THE WIRE-WALKER

THE BALATA REFUGEE CAMP

NABLUS, PALESTINE

"But let me see if—using these words as a little plot of
land and my life as a cornerstone—
I can build you a center."

—Qiu Miaojin

1

STILLNESS

I wake in the arms of my mother. Somewhere in the night men fire their rifles at the sky, the stars, or each other. Maybe there's a bride, a groom, many cousins, or maybe there are fighters in the mountains. An ambush? A wedding? A war? Words are slow near bullets or love.

My mother says, "Lie still. I shouldn't have to tell you."

She has faith in stillness, the safety of stillness. And it is true, or almost true, that every movement is a risk.

*

I would like to give all of Palestine the smells I love most: cardamom and coffee. These morning smells say to me, *You're alive, you're still here, and so is your family*. My grandfather invites me to sip his coffee. No sugar, no honey. Black mud at the bottom of the cup.

The morning has come to our alley, first light, almost no light, and two men of Balata have left us for Allah. My grandfather mentions the names of the martyrs. Unlike me, he knows them, remembers them, but how can this help? Eighteen years old and nineteen years old. Young men with moustaches, hard eyes. I can't see them, only imagine. They strayed beyond the alleys, the crevices and cracks of the camp, the passageways so narrow the walls hold their breath. But the martyrs have leaped to heaven. They are in heaven. Most of us believe this, or wish to believe. Mothers who lose their sons wail their grief and ululate their joy. *Lie still, lie still*. Or leap all the way to God.

I wonder if I will ever be ready to die. I'm glad I'm a girl because most of our martyrs are young men, or boys a few years older than me. I enjoy being alive even on mornings when I can do nothing but sip coffee that burns my stomach. Grandpa likes it this way. Bitter. He's skinny as I am, but his stomach is an iron basket. I would like to trade in my body for an iron one, a thick shell, or a body of light that neither bullets nor coffee can harm. Now I think light would be better than iron, far better. Iron can be melted, crushed, broken. Or die in a pile of rust. Light is beautiful. Light is difficult to harm.

"The Israelis will assume the worst," says my grandfather. "They will find new ways to punish us. If not today, tomorrow. If not tomorrow, the next day. They always assume the worst."

The dead are being washed and prepared for burial as I sit with my grandfather before a small window. I smell sweaty, I too should be washed, but not now. Grandpa Saeed knows what I need, or what we both need—he lights the lamp over our window. The sun will take half the day

to find us. Look. I can lean forward, extend my arm between iron bars, and touch the wall across our alley. How long is my arm? Not long. To light our alley, or the bottom of a well, or my face, the sun will need to rise over Mount Ebal, erase its shadow, and climb toward the highest point in the sky. A few minutes before noon, if no clouds pass over us, the sun will find our homes, our stone walls will turn white, and our pathways will shine like rivers. The sun will be ours a short while before it drifts toward our other mountain, Mount Jarzim, and leaves us in shadows. My grandfather, who seldom complains, calls the Balata Refugee Camp "a sardine experiment, too many fish in one can." Thirty thousand of us live inside one square kilometer, in homes that rise up three or four stories. Few streets here, mostly alleys, some of them as skinny as I am. Thirty thousand. I don't really understand a number this large. I am just one and my grandpa just one and my mother and my brother, each of us one, though I have more cousins than I can count. Our homes are small, yes, but they are not coffins. As long as there's light in the morning, or even a lamp over a window, I feel somewhat lucky. Grandpa Saeed offers me another sip of coffee. Not bad, not bad. The second sip always tastes better than the first.

Issam, my twin brother, leaves the room he shares with our grandfather and slouches in the doorway to the alley. How long will he live, my brother? Unlike me, Issam is unafraid to die. There are many like him, boys too angry to be afraid. Why are they so sure that death leads to heaven, to gardens watered by streams, to the end of hunger, thirst, and all suffering? I haven't visited heaven, nor have they. What will we see when we die? We all wish to believe in something beautiful that never ends, but what will we see?

My mother and my aunts often ignore my questions. In part, I love my grandfather because I can ask him almost anything. He seems to have a lot of room inside himself, a place wide enough for all the words I can wonder. Maybe I don't have to stay small just because I live

in a small space. Sometimes words are worlds—that's what I'm learning. I can ask questions, sometimes aloud, sometimes inside me, and I have a hunch I will not keep quiet till I die.

Maybe not even then.

2

SOMETIMES I WALK INSIDE A MOVIE

Late in the day, in the homes of the families of the dead, in the alleys outside the homes, the martyrs are remembered. Among the men, young and old, mostly young, there is much talk about what to do and what not to do in this fight against the Israelis. Does anyone believe this fight will ever end? I step away, choose not to listen. The sun has crossed to the other side of the sky and the light in our alleys is the color of smoke.

They always assume the worst. Maybe the Israelis will search our homes tonight, send in soldiers, make arrests, take a few of us to prison. What were those young men from Balata doing late at night on a road near Elon Moreh? Maybe trying to kidnap or kill a settler, or several settlers, or trying to leap to heaven. They are martyrs[1], istishhadeen. Soon their portraits will appear on posters on the walls of our alleys so we can celebrate them as long as our walls last, or as long as memory lasts. Maybe there will come a day or a night when our walls have no more room for faces. We will build stairs to our roofs and search for faces in the sky.

*

I am in my alley walking on a crack in the cement. Long before I learned of the Nablus Circus School, I began to play this game with myself, walking on cracks or on lines that I drew in chalk,

[1] The vast majority of those called martyrs are non-combatants, including women and children caught in the middle of the conflict. The term istishhadeen refers to the self-sacrifice of fallen resistance fighters; they, too, are martyrs.

or on thinner lines that I imagined. As a little girl I learned to wobble, then walk, and now I'm ready for the high-wire. I go to the Circus School when I can, but it's far away, on the other side of Nablus, so I mostly practice at home. I have ropes, wires, several of each, and sometimes I string one diagonally from my window to my friend Maysa's window some ten meters down the alley. Nobody pays much attention when I practice, but Maysa is all for me. She, too, is a circus girl. She often practices juggling while I rope-walk across our alley. For most of my life I have wanted one thing—to be an aerialist. I will try to explain.

I was five years old when I saw a movie from Europe, from Italy, I think, and though it was about war, not circus, there was one scene that showed a beautiful woman, almost naked, walking across a wire strung between two towers, the twin steeples of a cathedral. I was not supposed to see this. My mother had dozed off in a soft chair. My grandfather and my Uncle Sami were watching the screen, not me, my eyes peeking over a blanket. I lay on a green carpet, a hand on my chest, and for the first time I saw the life I wanted. Church bells rang. The beautiful woman seemed to walk one thousand meters over the earth as the sun shone on the towers of the cathedral, the stone so white I had to squint. Below, in a courtyard, a stout policeman stumbled this way and that, his arms open as though he could save her if she fell. Her face was the calmest my eyes have seen. Maybe God held her, a woman too beautiful to die, or maybe she was about to die in her own way rather than in a war, whatever war this was. Bombs began to fall near the cathedral, the streets, the alleys, as she kept walking, her pace steady, her balance perfect. I can't remember if she survived the walk or the war, though it doesn't matter. She was perfect every step of the way.

HOME

I live on the first floor amid four stories of cousins. My grandfather and my mother and my twin brother and I have the bottom floor because Grandpa Saeed is old and was already old when he was shot in the leg in 2002. My family shares one room with sleeping mats and kitchen things, but we divide it in three with plywood and curtains. I sleep beside my mother. If not for the partition, I could reach out and touch the bed where my grandfather and my brother sleep. In the homes over us, there are babies and kids and aunts and uncles, and an orange cat named Handala watches over us from our roof. Four stories of cousins lead to a ceiling, no opening to the sky, so I'm not sure how he gets up there. My grandfather named him after the most famous cartoon character of Naji Salim al-Ali.

On the wall opposite my home, you will see pictures of martyrs, but you will also see a drawing of al-Ali's Handala, a Palestinian boy who has grown too large for a newspaper or a book, a ten-year old giant three meters tall, a silhouette in green and black. What makes him Palestinian? Well, he turns his back to the world that has turned its back to him. My brother drew the spikes of hair that stick up from his skull while standing on my cousin Ghassan's shoulders. Maybe a dozen alley kids took turns drawing Handala. I helped to draw the bare feet, the raggedy pants. Handala stands near a pile of stones (real stones, not drawings) in an alley too narrow for a tank or even a jeep. My brother says the Israelis are afraid of us, and I wish this were true. Soldiers enter our alleys and search our homes whenever they wish.

We have no land, no orchards or fields, but we have Naji Salim al-Ali, his name written over and over on our walls. Someday I would like to show you the Handala in our alley, and also a three-meter-wide drawing of Big Fatty, the self-satisfied Arab politician and deal broker who

lives in comfort, and who—like the Israelis—looks down on us as from the distance of stars. We throw stones at Big Fatty. We practice our aim. Girls aren't supposed to throw stones, but sometimes a small one flies from my hand and means more to me than this flurry of words.

I want to live a long life, but I can't change where I was born. I wonder if walking on wires over the earth is as dangerous as drawing pictures, cartoons, or writing a story about the Balata Camp. According to my grandfather, Naji Salim al-Ali was assassinated, shot in the right temple in London, in 1987, at the order of Israeli intelligence. The Mossad killed a cartoonist on August 29th.

4

STONES

On a cool morning, after the first light has come to our alley, the planes arrive. My twin brother runs down a passageway to a wider alley to throw stones at a flash of wings. He is beautiful, my brother. A rain of stones arcs over rooftops and is gone. Maybe the rage, something harder than stones, reaches the wings, but the planes come again—three of them, or four—with a roar that seems loud enough to destroy the world. The Israelis often remind us of who is in charge. *We can kill you,* the planes say. *We can watch you disappear. Who will care? Will someone file a report?*

Our alley is too narrow for throwing at jets, so I start to run toward my brother, the wider alley, till my mother traps me in her arms.

The silence is as swift as the noise, but then my ears make whooshing sounds, back-and-forth sounds, echoes. The planes are gone, probably returning to their base, but my

brother keeps throwing stones. He calls out, as if the vanished pilots can hear him, “Come back, you cowards! I dare you!” I watch the last of his stones disappear in light.

I slip free of my mother when she opens her arms. I start walking to make sure that my body is here, that our homes are here, that Naji Salim al-Ali and Handala are here, and they are, they are. No bombs have fallen, no missiles. But my mother and grandfather and Uncle Sami and many cousins scan the strip of sky overhead and worry the planes will return.

I picture myself walking on a wire over our roofs, and up through the sky where the planes flew. Will they return? Will the sky remain quiet the rest of the day? Our prayers are often simple: *Sky, be quiet. Please be quiet. Stay quiet. Mercy. Inshallah*. None of us know what will happen in the sky or on earth. *We are here, we are alive*. Our day has begun.

5

FRIDAY

Fathers and sons and orphans burn tires and disappear in smoke. Israeli soldiers seem to retreat from the intersections of alleys, and maybe the drone operators sitting at computer terminals in Haifa or Tel Aviv or (none of us know where they sit) study plumes of smoke instead of spots (fathers, sons, orphans) darting across screens. An hour has passed since the midday call to prayer. My brother and three boy cousins—Ghassan, Naji, Mohammed—feed rotting tires to flames.

I slip into the room I share with my mother and wrap my face in a head scarf. Now I can breathe a small breath. I sit in a corner as black smoke billows over the walls of our alley. To

breathe is enough. I will ask for nothing more till this is over. A small breath, then another, another…thank you. I will stay here till the tires melt into black glue that will stain my feet.

Lord…sustainer of worlds. A voice, a smudge of light. A prayer I can almost see. I listen hard till I know who's in the alley praying through smoke—Aunt Salma. "In the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful…" She sputters, coughs, and I don't know who besides me is listening. I call to her through my scarf: "Auntie, this way, this way. Come in out of the smoke."

I believe she could pray better inside, but she stays in the alley. Do we suffer more than we need to suffer? Do we need to breathe well to pray well? I am better at questions than answers. Maybe her coughs and sputters mean something to Allah or an angel. Or maybe we're alone.

6

FIVE QUIET DAYS LATER

"Hey, Wire-Walker! Where's the circus?"

The only foreigner I know with a wink and a laugh in his voice is Juan Ramon of Spain, an Oxfam infrastructure expert, a volunteer, who pauses now and then to watch me practice. He may never learn my real name (Amal) because I seldom speak with men outside my family, but Wire-Walker is beautiful and daring and—inshallah—please call me this forever. The Israelis call me 753085164. I hope to live long enough to outshine their wire-walkers and trapeze artists, the greatest stars of their most famous circus. I would like to show them what I can do in Nablus and the Balata Camp, and in Tel Aviv and Jaffa, Jerusalem and Haifa. I would like to be good enough to travel with a professional circus and go wherever we have an audience. Europe

maybe, or even the U.S. My grandfather, the most knowledgeable man in Balata and perhaps the world, told me circus is "not integral to Palestinian history or culture." I believe him, I know he's right. But circus is part of the world and has been part of me since I saw that movie I already told you about.

I've visited the world beyond the Balata Camp and Nablus through YouTube. I've seen the Mediterranean Sea on a screen the size of my palm, but I will remain ignorant until I feel it on my body. My grandfather was born in Jaffa, his ancestors lived there for six centuries, but now he too is "a stranger to the sea." These are his words, and he is sad about being a stranger. I love my grandfather for many reasons. He's the only adult in Balata who believes me, or at least listens, when I promise I'll be in a professional circus someday, the best high-wire walker in the Middle East, if not the world.

*

One morning before school, I listen to Juan Ramon talking in English with my grandfather. "I've spent the last week in Ein Beit al-Ma'," he says. "Their alleys are almost as narrow as your alleys."

"We should hold a contest."

"And the Askar Camp's crowded, and New Askar's crowded."

"We keep trying to make ourselves smaller."

"It reminds me of how little my team and I can accomplish."

"Yes."

"We can't widen the walls, the alleys, but maybe we can bring more water to the camps."

Juan Ramon is part of a team, mostly Spaniards, trying to improve the water supply in four refugee camps. I don't know how they can help because the Israelis decide how much water

we receive, how deep we can dig our wells, and they rule the maze of checkpoints that encircle Nablus, the farms and orchards in the surrounding hills, and they sometimes close the road to the cemetery where my father is buried. He died when I was four. My mother has never told me what happened, but she nodded, almost bowed, when I begged her to answer one question: Was my father brave?

"Like Issam?" I probed.

"No, he was calmer than your brother. Issam lacks…" She made a basket of her hands to catch the right word. "Poise," she whispered. "Issam knows nothing of poise."

7

MY TWIN BROTHER

On a Friday night, I hear whispers through the wall that separates our bedrooms. "No," says Grandpa Saeed, "how will this help? You should take risks only when something can be gained."

Issam is about to slip into our alley and other alleys as he does on most nights to meet with his cohorts, the boys or men who devise plans to strike back against the settlers and soldiers who encircle Fire Mountain, the city of Nablus.[2] I doubt my brother carries a weapon other than rage. Grandpa says, "Have you forgotten who's in charge of you? I will be your grandfather till I die."

Issam remains silent.

"I'm too old to hit you. Your father, if he were alive, would take care of this."

"I don't want to disobey you."

"Then sleep, and allow others to sleep. There is nothing we can do at this hour."

[2] Nablus is also known as Fire Mountain.

Hundreds of Israeli soldiers protect the settlements, or maybe there are thousands, plus their tanks and assault helicopters, their fighter jets, and other gifts from America and Europe. Grandpa tells Issam what he already knows: “If you injure one settler, they will kill at least ten of us, and these may include your mother and your sister.” My brother speaks of dignity, honor, and the worthlessness of life if it is lived in a prison. No voice is softer at this hour. I hear two words clearly—dignity, honor—but I know them all.

Grandpa Saeed says, “You imagine things can get no worse, but I assure you they can.”

Issam grunts. I hear ruffling sounds. Maybe he’s putting on his shirt.

“A boy disobeying his grandfather—this cannot be accepted. And what will you do? Throw stones at a guard-post? A jeep?”

“I am sorry.”

“You’ll be worse than sorry if you’re arrested. Boys spend years in jail for nothing more serious than throwing stones.”

But stones are serious. They are hard and have no room to breathe, but they are what we know best. When someone dies in our alley, the men pass the body through the windows of our homes till they reach a street wide enough for a funeral procession. The dead, washed and wrapped, pass through windows, as do brides on their way to weddings. Alive or dead, we can fit almost anywhere. A stone is serious, and so is a bride, a corpse. So is my twin brother who tries hard to grow a moustache. So am I. So is my grandfather, though he is very old.

Issam slips into the alley, and soon his footsteps are on some other side of night. Maybe Handala the Cat watches over him from our rooftop. I wonder who Issam is about to meet. Friends from school? Other stone-throwers? Or men who will give him guns?

Maybe an hour passes before I hear him come in. Grandpa Saeed is awake, as is my mother. No one says anything, but I believe I know what my mother is thinking. *I pray that no soldiers have followed you home. I pray that you wise up and live at least long enough to marry and give me a grandchild. Inshallah. I hope we will all be alive when the sun comes up.*

*

We are. After breakfast and dishes and laundry, I walk down the alley past two Handalas, the drawing on a wall of the Palestinian boy with his ragged clothes, spiked hair, and the orange cat who perches like a sentry at the edge of our roof. Cats have good eyes. I bet Handala sees the whole sky over the camp, over Mount Ebal and Mount Jarzim, but all I see from down here is a sky-rope, a blue line over our walls. Does every wire-walker dream of walking on light, or just me? I am more hopeful than angry as I kick up some dust.

If you think this alley is a sad place, you are somewhat wrong. No one's bothered us in over a week, so we've used this quiet time to draw and paint more pictures on our walls, even some flowers and trees. I am learning that what we see inside our bodies, our eyes, is—as Grandpa Saeed says—"true enough." He claims he's "not an artist, never an artist," but he teaches painting and drawing to me and Maysa and several other girls, and—at different hours—to Issam and some boys. This NGO, Project Hope of Canada, has helped us for years, and they've given us boxes of paint and ink, brushes of different sizes, and even an easel. Grandpa Saeed says things like, "Tell the truth, don't waste time. Just do your best to be honest." So, yes, boys mark our walls with fighter jets, soldiers, splashes of red, colors louder than blood, but there are also—an arm's reach away—tomatoes on vines, almond trees in bloom, olives, yellow suns in the sky, and a fig tree as tall as a man. We have no gardens or orchards in Balata, other than those we make with paint or ink, brush and memory. My grandfather, whose words

stay with me because he often repeats himself, believes we have to tell the truth in different ways to tell any truth at all. You already know (because I told you) that most of our walls have pictures of martyrs. Yes, you'll need to look hard to find these other walls, but they are here. My brother draws nothing pretty, no flowers or trees, but he too is honest. A bomb, a man in a suit. A knife on a table. A frazzle of lines and colors that collide, implode. I have not yet painted a beautiful girl walking a tight-rope, but I will. She will have perfect balance even if there are drones spying her from above.

8

MEET THE PROFESSOR

In the last hour of light, Grandpa Saeed and my brother sit on plastic stools and sip lukewarm tea in the doorway to our alley. A jump away, or a body length (mine), I sit at our kitchen table, my forearms on the sill, and stretch my ears to hear my grandpa thinking, whispering, drawing words as from a well. *The poet writes his life on pages of water, the scientist too*. If the water goes silent, so does my grandpa. I catch other sounds—click, scrape—my brother grinding his teeth.

"We once more distinguished ourselves from other refugees," says Grandpa Saeed. "Almost no one in Balata owns a vehicle, yet we burn more tires per capita than any camp in Palestine."

Three clicks. Teeth loud as words.

"Aunt Salma's youngest daughter suffers from asthma," grandpa continues. "Several children in our alley, including three babies, struggle with similar afflictions." He flicks a hand. "And what did we gain from all that smoke? Before it dispersed, the Israelis had what they came

for—the fathers of the boys killed on the road near Elon Moreh. How long will they be in prison, the fathers? Can any of us estimate?"

Click.

"We will be sad if we count the days."

In single file—no room to spread out—four boy cousins pass by, the taller one carrying a soccer ball. They will play till dark when they reach Balata Street and the entrance to the camp.

Grandpa looks at Issam. "So what happened? How could the Israelis find the right homes, the right fathers? The air was black. We kept bumping into each other, bumping into walls. When the air cleared, when we could breathe without choking, we realized the Israelis had accomplished their mission." He holds up his hands. "How could they see through smoke? And not just any smoke, mind you, some lump of garbage on Al-Quds Street, but black smoke, *tire* smoke. How could they see through *that*?"

My brother's jaw bones stick out as he clamps his teeth.

"You're clever enough to figure this out in two seconds," says grandpa, "but sometimes you're too angry to think."

Two seconds? I doubt Issam will live long enough to be as clever as Grandpa Saeed, who was once a professor. As a young man, he studied at an-Najah National University in Nablus and received a doctoral degree in physics at the age of twenty-six. He later taught at the university, and also in Cairo, but his formal teaching career ended when he was imprisoned during the Second Intifada. I think of my grandfather as the professor of science of the Balata Camp, and sometimes he is also the professor of history, poetry, literature, art, story-telling, should anyone care to listen. Some people in our alley, even some cousins, don't like him because he "talks fancy." I like his fancy talk and he likes mine.

He calls to me. “Amal, help us for a moment. Why is burning tires sometimes useless?”

“The smoke makes us cough.”

“Yes, of course. It assaults the lungs. What else?”

“The Israelis have gas masks. They can breathe.”

“Yes.”

“And it seems they can still see us through the smoke.”

He waits a moment, then nods. “They most certainly can see us,” he says, “as can anyone who has the right tools. Drones, for example, are tools, and you can think of them as flying cameras, eyes in the sky, and they are most likely watching us now.”

Issam flashes a finger at the piece of sky over our alley.

Grandpa Saeed looks up, winks, waves, and continues.

“You’ve heard of radar, yes? You can think of it as waves that are able to feel things: the outline of a body, the frame of a window, a wall—even the air we exhale has a discernable shape. Standard x-rays provide maps of our bodies, our bones. Smoke’s just a gnarled-up ball of air, easy to see through compared to flesh.”

Issam rubs his right eye with a knuckle.

“No wizardry,” says Grandpa Saeed. “Any of us can see through smoke if he applies the right tools.”

The right tools. Inside me it seems that I, too, am made of waves that can move outward and feel things: other bodies, especially those I love (grandpa, mother, Issam, Maysa), the frames of windows, walls, the ropes and wires I walk, the air around me, the narrow sky. *A hole in the wall was enough for the stars to teach you the hobby of staring into the eternal.* Grandpa Saeed

taught us this poem, and many others. Narrow gaps—is that all we have? Will it be enough? The poem is true, though, whether or not any walls come down.

Issam points his chin at our grandfather. “So what are we, then? Insects under a microscope?”

“No, we’re human beings. We are human beings.”

“The Israelis don’t think so.”

“They will. They have to.”

Issam shakes his head.

“They have to. Otherwise…” Grandpa tugs at his chin. “Yes, they have the power now, they can do as they wish. But they need to wake up if we are all to live.”

My grandfather looks at our sky, a dull gray line over our eaves. I can’t see any drones, but I hear a slight buzzing. *The right tools*. Handala the Cat watches over us, as do the Israelis with their gadgets. Eyes in the sky. Mechanical. Inhuman. No people up there, no pilots. Only machines are at risk. I’d like to kill a drone, crush its eyes, its lenses, its radar, its waves that feel things. No blood would come out. Maybe just crackling sounds—glass, metal—breaking apart. I would burn it and make soldiers breathe the smoke.

If I were a wizard, a magician.

A god.