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Tasting the Sky

A Palestinian Childhood

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Farrar, Straus and Giroux New York

1967, Ramallah, West Bank

Written on my heart
All that I lost.

Shoelaces

The war came to us at sundown. Mother had just announced that our lentil-and-rice dinner would be ready as soon as Father arrived. She picked up Maha, my infant sister, held out a plump breast, and began to rock and feed her. I was three and a half years old but still wanted to be the one rocking in my mother's arms.

My two brothers, the noisy inseparables—Basel, six and a half, and Muhammad, a year younger—were chasing each other around Mother's summer garden. I stood at the door awaiting my father. Soon I would see him emerge from the curtain of evening shadows on the long gravel road that led to our home. As I did every evening, I was preparing to run toward him with all my might.

But because I owned one pair of shoes, and was allowed to wear them only on important occasions, I was barefoot.

close. His other arm enclosed Mother. She was frantically trying to quiet Maha, whose siren cries threatened to draw fatal attention to our hiding place. Because there was no room for love and lullabies in the narrow trench, Mother snapped sharply at Maha, who quickly stopped her crying.

My parents exchanged anxious whispers. "Think with me," Mother urged. "What else should we do to be safer?"

"There is no escape from destiny," Father replied, his voice filled with pain.

I reached for him and held on to him firmly. I felt that something beyond what I'd learned or would ever understand was about to happen to us. My father would not be able to protect us. He could not make the war stop. He could not talk to the people in the planes and tell them that we had done nothing wrong.

As darkness enveloped us, I could not see the faces of my parents or my brothers. Then, suddenly, Mother whispered that she could hear footsteps. My father ordered us to freeze. I stopped myself from breathing.

We quickly realized the footsteps were those of a stream of people from neighboring villages fleeing their homes. Raising his voice just loud enough so they could hear him, Father asked what they knew. A man's voice answered. "After the planes attack, they will be combing the area house by house. Word is that they will butcher every living thing they find."

My parents exchanged a few words, then quickly agreed. It was time for us to leave. "Death in a group is mercy," Father said.

"First I must get into the house," Mother interrupted. "We need food for the children," she pressed. And she was right. Hunger was pecking inside my stomach like a bird.

"Then don't light even a match," my father cautioned her. And so Mother tucked my silent sister into his arms and set out for our house.

But before we could settle into the thought that food was within reach, a loud, pulsing noise sliced through the dark. Bullets were being fired at Mother!

"Yamma!" my brothers and I exploded. But our father shushed us into silence. Then the noise of planes filled the darkness everywhere. One plane seemed to be right above us, seeding the ground around us with bullets and bombs, and as it trailed off into the distance, it set nearby patches of the darkness afire. It was impossible to tell which side of the sky would be the next to blaze.

Dad flung himself out of the trench. He found Mother's foot and pulled her back to us. Frightened and confused, she searched herself for a fatal injury. "Suleiman," she begged my father, "I want to see my children one last time before I die." But the darkness surrounding us was merciless.

Father held Mother to his chest. "Mirriam, they missed," he whispered. Miraculously, she had escaped injury, and the warmth in Dad's voice allowed my blood to flow again through my veins.

Mother, shocked, had nothing to say. Then, suddenly, she demanded that we leave.

It seemed strange, but she picked up Maha and began walking toward the house. Basel, Muhammad, and I leapt

after her as my father prayed hysterically that we come to no harm.

Inside the house, Mother snatched the pot of lentils and rice from the kitchen and wrapped it in a rag. Then she dashed into the darkness and searched for a bundle of golden bracelets that had been her dowry when she and my father married. I could hear her sigh of relief when she found them.

Mother then commanded that we put on our shoes. But I could not find mine, and the house was black as coal. "Yamma, where are my shoes?" I cried.

"Find them!" she ordered. My brothers and I obediently searched until all three of us found our shoes, then hurried outside.

Now my parents spoke urgently. My father said that if we didn't die that night, we'd have to sleep in the wilderness. We'd need clothes and blankets. When he came out of the house with a mound in his arms, he and Mother argued over whether or not to lock the door. They finally agreed: we would lock it and take the key with us.

People continued to pass by our house, spreading word of impending terror. A breathless man told my father that there was no one left in his village. He and the others were going to hide in the caves, then try to cross the bridge at the border to Jordan.

"Which caves?" Father asked.

"Just run with us," the man replied before disappearing into the darkness.

Father turned to Mother. "We must leave now," he said. His voice was sharp like a knife.

My brothers were ready. They held each other's hands tightly. Mother had secured Maha between her arms. My father strained to see the road from behind the mound of clothes and blankets he carried. But in spite of my desperate attempts to obey my parents' commands, my three-and-a-half-year-old hands were unable to lace up the one shoe I had put on. My right foot was still shoeless.

"Yamma, Yaba! Help me!" I cried in a hushed voice, lest I attract attention and we all die. But no one answered.

At that moment, a new wave of fleeing villagers rushed by. As they disappeared, everything faded into stillness. And my family was gone.

Had they just walked into the crowd and left me behind? Fear dug a hole in my heart. I could not grasp what had happened. I wanted to cry aloud, hurl their names across the darkness, but dread stifled my voice. I knew that the only hope for me was to instantly run in the same direction, leaving one shoe behind.

As I moved, sounds of distant gunshots and screeching swelled and then subsided. I kept running. When I looked behind, I could no longer see the giant shadow of our home. The world within and around me seemed to fade into the unknown. The gravel grated sharply into my skin. Once again, I commanded myself not to feel.

Soon, my ears detected voices. I waited cautiously, and when people approached, I attached myself to the end of their caravan.

Settling into the rhythm of this rapidly moving crowd, I could hear voices talking about a group of neighbors they

expected to meet at the caves. The caves? My parents were heading toward caves! My heart filled with hope that my family would be there.

But my hopes disappeared when flare bombs lit up the darkness and formed a dome of light in the sky. Silhouettes of everyone suddenly became visible. Now the warplanes could locate us. Would real bombs follow?

Anticipating the moment of final destruction, people prayed aloud. They said that Allah is one. But as the lights and sounds of distant bombardment continued and no bombs fell directly on us, it became clear that neighboring areas were the immediate targets of attack.

We continued on, slowly sinking into a solemn calm. I saw that we were joining other clusters of people, as ghostly and stunned as we were. Among those ahead of us, I thought I saw my mother, her thick, dark braid waggling on her back.

Our group hurried to catch up to the group in front of us, and my numbed feet flew forward. The lights in the sky came and went, but I kept my eyes on the braid. I fell repeatedly, but quickly got up. My eyes never wavered. I was determined to reach my mother. I pushed myself closer and closer to where I thought I saw her until I was only a few steps behind her braid. When my fingers finally touched her dress, the war seemed to halt.

Thinking that I was with my mother again, I could see that I had lost the one unlaced shoe I'd had on. I began to feel the feverish fire in my feet. I let myself weep a little, hoping my mother would hear me, then I pulled on her

dress and let it take my weight. The respite lasted for only seconds, however. As new flares flashed, a strange face turned to scold me. "Who are you?" she asked as she shook her dress free from my hand. Now I could see. The woman was not my mother.

In shocked disbelief, I dropped my hands to my sides, gripped my own dress, and could feel neither terror nor pain. My eyes searched for no one, and it barely mattered whether I walked alone or had people around. I could only put one foot in front of the other.

When we approached the area of the caves, I learned that there were many caves, in different places. Anxious voices pierced the air: should we hide or continue on? Some settled for hiding. But I found myself walking with those who chose to continue on until we arrived at the road that would lead to Jordan. It was deeply dark here, like everywhere else. So we waited for a long time for the night to be over.

When dawn finally lit up the world, I saw that I was surrounded by a large crowd. No one spoke to me, and I stared at the children who were clinging to their parents. I envied them having a hand to hold on to while I had none.

People were gazing into the sky as though a long line of unanswered prayers hung from it. They were cursing as they struggled to swallow their grief. They begged one another for a drink of water and begged God for mercy.

I wandered aimlessly, staring at strange face after strange face. And then, suddenly, I thought I saw my dad. "Yaba!" I called in a low voice, hoping it wasn't a mistake

again. But he turned to me. Tears streamed down his face. Now I was certain.

Next to him stood Mother, holding my sister to her chest. My father and my brothers hurried to meet me, holding out their arms. Muhammad, the one who had first noticed that I was missing, offered me his shoes.

My heart ached, my feet burned, and something in me still felt confused and lost. But I was no longer alone. Once again, I was with my family. Together, we entered the second day of war.

Souma

The shelter was a three-story stone house. Before we entered, Mother said that she was unsure whether Maha was still breathing. "She's been silent for so long; I don't have the courage to find out if she's alive," Mother confessed. Without saying a word, Hamameh reached down to my sister's nose. She pinched and held it briefly. To our stunned surprise, Maha coughed and then cried.

We fought our way into the shelter, which wasn't much more than a box of strangers packed in like sardines. Every few minutes, sirens went off. "*Khatar, khatar,*" voices would shout. People would run up the stairs, then run down howling news about fires and bombings they'd seen from the second- and third-floor windows.

The sirens were warnings before or after bombardment,

and they were always followed by a silent moment of nauseating anticipation of the destruction of our shelter. My brothers and my mother, Hamameh and her children all joined in the stair madness.

I hung on to my brothers and hopped along until I could no longer tolerate the pain of being elbowed or shoved or having someone step on my injured feet. The cuts I had from running barefoot had begun to swell, making it more and more difficult for me to walk.

I decided to sit in a corner of the basement. And there, standing almost invisibly in a cloud of dark and quietness, was a baby donkey. At first I could not believe my eyes. For one brief moment, the surprise made me forget everything else. I raised my arms and touched his face; he remained still. I spoke to him; he looked at me and listened. I knelt on the ground and pulled him toward me. He did not resist. I named him Souma and embraced him with my whole heart.

I stayed with Souma until the air raids subsided. But then the howling of stray dogs began. The war had awakened their pack instinct. They came to the city searching for food and corners to hide in. They sniffed, clawed, grunted, and yelped in frightening demon voices. Souma's ears stood like antennas measuring the danger. We were only one wooden door away from them.

"Be warned!" someone shouted outside. Expecting loud noises, I covered my head and plugged my ears with my fingers. But that did not keep me from hearing gunshots as bullets entered the bodies of the strays. An anxious cheer or two accompanied the shooting.

The packs retreated, but the injured dogs were left crying in voices that grew smaller and smaller until they resembled the whimpers of infants. Tears soaked my face. I knew that they were dying and that they had come to our door only because, like us, they were seeking refuge. But instead of understanding, we shot at them, the way the warplanes shot at us. I listened until there was only silence.

Crawling up the steps, I left Souma in the basement and went to be with the others. The women covered the windows with paper and cloth. They searched for charcoal but found none. Darkened windows would make it difficult for airplanes to notice light from our shelter and target it. The women then unfolded blankets that were stacked against the shelter wall like giant wafers. Children lay on them and formed tiny forts with covers that they drew over their heads. I lay down, too. I fell asleep, but my throbbing feet woke me up again and again. The women did not sleep. Instead, they passed the time by telling stories of the war in 1948, embroidering their memories with worry and tears. They only stopped when the call from the minaret of a nearby mosque announced the arrival of a new morning.

Allahu Akbar, God is greatest. Everyone awake repeated the words. But was God going to end the war today? End our flight and send us home? I wanted to know. We raised our arms above our heads in the shape of empty baskets for God to fill with the day's rations of our lives.

The women hoped the darkened windows would allow

the children who were still asleep to rest longer. But hunger awakened everyone. Food appeared and disappeared unexpectedly that day—mainly bread and tea were delivered to us when people outside remembered that we had nothing and knew no one around us. The following days were the same. We could never guess when or if we were going to get food.

Each time we did, however, the youngest and the sickest got their bread and tea first. Mother brought me my share and instructed that I eat every morsel. To check my temperature, she spread her hand on my forehead. She thought I had a fever, so she asked that I lay my cheek against the cool cement floor.

When I sat up and ate, Mother held my potato-size foot and measured its swollenness. I cried. She disliked my tears. "You will become blind and live in a corner forever if you keep on crying," she warned as she slammed her eyes shut for a moment to show me blindness.

I tested Mother's warnings. I clenched my eyes and attempted to see what she meant by becoming blind. But I discovered that, with my eyes closed, I saw more. I even saw things that were not around me—our home in Ramallah, the gravel road leading to it, the pine forest behind it, the green spearmint patches on the dry land, and the stone sculptures Father had taught us to build by stacking flat stones into human-looking shapes. He called each stack a *qantara*, but I called it a stone person. I now saw the *qantara* my father had once built to remind me that he loved me. And I saw the fig tree at the side of our house, alone in the

field with one early ripe fruit hanging on a hidden branch. The sparrows had not gotten to it. The fruit hung like a kiss. Its neck was softly tearing. Soon it would be on the ground, sweet like nectar. The sparrows would feast on it.

With my eyes still shut, I saw my father appear before me, wearing his green shirt with the bulging chest pocket covering his heart. Inside it he kept his tiny black comb and scraps of paper with old and new lists of foods Mother had asked for, and a clip-on pen that poked out near the colorless button. In my mind, I ran and held his hand tightly. I did not want to let go of him. And, suddenly, I understood what Mother meant by the word *imagine*. I, too, could imagine. Blink. Blink. Blink. I could see anything I wanted to see, anytime I wanted. I needed no one's permission. And I could close my eyes and hide anywhere in my imagination, making the sounds of war more distant and less alarming.

In a short time, the shelter began to feel like a home, everyone in it belonging to one large family. Mother and Hamameh talked to each other all day long. My brothers spent their time playing with the crowd of shelter children. And Souma the donkey became my best friend; we were inseparable. The strangers of only days ago now remembered each other's names, the cities they had fled from, and directions to particular neighborhoods. They told of their pain and illnesses, and cried to one another whenever their stories felt too heavy to bear alone. They gave one another messages to pass on if the shelter was attacked and they died. Since no one knew how long the war would last, they

decided that all would share the work and take turns sleeping. The women kept the shelter spotless, as if it were a home.

Our drinking water came from a rain well in the backyard and was stored in a clay urn. The urn had a thin base and could easily be pushed off balance, so only adults handled it. They watched over it carefully, snatching babies who crawled by it or shouting to warn children not to race near it. The urn had a mouth and two ears on its sides. An oversize tin saucer on the top looked like the rim of a man's hat, so the neck, round belly, and tiny base of the pot made it look like the only man among us.

Trash was left near the door in a rusted metal barrel. Stubborn flies quickly formed a lid for it until a group of boys rolled the barrel away and set fire to its contents.

The women who could do so nursed the infants of women whose milk had dried up. It was said, and repeated, that children nursed by the same woman would instantly become siblings and must never marry. Mother nursed only my sister, so we acquired no new siblings. But Mother gained a sister of her own—Hamameh, the driver's wife.

The two women agreed that if the war lasted a long time and their husbands did not return, they would help each other through whatever followed. But the war ended six days from the day it had started. For those of us at the shelter, it ended with two words, *Behawenha Allah*, spoken amid tears by an ailing man who leaned on a cane as he stood at the shelter's door.

All the faces cried, for *Behawenha Allah* meant "We have

lost so much that only God can ease our loss." Our loss? I knew that days ago I had lost my shoes and our home. But had everyone else also lost their shoes and their homes? I did not know why all the women, and especially Mother, who warned me often not to cry, were weeping uncontrollably now, tears streaming down their faces.

I, too, cried and held Souma close to me, because the words caused chaos in the shelter. Then everyone headed outside. I tried to go with them, but my feet, especially my right foot, made it impossible. The pain was too much for me, and I knew that, this time, if everyone left, I would not be able to run after them.

In the following days, everyone but Hamameh, her children, and my family left the shelter for good. Before departing, people shook their heads in sorrow and waved their arms as though to erase the memory of war. We, too, wanted to leave. We waited for Hamameh's husband and Father to come for us.

But no one came except a man and a woman whose wrinkled faces reminded me of my grandma. They were Um and Abu Muhammad, who had opened up their home to shelter us. They had spent the war days in Amman with their relatives, and now they had returned.

Um and Abu Muhammad were happy to see all of us who had taken refuge in their home. Though they had not met any of us before, they kissed our cheeks and held us for a long time while thanking Allah for our safety. Mother and Hamameh bent to kiss Um Muhammad's hand, but she

pulled away, refusing any gestures of gratitude. "It's a duty," she insisted.

They invited us to stay in their home as long as we needed to, but Hamameh wanted to find her relatives in Amman. She asked Abu Muhammad if he knew them. He instantly recognized the names. Like Mother and Hamameh, who could recognize the names of many women, even if they were not actual friends, Abu Muhammad knew the names of many men. He sent word to let Hamameh's relatives know where she and her children were.

Within a day, a man in a taxi, stirring a cloud of dust as he pulled up at the door, asked for Hamameh. He was her uncle. The time for Hamameh and her children to leave the shelter had finally arrived.

There was nothing to pack. Hamameh turned to Mother to say goodbye. Suddenly, I was frightened. Was Father going to come for us? Would we know how to get back to Ramallah? Who was going to carry me? I stared at Mother, who silently leaned against the wall. But Hamameh understood her silence.

"Mirriam, my home is your home," she said to Mother. "Come with us until the men return." She tugged at Mother's shoulder.

Mother agreed. Um and Abu Muhammad said they would tell my father and Hamameh's husband where to find us. It was time for us to leave, too. "We're going," I cheered into Souma's big ear, thinking that he had no one in the world but me. I was ready to go anywhere as long as he came with me.

"We have no space in the car for a donkey," Mother snapped at me.

"I won't leave without him," I shouted. "Yamma, let him come with us," I begged. I gripped Souma with all my might as Mother tried to peel me away from him.

Um Muhammad came between us. She quietly said that Souma belonged to her.

"No! He belongs to me," I protested.

"But he would be so sad to lose his home," she said.

Now I could see what she meant. And so I let him go.