staff remained adamant: no card, no treatment. I sat, resigned, on a wooden bench outside the eye clinic as my mother rushed back home to fetch the forgotten card, hoping to return before the clinic's closing time. After the nurse was convinced that my mother had indeed gone to fetch the nutrition card, he called me over and sat me down on the chair. He began examining my eye and applied a thick gauze patch over it, securing it in place. I waited there, anticipating my mother's return. She came back, breathless from the hurried journey, having run a considerable distance. The registration procedures were completed, and my mother was reassured by the nurse that my eye was fine. She tenderly held my hand, and we slowly made our way back home.

At that time, my main concern wasn't the injury to my eye, but rather that my sister Fatima had taken advantage of the situation and torn up my food card. It felt as though she had blinded my other eye by depriving me of the meals at the canteen.

Our family's financial situation was average during this period. Some families had progressed beyond us, thanks to their breadwinners working inside the occupied territories, while others, like the family of our neighbor Um al-Abd, were much worse off. Um al-Abd was a widow with four sons and three daughters, left to fend for themselves after her husband was martyred in 1967. She often said her husband left them "as mere scraps of flesh."

Though the UNRWA provided for most aspects of life, there were corners that needed financial coverage beyond what the agency could provide. Um al-Abd sought out every possible means of honest earnings. Her children would venture out every Friday with burlap bags, heading towards an area near the 1948 borders, where they would collect old shoes, expired canned goods, and empty beer bottles from a nearby Jewish settlement's dump. They brought back whatever they could sell or use, loading up their bags for the return trip.

Um al-Abd would wash the bottles thoroughly and sell them to another woman who peddled them near the clinic. People bought these bottles to store medicine dispensed by the clinic. She cleaned the shoes, paired them, and sold them to a vendor in the market, who then sold them to the camp residents. She also visited the canteen every morning to buy surplus milk allocations from other women, turning it into jameed (a semi-solid form of yogurt) and selling it at the school gate. Since the children often didn't have money, she traded the jameed for pieces of bread, using some for her family and selling the rest to scrape together enough money to meet her children's needs. She was a woman content with her lot, raising her martyr's children with immense dedication and pride.

My brother Mahmoud was accepted into the Engineering Faculty at Cairo University. The day we learned this, we celebrated in our usual way – with loud cheers, playful attacks on Mahmoud, pinching and hitting him. My mother prepared a tray of Halabia, a traditional sweet, and we were showered with blessings and congratulations. Mahmoud then began preparing for his journey. The vegetable stall had to continue operating as it would cover his educational expenses for the upcoming years. Hence, Hassan had to manage it in a way that fit with his school schedule and commitments. Mahmoud diligently worked at the stall until the day before

his departure to Egypt, and I was to take over his cleaning and organizing responsibilities at our uncle's factory, along with my brother Mohammed.

Before Mahmoud's departure to Egypt, my mother prepared many items for him to take along, including olive oil, tea, dried molokhia, dried okra, and other similar items. They bought Egyptian pounds from the currency market with the savings they had accumulated. Mahmoud took these to a tailor, who sewed them into a belt inside his trousers. This was to ensure he could take the money to Egypt, as the Jewish customs officers often confiscated funds and prohibited travelers from carrying money to Egypt.

Mahmoud visited the Red Cross office, which coordinated the travel of students from the Gaza Strip to Egypt and back, between the Israeli authorities and the Egyptian government. He finally learned his departure date. Like other students, he had to visit the intelligence department at the Saraya, where they were interrogated, warned against working with any organization, and attempts were made to recruit some of them.

On the last night before Mahmoud's departure, we stayed up later than usual. He was going to leave us for about a year. The night was a strange mix of laughter, tears, joy, and sadness, especially filled with my mother's instructions and commands to Mahmoud.

We woke up early the next morning. My mother had packed two large, used suitcases that Mahmoud had bought, filling them with all his necessities. My brother Hassan carried one, and our cousin Hassan the other, as they left with my mother to bid Mahmoud farewell. We said our goodbyes at the edge of our neighborhood and returned home, feeling a deep sense of sadness. We were beginning to understand the true meaning of parting from loved ones.

They escorted him to the Red Cross headquarters where many people had gathered to bid farewell to their children. The students waited inside the buses while their families stood at a distance, waving goodbye. As the buses departed, the families continued to wave until the vehicles disappeared from sight.

Days after Mahmoud's departure, one of our neighbors complained that my cousin Hassan was bothering and harassing one of her daughters. My

mother's face turned red with embarrassment, and she promised to address the issue. With my grandfather bedridden and Mahmoud in Egypt, everyone left in the house was younger than Hassan, who had grown up and become difficult to manage. Thus, my mother thought to use cunning and persuasion.

In the late afternoon, she called him over and began to speak to him, reminding him of the importance of being a good neighbor, his father's legacy as a martyr, our family's reputation, and what people would say. Eventually, Hassan promised not to approach the neighbor's daughter again. My mother asked, "A promise of honor, Hassan?" He replied, "A promise of honor, auntie."

Days later, the neighbor returned, trembling, and burst into the house, exclaiming, "Oh, Mahmoud's mother, this boy is no saint; he cornered my daughter in the street and laid his hands on her." My mother was furious and tried to calm her down, saying, "You know neither you nor I have any men to discipline him, but God knows your daughters are like my own. Let's think of how to put an end to this boy's behavior." They sat down to discuss. My mother proposed that they would tie him up while he slept and beat him with her and the boys' help. If he repeated his behavior, she would seek help from one of the resistance fighters, consequences be damned.

My mother prepared a rope and a stick, and when Hassan returned home, ate dinner, and went to bed, she, along with my brothers Hassan and Muhammad, entered his room. After making sure he was asleep, she gently and carefully tied his legs and hands with the rope. Then she woke my grandfather to inform him of Hassan's behavior. Shaking with anger, my grandfather said, "May God blacken your face, Hassan...blacken your face," and instructed them to beat him, even break his arms and legs. When Hassan woke up and found himself bound, he started threatening and cursing as the stick began to fall on his sides. After a severe beating, my mother made it clear they had kept the matter within the house to avoid public shame, but if he harassed Sa'ad again, she would inform the resistance fighters and ask them to break his arms and legs. They left him tied until the morning, when she asked my cousin Ibrahim to untie him.

Ibrahim was kind, obedient, intelligent, and diligent in his studies. He went and unbound his brother, but Hassan hit him while making threats. Then, Hassan rushed into our room, threatening and attempting to intimidate my mother, who yelled at him, "Wake up! Do you think you can scare me? You are a neglectful person, and the neglectful cannot scare anyone. You'll never become a man or a real man."

Hassan roared, moved towards my mother, and pushed her, causing her to fall. We all, boys and girls alike, attacked him, knocking him to the ground, hitting, biting, and pulling his hair. He got up, kicking, hitting, cursing, and left the house. Hassan left and did not return. We heard he had gone to the territories occupied in 1948 (inside Israel) and was working there, deciding not to return to his studies.

My grandfather's health deteriorated, and he passed away, leaving us in tears and sorrow—may God have mercy on him and grant him paradise. My grandfather died without knowing anything about the fate of my father, who had been missing for over five years, without seeing his grandson who fled Gaza to work in Israel, and without Mahmoud by his side. However, we did our duty, and the neighbors stood by us, as the camp is like one big family in joy and sorrow.

## Chapter Eight

Every morning, hundreds of children from the camp, ranging from seven-year-olds attending first grade to eighteen-year-olds in high school, would head out to their schools around seven o'clock. Groups of boys would follow groups of girls, and so on, each morning. The majority of the camp's youth didn't engage in romantic relationships, adhering to the unwritten rule of treating neighbor's daughters like sisters.

My mother always cautioned my siblings and me against relationships with the opposite sex. She frequently warned my brothers not to look at or interact with neighbor's daughters and cautioned all of us against disrespecting others' honor, reminding us that disrespect could be returned, no matter how clever one might think they are. This deterred us from even thinking about engaging in the behaviors some boys and young men did, such as standing on the corner of the street watching girls go to and from school.

Some of these young men stood by just to watch the girls or to throw fleeting comments like, "Where are you going, beautiful?" or "Don't ignore us... pride belongs to God." Others stood to catch a glimpse of the girls they loved, hoping for a relationship to develop, a look of acknowledgment that could fill their day with joy, or the chance to pass a heartfelt written message. Despite their hardships, camp residents, like everyone else, experienced love and lived life fully, though traditionally and with a high level of respect for customs, making expressions of love and affection more restrained and respectful, often confined to longing glances, distant admiration, or especially helpful deeds that might prompt others to wonder about the motives behind such dedication.

"However, some of the youth in the camp were braver in crossing those boundaries, allowing themselves to write and exchange love letters, and to meet during the goings and comings from school, even if it meant walking one behind the other as if by coincidence. Sometimes, they would exchange a few words as though each was speaking with his or her friends. Some girls even allowed themselves to open the window of their room at a specific hour when their beloved would pass by at that very moment to throw his

letter through it. Often, many of the girls were beaten by their fathers, brothers, or mothers when they were caught exchanging letters with young men. Yet, all these stories were very few and rare in the camp during that early period after the war.

On the other hand, the number of workers heading in the morning to work inside the territories occupied in 1948 gradually increased, and the phenomenon grew along with other accompanying phenomena. In the early hours of the morning, men would leave, each carrying a small bag or a backpack with his day's food, walking a long distance to the workers' stop. There, a large number of cars, trucks, and buses would be present, some heading to Jaffa, others to Ashdod, Tel Aviv, and beyond, with each driver calling out to passengers for his destination. The workers would gather, boarding the vehicles that took off with them. Many street vendors selling falafel, beans, or salep found in this large gathering of workers a suitable target and a profitable market for their business. As the workers made their way to the vehicle that would transport them, each would pull a few coins from his pocket to buy some falafel balls, quickly eat them to put in his food bag, and then rush to the vehicle that would carry them, throwing themselves into it to resume the sleep they had cut short by an hour or two until reaching their workplace, there in the heart of the occupied homeland.

These workers were employed in construction, agriculture, or cleaning, in any of the difficult and professional fields of work disdained by the Jews. The Jewish employer (boss) would stand over them issuing orders and monitoring their work. At ten o'clock in the morning, they would take a half-hour break to eat their breakfast or lunch and drink tea if they were able to prepare it. Then they would get up to continue their day's work. By three or four in the afternoon, they would finish their work, look for a car to take them back to Gaza or the West Bank, sleep on the return journey, and return to their homes exhausted from the labor."

On Fridays, they work only until 2 p.m., as Jewish employers prepare for the Sabbath, which is a weekly holiday. Some of these workers work on a daily basis, receiving their wages at the end of the workday, and then head out again the next day, standing at the workers' stops where contractors and

Jewish employers in their short pants come in their cars looking for laborers, prompting the workers to flock to them. The employers select those who fit their needs and agree on a wage. Others work more consistently on a weekly, monthly, or permanent basis.

As relationships between Arab workers and Jewish employers evolved and in the face of exhaustion from daily travel, employers began looking for places for their workers to stay throughout the week. Workers leave their homes early on Sunday morning and stay at their jobs until Friday noon, returning to their families with their pockets filled with money and their bags or baskets with items brought from Israel.

Some workers rent houses in Qalqilya or Tulkarm to be closer to the inside, sharing a room or house where they live throughout the week, and sometimes even for the month, to save on transportation costs and spare the effort and fatigue of daily commuting. There, within the occupied land, Palestinian workers encounter a new world with completely different customs, norms, and values from those of our people. The vast majority of these workers remain unaffected, looking upon it with disdain and contempt, but some young men get influenced, starting to drink alcohol, frequent brothels, nightclubs, and dance halls. In rare cases, one might meet a Jewish girl, develop a relationship with her, and start living with her according to the values and customs of her society.

With the influx of worker movement, the need for more vehicles to transport these workers increased, opening opportunities for a new set of drivers. Some of these workers managed to buy a car to travel to work, taking a specific number of workers from their neighbors who pay the usual fare, saving them the morning walk to the workers' stop and the evening return home. Thus, Peugeot cars started entering the areas, increasing the presence and movement of vehicles. One of these workers might bring back chairs, seats, or other types of furniture on the back of his car, which his Jewish employer (master) wanted to dispose of after buying new replacements, using them to improve the living standards in his home, gift to friends or relatives, or to sell in the market (the flea market).

Jewish merchants began flocking to the city of Hebron and other nearby towns, especially Tulkarm and Qalqilya, to purchase their supplies. Some of

them contracted with blacksmith or carpentry workshops, or the like, to supply them with a hundred doors or a thousand windows or similar, finding their needs at much lower prices than in Israeli factories. Palestinian employers raised their prices, thus earning more and employing other local workers. Despite the general improvement in people's financial situation, resistance continued in waves of fluctuation, never solely linked to the material situation but also to national belonging and a sense of duty. The financial difficulties fueled these feelings, hence the continuation of guerrilla operations: bombings here, shootings there, curfews imposed, arrests and investigations conducted, passersby detained for hours, spies discovered and killed.

The influx of hundreds and thousands of workers into the Jewish state opened opportunities for militants to consider executing widespread operations within the territories occupied since 1948, targeting population centers in cities, towns, villages, and settlements, thus opening a new front in the resistance. Abd al-Hafiz, the son of our neighbor Umm al-Abd, convinced his mother that for the future of all his siblings, he should stop his studies and work to enable his brothers and sisters to live and complete their education, relieving her from the exhausting tasks that wore her down. After repeated attempts to convince her, she agreed to the idea.

Abd al-Hafiz, like thousands of others, went to work inside Israel every morning and returned in the evening. After months, they managed to install a decent door for their house, replaced the tiles with corrugated iron sheets (zinc), and paved the house's floor with cement. However, after a while, everyone discovered that Abd al-Hafiz had another goal for working in Israel beyond improving living standards and educating his siblings. About two years later, it was discovered that he had joined the ranks of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, aiming to prepare and plan for guerrilla operations inside the territories occupied since 1948. Indeed, months after he started his job and became accustomed to the new reality, he occasionally took a bomb, hid it in his food bag, and carried it to Jaffa. There, he chose a bus, café, or nightclub to place and hide it before returning home after work, where it would then explode, causing injuries, damages, or sometimes fatalities. Abd al-Hafiz remained in this state for two years, working with utmost caution and carefulness. He succeeded in

executing many operations. The investigations conducted by the intelligence agency (Shin Bet at the time) led to significant suspicion towards Abd al-Hafiz. One night, a large force from the occupation army raided the neighborhood, surrounded the house, and arrested him for interrogation. There, he was subjected to hanging, beating, and torture, all the while denying any involvement in the accusations against him. Eventually, they arrested a colleague of his who confessed that Abd al-Hafiz was an organizer in the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Faced with this, he confessed only to that fact and was sentenced to a year and a half in prison.

As the academic year ended and the summer vacation approached, signaling the return of my brother Mahmoud from Egypt, we would start visiting the Red Cross headquarters to inquire about the return schedule of university students from Egypt, or to check the announcement board there where the names and return dates of the returning groups were posted. On the day Mahmoud was to return, we all would go out to wait for him at the passport building, where buses carrying students accompanied by military jeeps arrived. They would enter the passport area, disembark, and wait in the waiting hall where their families would rush to them, embracing, kissing, and greeting them before heading home.

Every year, we sat there waiting for Mahmoud's return. When he came out to us, we would rush towards him; he would embrace and kiss us, ask about our well-being, and kiss our mother's head and hand. She would look at him with pride and tears of joy in her eyes, overjoyed by her son, the esteemed engineer Mahmoud. Despite our limited means, our mother would make an effort to prepare various types of food to honor Mahmoud's return and compensate for a year of absence.

Mahmoud would bring us some cotton clothes from Egyptian manufactures. In those days, we began to know the texture and smell of new clothes, having worn only what we received from the agency or bought second-hand before. Since the end of his first year of study, our mother started calling him "the esteemed engineer."

On a street corner, a group of young men spread a black blanket, received from the agency, and sat on it to play cards (Shedeh) every day after the

afternoon. They sat there spending some of their time in the absence of other entertainment means, continuing their game until after the evening prayer when darkness fell. They would then gather their cards, shake off their blanket, fold it, and return to their homes, as curfew time was approaching.

One day, Sheikh Ahmad passed by them; that's what they called him, although he was still young, returning from the evening prayer at the mosque. He greeted them as usual whenever he passed by them, but this time, he approached them, sat with them, and they clearly expressed their surprise by stopping their play, gathering the cards, and paying full attention to the arrival of this unexpected visitor. Sheikh Ahmad sat with them and said, "Allow me to speak to you about an important matter concerning you." Their faces showed surprise, and they said, "Please, go ahead." The Sheikh started speaking at length, quoting verses from the Holy Quran and Hadiths, warning against wasting time in unbeneficial entertainment, urging obedience, worship of Allah, and performing the obligatory duties, reminding them of Allah's blessings, warning of the loss in the hereafter and the punishment of hell. He gently linked all this to the future of Islam, which must raise its flag in the land of Palestine, the land of Isra and Mi'raj, until the land is liberated, and the people are freed, and the efforts succeed.

The four young men remained silent, astonished by the speech they heard for the first time, appreciating the strange connection between religion and nationalism, a mixture they had never heard before. The Palestinian scene had recently accustomed to seeing either the Sheikh or the religious person disconnected from reality and the national concern or the nationalist or guerrilla who has no relation to religion or religiosity. They started to show signs of admiration, satisfaction, and conviction with the words of the young Sheikh.

One of them asked, "And what is required of us, Sheikh?" A slight smile appeared on Sheikh Ahmad's lips, saying, "Tomorrow, God willing, you will bathe, purify yourselves, perform ablution, then go to the mosque for prayer, whenever the call to prayer is raised." The young men nodded their heads, indicating their agreement. Sheikh Ahmad greeted each of them one by one, pressing his hand on each, and then left. They gathered their cards,

shook and folded their blanket, and left as darkness fell and curfew time had arrived.

After the campaign to carve out streets, it became clear that the occupation army's ability to control the camp had become much easier. The patrols, being vehicle-borne, could move around easily and monitor activities within the camp, thereby easily besieging any quarter where hostile movements were suspected, searching it, and arresting or killing those they suspected. The speed and mobility of the patrol cars, enabling them to reach all corners of the camp unexpectedly, began to weigh heavily on the resistance and the guerrillas. It became necessary to develop a new method for quickly alerting the guerrillas about the nearby presence of occupation forces, allowing them to take caution and prepare. Whenever occupation soldiers appeared anywhere, and as soon as any of the boys, girls, and even adults, men, and women saw the occupation forces, they shouted loudly "Bai'oo" (Sell), and everyone who heard this word immediately repeated it loudly ("Bai'oo.. Bai'oo.. Bai'oo and be relieved from it"). The intention was to demand the occupation soldiers to sell their weapons.

This phenomenon of calling out and raising the voice with this call quickly turned into a form of folk anthem. When students on their way to and from school saw an occupation patrol, their throats opened up in a rampant folk song ("Bai'oo.. Bai'oo.. Bai'oo and be relieved from it, and sandals are better than it"), and they kept repeating this as long as their eyes were fixed on that patrol, leaving the soldiers unsure how to react, thus falling into confusion and perplexity.

The guerrillas heard these voices and knew their location, taking their precautions and preparing accordingly. Usually, it was the children who chanted this call, but when no children were present and the adults had no choice but to chant it to alert the guerrillas, they did not hesitate to raise their voices with it. Days passed quickly, and we started counting the days for Mahmoud's return from Egypt, having graduated from the College of Engineering. We frequented the Red Cross headquarters daily, looking for his name among the batches returning from Egypt and his return date. After days of visiting the headquarters and inquiring, the lists of returnees

were posted on the announcement board, and we found Mahmoud's name in the third batch. We flew home to inform our mother of the arrival date of the esteemed engineer Mahmoud.

The preparation and readiness to welcome him were in full swing. The most significant thing was that she asked my brother Hassan to buy a quantity of lime (plaster), for which we prepared a pit in the middle of the courtyard, placed it there, and poured water over it to cool it down. Then we started to filter it and whitewashed the entire courtyard with white and a touch of blue. Then my mother began preparing food and drinks, especially fenugreek and sweet basbousa for us and the loved ones who would come to share in our joy and blessings.

On the day Mahmoud was due to arrive, we got ready and went out to welcome him opposite the General Directorate of Passports. The buses, watched over by army vehicles, entered the premises. We waited eagerly, along with hundreds of other families. The returnees began to emerge one by one until Mahmoud appeared. We ran towards him, our mother leading us, and he welcomed us with all his love, tears streaming from his eyes. When we reached our mother, who shed tears of immense joy, Mahmoud bent down to kiss her head and hands, and she blessed his graduation. He murmured, "I have returned, mother, and the era of hardship and toil has ended, God willing, never to return." "Thank God, thank God, God willing, God willing," she repeated. As soon as we reached the house, nearly the entire neighborhood gathered to welcome Mahmoud in a celebration resembling a massive public event. All the men hugged and kissed him, the women congratulated my mother, some even ululated. We entered the house with difficulty due to the crowded street despite its width, as neighbors pushed into the courtyard to offer their blessings and congratulations. My mother and my siblings were busy offering sweets and drinks to them, and calls of "Ya" engineer echoed as neighbors called Mahmoud, asking him about Egypt, the university, his health, and everything.

As the sun neared setting and darkness began to envelope, the curfew approached, so the neighbors started to leave their homes, repeating words of congratulations and blessings. We, the family, sat in the house

around Mahmoud alone, including Uncle Ibrahim's household, which had become part of our family without any distinction. The discussions about hopes and aspirations began. Hassan would clear the stall and dedicate himself only to studying. Muhammad and I would stop our modest work at our uncle's factory. We planned to build a new room in the house, raise the roof over two rooms, elevate their walls, roof them with asbestos, raise their floor, and pave the courtyard's floor with cement, etc. These projects were only to commence once Mahmoud got a job and started receiving his salary.

It was clear that Mahmoud had no intention of leaving the camp or the sector to work abroad. He was pleased to return home after completing his studies away from his family. We spent two more days celebrating Mahmoud's return and graduation, welcoming well-wishers. However, on the third night, hours into the curfew, while we were trying to sleep, we heard the sounds of patrol cars, which then drove away. Unexpectedly, we heard soldiers in our courtyard and their loud knocks on the door, calling us out. My mother and sisters quickly covered their heads, and we followed Mahmoud out to the courtyard, where we found dozens of soldiers occupying our home, with their rifles pointed at us from every direction.

My mother, emerging from the room, yelled, "What do you want? What are you after? What do you need?" The officer, addressing Mahmoud, asked, "Are you Mahmoud?" Mahmoud affirmed, and the officer said they needed him briefly at the headquarters. My mother protested, noting he had just returned from Egypt, but the officer insisted they only needed to ask him a few questions and promised he would return by morning. Mahmoud was asked to accompany them immediately, without changing his clothes. My mother attempted to follow, but they stopped her and closed the door behind them, as the vehicles sped away from our home and neighborhood.

That night, we couldn't find peace or sleep, as my mother screamed, cried, and lamented her luck, saying, "The poor woman wanted to celebrate, but found no place for her joy." Fatima and Hassan tried to calm her, reassuring her that Mahmoud would return by morning, as the officer had said it was only for a few questions. She repeated, "Just a few questions? If it was just a few questions, they could have waited for daylight and summoned him

formally." She then returned to lamenting, "Oh, my misfortune, oh my misfortune, what have you done, my son Mahmoud? What have you done?"

As dawn broke and the curfew lifted, dressed and accompanied by my brother Hassan, she headed to the headquarters. The soldiers guarding the gate stopped her, preventing her from entering while she tried to explain what happened and her desire to see what happened with Mahmoud. They didn't understand what she was saying and only repeated, "Go away from here."

Faced with the uncomfortable situation, Hassan convinced her that they wouldn't allow her entry and that they should wait across the street until Mahmoud's release. He gently pulled her across and made her sit, waiting as hours passed with no sign of Mahmoud. She alternated between wanting to leave and attempting to enter, while Hassan dissuaded her, warning it would only cause trouble. Back at home, we declared a state of mourning, anxiously awaiting the return of our mother, Hassan, and Mahmoud, but the wait prolonged.

As the evening approached, our mother and Hassan returned, their slow steps and sorrowful faces indicating the grim news without needing to utter a word. We didn't dare to speak, each retreating into silence. Hassan sat beside our distraught mother, promising to seek a lawyer the next day to inquire about Mahmoud and to notify the Red Cross of his arrest, to which she agreed.

Early the next morning, they set out to fulfill this task, hiring a lawyer and informing the Red Cross, only to learn that nothing could be done but wait, possibly without any news for a month. The first few days were dark and heavy, yet we learned to adapt to misfortune, accepting that all our prior plans were either canceled or indefinitely postponed. Hassan had to continue working at the stall, and I, along with Muhammad, kept our jobs at our uncle's factory for cleaning and organizing.

Every few days, my mother and Hassan would visit the lawyer and the Red Cross, checking for updates. After more than a month, the lawyer informed

us that Mahmoud would be charged and presented in court, suggesting the matter seemed minor and resolution could be expected within two or three weeks. About two weeks later, we learned that Mahmoud had been taken to court and the judge had extended his detention by another two months. Another two weeks passed before we were informed by the Red Cross that Mahmoud could receive visitors in Gaza Central Prison, allowing us a visit on the first Friday of each month, starting the following month.

Hassan, having completed high school and facing our family's economic constraints that precluded studying abroad, chose to enroll in the industrial school run by UNRWA, accepted into the machining and fitting department. He was to start his two-year diploma course at the beginning of the year, hopeful despite the challenges our family faced.

## Chapter Nine

In Jordan, after the victory at Karameh, King Hussein famously declared, "We are all guerrillas," inspiring thousands of Palestinian youth from refugee camps across Arab countries to join Fatah, fueled by the dignity associated with the victory at Karameh. The Palestinian revolution began to firmly establish itself on the ground in Jordan and other Arab states, with its leaders, especially Yasser Arafat, being warmly welcomed in Arab capitals, notably in Cairo by Jamal Abdel Nasser, who was considered the leader of the Arab nation.

Many Palestinian families were divided between the West Bank and refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, or Syria, not just those who migrated in 1948 but also many families that were dispersed during the 1967 war, fleeing the Israeli occupation and fearing brutal massacres.

One such family was the family of the merchant Ahmad from Hebron, who often hosted my aunt's husband, Abdul Fattah, for conversations. They shared a good business relationship. Abu Ahmad had four sons; one stayed with him in Hebron, while the other three fled to Jordan during the 1967 occupation. Two of them joined the revolution in Jordan, and the third worked as a truck driver there. The ones involved in the revolution could never return to Hebron for fear of arrest by the occupying authorities, while the third, Ahmad, occasionally visited his family and sometimes sat with his father in his shop, where he would meet my aunt's husband and discuss the situation of Palestinians in Jordan.

The Palestinian situation in Jordan was undoubtedly a source of pride and dignity for all Palestinians, but Ahmad was concerned about the future. He believed that the growing Palestinian power in Jordan was starting to worry King Hussein. More alarmingly, some guerrillas there were acting without regard for people's feelings, possibly exaggerating in challenging those sentiments, which could justify conflicts between the revolution and the king. Ahmad expressed these fears more than once, but some attendees tried to reassure themselves that matters could never escalate to clashes and conflict, considering such an outcome impossible.

Suddenly, the news of the confrontations that came to be known as Black September in 1970 began to spread, evolving into real battles that resonated throughout the region and led to political movements at the level of Arab leaderships. Um Ahmad had three sons in Jordan amidst those fierce clashes, each with a wife and children, placing them in real danger. Um Ahmad found herself unable to sleep or eat, trembling with fear for them. Abu Ahmad tried to calm and reassure her, advising her to trust in God, for nothing would happen except what God had decreed. Yet, a mother's heart knows no peace in such situations.

Given the circumstances, Abu Ahmad decided to travel to Jordan to check on his sons and their families. Um Ahmad exclaimed, "Are you going alone?" He replied, "Yes," to which she questioned the purpose, expressing that her worry and concern would only increase. He asked, "What's the solution? What do you suggest?" She insisted they travel together. Despite his attempts to dissuade her, he could not. He arranged the permits for both of them, and they set off to Jordan, where the situation resembled a real war.

Reaching their son Saeed's house, the driver, was fraught with grave dangers. Once they arrived, they could not rest easy as the situation was extremely perilous, with gunfire never ceasing. They had to close the windows and barricade them with cabinets and house furniture to prevent bullets from entering and injuring anyone inside. They had to walk bent over all the time; if anyone dared to walk upright, everyone else would scream at them not to raise their head lest they be hit by a stray bullet. Abu Ahmad would mutter every so often, "This is from under your head; we were safe back there," to which Um Ahmad would reply that being there with their children and grandchildren, despite the danger, was a thousand times better than waiting back home in agony. He would then mutter, "Okay, okay, may God make things right... Oh Protector, Oh Protector."

The events of Black September ended, and the revolution moved to Lebanon. As things began to calm down, Abu Ahmad and his wife returned to Hebron. Abu Ahmad went back to his shop, talking about the horrors and real terror he witnessed firsthand, thanking God for their safety. The attendees congratulated him on his safe return, and he again thanked God for the safety of himself, Um Ahmad, their children, and grandchildren.

Not long after, radio announcements declared the death of Jamal Abdel Nasser, a shock to the Palestinian masses who largely saw him as the leader of the Arab nation and their hope. Protests erupted across the homeland, in its camps, cities, and villages, reflecting the deep connection and hope the Palestinian people had placed in Nasser as a unifying figure for the Arab cause.

In the Beach Camp, the education was suspended for several days due to a declared hunger strike; commercial establishments remained shut, and demonstrations roamed, led by a number of teachers and intellectuals from the camp. They chanted for Arab unity and recited the virtues and achievements of the late president, raising his pictures and banners bearing Arab nationalist slogans and mourning Abdel Nasser.

The majority of the camp's inhabitants joined these demonstrations. Men wept, women wailed, and their cries intensified. At the height of its fervor, the demonstration moved outside the camp towards the city's main roads, heading towards the city center and Omar al-Mukhtar Street. We, the school students, both young and old, boys and girls, joined in chanting: "Long live Arab unity... Palestine is Arab, with our souls, with our blood we redeem you, Jamal." Upon the demonstration's first contact with Omar al-Mukhtar Street, the main artery in Gaza City, it was met by a large force of the occupying army. They began firing at the demonstrators' heads to instill terror, forcing them to disperse and halt their progression. The demonstrators responded with stones, prompting the soldiers to start shooting at their legs, resulting in numerous injuries. The wounded were taken to al-Shifa Hospital and the Agency's clinic, which had been offering medical treatment since the 1967 occupation.

The occupation forces and their apparatus had implemented a series of measures aimed at controlling the areas and stifling the resistance movement. They began a census, issuing personal identity cards to adults, registering children under their parents' names, and mandating the registration of births. A Department of Passports and Permits was established to oversee these and other civil affairs of the citizens and residents.

Lines of communication and understanding were opened with the local chieftains and dignitaries, who were periodically summoned by the area's military governor to discuss the people's living conditions and convey his messages through them. Several of these chieftains or dignitaries would head to the military governor's office, dressed in their traditional robes and mustaches neatly groomed, to be respectfully received by the military governor—unless there had been demonstrations or attacks, in which case he would angrily reprimand them, with the attendees humbly responding with "Yes, your excellency" and similar expressions of deference.

These Mukhtars continued to carry the seals of their office, which were essential for citizens and residents when they needed to conduct any formal transactions. Whether someone wanted to travel abroad, apply for a permit to open a business, construct a building, or any other official procedure, it was mandatory to seek the Mukhtar of their town, who would stamp the document. Typically, a small fee was collected for this service.

Occupation patrols roamed the areas, armed with military maps, navigating through the intricacies of the regions day and night, on foot and in vehicles, across plains, valleys, mountains, cities, villages, and camps. Soldiers marched in two, three, or four rows, maintaining several meters distance from each other, guns at the ready, constantly looking around. Those at the back occasionally turned around completely to check if anyone was approaching them from behind.

They would march, then pause occasionally; the officer would consult the map before proceeding in a determined direction. Often, they would stop passersby, young men or adults, demanding to see their personal ID cards to identify them. The officer might compare the information against a list of names and ID numbers of individuals wanted for arrest and interrogation pulled from his pocket. Every day or every few days, a convoy of military jeeps, led by an unmarked civilian vehicle (bearing a yellow license plate), would head out, signaling to everyone that they were on their way to raid a house, a farm, or a location to arrest someone from the guerrilla fighters or their helpers. Sometimes, on their return, the arrested person would be seen with his hands tied around a jeep's seat bar, his head covered with a thick, military-colored sack. Sometimes we recognized the person by their

clothes, but other times we did not, as they were taken away for interrogation.

Despite these practices, resistance operations continued. Every few days, we would hear that a bomb had been thrown at a patrol, injuring several soldiers. Or a guerrilla might shoot at a military patrol vehicle or foot soldiers with a Carl Gustaf rifle, injuring or killing some. However, the frequent or somewhat apparent presence of armed guerrillas, those whose weapons peeked out from beneath their clothes or who carried them in burlap bags openly in front of residents, made it unmistakably clear that these were arms.

This ongoing tension and the visible measures of resistance against the occupation underscored not only the resilience of the Palestinian people but also the harsh realities of living under constant surveillance and the threat of military action. Despite the oppressive environment, the spirit of resistance among the Palestinian populace never waned, manifesting in both armed struggle and the daily acts of defiance against the occupation forces' attempts to control and suppress them.

All these manifestations began to gradually disappear as the guerrilla movement became increasingly clandestine. In the early seventies, Unit 101 was formed by General Ariel Sharon and led by Major Meir "Dagan". Known for wearing red berets and popularly referred to as "the red berets", this unit was considered special, undergoing highly specialized training. It became notorious for raiding alleys within camps and citrus groves, shooting at anyone moving under suspicion, attacking people, and assaulting and killing without any legal or moral restraint. This unit played a significant role in combating the resistance and eliminating many of its leaders and members.

The force from this unit consisted of about ten to twenty soldiers, all young men in official military uniform, equipped with new weapons and the best training. They wore red fabric berets, some carried big walkie-talkies on their backs with high antennas, ensuring constant communication with the command and control center.

One day, one of these units chased a guerrilla after somehow noticing the bomb he was holding and he started running through the camp's alleys to hide. They pursued him, firing shots, racing through the camp, with the soldier carrying the walkie-talkie updating their command center. They managed to pinpoint the area where the young man disappeared, quickly surrounding it with a massive reinforcement, effectively sealing it off. The residents were ordered to leave their homes, men and women, young and old alike, and were made to sit by the road. An interrogation process began with each person by intelligence officers. Soldiers entered homes, overturning everything in search of the young man or any hideout he might have used. It seems they eventually found the house where the young man was hiding.

The officer and intelligence agents entered and exited, consulting with each other, turning the house upside down. Ultimately, they located the entrance to the shelter where the young man was hiding. They started using loudspeakers to call him out, but no one emerged.

This scenario illustrates the intense and often violent interactions between Israeli forces and Palestinian guerrillas. The measures taken by the Israeli military, particularly the specialized units like the red berets, underscored the lengths to which the occupation forces went to suppress and eliminate any form of resistance. Despite the danger and the overwhelming odds, the spirit of resistance among Palestinians persisted, manifesting in various forms of defiance against the occupying forces.

As they approached the entrance to the shelter, shots were fired at them, causing the soldiers to retreat. Then, several soldiers from the unit stealthily placed explosives around the location, withdrew, and detonated them, shaking the entire camp. Subsequently, a bulldozer, which demolished the house, began excavating to uncover the shelter and its contents. Eventually, the bodies of four guerrillas who had been hiding in the shelter were extracted.

Over time, the presence of the Popular Liberation Forces diminished, and most resistance fighters became affiliated with Fatah. In some areas, the majority were from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). Arrests among men and young people did not cease, especially following

the execution of guerrilla operations. There were always some who were released; thus, while one woman's eyes were sore from crying over her husband or son taken away in the night, another rejoiced with ululations upon the return of her husband or son from detention, after days, months, or even years of absence in the darkness of interrogation cells.

The practice of arrest in Hebron began from the early days of the occupation. Senior Israeli leaders visited the home of the city's mayor and prominent figure, Sheikh Muhammad Ali Al-Ja'bari, expressing their respect and asking for his requests. He asked them to ensure their soldiers refrained from violating the honor and property of the people, to which they assured compliance, and a reasonable degree of this commitment was initially observed.

However, in the following days, vast areas of land, mostly owned by the Al-Ja'bari family along with other families, were confiscated. These lands became the site for the construction of Kiryat Arba settlement, halting the completion of the Khalid bin Walid Mosque adjacent to the confiscated lands. The Osman bin Affan school, the old bus garage in the city center, and the Al-Dabboya building were also seized. These sites were initially used as gathering and staging points, which over time transformed into military bases and launch points for settlers moving towards the Ibrahimi Mosque. The Jews, considering the mosque a sacred place and part of their heritage, coveted complete control over it and aimed to expel Muslims from it.

The enemy began to exhibit intensified military movements over time, yet consistently aimed to avoid clashes with the locals. Efforts were made to develop and solidify their relationships with them, maintaining at least non-hostile relations. The friction caused by some altercations between Arab and Jewish youths concerned some of the senior settlers, such as Rabbi Levinger and others. They approached the local dignitaries for reconciliation, strictly adhering to Arab customs, emphasizing their desire for good neighborly relations and the continuation of brotherly ties. They would take "Al-Atwa" (a traditional form of truce), agree on compensation, and pay the blood money if necessary, all to keep the Arabs in a state of non-aggression and peace.

Certain areas, particularly the camps close by, like Deheisheh and Aroub camps on the main road between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, maintained a level of resistance warmth. Soldiers, military officials, settlers, and tourists using this road occasionally faced guerrilla operations launched from these camps, leading to severe repercussions for the inhabitants: curfews were imposed, men were detained, beaten, and arrested for periods.

The condescending view that city dwellers, especially those from Hebron, had towards camp residents persisted over the years. Despite the occupation displacing these people from their villages and towns, the same occupation now oppresses everyone, whether refugees in their camps or citizens in their cities. Moreover, this superior attitude extended to the surrounding village folks as well, a common sentiment across various regions where city dwellers looked down upon villagers, treating them with superiority except in rare instances.

Villagers and their women plant, harvest, raise livestock, make cheese and yogurt, extract butter, and go down to the city to sell their baskets of figs, grapes, and various fruits, or pots of yogurt or butter, at the city markets for modest prices. Then, they purchase their necessities such as clothing, shoes, soap, and more from the city at higher prices, returning to their villages with a few coins, happy and content, feeling the world could not contain their joy.

The boy and the woman carrying a basket of figs or a basket of eggs await the bus's arrival in the village heart from early morning hours, readying themselves for the journey. Clutching his basket and she cradling a clay jar filled with milk or butter, they board the bus traversing the unpaved rural roads until reaching the paved path leading to the city market. There, merchants take from them what they've brought, and they wander the market, purchasing what pleases them before returning to wait for the bus back to their villages. Upon return to the village bus stop, some may have to walk long distances back home, even with heavy loads, waiting for a relative or acquaintance to help carry the load on their back, head, or donkey, yet they remain content and happy.

With the opening of employment opportunities for Palestinian workers inside the territories occupied in 1948, these workers began to learn much

about the Jewish society's details, customs, traditions, and religion. On Friday afternoons, entering Sabbath until some time after sunset, many do not observe this in their private affairs and homes, but official institutions halt, and lighting or extinguishing fires and electrical devices ceases strictly on their holy day, Yom Kippur. Just before Yom Kippur in 1973, which coincided with October 6th, workers returned home as factories, offices, and institutions were closed.

These workers would gather outside their homes, chatting, joking, drinking tea, and discussing their work, problems, and life matters. While in this state on October 6th, 1973, a neighbor rushed out, radio in hand, shouting that war had broken out between the Arabs and Israel. Everyone was startled, asking, "What? War? With Israel? Which Arabs?" The neighbor urged them to listen to the radio.

The voice of the Egyptian broadcaster thundered, reading the first military statement from the Egyptian Armed Forces' command, announcing the Egyptian attack on Sinai and the Suez Canal shores, and the beginning of controlling the Bar Lev Line. Many rubbed their eyes in disbelief, then joy and happiness erupted with the successive military statements confirming Syria's entry into the war and the Arab advances in battles. Reports of a large number of Israeli aircraft downed by Egyptian and Syrian defenses and the destruction of numerous tanks fueled dreams of victory and return among the camp's residents.

However, these dreams were interrupted by the loudspeakers of the occupying forces announcing a curfew and ordering everyone to stay indoors until further notice. People complied, dreaming this might be the last time they were confined, hoping that in a few days, the liberating Arab armies would arrive. Each family, including ours, gathered around the radio, clinging to every piece of news.

## Chapter Ten

The next day after my brother Mahmoud returned to Gaza from his studies in Egypt, another student returning from Egypt for the summer vacation was caught during inspection with a letter containing a list of names of Palestinian youths organized in Egypt for Fatah movement. They were to start organizing guerrilla activities in the Gaza Strip, and Mahmoud's name was on this list. Consequently, he was arrested and interrogated.

The interrogation section in Gaza prison was ominously known as "the slaughterhouse" due to the torture and oppression inflicted on its detainees. It consisted of a building with a corridor approximately four meters wide and twenty meters long, with various-sized rooms on either side where the interrogations took place. Detainees were made to sit or stand along this corridor, their faces to the wall, their heads covered with thick cloth bags down to their shoulders, and their hands tied behind their backs.

Soldiers patrolled among them, continuously beating, kicking, and slapping. If a detainee appeared to doze off or lose focus, they were doused with cold water. Periodically, one of the detainees was dragged into one of the side rooms. Once the bag was removed from their head, they faced a group of interrogators who spoke Arabic with a Hebrew accent, bombarding them with thousands of questions, interspersed with relentless kicking, beating, and slapping.

One of the interrogators played the role of the detainee's "friend," ostensibly rescuing them from the violent attackers who had been beating them, insisting, "Leave him, I'll talk to him. I know beating doesn't help, and I know he wants to confess." They would pretend to try to attack the detainee again, but he would push them out of the room. Then, in a softer tone, he attempted to coax a confession from the detainee, insisting denial was futile since "everything was already known." They threatened more violence and torture if the detainee remained uncooperative, sometimes offering a cigarette or a cup of tea as gestures of false kindness. If he succeeded in extracting a confession, he would ask the detainee to write it

down. If unsuccessful, the others would return to continue their harsh methods.

The detainee is thrown on his back, his hands shackled with iron chains behind his back, a cloth sack covering his face and head. One of them sits on his chest to suffocate him and pours water over the sack, another stands on his stomach, and a third places a chair between his legs to keep them apart and sits on the chair, while a fourth presses on his testicles, and two others each hold one of his legs. Thus, in rounds, as soon as one round ends, it is separated from the second round by a few seconds, and he is thrown on a long table in the same manner, subjected to the same methods, and his hands may be shackled with iron chains behind his back. Then his hands are tied to a loop or a pipe fixed in the wall up high, where he is almost hanging, his fingertips barely touching the ground, his head covered with a sack or more, during which he is subjected to punches in the stomach and kicks all over his body, and cold water is poured on him, and sometimes an electric fan is turned on him, causing the detainee to shiver with cold, feeling his body freeze.

Mahmoud was subjected to all these methods and more during the interrogation in the (slaughterhouse) of Gaza's S\_\_\_, until his body wasted away, and he became thin and no longer recognized himself. Over forty days, he scarcely saw sleep, tasted food, or felt water touch his body. In moments when they wanted to give him a little rest, fearing death, they lowered him into one of the cells, a small room no wider than a meter and a half and no longer than two and a half meters, to find himself in it with five or six detainees who had been exhausted by the interrogation and lack of sleep, lying one on top of the other, sinking into a terrifying sleep, from which they only woke up when the jailers dragged them back to the interrogators.

After weeks of Mahmoud denying any relation to the organizations, to Fatah, or others, they confronted him with a list containing his name and others with a student who came after him from Egypt, and that they had organized there, demanding from them to organize work in the sector. Mahmoud insisted on his denial, asserting that it was merely a framing by

untruthful people, so they returned to their old methods of beating, torture, and ghosting, and Mahmoud realized they would not let him go.

He confessed that a person had organized him for Fatah in Egypt, saying they would contact him upon his return to Gaza, and Mahmoud thought that would be the end of it. But then the interrogation started anew.

"Were you trained on any weapons? What missions were you asked to execute? Who did you organize with? Did you recruit others? And who are they? Thousands of other questions, and in front of his denial of anything of that, the interrogation with him began anew, more severely and harshly. Mahmoud then realized that he made a mistake with his initial confession and that he would have continued to suffer the same torture in any case, so he had to insist on it, without implicating himself in longer prison terms. And so they continued to torture him and other detainees in the interrogation section, where nothing could be heard but the screams of the detainees and the insults and curses of the interrogators all day and night.

After about forty days, they realized they would not get anything additional from him, so they moved him down to the cells, and after weeks, he was transferred to a regular prison. He entered one of the rooms in one of the prison sections, after they handed him some clothes, blankets, two plastic dishes, and a spoon. There, he found in the room about twenty prisoners, some of whom he knew from the camp. There, his brothers welcomed him with comfort and consolation. They each introduced themselves, their name, area, charges, and so on.

The issue that was troubling Mahmoud and causing him concern was seeing my mother and us and reassuring us that he was still alive, and that he was fine. That he wouldn't be sentenced for a very long time, as happens with many who are arrested, enter prison, and never leave. From the first moments, he inquired about family visits, and the young men told him that for the Gaza City area, it happens on the first Friday of every month. He asked about the date today and found out he had to wait another two weeks.

My mother asked some of the neighbors who have detained sons, especially our neighbor Umm al-Abd, if we could take items, food, and

clothes to the prison and if they would allow us to bring them in. She was told no. She heard about the number of people allowed for the visit and knew that three adults or two adults and a minor were allowed. That night before the visit, we discussed a lot about who would go with my mother to visit Mahmoud, and each one of us wanted to be the one.

In the end, my mother decided by choosing my sister Fatima, me, and Maryam. Hasan got angry, expressing his dissatisfaction and displeasure, but my mother explained to him that she was worried about him getting into altercations with the soldiers and jailers and that this was our first visit to check out the situation, then we would decide, so he reluctantly agreed."

On Friday morning, as the sun rose, we stood at the side visitation door of the Saraya building, housing the Central Gaza Prison. Arriving early, we found hundreds of families waiting. Next to the wall, there was a barrier made of iron pipes to organize the queue. We all sat in a designated waiting area. A window in the door opened, and a jailer looked out, then opened the door, holding a register in his hand, and began calling out names.

As each prisoner's name was called, their families would stand up, saying: "Yes," and head towards the start of the iron barrier to line up, waiting to enter the building. Every time thirty names were called and their families lined up, he would withdraw inside, and the process of bringing people in for inspection began, separating men from women, then reuniting them after the inspection to enter for the visit.

We waited, eagerly, until my brother Mahmoud's name was called in the fifth group. We said, "Yes," and stood in line until our group was complete, then they began letting us in. There were no adult men with us, so we all went to the women's inspection device, where female soldiers searched my mother, my sisters, and me. Then we were led into a courtyard where we waited for the others to complete their inspection.

We saw the group that entered before us coming out from the visit, then we were taken through long, dimly lit corridors until we reached the visitation area, a concrete wall with holes covered by iron mesh on both sides of the wall separating us from the detainees. The young ones entered first, running, and the adults walked slowly. I ran with the younger ones,

each of us searching for our father or brother. I found my brother Mahmoud sitting behind one of the windows and screamed, "Yama (Mom), it's Mahmoud, Yama it's (Mahmoud)." My scream rose, but my mother didn't hear me, though she saw me standing in front of the window and came over with my sisters Fatima and Mariam.

My mother bombarded Mahmoud with thousands of questions about his condition, his health, whether they had beaten him, whether he was fed, how his body was, whether they had paralyzed his legs or arms. An endless stream of questions without waiting for the answers!! Tears flowed as Mahmoud tried to calm her down, signaling with his hands, saying, "All is well, Mom, all is well. I'm fine, and here I am before you, my body is fine, my legs are fine, I'm all fine. How are you, and how are my siblings? How are you, Fatima, how are you, Mariam?" Fatima mumbled as she wiped her tears, "I'm fine, my brother, I'm fine," and Mariam replied, "Thank God."

My mother started asking him about his case and the court? He answered her that it was simple and, God willing, the sentence would not exceed a year or a year and a half. My mother gasped, almost losing her soul from her sides, exclaiming: "A year or a year and a half, oh woe to me," so Mahmoud began to calm her down and tried to reassure her, telling her that she had appointed a lawyer for him. The jailers standing behind us and on the other side began to clap and scream: "The visit is over, the visit is over" (We managed to exchange greetings once more, and the jailers rounded up Mahmoud and other prisoners, pulling them behind the door and began to push us, the families, outside.

What I gained from this visit was that I saw Mahmoud; he asked me about my condition, and I asked him about his. When he said goodbye to my mother, "Goodbye, Ahmed," and all the time, the questions about well-being reminded me and he said: with whom my mother and reassurance from Mahmoud and discussion about the case and the sentence and the important thing is that since this visit, we felt that my mother's psychological condition had stabilized and she began to return to her normal self.

Mahmoud was placed in Section (B) in Gaza Prison, which consists of eight rooms opening onto a long corridor three meters wide. The rooms' size

varies between fifteen square meters and twenty-five, with several small windows and their doors made of iron bars. In one corner, there's a toilet. Each room houses at least twenty prisoners who spread blankets on the floor and sleep on them side by side, as there's not enough room for anyone to lie on their back, nor can they turn over unless they get up, stand, and then turn themselves to lie on the other side. If one of them leaves his place for the necessity of going to the bathroom, he must step over the sleepers, and upon returning, he finds his place lost as the others have shifted into it.

At six in the morning, it is announced over the loudspeakers that the count will begin shortly, the lights are turned on, and the jailers start knocking on the doors to wake up the prisoners. Each of them must wake up, fold his belongings, arrange them, and sit in wait for the count. If one of them is late and his fellows do not wake him, the jailers open the door and enter, kicking him with their feet with all harshness and brutality.

A large number of jailers led by an officer count the prisoners, where the prisoners must stand in two lines. The jailers carry batons, wear helmets, one of them carries a tear gas gun, and they count the prisoners room by room, then proceed to count the other sections.

In the end, the loudspeakers announce the completion of the count, and breakfast is served, usually consisting of two or three slices of bread, a little butter, some jam, and sometimes half a boiled egg, along with a cup of something that tastes and smells like tea. The prisoners eat their meal after having gone to the bathroom one after another, and sometimes one of them needs to use the bathroom, clutching his stomach in pain and pleading with his cellmate to leave because his condition is deteriorating.

The jailers come to the rooms one by one to take the inmates out in groups of two rooms at a time to the courtyard (the "fora"), a space surrounded by high walls with a roof covered in barbed wire, measuring about one hundred and twenty square meters. The prisoners come out one by one, each placing his hands behind his back and bowing his head, into the courtyard. There, the jailers stand with sticks in the middle of the yard, and the prisoners start walking around the courtyard in a circle. Anyone who opens his mouth to speak with a colleague, falls behind, or moves ahead, receives

his share of beating with batons, kicking, and slapping. They walk in this manner for an hour or less, then back to their rooms. Each must sit on his folded blanket, and they are forbidden from sitting in circles or groups to talk or study. If they do, the jailers storm the room and beat them severely, and some may be taken to solitary confinement cells, known as "snookats."

The noon count is announced, and after the count, lunch is served: a few slices of bread and vegetable broth, sometimes containing vegetables like carrots, or it might just be hot water tasting of salt. Sometimes mashed potatoes, rice, or slices of eggplant are served. The serving is so scanty it barely touches the prisoners. They eat their lunch, some wash the dishes, and others sit leaning against the wall, eyelids heavy with drowsiness from the monotony and boredom, and if a jailer sees someone nodding off, he yells at them to stay awake, as sleeping is only allowed at night.

Hours pass heavily until dinner is served, barely visible on the plate. Just before five o'clock, the prisoners eat and then sit waiting for dusk. About an hour or an hour and a half after sunset, after the evening count has been conducted in the same manner, the jailers turn off the lights, and the prisoners lay down side by side, ready for sleep. A jailer always looks in, monitoring the rooms, his footsteps echoing on the floor, as if refusing to allow them even the peace of sleep at night...

On Thursdays, prisoners are taken in groups of four to the showers at the end of the section, where each person has five minutes for their weekly shower. The water is rarely hot, and the poor-quality piece of soap must suffice for a quarter of the prisoners in the section. After the showers, the jailer gives each room a single razor blade for everyone to shave their beards with....

Friday is the day for family visits. Each region of the Gaza Strip has its turn on one of the Fridays. In the morning, those expecting visits prepare and wait for the loudspeakers mounted on the walls of the section to call out the names of the visitors, batch by batch. Those whose names are called exit the rooms after the jailers unlock them. They are gathered from all sections into a waiting room, searched one by one, then led into the visitation area where the jailers forcefully pull them in for another round of inspections, and prisoners from each section are separated. Back in their

rooms, their fellow inmates greet them with congratulations and blessings for the visit, to which they respond, "God bless you, may you have the same."

This harsh and bitter reality is what my brother Mahmoud encountered and lived through in Gaza Prison, which was nearly bursting with hundreds of prisoners from all over the Gaza Strip. The prison administration forbids any form of organized community life and deprives prisoners of their most basic rights guaranteed by human rights laws and the Geneva Conventions. Anyone who tries to object faces beatings and harsh treatment beyond what one could imagine.

On the day of the court, the jailers come to inform Mahmoud and the other prisoners that they must prepare to go to court. Within minutes, they are taken out of their rooms, subjected to a thorough search, then their hands are shackled with iron cuffs (handcuffs) behind their backs, and their legs are also shackled. They are then dragged into the nearby military court, located at the other end of the prison building, where they are placed in a waiting room. They are brought one by one into the courtroom, where they are kept in a defendant's cage guarded by soldiers. In the center of the room is a large table with three chairs behind it and the Israeli flag in the background. Military officers enter as judges, and one of the soldiers shouts, "Stand," requiring everyone in the room, including the families sitting on the other side, with soldiers' guns pointed at them, to stand up. The court proceedings begin, where the role of the lawyer is almost negligible.

Mahmoud sneaks glances between dozens of soldiers towards my mother, uncle, and brother Hassan, who are sitting among the families, trying to force a reassuring smile on his face. My mother tries to respond with a faint, gloomy smile that can't hide her anxiety and anticipation of what's to come. The court sessions pass one after the other without results, and each time, the prisoners return to the prison under the same procedures where their fellow inmates, curious about what happened, try to reassure themselves. If one of them receives a sentence, they try to console him by saying that freedom is near, that prison doesn't break men, and that this is the price of national belonging.

The conditions of life were unbearably harsh, and the jailers' reactions to any attempt at objection were harsher than imaginable. Often, a prisoner's head was broken for questioning whether the food was fit for human consumption or sufficient for twenty. His hands were often broken for turning to look at another room's door while passing in the line to the yard, and his eyes often bruised because three or four sat in a corner of their room in a circle, breaking the rule of interaction.

Three or four prisoners, including Mahmoud, began discussing the situation, each sitting in their place to avoid provoking the jailers, searching for a way to end this reality. It was clear to them all that using violence and force was not in their favor, as they had only their hands, while the jailers possessed batons, shields, helmets, tear gas, and all forms of brutality and inhumanity. What to do? They concluded that the only way to change this reality was an open-ended hunger strike. Through the hunger strike, they would enter a battle of wills and the ability to endure the pains of hunger and the wait for death, thereby overcoming the jailer's arrogance and forcing him to change his treatment equation.

The decision was made, and coordination began. They asked the prisoner worker, who went out to distribute food, to steal a pen from the jailers and arrange for some paper. After several attempts, he succeeded, hiding the pen and papers in a corner of the room not easily seen by the jailers during their patrols. The process of writing letters that would be directed to other sections to coordinate the strike collectively, in all sections, to start at the same moment, began.

On the day of the visit, some prisoners carried the letters, passing through the inspection with them wrapped in nylon and easily hidden in their mouths. In the waiting room, the letters were distributed to young men from other sections, each carefully placing the letter in his mouth and exchanging them with extreme caution. If someone noticed a jailer's movement in the corridor and coming closer, they would cough or stamp their feet on the ground, hiding the letter. Once a room finished with it, the letter was folded again, awaiting the next food delivery to pass it on, starting the process of circulation and reading. Within two weeks, all prisoners were informed and prepared for the strike.

On the morning of Sunday, after the count and the arrival of food, the usual prisoner assigned to distribute the food took it and stood at the door of the first room, saying, "Food, guys." They replied, "We don't want any, we're on strike." The jailer was surprised and called his colleague to inform the authorities, and the youths were instructed to proceed to the next room with the same message, "Food, guys," and received the same response, "We don't want any, we're on strike," and so on through the third, fourth, and the rest of the rooms, and likewise in the rest of the sections.

The jailers were enraged, and the prison director and his officers rushed to the sections with a large force of jailers carrying batons, shields, and gas. The director shouted at the jailer, "Open the door," and upon opening the first room's door, he ordered, "Bring the food." The prisoner brought the food, and the director began asking the prisoners one by one if they wanted food, to which they all answered, "No." He asked the second, who replied, "No," and so on through several rooms in most of the sections, without finding anyone willing to eat or receive food. They only drank water and a few grains of salt.

Lunch and dinner were not received, and the second and third days passed. After one and two weeks, the prisoners began to weaken, their bodies wasted away, and their eyes sunk in their sockets. Every day or every few days, the director or one of his officers would try to find someone who had broken down or was ready to eat, to no avail. It became clear that the prisoners were determined to continue the confrontation. The matter was undoubtedly escalated to higher authorities. The director came asking each prisoner about their demands, receiving a uniform answer from everyone, "I'm not authorized to speak about this; talk to the committee 'Mahmoud Al-Saleh,' 'Hassan Thabat,' and 'Abdul Aziz Shah,'" leading the director to shout, "There are no committees here. We do not recognize committees, nor do we acknowledge you. You are saboteurs and criminals..."

A third week passed, and it became clear that the situation was escalating. It was evident that there was a real danger to the lives of the prisoners, which would undoubtedly create intense pressure on Israel in international forums and the global media. It was unacceptable for these individuals to die without cause, nor was it desirable to showcase the Palestinian struggle

in such a heroic and dignified manner. Negotiations with the committee began, summoned to the prison director's office where a feast of delicious food was laid out on the table. The prison management team, led by the director, sat opposite the three prisoners, each barely able to stay seated but struggling to muster the last bits of strength in their weakened bodies.

The director offered them food, which they politely and kindly declined, stating they were on strike like their brothers and would be the last to eat if their demands were met. "What are your demands?" Stop the policy of beating and physical assault, allow sitting in the rooms as we wish, permit daytime sleep, freedom in the courtyard to walk or gather, requests for mattresses for sleeping, improved and increased quantity of food, double the cleaning supplies, increase bathroom time to twice a week, allow notebooks, pens, and books, among other demands. The demands were recorded and promises were made to respond at a later date. The three men struggled to stand, escorted by jailers whose faces showed increasing astonishment day by day at the resolve and determination of these men to face death willingly.

Two days later, the committee was summoned again, and the director announced the stance on those demands. Some were accepted, others rejected. The committee members stood up, declaring their intention to leave, stating, "This is not enough, and the strike continues." Attempts were made to persuade them to stay for further dialogue on other demands, but the refusal was firm: "We want a complete response to our demands."

The next day, the committee was called back and presented with responses that agreed to most of the requests. The committee gave a preliminary agreement to suspend the strike but asked to be allowed to tour the sections to inform the prisoners of the outcomes and hear their opinions. The request was initially denied, but after a few hours, the committee was called again and informed that they would be allowed to tour the sections accompanied by an officer. They went from section to section, room by room, greeting the prisoners, informing them of the developments, and obtaining their consent to end the strike. They completed their tour of the entire prison.

After confirming the end of the strike, the prisoners were ready to accept food, but it was decided that for the first three days, they should only have liquids. This gradual approach was necessary because their stomachs and intestines, which had not been in use for weeks, were not ready for regular food. This recommendation was made by one of the doctors among the prisoners.

After the first meal, the prisoners in each room held a collective sitting in a circle. In room 7 of section B, Mahmoud spoke about the victory achieved, emphasizing that if men are determined and ready to die, nothing can stand in their way, and victory will surely be theirs. He talked about the Palestinian revolution that started from the will and readiness of men alone, echoing the Fatah movement's slogan that only its men can liberate the land, just as our ancestors said, "Only its oxen plow the land." The next day, the prisoners went out to the courtyard without the presence of jailers and their batons, each doing as they pleased, walking or sitting, in twos, threes, or fours, without any intervention. A jailer stood on a nearby roof, observing the situation without interfering.

In the following period, cultural, religious, and educational gatherings in prison became very common. In one room, there was a session discussing Palestinian history; in another, a political session about the latest developments; in a third, a session about the principles, slogans, and objectives of the Fatah movement; and in a fourth, a session on socialist thought and Marxist philosophy. The prison transformed into an advanced school where learners taught others, and those inexperienced in debate and political thought were trained. A clear political and ideological thought began to crystallize among the prisoners according to their political affiliations, with three distinct groups emerging: the group of the Popular Liberation Forces with its Leninist tendencies, the Fatah group with its pure national approach, and the Popular Front group with its Marxist leftist stance.

## Chapter Eleven

As Mahmoud's release date approached, my mother started preparing to welcome him back and celebrate his triumphant return. We whitewashed the house again, and she prepared fenugreek, basbousa, and other varieties of food, and we began once again to talk about the projects and ambitions we had discussed upon his return from Egypt.

On the day of his release, we all waited in full gear in front of the Saraya gate... He appeared from the gate in the midday hours, and when he saw us, he ran towards us, and we ran towards him, welcoming him with hugs while muttering prayers of thanks for his safety. As usual, my mother was late. Mahmoud reached her, kissing her head and hands as she tried to stop him, saying, "No, my engineer." Then we headed home, heads held high, and whenever we passed someone we knew, they would stop quickly or turn to us and come over to congratulate Mahmoud, embracing him and saying, "Thank God for your safety, my engineer." As we reached the edge of our neighborhood, the whole community was waiting for us, welcoming Mahmoud like a liberating hero, and the celebrations and congratulations continued for several days.

No sooner had our celebrations of Mahmoud's return from prison ended than new celebrations began for his employment at the Agency, where he started working as a building inspector and civil engineer on various projects. It was clear that the heavens had opened for us after a long period of hardship, as the job at the Agency came with a very generous salary.

Just as our celebrations for Mahmoud's job concluded, another joy arrived with the engagement of my sister Fatima to one of Mahmoud's colleagues. This was followed by their wedding. On the day of Fatima's wedding, after she moved to her husband's house and we returned from the wedding celebration to our home, we felt as if a corner of our home had been demolished. Fatima had filled our lives so much that I personally felt as if my heart had been torn from my chest. But over time, we got used to her absence, especially after knowing she was happy in her marriage.

Shortly after, Abdul Hafiz, our neighbor and the son of Umm Al-Abd, who had been imprisoned on charges of affiliation and work for the Popular

Front, was released. The neighborhood welcomed him with a celebration no less grand than the one for my brother Mahmoud, and his mother, Umm Al-Abd, had also prepared sweets to celebrate his release.

Mahmoud's reception of Abdel Hafiz was very strange. On one hand, it was extremely warm since they had lived together in prison and had gone through the strike and suffering together, making them close friends. On the other hand, there was an evident sharp rivalry between them as they quickly criticized each other, cutting off the conversation when it touched on political and ideological positions.

Months after Mahmoud's job started, my mother insisted on beginning our projects by constructing a new room suitable for the engineer and for his friends, colleagues, and the youth and men of the neighborhood who came to visit him. Indeed, we hired a builder, bought the necessary materials, and built a spacious room with high walls, roofed with asbestos, featuring several large windows and an excellent wooden door. The floor was raised and paved with cement.

My mother then insisted on buying a bed. Although it was second-hand, it was a breakthrough in our household's evolution. Mahmoud slept on it, and sometimes one of us would lie on it for a while. Then they bought a table and two chairs, marking a noticeable development in our home. Then the talk about Mahmoud's marriage intentions began to increase, and my mother discussed with him the type of girl he wanted. Did he want a specific girl? What qualities did he seek in his bride?

The resistance had begun to wane as many were arrested and many martyred, and the world opened up to people, distracting them, in addition to the significant successes achieved by Israeli intelligence against the resistance, capturing large quantities of weapons and ammunition. It seems that their level of information and understanding of the Palestinian reality had greatly increased, enabling them to restrict and diminish the resistance. The Popular Liberation Forces began to weaken significantly as they were a military organization at their core without the organizational depth, external support, and presence limited to the Gaza Strip without extending to the West Bank. Over time, they started to occupy the position held by Fatah and the Popular Front.

Mahmoud's welcome for Abdel Hafiz was peculiar. On one hand, it was very warm as they had lived together in prison and shared the experiences of the strike and suffering, becoming close friends. On the other hand, it was evident there was a sharp rivalry between them, quickly moving to criticism when discussing political and ideological stances.

Months into Mahmoud's employment, my mother insisted on starting our projects by building a new room fit for an engineer and his visitors, friends, colleagues, and men of the neighborhood. Indeed, we hired a builder, bought the necessary materials, and constructed a spacious room with high walls, an asbestos roof, several large windows, and an excellent wooden door, with a raised, cement-paved floor.

After that, my mother insisted on buying a bed. Though it was second-hand, it was a significant upgrade in our household. Mahmoud slept on it, and sometimes one of us would lay on it for a while. Then, a table and two chairs were bought, marking a noticeable advancement in our home. Discussions about Mahmoud's marriage intentions began, with my mother inquiring about the type of girl he wanted and the qualities he sought in his bride.

The resistance's intensity began to wane as many were arrested or martyred. People were distracted by the world opening up and the significant successes Israeli intelligence achieved against the resistance, capturing large quantities of arms and ammunition. Their increased knowledge and understanding of the Palestinian reality allowed them to constrain and diminish the resistance. The Popular Liberation Forces began to weaken significantly as a military organization without the same organizational depth and external support, confined to Gaza without a presence in the West Bank. Over time, they started to occupy the positions of Fatah and the Popular Front.

With the arrest and imprisonment of many young men, intellectual and political currents began to emerge, leading to sharp intellectual and political discussions among these youths, their families, and in circles believed to be out of Israeli intelligence's reach. It became clear that some adopted Fatah's viewpoint and its ideas, while others followed the Popular Front's perspective and ideology.

Abdel Hafiz often visited our house, sitting with others in Mahmoud's room to engage in intellectual discussions. Abdel Hafiz, a socialist Marxist, advocated for this ideology, discussing historical materialism (dialectic) and citing works by Marx, Lenin, or Engels, talking about the Soviet Union's support for our people and rights, and the support from socialist countries for our cause, emphasizing the need to leverage this friendship and support. Mahmoud adopted a different viewpoint, arguing that our cause could not afford to be divided into different ideological currents. He believed everyone was free to choose their ideology, but our efforts should unite under the banner of the national liberation movement Fatah, which accommodates the religious, secular, communist, Christian, Muslim, and everyone, rejecting ideological differences.

Whenever they gathered at our house, Umm Al-Abd's house, or stood at the street corner, these discussions would erupt, voices rising, each staunchly defending their position, sometimes heatedly, but eventually ending with tea and returning to their daily lives and concerns.

On the other hand, Sheikh Ahmad started inviting young men to pray and come to the mosque. They began to frequent the mosque for prayers, then sit in a circle to read the Quran or study religious books on the Prophet's biography, jurisprudence, or hadith. Sheikh Ahmad would explain, interpret, and train the young men around him, who received his teachings eagerly. He guided these young men, who then spread out, bringing new youths to the mosque, thus expanding the circle.

My brother Hassan was the kindest-hearted among us and the most willing to sacrifice for others. He took on the responsibility of supporting the household and covering Mahmoud's educational expenses in Egypt through his work at the vegetable stall and his continued education, accepting to study at the Agency's vocational school despite having excellent grades in his high school certificate. Given a suitable opportunity, he could have studied engineering or science, but circumstances forced him to accept vocational studies, continuing to bear the vegetable stall's burden while nearing graduation from the lathe and milling section of the vocational school.

While working at the vegetable stall, Hassan became acquainted with Sheikh Ahmad, who bought his household needs from him several times and noticed his good character and genuine nature. The Sheikh invited him to pray and frequent the mosque, reminding him of the afterlife, warning against disobedience to Allah and the pursuit of worldly pleasures, and asserting that the path of religion and righteousness is the best and shortest path to happiness, success in this life, and salvation in the hereafter. Hassan was moved by these words, promising the Sheikh he would start praying and attending the mosque. Indeed, from that evening, Hassan began to perform ablution and pray, going to the mosque for prayer whenever possible.

He usually went to the mosque for the Maghrib prayer and stayed there until he had performed the Isha prayer. After Isha, he would return home. The matter was very well received by our family, especially by my mother, as prayer and mosque attendance were beyond reproach. Hassan, being mature and aware, there was no concern for him. Sometimes, he would participate in the discussions between my brother Mahmoud, our neighbor Abdel Hafiz, and other youths, where he was particularly sharp in his debate against Abdel Hafiz, accusing him of atheism, disbelief, and infidelity. It was evident that Abdel Hafiz was stronger in his intellectual presentation, as his cultural level was much higher than Hassan's, and it seems that his time in prison had endowed Abdel Hafiz with these intellectual capabilities. He would attack the religious thinking approach, claiming religion to be the opium of the masses and a numbing agent. "Where are the religious people, and what is their role in the national struggle and resistance against occupation?" Hassan's responses were weak, and he often clashed with Mahmoud in these discussions, urging the return to religion and adherence to it during the liberation process, citing a statement attributed to Omar Ibn Al-Khattab that the state of this nation's end would only be rectified with what rectified its beginning. Mahmoud responded strongly, affirming that there is no doubt or objection to religion, but we are in a phase of national liberation, and we must not be distracted by any ideological or religious disagreement, leaving Hassan speechless, unable to respond. Mahmoud then asked, "What about the Christians among our people? Where do they

stand in the national struggle? How will you deal with them if we declare and start the conflict?"

The next day, Hassan returned from the mosque with several books, one discussing and dismissing Marxist thought and socialist theories, another discussing the economic system in Islam, and a third on creed. He placed them beside him, flipping through them, searching for answers to the questions he had failed to address in the previous day's conversation.

Mahmoud began to notice changes in Hassan and occasionally sat with him, inquiring about the mosque and its activities, trying to advise Hassan to keep away from those groups. When Hassan did not heed his advice, Mahmoud attempted to use our mother's influence to deter Hassan from interacting with those groups, introducing terms like "Ikhwanjee" (Muslim Brotherhood affiliates). Mahmoud warned that Sheikh Ahmad and his group, frequenting the mosque and participating in seminars and exchanging religious books, were part of the Muslim Brotherhood. He expressed to our mother his fear of Hassan becoming "Ikhwanjee," cautioning that the Brotherhood does not believe in Arab nationalism, opposes Gamal Abdel Nasser, and has attempted to assassinate him. Moreover, regimes and governments are against them, pursuing and disliking them, and if Hassan were to become associated with them, he would unjustifiably endanger himself.

My mother would call Hassan to sit with him and inquire about what she heard from Mahmoud, especially regarding the Muslim Brotherhood. Hassan categorically denied being a member of the Brotherhood or that anyone from the mosque had discussed the Brotherhood with him, or that he had overheard anyone talking about it. He explained that the mosque activities were limited to praying, learning the Quran, and studying aspects of religion. "Is that wrong?" he asked, to which his mother replied no, advising him to be cautious and avoid troublesome matters. Hassan reassured her, leaving her content in the end.

I heard many of these incidents, whether between Mahmoud and Hassan, Mahmoud and our mother, or Hassan and our mother. Mahmoud's discussions were more convincing to my mind, but Hassan's kindness and simple approach to matters were more comforting and reassuring. Perhaps

sensing this, Hassan began encouraging me to pray and accompany him to the mosque. Sometimes I prayed, sometimes I did not, and I frequently joined him at the mosque, sitting in the "circle" sessions held between Maghrib and Isha prayers, which were led by Sheikh Ahmad. I attended several sessions, including interpretations of Quranic chapters like Surah Az-Zumar and Al-Muddathir.

Sheikh Ahmad's words were impactful and beautiful as he described the scenes of the Day of Judgment, the torments and pleasures of the afterlife, and how the Prophet Muhammad received his Lord's commands to carry the banner of the call to Islam and proclaim it boldly.

Hassan graduated from vocational school and immediately found work in a metalworking and machining workshop in the Zeitoun area of Gaza, earning a reasonable salary with the promise of an increase if he proved his technical skills. It became clear that we were entering a golden era of our lives after years of poverty and hardship.

At that time, I was about to finish my middle school studies, my cousin Ibrahim had started high school, and my brother Mohammed was in his second year of the scientific high school stream. Tahani had finished her high school diploma and had registered to attend the Teachers' Training College in Gaza, waiting for the results during that period. It seemed as though life was smiling at us again.

After years of absence, my cousin Hassan (re)appeared but in a new form. He had grown into a big man, had grown out his beard and hair, and wore strange, almost frightening clothes, similar to the attire of the Jews. He wore a gold chain around his neck, a thick gold bracelet around his wrist, wore a worn-out cowboy pants at the knees, and held a pack of cigarettes in his hands. He seemed completely from another planet. He knocked on the door, and when I opened it, I didn't recognize him at first. He ran his fingers through my hair, scattering it, and said, "You're Ahmad," and I recognized him by his voice. "You're Hassan?" "Yes," he replied, and I shouted, "Mom, Mahmoud, cousin Hassan has returned to our house."

Everyone came running out of their rooms towards the entrance, and Hassan had already stepped two or three steps inside. Everyone who came

out running stopped as if struck by lightning, unsure what to say. Mahmoud was the first to recover from the shock, went forward to greet and embrace him. Ibrahim greeted him, and Mahmoud led him by the hand into his room, followed by Ibrahim, Hassan, my brother Mohammed, and I, while my mother went to prepare tea.

We sat in the room, and Mohammed began to inquire about what had happened to him and how things turned out for him. Hassan told us he was living in Tel Aviv, working in a factory owned by his Jewish girlfriend's father, that his situation was excellent, and that he was renting a great apartment in Jaffa. The significant thing was his heavy tongue when speaking Arabic, frequently using Hebrew words in his conversation.

My mother brought in the tea and placed it on the table. He asked her, "How are you, my uncle's wife?" "Thank God," she replied. He then said, "The important thing, my uncle's wife, is that you benefited well. You got out of the refugee camp, saw the world, lived, and took your comfort instead of the misery and deprivation of the camp." My mother sarcastically responded, "Ah, so I saw the world with your Jewish girlfriend."

Hassan said, "So what if she's Jewish?" Mahmoud intervened, asking, "So, Hassan, what next?" Hassan replied, "There's no next or before. I just came to greet you all and see if Ibrahim needs anything." He then reached into his pocket, pulled out his wallet, and from it, he took out a large bundle of cash, counted out a significant amount, and extended his hand towards Ibrahim with the money.

Ibrahim didn't move, and we all remained silent. Hassan insisted, "Take it, Ibrahim." Ibrahim responded, "No, thank you. I want to live with my uncle's family like anyone else here; I lack nothing." Hassan said, "Take it, I'm your brother." Ibrahim replied, "You're my brother when you come back to live with us and leave the Jews and their lifestyle." Hassan retorted, "Take it easy, Ibrahim. Do you want me to return to the refugee camp? Why don't you come with me?" Ibrahim refused, "I seek refuge with Allah," to which Hassan replied, "As you wish."

Mahmoud tried to engage Hassan in a conversation, attempting to convince him to return home, reminding him that his home still awaits him, and he

could rebuild and arrange it. He suggested that they could find him a good wife and a respectable job. Hassan smiled throughout, indicating his refusal, and then left after a lukewarm farewell.

My mother kept trying to convince Mahmoud of the necessity of marriage, but he evaded the topic, claiming that the house was too small and unsuitable for marriage. She tried to persuade him that this would be temporary until we could expand. Now, the house had three rooms: his new room, the two old rooms we had repaired (where she, Tahani, and Mariam lived in one, and Hassan, Mohammed, I, and my cousin Ibrahim lived in the other), and he could marry and live with his wife in the new room.

Mahmoud wondered where guests or visitors would sit, to which she replied they could sit in the boys' room or in her and the girls' room. "Isn't this how all refugee camp families live?" Moreover, they had her uncle's house, where they could repair a room for expansion. Indeed, it was agreed to repair two rooms in my uncle's house, one for Mahmoud and his wife, and the second for Hassan when he gets married, while the new room would remain for receiving guests.

Following the construction of the two new rooms, Mahmoud suggested to my mother that his wedding be postponed for several more months so that he and Hassan could marry at the same time. This way, instead of bearing the costs of two weddings, they would hold a single celebration, thus saving on Hassan's wedding expenses. Hassan, being kind-hearted and having sacrificed his education for Mahmoud and the family, deserved a shared celebration. My mother was convinced by the idea and began to discuss it with Hassan, assuring him that everything was ready and the wedding would take place.

After days of persuasion and pressure, Hassan agreed, and my mother engaged in lengthy discussions with each of them about who they wanted to marry or the qualities they sought in a bride. She suggested several girls, visiting their homes to see the daughters, assess the cleanliness and orderliness of the houses, and gauge the families' habits, but she was not satisfied with the level she found.

Tahani suggested that my mother consider one of her classmates from the Teachers' Training College, a girl as beautiful as the full moon, of good character, and from a family of our social standing. The girl's family was simple and respectable. My mother and Tahani agreed to visit the girl's home. They went, and my mother returned very pleased, having found the perfect bride for Mahmoud. The only thing left was for Mahmoud to like her, the girl to agree, and her family to consent. And who would refuse Mahmoud Al-Saleh, the engineer? My mother described the girl to Mahmoud, who expressed his preliminary approval, pending a final decision after seeing the girl.

My mother visited the home of Mohammed Al-Saeed again, where she spoke with Mohammed's mother about the honor of proposing to their daughter, "Widad," for Mahmoud. After brief consultations at home, Mohammed's mother welcomed them and agreed on an appointment for the upcoming Friday afternoon.

On Friday, my uncle came to participate in the delegation, along with my sister Fatima. My mother, Mahmoud, Hassan, Tahani, and the rest prepared and headed to the bride's home. Traditionally, the men sat in one room and the women in another, with plenty of welcoming words and compliments. Eventually, Mahmoud and Widad saw each other, and each expressed admiration and agreement.

Joyful ululations filled the air as they were announced engaged, and it was agreed that the wedding and marriage contract would be held in two months, allowing us time to complete the necessary arrangements, especially finding a bride for Hassan, and for Widad to finish her diploma at the Teachers' Training College and receive her certificate.

My mother continued her search for a suitable bride for Hassan, day after day examining one girl after another but finding fault with each for various reasons. After each exploration trip, she returned to report her findings to Hassan, with Tahani accompanying her.

After much effort, Hassan confronted her with the question, "Why are you troubling yourself so much?" Angrily, she retorted, "Why shouldn't I trouble myself? Are you not worth it, Hassan?!" Laughing, Hassan clarified, "Don't

misunderstand me, mom. I mean, the bride has been right under our noses all along." Surprised, she asked, "Who? What do you mean?" Hassan revealed, "Suad, Am Al-Abd's daughter, our neighbor." My mother smiled and teased, "Really? You've liked her all this time, Sheikh Hassan?" Blushing, Hassan admitted, "You know me well, mom. I've never looked at her that way since we grew up, but she's beautiful, respectable, and just as disadvantaged as we are, just like the saying goes, 'The clay of your land is for your own brick.'"

Confirming his seriousness, my mother inquired if he truly wanted Suad. Hassan affirmed, and after discussing with Tahani, who was surprised but agreed Suad was beautiful and respectable, my mother decided to propose to Suad for Hassan first thing the next morning.

True to her word, early the next morning, my mother straightforwardly asked Am Al-Abd for Suad's hand in marriage for Hassan. Am Al-Abd requested time until the afternoon to consult her daughter and sons. In the afternoon, my mother returned to Am Al-Abd's house for her response, and their mutual joy was evident from their celebratory ululations, attracting congratulations from the nearby neighbors.

Preparations for the wedding began in earnest, with purchasing furniture for the newlyweds' home and preparing trousseaus for both. My mother tirelessly worked, visiting Am Al-Abd's house, Abu Mohammad Al-Saeed's house, and the town center for shopping, until everything was ready for the marriage contract signing and the wedding ceremony.

It was up to me, Mohammed, and my cousin Ibrahim to prepare many things. We rented several straw chairs and transported them on a cart, placing them in front of the door. We bought a large amount of meat, two bags of rice, and gathered a significant number of trays from neighbors, labeling each with the family's name to avoid confusion. My mother supervised several of our neighbors who came to help prepare the food. We prepared the wedding platform by connecting several tables next to the wall, covering them with mats and placing two borrowed bamboo chairs on them, which we covered with prayer rugs. We arranged for a long extension cord for electricity from one of the distant houses that had power, as not every home had electricity. We had rented a string of colorful lights to hang

above the wedding platform. Everything was ready by afternoon when the guests began to arrive.

Women sat inside the house, and men sat under the canopy we set up in the street. The sound of women singing and ululating never ceased. Then, we began serving the food - trays of yellow rice topped with red meat. Me, Mohammed, and Ibrahim stood with soap pieces and clay water jugs, with cotton towels over our shoulders, ready to assist guests with washing their hands after eating. After eating, many guests left, and the families of the bride and groom went back to their homes, waiting for us to go for the marriage contract signing and to escort the newlyweds to their home. Only the closest relatives and friends remained, and the women started walking towards the new home, singing and ululating. As they neared "Abu Mohammed's" house, they began singing the popular folk song, welcoming and celebrating the union.

When the women reached the door, ululations burst from inside the house. The men entered a room where the sheikh, who was to officiate the marriage contract, awaited. After the formalities were completed and the bride was ready, the men waited at the door. The bride, escorted by her father and brother, was handed over to my brother Mahmoud amid a crescendo of joyful ululations, and the procession made its way back home.

Upon entering the house, the bride was surrounded by a group of women, singing and ululating. The procession then moved on to fetch the second bride, Saad, following the same procedures. Her brothers handed her over to Hassan, who led her towards their new home amidst songs and joy.

The brides were prepared for the wedding procession in the same room. My mother suggested that Mahmoud and Hassan ascend to the wedding platform to await their brides' arrival side by side. While Mahmoud had no issues with this, Hassan vehemently refused, citing religious reasons against sitting in a place where women would dance in front of him. Surprised and pleading, my mother couldn't understand his refusal on such a joyous occasion. After much discussion, Fatima proposed a compromise: the grooms would sit on the platform for a half-hour without any dancing, only singing and ululations, after which they would leave and the celebration would continue among the women.

Agreeing to the compromise, Mahmoud and Hassan ascended the platform, and once the brides joined them, the room was filled with singing and ululations. My mother was moved to tears throughout, comforted by Fatima and Taha. They reminisced about how their father would have loved to witness this day, reopening old wounds of loss.

After changing their wedding attire, the newlyweds prepared to leave, removing one chair from the platform, allowing the women to continue celebrating. Mahmoud teased Hassan for his conservative stance, jokingly calling him a true Muslim Brotherhood member, while Hassan simply smiled and urged everyone to let the women enjoy themselves in peace.

Behind them, the sound of the women singing and ululating rose continuously. They persuaded my mother to join the gathering and dance; then, they also encouraged Umm Al-Abd and Umm Muhammad to dance. It was hard to understand how tears could flow amidst such overwhelming joy, but such are the conditions of the camp: every celebration reopens old wounds and brings back all the memories anew.

## Chapter Twelve

My aunt's husband had completed his prison term and returned to his business activities and managing the family's lands. Their son, Abdel Rahim, was now toddling around, babbling his first words.

My aunt's husband resumed his visits to the same shops in Hebron where he had strong business relationships. They sat in the same gatherings, discussing anew around the fire, sipping tea, with the men inquiring about his prison experience, the treatment, the torture, and the interrogations. He spoke modestly, trying to downplay their fears of the occupier and prison, asserting that although it was indeed hard, it was bearable. It polished one's resolve, strengthened the spirit, and made a person realize their strength and greatness. The men shook their heads in disbelief and astonishment. Perhaps after he left, one would say to another, "See, he's lost his mind, brought trouble upon himself and his family, created a stir, and yet he says it's possible and bearable. What nonsense!"

His brother, Abdel Rahman, was in his third year of high school (Tawjihi) at Tariq Ibn Ziyad High School in Hebron. Known for his diligence, morality, religiosity, and his close relations with many of the city and surrounding villages' school youth. At that time, a group of devout students associated with the Islamic movement began to emerge at Tariq Ibn Ziyad High School. Several teachers at this school, who had graduated from the University of Jordan a while ago and had joined the Muslim Brotherhood during their studies there, began spreading Islamic thought in the city upon their return to Hebron and working in its schools, finding fertile ground among the high school students.

Simultaneously, the Sharia College was opened in the city, overseen by the city's mayor. The youth gathering at the college naturally formed political and ideological currents, with the Muslim Brotherhood's influence being the most prominent, thanks to the teachers in the college and the Islamic and Sharia studies offered.

A group of students began to crystallize around the idea of the Muslim Brotherhood. The name of the Muslim Brotherhood in the city of Hebron was not accompanied by the loud music that followed it when mentioned in

the Gaza Strip or in the northern West Bank, where the name of the Brotherhood was almost like an insult or curse. However, in Hebron, the Brotherhood had an ancient history. The idea of the Brotherhood was adopted by families known for their wealth and honor in the city, making it easy for the name to appear and be declared without embarrassment.

In Tariq Ibn Ziyad School, Abdel Rahman met with another group of city youth and youth from other villages. Influenced by university / Sharia College students and some teachers, they formed an open framework to study and adopt the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood, embracing the study of Islam and contemporary Islamic thought.

One day, a group of these peers visited Abdel Rahman in the village of Surif as one of the Brotherhood's activities for acquaintance, bonding, and education. A group of about ten students, Abdel Rahman's friends, gathered on a hillside playing, talking about religion and politics. At Abdel Rahman's request, his aunt prepared lunch for them, where Abdel Rahman had slaughtered four chickens in the morning and she began preparing a meal of musakhan.

When Abdel Rahman's uncle returned from his shop and Abdel Rahman was late to fetch the food himself, he went to the land to deliver it to them. He greeted them, calling Abdel Rahman to inform him that he had brought their meal. Abdel Fattah thanked him, wondering why he bothered himself when he had intended to come and fetch it. Abdel Fattah explained there was no bother in it and that this was an opportunity to get to know the young men.

He sat with them during lunch, getting to know them and joining their fun, happiness, and discussions, trying to stir their nationalistic feelings, probing their opinions, ideas, and readiness. He inquired about their views on the current state of national work in the country. One of the youths replied that the problem is our people still lack the most important components of national work and resistance, hence the level of readiness and sacrifice remains low.

Abdel Fattah, surprised, asked how he could say that and what his claim was based on. The young man replied that a cause as significant and crucial as

the Islamic cause, the issue of Al-Aqsa Mosque, the first Qibla, and the third holiest site, requires much sacrifice and martyrdom, and the level of national work is still far simpler than needed. The people's readiness is a million times less than required.

Abdel Fattah discussed again, saying, "But haven't you heard about the fedayeen operations in all the occupied areas in the Gaza Strip, in the north and center of the West Bank, in Jerusalem, and Hebron, and the villages?" The young man interrupted: "Yes, I have heard, but all of that is far less than what is needed!! Don't you see, man, how the Jews move freely in the city of Hebron without anyone confronting them except rarely, how tourists visit the sanctuary and Jews roam and frolic in the Ibrahimi Mosque, how they come to trade in Hebron, frequent its blacksmith and carpentry workshops, and our people and our families deal with them as if they are not an occupation and not occupiers and usurpers of our land and sanctities."

Abdel Rahman interrupted: "No doubt, national motivation alone is not capable of managing the conflict, and it is necessary..." Abdel Fattah interrupted him: "My brother, our people have defended their land throughout history and do not surrender, and they are..." The young man interrupted: "I will tell you a story that happened to me. After the Israeli occupation of Hebron, I was still young, and I saw a Jew walking alone in the street of Hebron, which annoyed me, so I picked up a stone from the ground and threw it at that Jew, then ran behind the apple trees in a piece of our land and sat there for a while until I believed the Jew had gone. Suddenly, I hear the voice of one of the neighbors calling 'Jamal, Jamal... come, he has gone.' When I emerged from behind the trees, the Jew was hiding behind the corner of the house, came towards me, and had drawn his pistol towards my head, trying to scare me so I would not repeat it. I understood that after I threw the stone at him, he had knocked on the neighbors' door and threatened them that if they did not bring me and hand me over to him, he would destroy their house and imprison their children. So, one of their sons did that role where he handed me over to the Jew in that manner."

Abdel Fattah interrupted: "These things happen, these things happen.. but the people are fine, and our nation is fine, and I say that our nation is fine, even those people are fine, they are good people, but they are poor and afraid for their interests, meaning their willingness to sacrifice is limited, and a long process must be done..." Abdel Fattah interrupted: "Man, no need for any process, duty compels everyone to do their part, but what do we have with this talk and why am I troubling your heads with my talks, I should let you continue your day."

And he stood up, shaking off his clothes, saying: "Welcome, young men, welcome," and stood up saying "Peace be upon you" while shaking off his clothes and left. The young men stood up, frolicking and joking among the olive trees.

My brother Mohammed and my cousin Ibrahim were greatly influenced by my brother Hassan and his religiosity, so they began to pray and gradually became committed to praying and attending the mosque with him. I was not like them; I would sometimes pray and at other times neglect prayer, and sometimes accompany them to the mosque where we would perform the prayers in congregation.

Then, we would sometimes sit in one of those circles they held after the prayer, where one of them would talk about a religious topic, explain something from the Quran, elucidate a noble hadith, read from a book and explain what they read, or explain something from the Prophet's biography. Sometimes, after the Maghrib prayer, when I prayed with them in the mosque, they would sit in those circles and begin reciting prayers they call Al-Mathurat in a group voice. I did not memorize like them what they were reciting, so I would just move my lips along with them as if I knew what they were reading.

Mahmoud was very displeased with Mohammed and Ibrahim's religiosity, and he was previously upset by Hassan's religiosity. Often, he would sit with all of them together or with each one individually, trying to convince them to stop going to the mosque and participating in the activities there, warning them that those in charge are Ikhwanjis, meaning Muslim Brotherhood. He claimed that Sheikh Ahmad is an Ikhwanji and the Brotherhood are against Abdel Nasser and against Arab unity and do not

recognize the Palestine Liberation Organization. They say that the martyrs of the Palestinian revolution are not really martyrs and do not participate in resistance and armed action. They would look at him, whether they were together or individually, surprised, saying, "What are you talking about? I go to the mosque, sit in the lectures, and listen to what is said, and there is nothing like what you are saying!" Mahmoud would reply, his voice raised and becoming more intense, "But I know them, they don't say this kind of talk to you now, now they talk to you about religion, Islam, the Prophet, and prayer, and then they will start on the hot topics." One of them would express his annoyance, saying, "Man, leave this talk, do you think we are little kids?"

In all the times I went to the mosque and sat in those lectures, I never heard anyone who spoke there touch on politics, mention Palestine or the resistance or the occupation, not even the history of the Palestinian cause, the Liberation Organization, Fatah, the martyrs, or anything else. They only talked about purely religious topics.

Whether discussions on those topics occurred in sessions I did not attend, I do not know. However, like all the youth in the camp during that period, I felt a great deal of respect and admiration for Abu Ammar Yasser Arafat, who had become a symbol of the Palestinian revolution. I considered him my leader and commander, often raising his picture in demonstrations and chanting "With our souls, with our blood, we redeem you, Abu Ammar" with deep sincerity and seriousness from the bottom of our hearts.

However, I noticed that my brother Hassan was not like me or the other youth in the camp. I did not feel that he became as emotional or affected as us when Abu Ammar's name was mentioned, as if it was just any other name brought up in front of him, but I never heard him express an opposing or adversarial stance towards Arafat or the Palestine Liberation Organization.

When the topic of martyrs was raised, saying martyr so-and-so or so-and-so was martyred, he would sometimes declare that only God knows who is a martyr and who is not, as it is a matter connected to intentions and hearts. His candor would increase when it was mentioned that someone from the Popular Front had been martyred, saying, "And who knows if he is a martyr?"

He might originally not even believe in God or be an atheist, so how can he be a martyr then?" In such situations, Mahmoud would become furious and yell at him, "Who are you and all your sheikhs to decide who is a martyr and who is not, while you sit in your homes and issue fatwas on people who carry their souls in their hands and struggle for the nation?" Hassan would mutter some unclear words, stand up agitatedly, and leave the place. If Mohammed and Ibrahim were there, they would leave shortly after him, dispersing the gathering.

The discussion would become extremely heated if Abdel Hafiz was present in one of these sessions. He would start attacking the sheikhs and the religion, even going so far as to say that the Muslim Brotherhood are agents because they receive salaries from Saudi Arabia, along with different intellectual debates. Hassan would angrily respond with accusations of atheism and disbelief in God, and that they are tails of the Soviet Union, which was the first to recognize the state of Israel in 1948.

Much of Hassan's speech and dialogue appealed to me and resonated with my soul, but I did not understand his stance on several points. His weakness was apparent when they discussed the role of Islamists in bearing the national concern, their role in armed resistance against the occupation, and their stance on martyrs who die for the nation.

Also, their ambiguous stance towards the Palestine Liberation Organization was evident. Hassan, Mohammed, and Ibrahim felt their clear inability to convince others of their position because they themselves did not fully understand their stance on these issues. It was as if they turned to Sheikh Ahmad and asked him about it, and he informed them that he would discuss these matters in the sessions he would hold at the mosque in the coming days.

Days later, I felt they wanted me to join them for the Maghrib prayer at the mosque, where those sessions usually took place between Maghrib and Isha prayers. So, I went with them. We prayed Maghrib behind Sheikh Hamed, who had grown old, and his voice could barely be heard. The mosque was packed with young men, men, and boys, unlike when I used to come with my grandfather, may Allah have mercy on him, when I was a

child. After the prayer, some people left the mosque, then a large number of young men, about fifty, sat in a circle.

Sheikh Ahmad sat down and began his talk by praising Allah and sending blessings upon His Messenger, then he started discussing the role of humans on Earth and their servitude to Allah, giving a clear example with Rab'i ibn Amir's message to Rustum, the commander of the Persians before the Battle of Qadisiyyah. When Rustum asked him what brought them from the Arabian Peninsula to fight against them, he said: "We have come to bring out the servants from the worship of servants to the worship of the Lord of the servants, from the injustice of religions to the justice of Islam, and from the narrowness of this world to its expansiveness and the hereafter." He explained this in detail, stating that this understanding is difficult for people today from our nation to grasp in the context of our people's existence and our land under occupation. However, it is the only way for liberation and salvation, but people do not realize this, and they may even oppose it.

Just as the Prophet Muhammad in Mecca invited its people and the Arabs to Islam, where their dignity and greatness lie, and they did not realize it, opposing and fighting him. In the end, it was proven that the Arabs' dignity was in Islam, and that was what happened and what will be; our dignity is in our hands.

Then, he began discussing the definition of a martyr in Islam, stating that anyone who fights so that the word of Allah is supreme is in the path of Allah, and this is the legal definition of a martyr. As for what people conventionally consider a martyr, that is something else. He spoke at length about concepts related to the nature of the Islamic community representing Muslims, almost as if he was expressing reservations about the Palestine Liberation Organization being the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, but without stating it explicitly, only implying it.

Sheikh Hamed came and called for the Isha prayer. We stood up for the prayer, and Sheikh Hamed led us as the imam. During the prayer, he recited verses from the beginning of Surah Al-Isra and repeated some words or sentences from the verses as if he was continuing his lesson from before

the prayer about the subject "servants of ours, mighty in strength." I realized that Sheikh was avoiding talking about the conflict with the occupation explicitly, trying to hint at it, fearing pursuit and harassment by the occupation authorities and preventing him from spreading his idea.

Hassan, Mohammed, and Ibrahim left the mosque satisfied, expressing their contentment and admiration for Sheikh Ahmad's speech during our way back home. I didn't understand what pleased them about it, although the Sheikh's words were beautiful and impactful, but it didn't provide clear answers to the questions raised by Mahmoud and Abdul Hafiz in their discussions with Hassan.

The standard of living in the camp had begun to noticeably improve. Most households now had one or two members working in Israel, earning a decent income compared to the old conditions in the sector or in Arab countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. People's conditions were clearly improving; you could find radios in all the homes and many had televisions. Many households subscribed to the electricity network, lighting up their homes, some had refrigerators or gas stoves, and most homes were connected to the water network. In our home, we had a good radio and subscribed to both electricity and water networks, but we were not yet lucky enough to have a television, refrigerator, or gas oven. Despite this, our situation was much better than many families who remained in a state of hardship.

What's important is that in the past two decades since the migration after the Nakba (1948), the population of the camps had astonishingly doubled. The houses could no longer accommodate their inhabitants, especially since many who were children at the time or even born after the Nakba had now become men, married, and had sons and daughters. Each house had one or more married brothers, turning the already overcrowded camp houses into something resembling chicken coops.

At this time, discussions began about housing projects prepared by the Housing Department in the military government. Those wishing to expand in the camp house could register their name in Housing, pay nominal fees, provided they demolish their camp house, and thus, each married individual

in this house would be granted a residential room in the neighborhoods to be established.

This opened up a heated debate among the camp residents. There wasn't a gathering, meeting, or visit where this issue wasn't brought up, dividing people into opponents and supporters. Supporters argued for adapting to reality, stating that living in societies like "sardine cans" indefinitely isn't feasible. Houses can't accommodate us with the significant population increase, and the solution to the issue isn't visible on the horizon. Nor can we afford to buy regular land and build on it due to the prohibitive cost. Opponents feared that emptying the camps of their residents would dilute the refugee issue, believing this to be the occupier's goal: to settle refugees in these neighborhoods and end their cause. The debate continued, and these projects remained just an idea that hadn't yet been implemented, leaving neither side's opinion proven right or wrong.

Before my brothers Mahmoud and Hassan got married, I didn't know there was something called cosmetics. My mother, like other women in the camp, never used such products. All they did for special occasions was uncover their hair, lighten their eyebrows, and yet, they appeared extremely beautiful. Who would seek cosmetics when struggling to feed their children, who only tasted meat on significant occasions or couldn't distinguish between fruit names and types they only saw in school biology books' pictures?

When one of the girls got married, it was apparent that some makeup was used for their beautification, but I didn't realize there was something specifically known as cosmetics. However, after Mahmoud and Hassan's weddings, whenever I entered one of their rooms, I saw bottles and boxes on the dressers - wardrobes with a large mirror in the middle, placed in bedrooms - understood to be cosmetics. Yet, it seemed they weren't used beyond the wedding day and relatives' marriage occasions. Until this point, we hadn't seen any woman walking in the camp streets adorned with makeup.

Indeed, many women did not cover their heads, some did, but cosmetics were neither well-known nor widespread even as there was a clear improvement in people's overall economic situation... We didn't feel a

significant change in this aspect, but undoubtedly, some women had begun using cosmetics, though it remained limited.

Camp girls were natural, without cosmetics or even the simplest beauty treatments like hair removal or eyebrow thinning. Yet, they often shone like full moons, their beauty enhanced by the pinnacle of modesty. When asked a question, their eyes would stay grounded, and if their gaze accidentally met a boy's, they would immediately lower it, their cheeks flushing with blood, adding to their beauty.

"Khalil," a neighbor's son, began to develop feelings for one of the camp girls after their eyes met once. He felt he loved her and sensed she reciprocated his feelings. He would always wait for her to leave for school and return home, never daring to approach her or exchange even a word. He was content with their eyes meeting from a distance, understanding this as her sharing his feelings, and would hold onto this until he could propose to her parents after finishing his studies and finding a job, gathering enough to cover the costs of building a house and getting married.

Some young men corresponded with girls they loved, and some of these girls responded to their letters. Yet, the majority of camp youths adhered strictly to the rules against such interactions, following the strict guidance of our mother and her noble upbringing, staying far from these matters. However, it seems some youths dared to delve deeper into this area, treating it casually.

Once, returning from the beach, I turned at the corner of our house and saw Ibrahim, my cousin, coming back from the mosque. A girl from the neighborhood, known for being playful, was sitting by her house's door. Seeing Ibrahim walking shyly, his gaze downward as instructed by the mosque sheikhs and our mother's constant advice, she looked at him with a playful voice and said, "Oh, it's the great sheikh, bless you! Please, grace us with a glance, you who only look upwards, never down." I saw Ibrahim's face turn red with embarrassment and shyness, his pace quickening as if escaping a long-term capture, leaving her words hanging embarrassingly in the air. I threatened to expose her to his mother (my aunt) if she tried to tease or wander around me again.

The victory of 1973, although it did not practically alleviate our situation as Palestinians, marked a strategic turning point in all our feelings. True, we did not see Israel disappear and leave Palestine, nor did we return to our towns, cities, and villages from which our people were displaced in 1948. Even the territories occupied in 1967 in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Golan, and Sinai were not liberated. What actually happened was the advancement of the Egyptian army, crossing the Suez Canal and breaching the Bar-Lev Line. Yet, we were fully satisfied and gratified by Israel's defeat...

That's how we understood things back then, and we believed with all our minds and hearts that the myth of Israel and its invincible army had collapsed before the grandeur and will of the Arab soldier, whether on the Egyptian or Syrian front. Our heads were almost touching the skies with pride and dignity.

However, our feelings gradually started to change upon hearing the new tone from the Egyptian President Sadat about his readiness for peace with Israel. Our shock was profound when we heard him announce his willingness to visit the Israeli Knesset. The catastrophe completely silenced us as we listened to the radio covering Sadat's visit to Jerusalem and his speech in the Knesset before the Israeli government and Knesset members. We didn't have a TV at home, so we didn't see those images, but the radio coverage was enough to deeply shock us, making us question whether this was reality or just fantasy. It seemed the entire Arab world, or most of it, was shocked, given the level of contradictions and disputes that occurred between regimes, which were serious and far-reaching. Naturally, as Palestinians, we leaned entirely towards the opposing, antagonistic, and aggressive voices against Sadat and against the Camp David Accords. We preferred listening to opposition stations, especially those broadcasting from Baghdad.

The most significant event for our family was that Egyptian universities closed their doors to Palestinian students, against the backdrop of the profound disagreements between Sadat and the PLO, which was strongly opposed to peace with Israel. This opposition was known, clear, and explicit, culminating in some Palestinians assassinating the well-known journalist Al-Sabai over this issue. Consequently, a political decision was made in Egypt to

scale back relations with Palestinians, including not accepting graduates of the Palestinian high school certificate from the Gaza Strip into Egyptian universities as before.

My brother Mohammed finished his high school this year and was supposed to be accepted into Egyptian universities. Our economic situation at the time was most suitable for that (there). Standing at a crossroads, Mohammed ultimately decided to study at Birzeit University in the West Bank, near Ramallah. He traveled there, applied to the university, and was accepted into the College of Science. He began attending from the start of the new academic year, sharing an apartment with other students in Ramallah and living there. Mohammed would return home once a month, staying with us for a few days before heading back to Ramallah.

The fidai (guerrilla) activities continued in the occupied territories and inside the lands occupied in 1948 but had significantly decreased. Much of the national effort began to take the form of political, trade union, and mass work. The Israeli authorities allowed municipal elections in the West Bank, and political frameworks in various areas formed to participate in the elections.

In Hebron, representatives of the Fatah movement, led by Fahd Al-Qawasmi, allied with the Muslim Brotherhood and others against Sheikh Jabari, who had been the mayor since the Jordanian rule in the West Bank and during the Israeli occupation period. Sheikh "Al-Ja'bari" withdrew when he found his chances of winning were slim, allowing the Fatah/Brotherhood coalition to win and form a city council of mixed ideological and political composition. National representatives and well-known national figures like "Bassam Shak'a" in Nablus also won in other West Bank cities. At the same time, many professional unions such as the engineers, medical, and lawyers' associations were formed in various West Bank cities, where periodic elections were held to choose their administrative bodies. The competition was mainly between the leftist forces and Fatah, and then the Islamic current began to emerge, often allying with Fatah against the left before starting to run independently in some locations. Similarly, university activities began to mirror this dynamic at Al-Najah National University in

Nablus, Birzeit University near Ramallah, and Hebron University, which evolved from the College of Sharia in the city.

During this time, in the late 1970s, after the closure of Egyptian universities to students from the Gaza Strip, a group of notable figures from Gaza decided to open a university in the Strip. They began working to mitigate this by contacting the Israeli authorities, who did not approve the opening of a university.

It wasn't difficult to agree on that; a university was opened in the Al-Azhar religious high school in Gaza during the evening as an extension of the institute. It gradually expanded and transformed into a university, even though it never received recognition from the occupation authorities. Instead, it faced constant blockade and harassment.

Those figures continued their contacts with the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization abroad to receive support for opening the university, and with some well-known figures in Palestine and abroad to mobilize financial support for the university in Arab countries. With the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel coming into effect, Israel began attempts to beautify its image in the territories occupied in 1967 as a preparation for the autonomy included in the Camp David Accords. It established what is called the Civil Administration, which was supposed to take over the management of the areas from the military command as a preparatory stage for the autonomy to be established later.

The Civil Administration was just a new name for military rule, and the changes were not significantly distinctive. However, it opened the space for some controlled political expressions, as previously mentioned.

During this period, Islamists became active and applied to open institutions and associations according to the Ottoman law, and they were allowed to do so. This includes Islamic associations, Muslim Youth associations, Islamic Society, charitable societies, clubs, kindergartens, and medical clinics through which they began to offer services to the residents and spread the Islamist ideology.

My sister Tihani graduated from the teacher's institute during this period and after some time got employed at a UNRWA primary school in the camp

as a teacher. After a while, one of the decent young men proposed to her, and she got married, finding happiness and contentment in her marriage.

## Chapter Thirteen

The academic year concluded, and students of Tariq Ibn Ziyad School in Hebron sat for their final exams. Upon receiving their results, high school graduates began exploring their future prospects. Some planned to study at the College of Sharia / Hebron University, others sought opportunities in Saudi universities, and some looked towards Jordanian universities. My aunt's husband still harbored dreams of studying at the University of Jordan but realized that time had passed him by and his responsibilities had grown too large to allow for a return to full-time education. However, upon his brother Abd al-Rahman's high school graduation, he saw a chance to vicariously fulfill his dream.

He discussed the idea of studying at the University of Jordan, which Abd al-Rahman accepted, aligning with his own desire to study at the College of Sharia. This plan also matched the aspirations of his friend Jamal, whom he had met and conversed with on the slopes of the hill in the village of Surif.

Indeed, both were accepted into the College of Sharia at the University of Jordan. Before the academic year started, they traveled to Amman and, along with other students, rented an apartment in the Al-Muhajirin neighborhood, a populous area with a number of Palestinian residents. The university presented an entirely new world, vastly different from the environments Abd al-Rahman had known in Surif, Jamal in Hebron, or what they experienced together at Tariq Ibn Ziyad School.

The intellectual life, political struggles, social openness, and the level and influence of active individuals in the student life were all markedly distinct from their previous experiences. In the College of Sharia, where they studied, the adherence to the hijab by female students was exemplary. However, university life, in general, was considerably more liberal compared to the conservative society of Hebron and, particularly, the surrounding villages like Surif.

But Abd al-Rahman and Jamal had already decisively determined the direction of their lives, fully committing to the Islamic movement and embracing the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood during their years at Tariq Ibn Ziyad School in Hebron.

At the College of Sharia at the University of Jordan in Amman, they encountered several Brotherhood figures among the faculty, PhD holders in Sharia. Here, Jamal and his colleague met experienced individuals in advocacy, public engagement, and encountered figures who far surpassed their own aspirations, plunging into student activism and the ideological and political struggles within the university's halls and courtyards.

Following the university's decision to abolish student unions, student engagement in activities reached its peak regardless. Students found an outlet in the elections held for what were called associations, and Jamal, running for the Revival of Heritage Association within the College of Sharia, won as part of the Islamic movement associated with the Brotherhood. The association began to manage aspects of student activities, particularly in cultural and educational fields, by organizing trips to historical sites or arranging pilgrimages to Mecca for Hajj and Umrah. One of the association members suggested staging the play "A Scholar and a Tyrant" by Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi. The association embraced the idea, allocating a budget and hiring a TV director, leading to successful performances that impressed many faculty members with its high quality.

This period coincided with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which had significant repercussions on student activities at the university. The Islamists highlighted the situation, viewing the Afghan revolution and mujahideen as a cause they inherently supported, seeing themselves as an extension of that struggle. Discussions among the Islamic youth about the necessity to travel to Afghanistan to support the mujahideen became frequent. The Revival of Heritage Association even donated five thousand dinars from the proceeds of the play "A Scholar and a Tyrant," which amounted to around fifteen thousand dinars, towards the cause in Afghanistan.

The Jewish settlement activity intensified across the West Bank, with lands being confiscated, new settlements emerging, and settlers treating the land as their own. This situation provoked the residents and prompted the National Guidance Committee to start campaigns of demonstrations, marches, and media work against the settlements.

The situation escalated with increasing stone-throwing and Molotov cocktail attacks, especially in camps like Deheisheh near Bethlehem, a hub for settler movement between Jerusalem and Hebron. Against this backdrop, a secret extremist Jewish settler group began planning assassinations of prominent national figures from the Guidance Committee, aided by civil administration explosives experts. They succeeded in gathering information and planting bombs in vehicles or garages, causing injuries when detonated, while the occupying forces pretended to discover and defuse the remaining devices. These events fueled unrest in the occupied territories, significantly raising the level of popular activities but also noticeably diminishing armed resistance efforts. Birzeit University near Ramallah stood out as a focal point for national activism during these times.

Amidst this atmosphere, my brother Mohammed arrived in Ramallah to start his new life at Birzeit University's College of Science. This world was entirely different from the conservative, enclosed environment of the camp and Gaza Strip in general. At Birzeit University, it was rare to see a woman covering her head, and the openness and interactions between genders were akin to Western societies. For Mohammed, integrating into this new lifestyle was almost impossible due to his upbringing, the path he chose for himself, and the religious principles he committed to, making life in such a place seem nearly impossible.

Dealing with the clashes with the occupation forces during the sporadic demonstrations triggered by developments in the Palestinian scene was not difficult for someone who grew up in the Al-Shati camp and experienced the armed resistance in the Gaza Strip, finding these events relatively simple and manageable by comparison.

All accommodations in the town of Birzeit were taken by senior students, leaving no room for him, so he and a group of young men had to rent in Ramallah. This necessitated daily travel from Ramallah to Birzeit, a journey that was not long and relatively inexpensive but forced students to spend their entire day away from their study rooms and comforts while waiting for subsequent lectures.

In this shared accommodation, Mohammed discovered numerous contradictions and unsuitable situations as he was the only one among the

six young men who was religiously committed. One of them openly declared his Marxist beliefs, a prominent trend at the university, leading to frequent mocking of Mohammed's devotion and faith, often causing tension and estrangement within the house.

Another roommate was entirely uninterested in academics, focusing instead on discussing women, their relationships, and his alleged conquests. He would spend hours writing love letters to several women simultaneously, then read them aloud, oblivious to his countless errors and indifferent to those studying around him who pleaded for quiet.

Financially, Mohammed's situation had significantly improved, allowing him to manage his expenses without issue. He tried to save as much as possible to contribute to his household, but often found himself dining at the university's cafeteria on days when he had to stay for almost the entire day waiting for classes.

In those days, Mohammed faced the challenge of performing his prayers, especially Dhuhr, Asr, and sometimes even Maghrib, as there was no mosque within the university. He would find a secluded spot outside the university building, near an olive tree, to pray. However, he soon discovered that there was a mosque in the town, even though the majority of its residents were Christians. He began to frequent the mosque for his prayers whenever his schedule allowed. Surprisingly, he met dozens of fellow university students at the mosque who were also committed to their Islamic practices.

This group of devout and faithful youths found a high level of harmony and cohesion in an environment that was entirely hostile to any form of religious observance. When Mohammed returned to Ramallah after his classes, he would sometimes wander the city's quiet streets at night, following the sound of the Maghrib or Isha call to prayer to the nearby mosque where he would perform the prayer.

Repeatedly attending Isha and occasionally Maghrib prayers, as well as the Friday prayers, allowed Mohammed to become acquainted with several Islamic students and young Muslims in the area. They began to form the nucleus of the Islamic bloc at Birzeit University, gathering around each

other, praying together at the nearby mosque, and sitting at the same table in the university cafeteria to discuss their studies, university affairs, and Islamic activities.

Other groups formed nuclei for different movements, such as Fatah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, each planning their activities to attract unaffiliated students and gain their support in upcoming elections. The university's political and social landscape was thus divided among various student groups, each with its own agendas and strategies for recruitment and influence.

A significant portion of Birzeit University's student body was female, presenting unique challenges and opportunities for student organizations. While leftist groups faced no barriers in engaging with female students, the Islamic bloc encountered significant hurdles due to cultural and religious considerations in working with female students, reflecting the diverse and complex social dynamics within the university.

Some female students leaned towards Islamic ideologies, supporting the Islamic bloc, yet they were not active participants. Everyone in the bloc, including Mohammed, who came from the Al-Shati' refugee camp and was raised on strict rules repeatedly emphasized by his mother, agreed on the necessity of initiating communication with these women to invite them to join or support the bloc. However, Mohammed, faced with a simple academic query from a female classmate, would become visibly uncomfortable, responding briefly before quickly retreating.

As election preparations heated up, debates and discussions flourished across the university, touching on the history, current state, and future of the Palestinian cause, as well as the roles and criticisms of various factions. The campus was alive with posters, slogans, and banners as everyone aimed to secure the best outcomes. Eventually, the left-wing groups emerged with the highest results, narrowly outpacing Fatah, but it was the Islamic bloc that achieved surprisingly strong results, despite being the smallest group.

Mohammed made it a habit to return to the camp in Al-Shati' roughly every month, spending the weekend with his family before heading back to

Ramallah to continue his studies and student activism. Meanwhile, Jamal and Abdur-Rahman completed their final exams at the Jordan University's Sharia College and promptly returned to the West Bank, not waiting for the results. Jamal's mother eagerly awaited his return, hoping to see him settle down with a suitable partner. However, Jamal aspired to pursue a master's degree in Pakistan, where he could also express solidarity with the Afghan cause, even if only symbolically, by being in a neighboring country.

Under his mother's persistent encouragement, Jamal began to see the idea of marriage as increasingly acceptable, reasoning that marrying did not conflict with his ambitions. During a visit to the university to collect his diploma, surrounded by graduates, Jamal allowed himself to scan the crowd for a potential future wife. He noticed a young woman, radiating grace and modesty in her Islamic attire, seemingly perfect until a small child approached her, leading him to mistakenly assume she was married.

However, a woman soon approached Jamal, identifying herself as Intisar, his college peer. She mentioned a familial proposal for marriage to Jamal, expressing her preference for him over another suitor due to her desire for a religious partner. Despite the initial confusion, Jamal felt an immediate connection but later discovered Intisar did not possess a West Bank ID, complicating potential residency if they married in the West Bank.

Denied a travel permit to Pakistan by Jordanian security due to his association with the Muslim Brotherhood, Jamal decided to settle in Hebron and start working. Through a colleague, he was introduced to another university graduate from the Faculty of Science, whose personality and family impressed his mother. Plans were made to formally meet her family, marking the beginning of a new chapter in Jamal's life.

Upon entering the room, weighed down by immense shyness, Jamal found himself unable to maintain eye contact, focusing instead on the floor. Seated, he attempted to initiate conversation when unexpectedly, another young woman, whom he had previously mistaken for his potential bride, engaged in conversation, trying to break the ice. Divine destiny seemed to play its part, aligning their paths as potential life partners.

Many Islamic scholars, upon graduating, typically found employment within the Islamic Charitable Society in Hebron, which boasted numerous educational, developmental, and social institutions. Jamal secured a position at the Secondary School affiliated with the University Graduates League, which, though subtly connected to the Palestine Liberation Organization, engaged him in teaching Islamic Culture to senior students.

Working in an environment filled with diverse political and ideological perspectives served as a political forum for Jamal, challenging him to defend his views amid debates on the Palestinian resistance's historical decisions, such as their departure from Jordan and the absence of the Muslim Brotherhood's participation in political upheavals.

In the alleys of Jabalia Camp in Gaza, a young man's suspicious attire drew attention. A failed attempt to attack an approaching military jeep with a grenade, which surprisingly didn't detonate, highlighted the ongoing risks and concerns faced by factions within the Palestinian resistance, particularly Fatah. This incident underscored the complexities and dangers inherent in the struggle against occupation, reflecting the broader tensions and debates within the Palestinian political landscape.

During a gathering at Mahmoud's place, the conversation veered towards the concerns some had regarding the ineffectiveness of weapons supplied to resistance groups. Mahmoud questioned if the flawed armaments indicated a deliberate attempt to undermine the resistance efforts. Could this be a tactic by the Israeli intelligence agency, Shin Bet, to provide these groups with defective weapons? There was a consensus among those present that a thorough investigation was necessary to uncover the truth. They agreed on the need to reach out to anyone connected to the issue, especially those youths who had been detained, to gather more information and insights into the matter. This approach aimed to clarify whether there was an external manipulation at play, potentially orchestrated by Israeli intelligence, to weaken the Palestinian resistance by sabotaging their armament.

## Chapter Fourteen

The Lebanese civil war, erupting in full force and drawing in the Palestinians as both significant participants and victims, had a profound impact back in the Occupied Territories. Virtually every Palestinian family was somehow affected by the conflict due to the widespread dispersion of Palestinians across different regions following the catastrophes of 1948 and 1967. This dispersion meant that families were often split across various refugee camps and countries, with some members finding themselves in Lebanon amidst the turmoil. While my family didn't have direct relatives in Lebanon at the time, many of our neighbors did, living in a constant state of anxiety and worry as they followed news updates and desperately sought any information about their loved ones.

Communication challenges and the logistical complications of traveling to Lebanon only added to the distress. The story of a neighbor whose sons had joined the revolution in Lebanon illustrates the personal toll of the conflict. Her mental and physical health deteriorated drastically due to the constant worry and lack of news, eventually leading to her death without ever learning the fate of her sons. This tragic outcome highlights the deep psychological scars borne by families with members involved in the conflict.

As the civil war dragged on, my cousin Ibrahim faced a pivotal decision regarding his future education. He had the option of attending a university in the West Bank, like Al-Najah or Birzeit, or enrolling in the newly established Islamic University in Gaza, which was just starting with around twenty students. This decision point underscores the broader choices and dilemmas faced by Palestinian youth during a period marked by both internal strife and ongoing resistance against the Israeli occupation.

In this year, there was talk of accepting only a handful of students and about the inauguration of a Faculty of Arabic Language in addition to the Faculties of Sharia and Fundamentals of Religion. The prospects for this nascent university were not clear, and any sensible person at the time would have predicted its certain failure, given it had no buildings of its own; its students were studying in the building of Al-Azhar Secondary School in the afternoon. It lacked an academic faculty, relying instead on a number of

Al-Azhar School's sheikhs for teaching, with no significant budgets or any of the basic components of a university.

Immediately after Ibrahim completed his studies and the examination results revealed his outstanding achievement, scoring 91% in the science stream, my mother spoke with my brother Mahmoud about Ibrahim's university education and suggested that he study with Muhammad at Birzeit University. That evening, when we were all gathered at home, Muhammad called Ibrahim to his room and asked him to go to Ramallah in the coming days and enroll at Birzeit University. Ibrahim hesitated about registering at Birzeit, which made Mahmoud concerned and doubtful about ambitions our financial capabilities could not bear. "Then where do you want to study?" Ibrahim, uncertain, answered, "I might enroll in the Islamic University." Mahmoud asked in surprise and astonishment, "The Islamic University?! Do you mean the university they opened in Al-Azhar?" Ibrahim responded, "Possibly, possibly..."

My mother entered the room, having overheard the conversation, and said, "What happened to you, Ibrahim? It's like you don't want to study at Birzeit fearing the costs. My son, you and your cousins are like brothers; what's sufficient for one is sufficient for two, and our provision is from God. Our situation is good, thank God." It was clear that my mother understood what was deep in Ibrahim's heart, but he tried to hide it, his eyes welling up with tears, "God bless you, my aunt, but I don't want to leave Gaza."

Mahmoud pulled out a sum of Jordanian currency from his pocket and handed it to Ibrahim, saying, "This is for the first semester's fees, registration, travel expenses, and a bit extra for outings. Let's go and register at Birzeit." Ibrahim refused to take it and pushed Mahmoud's hand back, but my mother yelled at him, "Take it now, think at your leisure, and register wherever you want. We want you to register at Birzeit with Muhammad, but you are free, and the final decision is yours... Take it." Ibrahim reached out his hand, took the money while looking down, and it seemed he had already decided to enroll in the Islamic University since any calculation confirmed it would cost half as much as studying at Birzeit or elsewhere.

He did not want to burden the family any further, and being in Gaza allowed him to work occasionally to earn some money that could alleviate the financial burden on the family. Indeed, he went to the Al-Azhar school building, where he registered for study at the Islamic University and was accepted into the Arabic language faculty.

When he returned with the news, he first told me and took out the remaining amount of money from his pocket to give it to me to return it to my mother because he was embarrassed by her, but I refused to take it from him, saying, "What do I have to do with this, and why should I get involved between you and the government? Go to her yourself and deal with the matter." He said, "Come on," and I led the way to the kitchen where my mother was preparing food, telling her, "Congratulate Ibrahim; he has been accepted into the Islamic University, Faculty of Arabic Language." My mother turned to him, and before she could utter a word, he said, "God bless you, here's the excess money." My mother's eyes filled with pride and appreciation, she took the money from him and then gave him back five dinars, saying, "Spend it or save it, you need it now." He tried to refuse, but she insisted he take it, he took it with a shyness almost overwhelming him, repeating, "God keep you for us, my aunt, God bless you."

At that time, the Islamic University was no more than an ambition and a few students who were forced to study there due to a lack of other opportunities. It was located in the building of the Al-Azhar Religious Institute on Thalathini Street in Gaza, which after the morning study period ended for the institute's students and they went home, was used by about twenty Islamic University students who had completed their first year in the Faculties of Sharia and Fundamentals of Religion, and a limited number of new students in the Faculties of Sharia, Fundamentals of Religion, and Arabic Language.

Each group entered one of the institute's classrooms, and one of the institute's sheikhs would come in to teach them a subject from their specialty. The first sheikh would leave, and a second sheikh would enter, and so forth, through four or five consecutive lectures, exactly like in high school, without any significant change.

Into this educational atmosphere, Ibrahim entered without feeling that there was a university or university life like what he had heard from Mahmoud about university life in Egypt or what he had heard from Muhammad about life in Birzeit. However, he realized that he had no right to impose even a single penny of burden on the family, and his own pride prevented him from choosing any other path.

At the same time, he was capable of returning to work at the vegetable stall in the market, especially since his university studies were in the evening, allowing him to work efficiently in the morning. However, he realized that if he even mentioned this idea in front of my mother and Mahmoud, it would cause a commotion, so he began to think of another way to work and earn money without upsetting my mother or stirring Mahmoud's emotions.

One of his friends from the mosque, who worked in construction and refused to work within the territories occupied in 1948, settling for work within the Sector despite the low wages and scarcity of work, agreed that Ibrahim could work with him as an assistant until noon, which was acceptable to him. Ibrahim returned and presented the matter to us as wanting to learn the construction trade with his friend, not as a means to earn a living, and the family had no objections based on how Ibrahim presented it.

On the days when they found work in one of the houses, he would leave early in the morning dressed in work clothes. If the job was nearby, he would return after work to change his clothes and go to the university. If the job was far, he would take his clothes and books with him, changing into his clothes around noon if circumstances allowed, or go to the university in his work clothes, where he would change there. Sometimes, he had to attend lectures in his work clothes. Often, they worked on Fridays, cutting work short to go to the mosque for Friday prayers, then returning to complete their work in the afternoon. He was satisfied that Ibrahim began to cover his own expenses and needs, and eventually bought a bicycle to ease his movement between home, work, and university, saving him both effort and money.

The standard of living in the occupied territories began to noticeably improve, as political and intellectual blocs in various professional unions became more prominent. In the Engineers Association, the three main directions formed prominent blocs: the Fatah movement, the left-wing, and the Islamists. My brother Mahmoud was among the active Fatah members in the association, coordinating with his colleagues to win the largest number of votes from engineers in an attempt to win the elections for the association's administrative body, just like their counterparts from the other two directions, as well as in the Medical Association and the Bar Association.

The competition in these associations and unions was fierce, with each faction forming teams of activists who began visiting their colleagues in their homes and workplaces in an attempt to convince them to participate in the elections and to vote for them specifically. Sometimes, two forces would ally against the third to wrest control from it. Since the leftists were earlier in union work and better at organizing themselves, Fatah often allied with the Islamists to work on overcoming the leftists.

The most notable instance was in the elections for the Gaza Red Crescent Society, where the left was strong and established. This compelled Fatah and the Islamists to form an alliance in an attempt to win and defeat the leftists, leading to clashes mobilized significantly by the Islamists at the Islamic University in the Gaza Strip, which had seen notable growth recently.

My brother Mahmoud contributed his efforts in the Engineers Association elections from Fatah, planning to secure the largest number of engineers to win the elections. They had meetings every two or three days, sitting down to review the names of the engineers, the outcomes of contacts with them, and assess the work of opposing forces. They then launched into action for more decisive efforts until the election day arrived, when they deployed several of their cars to transport some hesitant engineers to come, as well as in the Medical Association and the Engineers Union, among other professional unions.

It was clear that the Islamists were focusing their efforts especially on university students and generally on high school students across all the

occupied territories in the West Bank through cultural, sports, and social youth activities aimed at gathering and ideologically and intellectually mobilizing the youth.

Sheikh Ahmad personally oversaw student activities in Gaza. He would invite a number of active students from the Islamic University to learn about the students' conditions and ask them to attend once a week. They, in turn, invited other youths close to them to come and discuss the work of Islamic activity in the university, preparation for the elections, how to work with ordinary young people, approaches to drawing closer to them, and winning them over for the Islamists.

After the elections were completed and victory was achieved, he directed them to work in high schools to prepare the atmosphere among students who would either go to the Islamic University or other universities, making them ready to join under the banner of the Islamic blocks and bear the burdens of Islamic work.

Ibrahim was one of the activists at the university during that time, and Sheikh Ahmad relied heavily on him and a number of other students. He was one of the Islamic block's candidates for the Student Union elections, who won. He was always busy with his work to earn some money in the morning, then studying in the afternoon, and engaging in his Islamic activities in the evening. Ibrahim was a model of dynamism and activity. When night fell and he returned home, he would have his dinner, then sit down to read his textbooks or other books, and hardly ever slept normally. He would often fall asleep with the book on his chest, so I would take the book from him, place it beside him, cover him up, and my respect and appreciation for him grew... And my determination and engagement with my studies increased in my third year of high school.

Mohammed was making excellent progress in his studies at the College of Sciences at Birzeit University. The accommodation in Ramallah was not suitable, so he made sure to arrange for new accommodation in Birzeit itself. With difficulty, he found that accommodation with a group of young men from the Islamic block. In the same house, under one of the luxurious homes from the other rear side of the street, were three rooms where Mohammed lived with five of his colleagues.

This house was completely different from the one he had lived in Ramallah, as all of Mohammed's housemates were devout young men from the Islamic block. The house had turned into a semi-headquarters for the block and its activities, frequented by the majority of the block's activists and used for their meetings, and planning their student work at the university.

Mohammed played a significant role in leading the work, which made him, despite himself, obliged to coordinate with the female students supporting the block. Some of the female students began wearing the hijab, marking a near-strategic shift in Birzeit University to see some veiled female students. He would always invite them in groups, so two or three would come, and they would stand talking in one of the university's corridors or sit in the cafeteria, lowering their gaze without looking up at them, and the women would do the same, lowering their gaze without looking up at the men. He would direct them to arrange work with the female students and explain to them their role in the work at the university.

Student activism in universities was not confined within the framework of a single university, and this was the level of all student orientations and frameworks. Each student bloc in one university attempted to connect with its counterpart in other universities and institutes spontaneously. Students of the Fatah movement in Birzeit would contact their peers in Al-Najah University and others. Similarly, for the Islamic bloc students, it was common to find a delegation from Al-Najah University visiting their counterparts in Birzeit University and vice versa. They exchanged experiences or advice and coordinated joint activities. Despite the infancy and limited student activism of the Islamic University, it took its role in that activity, and Muhammad and Ibrahim often met in some of the joint activities that were organized. Activists from Birzeit University frequently visited Al-Najah National University in Nablus. There, the level of openness was less than in Birzeit University but increased tens of times compared to the exceptionally conservative city of Gaza, even before the spread of Islamic activity. This was perhaps one of the factors for the significant spread of it in the sector, surpassing other areas. Hebron University was in its hierarchy between Nablus and Gaza; it was less conservative than Gaza and stricter than Al-Najah University. The movement of these students was far from any clear surveillance or harassment by the occupation's

intelligence agencies, and if there was any surveillance, it was not apparent. Thus, these students moved freely and carried out their activities without any restrictions, especially since they were usually confined to the realms of ideological conflicts and internal competition among different frameworks and orientations, which did not have a clear impact on the occupation. On national occasions or when special incidents occurred, and if the occupation forces had information or suspicions that events would take place in the universities, they would prevent students from reaching them by placing barriers on the roads, turning back students, or surrounding the universities with large forces and preventing students from leaving them, transferring their disturbances and activities to nearby areas. Sometimes there were confrontations between the students and soldiers. The students would throw stones, chant national slogans and chants, and the soldiers would fire tear gas or bullets over their heads, and sometimes at the legs, followed by some raids and arrests of some students, who were detained for a while; some were imprisoned for not too long periods, and then life continued as usual. In Carmel High School, where I study, the Islamic bloc students, supervised by my cousin Ibrahim, organized a trip to Jerusalem and some other tourist areas within Palestine, and began registering those interested by paying the trip fees. One of the activists approached me to participate in the trip. I hesitated and promised to consider the matter and get back to him later. At home, Ibrahim talked to me about registering for the trip and not missing out on it, saying it would be a loss to miss this opportunity to leave the sector for the West Bank, Jerusalem, and inside the 1948 occupied territories to get to know our country. He asked if I had any issues with the trip fees, he could pay for me. I smiled and explained that my financial situation allowed me to afford it, and the issue was not the fees but the principle of participating in such trips. He pressed me to participate, so I promised him I would. The next day, I registered for the trip, paid the fees to the bloc's representative at the school, and we prepared to leave early on Friday morning. We gathered at the school's gate, each carrying a bag with food for the two days, knowing Ibrahim would join us as the real supervisor of the trip. On the bus, he recited the travel prayer, and we repeated after him, "In the name of Allah, it moves and anchors. Praise be to Allah who has subjected this to us, and we could not have done it by ourselves. And indeed, to our Lord, we will return. Allah,

we ask You in this journey for righteousness and piety, and for works that You are pleased with." As we passed sites or remnants of Palestinian villages or towns destroyed in the war or by the Jews to erase all traces of Arab presence, Ibrahim or another young man with him would stop and explain, "This is so-and-so, these are the remnants of the city of Ashkelon, this sycamore tree stands at the center of Hamama village, here are the remains of the mosque of Asdud Park, and there are remnants of its school and some of its houses." Our first stop was on a beautiful hill with one of the Christian monasteries. We got off there, and Ibrahim began explaining about this place now called (Latrun Monastery), stating that this was the site of the Battle of Ajnadayn led by Abu Ubaidah Amer bin Al-Jarah" who led the Muslim army to conquer Palestine.

Ibrahim bent down as he described some details of the battle and the large number of companions who were martyred in it. He grabbed a handful of its soil, which tended towards a reddish hue, and said, "This soil bears witness that it is mixed with the blood of the Prophet's companions, peace be upon him." Tears welled up in his eyes, and a profound silence enveloped the attendees, broken only by a bird's chirp or the rustle of leaves shaken by the wind. Then he said, "This soil is our soil, and this land is our land, kneaded by the companions of the Prophet with their pure blood, and it must be kneaded again with pure, sanctified blood from the followers of the Prophet, peace be upon him, until it is liberated anew." I was stunned by what I heard, especially coming from Ibrahim, who was usually so reserved and silent at home, especially in front of my mother. He shone here as the best theorist of his idea, knowledgeable with detailed information about every place we passed by, growing in my eyes in greatness and respect.

The bus set off again, covering distances, and Ibrahim's colleague pointed down to the base of the hill, saying, "Here, at the foot of this hill, lies the village of Deir Yassin," and began explaining the massacre that befell the village, its notoriety, and how it became a symbol of Jewish brutality against the people of Palestine. Shortly after, we arrived in Jerusalem, then to the walls of the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Old City in Jerusalem. We walked through the old streets of Jerusalem, with shops on either side of the road displaying all sorts of traditional goods, everything you could want, especially the wooden handicrafts that tourists, filling the streets and alleys

of old Jerusalem from all around the world, buy. At every corner, there were several occupation soldiers from the border guard, carrying their rifles and watching every move and stillness with their eyes.

We approached one of the gates of the blessed Al-Aqsa Mosque. A large number of border guards at that gate scrutinized every visitor, checking their personal identity card, sometimes recording its number. We entered the Al-Aqsa Mosque after they recorded our ID numbers, and the voice of one of the sheikhs through the loudspeakers recited verses from the Holy Quran.

The Dome of the Rock, with its vibrant colors, stood majestically atop the elevated hill. We ascended the stone steps until we reached the gate of the blessed Al-Aqsa Mosque. A sense of awe and reverence overwhelmed me as I took my first steps inside the mosque, holding my shoes in hand. We paused to perform two units of prayer in greeting to the mosque, then sat awaiting the Friday sermon. The preacher ascended the pulpit and delivered a typical sermon, no different from those I've heard in Gaza. We then stood for the Friday prayer and its Sunnah, after which people started to disperse from the mosque.

We regathered and climbed the steps to the Mosque of the Dome of the Rock. Ibrahim began to explain about the mosque and the rock from which Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, ascended to heaven during the Isra and Mi'raj. He explained that the Isra was from Mecca to Jerusalem and the Mi'raj from Jerusalem to the Sidrat al-Muntaha in heaven. He then delved into the significance of Jerusalem being the essential earthly station on this celestial journey.

It could have been possible for the Prophet, peace be upon him, to ascend directly from Mecca to heaven, but God's wisdom dictated this passage through Jerusalem. This was to underline to Muslims the special significance of Jerusalem in their faith, their religion, and their path to heaven. Ibrahim repeatedly emphasized that it was from Jerusalem that the Prophet, peace be upon him, ascended to the heavens. A shiver ran through my body, and I was enveloped by chills I couldn't hide, echoed by those standing beside me. For us, from the Gaza Strip's refugee camps, visiting Jerusalem for the first time – previously just a name with minimal impact – now stood in this

sacred place surrounded by occupation forces, allowing entry to some and denying others. It dawned on us that the conflict had another dimension than previously understood; it wasn't just about land and a people displaced but a battle of faith, culture, history, and existence. Ibrahim and those who organized this trip successfully instilled this understanding in us. Amid these reflections, Ibrahim announced it was time to head to the bus for Hebron, to visit the Ibrahimi Mosque. As we moved towards the gate, extracting our feet from the ground was challenging – the sanctity of the place and the emotions it stirred made leaving willingly difficult, wishing we could stay longer.

Throughout the way to the bus, Ibrahim's words about Salah al-Din's pulpit, which he had prepared years before liberating Jerusalem and placed in front of him as a motivation and driver to move towards Jerusalem to free it from the hands of the Crusaders, kept echoing in my ears. And how it was burned by the sinful Jewish hands in 1968, I wonder to myself, is there a Salah al-Din for this era?

The bus set off towards Hebron, passing through the city of Beit Jala, then Bethlehem, and then the Deheisheh camp, recognized by its densely packed and simple construction. Ibrahim identified this as the Deheisheh camp and then pointed to the other side, where a tent had been pitched on an empty land with dozens of soldiers guarding it. He said, "Here camps Rabbi Moshe Levinger, one of the leading settlers in Hebron, staging a sit-in in front of the Deheisheh camp protesting the occupation forces' failure to protect settlers on their way to Hebron from the camp boys' stones raining down on them day and night." We then passed by Al-Aroub camp, and after a while, we reached Hebron.

Entering the old city's heart, we found it resembling a military barracks for the occupation forces. Hundreds of soldiers here and there, dozens of military vehicles moving in sensitive locations, and barbed wires surrounding many sites and buildings.

Since the mid-1970s, with the support, protection, and coverage of the occupation forces, Jewish settlers began to take over many buildings and locations in the old city, evicting people and settling in them, guarded by dozens of soldiers. Then they start construction, restoration, and changing

the face of the Arab area, and every day they take over a new building or location, guarded and supported by the soldiers.

The bus brought us to the Ibrahimi Mosque, where huge numbers of soldiers were stationed, examining the incoming Arabs' IDs and stopping them while Jewish and foreign tourists moved freely. We ascended that long stone staircase, walked through a long corridor next to a long prayer mat-laid courtyard, and entered a side courtyard leading to the main mosque's courtyard in the sanctuary, with two other prayer halls at its other end. We saw numerous tombs with names deep in history - Ibrahim, Isaac, Sarah, and Joseph, peace be upon them, covered in green cloth. We performed the Maghrib prayer in the mosque, toured to acquaint ourselves with its corners and the history of our nation and faith, then exited where we bought apricot leather, raisins, and pumpkin seeds from vendors at the doors, and then the bus headed back to Gaza.

Everyone started reciting the evening supplications, "We have reached the evening and the whole kingdom belongs to Allah, and all praise is to Allah..." The collective voice of prayer echoed from our throats, as each of us sank into his seat, giving the words we chanted a different meaning than what we were used to when mentioning Muhammad, peace be upon him, and our father Ibrahim, peace be upon him. After this journey, to those sacred places, the words take on a completely different meaning and impact. From that day, I decided to be diligent in performing prayers, never abandoning them again, and I had to start serious preparation for the General Secondary Education Certificate Examination (Tawjihi) as only two and a half months were left, and I needed to achieve reasonable grades.

## Chapter Fifteen

The first half of the ninth decade of the tenth century of the millennium witnessed many changes on the Palestinian scene, as well as a lot of developments in our ethics and behaviors. I finished my high school studies and decided to join the Islamic University of Gaza, despite the opposition of my brother Mahmoud, who would say, "What? Is this a university? This does not even qualify to be a high school!" However, Hassan supported my idea of studying there, and Ibrahim agreed, and my mother acquiesced to my wish, asking Mahmoud to refrain from commenting on the matter and leave the choice to me, as it concerned me, and I was the one to make the decision, so he reluctantly remained silent.

I enrolled at the Islamic University and was accepted into the Faculty of Science, eagerly awaiting the new academic year and the start of classes, especially since the news had come that the university would undergo significant development this year. It was expected to welcome five hundred students, elect a president holding a Ph.D., and several Ph.D. holders would join the teaching staff. Additionally, a building dedicated to the university was to be constructed.

Throughout the summer break, Ibrahim continued to work in construction with his friend, earning a decent amount of money. He did not stop there; he had now become a professional builder, having learned the trade from his friend. They became partners, employing a worker as an assistant, and began taking on medium-sized construction contracts. It was clear that Ibrahim's self-reliance was shaping him into a man.

My brothers Mahmoud and Hassan each were blessed with a child, as was my sister Fatima. Hassan's business developed as he decided to open his own lathe and milling workshop. He rented a place and began purchasing the necessary machinery for the workshop, not lacking in funds. Muhammad was advancing in his chemistry studies at Birzeit University, finishing each semester with distinction. The university waived the fees as it offered scholarships to outstanding students, so all he needed was just a bit of spending money for living expenses.

At the start of the academic year, we began attending classes in the same building of the Al-Azhar religious institute, and much of what we heard about the university's development began to materialize indeed. The number of accepted students, both male and female, was accurate, and a doctor had arrived to preside over the university, along with several other Ph.D. holders to teach. They had started to complete a building whose foundations had been laid some time ago to be specifically for the university.

All these were indicators that the university was on its way to becoming a true university, and the good omens confirmed this, making us, the students, more confident about the future. However, we still continued to attend classes in the institute's rooms in the afternoon. The male students attended in the section designated for Al-Azhar students, and the female students in the section for Al-Azhar female students.

The year we were accepted was a preparatory year, where we studied subjects equivalent to our general secondary education along with the Al-Azhar secondary students. Most of these were theoretical subjects, predominantly religious, taught by some sheikhs, along with some introductory scientific subjects, but these were few. Therefore, our level of seriousness and exhaustion from studying was very limited, and we spent most of the year playing, entertaining ourselves, and keeping up with the intellectual conflicts among students of different orientations. It was clear that the students of the Islamic trend were the most numerous among all students, the most organized, and the most capable of presenting their ideas and getting closer to the students, establishing relationships with them.

Fatah youth were less capable but were trying to develop their abilities and level well and continuously. Leftist students were a very small minority, with hardly any notable presence. They formed a small, introverted group with very limited movement.

A month into the year, the university began to seethe with student activity in anticipation of the upcoming student union elections. Concurrently, there were parallel elections for the female students' body. Activists from various

factions ramped up their efforts, reaching out to new students to present their ideas and trying to attract these students to join us.

The small cafeteria hall was brimming with debaters at the tables, presenting their ideas or attacking others. After a few days, we began to sense a problem among the activists of the Islamic bloc, where the majority of them were operating separately from their former leader, who had been behind the events and clashes surrounding the Red Crescent elections.

Days later, we learned that he had separated from them and would run in the elections on his own list, while they would compete on another list. The national forces from Fatah and the leftist organizations would come together on a third list. Discussions began to intensify, leaflets were distributed, and slogans were hung on the walls. Students from the national bloc frequently pasted pictures of "Abu Ammar" on the walls.

Each list featured the names of its eleven candidates, along with its name and slogan, and began distributing them to supporters and followers. Ibrahim was one of the most prominent activists in the Islamic bloc, and although I did not consider myself part of the Islamic bloc or a supporter of it, I had no choice but to vote for my cousin and his list due to our shared life and my personal admiration for him, which did not allow me to do otherwise, despite having some leanings towards Fatah due to its symbolism and its role in guerrilla warfare and armed resistance.

Election day was my first electoral experience, as it was for many others. We lined up in a long queue, each carrying our personal ID card, which we presented to the verification committee an hour before voting. Then, we were given a ballot paper after crossing our names off the voter list, and we proceeded to one of the designated tables to make our choice, fold the paper, and place it in the ballot box under the supervision of several university employees and an observer from each contesting list. Ibrahim was an observer for his list.

After exiting the polling station, I found a commotion happening on one side of the courtyard. I went over to see what was happening and heard from Fatah activists that activists from the Islamic bloc had torn up pictures of

"Abu Ammar" and stepped on them. No doubt, this had a negative impact on some, and it might have influenced the decision of some voters to change their vote away from the Islamic bloc.

After the voting ended, the counting process began, and some preliminary election results started to leak out, sometimes suggesting a win for the Islamic bloc, and other times suggesting that they remained at the university waiting for Ibrahim and the election results. Around eleven o'clock at night, the Dean of Student Affairs announced the results. The Islamic bloc had won distinctively, with a clear margin over the independent bloc that had preceded the national bloc. We returned home late that night, Ibrahim and I, with Ibrahim at the peak of happiness, and my mother at the peak of anxiety waiting for us. Upon reaching home, I remembered what happened when I exited the polling station and asked him if it was true that one of his activists had torn up pictures of "Abu Ammar" and stepped on them. He categorically denied it, affirming that they had immediately investigated and verified its falsity, and believed it to be an electoral tactic by national bloc activists to pull supporters from the Islamic bloc at the last minute. For me, I believed Ibrahim without a second thought, knowing him to always be truthful, and I had never witnessed him lie, but whether those he inquired were truthful, I wasn't sure.

Despite the outbreak of the civil war in Lebanon, which saw the Palestinian resistance as a key player, the presence of Palestinian resistance in Lebanon remained strong and a constant concern for Israel. Especially since the resistance occasionally launched Katyusha rockets at Israeli settlements in northern Occupied Palestine, notably Kiryat Shmona. Seizing the assassination of an Israeli figure in Europe as a pretext, the Israeli government led by Menachem Begin and his Minister of Defense "Sharon" mobilized their army along the Lebanese border and began the invasion of Lebanon. Some expected the incursion to be limited to a few kilometers to prevent rocket launches, and it seemed that "Begin" thought so too, but "Sharon" pushed the Israeli military deep into Lebanon, besieging Beirut. Faced with the Palestinian leadership's fear of the Israeli army's invasion of Beirut and Palestinian camps with the intent to annihilate the resistance, risking tens of thousands of civilian lives in such a war, the resistance decided to leave Lebanon through mediation. Indeed, the leadership and all

armed Palestinians left Lebanon, leaving the camps and Palestinian civilian communities without protection and coordination, leading to the Sabra and Shatila massacre where hundreds of Palestinian refugees, men, women, and children, were killed in one of the most heinous crimes against humanity. As news spread through the media, the situation in the Occupied Territories exploded, marking an extremely difficult and harsh period as nearly every household in the camps had relatives in the Lebanese camps, forcing them to live through the grief and anguish again, amidst painful human stories of mothers unaware of their children's fate, children unknowing of their father's status, or wives uncertain of their husbands' condition.

At the university, we demonstrated very loudly, everyone forgetting their affiliations and disputes, clashing with the occupation forces that passed by on the Thirty Street next to the university. We hurled an unimaginable amount of stones at them, and they did not stop firing bullets at us, launching tear gas grenades. Many students were injured and taken to the Al-Shifa Hospital for treatment.

In Hebron, settlement was increasing daily. Every Saturday, settlers would take over a new house, expelling its inhabitants, moving in, and the army providing them with full protection and support, which exasperated the residents.

Meanwhile, a Fatah commando cell of three young men organized and began planning a strong and deterrent operation against the settlers and the soldiers guarding them in the heart of Hebron. Amidst peak security measures, they acquired weapons, a few rifles and ammunition, and several hand grenades, and began scouting locations trying to choose the easiest and most feasible target where they could inflict the maximum losses on the enemy. After several rounds across the old city for various reasons as a disguise and cover for their real intention, they chose to attack the settlement and military gathering at the Duboyah building. With agility and caution, they snuck into the cemetery overlooking the building from above, took their positions, and waited for the decisive moment. They threw the hand grenades they had and opened fire with their rifles, causing screams and wails to rise from every direction, and none of the soldiers dared to return fire at the attackers until much later.

Shortly after, large forces arrived to reinforce the site and evacuate the dead and wounded. Accounts of the casualties varied, but undoubtedly, the number was significant. A curfew was imposed on the city, and sweeping operations, searches, and investigations began in the city to gather any information on the perpetrators, accompanied by a campaign of deliberate and intended destruction throughout. The curfew lasted many days, and when it was lifted, the occupation forces had imposed new rules in the city. In the sacred Ibrahimi Mosque, which they used to visit only as tourists, they now partitioned off parts for their use, where religious Jewish settlers are almost permanently present, except during Friday prayers.

They placed their seats and menorah in the Yusufiyya hall, and around the clock, dozens of soldiers guarded these places, the religious Jews, and their worship items inside the mosque. Routes were canceled, houses confiscated, and the squeeze on people increased. The density of the occupying forces' patrols, checking their ID cards and conducting searches on them and their belongings in every street or alley they passed through, turned their lives into a real hell. It became evident that people were almost suffocating from what the occupiers and settlers were enforcing.

Jamal was heading to pray at the Ibrahim Mosque, continuing his visits despite all the restrictions and tightening because nothing in the universe should prevent us from praying in our mosque. Everything they do is an attempt to terrorize us and drive us out of the mosque, and as long as we have a pulse, we will never abandon our mosque. Thus, the caring mother and the concerned wife had to accept reality and resorted to praying for protection and safety.

In the University Graduates Association School where he worked, among a large number of teachers who supported Fatah, discussions would explode on every occasion. Those teachers would start attacking him and the Islamists who stood by idly, not participating in armed action against the occupation. He would smile, arguing that for our people to truly fight their ongoing battle, they must arm themselves with the weapon of religion and faith. They must return to their religion so that the battle takes its true dimension and reaches the required level. When people realize that they are struggling and suffering in this life to receive reward and approval in the

afterlife, they will bear it easily and will rush their children towards jihad, sacrifice, without being harmed or accused of neglecting their national duty.

It wasn't long before the settlers had formed a secret organization, beginning to prepare and plan for attacking Arabs in Hebron and elsewhere. This group of settlers had weapons, ammunition, explosives, and military experience, as most of its members had served in combat units in the Israeli army. Extreme rabbis supported them, providing religious cover and issuing fatwas to kill as many Arabs as possible, destroy their homes, and places of worship.

In the morning hours, as the students of Hebron University gathered in the campus, a white Peugeot car stopped, and three armed men emerged, opening fire with their automatic weapons on the students. Within minutes, the car sped away, leaving behind dozens of students soaked in their blood, including several martyrs. After a long while, the occupying army and intelligence forces arrived, pretending to investigate the incident. They interrogated several students and bystanders, while people murmured among themselves... What do these people want? Do they think we believe that this incident was not planned and orchestrated by them?

The same group of settlers had rented a house in the Old City of Jerusalem and started to store quantities of advanced explosives, conducting intensive training sessions overseen by retired officers, including plans to blow up the Al-Aqsa Mosque and remove any Islamic traces from it.

The news leaked to the security services, and after consideration, they found that the time was not yet right for the destruction of the Al-Aqsa Mosque. They decided to stop this extremist group by arresting them and temporarily imprisoning them, despite their involvement in killing many and planning highly dangerous acts.

Around the same time, an extremist religious movement called the "Temple Faithful" announced its intention to enter the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound to lay the foundation stone for their temple on the ruins of the blessed Al-Aqsa Mosque, indicating they might use force to do so. Not long before, one of the extremists had stormed the Al-Aqsa Mosque, shooting at the

Muslim guards working for the Islamic Waqf, and the worshippers, killing several of them.

The news of this group's intention to storm the Al-Aqsa Mosque spread everywhere, reaching the Islamic University before noon. Immediately, a number of student council members, led by Ibrahim, gathered in the university courtyard and started a speech festival about the dangers threatening the Al-Aqsa Mosque. They announced that they would depart with any students willing to join them to Jerusalem. Some couldn't travel to Jerusalem without informing their families, while others didn't hesitate to give their bags and books to their peers to take home and inform their families about their departure to Jerusalem. Ibrahim and I were among those who did so.

The bus took off to Jerusalem with one of the university's teachers, Sheikh Younis, aboard. We wished the bus could fly us to Jerusalem so we could shield the Al-Aqsa Mosque with our bodies. Throughout the journey, the Sheikh spoke to us about the virtue of this sacred land and the merit of jihad in it, inflaming our emotions beyond their original fervor.

Upon arriving at the Al-Aqsa Mosque, we found it crowded with men, women, and children in a large, unorganized gathering. We, about sixty in number, gathered in one of the mosque's corners and formed a leadership headed by Ibrahim, with the Sheikh as our guide and motivator. We were divided into several groups, each tasked with protecting one of the doors through which the aggressors were expected to come. We had nothing to defend ourselves with but our hands, sticks, and stones at our disposal. We took our positions, instructed not to leave them under any circumstances, fearing that the attackers might assault the Al-Aqsa Mosque from multiple locations, and the disorganized crowd would rush to the first door reported to be under attack.

Each squad was split into two groups for performing prayers at their times—one group would pray while the other continued guarding. Once the first group finished praying, it took over the guarding positions, allowing the second group to pray. As night fell and movements quieted, suggesting a potentially prolonged situation, it was agreed that the first group would sleep for the first half of the night and then return, allowing the second

group to sleep during the latter half. The leadership group distributed commands to all teams to ensure unified action.

Those who stayed for guard duty began to feel the night's chill, prompting several locals to bring wool blankets, providing one for each of us to wrap ourselves in. We settled by the stone walls and pillars, contemplating the sanctity of the place and its historical phases, whispering to ourselves the honor of standing guard at Al-Aqsa to protect it from any vile enemy.

We reminisced about the Prophet's Isra and Mi'raj, remembered Saladin the Victorious, and our eyes welled with tears, with some quietly sobbing. The second group replaced us at midnight, to whom we handed over the blankets for warmth and stones for defense. We then headed to the Al-Aqsa Mosque's courtyard, laying down some mats to lie on and covering ourselves with others, until the dawn prayer, when we rose, performed ablutions, and joined the other worshippers for Fajr prayer.

One of the Al-Aqsa Mosque guards noticed our level of organization and preparedness, whispering to Ibrahim that there were hundreds of iron pipes, used for constructing scaffolding, available. "Take them and use them if necessary," he suggested.

As the sun rose, another busload of university students arrived, increasing our numbers to over a hundred, each armed with an iron pipe, significantly more effective than bare arms or stones. Everyone took their positions, and people started flooding into the mosque again. Occasionally, rumors circulated that an attack would come from the Maghreb Gate, drawing crowds there, while university students remained at their posts. We noticed a more organized group of young men and adults among the general populace, who also recognized us and identified Ibrahim as our leader. They introduced themselves as devout young men from the 1948 occupied territories, particularly from the town of Umm al-Fahm. They immediately joined us, becoming part of our teams. Their most distinctive traits were extraordinary kindness and an incredible readiness for sacrifice. It wasn't long before one of them would start chanting or singing, elevating our spirits with noble themes about sacrificing for Al-Aqsa with soul and blood, causing our tears to flow freely and our grips on the iron pipes to tighten.

The day designated by the Temple Mount Faithful passed without them daring to approach the Al-Aqsa Mosque. We stayed an additional day for reassurance. After confirming the absence of threat and performing the Dhuhr prayer in the mosque, we sat in a circle in the courtyard. Sheikh Younis spoke about our venture for Allah's sake to protect our Al-Aqsa, which didn't result in an encounter with the enemy, nor did any of us achieve martyrdom. He then prayed extensively, asking Allah to protect Al-Aqsa from their plots and grant us martyrdom and the merit of jihad. We all echoed "Ameen" with tears streaming down our faces and sobs rising. Then, the bus took us back to Gaza, enveloped in silence all the way.

Our trip to the Al-Aqsa Mosque and meeting our people from the inside reminded us of another part of our torn nation scattered across various regions. This was the first time we interacted closely with people from the inside; I had heard little about them before, but this encounter quickly endeared them to my heart, admiring their virtues, kindness, and light-heartedness.

Among everything, their resilience throughout the years of occupation stands out the most. Despite all attempts to strip them of their Arab identity, Islam, and Palestinian heritage, they remain firmer than anyone could imagine who hasn't met them and witnessed their spirit and readiness.

My brother, Mohammad, had met some of the youths from the inside during his visit to Hebron University. As it is customary for activists from different lists, Mohammad and his colleagues would tour other universities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, meeting with activists from their ideological stream to coordinate activities and stances.

During one of these visits to Hebron University, one of the activists invited them to a student house for lunch. There, they were warmly welcomed by a group of youths who prepared lunch and dined with them. Mohammad learned that they were from the 1948 areas, from towns like Umm al-Fahm and Kafr Qasim, and it was evident that these youths possessed incredibly kind souls and a high level of religiosity. Their years living under occupation only strengthened their commitment to their faith and cause.

Mohammad graduated with honors from the College of Science, which immediately enabled him to be accepted as a teaching assistant in the Chemistry Department at Birzeit University. My mother had been looking forward to his graduation and return to settle in Gaza, but his appointment at the university meant he would continue spending most of his time in the West Bank. This was a persistent problem for my mother due to Mohammad's absence in Ramallah. However, it solved another issue, as he would need a new room upon returning as a graduate, and our house did not have the space. When discussing his accommodation in Ramallah, he confirmed that he would live in a shared apartment with the same students as during his studies for at least the first year.

One day, after our stay at Al-Aqsa Mosque and while we were having a family gathering at home, I inadvertently started talking about that event. Despite Ibrahim's stern looks, I couldn't hold back or stop myself. Immediately, Mahmoud began criticizing Ibrahim and Mohammad Mohsen as members of the Islamic stream, accusing them of not participating in armed resistance and settling for political and mass work instead. He argued that their leadership was under suspicion for hindering the youth's potential for resistance in the name of religion.

Mohammad, who seemed to have gained significant experience in political discussions through his involvement in student activities, responded: "Anyone listening to you would think your guns never stop firing and that your operations will make the Jews flee within hours. You know that for years there has been nothing resembling an armed resistance, and all attempts are weak and die in their infancy, right, engineer?"

The next day, as we went to pray Maghrib at the mosque, the youths sat in their usual circle, and Sheikh Mohammad asked for permission to speak. "Sheikh Ahmad, allow me, for there's a question I'd like you to answer because it's frequently raised in every occasion we face: Where is the role of Islamists in national work, I mean, the resistance?" Sheikh Ahmad smiled, looking around at the faces of those present and said, "We are now in a stage of education and preparation," and began to explain the importance of education in building the future of nations and peoples aspiring to

achieve noble goals, then moved on to the topic he intended to address from the beginning.

The phrases "preparation and education" or "education and preparation" resonated throughout our discussions at home, at Um Al-Abd's house in the presence of her son Abdul Hafeez, or at the university in any debate addressing the Islamists' stance on armed resistance at the current time. Whenever someone from the national trend questioned their role, their Islamist counterpart would reply, "We are now in a stage of education and preparation," often citing the Islamic call's first man, Muhammad, the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, who spent many years on educational and da'wah work before starting jihad by the sword.

One day, we returned home late to find our mother extremely worried. We learned that a policeman had delivered a summons for Ibrahim, asking him to report to the intelligence headquarters the following morning and warning him against delay. Ibrahim was not distressed nor did he show any worry or fear, reassuring our mother that this was routine and many youths were summoned in this manner, asked a few questions, and then allowed to leave.

The next day, Ibrahim went for that interview, where he was detained in one of the booths along with several others who were wanted, for long hours until Asr (afternoon prayer). Afterwards, he was brought into the office of the intelligence officer in charge of our area, known by the nickname Abu Wadi'. The officer started asking him ordinary social questions about his family, relatives, residence, studies, and Ibrahim gave very brief and concise answers. Abu Wadi' tried to draw him into more extensive conversations, but Ibrahim stuck to being succinct.

After a short while, the questions shifted towards his student activities at the university, to which Ibrahim responded with either "yes" or "I don't know," provoking Abu Wadi', who yelled, "Do you think we don't know about your activities and relationships? That we don't know your head is as hard as a rock?" Ibrahim remained silent, further infuriating the intelligence officer who started pushing Ibrahim or giving him light slaps, yet Ibrahim did not react and his face turned red. Abu Wadi' yelled about "education and preparation... why education and preparation?" Ibrahim looked at him and

said, "I don't know what you're talking about?" Abu Wadi' laughed, "I knew you'd say that and I don't expect anything else from you. But just so you know, we are aware that you repeat these words and that you've said it hundreds of times in response to the national bloc students' questions about your role in sabotage activities against the State of Israel. Be informed that we are monitoring you, and we know every breath you take and the moment you think of doing something other than talk, we'll know how to put you in prison."

Abu Wadi' handed him his identity card, saying, "All this hatred filling your eyes like a mule's, don't bring it with you when I call you again. Leave it at home." Ibrahim took his ID card and left the room, smiling a smile that was not easy to hide.

## Chapter Sixteen

Aunt Fathiya was blessed with a daughter named "Mona," and despite the newborn's beauty, cheerfulness, and charm, she never distracted Aunt Fathiya from her son, Abdel Rahim, who had started to crawl and speak. They began preparing him to start school with the new academic year. Abdel Rahim was a handsome, dark-skinned child with a sharp sense of humor. If someone upset him, he would sulk and remain sullen until he could vent his anger by hitting the person who upset him. He was particularly attached to his uncle, Abdel Rahman, who had gotten married after finishing his university studies and had a daughter named "Ruqaya."

Uncle Abdel Rahman adored him greatly, and whenever he had the chance, he would take his little hand, after his mother had gotten him ready, and take him out of the house, either to the mountain or for a stroll in the village in its tranquil evening after sunset. He would buy him what he liked from a nearby shop and often took him to the mosque to pray Maghrib, with Abdel Rahim standing next to his uncle, mimicking him in prayer. If his uncle prolonged the prostration during a Sunnah prayer, Abdel Rahim would lift his head to check his uncle's position and if he saw him prostrating, he would return to prostration. Then, he would sit with him in the mosque alongside a group of young men who frequented the mosque to discuss a jurisprudential issue, a historical matter, or an event from the Prophet's biography. Abdel Rahim would sit cross-legged, slightly bowing his head then raising his gaze to the speakers, resting his head on his hands supported by his knees.

His uncle would also take him to Hebron to visit his friend and colleague, Jamal, where they would sit in the house engaging in conversation with other friends who would join them to discuss religious, political, and other issues. Sometimes, they would go to one of the mosques in Hebron or to a friend's house for a visit.

Political awareness in the Occupied Territories had clearly developed, especially among youth congregations and specifically in universities, institutes, and high schools. The competition between political forces and political thought was gradually escalating, especially as each force

attempted to secure the largest number of positions for itself. For example, in universities, each current tried to win over the students to ensure its victory in the student council elections.

During this competition, small and limited clashes always occurred but were quickly and easily resolved. However, as the power of the Islamic current began to compete in all areas, a severe sensitivity arose among the national current, especially led by Fatah. The national current, representing the different factions of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), considered itself the extension of the organization, which is the legitimate and sole representative of the Palestinian people. This has been the recognition the Palestinian people were accustomed to over decades, acknowledged by the Arab League, Arab countries, the United Nations, and other international institutions.

Suddenly, the Islamic current emerged in the Occupied Territories, growing significantly and competing in many positions against representatives of the PLO factions, winning many of them or achieving good percentages in others. This situation was extremely worrying, further aggravated by two other concerns. Firstly, this group did not shoulder any operational responsibility in the armed struggle against the occupation. Secondly, it did not recognize the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. Although its leaders and chiefs did not explicitly state this, they also did not clearly acknowledge this fact, providing diplomatic answers that were neither a clear no nor a yes when asked.

With the growth of this current across the Occupied Territories, especially in Gaza and specifically in the Islamic University, which came under almost complete control of the Islamic current through student council elections and staff body elections, the situation became increasingly concerning. Serious attempts were made to rebalance the situation, likely following directives from leadership abroad to earnestly resolve matters. This led to sharp frictions in many places, occasionally escalating into clashes that started in universities and spread to streets and alleys of areas and refugee camps. Attacks from one side on members of the other, followed by retaliatory responses, resulted in a series of assaults causing physical harm requiring treatment in many cases.

In this atmosphere, everyone was aligning themselves with their groups and organizations, showing loyalty even if just through words and defending their positions. This immediately reflected within our home. My brother Mahmoud was a Fatah supporter, my brothers Hassan and Mohammed and my cousin Ibrahim were from the Islamic bloc, and our neighbor and relative (Hassan's brother-in-law) was from the Popular Front. The moment any conflicts or clashes of this nature erupted, it directly impacted our home and relationships, turning discussions into heated arguments and shouting matches about who did what, questioning each other's actions and beliefs. My mother would try to mediate and cool things down to at least avoid physical fights, and I usually stood by her side. Mahmoud's wife would stand by him, and Hassan's wife by him... And eventually, everyone would disperse to their rooms, deliberately avoiding each other, clearly upset and angry.

Ibrahim's presence in the university and his leadership role in the Islamic bloc earned him an extraordinary level of respect, almost sanctified. Being at the university myself and close to him, I noticed this clearly and was often concerned someone might attack him, so I tried to stay close whenever possible and permitted by my schedule and his movements. He would sometimes disappear or be sitting or standing with bloc activists, where I wouldn't intrude, guessing they were discussing private matters they wouldn't want me to hear.

It seemed information about Ibrahim's role reached my brother Mahmoud through Fatah activists at the university, who considered Mahmoud one of their leaders. I could see the irritation and anger on Mahmoud's face towards Ibrahim, unable to approach or even speak to him without causing upset, which was a red line for my mother since upsetting Ibrahim was akin to a disaster, as we had been taught since their mother left him.

Occasionally, Mahmoud tried to engage Ibrahim in a conversation, holding his temper to prevent an escalation. My mother would intervene, pouring her wrath on Mahmoud's head, prompting him to argue that the situation wasn't as Ibrahim and his group portrayed, implying they bore some responsibility for the clashes. Ibrahim would smile and say, "Man, you're trying to pin this on us... We didn't start the clash, and you're not ready to

acknowledge our existence as a popular force and a political and social stream different from yours." Mahmoud would counter, "You're inclined to violence, using sticks, chains, and batons, you don't recognize the PLO, don't carry your weight in armed struggle, and attack representatives of the national movement while the occupation watches." Ibrahim would look at him reproachfully, questioning if this was an accusation of collaboration, that they were the occupation's favorites. Mahmoud would try to backpedal, "I'm not accusing you, Ibrahim, not you, but perhaps your leaders have personal agendas." Ibrahim would respond, "We never initiated a clash; we've always defended ourselves. The core issue is your unwillingness to recognize our existence as a competing force as if the mandate for Palestinian work and control over institutions and associations is registered solely in your names. You must acknowledge there's a competing force that disagrees with many of your views and positions." At this point, my mother, who had been paying attention and monitoring the discussion, would intervene, asking to stop this conversation and not bring street problems into our home disputes.

On one occasion, the military governor sent a notification requesting the presence of Ibrahim and other activists from various factions at his headquarters. When Ibrahim arrived, he found a group of about ten activists. The governor started calling them into his office one by one. When it was Ibrahim's turn, the governor began to speak with him and held him responsible for the ongoing events. Ibrahim objected to this approach, clarifying that he had no connection to the clashes taking place. The governor then shifted tactics, questioning how, as a people under occupation desiring independence, they could fight and quarrel among themselves, implying they were a people undeserving of life.

Ibrahim found himself in a dilemma; not responding would be a severe blow, and responding might affirm the ongoing situation or his part in it. After thinking for a moment, he said, "Firstly, I want to affirm that I have no connection to what is happening. However, I believe you are aware that all peoples living under occupation or those with sovereignty and institutions, like our people, experience disputes and clashes. This has happened among you repeatedly, both in ancient and recent times, including the Haganah's actions against the Irgun."

The governor was taken aback, unable to hide his surprise, and asked, "Where did you learn this?" Ibrahim responded, "It's written in books." The governor tried to turn the tables on Ibrahim, saying, "I'm proud that someone like you considers the Jewish people a role model and example." Ibrahim retorted, "I did not mention that as a role model or example, but rather as a historical model. And I reiterate to you once again that I have no connection to what is happening."

Day by day, my respect and admiration for Ibrahim grew. He was orphaned by his father, who was martyred when he was four years old, and later abandoned by his mother while still young. Raised among us, he became a self-made man and a true leader despite his young age and the challenging circumstances under occupation.

I watched him as he moved around the university campus, talking to one, directing another, issuing orders and instructions, and managing affairs as he wished. Then you'd find him engaging in thoughtful discussion and debate. Above all, he was modest, blushing easily, his face quickly turning red with a rush of blood to his cheeks.

The occupation was preventing construction at the university in an attempt to contain and restrict it. However, it was necessary to impose a policy of creating a fait accompli. The number of students, both male and female, had exceeded one thousand five hundred, and the number of academic and administrative staff had increased to such an extent that no one, neither students nor observers, could doubt that the university had passed the stage of danger and was now on the path to becoming a formal institution.

This turned into a challenge against the occupation, which fights us in everything, including education. Thus, you saw us erecting tents and palm frond arbors to study under, with Ibrahim overseeing the work with great seriousness and attention, instilling in the students a spirit of perseverance and challenge. Each of us came to the university feeling it was part of our national duty first, before our academic interest. The name "University of Tents" began to imprint itself on the Islamic University, and this became a source of our pride and dignity. The occupation could not stand against the will of a people for education and began to accept the reality, pushing us to move forward.

Suddenly, without prior warning, several trucks entered the university, unloading large quantities of building materials. Ibrahim transformed from a student and activist into a contractor, with him, a number of respectable students, and hundreds of us helping them to build brick classrooms with asbestos roofs.

Thus, a *fait accompli* was imposed on the occupation, and several classrooms were equipped for study. After a while, several other classrooms were prepared, followed by a third batch, making it clear that we had become independent of the palm frond arbors and tents. All of this only elevated Ibrahim in my eyes and in my heart, adding to his greatness, nobility, and love.

Ibrahim was studying and excelling in his studies, engaging in his student activities, and held a prestigious position among his peers as a leader in his group. Above all, he was involved in construction work, earning money that sufficed for his expenses. But it didn't stop there; one evening while we were sitting at home, he turned to my mother saying, "I want to suggest something and I don't want you to be upset with me." She replied, "You know I don't get upset with you and I know you wouldn't say anything that would upset me." He said, "But it seems this is the first time I'll do that, so I hope you'll forgive me." My mother looked at him in surprise and wonder, asking, "What's the matter, Ibrahim?"

He answered while reaching into his pocket and pulling out a bundle of money, "I want to contribute to the household expenses. I'm now a man earning a lot of money and I must contribute to the expenses. It's enough that you..." My mother interrupted Ibrahim, exclaiming, "What's gotten into you? Have you lost your mind?" Ibrahim mumbled, "Auntie, I'm now..." My mother shouted again, "No, not now or ever... Forget about this nonsense. If you have extra money, give it to me and I'll save it for you because you might need it tomorrow or the day after. Anyway, it will be needed when we marry you off after you graduate from university." Then she began to speak to him tenderly, "Whenever you have an extra penny, bring it to me to save for you. It will be needed, Ibrahim."

It seems the refusal did not sit well with him, as I would see him every few days returning home carrying an envelope or a bag filled with groceries,

fruits, vegetables, or sweets, bringing them home as a form of participation. My mother would look at him with admiration and respect, muttering, "Ah, what can I do with you, Ibrahim. May God be pleased with you."

Armed resistance had significantly diminished, and the saying "every death of a Jew causes so and so" became popular to illustrate the rarity or non-existence of such events. Not only did deaths among enemies decrease, but any form of resistance did. The signs of military alertness dwindled, the number of patrols roaming the streets reduced, and curfews were very rarely imposed. Nighttime curfews were lifted, allowing people to be on the beach at night in many areas.

Buses filled with Jews began to come to all areas, for example, to the heart of Gaza City on Saturdays for outings and shopping due to the cheap prices, despite the significant negative impact on the conservative level of the country when dozens of buses carrying scantily clad girls and women arrive.

Intelligence officers, responsible for the areas, began to roam the streets in their Subaru cars, even stopping at any time of day or night, anywhere, calling over passersby to check their ID cards, interrogate them, or converse without any fear or caution. Sometimes, if they saw something suspicious in an alley, they would chase someone down those alleys, a stark contrast to the large forces that couldn't invade the camp before. Now, you might see them shouting at or even slapping and kicking the young men they stopped, then driving off without returning their ID cards, demanding they follow him to his office, and woe to that young man if he did not comply.

The movement of workers to the inside became unrestricted, and many of these workers and craftsmen formed friendships with their Jewish employers. It wasn't limited to work relationships but extended to social ones. If a worker requested a week off for marriage, the employer would inquire about the date and inform him that he would come with his wife to congratulate and bring a gift. It was common to find an Israeli car with a yellow license plate entering the camp, stopping, and asking in Hebrew or broken Arabic for the house of groom so-and-so, where they would park, enter with gifts, and leave without anyone objecting.

The occupation's intelligence had begun to infiltrate the camp gradually, systematically, and deliberately. Anyone opposing or objecting would find the intelligence officer responsible for the area sending dozens of summonses to young men and men to his office. They would sit in the waiting room for hours, then be called in one by one, to be beaten, threatened, warned, bargained with, consoled, and efforts made to recruit them. Sometimes they succeeded in ensnaring some of the weak-willed. Anyone

wanting to travel abroad for study, to visit relatives, for work, needing a building permit, to open a workshop or store, or not needing anything at all had to go through the intelligence officer's office where bargaining began, and services were offered in exchange for very simple tasks from the citizen.

If initial cooperation is found, it is understood that it could be developed into collaboration and betrayal. The situation did not stop there but exceeded to a point where a number of agents became famous and known, carrying pistols on their sides, roaming the streets at will, entering the intelligence office whenever they wish, harassing and assaulting people. Some, when in need of a permit or license, which is denied by the intelligence officer, could turn to one of these well-known agents seeking their mediation to obtain their needs, for which the agent would demand a commission.

One of the neighbors' sons had gone to study medicine in Turkey. After six years and only his internship year left, he was prevented from traveling. Repeatedly visiting the intelligence officer, who refused each time to issue him a travel permit, his feet became worn out from so much walking. Advised by someone, he approached one of the agents for help. That agent demanded a large commission of five hundred Jordanian Dinars. When the man argued that the amount was too large, the agent sarcastically replied, "I am an agent for the Jews; if you could, you would kill me, so I must suck your blood before that happens."

Some opened offices for issuing permits and similar transactions that could only be done with intelligence permission, making commissions, accumulating wealth, and driving luxury cars. It became clear that through

its agents, the occupation's intelligence started promoting the trade and use of hashish, drugs, and alcohol. They considered this a means to destroy the nation and kill any spirit of resistance, while the agents saw it as a quick way to make money with their appearance protected. The agents began to promote corruption and immorality by spreading obscene pictures, magazines, and sexual videotapes among boys and girls.

Aware activists from various organizations saw these dark, murky images, and not only could they not act against this phenomenon, but they also all came under constant surveillance by these agents. Since my brother Mahmoud and my cousin Ibrahim were well-known activists, an agent closely monitored our main house's door, not knowing we had another door, previously my uncle's. Thus, Mahmoud and Ibrahim would quietly leave the house through the back door, while those suspects thought they were still inside.

All the youth in the camp knew many stories of women and girls who had fallen into collaboration and started working with the intelligence as prostitutes to trap young men into sexual activities. They would then be photographed in shameful and compromising positions, and the intelligence would attempt to blackmail and threaten them to work with them.

Stories became known about beauty salons or photo studios owned by agents turning into dens for moral entrapment as a prelude to security entrapment. These stories were particularly exposed after several suicide incidents of girls who wrote letters to their families saying they had been deceived into going to a certain salon where they were drugged and found themselves violated and photographed in disgraceful poses. They were threatened to cooperate with the intelligence, or else be exposed, leading them to prefer death and suicide.

Many of these stories, with names of those who committed suicide, names of the shops, and names of those who engaged in these disgraceful acts, became well-known. It was clear that the occupation's intelligence, using its agents, systematically practiced spreading organized corruption to destroy the people and end any hope of a future for liberation or resistance. Every day, their methods in this field evolved, to the extent that one of the well-known agents' offices would announce registration for a tourist trip to areas

inside the Green Line. During these trips, with dozens of naive young men, several prostitutes known for their collaboration with the occupation's intelligence were taken along. During the trip and at those tourist spots, attempts were made to entangle those young men in scenes and situations that were photographed, thereby threatening them with scandal or informing their families unless they agreed to cooperate with the intelligence.

One young man from the camp who went on one of these trips got entangled when they took compromising photos of him. The intelligence officer responsible for the camp summoned him to his office and proposed he collaborate with him, which he refused. The officer then showed him those photos, threatening to expose him in the camp and tarnish his image. The young man persisted in his refusal. "Abu Wadi' said, "I'll give you a week to think. After a week, I'll summon you again, and if you don't agree to help me, you'll see how I expose you."

The young man left in a panic, feeling he had fallen into a trap. If he refused to cooperate, he would be disgraced throughout the camp, and his reputation would be tarnished. If he agreed to cooperate, he would become more entangled and forced to betray his people and his homeland. Eventually, he turned to one of his friends, seeking a way out. His friend, finding himself in a dilemma due to lack of experience with such matters, accompanied the troubled young man to Mahmoud, hoping he could offer some advice. They explained the situation to Mahmoud.

Mahmoud scolded the young man for going on such trips in the first place, for getting close to collaborators, and for getting himself into this mess. He assured him that his problem was already solved because he had the courage to talk about it with his friend and sought advice from Mahmoud. Intelligence agencies typically do not publish such photos but use them to threaten naive young men. Their fear of public exposure could make them agree to cooperate. If the intelligence officer called him again, he should make it clear that he was not afraid of the scandal, that the officer could publish the photos, and he himself would distribute copies around the camp if necessary.

The young man was summoned a few days later and did as Mahmoud advised. This infuriated Abu Wadi', who began threatening him, but eventually, he dismissed the young man from his office, stating he would give him more time to reconsider. If he still refused to cooperate, Abu Wadi' warned, he would make his life miserable. One evening, as Abu Wadi' was patrolling the camp streets in his car and spotted the young man shopping, he stopped to call him over. Realizing this, the young man turned and fled into an alley, with Abu Wadi' chasing after him.

Mahmoud and his colleagues often discussed these topics in their meetings, deliberating on how to counteract the intelligence activities and their collaborators without finding a feasible solution. It seemed the situation had reached a point where the proverb "the rip has expanded beyond repair" applied.

Their dilemma worsened when Hassan, a cousin, returned to the camp. His Jewish lover had kicked him out after their business with her father collapsed, leading to bankruptcy. Wandering aimlessly, he decided to return to the camp. When he arrived home, it was clear he no longer belonged among them; he had become more like the Jews than his own people, and no one could bear his presence.

Despite this, Mahmoud proposed giving him a chance to reform and reintegrate into his natural setting. They cleared out the guest room for him and tried to make him feel the warmth of returning to the family. However, he was incapable of feeling warmth or affection. Every day he would cause trouble with the neighbors or infringe on their honor, leading to complaints. Mahmoud tried advising him without success until they unanimously decided to expel him from the house, with Ibrahim being the most adamant about it.

When Hassan returned from one of his escapades in a similar state, Ibrahim confronted him sternly and made it clear he had no place among them. He should leave wherever he wished. After a decisive conversation in which all participated, Hassan picked up a few of his belongings, including his television, and left muttering curses, mostly in Hebrew and some in broken Arabic. They thought they had finally rid themselves of the trouble he caused with the neighbors.

Days later, they learned he was living with a notorious woman, and news began to circulate that he was involved in drug trafficking and promoting indecent materials, clearly indicating his ties to intelligence. This was confirmed when some of Mohammed's friends informed him that Hassan was regularly visiting Abu Wadi's office without any restrictions.

Their family's reputation in the camp had always been impeccable, with Mahmoud's status in Fatah and Ibrahim's in the Islamic movement positioning them as pillars of national work and religious integrity. Suddenly, Hassan's reappearance threatened to tarnish this image. Hassan, known for his corruption and suspected dealings, caused the greatest harm to his brother Hassan, as people would become apprehensive upon hearing his name, associating it with the notorious "Hassan Al-Saleh." Every time his name was mentioned, Hassan had to explain the situation from the beginning, though listeners were not always convinced.

Hassan became our primary concern, and despite the neighborhood and camp's familiarity with us, we began to feel the need to walk with our heads down, ashamed of the stigma that had befallen us. How could we rid ourselves of this curse? We had to act, but our helplessness was evident. Ibrahim came to me one day, saying, "Ahmed, I need to discuss something with you, and I ask for your promise not to tell anyone." I promised, and he said, "We must kill Hassan!!" I was shocked and looked at him in disbelief, speechless. He repeated, "Yes, we must kill him. Either we do it publicly, to erase the shame that has befallen us, and I am ready to pay the price with a life sentence, or we do it secretly. The important thing is to erase him from the face of the Earth."

I understood Ibrahim's pain and what we all suffered from Hassan's actions and reputation, but I was not ready to go to such lengths, even in thought. However, a solution was necessary. I suggested to Ibrahim that we ambush Hassan and break his legs so he would remain bedridden in that house and stop harming others. I made it clear that I was not willing to go any further... and he agreed.

We informed Hassan of our plan, and he immediately agreed, readying three iron pipes and three masks for us. Indeed, we lay in wait for him, and one night, as he returned drunk to his ominous house, we pounced on him.

Ibrahim struck him on the head, and he fell. I whispered to Ibrahim, "Don't hit his head, just his legs," and we pummeled his legs and arms senselessly, then left the scene, with Hassan hiding the pipes and masks.

By the next morning, news had spread that a group attempted to kill Hassan. He survived with severe injuries, both legs and one arm broken, and a skull fracture. He was taken to the hospital, and we showed no concern. Everyone looked at us, their eyes saying, "You did it, God bless your hands."

A few days later, the police came and took all the young men from the house for interrogation regarding the attempted murder of Hassan. We denied it, arguing how could we kill our cousin, our own flesh and blood, as blood does not turn to water. We were detained for about two weeks and then released after no evidence was found against us. Despite our two-week detention, Hassan remained in the hospital wrapped in casts for over two months. Upon his release, he was left with a limp distinguishable even in the dark. However, he bought a white Peugeot 504 and continued to move around, but we no longer heard about his scandals in the camp.

In 1985, a prisoner exchange took place between Israel and the General Command "Ahmed Jibril," releasing many Palestinian prisoners who had spent years in jails, mostly from Fatah and the Popular Front, and some from the Islamic movement in prisons who were originally from the Popular Liberation Forces. Their release turned the occupied territories into a national celebration across the homeland, with celebrations and well-wishers everywhere...

On the other hand, this represented a clear boost in national and security awareness among the Palestinian people. The release of these experienced and seasoned individuals had a significant impact on the political debate on various issues. When these freed individuals were present in councils, our home, and at work, but patrols by suspects around the house did not cease; instead, they intensified and became more frequent, happening throughout the day and night.

My brother Sheikh Mohammed became acquainted with one of his devout female students, and it was clear he was drawn to her, reciprocating glances filled with modesty and a clear message of mutual feelings. He

returned to Gaza on Thursday, stayed with us until Friday, when he informed our mother about the girl and sought her permission to take the first steps. After some hesitation, she consented, insisting she must see the girl first as she considered Mohammed to be like a "blind cat" who might not find the girl beautiful enough.

Mohammed returned to Birzeit and asked the girl to allow him a two-minute private conversation, almost bursting with shyness. He asked if he could propose to her parents for her hand in marriage. Her cheeks flushed with blood, enhancing her beauty, and she nodded in agreement, providing her family's address.

The following Friday, Mohammed took a family delegation, including our mother, my brothers Mahmoud and Hassan, my aunt, and my sisters Fatima and Tihani, to the girl's house. My mother was undoubtedly impressed and later joked about Mohammed being like a "blind cat," which turned out to be a "disaster." The girl's family agreed, and the engagement was announced, with the marriage contract and wedding planned for after her graduation in a year and a half, which suited Mohammed and us.

## Chapter Seventeen

Jamaal and several of his brothers from Hebron drive their cars heading to Suraif to visit their friend Abdul-Rahman. Knocking on the door, Abdul-Raheem, living at the door, rushes out to find his uncle's and his elder friends, most of whom he knows from visiting them with his uncle since childhood. He greets them with a smile, "Welcome, please come in," and makes way for them to the guest room, while his uncle Abdul-Rahman comes rushing, welcoming them. They sit and talk, and Abdul-Raheem considers himself one of them despite the age difference of over twenty-five years.

The women prepare lunch and bring it to the room's door, where Abdul-Rahman and Abdul-Raheem come out to bring it in. After lunch, they go out for a walk at the edge of the village, with Abdul-Raheem accompanying them.

The land is fertile plains but lacks good cultivation and has remains of wires stretching over long distances. Abdul-Rahman points to the wires, saying, "This is the ceasefire line; beyond it are the Palestinian territories occupied in 1948 and 1967, and part of our village's lands to the west of the wire. Our family had forty dunams confiscated in '48, and this part continues our land by a few dunams, which we cannot farm due to its proximity to the border. Don't forget this, Abdul-Raheem." Abdul-Raheem nods, muttering, "How can I forget, uncle? How can I forget?" Jamaal murmurs, "How can he forget? How can we forget? How can one live without his heart and limbs...?"

They drive back to Hebron, with Abdul-Raheem sitting next to his uncle. On the way, dozens of cars bearing yellow license plates, indicating they are Israeli, move in both directions. Jamaal lets out a frustrated sigh, saying, "Then what about these settlers? They have swallowed the land and are never satisfied, never stopping at any limit..."

Entering the city as the Maghrib prayer call begins, the driver heads towards the Ibrahimi Mosque. The car can barely move due to the congestion, as hundreds of settlers and occupying soldiers guard their way to the mosque. They walk to enter the mosque, with tens of guns drawn by

the occupying soldiers. The Jewish settlers, wearing small decorated hats on their heads, long unkempt beards, and wrapped in striped cloths with many threads dangling, hurry to the mosque, jostling its people and stopping them at every barrier.

The young men enter the mosque, where the carpet has been removed from the back part, and barriers of iron pillars with thick ropes define the prayer area... Only a quarter of the mosque is for prayer, with the other three-quarters, along with the outer courtyard and two attached halls, filled with Jews ("Ah... It's Saturday," Jamaal mutters). In every corner, a Jew stands reading from a book in an incomprehensible and rapid manner, swaying back and forth.

The call to prayer is made, and Jamaal leads the prayer. The congregation stands behind him, responding thunderously to the supplication ("not of those who have incurred [Your] wrath or of those who are astray") Amen. Jamaal begins reciting with a beautiful, resonant voice ("Exalted is He who took His Servant by night...") until Allah's saying (and We have prepared Hell for the disbelievers as a bed) [Al-Isra: 8], they bow and the Jewish worshipers behind them sway while chanting from their Torah.

I left the lecture hall from my last lecture, which was late as the sun was about to set, and found my cousin Ibrahim in a nearby hall. Greeting him with peace, he returned the greeting. I asked if he was heading home, and he replied yes. We set off together, each carrying our books, surrounded by many students heading home, with a bus parked at the university gate, gathering students from southern regions to return to their homes.

We walked back home on foot. From a distance, a military jeep stood watching the students leaving the university. Ibrahim glanced at them and said, "Who would have believed that Gaza would actually have a real university as it does now? Do you remember, Ahmad, when I decided to enroll in the Islamic University, what your mother's reaction was?" I nodded in agreement. Across the street, a car filled with members of the Islamic bloc, Ibrahim's friends, called out to him. After exchanging a few words, he returned to me, handing over his books, saying, "Take these with you. I'm going on an errand with the guys and might be late, so reassure the 'government' (referring to his mother)." Smiling, I took his folder and books,

thinking about our 'government' (my mother), her way of dealing with Ibrahim, her love for him, and his for her, as memories began to flood my mind. I was jolted back to reality by the honking of a car that nearly hit me as I crossed a main road without paying attention. Surprised, I dropped the books, scattering them under the streetlight at the corner. As I bent down to gather them, mixing my books and papers with Ibrahim's, I tried to sort them out.

A paper from Ibrahim's documents caught my attention. As I was placing it back, I noticed the report's title... a report on "Hassan Al-Saleh's" movements and practices. My curiosity peaked, I quickly gathered the rest of the papers, allowing myself to read what was written in that tightly sealed intelligence report carried by Ibrahim and signed "Your brother (23)." So, Ibrahim and his group's activities extend beyond student activism, party rivalry, and mosque prayers.

Ibrahim was unusually late that night, causing my mother to worry. I reassured her by jokingly saying he'd be fine, but inside, I wondered what danger he could possibly be in. My mother, with tears welling up in her eyes, expressed her deep concern, insisting that a mother's intuition is never wrong. I watched as her worries couldn't be easily dismissed.

After performing the Isha prayer, my mother sat on the prayer rug for nearly three hours, visibly anxious until Ibrahim finally returned home. She immediately questioned him about his whereabouts and his late return. Trying to lighten the mood, Ibrahim jokingly asked if she preferred a written or oral report. However, his attempts to calm her failed as she pressed for answers. Eventually, Ibrahim explained he had been helping a friend resolve a problem, but my mother was not easily convinced, warning him not to stay out so late again.

While observing their interaction, I knew I had to confront Ibrahim about the report I accidentally read. Once my mother went to bed, and after Ibrahim prepared his own meal, I sat next to him, whispering my apology for reading the report on Hassan. Ibrahim was taken aback, unsure of how to react to my accidental discovery. I assured him his secret was safe with me, but inside, a storm of questions raged on.

The next day, Ibrahim insisted on accompanying me to university, using the opportunity to confide in me about his concerns regarding Hassan. I realized he was trying to divert my attention from the true origin of the report. I confronted him, making it clear I knew the report's information was too detailed for an ordinary observer. Our conversation shifted to what actions might be taken against Hassan, revealing Ibrahim's deep-seated intention to rid the community of Hassan's menace. Despite the gravity of his words, Ibrahim reassured me that everything would be handled in due time.

Ibrahim was saving up with my mother from the surplus of his earnings from his construction work. That day, when he returned from the university, he approached her requesting 1,500 dinars from those savings because he wanted to buy a car. This car would help him in commuting and in transporting his work tools, saving him time between work and study. I was aware that he was deeply planning to end the matter with his brother Hassan. My mother gave him the money and informed him that there were still about another 1,500 dinars left. Ibrahim bought a Peugeot 404, a very popular and widely prevalent type of car in the sector, all of which were used and old, at least fifteen years, but by the standards of the camp, it was a luxury.

Mohammed leaves the apartment he rents with a group of students in Birzeit, heading to the university. Upon entering, he immediately notices that the atmosphere is tense, unusual as the students, both boys and girls, prepare themselves for clashes with the occupation soldiers as usual. They prepare piles of stones at different corners, ready their masks, and set up barricades, then they organized into a massive demonstration that marched out of the university, chanting against the occupation and settlement and for Palestine. It wasn't long before the occupation patrols arrived, and the clash began. The soldiers took cover behind their vehicles, and the students retreated behind stone walls. The stones rained down on the soldiers who began firing bullets and tear gas at the students.

All student forces participated in these events. In such instances, when all student forces participate, the clash becomes more intense and violent as the spirit of competition fuels the students' readiness for the clash and ignites their enthusiasm. The confrontations lasted several hours, forcing

the soldiers to retreat several times while dragging one of their own bleeding from his head or face after being hit by stones. The soldiers began firing not just to disperse the protesters or to injure them, but with a clear intention to kill.

Within minutes, two students, "Jawad Abu Salameh" and "Saeb Dahab"... As usual, the students' fury was unleashed, and they began chasing the soldiers who were forced to retreat to the outskirts of the town, away from the university and the students. The bodies and the wounded were taken to Ramallah Hospital, and night had fallen... By morning, news of the martyrs and clashes in Birzeit had spread across the nation, igniting demonstrations in all areas, declaring a general strike, and extending confrontations between the protesters and occupation soldiers everywhere in the Islamic University.

The students erupted in massive protests, hurling their stones at the occupation patrols, and the events spread to the camp and across the city, especially the Shuja'iyya neighborhood where martyr "Saeb Dahab" resided, as well as to the south of the sector, especially Khan Younis, where martyr Jawad Abu Salameh lived.

The events continued over the following days. With stones being thrown at the occupation patrols stationed beside the university and passing by it, a large force from the occupation army arrived and besieged the university. It was clear they intended to discipline us to become "good and calm boys." Hundreds of soldiers surrounded the university and attempted to storm it multiple times but retreated every time before the flood of stones raining down on them. Time passed until evening approached, making it apparent that we would have to spend the night in the university.

However, a vehicle carrying some dignitaries was allowed into the university, and they negotiated with the student activists and university officials. They informed them that the military governor did not object to the students leaving the university in specific groups of ten every five minutes, so as not to cause a gathering and extend the protests into the city. They were assured that the soldiers would not harm any of the students. Everyone agreed to this, and we began to exit in groups of ten,

with the soldiers directing the movement to one of the side streets, with each group followed by the next.

I was in one of the groups, and when we reached a fork in that street, the soldiers directed us to turn, and we found hundreds of soldiers standing with their batons, and their vehicles blocking the street, turning it into a detention camp. Under beatings, we were forced to sit, squat on our knees with our hands over our heads and faces towards the wall, after taking our ID cards for verification. It seemed they had lists of activists' names as they sorted them into a nearby area under beating and kicking, then allowed the rest to leave after returning their ID cards. I was not classified as an activist for any of the student forces. I took my ID and fled from the place...

Ibrahim was detained along with about a hundred other students for three days, where they were severely beaten and subjected to unimaginable humiliation. The military governor thought he had disciplined us and taught us a lesson to become "good smart kids."

Several days later, upon entering the university, it was immediately clear that conflict was imminent. A group of activists, led by Ibrahim, were preparing for confrontations. Once the students gathered, stones began to rain down on the patrols and military vehicles passing by the university. Within half an hour, the university was surrounded, and military buses began to amass hundreds of soldiers... It was evident that this time, the beating we were to receive would be multiple times what it had been previously. But, every incident has its own narrative – it was time for a confrontation, and we were ready to face it as needed.

The majority of students masked themselves to avoid the cameras and binoculars mounted atop a high-rise building opposite us, and stones began to rain down on the soldiers hiding behind their vehicles and plastic shields, who responded with gunfire and tear gas. It was clear that the students were seeking revenge for the beatings received days before. A large armored vehicle was brought in to spray hot water; it approached the university's gate and, despite being pelted with stones, managed to break through the gate and advance towards us. We countered with a heavy barrage of stones.

The soldiers couldn't advance alongside it, so the vehicle retreated, and the situation became a back-and-forth of attacks until the afternoon. Then, the sound of a military tank tearing through the ground and breaking through the university's back gate was heard. A student screamed through a loudspeaker: "A tank has breached the university from the back gate!!" Suddenly, more than seven hundred students turned towards the tank instead of fleeing, racing towards it in a scene close to madness. There was a clear understanding among the tank's crew that they would be crushed under its tracks by dozens, but they were confident that the mob climbing atop the tank would tear them apart.

The tank turned around and exited the university. The crowd reached the torn gate and began to seal it with whatever they could find – stones, concrete blocks, barrels, and tree trunks. Most of them returned to monitor the soldiers from the wall.

As evening approached and the mediators came for negotiations, their attempts were rebuffed with harsh words. We waited, wondering what would come next. Ibrahim tried to hide a wide smile unsuccessfully. The situation calmed slightly when suddenly, the loudspeakers of dozens of mosques across Gaza City blared in unison, screaming for jihad... "The occupying soldiers are surrounding your sons and daughters in the university. Come out to rescue them. God is the greatest... God is the greatest."

The community from every neighborhood started to gather, forming massive protests from all directions towards the university. The entire city of Gaza had erupted in chants of "God is the greatest. God is the greatest and death to the occupation." A state of security chaos prevailed, and immediately orders were given for the forces surrounding the university to disperse and secure the city. The forces turned and spread out, only to be met by throngs of angry people in front and thousands of enraged university students behind, feeling victorious... Ibrahim exited the university in his car, saw me, and stopped to take me with him. He said he wasn't heading home but wanted to take a tour of the city to observe the situation. The city was alive; men, women, children, and elders were out on the streets, burning tires everywhere, barricades closing off roads, and

groups of panicked soldiers were spinning around, clueless about what was happening around them.

Ibrahim's smile was broad, and he made no effort to hide it now. "God be praised, the people are fine, thank God," he continued, noting the thousands of citizens and students heading towards the military governor's headquarters, pelting it with tons of stones while the soldiers couldn't protect their heads or shoot indiscriminately.

A few of Mahmoud's friends came over for a visit, clearly concerned. They sat down, and shortly after, I served them tea prepared by Mahmoud's wife. They continued their conversation, discussing a young Fatah member who had recently been arrested and was responsible for one of the specialized military groups. He had confessed to everything during interrogation. Mahmoud asked how that was possible, having heard that the young man was strong and stubborn. One of them explained that although he was indeed resilient, he had been taken to "the birds" (a slang for informants or spies used in interrogation) and there he confessed. Curious, I interjected, asking what "the birds" were. They explained that these were a large group of spies who assist in interrogations by pretending to be patriotic prisoners in regular jails. They attempt to extract information from detainees who the intelligence services have been unable to break.

The pretext they used was the need to extract information for the officials, fearing the arrest of the cell, or for any other reason. Sometimes, when they see a detainee defending himself as respectable and not an informant, they continue to accuse him. Thus, some detainees feel compelled to reveal their secrets to prove they are not informants, falling victim to such tricks and deceptions.

At the Islamic University, there's a complete separation between male and female students, each studying in their dedicated sections without any mixing. However, when going to and from the university, they meet in the streets, parking lots, and bus stops, where most adhere strictly to public decorum, even going above and beyond in compliance. Despite this, a few students might interact more freely once outside the university premises. Female students are required to wear the hijab as per the university's rules, with the majority wearing it sincerely due to the conservative nature of

Gaza's populace. Some, however, wear it only upon entering the university and remove it or push it back once they leave, revealing parts of their hair.

One of the girls from my neighborhood, who attended the university, often crossed my path to and from the institution. Without exaggeration, she was truly as bright as the full moon. Occasionally, I would steal glances at her as she walked, her gaze fixed to the ground, heading towards her destination without a hint of hesitation. Gradually, I found myself drawn to her, too shy and fearful to even greet her.

One day, our eyes met, sending a shiver through my body and stirring deep emotions within me. After that brief exchange, I started timing my walks to coincide with hers, feeling a sense of comfort just by being on the same street. I began to wonder if this was love, the emotion often spoken about. When our eyes met again, my heart raced at the sight of her. On the third occasion, her smile and the flush of her cheeks as she hurried away left an indelible mark on me.

Eventually, I was content just to watch her from a distance, not daring to hope for more than that. It sufficed to know that I had loved and that she understood it well, especially as she sensed my eagerness to see her every other day. I knew I had to cherish this feeling without seeking more, at least until I graduated and was in a position to propose to her properly, as I was raised.

My cousin Hasan's situation was a constant worry for Ibrahim, who had filled my head with concerns more than once. He took me along to monitor Hasan's movements to verify the information in the report. We confirmed several details; we saw him meet with "Abu Wadi", park his car near the headquarters, enter the Saraya showing a special ID to the guards, and disappear for hours. We observed his frequent visits to well-known collaborators' stores and his disgraceful harassment of women on the streets. It became clear that Hasan was involved in morally corrupt activities, leaving no room for doubt or interpretation.

My mother was strict about us not staying out late. If one of us tried to sneak out, thinking she was asleep or busy, she would immediately question where we were headed. Ibrahim knew this would complicate his plans

regarding Hasan, so we agreed to return home early, study, and sleep, then sneak out around midnight. This plan went on for weeks until one night Ibrahim returned troubled, changed, and went to bed without speaking. After that night, he never involved me in any mission to monitor or follow Hasan again.

About a week after that night, Ibrahim told me, "Ahmed, there's no need to stick to that schedule anymore. Take it easy and do as you wish." I found this odd but didn't question his reasons. On one of the following nights, as I was returning home late, I took a detour and noticed the car of the intelligence officer "Abu Wadi'" parked by the roadside. He was standing next to it, dressed in civilian clothes as usual, pointing at something on the wall of the mosque. I veered into an alley to avoid running into him and waited until he left. Then, as I passed the spot where Abu Wadi' had been, I noticed he had marked the wall with symbols and some numbers.

When I got home and entered the room, I found Ibrahim reading one of his university textbooks. I told him what I had seen, and he looked at the clock, commenting that if it weren't so late, he'd have gone out to see it himself, but he didn't want to risk our mother's wrath for leaving at such an hour. We decided to wait until dawn to go for the morning prayer. Before reaching the marked wall, Ibrahim cautioned me not to point or make any gestures, but to talk to him about it without indicating it physically. He saw the markings clearly as we approached.

After we passed, he whispered, "There are many such markings in various places. I thought they were municipal markers for sewer or electrical services, but they're actually for intelligence, meaning they're for very secret and dangerous operatives, as known agents wouldn't require such elaborate methods." We prayed at dawn and took another look at the markings on our way back, with Ibrahim muttering to himself about deciphering the day, hour, and location from them.

That afternoon, Ibrahim took me for a drive, instructing me to jot down certain details. We circled the streets, slowing down at walls marked with similar symbols, compiling dozens of them. After the evening prayer, we returned home where Ibrahim compared the numbers, concluding that

they matched dates, hours, and possibly minutes—essentially a code for intelligence meetings with their agents.

I took this opportunity to broach a subject I had long held back on, suggesting we use his "device" on this information. His sharp look of anger made it clear he didn't appreciate the reference to the sources of the report on Hasan. Despite our previous agreement to leave the matter behind, I realized I didn't actually know what I wanted from this conversation. We went to sleep after Ibrahim thoroughly destroyed the notes, leaving the matter unresolved.

Stay tuned for the translation of the second part of the novel coming soon.