

أطفال الندى

Children of the Dew

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On a hilltop that is almost flat, on the southern end of Mount Carmel, lies the Palestinian village of Umm al-Zeinat—"The Mother of all Beauty." One can reach her from several routes, contrary to the two roads that encyclopedias insist lead up to her height of 317 meters above sea level. The first is a paved road, 38 km, connecting to Haifa through Mount Carmel, and the second a road of 24 km, through the Ibn 'Amer Meadow.

The routes to Umm al-Zeinat are many, and its villagers are practiced at finding new paths through the rocky land, cacti and wild hawthorn. In the distance, a rugged road extends to Umm al-Daraj, a freshwater spring—its name connected to a battle the revolutionaries of 1936 led against the British forces. And setting off with complete freedom, far from the paved roads, villagers can make their way south to the villages of Umm al-Showf and Umm al-Fahem. Owing to the skill of the peasants, all routes lead to and start from Umm al-Zeinat. As for the tree-barren al-Maleh Valley, "The Valley of Salt," it remained a crossing the peasants remember well on their route to the east of Palestine. That was before the valley filled with trees in accordance with the prophecy of Sheikh Hamza.

All these routes and places connect to events, as there is no site that doesn't connect to a memory of some incident. Were we to observe the details of these events and places through time stretching back beyond a generation or two, through hundreds of generations, we would have an epic tale testifying to the human history, one "summarized" to a great extent in reference books and encyclopedias.

Umm al-Zeinat is a small village that rebelled, as told by

the official record of the Zionist colonizers, against the state's "authority"—that is, against the Partition Plan issued by the United Nations, making this village part of what they named "Israel." And like all of the archives and the summarized histories in encyclopedias, the decision was made to obliterate every detail, every human trace from that small spot.

But I remember that my grandfather was there one year out of the many years of this turbulent century, perhaps during the 1920s. He awoke one morning with the dawn and the rooster's crowing to descend to Haifa. And after he saddled his horse, he leaned against a cushion in the living room, drinking his coffee and smoking his first rolled cigarette of the day. As if the story is part of a myth, my grandmother sensed that he was late and went to warn him that the sun had risen and the sea waves had started to glisten in front of Haifa lying on the slope, only to find him still reclining, his head slumped to the side—he was dead.

And my mother narrates that my grandmother's grief was so great, so irreplaceable was he, that she beat her chest with stones.

The decision was made to erase the details and the details of the details, even those that I capture—me, the young boy, like someone trying to capture a dream, but all he finds in his hands are images. No movement, an image from here, and another image from there. But I awake after all these years and a whole village moves inside of me with all its routes, knowing that the schoolbooks only describe a road or two, but our elders know hundreds of routes that lead to and start from Umm

al-Zeinat.

The well of Al-Haramas—"The well of Lions." How many times have I heard this name roll off the tongue, especially my mother's, as she utters it in relation to some event that happened there. The villager doesn't know how to narrate an incident without it being associated with a place. Time could not be measured with abstract numbers, but only by lived experiences, the years of harvest and drought, the revolution, the *fitna*, the arrival of the English to besiege the homes and destroy their summer and winter rations. They mixed the olive oil with whitewash, the wheat with soil, and even chased chickens to crush their heads into plaster.

The Al-Haramas well floods me with affection, the source of which is unknown to me as one who has never once visited. But I can envision it, so it becomes part of my memory, and the name strikes me when I read it in books written differently, like this: "Al-H'aramas." How strange this name is, forced, to such an extent that I don't hesitate to liken it to a settlement built on top of the village of childhood. And I read that after they destroyed our village, the Zionist colonizers built a settlement close by, one kilometer away, which they called "Elyakim." Another empty name that means nothing. And I don't even know how this colony looks today. All I know is that the foundations of the houses of our village still stand, and extending a trellis in and around them are the cacti, olive and wild hawthorn trees. They reside there, trees breeding on the land and stones, becoming a forest. But when this forest burns, it will reveal the homes and all routes that lead to the village, those both paved and unpaved. Regards to the colonialist writer Abra-

ham Yehoshua, who, through his numerous nightmares, saw my village appearing after the forest was burnt down. This settler had enough time to dream my same dream at the time I was a refugee, effacing its details and the details of the dreamers.

Is it not my right to reclaim my details from the books, from the dreams of others who spoke about me and saw my vision before I reached adulthood? Is it not my right to object the UN resolutions that ignore my name and the name of my grandfather? They even ignore that Umm al-Zeinat's history cannot be known, in the same way we cannot know the history of a rose.

They have decided for us one or two routes, but there are many. When you move away from our village, spread like the palm of a hand on top of that low slope on the south of al-Carmel, and descend into the thickets of olive trees, you discover a house or two built in the heart of the greenery, and past them, the path extends south, north, east and west and everywhere between. And when the road coming from Haifa passes to the side of our house and ascends to the village, my brother back then descends from the only known bus. Our beloved greyhound hurries toward him, and we dared to extend our little hands to his panting mouth, granting to the memory something vivid. That was his blood when one of the villagers returned and hid in our house after the occupation of Umm al-Zeinat. And he narrated, "It seems they moved some of their dead to our house on the night of the invasion," and my mother said, "No, it was our dog that had no place to go, and returned home. And it seems they sensed his movement, and killed him."

My mother tells me about the routes and I discover another world. A path that leads up to the village, ascending, a track through the mountainous rocks leading to the al-Maleh Valley, a route to al-Roha, that wide open field of green, and to Umm al-Daraj, a route, and a route to the well, and the Asfiya and al-Daliya road. And I get lost amidst the details, and I don't know when the name mentioned is a spring, or a well, or a village, or just floor tiles, or an olive grove, since they were given names just as names were given to children. Everything in my homeland, starting from a stone, passing trees, and reaching the seasons, the fruits and human beings, has a name. Nothing remains without naming—one place or thing could have two names at the same time. And the image comes to me—me, whose imagination is filled with the village and its surroundings—that my people lived in a forest of names, certainly. A homeland does not exist in classical Arabic, yet is much more eloquent, everything in it named with simplicity. We understand, then, this colonial resentment of Palestinian names, for everything that is in Palestine besieges the foreign to a point of despair. For in every place a person has planted a tree, at every elevation there is a village, and at the bottom of every valley are scattered houses, as if they have stood since creation. Turn over a stone and reflect, and you will find that it is not untouched, with traces of an axe or a chisel that once passed through its surface. Never in any day of all days was Palestine a wilderness.

Sheikh Hamza, more alive and human than all of the United Nation's documents and strategies of the West, was a relative to us. He has been elderly ever since I became aware of his name. My father speaks of him as if his age was over a hundred, and someone else speaks of him forty years later as if he

passed two hundred, and the village believes that this Sheikh was so literate and perceptive that he told miraculous tales of what would happen in the coming days. He spoke to them of the barren al-Maleh Valley and how it would become forests of trees.

"He was a reader of books..." With this expression, always uttered in dread by the villagers, you would feel how this soul was abundant with vague memories of lost holiness in his homeland. The books and tablets were lost, but the sanctification of writing and the Book remained something implicit, as if the matter was stamped on the soul, as if the alphabet fulfilled its purpose and translated itself into life, and the human became a passage.

Our Sheikh remained there. And a relative told us that he had seen him after all these years, after 1967, that is, when the entire homeland became occupied, and asked what his books were saying, for everything he had prophesied in the past had happened, but what about the future now?

The Shiekh said, "Don't you see that the al-Maleh Valley has become a forest? You didn't believe what I had said. And now I know that the Arabs will triumph, joining hands with the Muscovites. And then the wheel will turn on the Jews." While retelling this conversation, the narrator fell silent in reflection, as if he was returning to the village once again. Our people thoroughly believed in prophecies. They spoke of those Jewish books (that some Jews told them about) with news of the victory of Israel—only until the time comes when the sentence is upended and Israel is defeated without return. And they con-

firmed this conviction by always moving to the village and its neighborhoods. The encyclopedias did not recognize them and the political books did not know what they knew. Every one of them knows their village and passes it on to their children with its details, and the names of its families, their arguments and upheavals, with its years. But the books of record disappointed them, and neglected to include the hundreds of routes leading to their villages, ignoring the names of stones, and valleys, and trees, and people who were generalized to a horrific extent, turning them into terms, into points of view, and not their point of view.

My mother tells me about the numerous routes that someone from Kafr al-Sheikh, al-Showf, Umm al-Daraj and Umm al-Fahem could take to our village. And I remind her of that dawn when she found me walking through mist, surrounded by people pacing, calling out to each other from between the boulders, lost in the fog. And that piece of the night sky above us, pierced by red embers, and that drowsiness to which the eyes cannot surrender, awoken by ghosts appearing in the darkness, following their lanterns. She details everything, recalls the event, and I become aware this night was the night of our departure from Umm al-Zeinat after it was occupied by the Jews.

And the village starts to appear once again, and it crowds with names and people. And stretching outwards from it, the routes.