

# I left Haifa as a child

but it did not leave me. The desert swallowed me up for years before I returned to Haifa four decades later. At the time, the atmosphere was full of hope: the Palestinians and the Israelis had signed a peace agreement. The children of Jericho were offering up bouquets of flowers to Israeli soldiers. My friend the novelist Emile Habibi had likewise become a real optimist. He urged me to come, and we agreed on a time and place to meet — in Haifa. Habibi was my guide to the city. And (I ask myself now) could I have possibly been honoured by anyone better as a guide? Getting directions to Habibi's office took some time since the municipality had insisted on changing the name of United Nations Street to that of Zionism Street, after the UN had decreed that Zionism was a racist movement. On the telephone, Habibi had forgotten to mention this to me. Perhaps that was because he would not acknowledge the new name of the street.

The picture of Haifa that I had in my mind was a blurred one, foggy because I had been so young then. The images mingled the reality of a child's eyeview with imagined shapes and figures that took form from other people's descriptions and remarks later on. For all that fogginess, the particular image of our departure from Haifa remained imprinted on my brain. On that day, I remember, I was crammed with my parents and three siblings in a small black Ford. We took a few belongings with us; meager as they might have been, they filled every bit of empty space in the car. Among these possessions sat a Singer sewing machine that my mother continued using for years, and an oud that my parents took delight in. My mother went on and on repeating a popular song of those years, "*Marmar zamani .. ma saqqani marmar.*" The lyric spoke of days ever-changeable in their sweet and bitter moments. Also among these objects was a wooden box which I imagined was meant originally for sweets, and whose importance I realised only later. It was something like a little personal treasure, a place of safe-keeping for depositing

valuable and important things including the keys and the tabu land deeds and legal papers concerning the house, and other documents like our birth certificates. This box was lost, alas, when our home in Beirut, and everything in it, went up in flames during Lebanon's Civil War. For us, the loss of these belongings was a catastrophe of enormous proportions, especially for my mother and elder brother.

Many images of the city and our family home in the Hadar area had remained fixed in my mind. I felt utterly ready to leap, eagerly anticipating the visit. I remembered words people had said, family pictures, and the many things I had heard about and read on the city, literary works, scholarly studies, and memoirs by some of its sons and daughters writing from their many places of exile after the flight from Haifa. And by those who had remained in the homeland.

I had not completely understood what my mother meant — as she moved amongst the cities of the Arab coasts, such as Beirut, Tunis and Alexandria, after her flight from Haifa — when she would say, repeatedly, “There is nothing like the sea at Haifa.” She would be staring out at the far horizon as she spoke. Haifa, a city that takes your breath away, overlooking the blueness of the sea and open to faraway places in front of Mount Carmel, the mountain that enfolds the city in its wings like a white dove. Yet, the geography of the place was not what impelled my mother to repeat those words. Rather, it was the warm familiarity of people, the friendliness of the place which reached into one's very soul. It was the feeling of Hasan al-Buhairi's poetry, from which Haifa is never distant. It is from his collection *Haifa, Full in Our Eyes* that I have taken the title of this piece. Al-Buhairi recalls the natural beauty of the city and its seaside, the children's playgrounds; his tender yearning and warmth for the city to which he would never return.

On the threshold of the city, the crowded images of the past in my mind were here in reality all around me. Habibi, who was my companion throughout the visit, pointed out the city's neighbourhoods and features while I competed with him, searching for and remembering names and locations before he could mention them: The Rushmiya Bridge, Halisa, Hisbat al-Khudar, Hanatir Square, later transformed into Paris Square metro station for the Carmelit, constructed by the French. Nearby, the Haifa Theatre Company had made its headquarters in the last of the old Arab houses. The company had included Arab and Jewish actors and actresses, and performed bold and critical plays.

There was Ilmaniyya where there had been fig and grape orchards before the Templars established their settlement there;

Wadi Nisnas, the heart of the Arab neighbourhoods; Hadar, the mixed quarter where my family home was located; Abbas quarter, named after the Bahai who had fled with his followers to Haifa and built a centre which was to become a landmark for its fine design and beauty. I noticed that its garden had become a retreat for lovers and newly-married couples who snapped photos to immortalise their wedding celebrations.

As for Kababir, that village in the city on the southern edge of Mount Carmel, there are still some folk whom we know and who know of us despite the borders that have separated us. Emile and I went round Carmel before going to visit them, and he said to me : "This mountain gives me hope, a place from which to view things. I climb it whenever I need to feel these things again." This might be why he gave the name *Masharif*, "Elevations", to the magazine he founded, and was editing, the year before his death.

Emile Habibi and I went with some of the elderly to look for our family home in Hadar. My mother had remained firm about not coming with me, insisting that she should stay in Britain where she lives. "It is such an enormous misfortune, and I do not want to die of the shock. My health can't take it. Give my greetings to al-Hamra' and bring me some pictures." Al-Hamra' is a Jewish woman, a sabra, the term given to Jews who were born and lived in Palestine or what later became Israel. Al-Hamra' — "the Red One" — was a nickname my mother had given her because her face was so red; her real name was Sarah. She was the sole tenant who still lived in the ground-floor flat of the house at the top of one of the terraced lanes of Wadi Salib which ascended from the city centre to the Carmel.

Sarah recognised me straight away. "Aah, of course I remember you, very well, you are the middle boy, the troublemaker — you used to chase me with the water hose." Sarah invited me to come in. She insisted on fulfilling the duties of a hostess, exactly as my mother or any other Middle Eastern woman would do. She talked about the lovely days she had spent with my family, and also of the "devilish little tricks" we played on her and her two children, Milo and his sister Olive. She would not stop talking, and I was eager to hear more. "This furniture belongs to you", Sarah said, "I brought it down from your flat upstairs to keep safe. Strangers came to the building after you left and I did not feel good about them. Did you notice that some of the windows have been blocked up with bricks? The municipality leaves these buildings neglected until they fall over or nearly so. I don't know what will topple to the ground first, me or the building, but I've spent my whole life after I got married here, raised the children in this house, and I am not going to leave it."

I took some pictures of Sarah and the house. And I noticed photographs of a man and woman in military uniform. "Ah, yes, Milo and Olive," said Sarah, "during their military service. They are married now and they have their own families. They live outside the city. I'll phone them tonight and pass on your greetings. They will be very happy to hear your news and to see you." Sarah and I agreed that the next day I would visit her again with a friend who has a video camera so that I might record a conversation with her to carry back to my mother. She welcomed the idea. That evening, she phoned me. "You can come by yourself to have a cup of coffee," she said. "But come without anyone else, and without any recording equipment." She didn't say anything about her children.

During my visit, I kept going with Emile Habibi to the sea. For him it was breathing space, a place to think; in fact, he had no luck as a fisherman. He had an explanation: "They killed the sea and they killed the fish, too." Then he added, "Never mind. We will buy fish in the souk, but don't tell my wife." From the sea we surveyed Haifa. Habibi interrupted our reverie:

"Doesn't Haifa show itself to be more beautiful, more awesome, from a distance?"

Habibi died before he could complete his grand project which was to bring back this acceptance of others that had been lost. He had always worked to elevate it by bringing together artists from around the world, among them Arabs and Jews. And the great British playwright Harold Pinter, a partner in this project, has died as well. Nonetheless, the seeds that Habibi and Pinter planted are still alive, the seedlings erect for other artists to tend. The alternative is the tragedy of uprooting the other. Instilling hatred. Continuing the chain of death.

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