THE SLEEP THIEF

'Sleep thief' is what the interrogator called me. I'll never forget that. I would steal a few seconds of sleep so I could remain steadfast before them. The name stuck; I even dreamt about it, the same dream, night after night. I would wake up not knowing what to do and drenched in sweat.

I cried until my eyes became so puffy they outgrew my face and enveloped it entirely. At night the gods came down to comfort me and wipe away my tears. But nothing relieved me. I cried so much my eyelids swelled over my eyes. I could barely see. I asked the gods to give me back my yesterday; they refused, except for one, the kindest among them. Upon me he bestowed the gift of stealing sleep so I could dream. The dream, he said, was the seed of a long path still ahead.

Had the kind god not set conditions, he would not have been a god. He relayed the same message every night: 'You have had your usual third of sleep. You need a second third, however, to continue the dream of retrieving your yesterday, and in that you cannot sleep unless you take the life of another human. All you must do is find someone to stare into your eyes. When they do, you will have their life, and dream

of whatever you desire, and you will inch closer to retrieving your yesterday.'

The gods depart before hearing me accept or decline. I do not like the gift. I do not wish to steal sleep from anyone. Nor do I want anyone's life. The one I have is enough. If I live and still have tears in my eyes, I will not die of thirst.

I forget the gods' gift and go out into the street. I see my family. They are all staring at me, happy to see me. I steal their lives, despite myself, and remember what I have become. I shut my eyes over what remains of the dream. I only open them again in a dark room, where no one can gaze into them.

Every night I spend the rest of the dream staring at the night's kohl.

The same dream recurs every night.

The dream recurs.

I am still a sleep thief. When will I have a different dream?

Gharib Haifawi
The Sleep Thief

GHARIB HAIFAWI

No one knows exactly who gave Gharib Haifawi his name, or why. Some say it was his mother, Alya Haifawi, because he was born in a strange time. There are those who claim she felt like a stranger in the village of Alaf in the Galilee. Alya had lived there after getting married and gave birth to Gharib, who was her firstborn, during the Six Day War. Perhaps she gave him his name because that war was so short and strange. Alya didn't live in Alaf for long and returned to Haifa; whoever lives on Mount Carmel must return or else they will die of sorrow.

It was not strange that war had roamed the country. That was perfectly normal. The war was merely resting. Even wars tire. But it *was* strange for a war to have been so short. It left just as people were getting used to it. Some malicious folk jibed that the people of Haifa and nearby villages came out with placards to protest the end of a war to which they'd become so happily accustomed.

What is important in our story is Gharib Haifawi himself. No matter the divergent opinions regarding his name's origin, what is certain and unequivocal is that 'Gharib', in Arabic,

comes from the root 'gh.r.b'. The following terms are derived from it: estrangement, west, to set, strange, to find strange, stranger . . . and so on. There is such significance in the etymology of this name, no?

Gharib Haifawi was born on the 11th of May to Adil and Alya Haifawi. Their surname refers to those hailing from Haifa, and in common parlance has a geographic association, though it usually begins with the definite article 'al-'. One is called al-Haifawi: of Haifa. There are those who say that the name goes back to Gharib's maternal grandfather. Arabs, after all, took their mothers' names in olden times.

Gharib's grandfather was a merchant, like all his ancestors ever since the day the Greeks boarded their ships and docked at Haifa to fall in love with it, just as it fell in love with them. They only left to roam the sea and yearn for Haifa. What is also certain, based on sound evidence, is that Gharib's origins go back to Greek merchants and Canaanites. This is proven by archaeology, genealogy and other evidence found in our archive.

The word 'archive' had a strange resonance for Gharib, suggesting incontrovertible proof, truths that could neither be debunked nor falsified. He also had a soft spot for the university archive at which he worked. He spent long hours reading there and many fond memories were born in its darkness.

Gharib was obsessed with the names of objects and the meanings of words. After much searching in the archive for the possible meanings of the word Palestine, he

chose a narrative redolent of sea waves. He would repeat PALESTINE to himself as if he were touching every letter with his tongue. Turning the letters in his mouth as if tasting a piece of dessert. He wanted to remind himself that even if they banned its use, he would not forget the country they executed. But it didn't die: it was resurrected.

He liked the narrative that attributed the name to seafarers from Greek islands who settled here. In that story, the place took their name. That story had the scent of the sea. When he was a teenager, he always told his friends: The Greeks love us so much! Whenever Greek teams played Maccabi Tel Aviv in the European Basketball Championship, he would say, look how they raise Palestinian flags. He used to cheer for any team that played against Maccabi. Their players were so arrogant, he would say. But he was bothered by more than that. What really drove him mad was the Israeli flag fluttering after they won. Gharib also detested the sight of people chewing gum with their mouths open; the tongue and teeth could be seen rumbling and moving as if in battle. Many basketball players used to do that, but Gharib only had eyes for the open mouths of Maccabi Tel Aviv.

His family called the year he was born 'the year of the Naksa'. 1967. Gharib could have resented being born in those circumstances and in that year. Instead, he consoled himself with an excess of optimism. 'That's alright,' he would say. 'If I first set eyes on this world in days of war, then surely whatever comes after must be better!' Too often, however, dark

pessimism would follow. Our friend Gharib and his people oscillated between these extremes. As if this pessoptimism, as that famous writer with a raspy voice and piercing look once said, was unwilling to part company with them. It should come as no surprise that they are oscillating still. As their prophet predicted, they remain trapped in that spot.

Gharib's eyes were honey-coloured, neither big nor small. He had thick eyelashes, as if a painter had just finished drawing them in kohl. His curly hair was rings blending the colours of sun and earth. He was of medium height, despite his hope and constant attempts to grow taller by playing basketball. Eventually he was convinced that 'the middle is best', as an Arab proverb insists.

What follows, dear reader, is Gharib's story. Or to be more precise, the story of a few days in Gharib's journey. When it began he was still sauntering on Haifa's beach and toying with its sands, before a sinister wave came and stole the grains squatting on his feet. You can identify Gharib on Haifa's beach by the slight bend in his neck that he tries hard to get rid of, or, at times, hide.

Dear reader, since Gharib does not like others to speak for him, he has taken matters in hand and said a few things he wanted us to know about those days. All I have done is collect his words and put them in story form. I will not deny that I have used my authority as a narrator and interfered, here and there, in those matters that Gharib did not wish to, or could not, describe. But they are few and far between.