

## THE CAPTIVE DOVE

Last week in a trade magazine I came across a story on the man I was now going to see. It was an article I normally would have skipped over but for a slab of grease that stuck it to the classified section I was scouring for a freezer chest. The uniqueness of the name made me stop. After reading further, I was sure.

It wasn't a good time to be leaving, I told my wife. She agreed but shrugged. "When is?" she said. "The restaurant," I said. It'll be fine, she told me. I had come to doubt whether I'd ever be the man she deserved. So many times I had tried and failed. Still, many times I *hadn't* tried and failed. I was coming to terms with the failures. It was the efforts that were crushing me. This time, I felt deep inside I had the chance to make it work. But yes, she was right again. When is the right time to ever leave?

I met him on June eighth 1967, and saw him only once after. That last time being thirty years ago. Both occasions were matters of life and death. The first time being mine; the last time being his.

Then, he was tall and thin with a protruding chin and deep set eyes. The photograph of him in the magazine bore little resemblance but for the smile. He was wide and full now, with a gray beard. He was neatly tailored in a blue suit. Back then, he smiled seldom for only the briefest of moments, but it was one I wouldn't forget.

He had done well. He had worked hard, created a successful business, invested wisely, and donated generously. He raised four children. His wife, a slight, petite thing with slouched shoulders stood behind him. I wanted to meet her. I wanted to see his children. I wanted to see a son who was tall and thin with a protruding chin and deep set eyes who smiled seldom but with purpose, and say thank you.

When I read the article, I knew I had go. But there was another man who came to mind. Though the three of us had spent no time together, ours lives were linked by those two meetings all those years ago. In my heart, it was right for him to join me.

I called the only person who knew his whereabouts. Nearly fifteen years ago I drove him across the Illinois River to dump him off in Peoria, not caring if I ever saw him again. I took the deserted road beneath the bridge as I was instructed, pulled into the riverfront parking lot, and waited. It was two in the morning, late January. The snow squeaked but other than that, there was no noise and no movement. I killed the engine. The silence grew.

The last time we met, before that ride, was not pleasant. I surmised by his silence on the three-hour drive he remembered it the same way. Several times I wanted to break the silence but my pride wouldn't allow it. I don't believe he ever felt the need to speak to me.

Lights hit my rearview mirror. Before the car pulled into the lot, he was out the door with his duffle bag. There was no good-bye. He got in the car and was gone.

I expected it would be the last I saw of him. I'd make the exchange and he'd be dragged out to some forlorn desert town where, if he was lucky, he'd live out the rest of his life in peace.

"Sabaah al-khair, Johara," I said. She sounded happy but guarded upon hearing me.

I explained my call, that there was to be a memorial service next week for a very good man. She asked how I knew him. I told her. "And why should Rasul go?" she asked. I didn't know how much she knew about the relationship between the three of us, but I felt an obligation not to discuss it with her.

"He won't go with you," she said.

"I know."

"He's still angry."

"He owes many people his life."

"Such as it is, he'll tell you."

"That's his concern now isn't it? Measuring the days?"

"He's always measured the days."

"He was wrong, you know."

"But not always. And he doesn't believe he ever was so there's no use in you telling him that."

"It's time you stopped protecting him," I said.

"I'm protecting you both, Joe. I'll call him to . . ."

"No," I said. "Don't. I don't want him denying me. It's time for both of us to talk."

She gave me his address. It was her against her better judgment, she said, but as always, it must be Rasul's decision.

He hadn't been driven into the desert. He hadn't even left Peoria. He was living in a plain house in a plain neighborhood east of the Central Illinois Railroad. Here, he was invisible amongst invisibles. He came and went with no one to give a damn. Almost fifteen years later, I'm back looking for him. Now, as then, I'm on a mission for a man whose time with me should

have remained inconsequential. But as he once told me, things change, and I've changed with them.

## CHAPTER

### 2

My story begins in the land my father called home. Palestine. It's not my home. Mine is Chicago where I've raised two daughters with a wife I treasure above all else. She knows my story, and during my bouts with fear and what my doctors have labeled severe depression, she holds me and understands. It's how I know I am not insignificant in the universe. I choose not to be and my wife won't allow it. I'm afraid sometimes that I've come to this conclusion too late for my children. They grew up with a man who dispensed of yesterday like spoiled food, who cared little for the pattern being woven about him. But time may change things. I can only pray it does.

Did I say it begins in Palestine? Of course it begins much earlier, the moment it begins for all of us, and isn't that a glorious thought? That though our paths are as varied as seashells and as numerous, one creation is indistinguishable from another.

I've at last found a bit of success and contentment as the owner of a breakfast and lunch shop on the south side. It's a rundown building which my wife and I have renovated. The first month we tried it was broken into. Twice. There was a third attempt while I was camped out inside. I was able to get a shot off when they came in. I think I grazed one of them.

This is our fourth business venture, all in the food service industry. I love food. Cooking, eating, and serving. My friends say we should work for someone, let them take all the risks. We'd rather not. I think I enjoy the risk as much as I do the food.

It was 1964 and my parents were sending me to Palestine with my Siidi, my grandfather. I had no idea where Palestine was. My brother told me it was far away. I thought maybe down past West 71<sup>st</sup> Street. At six-years old, that was as far as I had ever gone.

I'm known by Joe but my given name is Nasser, Nasser Khudayer. I was just out of kindergarten and looking forward to being in a real grade at Earle Grammar School, one you could count with numbers. I was looking forward to the new TV shows coming up that fall: *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*, *The Addams Family*, *Bewitched*, *Flipper*, *Daniel Boone*. My best friend, Franklin, just got a round pool in his backyard, one with a metal deck that went all around the outside and even had a place to sit and eat sandwiches which his mother forbid us to do because it would attract squirrels.

I knew nothing about the old country. I didn't care. I was an American and had learned early how to handle the slings and arrows that were those cruel names like, "sand nigger" and "camel jockey." I was taught to turn around and ignore them. If it was an adult, I was told, they were ignorant. If it was a child, they knew no better. Most times I followed those rules, but on occasion, when I knew I could take the kid and get away with it, I let loose with my legendary haymaker that never missed its mark.

Even at my age I understood that the names, though hurtful, were American names meant for American Arabs. I accepted them as readily as I did the names I heard for the Italians and the Chinese and the Irish and the Hispanics and the Blacks. Never did I have a desire to run past West 71<sup>st</sup> Street to escape them.

My father was from Palestine and raised by strict Muslim code. Siidi was my mother's father. He was of Palestinian descent. He married a woman from Nicaragua where they raised my mother with touches of Islam and Christianity. My parents weren't a match that would have worked well in either country, but it worked well enough on the South side.

They had the same trials and tribulations of any household of the 1960's which left little time for waging battles over religions. They were far too busy working and handling five kids ranging from age seventeen to me, their last born.

Actually, by the time I was six it was just three of us. A sister died of influenza shortly after I was born so I didn't know her and no one talked about it. I do remember another sister who was killed by a hit-and-run driver. She had just turned sixteen. Though her killer was never caught, there were suspicions it was a boy in the neighborhood who took his father's car that night. He was only fourteen. The windshield was smashed the next morning and kids said there was blood and hair on it. I never saw it and the car disappeared that day.

Though topics such as religion and ancestry were as commonplace in my house as an unoccupied bathroom, my father prayed devoutly in his Arabic tongue. I didn't understand the Salaat. I didn't understand the words or gestures. To me, it was a mournful wailing. I stayed in the corner, away from my ghost-like father who stood and bowed and knelt while gripped by a thing I knew nothing about. "Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar, Muhammed al rasul Allah." God is Great, God is Great, and Muhammed is the messenger of God. It was terrifying while fascinating.

And though I knew nor cared a single M&M about the politics of the Middle East, my father loved his Palestinian people. He wrote regularly to Presidents Kennedy and Nasser. He also wrote to Nikita Krushchev and Fidel Castro for their intervention. He was sure the FBI was tapping our phones for this, so small creaks and groans in and around our house became somewhat of an Anne Frank-concealment mission. After I came back from Palestine, this self-appointed duty didn't stop as he wrote steadily on to Presidents Johnson, Nixon, Ford, and Carter.

The trip to Palestine was his good idea that Siidi fully endorsed. Siidi was a merchant who left the Middle East for Nicaragua at forty. I was never told of the connection he had to that

other side of the world. My sister surmised, probably foolishly, that he had met his wife while she was on a humanitarian mission to Palestine. Deeply in love, he fled with her back to her country to escape his arranged marriage. This made some sense in the fact that he hadn't returned to Palestine since.

I figured my Siidi to be about eighty. It was not the way to discuss such things as age or familial relations with children. But using eighty as a yardstick, I suspected he left Palestine in about 1925 to avoid the European Zionist movement which was calling for Palestine to be made a permanent Jewish settlement. Of course this theory I came about decades later. At the time I left for Palestine, crazy love made as much sense to me as anything.

I didn't know Siidi well. I saw him on his bi-annual trips to the house but I was young and he traveled often to see other relatives and friends when he came. He arrived for good after his wife passed away and just prior to our journey. My mother's Spanish descent did nothing to endear her to her father's family, or endear my grandfather for that matter. After his many years away from Palestine, he was probably no longer wanted there. But now it was time for him to go home, before it was too late.

Though he walked slowly and with a cane, I knew him as a very vibrant man who told tales of Central America and Palestine with great clarity and the precision of a scholar. He spoke only Spanish and Arabic so my mother interpreted them for me. I figured the stories were meant to persuade me to go willingly. Looking back, I knew they were more than that to him. They were lost memories.

I became engrossed in those memories. If there were true-life stories of war ravages and beheadings and tortures in his day, he gave me no indication. Much to do with my tender years, I suppose, but something more, for in his eyes and in his voice there came a serenity. My favorite was *The Captive Dove* who is caught in a hunter's net and freed by a mangy rat who gnaws through it. A passing raven, so impressed by the rat's good deed, wants to befriend him. The rat will not hear of it. "I am a vile, repulsive, germ-carrying rodent," he says, "whom you would be better served without."

But the raven is insistent. He tells the rat that what he desires most, the rat possesses. The two join in friendship. Very soon this friendship grows to include other incongruous creatures: a gazelle, a fawn, and a turtle. It is the gazelle who next falls into a hunter's snare. Again, the rat gnaws while the others work alongside to free her. The slow turtle cannot move fast enough and is caught in a second snare. Ignoring further danger, the rat gnaws once again as the friends work feverishly to distract the hunter.

"Ahhh," the rat says to the raven when they are safely away, "I understand now. It is my long, sharp teeth you desire from me." The raven cocks its head. "No, my friend, many have teeth. But in you, self is forgotten."

*Ikwhan al-Safa*, Siidi called it, Brethren of Purity. To willingly sacrifice for your brother, he said, is to defy all the evils and vices of the world. To him it was a philosophical

compass; to me, it was a swashbuckling tale of danger and intrigue. I couldn't wait to get to Palestine.

For my own parents, I suspect there was a more urgent matter, to save us from the streets. As my grandfather's life was running out, so too was my childhood. My oldest brother, Daa'ood, we called David, was seventeen and already lost to the gangs of the south side. I don't recall the gang's name, but I remember my mother flipping out over the leather jacket he had stashed under his mattress. It had a sweet motif of a black and gray rose on the back, spots of scarlet blood dripping from the petals. She put it in her closet to show dad when he returned from work. I wasn't supposed to see it but I did. "That is sooo cool," I said. My enthusiasm shocked her more than the jacket itself.

David didn't deny his involvement with the bloody rose gang but he did his best to explain it away as a civic group of some kind. My parents were not impressed. And, it seemed, that in order to afford the jacket he earned his own money. Mom and dad knew he didn't work but fell shy of asking him how he came up with the funds. They had all the facts they could handle for the moment. So at six, it was only a matter of time before I would follow David's path. It seemed they had more faith in the powers of the mean streets than they did in their Salaat.

My fourteen-year old sister, Sureia, whom we called Sue, was to go with us. This did not sit well with her. She was about to enter high school. She was well-grounded, intelligent, ambitious. She loved learning and wanted to be a teacher, perhaps a college professor. Math and Science were her interest, but really, she was well versed and intellectual in many topics. She had a beautiful singing voice, doing all the Top 40's of the day. And folk songs, mostly, Peter, Paul, and Mary, Joan Baez stuff. You couldn't tell her from Mary Travers.

And I often heard her reciting poetry with friends on the front stoop at night. Allen Ginsberg and William Carlos Williams. I once listened from my bedroom window as she recited *Howl* in its entirety to a throng of friends. Passer-bys were stopping to listen in. I didn't understand the thing then; I don't understand it now, but like all of them, she had me mesmerized.

So off we went in the summer of sixty-four, just as the White Sox swept four straight from the Yankees and were creeping up on them in the standings. The Beatles were coming to the Amphitheater. Lennie Borskey's father bought him a four-foot boa constrictor. Me and three other kids finally managed to get the steel grate off the sewer in Lindblom Park. The stuff I knew of my sister was what I glimpsed from the corner of my six-year old world. Of Siidi, I knew cute animal stories. We were three strangers going somewhere strange. None of it made sense to me, yet I was anxious to get there.

## CHAPTER

Why is the sky so high? So the birds don't bump their heads.

A joke I heard in kindergarten. I thought about that as the jet climbed forever, leaving me to wonder if it would ever come down or disappear into the sky like I had seen so many freed balloons do. I looked around and no one appeared worried so I kept my fears to myself.

The trip took nearly ten days as we went from Chicago to New York to London to Germany. At each stop I asked if we were there yet. We spent several days in London and overnight in Germany with Siidi's friends.

It was the longest ten days of my life. I couldn't imagine the world being so big. We spent endless hours over Lake Michigan, then Sue told me it was the Atlantic Ocean. Siidi slept a good while on the flight. I played with the belt on his keffiyeh to pass the time until I pulled it out and the keffiyeh fell into his lap. He gave me a displeasing look and mumbled something.

He was always mumbling something. It being in Arabic or Spanish, I couldn't know if they were prayers or curses or just ramblings of an old man. Neither I nor Sue spoke anything but English so except for ordering food in London, we were usually left out of conversations. It made it all the lonelier. Home was so far away. I realized now that that was how it would be for us in Palestine. It hadn't occurred to me that I wouldn't be able to speak to anyone. And that not only would I sit in the house without speaking or understanding, I would sit in school without speaking or understanding, and walk the streets. How could I learn if I didn't know the language? This new venture was becoming as overwhelming as the skies I was lost in.

I cried. Not out loud but softly, when the lights of the rooms or plane went out. What were my parents thinking? Certainly they knew better than to send me away like this. When I told my friends I was going they asked if my whole family was moving. I said it was just me and Sue with my grandfather. They didn't get it. When they traveled it was with family during summer vacations. And they didn't go away with grandparents; they went away to visit grandparents. I began to see this was not an ordinary way of life and my early sense of excitement gave way to confusion.

The airport in Jerusalem was much like the airport in Chicago. It was immense and busy and noisy. Siidi had us sit on a bench at the baggage claim area while he made a phone call. I was wearing my navy blue blazer and black fedora. I was a short, pudgy boy and my legs dangled from the bench. Dark-haired women reached down to pinch my cheek while men doffed their hats to me. A woman gave me a bag of milk chocolate coated wafers which Sue and I shared while waiting.

We were picked up by the husband of Siidi's niece, Abdel El Karim, who greeted Siidi with a generous hug and kiss, referring to him as El-Hajj Mahmud. He spoke a few phrases of English which was a great comfort to me. But he was mostly aloof as he drove the black

Mercedes at incredibly high speeds. He was dressed in a black suit that was covered in a mist of dust from the desert sand. He was tall and dark and wore a thick mustache. But for the mustache, he looked like so many of the businessmen I saw in Chicago.

We were going to Dayr Ghasana, Siidi's village in the West Bank. It was a quiet ride. Siidi sat in the front, mostly taking in the sights that rolled past us. Sue and I did the same in the back. I was surprised not to be hearing the same kind of chatter between Siidi and Abdel as I had heard in London and Germany. There it was non-stop, serious talk that made the men nod and bow their heads. But here, Siidi seemed to have nothing to say. Perhaps he was looking at the land with the same attachment he recited in his stories. It didn't occur to me that he was as much a stranger to Palestine and Abdel El Karim as I was.

It was nearly an hour drive. Just outside Ramallah, Abdel pointed to a palace belonging to King Hussein of Jordan. Jordan, he explained proudly in five words or less, was the nation that ruled Palestine. Even at six that made an impression on me. The word "ruled" to me meant those stories about kings and queens and witches and dragons; the evil king who ruled the ill-treated peasants and tossed poor boys into dungeons. I developed an immediate dislike for this King Hussein and the magnificent palace the poor Palestinians had to build for him. I wondered if Abdel El Karim was one of those builders, but he looked too rich in his black suit and Mercedes to have been tasked into such labor. Perhaps he was a close friend of this King. I was determined to keep quiet on the subject of King Hussein during my stay.

Past Ramallah, the roads became dusty and the landscape bleak. The back of my brother's leather gang jacket had more color. Abdel pointed out the front window and announced, "olive trees." There were many groves of them on the hillsides. We passed rows of them in front of houses and even lining the streets the way oak trees did in Chicago. Some were mere bushes while others were thick, burly Halloween structures with gnarled trunks and jagged limbs that would have terrified me on a windy night. I didn't connect the trees to olives until Sue exclaimed that she loved black olives. I hated olives and spent many Sunday dinners picking them out of my portion of the family salad.

There were continuous clouds of dust. So bad in one tiny town that Abdel had to reduce his speed considerably. He said a dust storm had just blown through. I now had the sense of a true desert. It was stifling to look across. The car had air conditioning so we could keep the windows up but everywhere outside people moved about bent and slow with scarves covering their faces and heads. There was still a stiff wind that whipped their robes like struggling bird feathers. They seemed to be going about their day; walking with bags of groceries, children my age playing some game with a stick and a soccer ball, and some men were even chatting casually at a gas station.

An old man was having a terrible time corralling his sheep that must have become lost in the storm. The entire road was blocked as they ran in a figure-eight circle. The herder was old. His robe was tattered. The wind played him like a kite and flogged the sheep into a mad frenzy. We were the fourth car in a line that was backing up quickly. The three cars in front emptied so there were now about ten men, women, and children dashing in wide circles to contain the dumb animals. I pulled myself up and peered over the hood. It looked rather like a game. There were

three kids about my age who were having a ball. The women clapped madly at the sheep. The men gathered sticks to thrash at them. Others from behind us ran around our car to join in while Abdel leaned on the horn in anger. I was embarrassed to be sitting there uselessly.

Finally the road cleared and Abdel roared around the cars and people. We were climbing the side of a mountain. I had just witnessed the poor quality of roads through the desert; I could only imagine their condition as they wrapped around a mountain cliff. I wasn't wrong.

They were narrow and rocky. I closed my eyes most of the time and squeezed the armrest. Sue was nervous, too. Whenever I looked over at her she was peering around Abdel to see what was coming ahead. I didn't have to look. I knew. It was one quick turn after another. And always a sharp drop on our right. I was a daredevil. Always highest up in the tree, riding the handle bars of my bike, first one down the toboggan run at Swallow Cliffs, but this was insane. The time I dared mimic Sue to get a look, we practically scraped a man and his kids on an ox cart. They didn't flinch and Abdel never slowed. Very confident or very crazy is all I could think. That, and when the hell was the mountain going to end?

The ride down was less harrowing. The speed remained outrageous and the cliffs as steep, but the view of the valley below was breathtaking. It was still colorless desert but now so vast. "Ghasana" Abdel announced, alerting us the village was down there somewhere. I was overjoyed for our trip to be finally ending, yet terrified of the life that was to come.