

THREE ENCOUNTERS ON THE WEST BANK

Mercedes Kemp

I travelled to the West Bank in 2010 as a guest of PalFest, and then again in 2013, spending time in Nablus and its adjacent refugee camps. I am left with fragments of what I've seen with the eyes of the heart.

Three ladies from Old Askar Camp.

"affirm life.

affirm life.

we got to carry each other now.

you are either with life, or against it.

affirm life."

Suheir Hammad

In Old Askar Camp there is a small yard where flowers grow out of old tin cans: jasmine, bougavillea and a small lemon tree. I am greeted into the home of three ladies. The eldest, reclining on a divan, dressed in white, has been a refugee here for more than sixty years. The room is decorated with mementos and festooned with plastic oranges draped in greenery, as if to remind her of her home village, Abu Kishk, the scent of blossom and warm sea breezes. She remembers the Nakba. Running through the citrus groves, stalked by death. Her children were all born here, in this hive of sorrows, but her daughters look after her with affection and there is much laughter, gossip and affectionate banter. Old Askar looks after its own.

The girl from Jaffa

"I come from there and I have memories

Born as mortals are, I have a mother

And a house with many windows."

Mahmoud Darwish

My friend Wadi takes me to his mother's home where I have been invited to have lunch.

Old Askar Camp was built in 1950 on a limited parcel of land. Its population has grown to vastly exceed dwelling capacity. Every nook and cranny has been used up. There is much ingenuity and very canny use of space. But natural light is scarce. In Maleka's home its source is just a narrow slit framed by breeze block in a corner of her tiny kitchen. The corner is occupied by a cage in which two love birds are kissing. I wonder at the generosity in allowing the birds this privileged position.

Maleka's hands chop, slice and stir and as she works she tells me about the house in Jaffa, and her grandmother who, as she fed her children with rijla (parslane) that grew in the rocky crevices of the long road to exile, dreamed of crabs stuffed with red chilli, sting-ray soup doused with lemon, squid with golden rice,

sea-bass, sardines, and everything that swam in the clear waters that bathe Jaffa, the bride of the sea!

She dishes up the rice and chicken and says: I wish that I could offer you such a banquet, but I have never seen the sea. So I offer what I have.

The rituals of hospitality are accomplished with elegance and generosity. As I take my leave Maleka says: "I am a simple woman, but my daughters will study and grow wise. We'll go back to our land, Insha'Allah. And if not us, then our children."

A boy (because "About a Boy" is the title of a Nick Hornby novel)

"And it's a wonderful thing to be a boy, to go roaming where grown-ups can't catch you." George Orwell.

I meet Mohammad at New Askar Camp.

He is a young man of perhaps 18, tall and athletic: a footballer. He is wearing the Palestinian selection strip with a number 19 on the back. He is surrounded by a group of younger boys, pulling at his shirt, laughing, chattering and raising dust. Here at New Askar too they take care of their own. Older boys and girls look after the younger, teach them skills and resilience.

I want to see more of the camp, the overspill from Old Askar, equally strapped for space but with even fewer resources. Mohammad and his mates offer to take me for a tour. We walk the narrow, jerry-built alleys. The boys greet neighbours sitting on doorsteps, kick the ball for children playing in the street.

High on the wall there is the faded photograph of a young boy. I can see that the same poster has been covered by a new, clean version of the same image every time an earlier one became faded. Now the tattered remains are ruffled by the breeze, like a palimpsest of grief. All my companions stand and look at the poster. Mohammad speaks 'It's Odai, my friend. He was killed by Israeli soldiers.' I look at the dates on the poster. It was 7 years ago.

'We were children when it happened'.

'We were twelve'.

'Odai and I, we were friends since we knew life'.

'We lived very near to each other. Both in the same street'.

'We played football in the street everyday'.

'We were good. One day, when we were playing on our street, we heard the army coming. We ran through the streets. All the children in the camp ran towards the olive field in the hillside. I will show you'.

We walk through the alleys until we reach the edge of the camp. A few olive trees cling to the remains of a terraced hillside. A road below. On the other side, the tell tale cubic forms of an illegal Israeli settlement.

'We ran through the streets and we could hear the tanks coming. They were always coming. We could hear the gunfire. We reached the hilltop'.

'We could see the army coming, shooting tear gas and real bullets at us'.

'We were throwing stones at the army'.
'We shouted: This is our land! You can't come here!'
'We were only children'.
'The army were coming, shooting at us'.
'We all ran back, all of us, but not Odai. He was alone, facing the army'.
'We were hiding behind the cactus. We shouted: Come back Odai! Come and hide!'
'But he didn't'.

As the story unfolds, my companions enact the moment: hiding in rocky crevices and behind the cacti clumps. They show me the rocks eroded by many bullet holes. Their eyes are a little wild as they remember.

Mohammad is very still.

'And then Odai was shot'.
'We wanted to help him, but the army were still shooting'.
'We couldn't reach him'.
'When the army retreated, we ran towards Odai'.
'We asked some people to call an ambulance, but the ambulance didn't come'.
'I went to Odai. When I reached him, he breathed his last breath'.
'We carried his body through the field'.

Mohammad leads the way, tracing the steps of his wretched journey, this via dolorosa for a twelve year old boy.

'We reached the pharmacy. The pharmacist tried to help him, but he couldn't'.
'A neighbour brought his car and took him to the hospital in Nablus'.
'I went to his house. I had to tell his family he had been shot'.
'Afterwards, I was broken. I was angry'.
'I had two choices: to become a martyr or to live'.
'I chose football'.
'My life had changed. I had to learn to do everything without him, Odai'.
'My friends helped me'.
'My family helped me'.
'But most of all, playing football helped me'.
'I came to this field to play everyday'.
'And every week I came to visit his grave, my friend, Odai'.

At Odai's grave, in a small cemetery at the edge of the camp, an extraordinary transposal occurs. I am frozen to the spot, crying. Mohammad puts his arms around me and consoles me. "I understand your grief, you are somebody's mother".

'I became very good at football. I joined the Palestinian team'.
'I wanted to do this for two reasons'.
'One, for myself, and for my talent'.
'The other one, for Odai'.

We reach our journey's end. From a ramshackle back yard a young boy lifts his hand in a victory sign. Mohamed responds, smiling. They both shout "For a better future!"
