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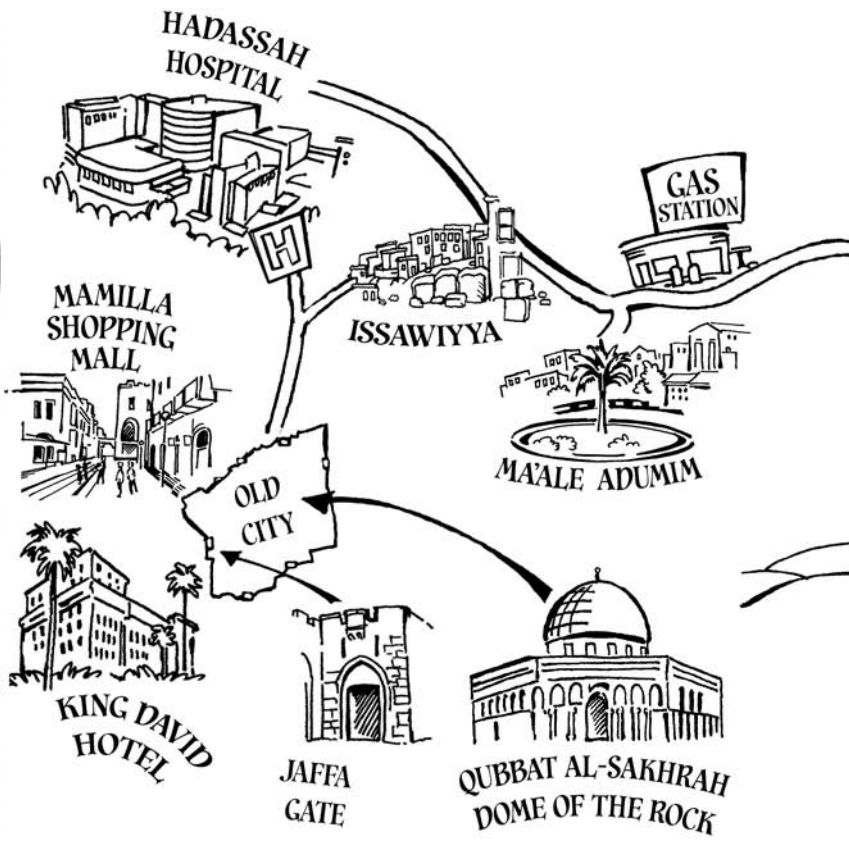


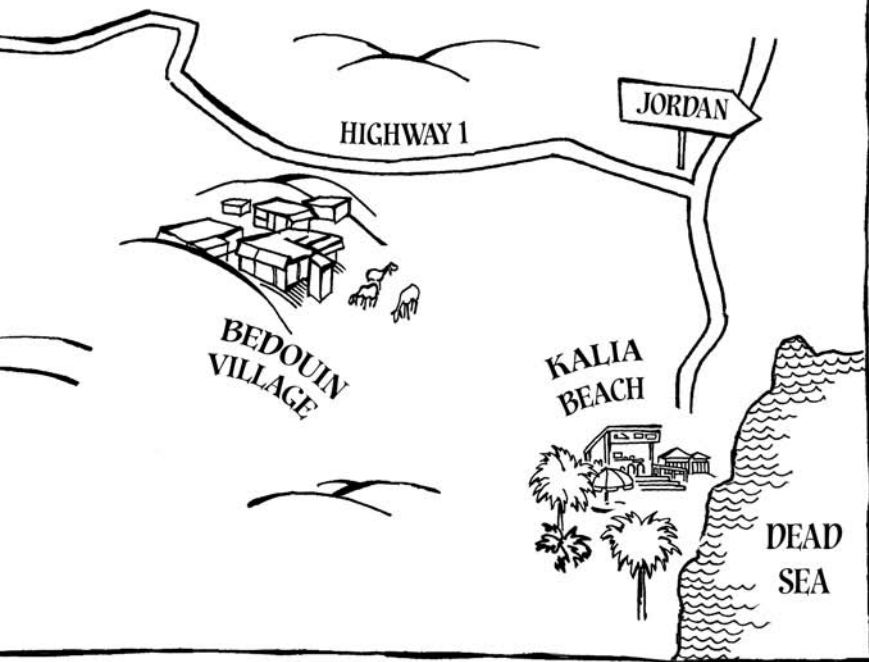
Every story is informed by something: a thought,
an image, or a character, perhaps. In this case
it was a single sentiment expressed by my cousin,
who lives in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

We are tired. We want peace.

—Detective Inspector William Daniel,
Royal Ulster Constabulary (Retired),
Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE)

JERUSALEM AND SURROUNDING AREA





Prologue

This is the story of Sam and Yusuf. Sam is Jewish and an Israeli. Yusuf is Muslim and a Palestinian. Both were born into war. Two horrific events would change their world forever.

Yusuf

Beit Lahm (Bethlehem), West Bank

Yusuf steps out of the house and races across the small courtyard. Mama's pigeons flap their wings furiously against the wooden bars of their cages as his shoes slap against the packed earth.

Ducking under an olive tree that curls around the door, Yusuf yanks the iron knob and steps into the road. Noisy goats trot toward him, kicking up swirls of fine yellow sand, and the dusty goatherd follows behind, keeping some sort of order by wielding his long crook.

Yusuf spots his father walking farther down the road and raises his hand in greeting. But Baba's eyes are cast down, his face creased by worry and too much sunshine. On most days

Baba wears Western-style trousers and a white shirt, but today his head is wrapped in a *keffiyeh*. His streaked gray beard is cropped shorter than those of most Palestinian men, and his white shirt and baggy pants balloon out as he walks.

“Baba!” Yusuf calls.

Baba waves back, and before long he is standing in front of his son. “Look how tall you are, Yusuf. Soon I will be looking up into your eyes. Where are you going?”

“Mama wants me to find Nasser and bring him home,” Yusuf replies, half hoping that Baba will say, “No. Walk with me instead.” But his father’s face darkens at the sound of his firstborn son’s name. His parents worry a lot about Nasser, about the trouble he gets into.

“Go and get your brother.” Baba waves Yusuf on. “And tie your shoes.” Now Baba smiles—a rare sight. Yusuf would never tie his shoes again if it meant that his father would keep smiling.

Yusuf knows where to look for Nasser. With the laces on his running shoes tied tight, he runs down narrow, crowded streets, up onto wooden walkways, through laneways, across open sewers and muck patches before coming to Manger Square in the middle of Beit Lahm.

As usual, sweaty tourists are swigging water from plastic bottles as they perch on a wall near the little door that leads into the Christian church. The Christians call his city

Bethlehem, the place where their Savior, Jesus, was born. But Jesus was a Jew, Yusuf thinks, so why do the Christians call themselves Christians instead of Jews? It's confusing. Baba explained it once but it didn't help.

Yusuf races across the open square paved with polished stones, past the flagpoles, the falafel seller, and a café serving carrot, fig, and pomegranate juice. The sweet smell of bread and pastries wafts from a restaurant. But when Yusuf makes a sharp turn up the road the streets become steep and narrow. Laundry lines are slung across alleyways, over twisted TV antennas, satellite dishes, shade canopies, and slack black wires strung from house to house.

“Hey, Yusuf!”

At the top of Frères Street, Yusuf turns to see Mazen and Yasser running toward him, their silhouettes blurred against the noonday sun. Lately Yusuf has been having trouble seeing things clearly. His mother gave him his uncle's thick, black-rimmed glasses, but when he tried them on, his older sister, Mira, said that he looked like a giant bug. Now he'd rather be blind than wear them.

“Yusuf, here!” Mazen stops and pulls back his leg, and a great, whirling, fuzzy orb comes hurtling toward Yusuf. He stops it with his foot—it's a new, scuff-free American soccer ball.

When he kicks it back it sails over his friends' heads. “Yes! Call me Salem, the best Palestinian soccer player of

all time!” Yusuf does a victory dance. “Where did you get the ball?”

“My cousin in America.” Mazen beams with pride.

Now Yasser is motioning to the others—he has something he wants to show them. He pulls a potato out of his pocket and holds it up in the air.

“How about we stuff this in the tailpipe of Abu Azam’s car?”

All three gaze across the street to a café, where Abu Azam is sitting on a spindly chair in front of a gently turning fan. He is sipping carrot juice, sucking on a water pipe, and rolling dice, all at the same time. His patched-up car—part Toyota, part Honda, with a bunch of Russian parts thrown in—is parked on a hill nearby.

Yusuf and Mazen nod in unison. No one deserves a potato shoved up his pipe more than Abu Azam. He’s mean. He’ll give a kid a smack, twist his ear, even kick him in the pants. And for what? For nothing!

“Come on.” Mazen grabs the potato out of Yasser’s hand and leads the way, with Yasser and Yusuf hot on his heels.

Crouching behind a pile of bricks, Yusuf and Yasser watch as Mazen ducks, zigzags, and weaves until he reaches the car. When he glances back over his shoulder, Yasser and Yusuf give him the all-clear signal. Then Mazen rams the potato into the tailpipe and gives it a swift smack

with a flat palm. He scurries back to the others like a crab on a beach.

“How do we get him to start the car?” whispers Yusuf.

“He has to be getting hungry—it’s past time for *ghada*. He’ll leave soon, be patient,” Yasser hisses. By the look of Abu Azam’s belly he seldom misses the main meal of the day.

Sure enough, Abu Azam bids good day to the men in the café, slowly walks over to his car, and gets in.

“Wait, look!” Yasser points to an Israeli military convoy roaring toward them through the dust—four armored vehicles in a line. Soldiers, some pointing guns, peer out from the vehicles. They are clearly on high alert.

“Yusuf, look! There’s your brother.” Mazen nudges him.

Yusuf looks directly across the street, and there is Nasser, standing on a wooden walkway, transfixed. What’s he looking at? What’s that in his hand?

Now the convoy is bearing down. Yusuf looks back at his brother. Is he holding a rock? Nasser steps off the walkway and is now at the edge of the road.

“Nasser!” Yusuf leaps up. Cars, bikes, and trucks veer off the path of the oncoming convoy. Abu Azam puts his keys in the ignition. The convoy is almost upon them.

“Nasser, you will get in trouble. Think about Mama. Think about Baba,” Yusuf whispers under his breath.

The convoy is directly in front of him. Nasser lifts his arm and takes aim. Yusuf screams, “*Nasser, no!*”

Yusuf doesn't see it coming. How could he? A sharp bang. Is it a gunshot? The pain is searing. One moment he is reeling backward and the next he is on fire. "*Yusuf!*" he hears Mazen scream. And then, nothing.