A CURIOUS LAND

Stories from Home

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herself. The director had given her their address: "I wish you luck and happiness," she wrote in her flowing Arabic script. After struggling to read English street signs and help wanted ads and rental contracts, the sight of Arabic automatically soothed him. "Thank you for your explanation," she wrote simply. "That was important to me. May your life together be long and filled with joy." He read and reread the letter that evening after a long shift at the factory, with Eveline in the living room, folding his clean socks in neat pairs, her hair snatched up in her big plastic clip. He put down the letter and watched her. She was tired already, but happy. Her eyes were no longer sad. She walked to the laundromat every week, and spent half a day cleaning and drying, and then had to walk back again to their apartment, down eight long blocks, so long and so far.

INTIFADA LOVE STORY

1988

When they came, they stayed on the rooftop for seven days. Nobody knew it would be that long, not at first. They came because of the demonstration in Ramallah, said Jamil's father. He'd been the one to see them from the salon window, as they'd trudged up the walkway, their backs loaded with olive green duffel bags, their shoulders embraced by the leather straps of dusty AK47s. Four shebab killed in that protest, including one of the boys from Jamil's history lecture class, and twenty arrested, they'd heard. All the villages were on lockdown.

The thumping of boots on the house's flat cement roof could be heard most clearly in the kitchen, despite the insistent humming of the old refrigerator and the loud coughing of the pipes. On the first day they were there, the heavy thuds shook loose bits of plaster from around the light fixture to the floor, like a light coat of snow that Jamil's mother sent him to sweep. Four, Jamil thought. There must be four of them up there. He counted their distinct footsteps and patterns of shuffling—one guy had a light, quick gait, while the another plodded like a giant with thick, flat feet—as he lazily swept the powdery plaster into a pile, then pushed the small hill
into a dustpan. Since his last sister had gotten married, household chores had come down on his head. The usual bad luck of being the youngest, the last egg to be plucked from the coop.

He put the broom and the dustpan back in the pantry, then turned on the sink faucet to rinse his hands. The pipes groaned, then backfired sharply, and he smiled to realize that the footsteps above his head froze. He dropped the grin when his parents rushed into the kitchen.

"It's just the pipes," he calmed them. They knew that, of course; the pipes always made that horrible cracking. His father exhaled and sat down at the table.

"Go talk to them," Jamil's mother urged her husband, her hands picking on a hair of scratched wood on the table's surface. With her thumbnail, she pushed the line out at the sides, until it tore a sliver of wood off and chipped a crescent out of her polished, pink nail.

"And say what?" Her husband seemed annoyed, like someone who thought himself clever but was easily beaten at a game of cards or tawla.

"I'll go," Jamil offered.

"No! God forbid," his father replied, standing reluctantly, petulant at being pushed to the task. "This is my house."

Up he went, trudging up the cement steps off the balcony to the flat roof, calling, "Salaam, salaam! Shalom, shalom!" as he neared the top. Jamil and his mother sat down at the table to wait, interpreting the noises—the stomps, the scrapes—above their heads. No shots fired, no yelling. That was good, at least.

When his father returned, Jamil could see the anger in his face, and the sweat that made his hairline slick. He sat down and croaked, "Water," to his wife.

After he gulped down the small glass she filled for him, he told them, "Four or five days. They said it shouldn't be longer."

"Why our house?"

"It's the biggest on this side of the hill. They can see everything from up there."

Only later did he mention the rest of it. He admitted it nervously, like a confession wrenched from his guilty conscience by a priest. "They want us to stay inside."

"We have to?" asked his wife sharply.

"And if we leave?" Jamil muttered. "What? Will they shoot us?"

His father slammed his hand down on the rickety table, catapulting the glass to the floor, where it shattered like a spray of ice pellets. His mother rolled her eyes at Jamil—that was the first glass from a new set, sent by her sister in Michigan, to break. "They shot four boys in Ramallah!" his father shouted.

After his father trudged out of the room, Jamil started to sweep up the glass shards from the floor, but his mother took the broom from him. "My turn," she said. "And keep your mouth sealed. Let this glass be the only casualty this week."

They played backgammon for the first night, sitting on the grape-colored, velvet-upholstered sofas in the formal salon, where they never sat casually. Tonight, though, his mother seemed not to care when Jamil's father took out the J&B bottle, set a glass on the coffee table, settled on the largest sofa and opened the game board. Poor game board, Jamil thought, almost hysterically. Before tonight, its function had been to serve as a decoration in the room, its inlaid dark wood, in a geometric pattern, accenting the stuffy furniture. It had been set casually, like a movie prop, on the side table, to make it look like they played every day, to add to the aura of their perfect family: Father, a retired schoolteacher; Mother, a beauty in her day; and Son, a top student and soccer player—Tel al-Hilou's model unit.

The phone buzzed steadily that first night. Their friends and neighbors, the Ghanems, called first. "I can see them from my bed-
room window,” Mr. Ghanem reported. “Little kids with guns. These Israelis—what? Are they sending children to monitor us?” The old woman, Miss Salma, on the other side, could see them from her bathroom window: “Six rifles, but only four soldiers. They have a little stove, and they’re taking water from your roof tank with a metal pitcher.” She asked if she could bring them any food, but Jamil’s mother said no. It was better to wait and not cause problems. “They’re probably nervous, and a nervous boy with a gun is no good thing.”

“They don’t look nervous to me,” Miss Salma replied before she hung up. “But let me know if you need anything. I’m not afraid.”

For most of the morning of the second day, Jamil’s father fretted that Miss Salma was implying that he was. “I carried her brother’s body on my back when we buried him,” he said angrily to nobody in particular. “She had better not be calling me a coward.” Jamil’s father lived his life worried about gossip, and as much as he claimed to despise old women with free time, he also feared their storytelling.

His wife soothed him, saying she’d only meant that they wouldn’t bother an old woman. He reminded her of the girls who had been arrested in the demonstration three months ago, and the one who’d been released—pregnant—to her parents. “It’s like the French in Algeria,” he muttered. In his bedroom, Jamil listened, and while his annoyance with his father was blossoming, he was nevertheless sinking in the quicksand of his own worries. Being trapped in the house was upsetting his parents, who had to survive each other as well as the soldiers, but it threatened to suffocate a seventeen-year-old man.

The bedroom, large and square and white, had only become his when his last sister had gotten married. Years ago, he’d shared it with her and two other sisters: four children, crowded in one room, sharing the bathroom with their parents. When the house had been built eighty years ago, his father once told him, it didn’t even have a bathroom. The third bedroom had become the bathroom when Jamil’s parents had married. His mother—whose family had been the first to hold a wedding in the new hotel in Ramallah instead of in the church hall, like everyone else—had insisted. That left them with only two bedrooms, because she needed to keep a salon as well, to receive visitors properly.

Now it suddenly felt like the room, the whole house, didn’t belong to him anymore, like the soldiers on the rooftop could come in and take this too. As he lay on his bed, listening to his parents’ nervous chatter in the salon and the faint scrapes on the roof above his head, Jamil imagined that the soldiers would never leave. What if they stayed up there, nested, made the rooftop and the house their base, and Jamil stayed locked in this house forever? He’d never finish high school, never get married, never have children.

His thoughts spiraled like a hawk, seeking prey, until they centered and swooped down, as they inevitably did, on Muna, the Ghanems’ daughter. She would be home from school in a few hours and he could see into her living room from his bedroom window. He hoped she would signal him, even call, perhaps, pretend she wanted to give him the homework assignments he’d missed the day before, just so he could hear her voice. And if he could glimpse her sheet of black hair, her eyes from the window, it would end this terrible day happily.

In the other room, his parents had started up another game of backgammon. Jamil napped, not knowing what else to do until dinner, but his thoughts were filled with Muna: Muna next to him in algebra class, Muna secretly holding his hand under their white robes during their confirmation ceremony, Muna being attacked in a jail cell by a soldier wearing thick black boots, Muna collapsing in his arms after he’d broken in, kung-fu style, to rescue her. He awoke in a sweat, noticing that it was four o’clock, hurried to the
window. But all the drapes in the Ghanems' house were drawn. Of course they were. Jamil didn't blame her father. They had three daughters too, just like his parents, but he felt like a castaway nonetheless. There would be no communication today.

Dinner that night was meatless, since his mother hadn't been able to go to the butcher. Lentils and rice, a tomato-less salad since they couldn't even go out to their own garden. "The last of my cucumbers," his mother murmured like a mourner as they ate. "I suppose we can't even go to the shed to get some pickled jars from our shelves?" His father didn't reply, and she didn't raise the subject again. They ate as usual, in the formal style she always insisted upon—quiet, cloth napkin in the lap, salad first. She baked a tray of hareesia, since all she needed was the sugar and the tabins and the wheat, and they ate it as their dessert.

In the middle of the night, in his bedroom, he heard laughter above his head, two loud stomps, and a man's explosive guffaw. He tried to fall back asleep, imagining his head so heavy that it sank into the thick pillow, but there was a pull, a tension in his neck that wouldn't relax. He gave up, instead switching on his lamp and pulling Muna's letters from his bedside drawer, where he kept them hidden under his old comic books. Every note she'd ever scribbled to him as they stood in line, had her younger sister discreetly palm to him—hastily written notes on napkins, plain notebook paper, on the pale blue sheets she'd used for half a year in tenth grade, all there in a bundle, organized from first to last from sixth grade, when their eyes first connected during Sunday mass, to two weeks ago, when she'd passed him a textbook in the library with a note tucked behind the table of contents. "All my love—mim." Always signed with her initial, a simple circle—⃝—but the tail curled with a flourish, so secretly and lovingly. Whenever he saw a mim, in anything—a store sign, in the newspaper, in Mubarak's and Shami's names, even—her face appeared, making the ugliness of it all more palatable. But her last letters were so insistent, and he hadn't answered them. Girls, he'd thought. Always needing confirmation, something official, some way to prove how he felt. Why? Why couldn't she accept the bare facts—she liked him, he liked her. Official things were in the distant future. He drifted off to sleep, wondering why Palestinian girls needed every little emotion clarified, every feeling uprooted.

He woke up in the morning, on the third day, startled, the letters under his chin, to the sound of yelling from the roof. An Israeli accent, speaking Arabic—"Shai. Bring shai. Four cups. Now." The voice was so close, and then he realized it was in the house.

His mother scuttled by in the hallway, glancing anxiously as she passed. He shoved the letters back in the drawer and hurried out, pulling his robe over his shoulders and licking the sleep off his teeth. His mother had put her small teapot on the stove and was digging in her canister for peppermint. His father walked in off the balcony, cursing.

"Sons of dogs, may their mothers burn at their fathers' funerals—coming into my house! May the blackest plague swirl around them and kill them!" he fumed, his chest heaving even as he pulled four teacups from the pantry. "I should put some rat droppings in their shai, those bastards. Too bad you are too perfect of a homekeeper," he muttered, consoling his wife, and even Jamil could see his father had now exploded sufficiently, released his anger, and could focus on calming his wife's anxieties. That's how it was in their home; the privilege of emotional outbursts always were awarded to his father before the others could share it.

"The roof" is one thing, but to come into the house!" his mother said shakily, steeping the tea leaves in the pot, pushing them down with a fork she pulled from the sink. It seemed to Jamil, standing in the doorway, leaning on the wall, that the water boiled languidly, slowly, and their nerves bounced like the leaves in the simmering pot. "They just walked in like they own it!"
 Intifada Love Story

“Sons of dogs,” his father muttered again, pulling a tray from the rack. “Are we servants now, as well as prisoners?”

It was left to Jamil to carry the tray up to the roof. His mother had started to do it, only to be yelled at by her husband—“My wife is not a waitress for the Israeli army!”—but she wouldn’t let him ascend either, because his temper would get them all killed. “Send Jamil,” she finally said. And so up the cement steps he went.

He reached up above his head and knocked on the roof door, calling “Shalom!” as his father had instructed, listened for the mispronounced “I’dja?” and walked through, pushing upwards, finally planting his feet on the cement roof and raising his eyes, to see a rifle pointed at his heart.

“You brought four cups?” asked a voice to the side, not owned by the curly-haired, rough-shaven teenager holding the rifle. The tray trembled in his hand and Jamil had the sense to steady it with the other.

“Yes,” he answered the Voice, his eyes focusing for some reason on the fingernails of the soldier—lines of black tucked deep in the nailbed, the knuckles below caked and peeling as the fingertips playfully drummed the trigger.

“Put it down,” instructed the Voice calmly. “Right at your feet.”

He did, and looked to the right. The Voice’s owner was younger than he thought, perhaps Jamil’s own age, his face and neck browned by the sun. Eyebrows like even rectangles, separated by a slit of brown skin. A chipped front tooth.

“Get the fuck out of here. And tell your mother to make us sandwiches for lunch.”

Jamil left, the gun still pointed at him, although he understood now that the initial splash of fear had dried off his body—they would laugh to themselves later, over and over, about his expression, imitate his reactions to pass the time.

His father roared, and his mother groaned, even as she began to pull the bread from the cabinet. When Jamil took it up to them, there was no gun now, only four pairs of eyes, four foreheads greasy and sweaty from the hot sun, four pairs of parched lips. They made Jamil break the corner off one sandwich and eat it, then the Voice took the small tray from him and they began devouring, not caring whether he’d descended or not, as they sat around the water tank.

Jamil stood awkwardly, feeling oddly like an intruder on their meal, despite the fact that they were gnawing on their hummus and pickle sandwiches while perching on his father’s—his grandfather’s—rooftop. He looked over the ledge, down into the courtyard, where the gate of the old chicken coop, long unused, swung lazily, unattached to the wall. Further up, he saw the metal doors of the old well, which they hardly used anymore.

The Voice licked his fingertips and picked up the fallen crumbs like a magnet attracting metal shavings, while the Gun paused, thumped his chest with a closed fist and burped. Jamil saw their guns leaning casually against the water tank, the large cylinder he’d helped his father install a few years ago. It caught the rainwater and stored it, a reserve right there on the roof, a modern development his father loved and was proud of, no longer depending on his well as many of their neighbors continued to do.

Across the street, in the window, a movement—small, quick—attracted his attention. A curtain pulled back at the Ghanems’ house, then dropped hastily. He waited, wondering if Muna had seen him, but the curtain stayed in its place. He looked back at the four soldiers only to find the Voice staring at him.

The Voice handed him the tray, cracking, “You have pretty neighbors,” in his rough Arabic. Jamil grabbed it as the others chuckled. He hurried down the steps, spent the rest of the day quietly reading and re-reading the three-day old newspaper, filled with turmoil that was meaningless in light of this moment. Riots in Jenin. A suicide in Lebanon, a girl jumped off her balcony. King
Hussein is feeling better, the Queen says in an interview with the New York paper.

That night he dreamed of himself in black ninja pants, his hands slicing through the air, breaking noses and cracking collar bones, defending his love. He woke up, sweating hard, his hands searching for the comfort of the bundle of Muna’s letters.

On the fourth day, Jamil worried that he might scream at his mother, who was obsessively fretting over her inability to hang the laundry on the lines. Or at his father for his bluster, promising between TV viewing and snacking to slaughter the army with his bare hands. Jamil opted to be even more alone than he was: he spent most of the morning watching a crackly video tape of a kung-fu movie. It was in Chinese, as far as he knew, dubbed into Russian, or Polish, or something, but he didn’t care. He could still follow the slow, angry glares, the face-offs, the jumps, kicks, and flips—the anger and its release. He knew every move by heart, had his favorite moments of the carefully choreographed fight scenes. But even that grew wearying, so he went into his room and spent the afternoon looking through his books. What were his classmates doing now? He lay on the floor in front of the low bookshelf. His sisters’ old textbooks filled half of it, and all the family’s other books—some inherited, some borrowed, the old Bible, some funeral memorial booklets of old people he didn’t know, a couple of photograph albums—sat dutifully, side by side, like victims condemned and waiting at the gallows. He pulled a battered, creased literature textbook, his eldest sister’s name scribbled in the front cover. Literature of the Globe. He opened it to the contents: “The Ancient World,” “The European Middle Ages,” “The Islamic Golden Era.” He turned to this section: he read Moses Maimonides, scanning the biography: a Jew. Nobody had ever told him that. Back to the contents: “India and the Subcontinent.” Tagore: he flipped to this section, and read “The Punishment,” about a wronged girl who stubbornly accepts her unjust sentence without a fight. Picked up the old newspaper again: some stories he missed . . . Food riot in Thailand. George Bush elects his new cabinet. The girl in Lebanon again. Enough victimization. He felt confused, his world was not right. He skipped dinner and went to bed early.

On the fourth day, they ran out of bread. Jamil told the Voice, whose beard and mustache were thickening, that they were out of almost everything else too: milk, butter, eggs, vegetables.

“Tell one of your pretty neighbors to bring it,” he replied gruffly. “And we need more tea.”

“How long will you be staying?” Jamil asked boldly, but his only reply was a glare. Irritated by the usual reference to the Ghansens, Jamil repeated the question, regretting it instantly, feeling in that second that he had betrayed his father, his mother, his priest, Muna, including his own intelligence. The Voice rushed to his gun, reaching the tank in three strides, spun and pointed it at Jamil in one fluid motion, while one of his comrades watched casually. While the gun centered on him, Jamil still saw irrationally another soldier to the left, behind the Voice, picking his teeth with his fingernail.

“What did you ask me, you filthy dog?”

Jamil felt surprised by how smoothly the Voice cursed in Arabic. How did he learn it? This question circulated persistently in his head as he stared, for the second time in his seventeen years, at a gun aimed at his heart.

“What did you ask me?” the Voice was shouting now, and when Jamil still did not reply—did he learn it in the prisons?—the Voice lifted the gun skyward, perpendicular to the flat roof, and with a casual contraction of his index finger, punctured the cloudless blue
sky with a single bullet. He just deflowered the sky, Jamil thought, and wanted to burst out laughing at his own insanity.

A small silence, and then Jamil sensed several things at once—a curtain pulled back, two sets of panicked footsteps below, his own heart pausing in its beats, a desert in his throat.

He moved to the steps to block his parents, to show them he was fine. His mother dragged him down by the hems of his pantslegs, then by the shirtsleeves, to the kitchen, ran back and locked the balcony door, and, despite his protests, searched every inch of his face, arms, and chest. “Are you sure? Are you hurt?” she muttered over and over, not listening for his responses and reassurances.

The phone rang and his father, his face gray, his tongue quieted for once, answered softly. “We are fine, thank God,” he said robotically into the phone and hung up, but it rang again almost immediately. Six more phone calls followed.

That evening, Jamil sat on the couch, reading the newspaper yet again. The story of the girl in Lebanon startled him out of his reverie, as if he hadn’t already scanned it ten times. Suspected rape, an uncle, fourteen floors, cement courtyard. The church wouldn’t bury her because it was a suicide. Sadness flooded over his body again, and he stood abruptly, asked his father to play tawla out of sheer desperation to fill his mind.

After playing several rounds to soothe his father and himself and after eating every seed, nut and pastry his mother placed before him, after they’d all gone to bed, to empty his own heart, Jamil wrote a long letter to Muna.

The next morning, the fifth day, shortly after dawn, old Miss Salma hobbled over to their front door. Jamil’s mother opened the door quickly and let her in. She carried two plastic sacks of her homemade bread, a jug of milk, and a block of cheese wrapped in cloth.

“God bless your hands, Miss Salma, and may God bless our lives with your presence for many more years,” Jamil’s mother said, accepting the sacks without the usual feigned reluctance and disappearing into her kitchen.

“Come here, Jamil,” Miss Salma said, sitting down heavily on the velvet sofa, her thick ankles balloon out under the hem of her blue dress. Her diabetes was worsening, he could tell. Her legs were like heavy slabs of meat, pushed into her shoes so tightly that the front bulged out against the leather tongue. Her mottled blue calves and shins looked like a world map. “Are you alright, young man?”

“I’m fine. They didn’t touch me,” he replied, putting a small side table next to her as his mother called from the kitchen that she was boiling tea. He walked to the kitchen and took from his mother a small dish of watermelon seeds and a glass of ice water.

“Those bastards stared at me as soon as I came out of my front door,” she said, cracking the seeds expertly between her teeth and spitting out the shells into her palm. Jamil grabbed an ashtray and put it before her politely. “They leaned over the roof and watched me all the way until I got here and knocked on your door.”

“Sons of dogs,” Jamil’s father grumbled from where he sat on the other sofa, his arms folded across his chest. “That other boy in Ramallah died yesterday. They couldn’t find a kidney.”

“They had one, but they couldn’t get it in. And a new checkpoint around Ramallah, did you hear?” Miss Salma asked.

Jamil’s father shrugged. “All I hear, my dear lady, is this news from you and sometimes whatever I can get on the radio. Our newspaper is a week old. The only thing playing on the TV are soap operas. We could have a full-out war, but Abu Ammar would find it only suitable to play Egyptian soap operas for us!”

“Sugar in your tea?” asked Jamil’s mother, and Jamil wondered, ludicrous as it were, whether his polished mother would always fret over etiquette and appearances even in the midst of an apocalypse.
While the world burned around them, she might spend precious minutes wiping down the silverware or folding napkins. Yet, while it irritated him, this image also soothed him; there would always be order, as long as his mother was around. Women, he felt, brought stability, like Miss Salma who'd arrived and solved their problems with her bags of bread and cheese, like Madame Amira, the former nun who lived on the other end of the village, who threw herself on top of boys so the army didn't drag them away.

"Two spoons," Miss Salma said. "You know, they're closing the schools, no?"

"What?" Jamil asked, panicked into joining the adults' conversation.

"Oh yes, all the schools in Ramallah will shut down, starting tomorrow. Seven o'clock curfew."

"But not here in our village," Jamil clarified.

"Well, be prepared," she said, leaning forward conspiratorially. "Yesterday the principal of the middle school called and asked if they could use my cellar as a classroom if they need to. All the villages are making back-up plans."

During the rest of her visit, Jamil barely spoke, feeling fretful and anxious. As she prepared herself to leave, he suddenly decided on a course of action. He rushed to his room, grabbed the letter, and then returned, insisting on helping the widow at the door. Sure his parents were not listening, he pushed the letter into her bag, asking her quietly to give this to Muna, Mr. Ghanem's oldest daughter. Not Huda or Lena, but Muna.

"Miss Salma . . ." he stammered.

She smiled and whispered, "Trust me, young man. Nobody keeps secrets better than me." And with a wink she was gone.

Jamil sat in his bedroom window that evening, having just delivered bread and cheese to the roof. His parents watched the new Egyptian soap opera on the television, but he knew they weren't paying attention. His mother was knitting a sweater for him that he didn't need and his father leafed through one of Jamil's calculus textbooks, for lack of anything better. "If they need schoolteachers," he'd told Miss Salma, "I'll come out of retirement. They will need math teachers."

He thought back to Muna's last letter, which he'd memorized by heart—it seemed like she'd written it and slipped it into his satchel years ago and not just two weeks—and her insistence that something be made clear between them. She wanted an answer. Why had he interpreted it so badly? She was right—there was no time to be lost anymore.

It was nine o'clock, and he peered out the window. Across the alley, the curtain moved aside, although the room inside remained dark, as he'd instructed in his letter. A pause, then the curtain fell twice, and was still.

Yes.

"God bless you, Miss Salma!" he said to himself.

The soldiers left on Saturday night, the seventh day, while they were sleeping, slipping away in the dark, leaving crumpled napkins and dirty tea cups next to the water tank. Sunday morning, they woke up and realized they could attend Mass. He would see Muna, make plans. They could do a long engagement, marry when they'd finished college, lock it in now, rather than search for a bride later. Or maybe they'd just marry this summer, and attend classes together. Why waste time? There was no time anymore, and nothing was certain.

Jamil hurried into the bathroom to shave, scrubbing his face with a soapy rag. The water pipes creaked as the water flowed, and Jamil looked more closely at the water as it pooled in the white
basin. A horrible thought came into his head at the same time that he heard his father cursing from the kitchen and footsteps stomping up to the roof.

His mother rushed into the bathroom, shrieking, "Don't use the water, Jamil! I think they—"

"I know, I thought as much," Jamil swabbed his face with rubbing alcohol, ignoring the sting and his watering eyes, then climbed up to the roof and stood over the water tank, staring down into it with his father. An empty bucket, which Jamil had never noticed before on the roof, lay on its side next to the tank. "They were using it," his father kicked the bucket, "as their bathroom, and then dumped it into our tank before they left."

Jamil stared down at the waste floating in their modern water tank, and suppressed the nausea creeping acidly up into his chest.

"Goddamn animals," he screamed. There, the anger did it. The anger quenched the nausea. His father was right to always vent.

He knew what to do. This week had made him into a man, with a man's problems and solutions. He walked down to the cellar and fetched a metal tin and a long rope, then strode down the courtyard steps to the well. He hadn't visited it in a long time, but he knew his father always opened it before a big rain. He pulled back the old, metal door, and he let the rope slide down its stone-blocked sides, the tin clanging, echoing, as it clunked down. The well was deep, deep, deep in the earth, and not as vulnerable as an open tank on the roof. The well was old, but could not be contaminated.

As he carried the bucket of icy, clear water to the house, he calculated how much it would cost to empty the roof tank, to sanitize it, and then how long it would take for the rains to refill it. He'd look for a job soon, start earning some money. Before he stepped through the doorway of the house, he glanced over at the Ghanems' window. He would see her today, no matter what, in church, would see, maybe touch, the black ribbon of her hair.

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THE FALL

1990

Hell, yes, it was a bad winter: first, Riham's father gets sick with pneumonia. Two weeks at Greater Memorial, and they're talking about putting him on a ventilator before he finally looked at a bowl of gray oatmeal and said, "I'm hungry." Still another month to recover at home, and Riham was running over there all the time to check on him, and just when things are settling down, you know, everybody's calm and smiling again at Sunday night dinner—my mom falls down the stairs, rushing to open the door for the FedEx guy. Down fourteen steps to the marble tiles of the hallway, and I don't like to sound like a jerk, but I'd told my dad at least a hundred times: "Get carpeting," I said. "Carpet's cheap and safer." No, no, you know how he is. "In the old country, we had tiles everywhere," he argued. "It's so nice and clean. Like back home." And when he'd come to my house, he'd argue so much about how dirty rugs are, how they were hotels for filth and germs, that we finally took them all out. All my life he's wanted everything to be like back home, but the man has never gotten on a plane—I'm talking forty-three years—and actually gone home. He doesn't talk much, but he knows it's a life here.