

## CHAPTER 1

### Hadil

She waited for the taxi that would take her from Ramallah to the Allenby Bridge, desperate to be out of the house. It was early on a Friday morning and the first signs of spring were in the air. Hadil was heading to a hotel on the Jordanian side of the Dead Sea, as moderator of a Jewish-Palestinian workshop. The following day she would travel to Amman, where she would spend the night with her friend Arij. Her husband Hisham took measured sips from his black coffee, while silently fuming. Sensing the charged atmosphere, their children Leila and Nadim, about to be driven to school by their father, wasted no time attending to their breakfasts. Hadil placed her hand on Nadim's forehead again, whether in a caress or to ensure that the fever he'd suffered during the night had abated.

A car horn was heard from the driveway to their home. The honk was sharp yet short and somewhat hesitant, as if to avoid an unnecessary disturbance. It was how their driver Amer always announced his arrival. Hadil leapt from her seat, thankful to be rescued from the tension of the dining area, then quickly planted a kiss on Leila's forehead as her eyes searched for Nadim. She hadn't noticed that Nadim had slipped into

the bathroom just moments before and locked the door. She pressed her face against the bathroom door and called, "Come on, *habibi*, baby, come say goodbye to your mother before I leave."

"No."

"*Ya rubi*, my soul, please, open the door."

"No!"

She tried to coax him to open the door over and over before sadly giving up. Hisham looked at her reproachfully. He had been sitting in his chair, silent, the entire time. She marched then to the door, pulling a small black trolley suitcase with squeaky wheels behind her with her left hand and carrying her handbag in the right. Hisham did not accompany her to the waiting taxi or respond to her goodbye. Leila rushed forward to help her mother, opening the front door for her and taking the bag. Hadil reclined comfortably in the back seat and let out a silent sigh of relief.

After driving through the HijmeH checkpoint, Amer inserted a CD of songs by legendary Iraqi singer Nazem al-Ghazali into the car's player. Before filling the taxi with his enchanting voice, Amer asked if the music was to Hail's liking. She was about to say that she preferred to make the journey in silence, but she shrugged her shoulders instead and said it made no difference to her. The disc was of poor quality, a cheap bootleg. But Amer enjoyed the warm voice of the artist who'd passed away more than five decades earlier. Hadil was very familiar with the songs of course; Nazem al-Ghazali was her husband's favorite. A thought passed through her mind: was there some kind of guiding hand here or was she merely succumbing to the foolish human urge to search for a hidden omen, some obscure meaning, perhaps a coincidence? Amer seemed to read her mind. He smiled and asked if she liked the singer. She replied that she did, adding almost incidentally that his songs are masterpieces. A slight twist hung at the corner of her mouth.

This is exactly how Hisham described his songs - *Rnua' al-Fan*, masterpieces.

"Nowadays no one sings like Nazem al-Ghazali, Allah have mercy on his soul," Amer declared, gently shaking his head for emphasis. "D'you know," he added, "he was very young when he died. Some say his wife killed him."

"Some say," Hadil replied tersely. It wasn't the first time Amer had shared his thoughts on the circumstances of his idol's death. Her laconic response didn't weaken his desire to engage her in conversation. His imagination was especially sparked by the thought that the famous singer's wife was responsible for his death. Despite the many years that had passed, the circumstances of al-Ghazali's death continued to generate interest throughout the Arab world. It turned into a source of rumors and innuendo that always tied the death to mysterious forces and dark conspiracies.

"You know," he went on, "after he died, she stopped singing. Out of sorrow. You understand?" he snorted. "First, she kills him, then..." He paused for a moment then continued: "They say his wife, who was Jewish, did it out of jealousy. She too was a great singer in Iraq, possibly the most famous of her generation. I really don't understand it," Amer shook his head, irritated by what seemed to him completely absurd. "Can you imagine," he went on, "anyone killing her husband because she envies his success? But who knows," he added in resignation, "As the saying goes: Who is your enemy, if not your partner in art? Only Allah knows how true that is! Right?" His eyes met hers in the mirror, awaiting her response.

"It doesn't have to be so," Hadil dismissed it, "but then envy can definitely be harmful."

She imagined Hisham's enraged eyes. She stopped listening to Amer though he continued to engage her. Here was this pleasant man, she thought, enjoying the songs of his long-dead idol, and he's full of joie de vivre. He doesn't view

al-Ghazali's music as a cultural asset, allowing him to look down on others, those who seemingly lack the delicacy to appreciate quality music, those who can't tell a masterpiece from trash. The bitterness that spoiled Hisham's interest in old Arab music and poetry unsettled and distressed her. Where once she had been able to keep up and match his enthusiasm, in recent years her interest in the subject had begun to wane. It was as if they were moving along separate tracks in opposite directions, destined never to meet again. The more he ensconced himself within Arabic poetry and music – while delivering harangues and diatribes bemoaning the lack of respect for high culture, the growing materialism, and other cultural affronts in Palestinian society - the less she was able to share in his tastes. They increasingly bore the weight of Hisham's sullenness and dashed hopes for making a mark in the field of poetry. Yet this art also signaled her own frustrations with him. Developments in the electronic media had further intensified the estrangement between them. While he spent long hours watching YouTube videos featuring old Arab music, mainly that of the greatest, long-dead Iraqi singers, she was incapable of sympathizing with these songs and the profound sadness within them. The technological advances that were supposed to take the world into the future also furnished Hisham with the means to retreat into the past and escape into an isolated inner realm.

Hadil's face took on a thoughtful and slightly tormented look. Her gaze became trapped in the hilly landscape beyond the car window. The road that led from the eastern slopes of Ramallah to the Jordan Valley, covered most of the year with a yellowish undergrowth, now had a green down. The thought crossed her mind that these are the days of grace for these poor hills, coming as they do once a year for a brief period. Noticing her sad mood, Amer switched off the music and the two travelled in silence. The taxi drove past sad-looking Bedouin

encampments that appeared as if they had been scattered along the roadsides, answering some obscure logic not comprehended by a stranger's eyes. She noticed a Bedouin girl in a black gown carrying a shepherd's staff. The girl's eyes wandered away from the herd of white sheep currently grazing on some sparse weeds in the rocky ground. She was looking at the cars that flashed past her, as if sketching in the far-off destinations to which they made their way - places her feet would probably never tread.

For better or worse, Hadil saw her relationship with Hisham as being bound to music and poetry. The ups and downs of their relationship, the highs and lows, were woven in the images, colors, sounds, and sights from that world. It was the desert landscape and roadside encampments that transported her to Hisham's tales of ancient Arab romantic poetry. The desert life, as he had explained to her long ago, provided the inspiration for these poems, and he used one of Umm Kulthum's revered songs as an illustration. They were lying on his narrow bed in the small apartment in Bir Zeit, only minutes after making love. He was on his back, she beside him, her head on his chest, with a thin blanket covering them. A few weeks before, they'd made love for the first time, and were not yet free of the discomfiture of revealing their naked bodies to each other. Hisham went on to tell her about Umm Kulthum and her song *Al-Atlal*, the Ruins of Love.

"You know," he said, proudly showcasing his erudition, "the writer of that song was actually a physician who wrote poetry. They said of him, derisively, that he was the best poet among the doctors and the best doctor among the poets."

Hadil gave him a gentle prod in the ribs and protested: "Don't! It's not kind. It's cruel to say that!"

"It's not me," Hisham smiled sheepishly and moved his body away from her elbow. "It was the critics, it's what they

said.” He went on to remark that many of the songs in olden times began with a description of the remains of an encampment in which the poet’s beloved had once lived. The remains, he explained, implied the regrettable ending of their love story. The story had come to an end when the various tribes, including those of the poet and his beloved, left the oasis and proceeded on their separate travels, each tribe following its own destiny. Hisham then went on to recite the last line of a song by Umm Kulthum: And then we both went our separate ways – don’t say we wished it; say fate wished it.

“So what,” she retorted focusing her bewildered eyes on him, “you’re telling me that we’re doomed, that your love for me, the love you are constantly declaring, will perish in the end? That our separation is inevitable?”

“*A’ooz be Allah, habibti*; God forbid, my love,” he said, horrified. “I’ll always love you. You’re the love of my life.”

“So why do these songs have such a hold on you?” she asked inquisitively.

He looked at her and whispered tenderly, “My soul has been tied to hers even before we were created.”

“Is this also from that Umm Kulthum song?”

“No,” he replied, “this was written by the poet Jamil al Ud’ri. He lived a long time ago. He wrote about *hub ud’ri*, virgin love. It is said of him that he was a shahid of love, a martyr of love, that he died from love, virgin love, unconsummated love.”

“A shahid of love?” Hadil repeated incredulously.

“Ah, ah, *hee*, exactly! A shahid of love!” Hisham said emphatically and recited a line from Al-Ud’ri: “They say to me, Ya Jamil, brace for jihad! But the only jihad I wish is the one waged on behalf of their smiles when they utter a *hadith*. Only then am I willing to be a shahid.”

“Seems to me,” she teased him, “that for you love is always tied to an ending, to death.”

He freed his chest and turned to look at her. He shook his head, smiled, and said, “I swear Hadil, you’re *msiba*, trouble.” She giggled in gratification.

“We’ve arrived,” Amer cut short her reveries. A self-satisfied smile was spread across his face as if he’d accomplished a grand mission. The journey from Ramallah to the Allenby Bridge had lasted about an hour. On the way they had passed through two more checkpoints with no discomfort or unnecessary holdups: the Jab’a checkpoint east of Kalandia as well as the Musa Alami checkpoint at the southern entrance to Jericho, near the deserted casino once believed to be a sign of long-due rapprochement between Palestinians and Israelis. Hadil thanked him, paid, and added a generous tip. They confirmed that he would come to pick her up at the Allenby Bridge on her way back to Ramallah.

She threw a glance at the disappearing taxi and its back window covered with stickers – *Salli ala al-Nabi*: Bless the Prophet, and *Al hijab ya ochti*: Don’t forget the hijab, my sister.

All Hadil had to do now was get through border control on the Israeli side and then on the Jordanian one. It was times like this that she agonized over her refusal to obtain a VIP pass that provided special treatment for senior employees of the Palestinian Authority and their families. Once when Arij whispered to her that her husband Bashir “knew people” with ties to the Palestinian Authority and the Jordanian Royal Court and could obtain such a pass for her, Hadil declined the offer, saying that she’d feel uncomfortable.

“What’s your problem?” Arij scolded her. “Anyone who can, gets one.

”*Saba alihom*, good for them!” Hadil shrugged as if to say no.

The transit between the two border points was quick and smooth, devoid of any distressing interrogations. She

boarded the bus that picked up the workshop's participants from the West Bank towns and arrived at her hotel.



## CHAPTER 2

### Yoav

The traffic was sparse on Friday afternoons at the checkpoint between Ramallah and Bir Nabala. Dressed in their ceramic vests and protective helmets, the soldiers threw perfunctory looks at the passing cars. The weather was between seasons per usual yet still felt jarring, as if all the seasons of the year had been pushed into a single day. The morning had begun under a veil of grey clouds, the air thickening as it rose into hesitant light showers. The temperatures started to climb towards noon as a heavy mist made itself felt. Coolness filled the air once the evening dispersed the heat of the day. The sharply-shifting weather provided a suitable background to the political climate. As the religious holidays drew near, hopes for peace initiatives were sparingly rekindled, followed by warnings of potential terrorist attacks and attempts to abduct soldiers.

“You should be prepared for a hot spring,” their commanding officers told them repeatedly. Yoav had just finished talking with his parents. They called him daily and, when they heard of any disturbance in the occupied Palestinian territories, however minor, they would call several times a day, wanting to be reassured that he was safe.

He looked around indifferently. There was nothing in

the hilly landscape that was exciting or appealing. He was doing his shift at the Rafat checkpoint, known as the Fabric of Life checkpoint. It was situated on a sharp-edged asphalt road, carved under the main highway connecting the cities of Jerusalem and Modi'in. Rafat had been established to provide the villages of Bir Nabala, al-Judeira, Al-Jib, and the ancient Beit Hanina, which otherwise found themselves encircled on all sides by a massive high wall, direct access to Ramallah. Tall piles of wrecked vehicles - likely awaiting recycling - and the stone quarries belonging to the Um-Shuriet village, which spread over the slopes to the north of Rafat, gave the location a decidedly charmless aspect. This horizon far beyond the village was adorned with high-rise residential buildings standing in the middle of Ramallah. To the south rose the tall buildings of Kafr 'Aqab. It stood a short distance from the checkpoint, barely touching an indistinct point at the top of the hill from which the road had been carved. Various vehicles made their way up the road toward Bir Nabala before vanishing from view the minute they crossed the horizon, as if they'd fallen into some waiting abyss. To the west meanwhile, the village of Rafat was hidden from sight by tall dirt ramparts. Yoav's army reserve unit had begun to man the checkpoint only a few days earlier.

"Just another place," he announced as he scrutinized the distant landscapes unfolding in front of his eyes.

His friend Alon, who was sharing the shift, nodded in agreement. "Yeah, it's boring as hell here."

"Boring's good. Let's just hope it continues like that. Three more weeks and we're going home."

He had made the same comment to Tali before leaving for this tour of reserve service. They sat facing each other across the kitchen table in their apartment on Chen Boulevard, not far from Tel Aviv's Habima Theater. Tali was visibly distressed. He stroked her forearm gently.

“Why the long face?” he asked in an attempt to raise her spirits. “It’s not like I’m being sent to some commando unit with orders to raid the kasbah in Nablus. They’re sure to send me to one of the checkpoints like last time. I’ll be back in no time.” Tali was not to be placated, expressing her chagrin that he hadn’t tried to cancel the reserve duty, hadn’t come up with some excuse. “We’ve discussed this already,” Yoav replied impatiently, picking up his kitbag, into which he’d shoved underwear, toiletries, laptop, and a few books: *The Ethnic Challenge of Iraq* and two novels in English. “Well, I’ve got to go,” he announced with an air of inevitability. “I’ll call in the evening.” Then he hugged her, gave her a peck on the lips, and left. Now, standing with Alon at the checkpoint, Yoav expressed the same vacant optimism.

One Friday night more than a year earlier, he had told his family of his desire to continue his studies in America. With the plate in front of him piled with a selection of traditional Sabbath delicacies, he casually announced his intentions. He was well-aware that the news would not be welcomed lightly, especially by his mother. His desire to pursue an academic career had always met with his family’s full support, but leaving the country for several years – that was something else altogether. Here, in one of the pictures from his BA graduation ceremony, the pride in his family’s eyes was easy to discern. They were all there: his father Shaul, his mother Nava, his sister Merav who was two years older, his younger sister Sivan, Grandpa Shmuel, and Grandma Camilla. They were all crowded into the photograph, standing happily around him in their best clothes, beaming. Their pride knew no bounds when his name was called among the students graduating summa cum laude. Shaul was in a summer suit with a red-and-blue striped silk tie, Nava beside him, her hair specially styled for

the occasion. Their necks were extended, their eyes fixed on the stage, watching him with admiration as he delivered the valedictory speech. They supported their son eagerly when he expressed the wish to take up academic research toward the end of his undergraduate studies. He would be the first PhD in their family – Dr. Yoav Yarkoni! But now, as he expressed his desire to take his studies further afield, emotions were stirred up.

“*Madlik*, cool!” Merav rejoiced. “Now we’ll have a brother in America. We’ll be able to visit and stay at your place for a few weeks. The Yarkoni family trailblazer in the land of opportunity.”

His sister Sivan, who was close to completing her compulsory military service, was also visibly excited by the prospect. “Please,” she simpered, “won’t you take me with you?”

His father threw his sisters a reproachful glance. “Enough, stop talking nonsense.” He turned his eyes to Nava, obviously wary of her response. “America?” he asked, trying to adopt a more impartial and businesslike tone. “Why there, of all places? Where did you get this idea from?”

Yoav said that his mentor, Professor Na’aman, believed he had a good chance of being accepted into one of the prestigious universities specializing in Middle Eastern Studies. Yoav’s research on the ethnic and religious rifts in Iraq during the British Mandate gave him an edge over other candidates.

“Iraq is a very hot topic these days,” he pleaded, glancing briefly at his mother, who remained silent while starting to fidget in her seat, like an animal trying to escape a trap. Any minute now the signs of distress on her face would intensify, becoming more decisive; unbridled rage was about to erupt. He knew her well.

“Why does it have to be America?” she protested, trying hard, like his father, to stay calm, to keep her composure and

appear indifferent. “You know how proud we are of you and how much we support you, and we’re eager for you to succeed... but come on, are there no good universities here that specialize in your subject? Does it make sense to you to move thousands of miles away from me, from the Middle East, in order to specialize in what? The Middle East! Don’t you think it’s strange that you want to move there to conduct research on things that are happening in Iraq? Can’t you do it here in Israel?”

Later that night he told Tali what happened. “It drives me insane when she says you’re leaving me, you’re flying away from me. It makes me crazy. It’s always about her. Leaving her, moving away from her, causing her... she’s always the victim. She says she wants to protect us, but she’s only concerned with herself. It all comes down to the trauma she went through a million years ago. Enough!” he went on as if to his mother: “Get over it!”

“What do you mean, ‘get over it?’” Tali replied crossly. “It’s not that easy to get over it, you know?”

“Tell me,” he assumed an amused tone, “whose side are you on, mine or hers?”

She didn’t reply. He tried again to fathom what was upsetting her. “Tali, what’s the matter? What’s going on?” She stared at him for a long while, as if struggling to come up with a suitable response, then said dryly: “Drop it. I don’t feel like talking.” He wondered where he’d gone wrong, what it was that had upset her so much. Then he shrugged and dropped the subject.

Yoav responded with frustration to his mother’s chagrin at his desire to further his studies in America. “Mom, what do you mean ‘leaving you hundreds of kilometers behind’? I don’t plan to stay there forever. I just want...” Nava cut him short. She lost her calm and her eyes flashed. “I don’t know,” she rebuked him furiously, “according to my logic, if you want to specialize in something, it makes sense to be close

to it – not to get further away from it. It's like saying you want to strengthen your relationship with Tali and then move to another city." She immediately fell silent, as if becoming suddenly aware that there is more to this point than a rhetorical ploy, a helpful analogy. "Well," she queried somewhat triumphantly, "if we're already on the subject, what does Tali have to say about this? Does she think it's a good idea? Are you going together? Is she staying here? Have you discussed it?" Yoav replied that the decision to study in America had been made together. "It won't be easy to find a university that will take us both, but we'll try." He added that Tali's parents were quite excited by the prospect of the couple furthering their studies together in America. "I don't care," Nava fumed, "what Tali's parents think."

Indeed, this had been her reaction whenever Yoav embarked upon any activity that made her feel unable to protect him and take good care of him should he be in any danger. It had been the same when he opted to do his compulsory military service in the Paratroopers Brigade, and whenever he set out to travel anywhere in the world once his service was over. Yoav's family was familiar with Nava's tempestuous reactions. "There she goes again," they'd say. "This is how Mom reacts when she feels she's losing control over us."

"Whenever any of us," Yoav once jokingly described his mother's behavior, "drops beneath her radar, she goes wild. But once she'd finally realized she couldn't control us," he added, "she developed the habit of withdrawing inside herself, like a tortoise into its shell. Without saying another word, she would sink into the depths of depression, which my father used to describe as 'melancholy'. It would continue for a day or two."

Sometimes it was impossible to know exactly what triggered Nava's rapid change of mood. She would shut

herself in her darkened bedroom and sink into a long slumber. Her children learned that at times such as these, there was no disturbing their mother. When the mood passed, she would emerge from her room and act as if nothing had happened. She would fuss around her children, ordering them to carry out various chores, and devote herself to her work as a schoolteacher of language and literature.

Yoav had first heard the expression ‘she’s sinking into melancholy’ one Friday evening around then. His mother had stayed in bed. His father undertook the task of setting the table for Sabbath and serving the dishes his wife had cooked earlier. “Where’s Mom?” asked Merav. “She’s unwell,” Shaul replied tersely. But later, when his maternal uncle Chezi called and asked to talk with Nava, Shaul suggested he call back later, tomorrow even, adding in a whisper, “Nava has sunk into melancholy again.” The expression haunted Yoav for much of his childhood. He didn’t understand what it meant, although he could sense its dark and foreboding connotations. He was particularly troubled by the word “sunk.” In the way of children, he interpreted the word in the simplest sense, imagining various bodies sinking slowly into some kind of liquid: a ship sinking to the ocean floor, his toy car sinking in bathwater, grains of sugar sinking and dissolving in a cup of tea, and so on. One night, he dreamed that he was seeing his mother sink deep into a large vat of putrid water. She was dressed in a white nightgown, her feet ensconced in slippers. Her legs were upright and close together, her hands spread to her sides, mouth gaping and eyes wide open. Fear and anxiety were manifest on her face. Bubbles rose from her mouth to the surface towards the opposite direction of her body, which dropped very quickly downward. Her black hair rose above her head like a long tail trailing downward after her. He awoke terrified.

His decision to further his studies in America provided his father with a great deal of satisfaction. “We’ll miss you,” he whispered in Yoav’s ear, so his wife would not know that despite his initial misgivings, he had come to acquiesce in his son’s wishes. “But never mind,” he added, “we can visit you from time to time, and you’ll surely visit us as well. Your mother too will eventually get used to the idea. It’s not the same as those earlier trips of yours to the Far East and those other hellholes all over the world.”

It had always been his father’s role to counterbalance his mother. While Nava did everything she could to keep her children close to her and close to home, Shaul would loosen the reins, encourage them to slip out from under her wings, and send them out into the big world so they would develop like everyone else, “like normal children,” as he used to say. But at the dinner table Shaul made do with questions that were seemingly noncommittal. He turned to his son and asked, “And what about the money? Where are you going to get the money? It must be pretty expensive to study there.”

“Don’t tell me,” Nava cried, detecting in his voice a sign of compliance with their son’s wishes, “that you think it’s a good idea for him to go off to America!” She didn’t wait for a response and turned her eyes from Shaul to Yoav, letting her fury intensify. “What’s all this stuff about opening your mind and developing?” she shouted. “You’ve opened your mind enough. You’ve toured the whole of South America, spent months on end in India and the East. Isn’t that enough for you? You went off to see the world, to experience new things, and left us here to eat our hearts out with worry. You say this is a crazy place, but what about all those horror stories we hear every day? One day it’s the Hindus killing the Muslims, then it’s the Sikhs killing the Hindus. Then there’s news of some bus rolling down the side of a mountain in Peru, and this is followed by a ferry



overturning off the coast of Thailand. And then there are those people who get mixed up in drugs and return to Israel after losing their minds. You're not a child anymore – you're thirty years old. It's time you started thinking about your future!"

"That's exactly what I'm thinking about, Mom," Yoav pleaded. "I'm not thinking of going to the Amazon, to the jungles of Brazil. I want to study in America and then come back and find work here, in Israel, at some university. What? You don't consider that a future?"

Suddenly he changed his tone to one of appeasement, attempting to open a door into her heart. "Doesn't it thrill you that I'll be specializing in Iraq, the country your parents came to Israel from, where Dad was born? Grandpa Aaron always spoke about *Al-Rafidin*, his Mesopotamia: the history, the culture, the poetry, the landscapes, the Euphrates and the Tigris... he spent all those years teaching Arabic in high schools there as well as here. As you did too, Dad. True, you were a child when you left Iraq, but you still have a strong connection to the place, don't you? Your roots and your culture are both there."

"Roots!" his sister Merav cried, barging into the heated exchange. "Since when are you interested in our Iraqi roots? And who, apart from yourself," she grimaced, "wants to reconnect with these roots? It seems to me watching the news that the Iraqis themselves are dying to get out of there, to break away from their roots."

Amused by her picturesque depiction of the upheaval in Iraq, Yoav smiled at her affably, muttering, "stop exaggerating."

"I'm exaggerating?" she chuckled in disbelief. "Believe me, it'll be the best thing for them to get the hell out of there, before they're wiped out by exploding car bombs in the middle of Baghdad. They'll be amazed to learn," she sneered, "that weirdoes like you, in Israel of all places, are

clamoring to reconnect with their Iraqi roots.” Merav’s wit stirred laughter around the table. But Nava was not amused. She seemed once again to have embarked on a journey to melancholy.

“So, you’re a purebred Iraqi,” Tali teased him once when he was recounting his family’s lineage. He looked at her with some trepidation and fired back, “What do you mean by purebred?”

She smiled wryly. “I mean biologically. Your mother and father are Iraqi, both your grandparents are too. No doubt you can trace your ancestry back to the destruction of the first Temple and the expulsion of the Jews to Babylon. It seems to me,” she continued to pester him playfully, “that you should be honoring your family tradition and searching for a woman with an Iraqi background. That way you’d be perpetuating and honoring your family’s racial purity.”

“Fantastic idea,” he sneered. “Got a nice Iraqi girl to introduce me to?”

“Now seriously, you’re following in your grandfather Aaron’s footsteps, aren’t you?”

“Maybe,” he shrugged, “but my grandfather was very connected to Arabic culture, especially Iraqi culture, and that isn’t my forte. I take more of an interest in the political history of the Middle East. I am fascinated more by Rashid Ali al-Gaylani and less by Nazem al-Ghazali.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Al-Gaylani was the man who led the revolt against the British in Iraq in the early 1940s, and al-Ghazali was an adored Iraqi singer. Whining songs, crying and moaning,” he added in obvious distaste. “But they continue to cherish those songs!” he uttered in disbelief. “It beats me why to this day he’s so popular with members of my family!”

“What nonsense you are talking. Do you really believe it’s possible,” Tali rebuked him incredulously, “to study the

history of Iraq without connecting with its culture, without knowing something of its music, its poetry? And you of all people believe that?!"

He looked at her and replied defiantly, "It's possible. Of course it's possible!"

## CHAPTER 3

### **Hisham**

He made his way to his parents' home in the village of Al-Jib on Friday afternoon. Passing through the checkpoint, he continued to drive through the tunnel, crossing the road that connected the cities of Modi'in and Jerusalem. Passing by the villages of al-Judeira and Bir Nabala, he continued until he reached his home village. The soldiers at the checkpoint casually observed the traffic as it sped by uninterrupted. On this occasion, Hisham, who often took his children on such trips to visit his parents', had chosen to leave them at home. He left his house before his daughter Leila finished her school day. He did not want to burden his son Nadim with the trip and left him with Ranin, Hadil's sister. She lived with her husband Elias and their kids in a spacious home perched above a hill of the prestigious al-Tira neighborhood, on the western outskirts of Ramallah. Hadil's frequent absence from home had been a source of much tension between them lately, but on that day her attendance at the Jewish-Palestinian workshop gave him mixed feelings. He and Mandy, the new American teacher of English literature and poetry, were scheduled to meet the next day. Mandy had begun her work at Ramallah's Friends School about a month ago. She

replaced the pregnant Nasrin Khuri, whose doctor had ordered her to maintain complete bed rest. He was looking forward to this meeting with some eagerness.

His visit to Al-Jib was his first in a month. Traveling across the West Bank had become a grueling journey whose consequences could not be foreseen. Except for special events demanding his presence, such as births, weddings, and funerals, he did not travel much. Like many West Bank Palestinians, he adopted the maxim: "Unless you have to, don't drive." Not only had his visits to his parents decreased considerably, but Hadil too, had virtually ceased to accompany him on these visits. After all, parents' natural tendency is to identify with their own children when they see them in distress and to resent those they believe responsible for their misery. Hisham and Hadil tacitly understood that if she joined him, his parents wouldn't be able to restrain themselves from saying something, further exacerbating the rift between them.

While his family readily sensed that things were not good between him and his wife, he was still reluctant to share his marriage problems with them. What could he say? That he found it increasingly difficult to put up with Hadil's frequent absences from home? That he was frustrated with her for neglecting their children and her household duties, for being no longer available to him, oblivious to his needs? More than once, he'd overheard his parents grumbling, whispering, suggesting that a woman's place is in the home, taking care of her children and her husband and that the world has now been turned upside down. It was in this way that they let him know what they thought of his marriage, of the disruption that had occurred in the natural order of things. He knew that his family would be attentive if he were to share his problems with them. But he feared that were he to do so, it could affect the possible

rapprochement between him and Hadil, and he still wanted to believe that their marriage could be saved. He smiled contritely as an Egyptian proverb went through his mind: “The sage was asked, ‘Where is your homeland?’ He replied, ‘The place where my wife resides’.”

His family was quick to notice the signs of a rift between him and Hadil. “He is obviously not happy,” his mother used to lament, “even when he says nothing. I can tell; I’m his mother. He’s not the same Hisham we knew. Always brooding, quiet. His head is somewhere else. You cannot cover up the sun with a sieve,” she would recite a proverb. “It was a mistake to mix breeds that do not mix. You do not mix the month of Sha’ban with the month of Ramadan. Hadil never became one of us, blood of our blood, flesh of our flesh.” As she went on and on, grumbling and bleating, her husband and children listened dolefully, making no comment.

When he arrived at his parents’ house, he found his father and mother sitting side by side on sofas in the spacious concrete courtyard at the front of the house. The fragrances of spring filled the air but the weather was somewhat inclement. And yet the two preferred to spend the early afternoon hours in the yard, which over the years had become a veranda engulfed on either side by lush vines, now standing in early bloom, sloping with tiny unripe grape clusters. He greeted his parents, kissed them, and sat down on the bed beside his father. “Why didn’t you bring your children?” His mother pleaded. “We miss them so much.” At the sound of his voice, his sister Siham rushed into the courtyard. Greeting him, she immediately repeated her mother’s grievance, and then added, to his chagrin: “Why isn’t Hadil with you? How come we no longer see her?” I knew this was coming, Hisham thought, but he replied casually that

Hadil had to go to Jordan. “Work,” he added dismissively. His parents exchanged furtive glances, as if to acknowledge that nothing could be done. Everyone was familiar with Siham’s outspokenness, a result of her mental sluggishness that her family preferred to call mere innocence. “She’s simpleminded, naive,” they excused her.

Siham never got married and she never left home. When she was a young girl, her parents, Marwan and Nadia, knew they would have trouble finding her a match. Already in her forties, Siham was a good-natured person and well-versed in housework. But these advantages were not enough to find her a suitable match. Her coarse facial features, excess weight, and mental lethargy heavily compromised her prospects. And so while her parents married off all of their children and were blessed with many grandchildren, Siham remained unwed. In recent years, due to strong encouragement by her brother Sharif, she adopted a strict religious lifestyle. She would awaken just after sunrise to attend morning prayer, perform the daily cleansing ritual, and cover her body with a long-sleeved dress and hijab. Every Friday during the month of Ramadan, she would join travelers to Jerusalem for Friday prayers at the Haram al-Sharif mosque, the Temple Mount. In recent years this practice ceased due to the difficulties facing those who did not carry blue IDs and needed to reach Jerusalem or anywhere else in the West Bank. So Siham diligently attended to the various household chores: cooking, baking pita bread in the tabun oven in the yard, scrubbing the floors, laundering clothes, nursing her parents, and serving them loyally.

A few years ago, one of the village elders expressed his wish to marry her, but she vehemently

refused. If this is what awaits me, she announced with sobriety that surprised her parents, I would rather stay home with my parents and take care of them instead of becoming a maid to a strange old man. And so Siham resigned herself to her fate, showing no desire to change. She never expressed envy towards her brothers and sisters and derived great pleasure from the company of her nieces and nephews. But her acquiescence with her lot in life didn't alleviate her brother Hisham's sense of grief whenever he saw her. "I don't know how to understand her behavior," he once shared his feelings with Hadil, "her blank expression. Is it apathy or sorrow?"

"Why don't you consider the possibility," Hadil suggested, "that your sister is at peace with herself? Religion," she added, "gives her something to hold on to." But Hisham found no comfort in Hadil's attempts to console him. "My sister does not exist on a desert island. She's aware. She feels that she doesn't have what others have. She isn't like my brother Sharif, who has a family and children. For him religion is something else. And I also hear how the village people talk about her. Anas – an old spinster! You must remember, when Leila was little, asking me, 'Baba, what's *Anas*'? She didn't know what it meant but felt it wasn't a good thing. She must have heard it from her friends, who heard their parents' gossip. What can I say?" He sighed contritely. "Fate was cruel to her, depriving her of what everyone deserves, what everyone has." And so it went. Whenever his sister's somber face crossed his mind, he was overtaken by a deep sadness.

Besides Siham, Hisham had two other older sisters and two younger brothers. He was born a year before the war of '67, after his mother had given birth to Afaf and Siham. Two other brothers followed - Sharif and



Fuad - and then the youngest daughter, Abir, was born. Except for Siham, they all got married and had children. Afaf, Sharif, and Fuad lived with their families near his parents' house, while Abir married a village man in the Bethlehem area and moved there with his family.

Hisham's father, Marwan Saada, was usually away from home for days, searching for work. After the June '67 war, employment in his area became scarce, and new opportunities emerged in Israel. Thus, in his late twenties, Marwan had begun to work for Jewish building contractors in various Israeli cities. Due to the distance of the construction sites from his village, he used to stay there for days on end. Sometimes the construction sites provided additional income, such as when his employers entrusted him with safeguarding the building supplies and equipment. "I belong to a generation of orange IDs," he used to declare wryly. "After the establishment of the Palestinian Authority," he added, "the color of the certificates changed. Now it's green, and it says," he smirked, "*al-Sulta al-Falestiniya*, PA. But except for the color of the papers, everything stayed the same, nafs al-hara, same shit."

During the olive harvest, the family would gather and drive to their olive groves. They would pick the olives and put them in their shirts, transfer them into sacks, then produce the olive oil in traditional mills. This used to be the case for many years before the mills were abandoned in favor of small factories, to which the plantation owners carried their crops, producing the oil and giving a tenth of the yield to the factory owners. Once, Hisham's daughter Leila shared with her parents the experience of harvesting olives with her Scout troop in one of the villages near Ramallah. Hisham retorted sardonically that, "Once upon a time, the olive harvest

was only an olive harvest. Today the olive harvest acquired national significance, and the olive tree has suddenly become sacred.” Hadil gave him a scornful look. Later, when they were on their own, she scolded him: “Why should you dampen the girl’s spirits?”

As a child, he’d eagerly anticipated the olive harvest. Fridays were particularly joyful. Unlike other harvest days, on Fridays the women would make traditional stews that required special preparation, serving mansaf and musakhan and afterwards filling the air with song. “*Al-zeit amud al-bait*, the olive is the pillar of the house,” his grandfather Mustafa (who passed away in the late Eighties) would say repeatedly. It was through his grandfather that Hisham inherited his great affection for the Iraqi singer Nazem al-Ghazali, whose hits Mustafa would joyfully sing. And it was through him too that Hisham first heard one of Abu-Firas al-Hamdani’s better-known poems, “And the Dove” - delivered in al-Ghazali’s enchanting voice.

“You should know,” his grandfather declared, as he’d tended to do often on various occasions, “that there is not, and never will be, a singer like Nazem al-Ghazali in the entire Arab world, may Allah have mercy on his soul. Many singers sing maqams, but no one sings them like him. The great poet Al-Mutanabbi once said that ‘the wine has meaning, but not the one to be found in the grapes’.” Mustafa also told them that Al-Ghazali had visited Palestine in 1948, during the war against the Zionists. He’d come to encourage the Arab Liberation Army commanded by Fawzi al-Qawuqji. “*Makoo awamer*, there are no instructions to assist you’ - this was the response of this supposed hero, al-Qawuqji, to Abd al-Qader al-Husseini, who asked him to help in the war against the Zionists in Jerusalem. A real hero indeed,” Mustafa repeated derisively. “*Makoo awamer*, of course,” repeated

Mustafa, the words in the Iraqi dialect. “What can I tell you; everyone knows what happened in the end to the Liberation Army. We lost Palestine to the Jews, and the Liberation Army could hardly save itself. But that’s another thing altogether. At least we had the privilege of hearing Nazem al-Ghazali singing in Palestine. That, too, is something,” he smirked, as if he’d had to make do with a few crumbs rather than the whole loaf of bread.

While his grandfather sat and recounted his adolescent years, Hisham would sit by his father, who would embrace him and pat his head lightly with the palm of his coarsened hand. An intense pleasure would chill Hisham’s head and, like a cat, he would tuck his head into his father’s elbow to intensify the friction between the rough arms, the result of long and arduous labor, and his own scalp. Had it not been for his father, who gently pushed him away so that he could tend to the children or some other task, he would have kept still, wishing his touch to continue indefinitely. Sometimes his father’s palm would flutter close to his nose. It smelled of nicotine from his tobacco-stained fingers. He wanted to stick his nose into his father’s palm, and sniff more of the acrid odor.

Whenever he pictured his father, it was always with a cigarette in his mouth. Hisham’s father used to pull a cigarette from the pack in his pocket, light it with a Zippo, inhale deeply, then push the smoke through his nostrils. Hisham was surprised when he first discovered that this skill was not exclusive to his father, and that it was not associated solely with the Time brand Israeli cigarettes his father favored. Once he saw an elderly village woman exhaling jets of smoke as powerful as his father did. In the early days of the first Intifada, while studying at Bir Zeit

University, he tried to persuade his father to stop smoking the Israeli-made cigarettes. He was deeply annoyed when his father refused to comply with the call to boycott Israeli goods. “*Yaba*, you’re helping the occupation,” Hisham protested. But his father responded with a dismissive wave of the hand; he stayed loyal to Time cigarettes and refused to replace them with cigarettes made in the West Bank, even when the Israeli cigarettes became harder to come by. “*Ya ibni*, my son,” he mocked, “if I stop smoking their cigarettes, then the occupation will be over? Is that what you’re saying?” Marwan shook his head, expressing astonishment at Hisham’s naïveté while continuing to inhale the smoke from the cigarette he held between his stained fingers. “It’s all *kalam fadi*, empty words,” he said, jerking his head dismissively.

Marwan broke the oppressive silence that followed Siham’s insensitive remark concerning Hadil’s absence. “The pruning we did to the olive trees a year ago,” he reported, “is good for the olives. I think it’ll be much better this year, not like last year. We put too much time in collecting them, and all for nothing; it would have been better to leave them to rot on the trees.” Hisham glanced at his father as he continued to sit on the bed in the house’s courtyard, drawing smoke into his lungs. He’d turned old before his time, Hisham thought. It’s all due to the prolonged, debilitating manual labor he had been doing for many years. His eyes wandered to his ragged palms and focused on the nicotine stains. “Those Israeli cigarettes are going to kill you,” he scolded him.

“This is what I tell him all the time, *ya ibni*,” Hisham’s mother backed him up. “He doesn’t stop coughing at night because of those cigarettes. But he doesn’t listen. Smoking and smoking.”

“Everything is God’s will,” stated Marwan, looking upward as the smoke was sucked into his damaged lungs and then streamed out of his nostrils. “Say”, he began to recite from the Quran, ‘only what God has decreed will happen to us. He is our Master: let the believers put their trust in God.’” Marwan noticed his son’s eyes rolling in despair and continued to defiantly recite: “Wherever you may be, death will overtake you, even if you should be within towers of lofty construction...” Thus, in the way of believers, Marwan maintained that there was no connection between the logic guiding celestial powers and the one governing earth. If God wishes, he’ll continue to smoke as much as he pleases and no misfortune will ever befall him, or if God wishes otherwise, he’ll suffer some terminal illness even if he stops smoking. It’s in Allah’s hands alone. No one can escape his destiny.

Siham came into the yard, bearing a tray with a copper coffee jug and small coffee cups. She put the tray on a small wooden table and sat down on the bed beside her mother.

“In the name of God, ya Hisham,” she suddenly declared, “I miss your children very much. I haven’t seen them in such a long time.” His parents froze. There she goes again, they probably thought, she’s going to mention Hadil. They sighed in relief. This time she said nothing about her sister-in-law. Hisham gave his sister a sad look, a bitter smile hanging at the corner of his lips.

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