

Autoethnography

Wajd's Sentiments – وجدانيات – وَجْدْ: A Life Writing Exploration of a Young-Adult Palestinian Refugee's Identity in Lebanon

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Abstract

In this autoethnography, I revisit crucial moments in my life shaped by my identity as a Palestinian refugee in Lebanon. Through reflective narratives, I recount not only the events themselves but also my personal experiences, emotions, and the influence of those around me. Each chapter explores a specific instance, connecting memories, relationships, and internal struggles that have contributed to my sense of self. A recurring theme present in my writing is the significant role that the perspectives of family, friends, and broader societal influences plays in shaping my identity at times. These narratives also serve as an exploration of how my values concerning identity, belonging, and resilience have changed over time. I also examine my conceptualization of home, questioning its meaning during the adversities I have faced. The intersection of the personal and the universal allows my narrative to highlight how shared experiences of exile and perseverance can shape individual identity. Each chapter is paired with a haiku poem that reflects on the layered simplicity and complexity of these themes.

Keywords: Palestinian, Lebanon, refugee, identity, home

Preface

Towards the end of *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said writes, “while it perhaps seems peculiar to speak of the pleasures of exile, there are some positive things to be said for a few of its conditions” (2000, p. 186).¹ I relate this quote to the power of storytelling in general but even more particularly when it comes to my Palestinian cause. I have blind faith that storytelling has always been and will always be an act of resistance that the Palestinian people cannot be confined through.

The stories of Palestinians have been told in so many ways and in various contexts; they're impactful and genuine. Writers and poets like Ghassan Kanafani (Saber et al.

2022),² Liana Badr (Arab World Books),³ Susan Abulhawa (Palestine Book Awards),⁴ and many more have immaculately transported the immense meanings of exile through literature. Nonetheless, most literature on the topic of Palestinian identity, especially in exile, is fictional. Such texts do a great job of representing the struggle of Palestinians in the context it needs; through them it is allowed to exist and be known. I can see how fiction has become a powerful space for Palestinians to express their resilience. However, as rich as such literary texts are, the absence of real narratives on Palestinian identity in exile is profound.

In *Politics and Palestinian Literature in Exile*, Joseph Farag (2017, p. 9) emphasizes that fiction dominates the Palestinian literary productions, especially the short story. He justifies that because of the lack of publishing infrastructure, Palestinians were not able to produce novels. Most resorted to publishing short stories in newspapers due to how significantly more practical it is. The short story captured emotions and trauma, becoming a refuge of concentrated political struggle. Farag notes that while these representations symbolize the struggle of Palestinians, space for real, first-person narratives is underdeveloped.

The crucial role of real narratives is foregrounded in my understanding of Kristine Sheets's thesis study *Third-Generation Voices: Memory and Identity in the Palestinian Diaspora*. She tackles the idea of memory when it comes to fiction and real narratives, referring to Marianne Hirsch's concept of post-memory. Sheets describes identity's reconstruction of Palestinians due to the generational trauma that is passed down from previous generations. Descendants of Palestinian refugees are burdened by their ancestors and hold the responsibility of relaying their memories and struggle to their own descendants. Her distinction of that transmission, as separate from that of fictional characters existing only within their world and timeline, makes me more confident in my belief in the utmost importance of the presence of real narrative texts.

My experience as a refugee is remarkably shaped by the stories I am repeatedly told – ones that include how my grandparents were expelled from their homes, how every single person with my status struggles to go anywhere in the world, and much more of the misfortunes that keep us aware of who we are as refugees. Our lives are overcome by struggle, and our souls are constantly yearning for freedom. The space to express myself through writing allows me some of that freedom, the same way other creatives express their Palestinianism through their crafts.

To tell a story of exile, is to tell a fragmented one. *Wajd's Sentiments* is a memoir of common experiences among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, which emerge in pieces structured into chapters, each exploring a key moment that helped shape my identity. Through this lived writing, I seek to help fill the gap in Palestinian literature that represents real, lived, and unfiltered stories rooted with emotional truth, complex realizations, and personal memory.

One: Born

*Into existence,
Cells formed, ideas not yet,
Its parts still detached.*

*Soul, created pure,
Cannibals off to hunt it,
Green and black shadows.*

*Heart, ragefully white.
Blood, drowned after forty-eight.
Not (h)ours, but the (i) years.*

Though it might be written down and etched into every aspect of their lives, not all refugees actually recognize that they are refugees. I may have read the word itself more than I have taken breaths, yet I have never heard a single person utter it to me.

'I am a refugee' are the words that I find myself occasionally latching to my existence the most. That hasn't been the case until a few years ago; but ever since I was a child, I knew that I was Palestinian. How I spent the first few years of my life affected every sense of my Palestinian being, and my mom's regularly told stories over the years keep me connected to them and how it all started.

I was only a few months old when my mom started taking me to work with her. She was working as a teacher at a small-scale kindergarten in the Ain Al-Helwe refugee camp in Saida, my dad also working but outside the country. She and her friends worked at the same place and had always tried their best to make an enjoyable learning space to the kids there.

Our house back then was only a ten-minute walk to the Lebanese army's checkpoint on the entrance of the camp. After the momentary pause to show the soldier on the early shift each of our thin blue Palestinian refugee identification cards,⁵ my mom made it to the kindergarten slightly out of breath with an already hungry me in the stroller.

The small bell at the entrance door of the big apartment chimed as she made her way inside. Once a few meters in, she knelt down and whispered to me, "this is it Wajouda, you will love it."

She hadn't been here since the month before I was born. My mom looked around, allowing both of us to take the spacious reception area in. That area was meant to be the living room for the apartment, but they had turned it into a reception area for the kindergarten.

A few more meters in, mom rolled my stroller closer to the wooden desk and the wall behind it. White papers with Palestinian flags drawn on them were hung from one wall corner to the other: red, black, white, and green all around them in minimal children coloring. The huge green chalkboard under them had the most random things scribbled on it. Children's names, scheduled activities, supplies needed, and other things made my mom chuckle and kneel down again, "your name is going to be up there soon, my baby."

My mom made her way to where they all got everything ready for the average hectic kindergarten day ahead. Before the chance to put my bag down to say hi to everyone, I was already in her best friends' arms who was bragging on my lack of tears when held by her. Everyone's laughter and versions of a baby voice filled the room, my evident fussiness growing by the seconds.

A few minutes later my mom joked about me growing up here, "so there's no need for Wajd to be sick of it already."

Then they all left to get the day started. As my mom fed me, the Palestinian national anthem rang through the speakers around the rooms. My mom proud of her own idea of

playing the anthem⁶ every morning to get the kids' day started whispered in my ear again, "when you grow up, these are the words that will fill your soul up... wherever life takes you."

It really didn't take much for the words of the anthem to be within me. I knew those words better than my own name only a year and a half later. It was the party trick I pulled out whenever the five-year-old kindergarteners acted too cool to hang out with almost three-year-old me.

My mom laughed at every attempt I made to befriend every kid there. I would steal new pencils from the teachers' room and gift it to them, and sometimes I would even draw them pictures while they were learning their ABCs.

One day, I was running around, from the kitchen to the reception area to the classrooms, the place too big for my little fast legs. I knew the place by heart, and I immediately headed to the end of the hallway when I heard the creaking of the rusty metal closet. I started jumping up and down when I saw my mom unlocking it and taking the bag filled with keffiyehs' out.

"You know what that means, Wajouda," my mom told me, taking one out and placing it on my shoulders which made it seem like a cape on my small body.

I sprinted to the "PE+Dance" room, the kindergarteners already knowing what was coming next. My mom's best friend put in the Palestinian Revolution CD Mix into a radio player, and a circle formed on its own. The teachers were teaching the kids how to do the Palestinian Dabkeh; meanwhile, I was dancing around in the middle, pretending my keffiyeh was a dress.

My mom saw a dream in that kindergarten, one where children attended their first years of school knowing who they are, in the camp that was their only home. Their only refuge.

We didn't live in the refugee camp because of the dangers of the politics in it, and due to the constant risks, the kindergarten closed up a few years later. But up until now, my mom occasionally mentions how grateful she is I got to spend the first years of my life immersed in that place. I come alive whenever she tells me stories about it.

Though minimal, the memories of the school and the things I used to do there allowed my Palestinian identity to prevail.

Two: Perceived

*Only to my ears,
My voice is never the same.
Different, here or there.*

*Wherever I go,
Heard, perceived, and recognized.
No matter how changed.
Both homes want it all:
Custody over my mouth,
But tongue chooses one.*

The way I speak has always been a major way to express myself, not the way that any person would. If asked about how I was as a child, my parent's first way to describe me would be talkative. In most scenarios I have lived through, this particular quality of mine was passed off as adorable or quirky, and maybe sometimes annoying.

But I could say with sincere conviction that I never thought my talkative side is one I would ever dread. Growing up, my dialect settled on two major modes that underwent many changes over the years.

The original is the one I often describe as my mother tongue. The Palestinian one. Both, my dad and my mom's different Palestinian town dialects combined and made my own. I never took notice of it until I started attending the local private school close by.

My memory does not do the best job at marking the years I spent at this school, but they were some of the years that left their imprint on my personality the most. The friendships I formed with most people in my grade are ones I appreciate and cherish to this day – a significant part of which is the way I speak. The students at my alma mater were mostly Lebanese.

My awareness of this issue began some time in first grade when I started unintentionally abandoning my Palestinian dialect. I blame how authentic my formed Lebanese dialect can sound on the automatic reaction my brain decided to cope with the change. Weirdly enough, my mom occasionally explains, I was an expert at speaking Lebanese with Lebanese people and speaking Palestinian with my Palestinian people. I was never ashamed, but it was a decision I feel was inevitable for a young me to make. It is something that happened so subconsciously that it has never stopped.

Even though I was proud to be Palestinian, the pride in my Palestinianism was a struggle, especially when this fusion began to crumble.

The day I slipped up started as the most average one, until my classmates and I were informed that our history teacher wouldn't be available anymore. Most of us didn't care about the change, but history was one of my favorite subjects. I especially enjoyed my teacher's way of teaching it.

I didn't particularly enjoy the substitute teacher's classes, but I also didn't mind them. After a few weeks had passed, I tended to listen and let everything out the moment she left the class. It was all okay until I slipped up.

We had an oral assessment, and the new teacher asked me a question. I knew the answer immediately. "Aaleh," I said.

Seconds later I realized the way I said it, the Palestinian way. A real Lebanese would have said it with a 'y' sound at the end instead of a silent 'h.' I expected the teacher to be the only one to not make fun of me, but no, she was the only one whose laughter rang in the classroom, echoing in my ears.

Laughing, she said, "repeat that, Wajd."

I remained silent, standing in my place in front of her desk in the middle of the class, sweat wetting my hairline. Moments later, I looked around the class, fear that my friends would be laughing too forming in the pit of my stomach.

My friends' eyes roamed around the class, from each other to me to the laughing teacher, their confusion evident. But I couldn't tell.

When she lost hope in me repeating the word, she did it herself, "Aaleh... Aaleh." Her laughter wasn't the only sound in the once quiet classroom anymore.

Some of my classmates joined her, finally understanding why she was laughing. I was left with no more hope of spared embarrassment anymore. I looked at my empty desk and my best friends sitting next to it, their faces offering me nothing, but at least they were not laughing as well.

I had no other choice. I looked down to my feet, let out a laugh, and walked back to my desk. I didn't know what her reaction was, I could not even stand to look at her anymore, not then and not until my old teacher came back.

The same weight of that moment, I also carry whenever I slip up on the flip side. In my mind, there are two sides of this. Most of the time, they are at peace. But even if rarely, slip ups still happen. Just like the Palestinian "Aaleh", there is a Lebanese one as well, but perhaps it haunts me a little less. This time, the slip up didn't even need to happen, but maybe it still is one.

The part of me that hated being split up into two is healed because of it. Black and white. Yin and yang. Palestinian and Lebanese. That's how it always has been. The life I have lived bridges those for there to be no space in between. No fusion, no separation. My brain now barely can tell the difference, but apparently a true Lebanese could.

When the attacks on different areas in Lebanon started towards the end of 2024,⁸ my friend's rooftop became the designated place to see each other. Most of our parents did not allow us to be at random places or go on road trips. It was our only option.

Earlier that day, four sonic booms rang through our city, none of which stopped our meet up. Cigarette butts covered the floor more than usual, and our voices probably could have been heard all around the neighborhood. We were joined by my friend's displaced cousins who were both around our age.

The South was constantly being bombed by the Israeli Occupation Forces,⁹ but Karam and Saiid were a breath of fresh air to what all of us were experiencing. Usually, my friends and I would go on our phones and have the most random conversations, but that changed that night.

Introductions were necessary, and they weren't the *hi my name is* type.

After getting to know all of each other's names, Saiid was the first to say, "okay, now let's get to the real stuff."

"Who was the smartest one in school?" he unexpectedly asked first, blurring every line of formality between all of us.

It was between two of our group, and he rudely – and funnily – interrupted us after we couldn't decide, "okay, I don't even want to know anymore, but now what I definitely want to know is, who was the dumbest!"

Laughter roared within the hollows of our cozy night, Karam quieter than the rest of us. We couldn't decide on that answer either, yet an hour passed by until the awkward and amusing questioning halted. Karam was less chaotic throughout the whole night.

I noticed he was more of an observer than a conversation starter until he asked his own question, "where are you from?"

My pulse quickened for second. My friends went first, stating different areas in Lebanon. My pulse settled back down. He looked at me, waiting, "I'm actually Palestinian, I'm not originally from here," I finally said seconds later.

"Oh, I knew that already. Where from Palestine are you?" he said as if I'm the clueless one who should have expected him to know.

"Safad... how did you know though?"

"I could tell from your dialect... Safad is right by the borders, it's really cool that it's so close to Lebanon," he moved on from the existential crisis he didn't know he was giving me.

During the few seconds after that, all the years of trying not to be affected by this flashed in my brain. Pride and embarrassment flowed through my fingertips.

He was slightly puzzled by my own bewilderment, both confusion and clarity on my face.

"Yeah, they're pretty close," I replied, choosing comfort instead of despising the fact that he could hear the Palestinian in my Lebanese.

Three: Worn

*On my neck, gleaming,
I'm connected to my land.
Always kept: safe, sound.*

*Around the whole globe,
Everyone linked to the other,
Roots declared on chests.*

*The home within us,
Is not confined or hidden,
But loud and set free.*

I have always been aware of being Palestinian, but when I received my parent's gift on my sixteenth birthday, I was overcome with joy and pride. The golden chain that rests on my neck every day is a constant reminder of my homeland. I started noticing the amount of people who wear it. Singers, actors, relatives, friends. I discovered how it is a form of activism we all don't realize we are advocating for.

My own mom has one with her name engraved in the middle of the map, which she often described as "her in the heart of Palestine the way Palestine is in her heart." My best friend's mom has a map alongside the keffiyeh. Saint Levant,¹⁰ a Palestinian Algerian artist, has the borders of the map in rhinestones. The designs are incredibly countless that I occasionally find myself wanting to start a collection of all of them, but mine remains my own. My own piece of Palestine.

It did not take me long to realize how deep the resistance of wearing the map next to our hearts runs. It was a collective beacon of Palestine that we all kept safe on us and within

us. However, one incident stands out about a time where the confidence in its power and my identity faltered.

It was going to be another exhausting day at university in Beirut. Another day I had to wake up way too early to get on a bus, then in a taxi, to attempt getting to class on time. Another day I was worried about what my classmates and professors think about my being late almost daily.

Another day I silently screamed at myself for wearing sweatpants and a hoodie. I didn't really allow myself the luxury of waking up earlier to think about my outfit choices, and I was always too tired before I went to bed.

But it was also another day I wore my Palestinian map necklace. Another day the golden chain claimed my neck as its home. Another day it made me feel closer to Palestine more than anything ever could. The "فلسطين"¹¹ centered in the middle of the map glistened on the black of my hoodie, filling me with pride.

It was never a conscious decision to wear my *Palestine* necklace everywhere and all the time. Ever since I got it as a gift from my parents on my sixteenth birthday, it stayed there. I hadn't given it much thought until that morning.

I had gotten off the bus and was on my way to my university. The driver's chatter was completely ignored, and I could barely tell what he was talking about. I was too busy worrying about how my class had already started a few minutes ago to pay attention to anything he was saying. But knowing taxi drivers in Lebanon, he was most probably complaining about the traffic, the road, and everything in between.

Moments later, I was looking out the window when I heard him loudly say, "he's obviously a Syrian, what do we expect?" That caught my attention like nothing ever had, and my hand immediately went to the thin chain around my neck. I tucked it in my hoodie. Putting it away, hiding it, and concealing who I am with it. I was scared of being attacked like the person who was about to be slandered by the taxi driver.

A *Syrian*? How that contributed to how people drive cars, I didn't know. The traffic we were stuck in was obviously the fault of people's collective stubbornness and not because one single person did one wrong driving move.

The driver went on, "all those Syrians, they're the ones who ruined this country. They came here, took our jobs and our money, and now they get all the attention. All countries help THEM, why not us? I don't know. But, no, no, let's help the Syrians. They're the only ones that are struggling."

I was not one to engage with ignorant racist claims, especially when someone was clearly so set in their heads they would refuse to listen to any logical reasoning. I ignored the taxi driver as he went on and on saying the same things in different words. Even though I didn't say anything and tried my best to keep my face free of disgusted expressions, he got annoyed that I was not agreeing with him.

He occasionally glanced at me in the rear-view mirror for the rest of the slow twenty-minute car ride. It was physically difficult to stop myself from calling him out and defending the 'Syrian' man with everything in me, granted it was never confirmed the man was even Syrian. He could've been Lebanese for all we knew.

Not including myself in such a situation was a tough position to be put in. I so desperately wanted to talk back. Defend any person that was receiving any hate without them even knowing. I was in a situation where I could have spoken up and actually tried to make a difference, but I didn't. I was too scared. Too terrified that he might scream at me harder, kick me out of the car, or hurt me somehow.

I knew better than anyone that it was not any immigrant's fault what goes on in their country. What leads thousands of families and communities to flee their homes looking for safety is not an average person's daily punching bag. No one gave that driver the right to minimize those people's suffering by making fun of the way they drive or the type of politics they might be included in.

When I reached my university, I gave the driver what I owed him, muttered a faint *thank you*, and left as quickly as possible. I wanted to be away from the car and the situation and get to class. A class where I fortunately felt valued and loved. One that made me feel safe enough to take my necklace back out of my hoodie and be proud of what it represented.

The guilt of not saying anything to the taxi driver slowly ate at me. And by the time the class ended an hour and a half later, I was feeling pretty ashamed. Out of all people, I should have said something. A nineteen-year-old Palestinian university student should've been able to defend racist claims that were said by one ignorant person, I kept thinking.

I wish I had made him feel the disrespect and hate he was emitting into the world about people who share his struggles, but I didn't. I didn't say anything, and that cannot be reversed. Ever since that day though, I made sure my Palestinian map showed on every top I wore. I consciously flaunted it and made sure whoever saw me, saw it too.

Four: Denied

*Expelled from our north,
In this south, now we are trapped:
Colonized, expelled.*

*Dreamt about abroad,
everywhere I want to go.
Only if allowed.
Rejected because
golden words in the corner
determine my path.*

My whole life, I have dreamt of becoming a traveler. My dad's work in the United Arab Emirates and his willingness to travel for work every other month surprisingly did not make me hate his being away from home. My travel obsessions still fluctuate from wanting an apartment in New York City to dreaming about a safari in South Africa to admiring Japan's spring seasons. Those dreams were short-lived though.

The first realization of my Palestinian status hit when I was about ten years old. It had been the first day of fifth grade. After the teacher's introduction early in the morning, her first question was, "So, what did you do in the summer?"

The students started in turn, all excited to have a chance to tell everyone what they had done. I couldn't wait to tell them about how my grandma taught me so many things about

gardening and how I stayed over almost the whole summer. She even let me water the plants every morning, and I was so proud of that part.

“We went to Paris.”

“My mom took me shopping in Turkey.”

“We visited our cousins in Egypt.”

The flood of answers made my stomach churn, ‘I just spent it at my grandma’s house,’ my thoughts rewinded.

Only five people were ahead of me, it was almost my turn. With my excitement wearing off by the second, I didn’t think the truth would satisfy me, or my classmates.

One student tells the story of how his parents had promised him to make up for their lack of vacation time because his grandfather was sick. My heart rate quickened; I feared everyone would hear it.

A minute after, every pair of eyes in the room was on me. Waiting, expecting. In those split seconds I knew there was no coming back from, I decided to not say something different from what I was already planning, “I spent my summer with my grandma, and she gave me gardening lessons every day in her garden.”

The teacher replied with a variation of the same polite answer she was giving all of us, “that’s so cool, Wajd, I’ll have to check gardening out now.”

Later that day, while my dad was tucking me to bed, I asked, “why have we never traveled anywhere before?”

My dad didn’t reply right away; he sat on the end of my bed and started stroking my blanket over my legs. In his eyes, I recognized the same wheels that spun in my head right before I answered today.

“You know we are Palestinian refugees,” he started slowly, resulting in my impatient nods, “...and you know that it was colonized, and we had to leave.”

“Yes, dad I know, but why can’t we travel?” I insisted.

“Well, because of that, our ancestors had to take refuge in Lebanon... so we are now treated as refugees which doesn’t allow us to travel freely,” he said lightly and waited for my questions.

Both my breath and I stilled.

My dad sensing a shift carried on. “That is not your fault, my love, or mine, or mom’s... this is just how the world is at the moment... you can still travel when you grow up.”

“How? If no one can, how can I?” I breathed out, the warmth of his strokes paused over the blanket.

“It’s not an always thing. Sometimes, with the right reasons, you can, but you know what the most important thing is? Not only to travel, but in general as well?” he asked. I nodded questioningly waiting. “That you stay on top of your studies and your hobbies, that’s the best thing you can do to succeed, ever.”

He let me ponder it for a few minutes, and before getting up to turn my lights off he said, “then you will be even more special... than all the special you already are.”

That realization I had at age nine, prepared me for the one I had at eighteen. I can imagine how angrier at the world I would be if I never gradually learned about the realities of travel if one is a Palestinian refugee. After my father’s words, I still had some hope in traveling the world one day.

That was until my uncle got in a car accident in the United States and was paralyzed from the neck down. Thankfully, my dad’s work in the United Arab Emirates helped soften his Palestinian Refugee passport, and his visa application to the US Embassy was accepted. He was able to go see his brother and offer him the immediate support he needed.

However, it took four more years after his accident for my mom, my sister, and me to consider visiting, financial reasons keeping us away. He had to live at a clinic due to his condition, and we wanted nothing more than to give him the warmth that only family can, even if for a short amount of time.

Nothing can come close to the insufferable days my parents and I struggled to fill the US visa application or to the places my mom and I had to drive to get every single document ready in time. Envy creeps into my chest whenever I see a relative or a friend outside the country because even when it comes to sickness, we are not allowed the luxury to go through it. It takes conscious effort to not break whatever is in front of me when I remember the day we got there.

My mom had woken me up at five in the morning. A layer of sweat was dampening my usually dry skin, mid-August evident on my face. I got out of bed quickly not wanting to be part of waking my 13-year-old sister up.

Less than an hour later we were on the road, the taxi driver picking us up. I have no recollection of the drive there because I went back to sleep the moment the car started moving, but I could feel the wind shift from crisp to thick as the time dragged on. The envelope tight to my chest, my fathers’ words echoed endlessly in my head, “you take the lead, Wajd.”

I had double—triple and quadruple as per my dad’s demands— checked these documents the night before and the moment before we left the house, taking care of them like a precious baby.

It had been a few weeks since my parents decided that we were going to apply to the US visa so we could visit my uncle in the US, and the last half an hour of the three-hour long drive was revision time. My dad was at work, outside the country, but he managed to call and go over a few things with me.

“Remember to ask for the English speaker, I hear they are more merciful,” his first note was.

I wanted to argue that the language one speaks does not determine their capacity for compassion, but I held back. The day was nerve-wracking for all of us.

My mom was listening to every word he was saying, even if ‘I was to lead’ the interview. I was the best English speaker in the family, and they both seemed to think that it would get

us the approval. My sister had her headphones in, blocking everything, and everyone, out. Not a care about dad's second note.

"Remember to mention that you have a high financial aid percentage. Also, remember that you—RIGHT, you also go to an American university!!!" he interrupted his own thought.

I could not find more alternatives for 'okay' and 'I won't forget,' not that he was listening. His worry and nervousness for us was justified, yet it settled down when we got to the embassy after that one last note. We were an hour early which mom took as a good omen, as if the roads outside didn't sense us before the sun. The file still tight in my arms made it through two security checkpoints at the entrance. Then, we were in.

The place did not uphold its reputation; I was still more nervous at a dentist's clinic. Blue waiting chairs with silver legs were all around the room, yet no one was warming any of those seats. A line had already formed, making us 12th in the queue. The first person was standing exactly on the red scotch tape line on the floor facing the first window, staring, waiting. The white, fluorescent lights made everyone look like they're in wait for some sort of reaping. Only the four empty windows in the walls stared back into our souls.

A few minutes later, a woman no older than 40 appeared in the window and gestured for the man to come to the window, triggering the turn.

The first two in the turn got their visa approved, their passports now with the woman, their smiles worn brightly on their faces as they left.

The third man was moving to the States for a job, his suit well showcasing the professionalism I overheard him telling her about. She did not say much to him, just asked him a few questions and hummed at his direct answers. Seconds later, a printer interrupted the room's already harsh silence. Her voice dropped a note, but I could hear her, "the reasons are mentioned on this paper." He murmured a soft *thank you* and started walking away. Only then did I notice that he had a passport like ours. The Palestinian Refugee Travel Document passport.¹² Those words on the corner, golden and life changing. On my passport, on his, and in my being.

The fourth were a couple who bonded with her about wine as well as visiting their pregnant daughter in New York. She wished them a safe delivery and took their passport, the Lebanese one.

I started taking note of each and every one, eyeing the people's hands as their arms were raised to and from the hole at the bottom of the glass window. Until it was our turn, every person with the normal Lebanese passport was on the other side of the window to be stamped with the visa and mailed to their correspondent owners. Whereas the Palestinian passports hung from disappointed hands. Their applicants leaving with their heads to the floor, eyes clinging to the hopelessness of its carpets.

The fleeting moments before we walked up to the window my brain was spiraling.

I am the lead.

I go to an American university.

I have financial aid I cannot let go of.

I am not emigrating.

I just want to visit my sick uncle.

I am the lead, I am the lead, I am the lead.

The woman smiled at me and asked for our names, humming at my sufficient answers. I found myself cursing her hums in my head, wondering if we were going to be walking away like the man in the suit.

She asked about my university and my career aspirations, wondered about the severity of my uncle's situation. And during my expression of his fading mental health and distance away from his family, I heard her press a few keys on her keyboard. Precision I was sure she was used to. As she was saying it, I blocked out the statement I heard at least four times this morning. I reached out for the passports, my hands shaking, hers steady, already looking at the application interview number 13.

'Not even for my sick uncle' hummed in my head as I walked out, glad I left unaware of what color those carpets were.

Five: Ostracized

*A residency,
not even officially,
became my real home.*

*It aches from within,
I cannot offer defense
For its caving holes.*

*Grandparents take it
as refuge, but are treated
like unwelcomed guests.*

I have always thought that even if I was not Lebanese, I am responsible for trying my best to make it a better place. I am not strange to the political divides Lebanon had been facing ever since its independence, but I especially became aware of the magnitude of every issue when the October 17 revolt¹³ broke out.

With all that I am, I grew up feeling as much Lebanese as I was Palestinian. My connection to my Palestinian heritage only made my attachment to Lebanon deeper. Even at a young age I was conscious of the shared history the two peoples had, making it impossible for me not to believe in the change that comes upon resilience.

In 2019, most Lebanese people banded into revolution due to the country's pressures rising on all of them. For the first time in my whole life, I got a sense of what an undivided Lebanon would look like. My parents made sure to never let my love for my countries diminish in any way; all parts of me ached for Lebanon's potential and for the contributions I could hope to make to its prosperity. The events of October 17 jolted that longing right out of me.

My parents were the first ones to call out the awfully stable past couple of years in Lebanon. And I had been only sixteen when it started. News of taxation over WhatsApp and other possible internet usage emerged. I could assume the state of every single household in the country. I didn't need to though; the people raided the streets. The TV in our house stood on its last leg because of how many times the news channels were switched to. It was not purely about the WhatsApp taxes anymore. The plethora of the government's shortcomings erupted.

Through the television screen my parents were glued to I saw the Lebanese people charge to the streets. Pregnant women with their husbands, children with their grandparents, and many teenagers with their friends. Lebanese flags were rising high, every difference that split them before forgotten.

My patience was unraveling with every interview I watched live from the streets. One particular time, I was watching the news in my room and even though I usually just let it play in the background, one voice agreeing to be interviewed caught my ears.

The reporter had asked the man, "Why are you here on the streets today?"

"I came down here to show the rulers of our country that they will never break us... because despite the conflicts THEY created between us, we are all here together," he expressed devotedly with the flag as a cape hung on his neck and on his back, like a superhero willing to risk it all.

The sweat dripping down on his forehead reminded me of the revolutions around the world. His smile and pride in his people allowed a scene of an olive trees field and 'Yeba'a Enna' by Adonis¹⁴ in my mind.

Moments after the reporter moved to another person, I walked to the living room, ready to initiate my friends and me in joining the people's marches, my parents' permission being the first step. They were the most righteous people I knew; it must be easy.

They were both sitting on the couch, the air in the room lingering with the coffee they had after breakfast that morning, the TV on as usual.

"Can you take me to Elia Square tomorrow?" I decided to get to the point immediately. "What's in Elia Square?" my dad asked first. My eyes almost bugged out, "What do you mean? That's going on," I pointed to the TV. "What does that have to do with us?" my mom jumped in. I was too stunned to speak, understanding straight away what she meant. I had to take a few breaths.

"We live in this country as well, you know," I declared, treading lightly. "We know we live in this country, but you know that although admirable, this won't get anywhere," my dad declared right back. "How do you know? The more the people put pressure on the government, the more they will be forced to change," I said. "You know that's not how it works, and let's say it does... What do you think we have to do with it? We will be cast out as usual, unable to take any decisions, even when it comes to our own rights and lives," my dad explained. "That's different, what everyone is protesting for affects all of us, every resident in Lebanon, not only its citizens," I retorted. My mom jumped back in, "did you forget that we are not even residents? We are simply refugees, Wajd, not everything that applies to the Lebanese applies to us."

Both of them were clearly done with the explaining they thought should not even be necessary.

I went back to my room, my thoughts altered and my heart pounding, hating that my parents gave me constant reality checks when I least wanted them. Unsureness flowed

through my fingers as I turned the TV off and aimed for my bed, a new inner voice coming out.

You are failing the country that took your grandparents in, I thought.
The country that took you in failed you, the voice in my head countered.
How? I thought.
You know how, I don't need to tell you, you remember, it said.

I had been only eleven when we moved from our house that my parents had to pay rent for every month. The new one was one that my dad owned, and I was over the moon. My mom and dad tried their best to not burden me and my sister in any of our family's financial burdens, always providing for us in any way we needed, yet they always taught us the value of money and how to deal with it. But I was always aware of what was going on, and this was about to change our family's life for the better of the best.

"Does this mean if you die, I become the new owner?" I had asked my dad when we first moved in.
"Are you waiting for me to die now, then?" my dad replied, a glimmer of his laugh evident in his voice.
"Well, I was just wondering, genuine non-morbid question." I laughed.
"Well, I hate to tell you, but I don't really own the house, my cousin does," he explained.
"What do you mean? Why? I thought we bought the house?" I said, frowning.
"Palestinian refugees are not allowed to own property in Lebanon," he clarified, my 12-year-old brain too optimistic to understand why that would not be permitted.

At the memory of realizing I could never actually own any land in the country I lived in, my heart sank, my body with it in the cold bed regardless of the summer heat.

The voice was right. I did remember. I knew what it meant to be Palestinian in this country. Yet, many parts of me gnawed at me for change and revolution, not wanting to be any different in the way I could fight for the two countries that inhabited my soul.

The streets never saw my will to march and scream for the rest of the October 17 Lebanese revolution. It died down in the end, the economy crashing like it never had before. Nothing changed for the Palestinians in particular, but so much was deteriorating for everyone else.

Six: Occupied

*Child one has a toy,
the best. It makes them happy.
They love it the most.*

*Two takes it away,
Parents do not really care,
"children fight sometimes."*

*My sister gasps, says
"but it was their favorite."
Used, and occupied.*

People have always been curious about the way my sister and I grew up due to the unconventional age gap between us. I never felt like five years was an actual age gap, but

being the first child in the family left its mark on the responsibilities I was given, most importantly ones that have to do with being Palestinian.

Our parents have taught me and Haya everything about Palestine. To this day our dad regularly pulls up the “can you name 20 cities in Palestine?” question in random conversations. They have always kept our knowledge of our homeland wider than all our loves for it combined.

Yet, as glamorous as any parent tries to paint the beloved homeland, there comes necessary fundamental heartache with a Palestinian refugee realizing the truth about their homeland as a child. The moment I registered the truth about the Palestinian cause and why it even exists has always been ungraspable in my mind, always lost. I don’t want to find it, have always preferred to keep it locked away wherever it is hidden.

However, my sister’s moment is always fresh in my memory. It plays every time we bring up anything related to our country. And it is forever alive in the first-ever poem I have written, ‘Occupied.’

It had started as an average day on a sleep-filled weekend. I was usually up by six in the morning, and ready to go to school by seven, so I took advantage of every extra minute of sleep I could get, until my energetic little sister got bored and woke me up.

That day, she had been way too excited and ready. Ready to play. Ready to read. Ready to watch television. Just ready. We did everything together. Ever since she was born, I considered her my actual baby, the one I was meant to take care of and protect.

We had breakfast, and we started the quest of another day taken up by random sister activities. Immediately after helping our mom with the dishes, we hit up Haya’s coloring station. And from the wide selection my dad prints for us at the beginning of every year, she chose a picture of a butterfly, handing me a similar one of a ladybug. That was short-lived though, she got bored after coloring only the left wings of the butterfly, declaring, “this will take too much time, let’s go watch TV.”

We picked—she commanded—the channel that does regular reruns of SpongeBob SquarePants episodes.

“You will get bored of this too,” I sang to her.

“No, I won’t,” she did it right back.

Three ten-minute episodes later, she started huffing and looking to the side of my face. I slowly turned to her, a smirk on mine.

“Okay, okay, I got bored, let’s do something else,” she exclaimed.

“What do you want to do?” I questioned, letting her boss the day, and me, around.

She looked around our living room, finger to her mouth, imitating smoking a cigarette. A cackle came out of me uncontrollably. She is too funny and smart for her age, I thought.

Then, two second later, she smacked my shoulder with her hand and screamed, “TAG!”

“Oh, you did not just start this war,” I yelled back, Haya already in the hallways heading to our room.

I ran slower though, not wanting to disturb my mom’s peace watering the flowers outside. Haya’s version of tag was different; she ran away and hid, switching the game to hide and

seek. I looked around our room for a minute. And as expected, she was under my bed with a fake body made out of her stuffed animals under her blanket on hers. I decided not to play dumb in that moment and not aim for the animals first, the way I normally would.

“HA!” I shouted, leaning down and looking into her gleaming eyes. A wild shriek burst out of her as her foot knocked down the things on my nightstand.

I ran to the floor, checking if my Jerusalem snow globe broke, despite the fact that we would have definitely heard it and seen it shattered on the floor if it had broken. A few nervous sighs could be heard in the quiet of the room as I put everything back on the nightstand. Ready to move on with our day, I looked back at my sister, her guilty eyes staring into mine with apology.

“It’s fine, nothing happened,” I assured her.

That didn’t satisfy her, her eyes darted to the nightstand.

“Haya, don’t worry it’s good, nothing happened, what should we do now?” I tried to assure her seven-year-old guilt.

“Why have we never been there?” she asked, surprisingly.

I had always known that was coming, but I didn’t know I was going to be the one to deal with it. I, of course, could have called my mom and let her explain, but that didn’t sit well with me. She is my baby sister, I should be the one to do it, I thought, ultimately deciding against letting one of our parents give her the truth.

I sighed, and started, “we cannot visit there very easily, because a long time ago, before our grandparents came to Lebanon, some people who loved Palestine wanted it for themselves, and they did everything they could to take it from us.”

I hoped that would be it; my heart already heavy.

“Why did they want it? How did they take it? Why did no one stop them? Where was the army? The people in the movies didn’t help us?” Her stream of questions came at me rapidly, filling out my lungs with unbreathable air.

“It’s like this, look,” I said as I went to her bed, took the blanket off her stuffed animals.

I grabbed a few of them and organized them on the floor in front of us. One bear holding a toy on one side with another bear facing it, holding nothing, on the other. The rest, noticeably bigger than the first three, farther away facing the two bears.

Haya was watching me with weary eyes, her mind clicking with ideas trying her best to understand what I was trying to do.

When I finished setting the scene up for her, I lay on the bed, my hands reaching down, my fake voices ready.

“I love my globe so much, I’m so glad I have it, I love it more than anything,” Bear One said.

“I like Bear One’s globe, I want one too,” Bear Two said to the crowd of bears behind the both of them, as I turned it slowly to face them.

I held one of the background stuffed animals as it addressed Bear Two, “we don’t have a globe like that to give you, ask Bear One to play, maybe you can become friends.”

"I don't want to be friends with anyone, but if that will get me the globe, of course!" Bear two exclaimed as I pushed it closer to Bear One, "Hi Bear One, can I play with you?" "Yes! But only for a little while," Bear One was excited to have a new friend.

They played for a bit, Haya more excited with every second; I could already tell she was going to ask me for more stuffed animal plays later on. She patiently waited for what was going to happen next, closer to me and the stuffed animal with every second that passed by.

Bear Two got more excited, "can I borrow your globe, Bear One?"

"Yes! But only for a little while, we both need to go home soon!" Bear One was happy its new friend was happy.

"Thank you, Bear One!"

A few seconds later of playing, Bear One said, "can I have my globe back, Bear Two?"

"No! I love this toy, it's mine now." Bear Two finalized their disagreement, and I imitated it walking away from Bear One, its back to all the other stuffed animals.

But Bear One did not give up; it followed Bear Two and tried again, "Bear Two! It is my toy; you stole it from me!"

Bear Two pretended it couldn't hear, "la la la la, laaaa," coming out of me as its singing voice.

Bear One was confused, Haya's expression mirroring what its emotions would be if it was real. I turned it to face the crowd behind them again. "Did you see him take my globe? Tell him to give it back."

I shook another animal from the crowd, "just let it play for a little while, you'll have your globe in no time."

Bear One tried to reason with them. I could hear Haya thinking out loud. Asking 'why?' repeatedly, murmuring that it was Bear One's favorite toy. After a few tries of Bear One trying to get its toy back, the crowd of bears turned their back on the whole scene unfolding.

The whole time the stuffed animals' play was going on, my eyes never went to Haya. I could hear her hums and sighs, and I could feel her thoughts taking over her brain. I never doubted her ability to understand, but what blew the air out of my lungs was the way she grabbed Bear Two as she took the globe from him. She put it back on my nightstand, placed Bear One behind it, its hands cradling the glass, and said, "Bear Two will never take it again."

ENDNOTES

1. Edward W. Said (1935–2003) was a Palestinian American literary critic, theorist, and public intellectual known for his foundational work in postcolonial studies (Encyclopedia Britannica). Reflections on *Exile and Other Essays* is a collection of essays exploring themes of exile, displacement, and the experience of living between cultures.
2. Ghassan Kanafani was a Palestinian writer, journalist, and prominent member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), known for his influential works of fiction that depict the struggles of Palestinian displacement and resistance. His notable works include *Men in the Sun* (1963) and *Returning to Haifa* (1969), which highlight themes of loss, exile, and identity.
3. Liana Badr is a Palestinian novelist, filmmaker, and cultural activist known for her works that explore themes of exile, displacement, and the experiences of Palestinian women. Her most notable novel, *The Eye of the Mirror* (1991), portrays the siege of the Tel al-Zaatar refugee camp, highlighting the resilience and suffering of its inhabitants.
4. Susan Abulhawa is a Palestinian American novelist, poet, and human rights activist best known for her debut novel *Mornings in Jenin* (2010), which depicts the Palestinian experience of dispossession, exile, and generational trauma through the story of one family. Her works highlight the enduring impact of forced migration and the struggle for Palestinian identity.
5. The Palestinian refugee identification card is a document issued by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) to registered Palestinian refugees. It serves as proof of refugee status and grants access to various humanitarian services, including education, healthcare, and relief assistance provided by UNRWA.
6. "Fida'i" was declared the national anthem of Palestine in 1972; it reflects the struggle and resilience of the Palestinian people (Palestine).
7. The *keffiyeh* is a traditional Palestinian scarf. It is characterized by its distinctive black-and-white checkered pattern, each part of it characterizing a different symbol of resilience of the Palestinian people (Mohammad, 2023).
8. Towards the end of 2024, a series of attacks targeted multiple areas in Lebanon, intensifying the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hezbollah. These attacks led to significant displacement of civilians and heightened regional tensions.
9. "Israeli occupation forces" is a term used to describe the Israeli military presence in the territories occupied after the 1967 Six-Day War, including the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza (prior to the 2005 withdrawal). The term is widely used in political and academic discourse to critique the military governance of these areas (Relief Web, 2023).
10. Saint Levant, born Marwan Abdelhamid, is a Palestinian Algerian artist and musician. His work often blends English, Arabic, and French, reflecting his multicultural heritage and addressing themes of identity, diaspora, and love.
11. "Palestine" in Arabic.
12. The Palestinian Refugee Travel Document, sometimes referred to as a passport, is issued to Palestinian refugees by host countries such as Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, and others. It facilitates international travel but does not confer full citizenship rights or national status (LibGuides Lebanon).
13. Lebanon's October 17 Revolt began in 2019 as mass protests against government corruption, economic mismanagement, and a proposed tax on WhatsApp calls. The demonstrations rapidly grew into a nationwide movement demanding political reform and accountability (Amnesty International, 2021).
14. "Yeba'a Ana," released in 2021, is a song by Adonis, a Lebanese indie band. It explores themes of courage, resistance against oppression, and the quest for authenticity. The lyrics emphasize honesty in confronting reality, the resilience required to fight systemic injustices, and the personal sacrifice that comes with rejecting hollow causes and false idols.

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