

Prologue: The Black Day

Anaheed Al-Hardan

Come here grandmother, take a seat next to me, and let us be very clear. Tell me about those lines that crease your olive skin, leaving behind them endless trails of a thousand silent sorrows. Of the lost world in which only comfortable familiarity arose on the edge of the eastern sun towards the lands of the Prophet and dutifully set in the west towards the lands of those people who they told you were the Crusaders. Those days in which your friends were the laurel and the carob trees, and in which your lives were named with vivid events. The seasons that you marked with the harvests, and the harvests that marked your children's births. And what of the feelings that overtook you when you walked in your own orchards and vineyards? Tell me of that time that was pulled from underneath your feet, grandmother, leaving you to float in the eternal abyss of timeless loss.

What of the Black Day in which the whole world was usurped, in which you found yourself pushed out of your own existence? Tell me, grandmother, was it the smoke of the flames that engulfed our village above that forever signified Black Day? Or was it awaking in the darkness of the night, to the sounds of the bullets that shook the sky, and embarking upon those familiar paths that were suddenly swollen by the strange and sinister darkness ... The night in which your whole world

fell prey to the hyenas and in which the little ones' cries for water were hushed with drops of dew. That same night in which it was your mother instincts, I'm sure, that pushed you on those paths, from one village to another, until you found yourself sleeping under another's almond trees, with only the sky as your cover.

Let me touch your sun beaten skin, grandmother, and look in those brown eyes that spent half a century in an unknown world, condemned to exile under the harsh sun of the eastern desert. What of that silent suffering to which your dignity refused to even let the tears of the refugee flow? Did you find the sweetness of the dates that you came to collect from underneath the palm trees for a living, grandmother, or was sweetness too left behind in the homeland, along with all the joyful colours of the greenery that surrounded us? And what of your children who opened their eyes only to tales of another landscape, dotted with mountains and chains of stone-wall terraces, to find themselves in a land whose yellow sand stretched to infinity...?

Did you only then look back at those people, the same unfamiliar people of the Crusaders' lands, who you thought had arrived at the edges of our village to live alongside us? Was it only when the rattles of those unfamiliar words, of *kadima*, *kadima* (advance

in Hebrew), rang in your ears that it all became clear? What of those people you told me about, the Jews of our homeland, grandmother, who warned you of the unfamiliar Jews who hadn't arrived to just live with us...? The ones you met in the fields, grandmother, the ones you spoke to, the ones who were as alien to the ruggedness of our homeland as we would later become amidst the never-setting sun and the desert of the east.

And what of your grandchildren? What of this prologue that I carry on my shoulders, which half a century later, still finds me revisiting that beginning, the beginning of the dream that would become barren of all meaning and of all time...? How can I undo the Black Day, and the burning injustice which poignantly torments the depth of my soul? An injustice which I can define and calculate, grandmother, because I opened my eyes to the city and the concrete, to books and words that you cannot read, books and words that did not need to be read in a homeland of rocks and of olive trees, of buried tablets and hidden scrolls that existed on the edge of your world. How can I explain our dispossession, grandmother, to people

who deny your existence; to articulate, to reason - and how much of your sadness will it extinguish?

Forgive me grandmother, if I speak with a different language while running my hands through your white hair. For I opened my eyes in the shade of your world, a world that was denied to me, yearning for those places you describe and knowing that the scattered rocks of your homes is all that remains of our village. They even destroyed our cemetery, grandmother, the final resting place of our dead, of our forefathers. And I am still here, breathing and feeling, as rootless as a floating feather, denied a homeland and our ancestors. And you, grandmother, you spent your final days calling out for that lost world, overtaken by the same confusion that overwhelmed you on the Black Day, before they lay you down into your final sleep, somewhere underneath the desert sand of that cruel eastern sun.

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