

New Nonfiction by Dean Hosni: “The Cartoon War”



Egyptian military trucks cross a bridge laid over the Suez Canal on October 7, 1973, during the Yom Kippur War/October War

October 6, 1973. Los Angeles.

The stack of newspapers sat in front of me on the brown shag carpet, and next to it was a plastic bag half full of red rubber bands. I reached into the bag, took a dozen or so bands and slipped them onto my wrist. I pulled a newspaper from the stack and folded it methodically; the right third over the middle, then the left third over that. I snagged a rubber band from my wrist and slipped it over the tri-folded paper. Once done with the stack, I would load the papers into the twin green bags tied to my handlebars, straddle the bike, and start

my route, as I did every Saturday.

But this Saturday, my customers would wait late into the afternoon for their morning edition of the Herald Examiner, while I stood statue-like in front of a grainy black and white television screen. A familiar desert landscape would erupt in fire before my eyes.

As was her ritual, my younger sister watched Scooby-Doo. I did too, as I folded newspapers. I could always identify the villains, the characters behind the mask of the Ghost of Captain Cutler, The Black Night, or The Caveman. Their disguises were thin and their guilt certain. Telling my sister who the villain was just before the unmasking was satisfying in a mean-spirited way.

My sister sat open-mouthed in front of the television and watched Shaggy, Scooby, and the rest in the final chase scene. With the masked villain captured, I pointed a finger at the screen, ready to reveal his identity and ruin the ending for her. But before I could utter the words, a news anchor's face appeared.

"We interrupt our normally scheduled program to bring you a special news bulletin," he said.

Images of tanks and armored vehicles raced across the sandy terrain of the Saini Desert in Egypt, and dark-faced soldiers fired Kalashnikovs at enemy positions. The contrail of a Phantom fighter jet ended in a white plume, intercepted by a surface-to-air missile. My sister looked at me in dismay, her expression asking: Where had Scooby gone?

I knew I shouldn't wake my father. He was catching up on sleep after working a graveyard shift in a low-skill job, the only kind available to some immigrants.

I walked into the bedroom. "Dad...? Dad...? Egypt is at war."

He was up. Glassy eyed, staring at the blurry screen, adjusting rabbit ears.

On the television, artillery shells rocked the desert in an unending barrage. Egyptian and Syrian troops, in a coordinated attack, advanced on enemy positions in the Sinai Desert and the Golan Heights. On the Sinai front, tens of thousands of Egyptian infantrymen crossed the Suez Canal in inflatable boats under heavy shelling and through clouds of smoke. Key Israeli military positions throughout the Sinai were bombed by Egyptian jets, clearing the way for the advancing ground assault. The Yom Kippur War had begun.

Watching this war unfold before my eyes, I was thrown back in time to a day six years earlier. My mother was carrying my then baby sister and gripping my hand so tightly. Terror filled her eyes as she looked out the window of our Cairo apartment. The flash of bombs lit up the night sky and silhouetted darkened buildings. The air smelled of spent firecrackers. Israeli jets were bombing a nearby airport. A staccato of red tracers shot upward toward them, searching, not finding.

In June 1967, the Israeli Air Force struck airports across Egypt, targeting runways and rendering them useless, then picked off jet fighters on the ground. Egypt lost nearly its entire Air Force in a matter of hours. Then, in a haphazard retreat, the exposed Egyptian army suffered extensive losses and ultimately surrendered the Sinai Desert with hardly a fight. Victory for Israel was swift in what came to be known as the Six-Day War. For Egyptians, it was a humiliating defeat; a war lost as soon as it began.

In the few years that followed the '67 war, Israel built one of the most formidable defensive lines the world had known, the Bar Lev Line, on the eastern shore of the Suez Canal. A seemingly impenetrable seventy-foot-high wall of sand studded with anti-tank mines spanned the length of the canal. Behind

it, thirty-three heavily fortified military installations and hundreds of tanks kept watch, ready to open fire on Egyptian forces should they try to cross the canal and retake the Sinai. To Israel and the world, any such attempt by Egypt would have been suicidal. To Egyptians, the Bar Lev Line was an ever-present reminder of their defeat, a stain on their national honor.

The world didn't seem to care about the lost pride of a defeated Egypt. Not as long as Arab oil was flowing, not with the Israeli military appearing, by all accounts, invincible, and not with the Arab nation lacking the military capability to change the reality on the ground. Egyptians, it seemed, were expected to simply live with their June '67 defeat and accept the occupation of their cherished Sinai by their enemy. Egypt's prized Suez Canal, a source of international prestige and badly needed money, would have to sit idle with Israeli soldiers on its eastern shore, taunting and humiliating. Nothing to be done about it, the world thought.

Six years later, I stood by my father in front of the television in our Los Angeles apartment, neither of us able to speak. A surge of patriotism rushed through me, and I felt my heart race as I watched columns of Egyptian tanks and infantrymen pour into the Sinai Desert to reclaim our occupied land.

I wished I was back in Egypt. I belonged in Cairo streets, among the crowds in Tahrir Square, all of us proudly waving our flag with the golden eagle. Had I been older than my twelve years, they might have let me donate blood. A little older yet, and maybe they would have given me a post where, ever-vigilant, I would stand with my finger on a trigger.

Why had my family ever left Egypt? I remember asking myself. And when the answer came to me, I felt ashamed. We left a defeated, virtually bankrupt nation for the American promise of economic prosperity. We left for the possibility of buying

our own home, a car, and a television for every room. Things that seemed so trivial as I considered them in that moment.

I pulled myself away from the television, took another newspaper from the stack, pounded each fold flat, and stretched a rubber band around it. The rubber band snapped in my hand. I felt the burn on my fingers and in my soul.

#

The Yom Kippur War coincided with the month of Ramadan. I had always cherished the joyful celebration of this holy time in Egypt. I remembered the children carrying colorful, candle-lit holiday lanterns and prancing on the sidewalks in the early evening. I had watched their blue, red, and yellow lights dance on the sides of buildings as they sang, skipped, and twirled. But this Ramadan would be different, I knew. Lights in Egyptian cities would be extinguished, even the lanterns, to deprive enemy bombers of easy targets during their nighttime air raids.

That year, in America, Ramadan would be stranger yet.

In a time before call waiting, telephone lines were constantly busy. Our receiver sat on the hook only moments before the phone rang again. Instead of offering the customary Ramadan greetings, callers asked, "Are you watching this?" Shock and disbelief robbed the color from my parents' faces even as they tried to reassure acquaintances who feared for relatives at home, for Egypt. The calls often ended with "Alhamdulillah," an expression of gratitude and praise to God for the early military successes we were witnessing.

The day after the war began, Sunday, the downtown Los Angeles mosque was filled to capacity. Emotions in the grand room peaked with pride and hope. The fiery sermon the Imam gave rendered his voice raw. All in the mosque raised their hands to God. We prayed for victory, and more than that, we prayed for redemption. Let it not be like the last time. Let it not

be another Six-Day war—another humiliation. At the end, the Imam gave many of the worshipers, including me, a firm handshake. He told me to be brave, to be proud. I nodded and told him that I would. But this, I later learned, would not be easy.

#

Monday afternoon, I sat in my seventh-grade classroom waiting for an instructor to arrive and begin teaching a subject I was hardly interested in. I wanted to be home, to pull a newspaper from the stack and thumb through it, looking for a headline with the word “...Egypt.” How many miles would it say we had taken back from our occupied land? How many enemy jets had our SAM-6 missiles shot down? And would it answer the big question: Were we still winning?

I fanned through pages of pencil sketches in my notebook, talentless drawings of tanks and jets in desert combat. I was startled by a voice close to my ear. “Your country attacked my country,” said the taller of two boys standing over me, a known bully.

His country? He wasn’t Israeli. There was nothing foreign about him. I was the immigrant, the one with the strange name. The one who stuttered trying to decipher English words in a textbook while other kids snickered. I did not respond.

With his finger poking my thin chest, punctuating each word, he said: “Are you happy about it?” Again, I didn’t answer. He rested a fist on my desk, his face close to mine. His friend stood behind him, helping make the point. I looked for the teacher, who still hadn’t entered the classroom. I scanned the room for anyone who might help, anyone who would be on my side. Kids chatted and clowning about. None of them had taken notice, nor would they help if they had.

Looking up at my adversaries, I cowered. This was their classroom, their school. I was an immigrant, tolerated in

their country. I was alone. I flinched at the boy's feigned punches. I endured his provoking slaps, barely blocking them, never getting up from my seat. I did nothing to stop him. Finally, the teacher walked into the room and told my assailant to take his seat. The insult of that day lingered, as did the shame of having not stood up for my country's honor.

In the days that followed, one question played on my mind. The American boy had said that Egypt attacked his country. Was Egypt fighting Israel or America? Or were they one and the same in this? How could America someday be my country, my home, if it gave aid and comfort to my enemy?

#

Ten days into the war, America's Department of Defense delivered on a promise: an airlift so massive it reconstituted the Israeli army, which had been heavily compromised on the Egyptian front. Now, with even more advanced weapons in Israeli hands, the tide of the war would turn, and not in Egypt's favor. I pulled the knife's edge through the string holding my daily stack of newspapers. I took the top copy, and without looking at it, I began folding; the right third over the middle, and the left third over that.

The phone stopped ringing. Conversations about the goings-on of the war were less frequent, more subdued. I heard adults around me grumble about Egypt having to make do with outdated and inferior weapons from the Soviets. No bombers, no long-range missiles, only defensive weapons for Russia's Arab client. In the eyes of many, this reflected the Soviet's long-standing strategy: to help Egypt survive, but never win a war. A victorious Egypt might need Russia less. And if Russia lost its largest client in the region, its influence over the oil-rich Middle East would diminish. Frustrated by the limited access to needed weapons, Egypt's then President Anwar El-Sadat had expelled 15,000 Russian military advisors a year

before the start of the Yom Kippur War. While Israel had the full might of American power behind it, Egypt's backer seemed less committed.

As a child, watching the politics play out with Egypt and America on opposite sides, I was torn. Where should my allegiance lie, with my native Egypt or my adopted U.S.? I feared what Americans would do to me, to my family, if they knew of my questionable loyalty.

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A couple months passed, and the war was over. And mine, it seemed, was the last shaky voice crying out: "Egypt won. We did it." But my truth was cast aside as fables of super-human feats by Israeli soldiers in the battlefield took center stage. Then came the pictures, splashed across magazines. Handsome Israeli soldiers with lovely light-eyed girls posing next to American tanks. Rockstars selling victory, democracy, freedom, and sex; a marketing campaign for a Western audience. And in time, I began to doubt my own truth. Perhaps our victory, the one talked about in Egyptian media, was exaggerated, even fabricated.

My heroes, once again, became cartoonish villains, unsophisticated and unrefined. Hopeless in their fight against a foe superior in every way. They were faceless in a grainy sepia-toned picture, a sandy landscape. Draw your best dark-faced bad guy here.

For the rest of that school year, my classmates largely ignored me. I was that kid who held on to a fantasy, a crazy story about a victorious Egypt, a version of events neither believed nor cared about. The world had moved on. In a noise-filled classroom, I sat alone.

#

A year later, in eighth grade homeroom, a boy with an accent

introduced himself to me.

"Where are you from?" he asked.

"Egypt."

"Oh... I'm from Israel."

I tensed up, saying nothing.

He leaned over. "Here, in America... no war. Okay?"

Before I knew it, before I decided whether it was something I wanted to do, I extended my hand. We shook.

My new friend asked me if I had seen any fighting when I lived in Egypt. I thought of the night when I stood alongside my mother and watched the airport burn.

"No. I didn't see any fighting." I lied.

"I did," he said. "Egyptian jets attacked my town. For a while, it was maybe once a week."

I felt a jolt of pride run through me, though I kept it hidden from my friend. His words affirmed my belief. Egyptians had fought back. They had punished the enemy for its sins. That evening, done with my paper route, I held my bike on top of a hill. The empty green bags hung from the handlebars. Traffic had died, and the street was empty. I straddled the now light and agile bike, unburdened by the weight of newspapers. I rocked the Schwinn forward, then back, then forward again. I kicked off. Peddling, harder, faster. I raced down the hill, the cold air making my eyes water. The empty bags fluttered at my sides, their straps pulling. Could they tear away? I peddled faster still. A jitter, then a high-speed wobble tested me, but I held on. The fluttering sound grew louder in my ears, a make-believe engine, roaring—an Egyptian jet fighter. My front wheel lifted. I soared into the night sky.

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Decades later, more was revealed about the Yom Kippur War—declassified top-secret reports, clandestine tape recordings, and never-before-seen newsreels. First came the picture of the Israeli Prime Minister, Golda Meir, her hand holding up her forehead, distraught at the calamity of a war she never saw coming. Then, a video of the Minister of Defense, Moshe Dayan, shaken, looking small in his military uniform, broadcasting to a frantic Israel on October 10, 1973; his words offering no relief. I pointed at the computer screen: There it is. Proof, we beat them. From their own mouths. Then, as the video stopped playing and the screen went black, I saw my own reflection. Sitting alone, no one by me to co-witness.

More recordings came: soldiers' recollections, nightmares, acts of heroism and of humanity. One such recording still lives in my mind. A transmission by an Israeli soldier, a hold-out in an underground Bar Lev Line fortification. His frantic calls for reinforcements—tanks, airstrikes—go unheeded on a static-filled radio channel. He pleads for his life as the structure collapses around him. His voice strains, calling for God as artillery shells fall. "They're coming... breaking in... I'm burning." About to meet his end, he curses the ones who would leave him to his fate: "God will not forgive you..." Then, his final words, to his mother.

I had not prepared myself for this; a voice reaching through the decades and gripping my chest.

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When she was in the ninth grade, my daughter's class was given an assignment. "We're going to have a town meeting about the Arab-Israeli conflict," she said. "Each of us will talk, like...you know...like we live there. Like Arabs or Israelis."

"Easy A," I said. "I got you covered, kid. Your dad knows

everything about the Arab-Israeli conflict.”

“I’m supposed to give the perspective of someone my age. A boy. His name is Shlomo.”

“Shlomo? What kind of an Arabic name is Shlomo?”

“It’s not Arabic, Dad. It’s an Israeli name.”

“Wait. Does your teacher know you’re Egyptian?”

“Yes.”

I was impressed. It was a lesson in empathy.

#

Through the years, I had watched one fictionalized Mossad movie after another. Miraculous ventures projecting Israeli superiority. The same story, repeating, image-building, propagandizing.

But in 2013, I came across “the postmortem.” That was what the senior CIA analysts and directors called their video-recorded discussion held at the Richard Nixon Library. It was the intelligence community’s examination of what had gone wrong, how the CIA and the Israeli Mossad failed to see the Yom Kippur War coming. As the experts spoke, I leaned in. I watched, rewound, and watched again.

They said it plainly. Egypt’s President Sadat launched a war of deception that took advantage of inflexible American and Israeli mindsets. No one believed Sadat would start a war with his country in such a weak military position. Israel, still high on its victory in the Six-Day War, believed no Arab nation, least of all Egypt, had the will to fight. With every Sadat promise of an attack that didn’t come to be, with every mobilization of his military forces that he later recalled, Israel and the West became more certain that war would come no time soon. They grew to disregard what appeared to be Arab

bravado, saber-rattling, amounting to nothing.

No one saw Sadat's gamble for what it was: a limited war, not to conquer an enemy, but to reanimate a dead peace process.

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Heroes achieve what in the moment seems unimaginable. In the first two hours of the war, Egyptian forces had overrun the formidable Bar Lev Line. They advanced into the Sinai and retook the Suez Canal, along with seven-hundred square miles of enemy occupied land. In so doing, they ripped away Israel's mask of invincibility.

As the war progressed, Israel gained momentum. Israeli forces moved into the western side of the Suez Canal and encircled the Egyptian Third Army, cutting off its supply lines. But, as a condition of the ceasefire agreement that ultimately ended the war, Israel retreated from those gains. Pundits took turns spinning the outcome of the war, each claiming victory for their side. As, I presume, they forever will.

Having achieved his objectives in the Yom Kippur War and created a path for diplomacy, President Sadat walked into the Israeli Knesset and began the work of peacemaking. This time, Israel was less eager to let slip such an opportunity. It would no longer reject out of hand peace efforts that required it to surrender occupied Egyptian land.

I still remember Sadat putting a match to his smoking pipe and saying: "No one will capitulate here. I am not ready to capitulate. [We will not give up] an inch of land or a grain of sand from our land."

In signing the 1978 Camp David Peace Accord with Israel, Egypt gave up its privilege to use its military against Israel in support of its Arab neighbors. But after twenty-five years of war, this was a privilege it no longer wanted. Within this Agreement, Egypt endorsed a framework for peace negotiations

between Israel and its other Arab neighbors. This framework was used as a foundation for the Oslo Peace Accord signed by Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization in the early eighties.

I knew the Camp David Peace Agreement was an admirable achievement. But at the time of its signing, my teenage heart had not yet learned to appreciate the virtue in peace-making. It still sought vengeance. I wanted the chance to stand before a classroom and bask in the light of undisputed victory. I searched for evidence of victory on the battlefield through books and news articles. What I found was this: No longer would Egypt stand in the shadow of its defeat in the Six-Day War. No longer could its enemy claim invincibility, not without a note in the margins, not without a question mark. That was what mattered to sixteen-year-old me.

On October 6th, 1981, the eighth anniversary of the Yom Kippur War, Sadat was assassinated. It was then that many began to speak of the man's achievements and sacrifices, to contemplate his legacy. Anwar El-Sadat; the great strategist on the world stage. The hero who did more than win a military objective, who did more than win back the Sinai for Egypt. Here was the man who successfully executed a war to win peace.

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I recently turned on a Scooby-Doo episode for my grandson. It was The Funland Robot episode. One of my favorites, I told him. At the end, after the unmasking, I said: "You know, in real life, it's not so easy to tell good guys from bad, winners from losers. Sometimes, you have to look hard to find the truth. It's not like in cartoons."

My grandson looked at me and said: "That show was boring, Grampa." He reached for his game controller, ready for combat. Enemy soldiers scurried, shooting. He returned fire.

My daughter entered the room. "Time to go home, baby," she

said, as blood splattered the inside of the television screen.

“One more minute, mom.” He answered, ditching his AR-15 for a pump-action shotgun.

“Are you good with him playing these games?” I asked. “I mean, they desensitize.” She gave me that I-can-raise-my-child-on-my-own-thank-you-very-much look.

“Now, young man!” she said to my grandson. He obediently clicked off the game.

Teasing, I said: “Next time you come here, boy, you leave that game controller at home. We’ll play checkers.” I wanted to see them roll their eyes in exasperation at Grampa. They did, and I laughed.

Violent as my grandson’s game was, it fostered no hatred in him. I knew he saw no evil in his cartoon-like adversaries. I hoped that things would always remain this way, that he would never know a real enemy.

As I watched my grandson leave, I thought about another boy—on his bike, tossing newspapers. I thought about that boy seeking retribution. I thought about the rage in his voice, unheard. I thought about him growing up, so long unable to see the glory in the fight for peace.

New Fiction from Hadeel Salameh: “Everything Will Be

Okay”

1. Her Friend the Israeli

(Eli)

Mais got a phone call from her parents in the occupied territories of the West Bank. I don't know what they told her yet; she's been too shaken to tell me. All she told me is that I needed to book her a ticket to Palestine. She wants to go through Jordan, cross the border and reach Sarta that way. I tell her I'll come with her, and that we'll go through Ben Gurion, that it'll be quicker. She doesn't want to enter Israel.

She insisted she go alone, that it's not appropriate for her to bring a friend with her. I want to think she means it's inappropriate for her to bring her male friend to her parents', that if her family saw us together, they'd think we're an item, the thought of anyone thinking Mais and I could be together, that I'm not crazy to think we look good together, that it's not only me that can see it, is hopeful. But what I know what she means is it's not appropriate for her to bring an *Israeli* friend with her, although she won't admit this.

But I can't let her travel alone like this, feeling so distraught, so I insist I'll join her, say that I don't need to go with her to Sarta, that I'll visit my family in Tel Aviv while she's there. I want to be near in case she needs me. She didn't argue, and now we're waiting at a bus stop in downtown D.C to go to the airport, to Jordan.

I can feel the cold outside, making its way inside my bones. It feels as though the raindrops pouring on my skin are sinking through the surface, freezing once they pass each layer of warm flesh. Just as the blood flow seems to slow down in between the narrow veins in my arms, she tells me why we're

going. Her brother attempted suicide.

She starts to cry.

I never met her family, and don't know much about them, only that she hasn't seen them for years. I don't know why, if it's because of the distance, or for some other reason, but I never thought much about them. It didn't seem she did, either. But now her crying is uncontrollable. "I should have never left, Eli. I left them," she says between breaths and cries harder. I don't know what to do, or how to comfort her. I don't know the situation. I'm afraid to make things worse and people around us aren't sure if they should help me try and console her as I sit there, next to her on the bench, and listen. Others seem to decide to mind their business. They stand back and watch her cry, although some whisper. I don't know why she left, but I'm glad she did because I would have never known her if she stayed. I hate myself for this, knowing the pain she's in now for being here. I don't tell her she did the right thing by leaving, I don't know the situation and I'm afraid I'll say something to make it worse so instead, I stand by, too, and let her cry until the bus comes.

"I should have never left," I hear her say again, rocking gently. "I should have never left."

At the airport, Mais is calmer now, and I hold her, my Palestinian friend. I hug her tight and let her know I'm here, but she's cold and distant. When I let go, I feel she's glad I do. I even notice her shift in her seat a little, inching away from me. Did I do something? I think of everything that happened, if anything happened, and I can't think of anything.

She sighs. I notice her knee is shaking and, in my head, I raise my fingertips higher and intertwine them through her charcoal hair, brush away the fallen strands from her moist lashes as she starts to cry again. But I'm not sure if she would let me. I should, at least, tell her to calm down, to

take a deep breath before her crying starts to build again. None of it would do any good, anyway. Fixing Mais's hair wouldn't change the once milky complexion of her face from pale. It wouldn't sooth the dark circles under her eyelids, and it wouldn't stop the trembling of her knees. Maybe it would only push her away. The tiny voice inside my brain is screaming louder for me to do something to calm her crying. It's growing larger and maturing more with every second we wait for the line to board, leaving us waiting on the cold, metal bench, but it's too late, she stands up and starts to pace near the window of the terminal.

Outside the terminal window is endless pavement where the plane we will board will take off. It's empty and around it only a plain field. It's unlike our city, but it takes me back to a day I spent with Mais last fall, when we spent Friendsgiving together at her place, just the two of us. We feasted on the canned cranberry sauce that day because I burnt the turkey. The smoke alarm had gone off and we needed to open the window to clear the air. It was a disaster. But there was a moment, between all that smoke and the cold air coming in from outside, her laughter uncontrollable as she threw herself into my arms, "you had one job," she said between sweet giggles and chattered teeth. I felt the goosebumps on her arms as I held her. And I knew that with the cold she felt it, too, the warmth between us, for when the smoke cleared she stayed in my arms, looked up at me with lips slightly open, wet, and eyes locked on mine. She watched me lean in under the dull lighting. She didn't pull away until after my lips touched hers.

She closed the window shut behind her when she turned away and I stayed behind a while looking out, watched the leaves continue to fall, one after another, listened to the bitter wind scratch at the glass.

I can tell when Mais's knees start to shake as she paces. It doesn't look good; her face is turned to the window and she

occasionally looks up at the ceiling, tilts her head so that the tears don't fall. It's time to board so I stand in line, signal for her to come back. When she does, her eyelids are heavy and her cheeks are wet with tears, she doesn't face me. I ask her if she's feeling better and she looks at me as though she's disgusted.

"Am I feeling better?" she mocks me. "My brother could be dead, and you think I could feel better?"

I didn't mean anything by it, and I want to explain that but she gets heated and starts to hit me.

"Of course, you'd think that—"

She raises her voice. "I'm so stupid for thinking that you'd ever understand, to let you come with me. You'll be in Tel Aviv, on the beach, when I'm going home to—" she starts to cry hard. She's overreacting, people are looking at us.

"He could be dead and it's because of you, your people burn everything to the fucking ground!" She pushes me and cries and then pushes me again and people behind us start to talk. "I know it! You Israelis ruin everything, kill everyone!" she pushes me again and again. "You take everything from us and now he's lost even the will to live!" Her knees buckle and she falls to ground and wails until her breath is shortened.

The people behind us see her as a petite woman who falls to her knees with a larger man standing over her and assume the worst, I know it looks bad when I feel others step in to pull me away from her. I raise my hands when the security comes, step back. I look at Mais, wait for her to say something, to tell them that it's a misunderstanding, that I could never hurt her.



When we board the plane, I give her space and even try to exchange seats with someone across from us, but Mais tells me it's okay, admits she overreacted.

Now that she's calm, I'll talk to her. "Yes, a lot," I say. Even though that's not what I want to say at all. I want to say, "don't worry about it," that everything will be okay.

Auburn green and swollen hazy eyes glance up at me apologetically and for a moment I'm looking at her through windows of despair. A bulging lump of disappointment builds in the back of my throat and I feel I need to throw up. I can't believe she blamed me. I don't know what happened to her brother, how could I know why he tried to kill himself? But the more I think of it I worse I feel. I know the situation, about the occupation and the *intifada*—it's chaotic over there, has been for years and nobody's known what to do about it—and that's enough to understand she feels worse than I do. But I think I just need some time to collect my thoughts.

I fall asleep and wake up to find Mais reading *Everything that Rises Must Converge*. I don't like how we left things, and I understand she's worried, understand she didn't mean what she said earlier before we got on the plane, but what if, deep down, she did mean it?

I can't help but wonder if that's how she really sees me, as her friend the Israeli? I'd much rather she see me as her friend, who happens to be Israeli. I'd much rather she just let herself look at me long enough and see that I can be more than that.

I want to try again, tell her everything will be okay. But will it? She needs truth, answers and ways to get there and I know it might be true, that she won't get the answers she's looking for. All I can offer her now is my unbending stone of a shoulder to lay her head on and wish for more.

"Everything will be okay," I say a million times in my head. "When you reach, you'll see he's fine," I say. "It'll be okay," I say. But then I open my mouth to say just that and I don't say anything. The words inch out and I swallow them back.

2. Her Home the Occupied

(Mais)

Mais thinks back to a conversation she had with her mother five years ago, the summer before she left Sarta for America.

"Any ideas on what to cook tonight?" her mother had asked. Mais's uncles, aunts and cousins were coming for dinner.

"Anything works. Just try to cut down the coffee, okay? It's too much work keeping up with your caffeine." Mais laughed at how many times the visit would mean making tea and coffee.

Her mother laughed faintly, without much enthusiasm.

"As soon as our guests come, we offer them a cup of Turkish coffee as an appetizer, then there's dinner, and another cup follows that," Mais continued. "And then right after, I mean, before the dishes are even dried you guys are at cup two. And a few hours after that you will want another," Mais said. "I find it difficult to sleep at night just by watching you guys take all that caffeine in."

"We're Arabs," her mother said. "It's our water."

Mais smiled and there was quiet for a while.

"We'll miss you here."

"We still have all summer."

"It's going fast." Her mother seemed to take a moment to collect herself, "it's good that you're leaving," she said after a pause, "you'll have a beautiful life."

When the VISA was approved, Mais knew she'd miss Mejd the most. She liked being his older sister; it meant being looked up to, and that helped her with her work ethic. She wanted to make him proud, thought of ways to so that he could learn from her and find ways to study himself—no matter the circumstances that stood in the way. That was back when the *intifada* started, when people were uprising against the Israeli occupation and, as a result, schools and universities were closing. If it wasn't for the way Mejd looked up to her, Mais would have never worked so hard to get that scholarship she got so that she could leave and make something of herself abroad. She would have never made it out of there.

She knew she'd miss Mejd the most because she was hesitant to leave Palestine at all when she won the scholarship. With a ten-year gap between them, she worried for him more than most sisters worried about their brothers—she was the one that styled his hair on his first day of school, the person who helped with his homework and told him how to get other boys to stop bullying him. She was worried that he'd need her, and she wouldn't be around. More than that, she was worried she'd need him, and that it'd show, that she'd miss him so much he would know that she wasn't as strong as she seemed, that she was only strong because he looked up to her and needed her to be.

When she first came to America, she waited for the weekends to hear Mejd's stories. He told her everything—how he and his new friend, Hadi, climbed the top of Jabal Al-Shaykh and how he was excelling in school despite the village school's closure, despite the checkpoints crossings to other schools closing

constantly—how he had found ways to go to a school in Nablus with Hadi, whose father had a permit to work in Israel and so could use the Jewish-only freeways.

As the years passed, Mais became busier with college, and with the difference in time zones, her calls home minimized. Mais didn't mean for this to happen. She had meant to call more often, never meant for the phone calls to stop when they did, but it became harder to keep conversation when she did talk to her family the longer she stayed in America. Her mother told her of gossip among the village and her father only cared to know about her studies—he seemed happy as long as she was excelling, and Mejd became less eager to pick up the phone as he started his teenage years. He was growing up, she understood, didn't need her as much, and with everything going on around her, she couldn't herself keep up, balancing both grades and a social life. There wasn't much in common anymore and the phone calls naturally stopped altogether somewhere between graduation from University and the start of graduate school. She no longer knew if Mejd was still going to that school in Nablus, but she kept watching the news, knew that in Nablus things were better than in the villages around it, assumed there was no reason for things to have changed for him.

Now she thinks of home, remembers how badly things were when she left—reminds herself that it was why she had to go. She realizes, though, that she wouldn't have had the determination to get out if her brother didn't need her to find strength to carry on and study the way he did. And things change, of course everything does with time, even people, even Mejd. She wonders now why he stopped talking to her as much, what changes happened to him while she was away. If her brother didn't need her, she thinks to herself now, it would have been okay that she wasn't there.

When Mais had picked up the phone, she couldn't make out what her mother was saying at first. It sounded like she had been

crying, but Mais couldn't be sure—when she asked, her mother told her to let her finish, first. She started to talk about Mejd and Hadi, how a few months ago, they were approached by three Israeli settlers, who she said had probably come down from the settlement miles away on the hilltops. She told her how these settlers started fooling around at first, how they walked between the copse near Hadi's house, picking olives from the trees, throwing them at one another and laughing.

Mais asked her mother why she was saying all this—asked what it mattered now. Her mother sighed, told her to listen. That what she was calling to say wasn't easy, to let her say explain it to her.

She went on to tell Mais how the settlers then started to throw olives at Mejd and Hadi. The boys got scared, started to walk away, but the settlers called them cowards, told them to come back.

Mais felt her face turn hot as her mother told her this. "Please tell me nothing happened," she said.

Then there was silence.

"Yama?" Mais called for her mother, told her again to assure her.

"They killed Hadi, Mais," her mother said. "They took him, one tightly held the boy in his arms as the other two threw olives at him. Then they started throwing rocks."

"Your brother was brave, tried to fight them off. Picked up rocks and threw them at the settlers that were abusing Hadi. But then they charged after him. Thank God he survived."

Mais felt as though her heart would collapse; she couldn't understand what her mother was saying—she couldn't believe anyone would harm a boy like that, only a teenager. "Tell me everything. What happened," Mais sobbed. "What did they do to

Mejd?"

"They made him watch."

Mais hung up with her mother. Imagined her brother and his friend, imagined her little brother, with tears thick as oil running down his face, watching the settlers pierce sharp, heavy stones into his friend's skin, breaking bruises and burning blood with the dirt from the ground. She could not imagine what her brother must have experienced. She imagined that he and Hadi tried to be strong, that maybe his friend Hadi had tried to stay silent so the settlers wouldn't take joy in his pain.

Her mother had told her how it wasn't until a half hour after the incident that Hadi's father came home from work and found the boys nearby, Mejd screaming at his friend to stay awake. By the time they reached the hospital, he was dead.

Mejd survived, Hadi didn't. That sense of guilt seemed to stay with him. Her mother told her how, for months after Hadi's death, Mejd stayed home from school, as Hadi's father stayed home from work. She said Mejd got angry when she told him it was time to go back. How he told her he couldn't—that he didn't want to see Hadi's empty seat in class. He didn't want to ride back in silence with Hadi's father, wondering if his father wished he had died instead for not having done anything to save his son—and most of all, he couldn't look out the car window and see a hundred olive trees.

Mais's mother told her she had found Mejd's body hanging inches from his bedside, from a rope attached to the fan on his ceiling. He wasn't conscious. Her mother needed to cut the rope quickly so she could bring him down and breath into his lungs, but nobody was home to get her a knife, so she stood on his bed and grabbed the rope, pulled so hard the entire fan fell.

3. My Friend the Palestinian

(Eli)

I first met Mais three years ago, when I overheard her voice as she talked with a table of friends. A thick accent, with a sharpness in her words, something about the light way the l rolled off her tongue, sounded Israeli. Her voice caught my attention and when I looked back from the bar, I remember feeling electrified, like when the Tel Aviv sun burns the back of my neck after a cool swim. Her dark, curly hair draped down her shoulder was alluring in a way that made me nostalgic, and I couldn't look away. I looked at her and it felt like home.

I was foolish to approach her, too confident and sure of myself—not of myself, exactly, but of her—when she wasn't Israeli at all. When she turned out to be the farthest from it.

"Shalom," I said. I must have looked so foolish to her, with a smile on my face. She didn't know my palms were sweaty, that I was hiding them behind my back and trying to wipe them off my trousers. If she knew, maybe she would have known it was an honest mistake.

But how could she have known? She heard the words and thought it was a joke, that I knew she was Palestinian and purposely wanted to insult her.

"Is this your idea of a peace talk?" she snapped at me and folded her arms.

I had no idea what she meant, what her problem was, and the allure of her made me pull a seat over and sit down. She looked at me in a disapproving way, like I was a narcissist or something. I could feel her green eyes, pierce through me. She saw me the way she thought I saw her, *other*, as the enemy.

"Can I get you a drink?" I offered, genuinely. I didn't know she was Muslim, that she didn't drink. I still thought she was Jewish, and by the way she dressed, I didn't think she was

religious to keep kosher.

She got up and left, without boxing her meal and forgetting her keys. Her friends all looked at me like I was an asshole and I realized my mistake when I saw the red and green cloth braided together with white and black, a small, Palestinian flag hanging from her keychain.

I still don't know how she talked to me after that.

I took the keys and ran after her, hoping I could explain I didn't mean to be a jackass. I found her searching in her purse outside, by the parking lot. She looked angry and frustrated, turning her purse inside out and not picking up items that fell out.

I knelt and picked up her stuff, offered her keys to her.

"I'm sorry," I said.

She yanked her keys from my hand. Rolled her eyes.

"I didn't know you were," I paused. "I thought you were like me—I mean, I thought you were Isr-Jewish. I'm sorry. I didn't know you were Palestinian."

Her arms folded again.

"Not that it matters that you are," I said. "I didn't mean—I'm sorry. Really, I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize. You're right," she said. "I'm not like you. I'm *nothing* like you—I would never pull a seat up to a table of people *already sitting there* and force my presence onto people who were just trying to eat their meal like they have been for the past hour."

She was uncalled for and unapologetically intimidating, and it captivated me. I never met anyone so bold. It was the sexiest thing I've ever seen in a woman, and I needed to know her.

"Look. You're right—that was *your* table, and yes, you were already sitting there. I shouldn't have intruded. I just wanted to sit by you." I wanted to tell her how beautiful I thought she was, how I thought she was even more beautiful after knowing she was Palestinian. But I didn't tell her that. I knew I couldn't. I knew then there were boundaries between us—like a wall—and that all I could hope for is a friendship, one built on trust and understanding, that our worlds are too far divided to come together. I knew then I could never let her know how I felt when she looked at me, how desperate and weak it made me feel when she talked. That she was stronger than I was, that she had a hold over me, occupying my thoughts with her dark gaze, firing shots into my chest, paining me the more I looked into her eyes, seeing how pure her distrust was in me.

I knew that no matter what, I couldn't let her know how badly I wanted her, that what I really wanted was to tangle my fingers in her hair and pull at it, bite her lips and taste the sweet bitterness of her hate and devour her. That I wanted her like I never wanted anybody.

"We're in America; we don't have to talk about the Middle East," I said. "I just want to be your friend."

My Home the Occupied

(Mais)

Our plane from Dulles International Airport reaches Amman, Jordan, and it's time to part ways with Eli. As we get off the plane, he insists on holding my bags and wants to come with me to the King Hussein Border. It's nice of him to offer, I feel he's trying to be here for me, to show me that he's worried for me, and wants to make sure I reach safely. He cares, he's a good friend, and when I first heard the news of Mejd and everything that had happened, I admit I needed someone to be with me. I think I still do, even now, but I don't think it

can be him, no matter how badly I want him to be the one I need. He couldn't understand what I'm going through, maybe back when we were in D.C, between diverse crowds of ethnicity and thought, I could pretend he understood, but here, I think is where we say goodbye.

It's late and we're both tired. He insists I stay in Jordan until dawn, that he call me a taxi to a hotel, and, when the night is over, a taxi will be ready to take me to the border. He says that it would be safer for a woman to travel alone under the morning light, and I know he's right, and I'm anxious to go back, too anxious to get any rest, though. So we go to a coffee shop and wait out the night there, instead.

Eli orders me an American coffee, black, no sugar or cream, without needing to ask. He's good at things like this, pays attention to the details, knows what I like and what I need. It makes me feel like I've known him forever, the way he pays attention to me. When I first met him, I was so insulted at his approach. What an asshole, I thought, when he walked up to me and sat beside me and my friends. Just started talking like he owned the place. But that was before I got to know him; I soon realized he was just paying attention to the details then, too, but he had mixed up his details. In a way, it was charming—his awkwardness as he tried to explain himself, the eager way he took me out to coffee. He never once brought up Israel and Palestine, and I appreciated that. I never thought I could become friends with an Israeli, but something about him, the spark when our eyes met briefly, followed by the quickness in which he would look away, before I could smile at all, told me he was different than most men I had met. That he would look after me the way an older brother would want another male to treat his sister, that something in his mannerisms was familiar to me, that while he came from Israel, he couldn't have been Israeli at all, couldn't look at Arab women the way the soldiers looked at me when I crossed checkpoints to go to my aunt and uncle's. As something of

meat.

Maybe he was just careful, all those years, to not look at me for long so that I wouldn't mistake his glances for something of passion or intimacy. Maybe he could just never see me in that way, and avoided looking at me in any physical way at all, maybe as an Israeli he couldn't see any beauty in me because of what I am. In the back of my mind, I admit, I hoped he'd never notice the way I longed for him, the way I longed for him to look at me just a little longer and see me. The way I couldn't look at him at all, too afraid he'd see the way I want to be seen by him. Maybe that's why we've stayed friends for all this time—I wanted him to see me, and he wanted a challenge, to see me, without having to look at all.

We smoke shisha and drink coffee. I try to calm my nerves. I don't think of home, not in this moment. I think of Eli, how he'll be in the same country as me, but a different state entirely. How we'll be so close, but there will be a thick wall between us, checkpoints and security zones that stretch miles and miles between us. When he booked my ticket, he had booked two two-way tickets, assumed I would come back with him at the end of the week. He needs to come back for work, but I don't know if it'll be that easy for me. I told him I didn't know how much time I'd need, how much time Mejd would need to recover. I changed it to a one-way ticket.

He sips his coffee and asks if I'm sure I don't want him to meet me on the other side of the border. I almost laugh at how naïve he is to think we'll reach at the same time. Doesn't he know that Israelis will go on buses far before the Palestinians board? I think he's joking, or he wants to show me he's willing to wait for hours. Either way, I tell him that this is something I need to do alone. He nods and looks away.

When we finish our coffee and dawn creeps in, he orders a cab and helps the driver put my bags in the car once it reaches. He opens the door for me and then leans in and kisses me on

the forehead, tells me to let him know if I need anything, anything at all. He says he'll miss me.

"Aren't you coming in?" I say.

He doesn't answer, and I think maybe I've hurt him by saying I need to do this alone. I want to reach out and grab his arm, tell him that I didn't mean it, but instead I watch him stand by the curb and force a smile at me.

I roll down the window and look hard into his eyes. The morning sun is angled right at his face, but his eyes are open wide, unsquinting as he looks directly at me. In that moment he is looking right at me, and I think he sees me. "I'll miss you, too" I say.

At the border, Jordanians and Israelis search me and look through my purse, my permit to leave and enter the West Bank is stamped, I pay, and I stand in line countless times.

On the bus, I fall asleep and wake up to go on another bus, where first I'm searched again. I sit and look out the window for hours until the bus starts to move, flies hovering around my underarms.

When I reach the Israeli soldiers search my body and look over my documents, and then I go to look for my bags. I find them and go out to find a taxi.

When the taxi drops me off in Sarta, I walk on the main road to my parent's house. My family doesn't know I'm coming, I didn't tell my mother when we talked, couldn't say anything as I listened to her blow her nose between words.

I knock on the door and when my mother opens it and sees me, she hugs me hard, cries into my hair and I feel her tears tickle down my spine. It's a cold feeling even though her tears are warm. She then wraps her arms around me, holds onto me tightly, and I know she's holding me now to make up for all

the times she couldn't the past five years.

I want to stay in her arms, feel her hold me, but I pull back, unsure why. Then, I see the way she looks at me, concerned and afraid, as though she cannot believe I made it home, as though it doesn't make sense to her that I came back. She must feel like it, maybe my guilt shows though, somehow, she knows I don't feel right being back after all these years. Even she must know I should have been here all along. But I wasn't; I was in America, getting a career of my own, putting myself first at the cost of her and her husband and her son. What kind of daughter does that make me?

I don't cry, but she brings her hand to my face and wipes at the dryness around my eyes. I hate myself, I should be crying, even she knows it. I'm sad and terrified but I don't allow it to show. My heart has become hard abroad, it has coped with distance and divided me from even my own self. This I know now as I feel her warm fingers wipe away my invisible tears, perhaps trying to see some heart in me. Trying to see me as her daughter.

Yet, she is crying, sad, and looks happy at the same time. She is happy to see me, even though she probably doesn't recognize me as the daughter she remembers. I reach for her tears, wipe them from her face so she knows I'm still in there, somewhere, that I'm back, I'm home, and I'm trying.

I then kiss her cheek and tell her I need to see Mejd. She nods, takes my bags inside as I walk over to his room. Mejd is sleeping when I go inside. I sit on his bed and look at him as he sleeps, look at his round eyes, the small hairs forming on his chin and the faint bruises on his neck.

My hand jumps to his and holds it, feels it cold and alone, and as though my own coldness inside me spreads onto his skin and jolts inside him, he wakes up at my touch. I feel him tremble as he starts to cry, as if he cannot believe I came

back to see him. He sits up as to hug me and my body moves in to hug him back without warning.

My mouth is moving, my words are forming, tell him to lie back down, to rest, and my hands are working, adjusting another pillow for him to lean against. I don't know how he sees me and isn't upset, after all he went through, without me, perhaps through it all thinking I had forgotten about him.

I don't know what I can say now that would change what happened to him—days and weeks and months before—when I didn't bother to call him to say anything. But then, I think back to hours before this moment, I remember when our mother called, how horrible it was to feel the fear in her voice, how desperately I wanted to say something to make her feel better, but couldn't, and so, I left her to cry on her own. And then, karma, as though God was telling me I deserved nothing more than the coldness I give, when at the terminal, hours passed sitting on the bench and waiting in line, I thought I would never make it back home. That if I did reach, it would be too late, because Mejd would have hurt himself again in the meantime. How desperately I wished someone would have told me things would be okay, even if it was a lie, how it would have felt good, at least for a moment, to hear that I wasn't feeling the pain alone—that someone else was with me, understood that the pain was too much for me to comprehend, knew that a lie might be right to take my mind off everything terrible that had happened. But nobody told me things were going to be okay, because I didn't deserve to hear it. I didn't deserve that beautiful lie, I only ever gave ugly ones to the people I love, ugly lies of silence, when inside I knew they wanted more—needed more. Maybe all this time Eli really did see me for what I am.

"I know things are bad now, but someday, maybe not anytime soon, but someday," I start to say, but stop. I can't seem to finish what I want to say, what Mejd deserves to hear, that everything will be okay.

Instead, I say, “You’ll remember a good time you had with Hadi.” I tell him to remember that, that Hadi loved him, that we all do, and that he would want him to live.

New Poetry by Yael Hachohen



Fortitude

Seven times I've been to the Wall
to scribble my prayers
and fold them into
the seams in the yellow stones.
The walls of Jericho fell on the seventh
so I elbow my way through the crowd
to put my ear to the stones
and hear the horses surround them,
but the wail of sirens drown out the hooves
the herds disperse from the plaza
and I forsake the Wall
to let it stand on its own
an ancient olive tree
straining against its plot in the dirt.

Pre Traumatic

The first time I shot an M-16
it was the heat of summer in the Negev.
Gas-operated with a rotating bolt,
five-point-fifty six caliber,
with nineteen bullets a box.
I could shoot like an angel,
I could hit a running target
at six-hundred-fifty meters.
I cried the first time.
I was eighteen.
Already, my hair in a bun.
You didn't stand
a chance.

Photo Credit: [Friends of the IDF](#)