part 6 Karmi, Ghada. In Search of Fatima. New York: Verso, 2004.

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but in the end, what could we have done? We're just ordinary people, no match for an army." He paused and everyone looked at him. "All those who could walk went in the end. The very old ones, like father, were left behind because they couldn't move and there was no way to move them out. God knows what happened to them."

It later emerged that the Jewish troops rounded up these old people, whose average age, according to the Jewish military commander in Safad, was eighty and who were all Muslims, and expelled them to Lebanon in early June of 1948. That left a small number of elderly Christian Arab Safadis still clinging to their homes. But these were also removed, driven in lorries to Haifa, where they were placed in the care of two convents there. Not one of the inhabitants of Safad was ever allowed back and, in the chaos of their various expulsions, I don't know if Mustafa ever saw his father again.

Out in the street, the talk was all of Palestine and Palestinians. Men in pyjama trousers stood around and talked of Safad and of politics in general. The custom in the poorer parts of Damascus was for men to wear their pyjamas in the day as well as at night. Sometimes, they "dressed up" by wearing a shirt over the pyjama trousers and if it was cold they might slip a jersey over the shirt.

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After a few months of looking fruitlessly for work in Syria our father left us to go to England. This had not been an easy decision for him to make and only arrived at after much hesitation and disappointment, not to mention opposition from my mother. Finding that he could not return to his job in Jerusalem, he realised he would have to find new work, "until the situation in Jerusalem settles", explained our mother. He searched in Jordan, but Amman in those days was a small provincial place with little capacity for absorption of qualified people like him, and he had already turned down the only good position with the bank the year before. Abu Ahmad, our old neighbour who had ended up in Cairo, wrote to my father through his cousin in Damascus, urging him to come. He said that Cairo was a paradise on earth, there were jobs to be had and money to be made. My mother was excited when she heard this.

"Perhaps it's true," she said. "Perhaps that's where we should go until we can return to Jerusalem." Egypt was the home of glamour in the Arab world. It had a film industry, produced the most famous singers and entertainers and published the best-known newspapers and magazines. Cairo was the foremost centre of style and fashion, but also of intellectual and political life. Every Arab aspired at least to visit there and many would have liked to stay.

But my father did not agree. "I wouldn't trust Abu Ahmad if he were the last man alive," he said, "not after that business in Palestine." There had been much talk in Jerusalem that Abu Ahmad was one of those who sold land to Jews. He worked as an estate agent and made a reasonable living but no more. When he suddenly got rich, the rumours started that there was only one way this could have happened – by selling land to Jews. My father once saw him slipping into the offices of the Zionist land agency in Zion Square in Jerusalem. It was well-known that the Jews who came to Palestine from the 1880s onwards were desperate to acquire land. They would have paid any price to get hold of it, often backed by wealthy Jewish sources from Europe and America. And at first, some Palestinians sold them land and became wealthy in the process. But gradually the realisation grew that this was not as innocent as it seemed.

"They've got a plan in mind," people said. "They want to take over our country." Selling of land to Jews after 1946 became an act of treason in the eyes of the AHC, even on occasions punishable by death. One night in the summer of 1947, when our neighbours were all congregated at the house of Abu Ahmad and there was much laughter and merriment, masked men suddenly appeared. They barged in and immediately separated the men from the women whom they pushed roughly into a back room. Shots rang out and a man was wounded, but it was not Abu Ahmad, "although that's who they were after", asserted my father. He meant the Boycott Committee, which was one of the AHC's units set up to fight commercial dealings with the Zionists. He had also been invited to Abu Ahmad's that night, but had somehow lingered on at home, lighting a narghile and looking through his books. "As if he'd known what was going to happen," remarked my mother.

After that, Abu Ahmad lived in some trepidation. He and his family were terrified that the AHC would come after him again. But nothing further happened and they stuck it out until the beginning of 1948. They then packed their belongings and headed off for Cairo. Before long Abu Ahmad succeeded in establishing himself there and setting up a prosperous business "with tainted Jewish money", said our neighbours in disgust. As we knew no one beside Abu Ahmad in Cairo who could advise us, and my father had little money to spend on going there to find out for himself, he had to think of something else. He spoke to my uncle Abu Salma, although he did not set much store by anyone's advice.

Abu Salma advised my father to wait for the situation in Syria to settle after the first rush of refugees, or else think once again of working in Jordan. They had both accepted by now that an early return to Palestine was not realistic. My uncle's city of residence, Haifa, had fallen to the Jewish forces at the end of April. Nearly all its Arab inhabitants had fled or been evicted and it had become what it had never been before: a Jewish city. Shortly after, in May, my aunt's home town of Acre met the same fate. Other Palestinian cities were similarly overrun during that period. When Jaffa, the largest of the cities fell, its Arab inhabitants reduced from 80,000 to 4,000 in just a

few weeks, there was immense shock and gloom. These stories all had the same ending, thousands of people on the move, destitute, walking towards safety wherever they could find it. The Arab leadership and sometimes the British authorities as well ordered them to go back, but no one was prepared to provide them with any protection.

Meanwhile, in Tulkarm, events had worsened for our family. In order to defend the town against Jewish attack, armed young men had stationed themselves in the school building just above our aunt Souad's house. From there, they could see the road leading up to Tulkarm and could shoot at the Jewish soldiers. Aziza was by then living with her mother because her husband Zuhair was away studying in London on a government scholarship. She had three small children, two girls and a boy, and her main anxiety was how to keep them safe. From the beginning of 1948 the situation had become more and more unsettled and dangerous with displaced people pouring into Tulkarm. There was not enough food for them all and everyone's stores ran out. Even the tobacco was finished and people started rolling herbal cigarettes. Eventually they were all eating dates, the staple diet of the Arabs from ancient times, and hence that time in Tulkarm was known thereafter as "the year of the dates". It was a long time before the town's food stores were replenished.

By April, shooting was an everyday occurrence, and Aziza lived in daily terror of her children being hit. One morning, a bullet whizzed through the window of the house and lodged itself in the door just above the place where her three-year-old daughter was playing. In that moment, she said afterwards, she felt that she had lost her reason. The food shortages, the constant danger, the absence of her husband – news of him had not reached her for months because of the troubles – all combined to make her determined to escape the hell they were living through. She packed a bag, mainly with her children's clothes and nappies, and told her mother she was leaving for Amman. Seeing her so distraught, our aunt Souad pleaded with her to stay, but Aziza would not be swayed. She had little money and only a vague idea of where she would go once she reached Amman. During her time as a schoolteacher, she had been friends with another teacher whose father, she remembered, owned a restaurant there. She thought to go and find it and throw herself on their hospitality. She bundled her children on the bus, whose driver was a relative of ours, and he took her to Amman free of charge.

In London, Zuhair, who had been studying at Imperial College since 1947, was living in constant apprehension as the news of the disturbances in Palestine came through. Towards the middle of April, he and forty Arab students who had come from all over the Arab world decided they could no longer stand by while Palestine was being torn apart. They made up a delegation and went to ask their professors for leave of absence from their studies to go and help in the struggle. This was no mean sacrifice for Zuhair, since government scholarships were hard to obtain and much sought after. Breaking such contracts incurred the risk that they would not be renewed. In addition, the students were uncertain of their professor's reaction, since the British had a confused and ambiguous attitude towards Palestine. To Zuhair's pleasant surprise, however, his professor was sympathetic and understanding. He let him go and wished him luck.

Zuhair reached Tulkarm on April 14 to find Aziza and the children gone. No one could tell him where she was, except to say that she was probably in Amman. And then there followed a nightmare quest for her whose memory remained with him all his life. Having left Tulkarm as a relatively tranquil place, albeit under the encroaching shadow of events in the rest of Palestine, he was totally unprepared for what he saw on his arrival. The town was unrecognisable, teeming with thousands of refugees who had come from the north and the coastal villages. They were living in schools, mosques, public buildings and even in people's houses. There was little food and no authority to organise the flood of displaced people. The National Committee was undermanned and wholly taken up with defence. Outside Tulkarm, battles were raging between armed Jewish and Arab groups, but the fighting seemed chaotic and uncontrolled. Zuhair tried to leave for Jordan, but the National Committee stopped him, since they were under orders to allow no one to flee. He told them of his plight and begged them to let him go. The Committee's commander was the father-in-law of Aziza's sister and so he agreed, but only on condition that Zuhair should promise to return. He told him to look in Salt (a city to the west of Amman), since the refugees coming out of Palestine went there first.

On his way to Salt, he was stopped numerous times by Arab fighters to check that he was not a Jew. When he got there, he found the situation far worse than the one he had seen in Tulkarm. Here again, thousands of refugees lived wherever they could find a place, families separated from each other by bed sheets hung on washing lines to give them some privacy. He looked into a mosque full of refugees and saw a woman giving birth in one of the corners. The local people had all become volunteer social workers. They fed the refugees and gave them what shelter they could. But, as in Tulkarm, there were no government representatives and no public authority here to provide services. It was a scene of breakdown and chaos.

Zuhair looked desperately for Aziza and his children amongst the horde of people and it seemed to him that none of them could have been his family, for thousands of village men and women wore similar clothes and had the same wretched and anxious expression. Someone had drawn up lists of the names of the refugees and they gave him these to search through. People were kind and wanted to help; they said he was not the only one to have lost relatives and, God willing, he would find his.

With increasing desperation, he left for Amman, only to be met again with sights like those in Tulkarm and Salt. He searched fruitlessly amongst the refugees here and began to think that he had lost Aziza forever. So angry and dejected did he feel that he decided there and then to join any group, any army, so long as it was engaged in fighting the Jews. He would give up his training and his hard-won education and dedicate his life to that fight. Unknown to him then, Aziza had found her schoolteacher friend and was staying with her. She had returned to her senses somewhat and now longed to see Zuhair again. She knew that our uncle, Abdul-Ghani, was based in Amman and went to seek his help. When Zuhair also ran into our uncle at one of his usual haunts, the Philadelphia Hotel in central Amman, the couple were re-united and the next day they went back to Tulkarm.

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On May 14, 1948 the news went out everywhere that a new state called "Israel" had been set up in our country. Its people would henceforth be known as Israelis. "Now you see," said my uncle Abu Salma, "this is what the Jews were aiming at all along." And he kept shaking his head. No one took the new state seriously and it was universally referred to in the Arab world as "the alleged state of Israel". At the same time, everyone castigated the British and the Arab states for having allowed matters to get this far, for having encouraged the Jews in their conceit. There was talk of British betrayal and that it was the British who were the real enemy – and not the Jews – for having permitted them to enter Palestine. The talk at my grandfather's house was full of anger and disappointment and it reminded me of how it used to be in Jerusalem with all the neighbours constantly complaining about the same things.

The next day, May 15, the armies of five Arab countries, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and Iraq, moved in to attack the "unlawful entity" erected, as they said, on pillage and the theft of Arab land and property. They would overcome the Jews, they boasted, and return the refugees to their homes. People rejoiced at this and the refugees began to have hope. "Give them hell!" they said, "Let the Jews eat shit!" The Iraqi army moved to the western front line with the Jewish forces and encamped outside Tulkarm. As one of its first acts, it let off a million shells, firing continuously for over thirty minutes. The Jewish advance in the direction of Tulkarm was halted immediately. "Those shells were like music to our ears," said Zuhair. "For the first time we started to feel that deliverance was at hand." Until the start of 1948, the people of Tulkarm had shared the general Arab view that the Jews were cowardly and would not succeed against the Arabs. The ferocity and effectiveness of the Jewish attacks had taken them completely by surprise and so they were overjoyed at seeing the Iraqi soldiers; they lined the streets and applauded them enthusiastically. Zuhair had bought a rifle after returning from Amman to defend the family, but with the arrival of the Iraqis he put it away.

In Damascus our father only said, "We'll see, we'll see." He seemed at this time more depressed than ever. For the reality we had to face was that we had lost our home in Jerusalem and we had no money. The sense of finality he had felt in Amman returned more vividly after the State of Israel was declared, as if it were the last chapter in the story of Palestine. He no longer planned on an imminent return there and continued to look for work. Nor did he accept our uncle Abu Salma's advice to stay in Syria or Jordan but went back to thinking of other possibilities.

By June, it was clear that the combined armies of five Arab states, however grand that sounded, had failed in the war against the Jews. Most people at the time did not realise what became clear after the recriminations had died down, that the total number of troops of the five Arab countries scarcely amounted to those of the Jewish army and that they were inexperienced conscripts, poorly trained and unmotivated. They were no match for the more sophisticated, highly dedicated Haganah, many of whose men were Second World War veterans who had fought with the Allies and had been trained by the British. Moreover, the Jewish leadership had been preparing intensively since 1947 for the war it anticipated with the Arab states and had reorganised its army in line with professional British advice well in advance of May 1948. It was well-armed with modern weapons and had bought over twenty warplanes from the British. By contrast, the Arab side was ill-prepared and did not decide to go to war against the Zionists until the very last minute. The arms their soldiers carried were inadequate and out-of-date. The only exceptions were the Iraqis and Jordan's Arab Legion, especially the latter, which was British-officered and British-trained. These advantages were however dissipated by the lack of coordination between the Arab commanders of each country, the absence of a united strategy against the Zionists and by the fact that Jordan (or Transjordan, as it was known then) had entered the war with an agenda of its own.

Rumours abounded that Jordan's King Abdullah had made a secret agreement with the Zionists to carve up Palestine between the two of them. The Jews could have the area assigned to them by the UN in the partition resolution and the king would take the densely populated Arab regions and make them part of his kingdom. Consequently, the Arab Legion was said to be under orders not to attack the Jewish army in that part of Palestine which would form the Jewish state – to the frustration of its well-trained soldiers, who were made to withdraw each time they thought they were winning. But Jordan was not alone in its designs, for Syria, it was thought, had entered the war in order to take Tiberias, which was in the north and close to the Syrian border, for itself. The Iraqis too were said to have their own agenda.

If all that were true, then the Arabs were fighting with one hand tied behind their backs, everyone said.

In June, a truce was drawn up between the two sides, but not before the Jews (or Israelis) had halted the Syrian advance in the north and been inexplicably left to do so by the Iraqis, who were still in the vicinity of Tulkarm. Having succeeded in pushing the Israelis back from Jenin, they suddenly stopped fighting. They said they had no orders to continue. "We couldn't understand it," said Leon Blum, my father's old colleague in the education department when he came to visit us in London in 1950. He was by then an Israeli citizen and had changed his name to Gideon Binor to fit in with his new identity. "All the Iraqis had to do was extend along to Tel Aviv and they would have cut the country and our forces in half. We would have been in real trouble then. Why didn't they do it?"

During the fighting, the Israelis had attacked the Old City of Jerusalem trying to secure the Jewish Quarter. In doing so, they had shelled the Dome of the Rock, and this provoked widespread horror and outrage. The women of our neighbourhood in Damascus, some of them my mother's relatives who came round to visit my grandmother, were angry. They turned their anger four-square on my mother.

"If the mosque is harmed it will be your fault, God's punishment for your lack of religion," they said. "All of you in Jerusalem, going about with your heads bare and without shame, it's no wonder!" They were referring to the fact that neither my mother nor my sister had worn the veil in Palestine. This was not strictly true, for my mother had only discarded the veil when we moved from the Old City to Qatamon. Since coming to Damascus, she had been forced to wear it again in deference to social custom, but this did not satisfy any of the women who knew it was not genuine. Admittedly my mother shook off her veil the moment she was out of my grandfather's neighbourhood. My grandmother, who always tried to keep the peace, shushed them all and said they weren't being fair and it was nothing to do with my mother. "God knows, she's upset enough as it is by the news," she admonished. And indeed my mother looked unhappy and cried a lot. She was thinking of all her friends who lived in the Old City. "Please God, they're safe," she said, turning her palms up to heaven in prayer. "Please God, that no one has harmed them."

Following the first truce, fighting broke out again and a second truce was declared a month later without the Arabs being able to defeat the Israeli army, although the Arab Legion had managed to prevent an Israeli conquest of eastern Jerusalem. People were furious. "How can it be that the armies of five countries, *five countries no less*, cannot defeat a bunch of Jewish gangsters?" There were bitter complaints that each truce seemed only to benefit the Jews who took advantage of the lull in the fighting to replenish and illegally stock up their arms, while the Arab side was prevented from doing so by a UN arms embargo.

In Tulkarm, apathy and a feeling of helplessness set in. Its people had worked ceaselessly to help in the war effort, but apparently to no avail. In the battle outside Qalqilya, for example, they had sent as many men as they could muster to fight the Jews alongside the Arab army. When they arrived, they were ordered to advance against the enemy under cover of cannon fire. But they were largely untrained and the Arab army was outnumbered in men and fire-power by the other side. Inevitably, the battle was lost and Tulkarm's single hospital was inundated with the wounded and the dying. The town's pharmacy offered all the medicines it had for the care of the wounded. Zuhair, who had never treated anyone in his life but had studied biology in London, offered his services to the hospital with the other volunteers. Amongst his first patients was a severely wounded man whom he started to tend energetically until he realised with horror that the man was dead.

At the same time and under cover of the war, the Israelis continued to empty the towns and villages of Palestine of their inhabitants. In June, scores of villages in the vicinity of Haifa, Tel Aviv and Acre were entirely demolished, levelled to the ground as if they had never been. Both my father and my uncle knew many of these places because they were all near to Tulkarm or Haifa. By July, the Israelis had taken all the land outside Tulkarm up to the railway line. In this takeover, my uncle estimated that our family had lost 100 dunums[2] of its land and Aziza's family 200 dunums. He and my father listened to the radio together in grim silence when it was announced that the Israelis were doing this in order to prevent the inhabitants from ever returning. But the Arab states, it said, were aware of these evil manoeuvres and they would avail the Jews nothing in the end. Egypt and Syria declared that they had already won the war against Israel. People, listening, just shook their heads and sighed. The atmosphere of gloom and dismay was almost palpable and it somehow served to decide my father on what he should do next.

My father never made any secret of the fact that he had a love–hate relationship with the British. On the one hand, he admired their culture, their language and their organisational skills, but on the other, he hated them for what they had done to Palestine. "But for them", he was fond of repeating, "there would never have been a Jewish invasion of our country and there would certainly never have been an Israel." In 1938 and again in 1946 the Mandate government in Palestine sent him on a training course at the Institute of Education in London. This engendered in him an abiding love for the city which never faded. "London grows on you," he used to say. "It's not a place you like at first. You have to live in it to appreciate it." So, when from Jerusalem he applied to the BBC in London for a posting, he had had in mind the simple idea of spending more time in the city which he admired.

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[2] 4 dunums = 1 acre

The dire situation in Palestine and the difficulties of finding suitable work in the Arab world, or at least those parts of it he was prepared to consider, now acted as an incentive to revive his old interest in going to London. He reapplied to the BBC and received a favourable response. He was asked to go in June to Cairo for an interview, which made my mother hope that he would find other work there. And he did indeed look up our old neighbour, Abu Ahmad, who tried to persuade him to stay in Cairo. But after his interview the BBC offered him the job of language supervisor in its Arabic service and he was keen to accept. Shortly after his return to Damascus they wrote from London advising him to come alone at first, without the family. "We are still recovering from the war," they wrote. "There is food rationing here and we cannot recommend that you bring your children into the country at the present time." My father secretly determined to go, but he first convened a meeting of our family and friends to discuss the matter. My grandfather was strongly against it and my uncle likewise urged him to reconsider, "Your wife is a conservative woman, not used to living outside our society, and your children are too young to be taken so far away," he said. Most of the friends agreed, but a few said there might be no harm in his trying to see how it was.

In the end, my father decided to go on his own for one year to begin with. If all went well, Siham would join him so that she could go to university. Ziyad and I would remain with our mother in Damascus until she felt ready to go to London as well. On hearing this, our mother became greatly alarmed. For her, his decision to go to England was the worst thing that could have happened, second only to our flight from Jerusalem. She made clear that, whether he went to England or not, neither she nor any of us was going to join him. For her, the prospect of going to a remote country whose language and customs she knew only sketchily from meeting a few English people in Palestine, distant from her family and friends, was unthinkable. She was a daughter of the Arab world and content to be so and her plans for our future had been quite different. She had hoped for my father to settle in a job in one of the Arab countries close to Palestine, preferably Egypt, but possibly Jordan. "At least the children will be able to grow up Arab, as if we had still been in Palestine, and the girls will eventually find husbands," she said. "But if we go abroad, what will happen to them?"

However, she could see that my father was determined and she also recognised that we could not go on much longer without more money coming in. My father had been a prudent saver and had set aside funds for contingencies in the Arab Bank in Jerusalem. On the day before we left, he took out all his savings because of the uncertainty of the situation. Afterwards, he said that some sixth sense must have guided him in this, for many of his friends lived to rue the day they had not done the same. Not having withdrawn their money before May 1948, they found that after that date their bank and its contents had been taken over by the new Israeli state. All Palestinian bank accounts were appropriated by the Israeli government which did not reimburse their owners until years later. It took a concerted and prolonged effort on the part of the UN and a loan from Barclay's Bank in Amman to persuade Israel to hand over Palestinian bank accounts they had frozen. Even then, not everyone was reimbursed and some lost their money, which presumably went to fund the new Jewish state.

So, much against her will, my mother agreed and my father spoke with my grandfather about his decision. "I will send Amina fifty pounds a month," he told him. "She and the children will not want for anything."

"In gold?" queried my grandfather, whose financial accounting was still grounded in the Ottoman era. My father laughed, "No, no, not gold, but it will be enough, you need not worry."

He left at the end of July, just after the start of the second truce in Palestine and just after we had received word that the Israelis had begun moving Jewish families into the empty, pillaged Arab houses in Qatamon. The Israeli army had by now conquered more areas of the country; a large part of the Galilee and the towns of Nazareth, Lydda and Ramleh, where Siham was born, had all fallen. "Perhaps it's good that you're leaving now," Abu Salma told him when he and his family came to say goodbye. "You won't have to see the wolves feasting on the corpse." A further 100,000 people became refugees and flooded out of Palestine. A few families tried to return when the truce commenced, but they came back saying the Jews had pushed them out at gunpoint. Many of the roads out of Palestine were mined by the Israelis, making them hazardous. It was becoming clearer that the newly established Israel was determined to do everything to keep those who had fled from ever returning. But though everyone talked of these things, my father seldom joined in. He just quietly made his preparations to depart.

At first I did not understand that he would be away for a long time to come. I vaguely remembered his visit to England before in 1946 when I was six and it had not seemed too long then. So I thought it would be the same this time, although I did not fully know why he was leaving us again. My sister was sad but also excited about his going because he had promised to have her join him as soon as he could. Ziyad, however, looked unhappy. For him, all that mattered was that the family should stay together. He had accepted leaving Jerusalem because we had done so together and were still one family at the end of it. But now, it was different. For the first time he began to feel that we were truly being split up. He let our father kiss him goodbye but showed no emotion.

Father kissed the rest of us, except for our mother with whom he shook hands only. That was because our grandfather was standing by, and it was not the custom for men and women, even married couples, to kiss in public. I don't know what he felt when he said goodbye, except that I noticed he had tears in his eyes. Were they, I wonder now, for his parting from us, or for the parting from his roots and memories of Palestine that he believed irretrievable? It was impossible to tell because he never talked about his feelings. Throughout that difficult time, I remember how he always appeared preoccupied, but it was with the practicalities of our situation, never with its human significance. It was almost as if our leaving Jerusalem was nothing more than an inconvenience, albeit a serious one, which meant his having to make some tiresome arrangements. Accordingly, he made those arrangements and did what was necessary with a minimum of fuss, as if there were nothing more to it than that. Who knows what private anguish he endured for the loss of his career, the home he and my mother had struggled to create, the destruction of his ambitions and the plans he had made for his future and ours?

On arriving in London, he sent us a temporary address while he looked for something else. And at first he was as good as his word; our mother would go to the British embassy every month and collect the fifty pounds he had promised. And then, suddenly, nothing more was heard from him and no money arrived. Our mother became worried. It wasn't like him, she said, he had always done his duty by us and by his mother and sisters and brothers who all depended on him. She could not understand it. Eventually, she made Siham write to him and ask him to send us some money, as we had none and my grandfather's means were limited. "Ziyad has to walk to school because there is no money for his tram fare," she wrote affectingly. "And we are still wearing our old clothes which are now full of holes." "Where did you get all that from?" demanded my mother when Siham read her what she had written, but she was not displeased. And it worked. A short while later, our father answered. He had been busy, he said, finding somewhere to live and settling into his new job. Finding accommodation in London was not easy and he had had to move from one bedsitter to the next. Family houses were next to impossible to obtain, but he was still trying. He was not coming back but would send money very soon.

After this letter, our mother had even less time for us than before. She went out visiting people all the time and came back just as we were about to have lunch, or sometimes after. In Jerusalem, she had also liked to be out seeing her women friends, but she never left home without cooking first and she always returned in time to have lunch ready laid out for our father and us. But now, she often did not cook at all, leaving it all to my grandmother or even Siham. Not infrequently, she stayed the night at people's houses and only appeared the next afternoon. One day, she had a shouting match with my sister.

"What's the matter with you?" said Siham angrily. "What about us, what about Ziyad and Ghada?" "Leave me alone!" my mother screamed. It was only when our uncle Taleb, who had also noted her absences, commented that as she no longer did the cooking he would henceforth go to my aunt's house for lunch, that she started to cook for us once more. There had always been a slight rivalry between her and my aunt, and she was stung by my uncle's implied criticism. But for him I think she would have continued to go out every day.

Thinking back on my parents' behaviour during that period, I realise now that it was bizarre. It was as if each one of them had been attacked by a temporary madness, an abnegation of responsibility that would have been inconceivable before. Perhaps the trauma of what they had been through went far, far deeper than any of us realised, and the prospect of having to build their lives and ours anew led them somehow to lose control – to want to escape the bleak reality we all faced. Hence my mother went gadding about in Damascus as if she had been a young girl, while far away in London my father put us out of his mind and behaved as if he had no ties.

Soon enough, however, he started to send us money on a regular basis once again. He wrote that he was getting used to working for the BBC where he had met a number of other Arabs and a small number of Palestinians. Ziyad and I were sent to school in September of that year and life began to acquire a certain normality. Ziyad's was at a government school to which he usually walked as we could not afford the tram fare. The tram was the commonest form of transport in Damascus at the time, one that we found strange when we first arrived. In Jerusalem we used buses and had never seen trams before. When he was late for school, he climbed on the back fender of the tram and hitched a free ride until the conductor saw him and shooed him off. It was a wonder the trams managed to move at all, weighed down as they were by the large number of youths who clung on to the back. At other times he rode pillion on Um Said's son's bicycle.

I think he was quite happy at his school, but I did not like mine. It was nothing like my school in Jerusalem. It was full of impoverished-looking girls, many of them Palestinians who had come with the exodus from Safad. They were poorly dressed and talked about nothing except that there was not enough to eat here and how they wanted to go back home to Palestine. Some of the Syrian teachers were sympathetic to our plight, others less so.

"You should be grateful that you found us to take you in. It wasn't our fault that the Jews threw you out," was a point often heard. Whenever they said this, Zeinab, who was a Safadi and the only friend I made at that school, would hang her head and say nothing. I remember how she looked, thin like me, but sad with large green eyes and long chestnut hair braided in two thick plaits. Her clothes were shabby and she wore black boots so big and heavy that her spindly legs could scarcely lift them up when she walked. "Your friend with the boots," my grandmother would say. I used to take her back with me to my grandfather's for lunch because I felt sorry for her. She was one of a large family who lived near us – I think there were eight or nine children – and she said they never had enough food in the house. She sometimes brought her youngest brother with her, a boy of three or four who looked pale and sickly. The children used to make fun of him because he passed blood when he went to the toilet, "just like a girl", they mocked. "Only girls pass blood from their behinds." And at this, he would cry and bawl while his sister put her arms round him. "Poor thing," my aunt said, "he looks half starved." A year later, all of Zeinab's family were registered with UNRWA[3] and I suppose they finally did get enough to eat. After we left Damascus, I forgot all about her, and for over thirty years we never met nor heard of each other again.

And then one day, to my astonishment, she found me in London. She came with a man she introduced as her husband and told me they were on their way back to Canada where they now lived. Theirs was a typical Palestinian diaspora story: moving from one Arab state after another. A little studying here, a job there, visas, expired work permits, running after residency permits, again visas, passports. Finally, despairing of the Arab world and the Middle East, they ended up emigrating to Canada. "It's not home," Zeinab said, "but what can you do?"

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The months went by and our father never mentioned when he would be coming to see us. To me, he became a distant memory bound up with the now unreachable past in Palestine. Although he had been with us when we first came to Damascus and stayed at my grandfather's house, it seemed to me that he had actually been left behind in Jerusalem along with Fatima and our house and Rex. He now belonged to the lost world where he would go on existing separately with the other memories. When Siham read out his letters from London to me and Ziyad I had no image of him in my mind nor of this place called London. He could have been writing to us from heaven for all I could imagine. I certainly never thought we would ever go there, and perhaps we may never have done if it had been left up to him. In January 1949 he wrote suggesting that Siham should come alone and join him. He said that he had still not found a house but had managed to rent a small flat. So Siham could come to London and start her university studies which were overdue; the rest of us would follow once he had found a suitable place for us to live in.

Our mother would have none of it. "Either we all go together or no one goes," she said adamantly and, unable to write well enough herself, got Siham to write and tell my father so. Better still, she said, he should try to come back and resume the search for a job in the Arab world. Things might have changed since it seemed that the dreadful exodus from Palestine had finally come to an end. Thousands of refugees were now living in temporary camps put up in the countries where they had ended up – Jordan, Syria and Lebanon – waiting until they were allowed to go home. It was grim but, at least, the first scramble for jobs had died down and there may well be some work for our father now. But he had other ideas: we must consider coming to London to join him. It would only be temporary, he wrote, just while the UN and the Arab governments sorted out the problem. We would return to our homes soon, but in the meantime, where would he get a job and we a decent education outside England? "Even when England was the cause of our problem in the first place?" retorted our mother.

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[3] The United Nations Relief and Works Agency was set up in 1949 specifically to provide assistance to the Palestinian refugees.

By the spring of 1949, it seemed inevitable that it was only a matter of time before we all went to London. We had been in Damascus exactly one year. After Ramadan, our father wrote that he had now found a family house, passed to him by an Egyptian colleague who was returning home. Our mother began reluctantly to accept that if our family was to be re-united at all it would have to be on my father's terms in London. She knew she had no real choice in the matter. "Perhaps it won't be for long," she said wistfully. Siham wrote to tell him the news and he wrote back after a while with the instructions for our travel.

Ziyad and I knew that we would be going to London, but it was in some remote future time and we played games in which we imagined how it would be over there and what we would do. No one spoke about the actual journey or the date of travel. And so it was with surprise and shock that in the summer of 1949 we received the news of our impending departure to this unimaginably far-away place.

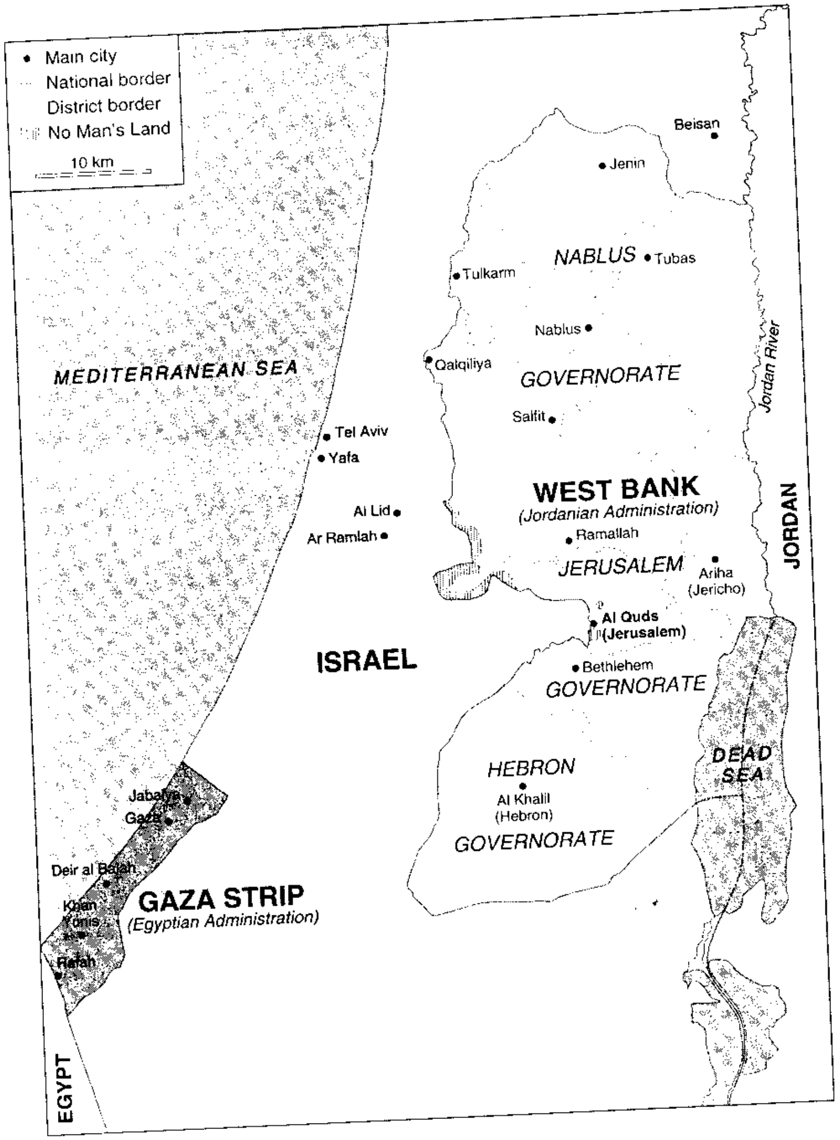
With my mother, Uncle Taleb, Siham and Ziyad in Damascus, February 1949

We had to have visas for entry into Britain and so our uncle Taleb took us into town to be photographed. Ziyad had got over his initial shock and was now excited about going to London, where we would see our father again and be one family as in the past. He perused his comics intently for clues about how English people dressed. They all wore long trousers, not short ones like his, and when our mother took him to the shops she bought him a pair of plus-fours because the salesman told her these were typically English. (Later, when he wore them in England, the other boys laughed at him and he threw them away.)

At last the time came when we had to leave for England. My mother and sister had been packing for days and we ended up with some six or seven suitcases. These were full of bulky winter clothes because everyone warned of the cold and fog which they said was the permanent state of the English climate. My father had sent my mother and sister a fur coat each, one brown and beige, and the other brown, which Ziyad and I loved to stroke, as if the coats had been two cats. To the clothes in our suitcases my mother also added great quantities of dried foods, spices, nuts and sweets. "Who knows where in that God-forsaken place we'll ever find decent coffee or spices for cooking," she said when Siham objected. Finally, the packing came to an end and it was our last morning in Damascus.

Munthir, who was a cousin of my mother and worked at the Arab Bank in the centre of Damascus, came to say his goodbyes. He was a thin, earnest young man who, it was rumoured, had taken a shine to my sister. "You know, I suppose," he said self-importantly, "that you're probably never going to see Jerusalem again." Everyone looked shocked. "God forbid!" said my mother. "Oh yes", he persisted. "They say that thousands of Jews are pouring in from all over Europe, and they're being settled in all the houses and buildings and farms you left behind. There's probably someone in your house right now." He did not realise that we had heard some such rumour before in July of 1948, when we were told that a family of Yemenite Jews had moved in. My uncle shushed him angrily. "If you've got nothing good to say, better keep your mouth shut," he exclaimed. Munthir looked as if he could say more, but decided against it. I heard him incuriously, as if he were speaking of events and places occurring in some remote country, far away from the one I knew. I had no feeling that any of it was connected with our home in Jerusalem and no image at all of some anonymous Jewish family sitting in our *liwan*, eating in our dining room, walking in our garden.

I was only dimly aware that on that September morning in 1949 we left behind a Palestine ravaged beyond recognition. A new, Israeli government ruled there now and more than half of its area was in Jewish hands, virtually emptied of the Arabs who had once lived there. All over its land, new Jewish settlements had sprung up, replacing the old Palestinian villages. Some 200,000 new Jewish immigrants arrived, mainly from Europe, and were being settled in what had been the Arab districts, towns and houses. Following the armistice agreements which ended the war between the Arab states and Israel in the first half of 1949, the Palestine we knew was fragmented. More than half became Israel and the rest come under Jordanian and Egyptian rule. Tulkarm was now part of the "West Bank of Jordan", ruled by King Abdullah. Our city of Jerusalem was split down the middle. Its western half, where we used to live, was left in Israeli hands, while the other half was annexed to Jordan. "At least", our friends in the Old City commented, "we're all Arabs together here." In the process, three-quarters of a million people lost their homes, like us, and were living temporary lives in other places, some in Syria, some in Lebanon and some in the part of Palestine which was now under Jordanian rule.


• Main city
National border
District border
No Man's Land
10 km
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
Beisan
Jenin
NABLUS
Tubas
Tulkarm
Nablus
Qalqiliya
GOVERNORATE
Salfit
Jordan River
Tel Aviv
Yafa
Al Lid
Ar Ramlah
WEST BANK
(Jordanian Administration)
Ramallah
JERUSALEM
Ariha
(Jericho)
JORDAN
Al Quds
(Jerusalem)
ISRAEL
Bethlehem
GOVERNORATE
HEBRON
Al Khalil
(Hebron)
GOVERNORATE
DEAD SEA
Jabalya
Gaza
Deir al Balah
Khan Yunis
Rafah
GAZA STRIP
(Egyptian Administration)
EGYPT

Palestine in 1949, at the time we left the country

As we were standing by the door with our suitcases ready to go, my grandfather, who was normally stern and not given to displays of emotion, suddenly put his hands on my mother's shoulders. His pale blue eyes were shiny and the tip of his nose was red. "Don't go, my daughter, don't go," he entreated. "Don't take your children to the land of the unbelievers.[4] They will grow up heathens, ignorant of their faith."

"It's too late, father," she said. "What choice do I have? I never wanted for this to happen as God is my witness, but we need to be together again as a family and Abu Ziyad cannot come back. There is no work for him here, as you know, and with so many others from Palestine looking for work as well, he didn't have much chance."

My grandfather shook his head from side to side, unconvinced. "Even so, it is wrong, it is wrong," he repeated.

"It will not be for ever," said my mother, "don't worry. We will be back, Palestine will not be lost to us and we'll go to our house again in Jerusalem and look back on this as if it were a bad dream, you'll see." But he continued to shake his head. Without another word, he turned on his heel and went into his room and we could hear him crying.

A great crowd of family, neighbours and friends came to see us off at the front door of the house where the taxis were waiting. The alley leading up to the house was narrow, like all the roads in that neighbourhood, and the cars had found them difficult to negotiate. As we got into the taxi, I saw that many of the women were crying. "Don't forget all about us when you're far away over there in England," they said, "and come back soon." The last contact any of them had had with foreign travel had been the time when my uncle came home from Brussels, and it was still an unfamiliar happening for them.

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[4] Literally translated from the Arabic expression, *bilad al-kuffar*, a designation commonly used in the Arab world for Europe and the West.

It was arranged that we would go first to our uncle Abu Salma's house in downtown Damascus, and would later drive from there to the airport. Our uncle Taleb was to come with us. Our grandmother, weeping all the time, kept slipping her hand under the heavy black veil covering her face to wipe her eyes. Our grandfather was left behind in the house with our aunt Khadija who had hugged and kissed us goodbye, and I saw Siham look back and suddenly burst into tears. She cried on and off all that day.

"I do want to go to London," she said, "but I don't want to leave you behind." She had grown deeply attached to our grandparents, our aunt and our uncle in the eighteen months we had spent in Damascus. My uncle Abu Salma put his arm round her when we reached his house and made her dry her eyes. My aunt had prepared us a light lunch and soon we re-boarded the taxis, with the addition of Abu Salma this time. No one spoke much as we squeezed into the cars and resumed the short journey to Damascus airport. I remember very little of the farewells which took place at the airport, for the prospect of boarding an aeroplane was so frightening and exciting that it was all Ziyad and I could think about.

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All that seemed unimaginably far-away as we stood in London airport. After getting off the plane, we were accompanied by a pleasant and smiling air hostess. We had to walk in the open air to get to the terminal building, and then through long corridors until we reached immigration. My sister was the only one who could speak English because she had learnt it at school. While on the plane, she had been given forms for all of us to fill and, walking through the airport, it was she who could read the signs that told us where to go. Thanks to these, we found ourselves standing in a queue at the immigration desk, which was the first time any of us had ever been in such a thing as a queue; we were used to people pushing their way to get ahead of others.

I thought the immigration officers looked like the British soldiers I had seen at the bottom of our road in Jerusalem – with uniforms and pink necks. My sister gave them our two passports, hers and my mother's, which included Ziyad and me. They were dark red and had a white window at the top, and on the inside page it said "Government of Palestine" in English and Arabic. Of course, by 1949, there was no Government of Palestine any more, and the officers examined our passports and our visas slowly and carefully. They asked Siham many questions, but in the end they let us go. We went through to the baggage hall and collected our cases. And there, by the customs counter where we were told to take them, stood our father.

The authorities had given him permission to come to the customs area because he had explained that we knew no English and had never travelled this far before. Without thinking, I ran forward towards him, Ziyad behind me. He kissed the top of my head and hugged Ziyad awkwardly, but he was smiling. "Wait, wait till we're outside," he said pushing us back. He turned to mother and Siham and kissed both of them, which was the first time I had ever seen him kiss our mother.

I could not take my eyes off him, for he did not seem like my father at all. His hair was all white and he was thinner and smaller than I remembered. I tried to fit the image of this stranger with that of my father, the one I knew in Jerusalem who was not white-haired and was bigger and somehow nicer and who had spoiled me and loved me, but I couldn't. The customs officer asked us to open our cases. While my father struggled with the locks, he asked if we had brought in any cigarettes or tobacco. My mother who was a smoker and had brought her tobacco with her said nothing. She normally rolled her own cigarettes and used only Turkish tobacco. "Do you have to take that?" my sister had asked in Damascus. "Of course!" my mother had replied indignantly. "Where on earth am I going to get this tobacco in London?" And she had stuffed a great packet of it into her coat.

The customs officer immediately asked for her coat and searched its pockets, whereupon he came across the tobacco. "And you," he said to Siham, "when did you get that watch?" This was a parting present from my uncle Taleb which he had given her just before we left and she was very proud of it. "Last week," she answered truthfully. Meanwhile, the cases had been opened to reveal a variety of foods – dried *mulukhiyya*, mint, saffron, pine nuts, garlic, coffee and sweetmeats – the like of which the officer could never have seen in his whole life before. My father was looking annoyed and embarrassed. He tried to explain that my mother knew nothing about London, had never left her native land and was worried about the rationing. There was a twinkle in the customs officer's eye, "If you don't mind my saying so, sir," he said, "even without the rationing, I don't think your wife would ever find anything like this over here." And with that, he told us to pack our things, said he would not be charging duty for the watch and my mother could enjoy her tobacco in peace. My father looked greatly relieved and we took our cases out into the arrivals hall.

"Well," he said, "here we are". No one answered and he continued, "Let's get a porter to carry all these things." And as the porter struggled with the cases, my father said, "Good heavens, have you brought the whole of Syria with you?" Our mother said something about heavy winter clothes for the cold and the fog. We carried our smaller bags and the porter took the rest. Out in the fresh air, we found a taxi and our father packed my brother and me in the back first, then my sister next to us, and he and our mother sat opposite. "All set?" our father said. My sister nodded and he tapped the window behind him for the driver to start the journey to our new home.

So, for the third time in my short life, yet another taxi was to transport me from one world into another. But though I did not know it then, this time would be the strangest and the last.

Part Two

England