

# We were over Cyprus, the pilot said.

We'd be landing in 20 minutes or so. Would I see Haifa beneath me? I stuck my nose to the plane window but could only make out twinkling lights on the shoreline below.

Landing formalities seemed normal enough. No special check, no identity verification. An official issued my visa without querying "Born in Haifa (Palestine)". In just a few minutes I was through the airport and into a taxi taking me to the family pension where I'd reserved a room.

I was home but not yet in my home town. Having decided to discover Haifa at daybreak, I'd spend my first night in Jerusalem.

The taxi followed a long, straight road parallel to the coast. The landscape being of no special interest, I idly watched silhouettes of trees slip by. A mysterious feeling of safety came over me as soon as the taxi set off. In the absence of my family the night took charge, hiding me under its starry cape.

For half an hour we sped between interminable orange groves. All of a sudden, the driver braked furiously. I took a quick look at the road. Nothing special. "What's up? What's happening?" I yelled, immediately regretting that I'd exposed my fears to this stranger who had not opened his mouth since we set off. No response. It was a few seconds before I realised that the man had been surprised by a disused railway track which crossed the road without any level crossing sign.

Years spent collecting oral family history and delving into the smallest recesses of this forbidden land via books meant that I knew straightaway where we were. We'd just crossed the old coastal railway line. The very one which my parents, when they still lived here, would take for trips to Egypt or the Lebanon. A sudden sadness hit me. A few metres later it left me again. The sheltering darkness

had snatched me back before I drowned in images of forced goodbyes and the faces of loved-ones glued to window panes.

The Hotel Al-Zabra proved to be a fine nineteenth-century stone edifice. I'd barely entered the high-vaulted hallway when a large, calm young man greeted me: "Welcome", he said "you've finally come home."

Intrigued, I wondered how a sleepy adolescent could know me. Perhaps my accent gave away our common origin. But why the mention of my first visit?

"What's your name?"

"Hafiz. I'm the night porter. Beter, the boss, will be here in the morning."

I smiled at him affectionately. My fellow countrymen, whether in exile or at home, all find it hard to pronounce the letter "p". Of course the boss was called Peter. Like a password or a nod, Hafiz's elocution problem gave me heart as I stood there.

"Don't stand in the doorway. They might see us. I'm not meant to be here. My village is far away. I can't travel there and back each day. Beter allows me to sleep at the hotel. I'm a proper employee during the day, but by night I'm clandestine."

"You could get caught greeting hotel guests."

"My bedroom is over the front door. I'd been warned of your late arrival and saw you getting out of the taxi. If you need anything I'm here."

He indicated a door at the other end of the large dining room with his chin. The empty room, chairs upended on tables, awaited the arrival of the maid in the morning.

It wasn't particularly late but the streets were deserted. I've since realised that we were deep in the suburbs. A powerful silence hung over the town, interrupted at regular intervals by the boots of patrol squads and intermittent crashes as soldiers beat street-corner bins with their truncheons. Was it to announce that a bomb had been defused? To reassure themselves? There was no perceptible tension. Shut away at home, the populace ignored the occupation force outside.

I soon fell asleep. My sleep was restless, full of short, unlinked dreams. I witnessed a parting. An unknown person was saying goodbye on a deserted headland which fell gently down to the sea. The man was young, extremely thin, all slender nerves. Standing before the waves, he spouted a poem to the surrounding vegetation. Its verses drifted towards me in scraps. Did this stranger declaim some verses and recite others? Was it perhaps the fitful breeze which reduced some passages to silence or spread them over the waves?

*Adieu, friends, adieu. Umbrella pines, Aleppo pines, cypresses, evergreen oaks, Russian olives, olive trees, carob trees, Spanish broom and dye trees... Adieu mastic trees, water willows, rockroses, delphiniums known as larkspur, scarlet horned poppies, rock samphires, large convolvulus, seashore ipomea vines.*

*I'm going now.*

*Adieu, friends, adieu. Umbrella pines, Aleppo pines...*

On waking I recalled, pell-mell, the tree and plant names. They were mostly unknown to me. In my dream a voice had tirelessly told me to retain them. But I forgot many of them. Then I dressed and went down to meet Beter.

I first saw the light of day in a port built into a gentle slope sheltered by a headland. My home town was known for its long sandy bay and very salty sea. "Salt water, frowning faces" the jealous said, hoping to put a spell on our city and its children.

But, that day, I was on my way back to my birthplace and could only think of family kindnesses. It was almost 50 years since we all were there.

"When we left we had only the clothes we were wearing."

That's how stories of lost lands start up. Sad monologues, beginning and ending on the theme of absence. Endless stories, stuck in timelessness. Spoken by the father who understands his child's sadness but is unable to tell a different story.

"Above all, be curious and - wherever you go - open to everything around you, but never, never forget from whence you came."

Me, that morning, I was off to my home town. I had never forgotten.

I was soon en route. The Al-Zahra hotel slept and the road was deserted. But what, in fact, was I really doing here?

The monologue returned in the form of my father's individual voice, with his own very particular inflections and pauses.

The monologue, such reassuring music, returned that dawn, cradling my sleepy eyes, music which that morning accompanied the landscape on either side of the road, a hedge of honour for the returning child, simple, magnificent views standing up and being counted as if propelled by others even more beautiful. My land jostled to see me.

"When you come from Jaffa in the south towards our town further north... don't forget... one day you'll take that road and you must not get lost or appear to be a foreigner who's just arrived... to get from

Jaffa in the south to our town further north ... you'll pass Salama on your right ... it's the village where one of the Prophet's companions is buried, and can be recognised by the cupola of the shrine. It's surrounded by fields of wheat and oats, by banana trees and orange groves ... Salama, though a small village, had five cafés and even boasted its own bus operation, the Salama-Abassiya Automobile Company... the village fell on April 30, 1948. Ben Gurion went to see the site for himself and noted in his diary that 'only a blind old woman' remained.

"After Salama you'll pass Massoudiyé, then Jarisha, then you'll drive by Jammassin and ...

"One day you'll make this journey. Remember these names but don't worry too much if you can't spot the villages. Most of them were razed to the ground. Don't worry – they will see you because they are still there. Our land doesn't forget."

Sawalmé, Abu Kishk, Ijlil...

"As an old man your grandfather didn't go out much. His best friend, Abu Edward, came to visit every day. The two elderly chaps would meet every afternoon. But your grandfather installed himself each morning on our terrace opposite an empty chair. 'That's Abu Edward's place', he'd say. Abu Edward would arrive about five pm. Each took a glass of arak along with little cubes of ewe's cheese. But the two friends hardly spoke. Their meetings were silent ..."

Sayyidna Ali, Al-Haram...

"Aziz Khayyat was a rich landowner. He had a beautiful stretch of land on the coast, a long sandy beach where we went swimming. Strangers called it Khayyat Beach, but we called it Aziziyyé..."

Qayssariyyé ...

"One day your Aunt Nahil, who lived with us at the time, won a bicycle in a tombola. But your grandfather forbade her to ride it out in the street. 'A girl from a good family riding a bicycle? Who would want to marry her?' All the same your aunt hung onto her bike, often pushing back the furniture to the walls and riding round and round our living room ..."

Kaboura ...

"You were very young when you learnt to walk. Our town was built around vertical steps. Arabs lived in the lower town, Jews populated the higher part. As the political situation deteriorated some Jews started to roll barrels filled with explosives down the steps to explode against our houses. I was targeted in one of these attacks. Very luckily the barrel exploded against a low garden wall. We'd put you on a rug with a few toys. The explosion made a terrible noise. Panicking, you stood up and ran through the house. The windows had been blown out

by the shock and there was broken glass everywhere. But I ignored that and shouted to your mother: 'Smalla, smalla, look at him, look at him — he's walking already!' Can you believe it? You were only seven months old..."

Tantoura...

"A Jewish singer called Carmen Peggy was performing in the gardens of the Hotel Panorama. She it was who introduced La Cucaracha to Haifa. George Abyad fell madly in love with her. One day he gave her a fur coat..."

Kfar Lam...

"I used to go to Elias Preir's salon to have my hair cut. He was very stupid but he was the best barber in Haifa. He'd trained starlings to fly around his salon. The starlings fed off insects and Breir used these birds to rid his clients of irritating flies..."

Sarafand...

"Beirut a modern city? Tell me another! I tasted draft beer in Haifa in the 1930s at a café run by Germans; in the cinema there I watched tens of episodes of Tarzan before movie houses came to Beirut. I spent New Year's Eve 1932 at the Majestic Hotel. There was a masked ball, but I refused to put on disguise. I can still remember their disgust. The hotel's international credentials were, can you believe it, spelt out in English: *Majestic Hotel. Standing in its own gardens. Home comfort. Spacious terraces. Beautiful scenery. Dragomans meet all trains and steamers. Telephone 212. PO Box 171.*"

Atlit, Al-Mazar...

"I so miss Haifa..."

Damoun...

"Dahma, the Midnight Blue, my mare, lived in the vaulted cellar under the house. She was a gift to my grandfather from Sultan Pasha al-Attrache, the Druze chieftain. My mother was a better rider than my father. She taught me how to mount a horse. She forbade me to use a saddle, making me ride bare-back. Dahma was my friend..."

Khayyat Beach, Tiri...

"We had two almond trees in the garden. One bore sweet almonds, the other bitter almonds..."

Haifa...

"I miss Haifa. Everybody knew me there..."

I went up and down our street twice without spotting our house. I'd memorised the tiniest details but everything seemed small, sized-down from the image I had in my head. So I went into a patisserie and asked "Can you tell me which is Wadih Sanbar's house?"

For the first and last time in my life I asked directions to my father's house. Suddenly his name, my name, resounded outside of me. It existed in its own right.

"What is the origin of our name, father?"

"Sanbar means a slender palm tree. We are descendants of a woman whose first name was Sanbar. They say that a long, long time ago, when a terrible plague gripped the country, some travellers stopped at our town. Haifa being in quarantine, they were forced to camp outside the walls. One evening a young member of the party noticed a girl taking the air on the ramparts. He fell hopelessly in love with her. That same night, avoiding the guards, he managed to sneak into town. This routine took place again each subsequent night. But one morning the young man did not rejoin his friends. Struck by the plague, he had died in the town. Nine months later Sanbar gave birth to a baby she called Tayyim Sanbar, the Orphan Palm. He was our forbear, and we were first called Tayyim Sanbar. Over the years the orphan got lost. We became simply Palm.

When I knocked at our front door I had the wild hope of seeing it opened by someone I knew. A voice replied in Arabic.

"*Aywa, aywa*, yes, yes, who is it?"

"I was born in this house and I'd like to look around."

The door was opened by an old lady in a dressing-gown.

"So it's you who sends all these people?"

"Yes."

"We are Palestinians from the village of Fassouta and..."

"I've a friend in Fassouta called Anton Shammas, do you know him?"

"... and we've been living here for several years. We pay rent to the Israeli Custodian of Absentee Property."

"Don't worry, I'm not here to claim the house back. I simply want to look around."

"I'm alone, it's cold and I don't have the strength to get dressed... So it is you... Look at the state of the house... The roof leaks but we aren't allowed to repair it, you understand, "they" say we must keep your houses so that when you return you will find them exactly as when you left. You have "them" to thank. It's dark, I will switch on the lights so you can see as you go round."

"No, please don't put yourself out for me."

All the house shutters were tightly closed. The old woman obviously hoped they would counter the cold.

"Stop, don't put yourself out..."

And, moving from one window to another, I opened the shutters.

I didn't have a good look around our house. In the end, I wasn't there for long.

Just long enough to walk through the rooms without stopping; to follow, eyes to the ground, the flower-patterned floor borders; to spot the hatch where food was passed from the kitchen to the dining room; to note that my grandparents' portraits were no longer affixed one way or another to the large living room window; to think of the two green velvet armchairs in the hall; to hear my mother shouting to her children not to go near the well's edge; to ingest the special smells of Sunday food; to see my father in a window recess smiling at a photographer standing in the garden; to appreciate my bedroom's lofty ceilings and to tell myself 'Now you know that's the first thing you'll look for when you go into a house'; to go out on our balcony and admire the headland's beauty; to locate my Uncle Habib's house opposite ours; to remember that he was crazy about poetry and presented me with a poem when I was born; to look out at the sea and the port and to watch my father walking down the few steps into the garden each morning, opening the creaky little iron gate, waving to the grocer opposite, turning right and walking to the end of the street, tapping on his sister's window, who replied 'Wadih, it's you, *khayya?* Ahlan, ahlan, come in and have a cup of coffee' – 'Thanks but I have to work, tomorrow perhaps' then turning left and vanishing from sight; to respond to my brother's laughter; to see my elder sister on the porch in her wedding dress; to hear the key turning in the door, to relive the few seconds when my father and my younger sister paused outside their house after it had been locked up for the last time and to hear their footsteps disappear into the night... just long enough to smell my mother's fragrance.

I didn't have a good look round our house. In the end, I wasn't there for long. But I was in no hurry and I had plenty of time.

"Well. Thank you, I'm going now, but one room that I would have liked to see was locked."

"Ah, yes. The room at the back. Excuse us, it's my son Tony's room. He locks his business up and he's not here, please excuse us."

"His business?"

"Yes, work things..."

"But who's this son who doesn't trust his mother?"

"You are a comedian. It really is you who sends..."

"Yes, it's me who sends..."

I left.

A year after my return from Palestine a letter came in the post. It had been addressed to my editor, who forwarded it. The sender, a French woman, was not known to me. This is what she wrote:

*Monsieur*

*Perhaps you remember me. I asked you for an index to the Revue d'études palestiniennes when the "Belles Etrangères palestiniennes" (organised by the Centre National du Livre to feature Palestinian writers) was on, and you very kindly sent it to me. I'd like to thank you, although I'm a little late in the day. I, too, have something for you – these photos from Haifa. Using your book Palestine, le pays à venir, I tracked you down to a part of town I know well. That wasn't too difficult because I have friends in Haifa.*

*These photos were taken at Tony's place. He's an antiques dealer from Fassouta and he lives in your house, which he didn't know until I told him.*

*I decided to take these few photos. Maybe you have something like them already, or maybe the fact that I gave myself permission annoys you. In which case I am truly sorry. But I do hope you'll see them as repayment for your kindness.*

The photographs had been taken in the room I couldn't enter. It was indeed full of 'business' - the bric-à-brac of an antiques dealer. It was Tony's shop.

Among the objects photographed by my mystery donor was a large framed portrait. The black and white image showed a man standing between a window seat and a vase placed in a flower holder of pleated cane. Sporting a tarbush, the man wore a three-piece suit and little leather boots. To judge from the tightness of his buttoned waistcoat he was rather portly.

The inscription under the frame ran as follows:

"Elias Sanbar, born and died in Haifa, 1878-1932."

I have never known who my namesake was. The older members of my family could not remember this man, the younger ones had never heard of him.

I have not tried to find out where Tony bought this portrait.

But I do know that the day I returned home my name was there. In a locked room.

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