The Book of Disappearance

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For Tata Rasmiyye.
For Sidu Mhammad, Ikhlas, Abla, and Salim.
For Jaffans.

1
Alaa

My mother put on mismatched shoes and ran out of the house. Her curly hair was tied back with a black band. The edge of her white shirt hung over her gray skirt. Fear inhabited her face, making her blue eyes seem bigger. She looked crazed as she roamed the streets of Ajami, searching for my grandmother. Rushing, as if trying to catch up with herself. I followed her out. When she heard my footsteps, she looked back and gestured with her broomstick-thin arm: go back!

"Stay home, maybe she'll come back."

"But Baba is there."

"Then go to her house, and then to al-Sa'a Square. Look for her there."

She went frantically from house to house. So tense, she looked like a lost ant. Knocking on doors so hard I was afraid she'd break her hand. As if her fist was not flesh and bones, but a hammer. She didn't greet whoever came out,

just asked right away if they'd seen my grandmother. If no one answered, she'd take a deep breath and weep before the closed door. Then she'd go on to the next house, wiping her tears away with her sleeves.

I followed her like a child. I'd forgotten how fast her pace was. I was forty and had retained only faint and distant memories from that childhood. I was afraid she'd get hurt. I'd never seen her so overtaken by fear. She looked back every now and then, perplexed that I insisted on following her. I stayed a few steps behind. I felt too weak to challenge this woman. My mother. I begged her to go home and told her I'd search Ajami, house by house, to find Tata. She gestured again with her arm, as if I were a fly in her way. She kept searching and the houses spat her out, one by one.

I had gone home to our house in Ajami about an hour earlier to catch the sunset in Jaffa. I go twice a week, usually two hours before sunset, and wait until we are all sleepy before heading back to my apartment in Tel Aviv. Tata had moved in with my parents six months earlier. Mother insisted after having found her unconscious in her bathroom, her leg almost broken.

Tata's house on al-Count Street was just a ten-minute walk away. "Al-Count" is the old name Tata still insisted on using. I had put "Sha'are Nikanor" on the mailbox. What am I saying? She didn't "insist" on using that name. That *was* its name. Al-Count sounded strange to me when I was a child. But later Tata told me that it was the honorific given

by the Vatican to Talmas, the Palestinian man who donated money to build the Maronite church in Jaffa. He had lived on this street and it took his name.

After she moved to live with my parents, Tata insisted on going back every morning to water and tend to her roses. Mother would accompany her and, just before sunset, she or my father would bring Tata back home. That morning Tata said she felt a bit tired and she didn't go. She went out alone, which was unusual, an hour after mother did. That's what my father said when I got home. When my mother came back after visiting a friend and buying a few things she was terrified.

The day squandered its minutes before my eyes. I was tired of following my mother, so I left her and hurried to al-Sa'a Square, which Tata loved. We called her Tata, not sitti. She didn't like sitti.

But then I stopped. She won't be there. There was no place to sit and look at Jaffa there. I figured that she must've gone to the shore, the one near the old city. She loved that spot too. So I hurried toward the sea, to the hill where she liked to sit. To get there quickly, I had to go through the artists' alleyways in the old city. I hated walking through them.

Will I find her? Will I find Tata? I felt my heart choking.

I heard my breath stumbling as I went through the narrow alleyways between the dollhouses. That's what I used to call the artists' galleries there. I felt a sudden pain in my chest as I ran up the old steps. As if my lungs

had become narrow, just like those alleyways. When I used to pass through old streets as a child I would see my shadow walking beside other shadows. Sometimes my shadow would leave me, as if it had become someone else's. I thought I was crazy and kept this a secret for years. Once I was with Tata and I asked her to take another route that doesn't go through the old city. She laughed, kissed my head, and held my hand. "Don't be scared, habibi. All the Jaffans who stayed here see a shadow walking next to them when they walk through the old city. Even the Jews say they hear voices at night, but when they go out to see who it is, they don't find anyone."

Her story didn't help me shake off my fear, which overwhelmed and continued to haunt me even as I got older. I reached the open square overlooking the sea. The sea surprises me every time I come here after escaping the jaws of the old city's alleyways. I felt a dry wind touching my lips as though I were in a desert. The sea is before me, yet it feels like a desert. I looked north beyond Jaffa. The glass windows of the other city, the white city, the city of glass, shot their reflections back at me.

I headed to the hill next to Mar Butrus Church. I felt the church, too, was tired.

I found her.

She was sitting on the wooden bench, looking at the sea. I called out, happiness lilting my voice as I ran toward her: "Tata! Tata! Tata!" I looked at her tan face gazing at the sea.

A strand of black hair had managed to slip away from her headscarf to dance with the wind. A light smile perched on her lips. I sat next to her and held her hand. "You scared us to death!" Her fingers were wooden, dry, even though to me at least her body didn't feel cold. When I shook her shoulder, she leaned a bit. I held on to her shoulder again with my shaking fingers. Had she fainted? I placed my ear to her chest to see if she was breathing. I felt suffocated, as if all of Jaffa was caged inside me. I took out my cell phone to call for an ambulance. I could barely force words out of my dry mouth. All that water around me, yet my mouth was still so dry.

She was sitting on the old wooden bench gazing at the sea. Surrounded by the noise of the children playing nearby. "Children are the birds of paradise," she used to say. Mother would shoot back, "God save us from such birds. They're all noise and no fun. Oh God, will there be noise in paradise too?" None of the passersby had noticed she was dead. She died just how she'd wanted: either in her bed, or by the sea. She used to pray that she'd never get so old to need anyone's help. "Please, God, don't let me be dependent on anyone. Take me to you while I am still strong and healthy." I inched closer and hugged her. Perhaps she was the one hugging me at that moment. I knew it would be our last moment alone, before the ambulance came. I could smell jasmine, her favorite scent. She surrounded herself with tiny bottles of it, everywhere in

her house. I didn't shed any tears. Perhaps I had yet to comprehend what had happened. Or maybe I didn't want to believe that she had died. For me the only meaning 'died' had at that moment was a strange and overwhelming sense of emptiness. I called my father. He said mother was back at home and on the verge of madness. They were going to follow me to the hospital.

She had taken a bath before going out. As if going to her own funeral.

2
Alaa

"I lived my life lonely," she used to say. Even though her house was always full of guests, as I remember. But memory is dense fog that spreads or clears as one gets older. I never understood why she spoke of herself in the past tense so often. Even when she laughed, and she loved to laugh, she would still speak of herself in the past tense and would say, "I used to love laughing. Oh, how I loved laughing!"

Tata died.

I still get goose bumps whenever I say it. Tata died. I was relieved that she died without needing anyone. But she died.

She died.

She took a bath before leaving the house. As if going to her own funeral!

She was sitting in the middle of the wooden bench, facing the sea. She was wearing her purple plissé skirt, and a matching shirt under her black chiffon coat. Without her

tiny black purse this time. Or maybe someone stole it from her? How did she get here? A sheer black scarf hid her hair. She never let it go white and would always dye it black. Even after reaching her seventies, she would still paint her nails, making sure the colors matched her clothes. "No one loves life like us, the people al-Manshiyye, the people of the sea." She would always mock those who didn't keep themselves up, as if only city folk and Jaffans knew how.

She liked to sit by the sea, often on the Arab beach, near Ajami. But she loved that other spot too, atop the hill where I found her, especially the wooden bench. I never knew why. And she died here, by the sea. She preferred to die in Jaffa than to leave it. Whenever she mentioned Jaffa's name, she would take a deep breath, as if the city had suddenly betrayed her and scorched her heart. At that moment, when I saw that her body was a corpse gazing at the sea, I realized that there were so many questions I hadn't yet asked; death and time beat me to them. "How many times can one say the same thing? I swear sometimes I get sick of myself," she used to say with a smile, when I asked her to retell one of her stories.

Longing for her is like holding a rose of thorns!

I noticed that she was clutching something in her right fist. When I tried to prise her hand open, I saw her pearl necklace. It had come loose in the past, but she didn't want to have it restrung. Sometimes she used to take it out of its old wooden box, where it was wrapped in cotton, just to

look at it. I asked my mother about it, but she didn't know anything, or if the pearls were real or fake. I had a feeling she wasn't telling the truth.

Tata had a black beauty mark on her right cheek, like the gem of a precious ring. When I was a child I used to reach up to touch and kiss it. Mother has one, too, on her left cheek. When I looked at Tata's face there was a light smile still alive, showing some of her teeth. "I don't wear dentures," she used to say, "No one believes that I am over eighty and don't need them. My feet ache because of the sewing machine, but my teeth are like pearls."

Why did Tata choose to die alone, facing the sea? Was she always lonely, even when she was with us? Something about survivors leaves them that way. "I walk in the city, but it doesn't recognize me,"she once said in a sad voice.

"Why would the city recognize you, Tata? It's not like you're Alexander the Great. The city is inanimate! It's not a person, you know."

"What are you saying? Who told you a city cannot recognize its people? You kids don't understand anything. A city dies if it doesn't recognize its people. The sea is the only thing that hasn't changed. But so what? The sea is meaningless. Lots of water for nothing."

I laughed when she said that. She would later take back her insult, as if the sea were the only thing that remained loyal. It neither changed, nor left. She would always complain that the streets were empty. They had many people,

but were still empty. "All those people left their own countries and came here. What for? They crowd everything, but have no gravitas. I don't like to walk down the street in the morning and not come across someone I know. There are only a handful of us left who can greet each other. Come, let's stop by the pharmacy to say hello to Abu Yusif."

I used to accompany her to al-Kamal Pharmacy. As soon as we enter, she would start complaining to Abu Yusif about the pain in her knees. I would remind her that he's not a physician, but he would tell me to let her ask her question. Whenever she met someone who had stayed in Jaffa, she would become a little girl again. They would speak of "that year" and what happened before and after "that year." When I was a teenager I used to mock the pharmacy's name and its greenish wood. But now I've learned to love it. I get all my prescriptions there. I see Tata standing or sitting there, taking her time, and talking to the pharmacist. Always about Jaffans, their names, and news. I used to get tired of all those names when I was young.

"He told me that we must leave. I've arranged everything, he said; we must go to Beirut before they kill us all. We'll come back when things calm down. I told him that am not leaving. I'm six months pregnant. What would we do if something happened on the way there? How could one leave Jaffa anyway? What would I do in Beirut? There is nothing there. I don't like Beirut. You live in Jaffa, and think of going to Beirut? I never liked Beirut. I don't know why

people like it so much. Nothing worth seeing." Whenever sidu's name came up, she used to repeat her answer to him, but would revise details here and there. Sometimes Beirut becomes beautiful, but it wasn't her city and she didn't want to go there. At other times Beirut was a trivial hell.

"Weren't you afraid?"

"Who said I wasn't? A week before your sidu and my folks left, I thought I was going to have a miscarriage. The bullets were everywhere. They used to shoot at us whenever we went outside our houses. We were like mice. Our lives had no value. Why do you think everyone left the city? Do you know why my brother Rubin, my sister Sumayya, and all my uncles left? No one leaves just like that. That's enough, grandson. Don't hurt me even more."

I waited two days and then asked her again about the house. She said it's in al-Manshiyye. The building where her parents lived was bombed and collapsed on top of its residents. She was lucky that she felt severe pain that night, and her family came over to her and stayed. When they went back the next morning, they didn't find their neighbors. They all perished in the rubble of the building. The building died, and they died with it. It was a coincidence that her family survived. My grandfather and her family decided to go to Beirut until things calmed down. But she refused to go with them. He was convinced that she would join him later. Her mother and siblings went with him. Her father, my great grandfather, stayed with her after she

refused to go. He had hoped that he would join the others, or that they would eventually return. But they weren't able to do so, and she didn't want to leave. She inherited stubbornness from her father. My grandfather waited ten years for her, but she never joined him. She would always say, "I never left. He's the one who left. I stayed in my home."

So, my mother lived without her father and never knew him. My grandfather married another woman after divorcing my grandmother. After tens of letters he had written and sent via the International Red Cross, he penned one last one. In it he said he would wait until the end of the year. If she didn't come, he would divorce her and set her free. And so it was, on paper at least. I asked her once if the pearl necklace was a gift from him. She laughed and didn't answer. When I asked her when it came loose, she answered, but without answering. "People went away, a country stayed, our souls came loose, and you keep asking about the pearl necklace? I'm done tonight. Enough questions."

I wish I'd asked her more questions.

I wish I'd talked to her so much more.

Alaa put his pen down on the wooden table, whose short legs were anchored in the sandy beach. He felt some back pain, so he reclined in the orange chair. He gazed at the sea's blueness. He turned left and saw the lights of Mar

Butrus Church and the Bahr Mosque. He went back to read what he'd just written. She used to mock his chaotic script whenever she saw him writing. "Why are your scribbles like chicken marks, sweetheart? You should have seen my father's script. It was so beautiful, like a calligrapher's."

It was the first time Alaa had started writing his memoirs in the red notebook. Its color caught his eye when he was passing by a stationery store on Allenby Street. He bought it and was walking to Tsfoni Café on the beach when he decided to start writing his memoirs.

He felt exhausted and shut his big blue eyes to listen to the waves of the sea, and nothing else. But the loud reggae music billowing from the big speakers jammed with the chatter of other customers to silence the sea. He tried, in vain, to listen to the waves.