

SANDY TOLAN

NATIONAL  
BOOK CRITICS  
CIRCLE AWARD  
FINALIST



THE  
LEMON  
TREE

AN ARAB, A JEW,  
AND THE HEART OF  
THE MIDDLE EAST

"[An] extraordinary book...A sweeping history of the Palestinian-Israeli conundrum...highly readable and evocative."—*Washington Post*

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## Praise for *The Lemon Tree*

" *The Lemon Tree* is the story of two people trying to get beyond denial, and closer to a truth they can both live with. By its end, Bashir Khairi and Dalia Eshkenazi are still arguing, talking—and mostly disagreeing. But their natures—intellectual, questing, passionate and committed—may represent the best hope of resolving one of the most intractable disputes in human history. . . It is very tempting to write off the Israeli-Palestinian standoff as insoluble. But one lesson *The Lemon Tree* is the relatively short span of its history. The conflict between the two people is little more than a century old."

—*Seattle Times*

" *The Lemon Tree* is not only an empathetic look at the struggles of these Holocaust survivors and Palestinian exiles, but a concise history of their competing claims for Israel and Palestine. The story of Dalia and Bashir's first face-to-face meeting in 1967, and the remarkable four-decade friendship that has followed, illuminate the personal narratives at the heart of the conflict."

—*Mother Jones*

"This wonderful human story vividly depicts the depths of attachment to contested ground. A excellent choice for general readers."

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

"Instructive, heartbreaking and well-written, *The Lemon Tree* will inform readers of efforts by Palestinians and Israelis to make peace, despite the geopolitical and religious pressures to the contrary."

—*St. Louis Post Dispatch*

"Tolan, who first told this story in a public radio documentary, is admirably evenhanded, alternating between the points of view of the two families and their respective nations. The book has no neat solution. But just as the Khairis and Eshkenazis learn each other's better qualities, we come to understand more about both sides."

—*BookPage*

"Through broad sweeps of narrative going back and forward in time, Tolan's sensitively told, eminently fair-minded narrative closes with a return to that lemon tree and its promise of reconciliation. Humane and literate—and rather daring in suggesting that the future of the Middle East need not be violent."

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

"A much-needed antidote to the cynicism of realpolitik."

—*Booklist* (starred review)

"This truly remarkable book presents a powerful account of Palestinians and Israelis who try to break the seemingly endless chain of hatred and violence. Capturing the human dimension of the conflict so vividly and admirably, Sandy Tolan offers something both Israelis and Palestinians a

too often tend to ignore: a ray of hope."

—**Tom Segev, author of *One Palestine, Complete***

"Those looking for even a symbolic magical solution to that conflict won't find it here: the lemon tree dies in 1998, just as the Israeli-Palestinian peace process stagnates. But as they follow Dalia and Bashir's difficult friendship, readers will experience one of the world's most stubborn conflicts firsthand."

—***Publishers Weekly* (starred review)**

"This fascinating book is a tapestry of compassion, grief, and hope about a land that has never been running short of any. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has long been one of the most bitter, disputed and extensively analyzed in the world and yet only a few books can claim to grasp the human dimension of the conflict as honestly and thoroughly as this one. Sandy Tolan's great achievement is that he renders the abstract and intricate world of international and regional problems almost 'touchable' by making us see them against a background of the experiences and emotions of the ordinary individuals who have lived them. This honest and meticulous research encompasses a spectrum of generations of tales and tales of generations. Sandy Tolan's voice speaks with great compassion and acumen, and this painfully beautiful narrative lingers in the mind long after the book is over."

—**Elif Shafak, professor of Near Eastern Studies, University of Arizona, and author of *The Bastard of Istanbul***

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# THE LEMON TREE

*An Arab, a Jew,  
and the Heart of the Middle East*

SANDY TOLAN

BLOOMSBURY

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For the children, Arab and Jew, between the river and the sea. And for Lamis, who brought me  
into the story.

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## FIRST WORDS

*The house depicted in this book is an actual place, and the lemon tree in its yard is a real one. You could see the place for yourself if you boarded a bus in the West Jerusalem terminal, rode west, climbed and then plunged down the hills toward the Mediterranean, and banked up a two-lane rise until you came to a bustling, industrial town in a place once known as Palestine that is now the state of Israel. When you stepped off the bus, you'd walk down the busy main road known as Herzl Boulevard, past the juice vendors, the kebab stands, and the old storefronts selling trinkets and cheap clothing, and take a left at a street called Klausner. There, at the next corner, you'd spot a run-down gas station, and across the street a modest house with a pillar-top fence, a towering palm, and stones the color of cream.*

*This is the place, you could say to yourself. This is the house with two histories. The house with the lemon tree.*



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## [AUTHOR'S NOTE](#)

THIS BOOK is firmly planted in the soil of nonfiction narrative. Many of the events depicted are from fifty, sixty, or seventy years ago; nonetheless, their retelling relies, like everything else in the book, entirely on the tools of reporting and research: interviews, archival documents, published and unpublished memoirs, personal diaries, newspaper clippings, and primary and secondary historical accounts. For *The Lemon Tree* I conducted hundreds of interviews in Israel, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, and Bulgaria over a period of seven years, mostly since 2000. I visited archives in Jerusalem, Ramallah, Beirut, Sofia, London, New York, and Austin, Texas; and consulted hundreds of first- and secondhand sources, many housed in one of the world's great research centers: the Doe Library at the University of California at Berkeley.

I have not taken liberties with the history, no matter how minor. At no point do I imagine what *probably* happened, for example, at a family event in 1936 and state it as fact; nor at any moment do I describe what someone was *thinking* unless those thoughts are based on a specific recounting in a memoir or interview. Rather, the scenes and sections of the narrative are built through a combination of the available sources.

For example: Descriptions of events surrounding the Eshkenazi family are based on family interviews in Jerusalem and Sofia; interviews with other Bulgarian Jews now living in Israel; documents unearthed in the State Archives of Bulgaria, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee archives in Queens, New York, and the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem; and newspaper clippings and other historical accounts translated from the National Library in Sofia. The portrait of the Khairi family in al-Ramla in 1948 is similarly based on multiple sources: personal interviews of family members; memoirs and other accounts translated from the Arabic; Israeli military intelligence reports; documents from state and kibbutz archives; the memoirs of Yitzhak Rabin and Arab Legion commander John Bagot Glubb; U.S. State Department cables from the day; secondary historical accounts by Middle Eastern scholars; and years of my own interviews with Palestinians in refugee camps in the West Bank, Gaza, and Lebanon. For details and additional historical context, see the source notes section.

An author's refusal to take poetic license does not, of course, ensure that each event depicted speaks an "objective" truth, especially when the topic at hand represents two highly subjective histories. Where else, after all, would the same event be remembered as the War of Independence by one people and the Nakba, or "Catastrophe," by another? In such cases, particularly when the history described is volatile or less familiar to Western readers, I have intensified my basic research approach, endeavoring to gather an even greater multitude of sources from various perspectives, thus ensuring that the emerging narrative is not based primarily on decades-old personal memories.

None of this, of course, means that *The Lemon Tree* represents a definitive history of the conflict between Arabs and Jews since 1948 (or, if you prefer, since 1936, or 1929, or 1921, or 1917, or 1897, or 1858). By juxtaposing and joining the histories of two families, however, and placing them in the larger context of the days' events, I hope to help build an understanding

the reality and the history of two peoples on the same land.

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## A NOTE ON SPELLING AND PRONUNCIATION

IN THE MIDDLE EAST, the use of a single letter—say, an "e" instead of an "a"—can be a political statement, or at the very least a declaration of identity. Take the case of Ramla—or, as it has been called, Ramla, or Ramie, or Ramleh, or Ramlah. Present-day Israelis use "Ramla," which is how the road signs read in English; in classical Arabic, it's "al-Ramla"; in spoken Arabic, and throughout its history from the eighth century A.D., including during the British Mandate from 1917 to 1948, it was "Ramie." Israeli historians generally use "Ramie" when referring to the era before 1948, and some Israelis continue to call it "Ramie" rather than the Hebraized pronunciation "Ramla," because, unlike other cities where Jews lived in antiquity, Ramie was always exclusively an Arab town, founded by Muslims in 715.

How to resolve this dilemma for a writer intent on conveying two histories? I have decided, after much experimentation, to use the classical Arabic "al-Ramla" when looking at the city through Arab eyes and "Ramla" when describing the place through the Israeli experience. That way, it is clear that I am referring to the same place—and, by the way, not to Ramallah, a Palestinian town in the West Bank about twenty miles to the east.

In single references, I tend to use the pronunciation favored by the person through whose eyes the reader is seeing at a particular moment. Thus, Bashir sees the hilltop at Qastal, not Castel, Kastel, as many Israelis know it; similarly, Dalia looks upon the hills of Judea and Samaria, known as Jabal Nablus and Jalal al Khalil (Nablus and Hebron Mountains) in Arabic.

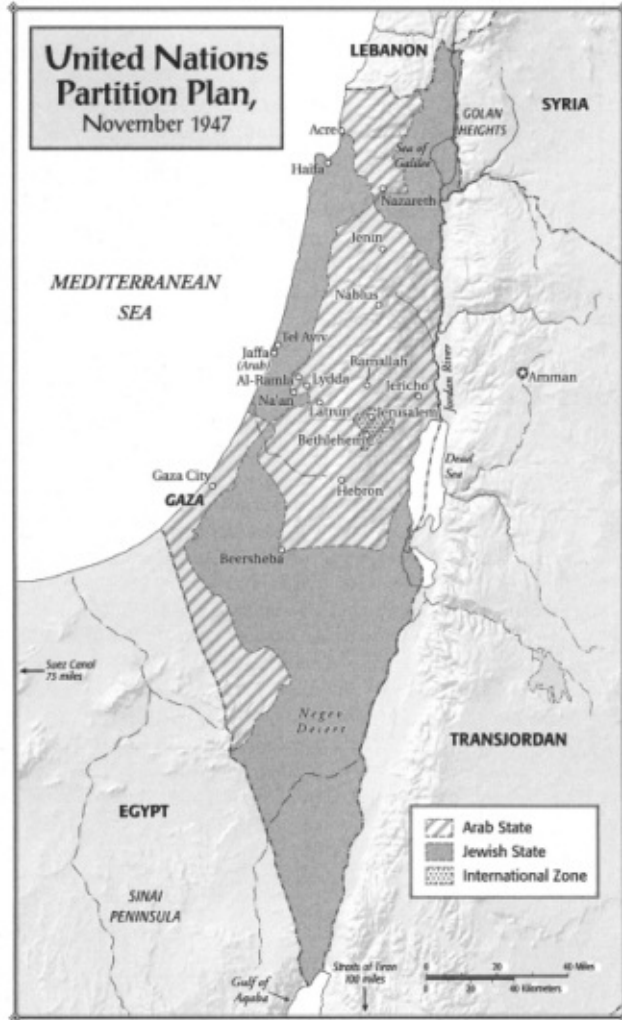
For Arabic words, I have chosen not to use accent marks unfamiliar to most readers; rather, I have used spellings in English which will come closest to the actual pronunciation in Arabic. Similarly for the Hebrew. For example, the Hebrew letters *kajf* and *khet*, indicated as "ch" by some writers, are pronounced like an "h," but in a more guttural way, and I have generally used "kh," which comes closer. (An exception is where the "ch" spelling is commonly accepted, as in Chanukah.) This guttural "kh" is also represented by the Arabic letter *kha*, and pronounced similarly—as in Khairi, Bashir's family name, and Khanom, Bashir's sister. Bashir's name, by the way, is pronounced bah-SHEER.

Dalia's family name was Eshkenazi, not Askhenazi; despite how odd that spelling may look to many Jewish readers, it is common for Bulgarians, and Dalia assures me this is how her father always spelled his name in English. Her name at birth was Daizy, and she kept that name until she was eleven years old, when she changed it to Dalia. To avoid confusion, and after consulting Dalia, I have decided to refer to her as Dalia throughout the book.

**Palestine**  
under the  
British Mandate,  
1936



**United Nations  
Partition Plan,  
November 1947**



**Israel and the  
Palestinian  
Territories,  
with Israeli  
Settlements, 2005**



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## INTRODUCTION

IN EARLY 1998, I set out for Israel and the West Bank in search of a surprisingly elusive story. Despite the forests of newspaper stories and miles of videotape documenting the intractable conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, precious little light had fallen on the human side of the story, the common ground between enemies, and genuine hopes for coexistence. My assignment came on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the first Arab-Israeli war—known to Israelis as the War of Independence, and the *Nakba*, or catastrophe, to Palestinians. I wanted to explore how this event, and the history that followed it, was understood by ordinary Arabs and Jews in the Holy Land. I needed to find two families linked by history in a tangible way.

I spent weeks reading Israeli military history, Palestinian oral history, and scholarly treatises looking at the roots of the conflict. I traveled from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv, from Ramallah to Hebron to Gaza, digging for the human story that would move beyond the heartbreaking images transmitted from the region.

I encountered many dead ends and broken leads. But then I came across something real. It was the true story of one house, two families, and a common history emanating from walls of Jerusalem stone on the coastal plain east of Tel Aviv and Jaffa. From a single house, and the lemon tree in its garden, lay a path to the histories, both separate and intertwined, of the Khairi and Eshkenazi families, and to the larger story of two peoples on one land. This promised to be not simply a recounting of decades of pain and retaliation; as I began interviews with Bashir Khairi in Ramallah and Dalia Eshkenazi Landau in Jerusalem, I quickly saw that I would cross a new landscape, to the twin hearts of the story.

Like many Americans, I grew up with one part of the history, as told through the heroic birth of Israel out of the Holocaust. The mother of one of my schoolmates had lived in Anne Frank's neighborhood and had got out of Amsterdam in a harrowing journey, just in time. I knew Israel as a safe haven for the Jews. I knew nothing about the Arab side. For millions of Americans, Jew and Gentile, it was the same. They too were raised with the version of Middle Eastern history as told in *Exodus*, Leon Uris's hugely influential mega-bestseller, first published in 1958, then made into a movie starring Paul Newman. In Uris's engaging novel, Arabs are alternately pathetic or malicious, or perhaps worse; and they have little real claim to their land. "If the Arabs of Palestine loved their land, they could not have been forced from it—much less run from it without real cause." But as generations of historians have since documented, and Dalia and Bashir recounted to me in their own words, the actual history of the two peoples' relations is far more complex, not to mention richer and more interesting.

The story of Dalia and Bashir was first broadcast as a special forty-three-minute documentary for NPR's *Fresh Air*, and the response was overwhelming. Though I've reported from more than thirty countries over the last twenty-five years, the feedback I received from that single program was greater than that from all the stories I'd ever done, put together. Clearly the story had awakened a desire for a deeper narrative, one that would penetrate beneath the headlines and the endless cycles of repeated history, and explain *how* we got to this difficult place.

Seven years later, after countless hours in archives and on the ground in Israel, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, and Bulgaria, the seed of the radio documentary had grown into *The Lemon Tree*, and the response to the book, and to a series of public talks and readings I've done in the months that followed, has again been astonishing. As I've traveled from San Francisco to Milwaukee, from Detroit to Los Angeles to New York to Boston to Seattle, I've been moved to see how this story of one home and two families creates an opening for a deeper, sometimes painful exchange about the past, and the future.

Not everyone is comfortable hearing the story of the Other. A talk show host on Arab radio said he was sick of hearing the story of the Jewish love for Israel; a woman in Los Angeles chastised me for telling the story of the Arabs of a "nonexistent 'Palestine.'" "

Most people, however, have responded to the story of the Other with passion and courage. In Seattle, as the C-SPAN cameras rolled, an Arab man stood up to tell his family's story as Jewish members of the audience listened intently. In Milwaukee, a Jewish mother rose to say her son was on his way to Israel and had decided to visit Dalia as the result of the book. In Gloucester, Massachusetts, a lifelong supporter of Israel said that this was the first talk about the subject of Israel and Palestine that he had not left feeling angry. In San Francisco, an Arab native of Ramat spoke up during a Jewish book fair to say that *The Lemon Tree* reflects the history of her own family, and that understanding can only come from a recognition of each other's history.

The key to this openness, I think, lies in the interweaving narratives: When someone sees his or her own history represented fairly, it opens up the mind and heart to the history of the Other. I've received countless emails since the book's publication. Each week I receive messages from people who say, essentially, "AW I know what this struggle is all about"; or that they see their own experience in the story of Dalia and Bashir; or that they have for the first time recognized the humanity of the other side.

As notices come in from across the U.S. telling me of book clubs and new reading groups forming to discuss *The Lemon Tree*, I'm hopeful that the human story beneath this "intractable" problem will show that it may not be so intractable after all. As Dalia says, "Our enemy is the only partner we have."

SANDY TOLA  
DECEMBER 2000



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## One

### BELL

#### I

THE YOUNG ARAB man approached a mirror in the washroom of Israel's West Jerusalem bus station. Bashir Khairi stood alone before a row of porcelain basins and leaned forward, regarding himself. He turned his head slightly, left to right and back again. He smoothed his hair, nudged his tie, pinched his clean-shaven face. He was making certain all of this was real.

For nearly two decades, since he was six years old, Bashir had been preparing for this journey. It was the breath, the currency, the bread of his family, of nearly every family he knew. It was what everyone talked about, all the time: return. In exile, there was little else worth dreaming of.

Bashir gazed at his reflection. *Are you ready for this journey?* he asked himself. *Are you worthy of it?* It seemed his destiny to return to the place he'd mainly heard about and mostly couldn't remember. It felt as if he were being drawn back by hidden magic; as if he were preparing to meet a secret, long-lost lover. He wanted to look good.

"Bashir!" yelled his cousin Yasser, snapping the younger man back to the moment in the bus station men's room. " *Yallah!* Come on! The bus is leaving!"

The two men walked out into the large waiting hall of the West Jerusalem terminal, where their cousin Ghiath was waiting anxiously.

It was nearly noon on a hot day in July of 1967. All around Bashir, Yasser, and Ghiath, strangers rushed past: Israeli women in white blouses and long dark skirts; men in wide-brimmed black hats and white beards; children in side curls. The cousins hurried toward their bus.

They had come that morning from Ramallah, a Palestinian hill town half an hour to the north where they lived as refugees. Before they embarked, the cousins had asked their friends and neighbors how to navigate this alien world called Israel: Which bus should we take? How much is a ticket? How do we buy it? Will anyone check our papers once we board the bus? What will they do if they find out we are Palestinians? Bashir and his cousins had left Ramallah in the late morning. They rode south in a group taxi to East Jerusalem and arrived at the walls of the Old City, the end of the first leg of their journey. Only weeks before, these walls had been the site of fierce combat, leading to devastation for the Arabs and the occupation of East Jerusalem by Israel. Emerging from the taxi, the cousins could see soldiers stationed at Damascus Gate, the northern entrance to the Old City. From there the three men turned west and walked away from the ancient walls and across an invisible line.

From the Old City, the cousins had walked west, away from the ancient shrines, across the line of an old boundary between nations. Until a few weeks before, this line had divided West Jerusalem and Israel from Arab East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Now, after defeat of the Arabs in the Six Day War, Israeli forces occupied the West Bank, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan Heights and were redeployed to defend the new frontiers. Bashir and his cousins had thought it easy to cross the old no-man's-land and into a territory simultaneously old and new. They had trudged in the heat for several miles, down crowded lanes and past stone houses th

seemed oddly familiar. Finally the narrow streets had given way to busy, modern avenues, where the West Jerusalem bus station had come into view.

Bashir and his cousins hurried across the concrete terminal floor, past the station agent pushing tickets through metal bars, past the kiosk selling candies, gum, and newspapers in a language they could not recognize. On the platforms at the far end of the terminal stood buses bound for lands they had only heard about: the forests in the north; the southern deserts; the coastal plain. The three men held their tickets to al-Ramla and hurried toward platform ten where their bus, painted in waves of aqua and white, was ready to take them home.

## II

The young woman sat alone at the kitchen table. Sunlight streamed in through the south-facing windows of the stone house. The morning was clear, Dalia Eshkenazi remembered, and the quiet would have been broken only by her sips from a steaming mug of tea or the crunch of her teeth on black bread spread thick with Bulgarian cheese.

In recent days, life in Dalia's home and her hometown of Ramla had returned to normal—normal as could be expected, at least, in the Israel of 1967. The air raid sirens had at last fallen silent, and Dalia's parents were back at work. Dalia, on summer break from Tel Aviv University, now had time to contemplate her emotions of the last few months.

First had come the unbearable tension and the trauma before the six days of war. Alien voices broadcasting from Cairo told her people to go back where they came from or be pushed into the sea. Some Israelis thought the threats were funny, but for Dalia, who had grown up amid the silence of unspeakable atrocities, it was impossible to fully express the depths of fear the threats awakened. For a month before the war, it had felt to her that the end was coming. "Not just the disintegration of the state, but the end of us as a people," Dalia remembered. Alongside this fear was a determination, born from the Holocaust, "to never again be led like sheep to the slaughter."

Late on the first night of war, Dalia learned that Israel had destroyed the enemy's air force. She knew then that the outcome of the war was essentially decided. Dalia believed God had a hand in Israel's survival and compared her own feeling of awe and wonder with the feeling she imagined her ancestors had when witnessing the parting of the Red Sea.

Dalia's parents had never been religious. They had grown up in Bulgaria, married in 1941, survived a pro-Nazi government, and moved to Israel after the war. Dalia was eleven months old when she arrived.

Dalia's family had been spared the atrocities in Bulgaria by acts of goodwill from Christians; she was raised to admire and remember. Now, she believed her people had a destiny on the land of Israel. This was partly why she believed what she had been told: The Arabs who lived in her house, and in hundreds of other stone homes in her city, had simply run away.

## III

The 1965 Leyland Royal Tiger let out a low rumble, then a burst of exhaust, as the bus drove downshifted to descend the hills west of Jerusalem. Inside sat the three cousins, riding toward their hometown. They had boarded the bus in prior agreement not to sit together. First, that would eliminate the temptation to speak to one another, thus reducing any suspicion among the other passengers about their identity. By sitting apart, each cousin could also have a window seat, to take in every inch of the journey home. They sat three in a row, absorbing the scenery.

Bashir wasn't sure if he wanted the trip to go quickly or slowly. If it went quickly, he would be in al-Ramla sooner; but if time slowed down, he could more fully take in each bend, each landmark, each piece of his own history.

The bus roared up the curving highway toward the crest of the famous hilltop at Qastal; here, the great Arab commander had fallen in battle nineteen years earlier, breaking the back of his people's army and opening the road to the Holy City for the enemy. Beyond the hilltop, Bashir could see stone minarets of the mosque at Abu Ghosh, one of the few Arab villages that remained standing on the road between Jerusalem and the sea. The village leaders had collaborated with the enemy here, and their village had been spared; Bashir looked upon Abu Ghosh's minarets with mixed feelings.

The Royal Tiger sped down the hillside, easing up as the mountain walls closed in, then opened to a broad valley below. Eight centuries earlier, Bashir's Arab ancestors had battled the Christian invaders in hand-to-hand combat, repelling them for a time. Along the roadside, Bashir looked out the window to see the burned carcasses of vehicles blown up nineteen years earlier, from a more recent war, and the wreaths and fading flowers laid alongside them. The Israelis who placed these wreaths here were honoring what they called their War of Independence; to Bashir, this same event was known as the Nakba, or "Catastrophe."

The bus entered the valley, slowed, turned right onto a narrow highway bisecting rows of irrigated wheat fields, and angled up a low rise. As they passed near Latrun, Bashir suddenly recalled a journey made in haste and fear two decades earlier. The details were elusive; he was trying to remember the stories from when he was six years old, events he had brooded about nearly every day for the last nineteen years.

Bashir glanced at his seatmate—an Israeli man absorbed in his book. Looking out the window meant nothing to this man, Bashir thought. Perhaps he'd seen it so many times. Decades later, Bashir would recall feeling jealous of the man's inattention to the landscape.

The bus hit a bump—it was the railroad crossing. Simultaneously, the three cousins experienced a familiar sensation, grooved into memory by a repetition two decades distant.

Bashir and his cousins knew they had arrived in al-Ramla.

## IV

Dalia finished rinsing the morning dishes, wiped her hands on a towel, and walked to the kitchen doorway, which opened onto the garden. In recent days, since the end of the war, she had been carrying on a silent dialogue with God that she began as a child. *Why, she thought, would You allow Israel to be saved during the Six Day War, yet not prevent genocide during the Holocaust? Why would You empower Israel's warriors to vanquish its enemies, yet standby while my people were branded and slaughtered a generation earlier?*

For a child, it was difficult to comprehend the trauma of the people who surrounded her. Only after probing could Dalia begin to understand. She had asked her mother: How were the people branded? Did they stand in line? Did it hurt? Why would anyone do these things? Over the years, Dalia's curiosity would fuel her empathy. It helped her understand the silence of the children she grew up with—children she would invite home after school and try to cheer up with her elaborate skits and solo performances in the garden.

Through the doorway, Dalia looked out at the jacaranda tree her father had planted amid the flower beds. As a girl, Dalia had loved to water the deep red Queen Elizabeth roses, with their overwhelming perfume. Near the jacaranda stood the lemon tree. Another family had planted the

tree; it was already bearing fruit when Dalia and her parents arrived nearly nineteen years earlier. ~~Dalia was aware she had grown up in an Arab house, and sometimes she wondered about the~~ previous residents. Had children lived here? How many? How old? In school Dalia had learned that the Arabs had fled like cowards, with their hot soup still steaming on the table. As a younger child, she hadn't questioned this story, but the older she got, the less sense it made. Why would anyone voluntarily leave such a beautiful house?

## V

Bashir, Yasser, and Ghiath emerged from the bus into a hot, glaring world at once bizarre and familiar. They could see the old municipality building, and the town cinema, and the edge of the neighborhood where they were raised. But none of the streets seemed familiar, at least not at first; they all had new names. Most of the old buildings were covered with brightly colored signs in blocky, indecipherable Hebrew lettering. On some of the building archways, the remnants of the original flowing Arabic cursive remained.

Suddenly Yasser, the eldest, spotted something he knew: the old neighborhood butcher's shop. He quickly walked inside, his cousins following, and threw his arms around the butcher, kissing both his cheeks in the customary way of the Arabs. "Abu Mohammad!" Yasser shouted in gleeful surprise. "Don't you recognize me? *Habibi*, my dear friend, I recognize you! We meet again!"

The Jewish butcher couldn't have been more startled. Abu Mohammad had left many years before. "You are right, *habibi*," the man told Yasser, stammering awkwardly in the language of his visitor. "Once there was Abu Mohammad. Now, no more Abu Mohammad. Now, Mordechai." The butcher invited his guests to stay for kebab, but the cousins were too stunned by the man's true identity and too distracted by their own mission to accept his offer of food. They walked out, flustered.

"You were pretending you know everything here!" Ghiath teased his older cousin as they left the shop. "You don't know anything here!"

The three men turned a corner and found themselves in the quieter streets of the neighborhood where they once played. They felt at ease and happy, and they forgot their earlier admonitions about speaking to one another and conversed openly in their mother tongue.

They came upon Yasser's house and approached the door; Yasser stepped forward to knock. A woman in her forties came out, looking at them strangely. "Please," said Yasser, "all we want to see the house we lived in before."

The woman grew agitated. "If you don't leave the house, I will call the police!" she screamed. The cousins tried to calm her, explaining their purpose. The woman continued shouting, taking a step forward and shoving them back. Neighbors began opening their doors. Eventually the cousins realized they might soon find themselves in trouble with the local authorities, and they retreated in haste.

Yasser drifted along in a silent daze. "It was as if he had no soul," Bashir recalled. "He was just a walking body, nothing more."

"I cannot accept such a feeling," Yasser said finally. "It is something that I really cannot bear."

Soon they came upon the house where Ghiath had grown up. Outside was a large sign they couldn't read and a guard armed with a machine gun. The two-story stone house was now a school. The guard told the men to wait while he went inside, and a moment later the principal came out and invited them in for tea. She introduced herself; her name was Shulamit. She told them they could walk through the rooms when the class period ended, and she left them in her

office to wait.

~~There they sat, silently sipping their tea. Ghiath removed his glasses and wiped his eyes. He~~  
put them back on and tried to look cheerful. "I can't control my feelings," he whispered.

"I know," Bashir said quietly. "I understand."

When the principal returned, she invited them to tour the house. They did so, Ghiath crying the whole time.

After their visit they left the house and walked in the direction of Bashir's old home. No one could remember exactly where it was. Bashir recalled that it had both a front door and a back door that faced a side street. It had a front gate with a bell, a flowering *fitna*, or plumeria, tree in the front yard, and a lemon tree in the back. After walking in circles in the heat, Bashir realized he'd found the house. He heard a voice from somewhere deep inside himself: *This is your home.*

Bashir and his cousins approached the house. Everything depended on the reception, Bashir told himself. You can't know what the outcome will be, especially after what had happened to Yasser. "It depends," he said, "who is on the other side of the door."

## VI

Dalia sat in a plain wooden chair on the back veranda of the only home she had ever known. She had no special plan for today. She could catch up on her summer reading for the university where she studied English literature. Or she could peer contentedly into the depths of the jacaranda tree, as she had done countless times before.

## VII

Bashir stood at the metal gate, looking for the bell. How many times, he wondered, did his mother, Zakia, walk through this same gate? How many times did his father, Ahmad, pass by coming home tired from work, rapping his knuckles on the front door in his special knock on arrival?

Bashir Khairi reached for the bell and pressed it.

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## Two

### HOUSE

THE STONE LAY cool and heavy in Ahmad's open hands. Pockmarked and rough, the color a cream, it was cut in foot-thick slabs, with the blunted right angles of the stonemason's chisel. The dips and rises defined a landscape in miniature, like the hills and *wadis* of the Palestine it came from.

Ahmad stood in an open field in his coat and tie and Turkish fez. He looked down, crouched low, and laid the first stone upon its foundation. Hundreds of other chiseled slabs, known as white Jerusalem stone, were stacked high beside him. With the first stone in place, Ahmad looked to the cousins, friends, and hired laborers beside him. They began to place stone upon mortar upon stone.

It was 1936, and Ahmad Khairi was building a home for his family. The house was to stand on the eastern edge of al-Ramla, an Arab town of eleven thousand on the coastal plain between Jerusalem and the Mediterranean. To the north lay the Galilee and southern Lebanon; in the south, Bedouin lands to the south, the sands of Palestine and Sinai.

Al-Ramla was named for sand, some believed, from the Arabic word *raml*. Mostly the soil here was good, bearing citrus, olives, bananas, lentils, and sesame. The year Ahmad Khairi built his house, Arab farmers in Palestine would produce hundreds of thousands of tons of barley, wheat, cabbage, cucumber, tomato, figs, grapes, and melons. The Khairis tended oranges, olives, and almonds in a communal *waqf*, land owned collectively by the extended family and administered under Islamic law.

The Khairis traced their history and landed wealth to the sixteenth century and the religious scholar Khair al-Din al-Ramlawi. Khair al-Din came from Morocco to preside as a judge for the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans, based in Istanbul, would rule Palestine for four hundred years. At its height, the empire stretched from the outskirts of Vienna through the Balkans, Central Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East. From Istanbul, the Ottoman sultan bequeathed to Khair al-Din the productive *waqflands* that would sustain the family for centuries.

By 1936, Palestine was under the rule of a new overseer, the British, who had arrived at the end of World War I as the Ottoman Empire collapsed. By this time, the Khairis of al-Ramla had their own family quarter, an expanse of open grounds and houses connected by stone gates and archways that made it possible to travel from home to home without ever leaving the compound. The women rarely ventured out, leaving the shopping to maids and servants.

The Khairis owned the town's cinema, and on Tuesdays it was made available for the exclusive use of the clan. Dozens of family members would come to watch the latest films from Egypt. In the privacy of their own theater, the Khairi women would not be exposed to the looks of strangers, especially men. Khairis rarely married outside the clan, but at his wedding seven years earlier, twenty-two-year-old Ahmad was an exception: His bride, Zakia, nineteen, was from the Riad family of al-Ramla. Quiet, discreet, and loyal, she was considered a good housewife and was much loved by the Khairis.

Ahmad's uncle Sheikh Mustafa Khairi was both the family patriarch and the longtime mayor

al-Ramla. Mustafa was like a father to Ahmad; when Ahmad was seven, his parents died, and Mustafa's family had raised the boy as their own. Mustafa was popular both with the town's citizens and with the British colonial overseers, despite growing tensions.

The British had arrived in 1917, the same year of the historic Balfour Declaration, in which England pledged to help establish a "national homeland for the Jewish people" in Palestine. That was a triumph for Zionism, a political movement of European Jews founded by Theodor Herzl. The British had authorized "an appropriate Jewish agency" to help develop public works, utilities, and natural resources—in essence, the beginnings of a Jewish government in Palestine. In recent years, Jewish immigration to Palestine had driven the Arabs and the British further apart, and Sheikh Mustafa, as mayor and town patriarch, had to mediate between the colonial overseers and his restive fellow Arabs.

Ahmad watched his walls go up from the loamy soil on the eastern outskirts of al-Ramla: from foundation to roofline, fourteen layers of Jerusalem stone. His decision to move out of the family compound, and its world unto itself, was unusual. Ahmad wanted to feel independence, however, and he conferred with Sheikh Mustafa. They agreed that from the young man's inheritance, his own share of the Khairi *wacff* income, and the income from his al-Ramla furniture workshop, his family's home would rise. It was time. Zakia, now twenty-six, was pregnant with her fourth child, which Ahmad hoped would finally be a boy.

The young couple had envisioned a house with an open design. Ahmad had gone over the master plan with a British friend and builder, Benson Solli, one of only a few Jews who lived in al-Ramla. For the Khairis, as for many Arabs, Jews like Mr. Solli, as Ahmad's children remembered him, were simply part of the landscape of Palestine. Jews from the *kibbutzim* bartered for wheat, barley, and melons at al-Ramla's Wednesday market. Arab laborers worked the nearby Jewish fields, pushing hand plows made in the *kibbutzim*, and Jewish farmers brought their horses into al-Ramla to be shod. Arabs would recall Jewish engineers and conductors working for the Palestine railroad that passed through town; some remembered bearded, Arabic-speaking Jews riding by donkey to purchase bags of cement at the local factory. For the most part the two communities lived and worked in separate worlds, but their degree of interaction was undeniable. The well-to-do of al-Ramla traveled to Tel Aviv to have suits cut by Jewish tailors, fezzes cleaned by Jewish drycleaners, or portraits taken by Jewish photographers. Khairi women recalled traveling to Tel Aviv to have their dresses made by a Jewish seamstress. One of the Khairi family physicians, Dr. Litvak, was Jewish; and at the Schmidt Girls College in Jerusalem, where Ahmad and Zakia's daughters studied, many of the girls' classmates were Jewish. "They all spoke Arabic and were Palestinians like us," one Khairi daughter would remember decades later. "They were there—like us, part of Palestine." Mr. Solli, an architect and builder, was a quiet man, unassuming, with daughters named Rosalie and Eively. He spoke Arabic and, according to later generations of Khairis, coexisted comfortably among the town's Muslim and Christian Arabs.

Ahmad and Mr. Solli designed large living and sleeping quarters separated by double wood doors in the center. Workers walled off a small bedroom in a corner. They laid tile, hung wire for electric lights, and ran pipe for indoor plumbing. Zakia would have an inside kitchen with a modern stove. Instead of baking her Arabic bread in the *taboun*, the open-air, wood-fired oven found at most traditional homes, she now had the luxury of sending her dough to the communal ovens in al-Ramla, to be brought back as warm bread ready for the table.

These were new luxuries for the town founded twelve centuries earlier, in 715 A.D., by the

Muslim caliph Suleiman Ibn Abdel-Malek. Suleiman, it was said, did not name the place for its *raml*, or sand, but rather for a woman named Ramla who had been generous to him as he had traveled through the area. Suleiman made al-Ramla the political capital of Palestine, and for a time it became more important than Jerusalem. The town lay halfway between Damascus and Cairo, and soon it was a stopover for camel caravans hauling leather, swords, buckets, walnuts, barley, and cloth. Suleiman's workers built the White Mosque, considered one of the most beautiful in the Arab world. They built a six-mile-long aqueduct to carry fresh water to the town's residents and to irrigate its fields. The gently sloping lands surrounding al-Ramla would be considered among the most fertile in Palestine. By the tenth century, a Muslim traveler would write of al-Ramla:

It is a fine city, and well built. Its water is good and plentiful; its fruits are abundant. It combines manifold advantages, situated as it is in the midst of beautiful villages and lordly towns, near to holy places and pleasant hamlets. Commerce here is prosperous, and means of livelihood easy . . . Its bread is of the best and the whitest; its lands are well favoured above all others, and its fruits are of the most luscious. The capital stands among fruitful fields, walled towns, and serviceable hospices. It possesses magnificent hostelries and pleasant baths, dainty food and various condiments, spacious houses, fine mosques and broad roads.

In the next thousand years, al-Ramla would be conquered by the Crusaders, liberated by the Muslim hero Saladin, and ruled by the Ottoman sultans from Istanbul. By the 1930s, the town housed a military garrison used by British forces and a colonial office for a subcommissioner dispatched from London. British officers were fond of hunting fox through the olive groves, over cactus hedges and stone walls, with hounds from the town's kennels. A British subcommissioner filed periodic briefings to His Majesty's government in London. In a cursive scrawl with his blue fountain pen, he noted crops, tonnage, and, by 1936, as Ahmad Khairi's house rose, an increasing disintegration in the public order.

In 1933, Adolf Hitler had taken power in Germany, and the situation for Jews was deteriorating across Europe. Within a few years, demands for Jewish immigration to Palestine increased. Underground Zionist organizations began smuggling boatloads of Jews in ever greater numbers from European ports to Haifa, along the northern Mediterranean coast of Palestine. The British authorities struggled to control the flow. Between 1922 and 1936, the Jewish population of Palestine quadrupled—from 84,000 to 352,000. During the same time, the Arab population had increased by about 36 percent, to 900,000. In those intervening fourteen years, as the Jewish community in Palestine had grown more powerful, a nationalistic fervor began to rise among the Arabs of Palestine. For decades, Arabs had been selling land to Jews arriving from Europe. Gradually, as land sales increased and Jewish leaders pressed their call for a state of their own, many Arabs began to fear Jewish domination. Already more than 30,000 Arab peasant families—or nearly a quarter of the rural population, had been dispossessed through the sale of land to Jews, many by absentee Arab landowners. The families arrived impoverished in the cities of Palestine and in many cases earned wages by building houses for the new Jewish arrivals. By the mid-1930s, Arab leaders had declared that selling land to the Jews was an act of treason. They were opposed to a separate Jewish state, and, increasingly, they wanted the British out of Palestine.

Ahmad and his workers hung wooden shutters on the windows. For the exterior fence, they fastened lengths of iron bar to limestone pillars. They laid the tiles for a small garage—for a car that Ahmad didn't yet own but hoped someday he would.



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