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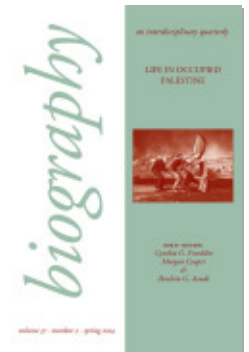
Dreaming of Never Land

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DREAMING OF NEVER LAND

SONIA NIMR

When I was little, I always thought that the stars were singing. I would lie in bed at night watching the sky from my window and see the stars twinkle and wink at me; I heard them singing especially for me. It took me years to realize (to my disappointment) that the singing actually was coming from crickets. Stars were dead things I was told, they do not sing, they don't wink at you, they merely reflect light. Years later, as I lay in my bunk in prison trying to listen to the sounds of the night, the stars (which I couldn't see from my cell window) were singing, it wasn't my imagination, they really were singing. I felt that we, the stars and I, had found our secret bond again and we had both reclaimed our magic voice.

JUNE 1967: JUST BEFORE THE WAR

Listening to the radio days before the war, we knew that war was imminent. The propaganda we heard on the Egyptian radio inflamed everyone:

“It is time to liberate Palestine,” said the strong confident voice from the Voice of the Arabs radio station: “Arab armies are ready, Israel, beware of our wrath. . . .”

For me the outcome of the war could only be victory, the defeat of Israel and the liberation of Palestine. Defeat was unthinkable, out of the question.

“Jaffa's sea is blue. Haifa is the bride of the sea,” we repeated in Arabic grammar classes at school.

I had always imagined Palestine as a dreamland, a paradise with rivers of honey and milk, rolling green hills, fertile plains with golden wheat stalks raising their heads to heaven. In short, I made the description of paradise in the Qur'an fit the Palestine of my dreams, and I found an extra space to fit in the blue sea of Jaffa. (How come there is no sea in the Quranic paradise?) Yet, it seemed to me like Never Never Land—so fantastic, so close, and yet so unreachable. No happy thoughts nor magic dust would make it any closer.

I so much wanted the war to end so that I could feel the warm sands of Jaffa and stand on the walls of Acre that had defeated Napoleon. I could see with my twelve-year-old eyes the refugees coming back to their homes and living happily ever after.

My father once said, “Haifa is only 50 kilometers away from Jenin.” So close, yet so inaccessible. I longed so much to see the sea; I could smell its humidity on the wind but never touch its water. From the balcony of my house I could see the distant lights of Nazareth; it seemed so close yet so far. How many times I stood there gazing at these lights.

All these feelings were also mixed with fear. I was afraid of the war, I was afraid to die, I was afraid not to see these dreams come true. My fear of the war was justified. Only one year earlier, there had been an Israeli raid on Jenin. We sat huddled together in the corridor of our house, which my father thought was the safest place. We sat in total darkness listening to the terrifying sounds of tank shelling and explosions. I knew that war was dangerous and killed people. I knew there was a chance that I or any member of my family could be killed. Still, on the day the war actually broke out, I was very calm, with the certainty that the glorious end would come soon, feeling ready for martyrdom, knowing that this was a worthy sacrifice for my people. We listened to the radio and heard the Egyptian announcer talking enthusiastically about the early Arab victories—“The brave Arab Army shot down 12 of the enemy planes,” “Arab people everywhere, rejoice, the day has come.” Every time we heard a communiqué like that we shouted and cheered with excitement.

Three days later, we woke up to the noise and rumble of tanks. “These are the Iraqis,” shouted one happy voice. “The Iraqis are coming to liberate Palestine, hooray!” another voice confirmed, “They are coming from the east, they are definitely the Iraqis.”

Jenin had an added reason for celebration: in 1948 the Israelis had occupied the town and an Iraqi platoon had refused to obey orders to withdraw and leave the town to its fate. The platoon counterattacked and liberated the town. “The Iraqis are coming, they’re here,” came more shouts from balconies and open windows. Suddenly people were standing on balconies, rooftops, at windows; some even dared to go into the street. Shouting with excitement, waving their arms to greet the victorious Arab army, some were even in tears. I stood on the balcony in a fever of excitement to watch the first Arab army advancing to defeat the Israelis and drive them into the sea.

Our celebration lasted for only a few moments. Suddenly someone shouted, “These are not the Iraqis, they’re Israelis.” Silence fell. The only sound heard was the thundering tanks. People suddenly disappeared, windows closed. Now, even the noise of the tanks stopped. For a few seconds there was

total silence. I was pulled away from the balcony by a firm hand just a moment after I had a quick glimpse of the soldiers on top of a tank. I was dazed, overwhelmed and confused. What were the Israelis doing here? They should be fleeing towards the sea from the victorious Arab armies.

Something else was even more confusing and disturbing; the Israelis I saw on the tanks were humans. I had always imagined them as monsters, or more like demons with horns on their heads, tails sticking out of their behinds, fire coming out of their eyes, ugly and vicious. The fact that they looked human was very difficult to deal with. I could not match these people with the image of the killers, rapists, and thieves who had stolen our beloved homeland and planted strangers in it, making two-thirds of my people refugees.

“Mom,” I cried in confusion, “Mom, they are people like us.” She replied: “They are people all right, but not like us.”

Then it dawned on me, the Arab armies were defeated, and instead of liberating Palestine, the rest of Palestine was now under occupation. All of this was too much to take in.

SUMMER 1973: GRADUATION FROM SCHOOL

I finally would leave the town where I had grown up, which had begun to feel very small and boring, and I would take my chances in a bigger world.

At the college, I was introduced to a completely new world, but mostly to the world of active politics. I was very much interested in politics in my own way. When I failed to run away when I was thirteen, I had begun to collect money to buy warm clothes for freedom fighters, and I was involved in every demonstration against the occupation. I read a lot of books; I used to spend all my pocket money on books. But nothing prepared me for what came next.

At the college, there were different political groups, all working together: Fatah, Popular Front, Democratic Front, and the communists. I became friends with all of them, but none of them asked me officially to become a member. Each group assumed that the others had recruited me. I was still waiting to be asked by one of them.

One day I was at home in Jenin for the weekend, and a colleague from the college came to visit. I was surprised, I was not a particular friend of his, and male colleagues did not simply come for a visit (after all, we were still a very conservative society). After having coffee and small talk about the college and the political situation, he cleared his throat and came to the point of his visit: “I was wondering if you would be interested in joining our group, the Democratic Front. You are aware of course that we are active at the college and”

“I accept,” came my answer without thinking. I had been waiting for this to happen for so long, though not with this particular group. I felt I sounded

too eager, that wasn't good. I should have said, "Give me time to think about it." But now that I had spoken, I couldn't do anything about it, so I continued, "Well, I mean I will be honored to join your ranks and I will try to be a good member."

He was not surprised, as if he had been certain I would accept, and said: "Good, here are some things to read." He handed me a badly typed folder and left, saying: "I'll see you at the college then, comrade."

And that was that, I was now officially a member of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine. I had an organization to belong to. Now I was a comrade.

1974: FIRST EXPERIENCE OF PRISON

"There is a call for you," said one of my roommates in the dormitory. I went downstairs and picked up the receiver, not expecting a call from my parents at this early hour. I was very surprised to hear my mother's voice: "Your brother was arrested last night."

What, Sa'd—arrested? But he is only fourteen. Blood rushed into my head, there seemed to be a huge sea wave pumping in my ears, my hands began to shake.

I asked, "Why, how, when, what are you going to do, is he OK, did they torture him?" All the questions came out like bullets, with no pause between them to give my mother a chance to answer. She tried to calm me down and answered with her usual patience: "He was in a demonstration, the Israelis claimed that he was throwing stones at them, he is in Jenin prison, your dad is trying to find out about him, don't worry, he will be OK."

But the way she said it, despite the calming words, sounded to me like "Go ahead and panic."

I said: "I'm coming to Jenin." She insisted: "There is no need for you to come, he'll be out soon, don't worry; we will keep you informed."

No way was I going to stay in Birzeit while my brother was probably being tortured at that very moment. All the way to Jenin I was imagining the horrible things being done to my little brother, I imagined blood streaming out of his mouth; I imagined him handcuffed and blindfolded, not knowing when or where the blows were coming from; I imagined all the sorts of torture that I'd heard were practiced against Palestinian prisoners being done to him. By the time I arrived in Jenin I had practically killed my brother. At that point, I realized how much I loved him, and hated myself for imagining all this torture. At the same time I felt very proud of him, and in my mind's eye he became a hero. My brother stayed a week in prison; he was released because of his youth, after paying a big fine. It was a joyous day.

My brother went to prison as a young teenager and a week later he came out a man.

I decided that my brother was old enough and now a man of experience to join our political group. I asked him to join, and he happily accepted. My brother became a comrade.

That was the first of many arrests that my family would endure during the long years of occupation.

MAY 1975: SECOND EXPERIENCE IN PRISON

My brother was arrested again, but this time with almost sixty of our comrades. Apparently a list of sixty names of Democratic Front recruits was discovered on one of our comrades while crossing the Allenby Bridge to Jordan. The Israeli forces arrested fifty-nine of my comrades, including the man who had recruited me two years earlier.

I was not arrested. I began to worry, sure my name was on the list. I slept with my clothes on, ready to be taken any time, day or night. But still they didn't come.

* * * * *

On October 20, 1975, it was my turn to get arrested.

It didn't happen in the dramatic way I had been imagining and expecting, army vehicles surrounding the house, soldiers armed to the teeth storming into the house, pulling me away from my bed, blindfolding and handcuffing me, with all the neighbors watching, and gathering later to give their support to my parents. They even denied me this spectacular departure.

A letter of two lines arrived at my father's workplace asking him to bring me to Jerusalem for questioning. That was that. As no one can say no to the Israeli army, my father took me the next day, relieved (as he convinced himself) it was only questioning. Nothing was mentioned about arrest.

I entered the gates of Maskoubiya (the old Russian compound), to be released three years later.

A special journey started, which left its mark on me forever.

Before my arrest, during the difficult five months of waiting, my father tried to convince me to leave the country to avoid arrest. "You can live in Amman," he said. "I don't want you to be arrested, they say they dishonor the girls, they say they torture the girls badly, they rape the girls." He tried in every possible way, but I refused. I told him if I left the country, I would never be back, and that I could not live in exile the rest of my life, that I would rather go to prison no matter for how long, and stay in my country. My father didn't understand my romantic patriotism as he put it. But I insisted on staying and facing the consequences.

PRISON OR JUST WALLS

Many times I tried to write about this experience, and every time I started, the pain of the memory held me back.

I know that my experience is not unique. Almost one-third of the entire Palestinian population has experienced prison under Israeli occupation. Each has dealt with this traumatic experience in his or her own way. I tried to forget the painful memories and push them to the back of my mind, and when an occasion arises to talk about prison I manage to remember the funny incidents. Perhaps this is my own way of dealing with the trauma.

I am not a heroine, I have no super powers. I am just an ordinary person who had to live in extraordinary circumstances, whose dreams have been robbed, whose past was marred with the pain of re-occurring disappointments, whose whole life has been affected in every detail by occupation.

Now, when I look back on my life, I see it like many dots or points. Each is a stage of my life and the only thing that connects these dots together is occupation. Occupation interfered in everything in my life. It didn't only rob me of three years, it robbed me of my dreams, my hopes, and my past, present, and future. It is always present in my life, following me like a shadow. Even today, some thirty years later, I still have nightmares about being imprisoned or chased by soldiers.

* * * * *

Maskoubiya. The name brings a chill and a shudder to the bodies of all who have experienced it. It is an old building, built by the Russians in the nineteenth century as a hotel for Russian pilgrims to Jerusalem. Today the place is a prison where Palestinian prisoners are interrogated and tortured.

I was put in a big empty cell with six metal beds with thin mattresses. The walls were a yellow-grey, scratched by thousands of finger-nails. Writings on the wall, both in Hebrew (which I didn't understand) and Arabic, slogans about freedom, names of prisoners who had passed through, names of loved ones in big scratched hearts. The ceiling was high, with one single barred window near the top. One door, barred.

I sat there inspecting my surroundings, still dazed from the fact that I didn't know what would happen to me or what form of interrogation and torture lay ahead of me. I was scared; I felt the cold in my bones. The walls of the cell were closing in on me, suffocating me. I tried to calm myself down by reading the names on the walls, trying to recognize any of them, trying to find encouragement. I was not alone in this, many had been here before me and many would come after me. After all, struggles for freedom have a price. This made me pull myself together. Just a little.

The giant door was opened; an old Palestinian woman was pushed in. She looked old and frail. She was wearing a green traditional embroidered dress and a white head-scarf. She went in, sat on one of the beds, covered her face with her hands, and started sobbing. I sat beside her, and asked her, "How are you, hajjeh?" She looked at me, and the look on her face was relief as if she felt comforted that I was Palestinian and not Israeli. She dried her tears with the end of her scarf and said, "I didn't do it, I swear by God and the holy Qur'an. They did it."

I asked her to explain and she said, "My husband, he went to work on our land yesterday morning, our land is near the settlement, he was found dead in a well." She started sobbing again. I waited for her to collect herself before I urged her to finish her story. "They arrested me and said that I killed him. How can I kill my husband? The settlers did it, they killed him, they hit him with stones on the head, he is an old man, he can't defend himself, he is almost eighty." I put my arm around her shoulders. She felt very small and thin; I could feel her bones under my arm. She pulled my arm away gently, and looked at me, she wanted to continue with her story, she was relieved that one of her people was listening and believing that she was telling the truth:

First they came and took the olive grove on the hill, my husband showed them the papers of ownership, but they said they needed it for security reasons. It took them two weeks, I swear by God only two weeks, and the bulldozers started uprooting the trees, they built a settlement, a big one. They gave us a bad time, only a small piece left, my husband grew wheat there, many times they came and said that he was spying on the settlement, but he wasn't, he was only working the land. Twice they attacked him with sticks. And now they've killed him. Only God is my witness, I haven't seen him all day, he left in the morning and he was brought home in the evening dead, his clothes covered with blood, I didn't even see him buried. God may curse them, I only ask God to burn them in hell.

She began to cry again.

She had five daughters, all married now, and no sons. "He didn't divorce me, and he didn't marry another woman to bring him boys, he just said that it was the will of Allah to be the father of girls."

I felt very angry. Not only did they kill her husband, but they accused her of doing it and they didn't leave her alone to grieve for the man she had lived with for some sixty years. They didn't even have mercy on her old age and frail body.

She stayed with me in the same cell for almost ten days, and finally they released her. I decided to visit her once I was released. But I never had the chance. But I still remember very vividly that first conversation in prison with another Palestinian.

NEVI TERTSA WOMEN'S PRISON

After eighteen days at Maskoubiya, I was taken to Nevi Tertsa women's prison in Ramleh.

Ramleh was a small Palestinian town that was occupied and evacuated of its Palestinian people in 1948.

In Nevi Tertsa I spent four months before my trial.

I arrived there on a Friday morning. I didn't see the gates of the prison, as I was blindfolded all the way, but I felt the closed prison van stop, I heard the sound of an electric buzz, then the squeaking sound of a gate being opened. The van moved in, the back door opened, a hand pulled me, I went down, someone pushed me from the back urging me to move forward. Then I climbed seven steps. Another electric door opened, a female voice talking in Hebrew. I didn't understand a word. I heard the sound of paper being shuffled. The electric door closing. A different hand pushing me forward, then the sound of keys. I was pushed through another door, two women talking in Hebrew. I was trying to feel the place by the sounds, but nothing was clear. I smelled disinfectant. The blindfold was removed. I looked around; I was in a small room, with shelves, like a storage room, and a short fat woman guard was studying me, while another one with dyed blond hair was busy talking on the phone. Then she hung up and said something in Hebrew to me, I didn't understand. The fat woman said in a heavy Arabic accent while she removed my handcuffs, "You are now in Nevi Tersta prison." Then she gave me a bundle of things: two smelly blankets, a pillow, a soap bar, toothbrush, two towels, a change of underwear, a green dress, and a pair of blue pants. She held my elbow and said, as she was leading me through another door, "Now you'll meet your terrorist friends."

We walked down some stairs, she opened a gate, we walked through an open corridor with a fence on both sides, then she opened another gate to a building.

As I entered the Palestinian prisoners' section, all the Palestinian girls were cleaning the cells and the long corridor between them. When I entered, they all came to greet me with encouraging smiles. They walked along the corridor, surrounding me. That moment I felt all the fear disappear. I felt safe, I wanted to hug all of them, I wanted to ask them a million questions about this prison. But the guard kept pushing me; she stopped at a big metal grey door numbered 41, she pushed me inside and locked the door behind her. As soon as the door was locked, the tiny window in the big grey door was filled with friendly faces, as one by one the girls came to this window to talk to me and encourage me. I began to put faces to many names I had heard of, women who were considered big heroes. The lovely smiley face of

Aisha Odeh; the sharp, powerful features of Rasmiya Odeh; the huge, beautiful brown eyes of Maryam Shahksheer; the playful, childish face of Aida Sa'd; Fatima Bernawai, the first woman to be arrested after the occupation, legendary for her heroic actions; the happy face of Nahla Abboushi, who was from Jenin but whom I had never met before; and the beautiful round face of Samia Mustafa, who told me that she was my cell mate.

They all tried to make me welcome and ease my fears.

They helped me join the daily routine of prison and join their discussions.

These women whom I came to know and love, these women who became part of me for better and for worse, stood by me. Their names and faces will forever remain printed with letters of gold in my heart.

Little by little I began to get used to the daily routine of prison life, and each step of the way my comrades were there to guide and help me.

In prison we had to work, because if we didn't, we were locked in our cells for twenty-three hours and forbidden to go out in the yard except for one hour each day. We worked for seven hours a day and in return we received a few pennies (literally a few) which were put in our account to buy things from the prison canteen—coffee, tea, unfiltered cigarettes, and toothpaste.

During my three years in prison I was kicked out of almost every job I had. My first job was to make wooden clothes pegs. We would sit for seven hours in front of a gadget at a table in which we put both ends of the wooden legs of the clothes peg; in the middle we fixed the iron spring and when we pushed a handle downwards, the peg was ready. It was one of the most boring and tedious jobs I have ever had. A guard watched us all the time and it was entirely up to her to allow us to talk or order us to be silent.

These times (almost every day), while my hands did the mechanical movements, I let my mind wander. I invented a few places where I could escape to when doing this job or when things got tough or when I was punished and locked in isolation cell. I went to my special island and I put myself in such a state that I could actually feel the warm sand under my feet and the sun touch my face, hear the waves singing specially for me, and taste the salt on my lips.

Sometimes I went to my cottage on the top of a snowy mountain, sitting beside the fireplace sipping hot chocolate, feeling its warmth seep through my veins as I wrote the names of my loved ones on the misty film on the window. At other times I went to my green field, walking between wild flowers, or lay in the shade of a tree listening to the singing of the birds.

I always went alone to these places, I never imagined anyone with me. I needed to seek the privacy I never had in our communal life or while we were being watched twenty-four hours, day and night, by the male guard in the watch tower. We even had to go to the toilet to avoid being watched when

we changed our clothes. It is such a horrible thing to be watched all the time; not only your privacy is invaded but so is everything personal, everything that makes you you.

In my private places I found peace, I breathed freely without someone counting my breaths. In those places I was beyond the prison walls and away from the greyness. I was free. It was there, as I lay in my prison bunk, listening for the sounds of the night, I heard the stars singing.

* * * * *

I had another job which was equally tedious, folding wrapping paper sheets. Each week a huge bundle of sheets would be brought in and we had to fold each sheet and wrap it with a plain white paper in the middle. That job was even worse than making clothes pegs, because each week we had to wrap one color. Yellow was particularly bad because our eyes, used to only grey, couldn't adapt to the brightness of yellow.

We had our little revenge, we stuck all the sheets with glue from inside so they eventually became useless, and when they were unwrapped they tore. And on each sheet we also wrote "With the compliments of the PLO." A few months later the whole wrapping job was canceled.

My third job was even worse; I was assigned to ironing the guards' uniforms. It was particularly difficult in the summer. The steam was very hot. The steam iron was very big and attached to a long snaky hose, and if I didn't hold on to it firmly it ran all over the place. I hated ironing, and this time it was particularly difficult because the guards were very fussy about the neatness of their uniforms. They liked their shirts to have a line at the top of the back and be neatly folded. I didn't last very long in this job. One day the officer in charge came to the ironing room and threw her shirts on the floor. "What's this?" she said.

"Neatly ironed shirts," I said very smugly. She held one of them in front of me: there were six horizontal lines on the back. She said, "And these?" I said, "An added neatness." She didn't appreciate my ironing innovation, because she kicked me out of the room there and then.

I was next assigned to the kitchen in our building. All the cooking was done in the big kitchen in the Jewish girls' building because we were not allowed to handle tools like knives, and so the food came to our building in big pots, and my job was to distribute the food onto plates, and do the washing and clean the kitchen after each meal.

The job was particularly difficult because I had to divide the food equally onto the plates, and that wasn't easy, especially for the morning and evening meals. I had to calculate the measurements of one small pot of yogurt to be

divided into six equal portions. After a while I got good at it and my measurements became much better. And later I mastered cutting one tomato into six equal pieces.

ENEMIES OR FRIENDS?

Our building looked like a bus, one long corridor with rows of cells on each side. At the far side of the corridor there was a long narrow widow, covered with two layers of wire, iron bars and vertical shutters which didn't open. However, if I lowered my head and looked upwards I could see pieces of the sky and a tall, maybe ten-story building.

With that building, I had a three-year relationship.

From my position at the bottom of the window I could only see the building's three top floors. It became a habit: every day I looked out of the window at those three floors of that building. After a while I made up lives about those floors, real-life stories in my imagination.

Judging from the size of the building the inhabitants are well off, perhaps upper middle class. Or professionals. On the top floor lived an old retired architect, a widower. He lives alone with his cat.

In the floor below live a couple with their little daughter. And on the floor below lived old retired university professors.

I became aware of their habits just by looking at the lights on their floor.

The big window facing the prison must be the living room. Beside it, a smaller window must belong to the kitchen. And the smaller one on the corner of the building is the bathroom. The other rooms of the flats faced the other side. So I could only build the lives of these flats from the rooms with lights facing me.

Every night (I didn't watch during the day as I couldn't see anything) I watched their windows and told their stories to myself. After a while these people who I didn't know became my only link to life outside of prison.

The old man with the cat lives a very lonely life. He puts on the lights in his sitting room at around 4:30 in the winter and around 7:30 in the summer. He puts the kitchen lights on for almost fifteen minutes and turns them off. He must be eating very light dinners for them to be prepared in such a short time. I imagined him taking his plate with some baked beans, sausages and boiled potatoes, with toast (or pizza or a TV dinner). He goes to the sitting room, turns the TV on and eats while watching. After he finishes, he goes to the kitchen for three or four minutes and washes the plate; puts some cat food in the cat's dish; comes back to the living room, turns the big light in the ceiling off and puts on a side light; keeps watching TV until he goes to sleep in his chair. I don't know if he ever sleeps in his bed or stays in his chair

all night, as by 8 o'clock we have to be locked in our cells and his light is still on. So my watching is over every night at 8 o'clock.

The couple on the floor underneath are very unpredictable. Sometimes they don't put their lights on at all, which makes me assume they are out for dinner. At other times they keep all their lights on. It seems they don't worry too much about electricity bills.

I don't know how much time they spend preparing dinner. When they arrive home they put all the lights on at the same time as the TV. I can see it blinking. They don't come home at the same time every night. They don't seem to have any fixed habits at all. So I had to invent all their life without even the help of their lights. Perhaps there's a little girl who is afraid of the dark and keeps finding monsters hiding under the bed or in the closet. I can imagine her sleeping in her bed with the light on. She sometimes finds different excuses to go to sleep in her mummy's and daddy's bed.

The couple underneath are so fixed I can almost count how many bites each of them eats. They are not into TV dinners; they are a healthy couple, determined to live a long healthy life. They put a small lamp on in the living room at precisely 6:30, rain or shine. They take at least two hours preparing dinner. They have their dinner in the kitchen. They turn on other lights in the sitting room much later. Sometimes I'll be locked in my cell before they put the lights on. Unlike the young couple upstairs, these people put only two lamps on. I can see the different lights glow from the three floors. I don't know what time they go to sleep, I can tell that they read because I can't see the TV light glowing. I can imagine classical music playing from a radio in the corner. They must go to bed after I am locked up.

These people became my own private entertainment. I made them fight; I made them dance; and I made them happy, and sometimes sad. Their lives are my own; I can do anything I fancy with them.

On the day I was released, I had a last look at the building, and bade my enemy friends farewell.

Sometimes they come into my mind and I wonder if the old retired architect is dead, and if he found friends and family to mourn him?

Did the girl from the flat below stop being afraid of the dark? Did she get rid of her demons?

Did the couple underneath actually live longer healthier lives?

I wonder.

FAREWELL WHITE STARS

In the prison yard, where we were allowed to walk for two hours a day, there was a jasmine tree. No one planted it; we didn't know how it came to be

there. We assumed, since this was Palestinian land, that a Palestinian must have planted it once upon a time, and long after he or she was kicked out of the land and no longer took care of it, the tree somehow decided on its own to spring back into life for our sakes. It was there, and it was ours. Tall and elegant and leaning against the prison wall. We loved that jasmine tree; we all cherished it and took care of it. Its flowers were so white, in contrast to the greyness of everything in our prison. Its fragrance filled the air, especially in the afternoon, our time outside, as if the tree especially wanted to spread its scent for us.

Above all, it dared not only to climb the prison wall, but also to look over the other side. It was our secret link to the world outside. We loved it, loved everything about it, and loved it daring to climb the forbidden wall.

How many times we longed to climb our jasmine tree and just have a peek at freedom. But the eyes of the guards were always watching us.

One day the warden came into the yard, looked at the tree with hateful eyes, and said, "This tree must go, cut it down."

We were terrified, we protested, all of us protested; this tree meant something special to each and every one of us. The warden was determined. A short time later came the only male allowed in our prison, Yacob, the handyman, with a hand saw. We shouted at him and tried to convince him to keep our tree, but he said the orders were clear. We shouted, we pleaded, but it was no use, he couldn't say no to the warden.

We stood around, some of us started to weep, watching the saw biting into the trunk of our beloved jasmine tree. The saw scratched the trunk, with every movement the saw reflected the sun, and for a moment it appeared as if the saw, instead of killing the tree, was impregnating it with new life from the rays of the sun. But Yacob continued to push the saw forward and deeper into the tree's heart. He began to sweat. The tree still held its ground, and didn't yield. Yacob said with amazement, "This trunk is so strong and hard, it's not yielding to the saw." He took his saw and left. We all cheered, thinking that he had given up on murdering our tree. But a few minutes later, he came back holding a big chainsaw. Our hearts sank; this was the end. Yacob pulled the string of the saw and sharp teeth bit into the trunk like a monster devouring its victim. It didn't take long before our tree gave in. Suddenly it fell to the ground, and the white flowers scattered onto the ground like dead stars. Silence. We stood there looking at its dead body, in shock.

Yacob stood in triumph, wiping the sweat from his fat red face and looking at the murdered tree with satisfaction. He went away with the murder weapon and left us to mourn our beloved tree. Tears began pouring down our cheeks, some of us were sobbing loudly. We collected as many fallen flowers as we could. Yacob came back; he simply held the end of the trunk with one

hand and started to drag it away, leaving a trail of white dead stars on the earth behind him. We watched him take our tree away. Last farewell to a beloved friend. He disappeared.

Only one girl started grinning and we all looked at her with surprise. I was just about to express my disapproval when she simply produced a small branch from under her green prison dress, and hid it again quickly.

We all began to smile, and the puzzled look on the guard's face made us burst into loud laughter.

Days later, after careful watching lest the guards noticed, the jasmine tree was planted again.

GOING HOME

As I counted the days to my release, I looked forward to a joyous day, saying farewell to my comrades and then flying out of the prison gates into the arms of my happy parents. But it went differently and totally wrong. As the day approached I began to feel uneasiness, something heavy weighing on my stomach. Even as I was excited at the thought of being free again and of doing all the things I had been dreaming of, and of pursuing all the possibilities in that unknown outside world, I also was scared. I feared that my friends would not be there, or would have forgotten me, or that things would not be the same as I had left them. And guilt, a big guilt that I was being freed and my comrades didn't even have a date for release in the foreseeable future. Aisha, Rasmiya, Maryam, Afifa, Fatima, Teresa, Aida, all had a life sentence. Would they ever be released? Would I be able to see them again? My bond with them was more than friendship, or comradeship, it was way deeper than that, they had become part of me, a part that I would leave behind.

On the day that marked exactly three years to the day of my imprisonment, I woke up tired and scared. I hadn't slept well the night before. I was scared to leave this place. I never expected to feel like that, but somehow my body had got used to the rhythm of the place, it had become numb, and with the strict daily routine I didn't have to think. I knew what to expect at any hour of the day. To leave this and enter the world with all its unpredictability was scary. To cope, I would have to retrain my body and mind. Saying goodbye was the hardest part. Early in the morning after roll call, I started distributing my better prison clothes among my comrades, giving away my meager belongings. There was a sad cheerfulness. One told me to eat as much molokhiya or ice cream as I could, another was telling me for the hundredth time to visit her family. "Go to the Red Cross and ask them to send us books, more books, we have run out of things to read." "Don't forget to talk to our comrades." "Remember the sick ones here, perhaps you

can help get them to hospital or send a decent doctor.” “Don’t forget us.” How could I?

I was pretending to be cheerful and crack jokes, and say the things that I thought were right, like, “No, I won’t eat all the ice cream for you, when you get out do it for yourself.” I knew in my heart of hearts that this would not happen, but I had to convince myself, to ease the guilt.

The guard came and called my name. Suddenly all the cheerfulness disappeared, all the contradictory emotions I had been holding in my heart came out at the sound of my name. I began to shake violently, my legs became weak, and I started to cry, not a normal crying, but very painful, loud, and uncontrollable weeping. I clung to my friends and refused to let go. Suddenly I didn’t want to leave. My friends said things like, “Don’t be silly, your parents must be waiting outside,” “Don’t you worry about us, you know us, we eat stones,” but nothing calmed me down. One of the guards brought me a sedative, saying, “If she continues like this we will have to carry her out.” They almost did.

The scene my parents were anticipating was a complete shock. Instead of bursting out of the prison gates with a joyful cry and running into their waiting arms, two guards, holding me by my arms, practically dragged me out, my face red and swollen from crying, and my eyes swollen and puffy. With me was another released comrade, Raiqa, who did all the right things and left the gates with dignity.

After I managed to compose myself, I introduced Raiqa to my parents. We found out that none of her relatives were there to take her back to Gaza; there was a mix-up over the date of her release. So instead of going straight to Jenin where my relatives were waiting, we drove all the way to Gaza to deliver Raiqa back to her family. Those six extra hours gave me enough time to calm down, although I hardly looked at the road ahead, nor the bright sunshine and the trees.

When we finally arrived home, I was in better shape, but still home was not the same: my brother Sa’d was absent, still serving his third period in prison, this time a seven year sentence.

THE WORLD DID NOT STOP MOVING

The world did not stop moving when I was away. But my world had changed. I went back to Birzeit (my college which had become a university). My friends had graduated and I went to classes with students who were younger than me. I had to make new friends.

But most importantly, I realized that the world wasn’t waiting for me to get out of prison. Life had gone on without me, and I had to adapt to this fact.

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Sometimes I feel the sky falling down on me shattering my life into little pieces, having to put them patiently and painfully back together again and again. Sometimes I feel that I am holding the sky with my hands feeling the heaviness of its weight, trying to balance it not to fall on my life.

I am just an ordinary woman who dreamed of a fairyland that I can't enter. Just seeing it behind the horizon green and magical, I often wonder what if all that never happened, if my land, my Palestine, was never occupied. What if . . . ?, I often wonder, all that never happened, what would my life be?