

Excerpts from The Book of Disappearance by Ibtisam Azem

[The novel takes place within 48 hours after the Israelis wake up to discover that all Palestinians have disappeared. The journey to find answers begins. The novel focuses on Jaffa and Tel Aviv and the history of a city between the past and the present. Two narrators alternate; Alaa, a Palestinian who converses with his dead grandmother in the journal he left behind after his disappearance and his Jewish neighbor, Ariel, who is confounded by the disappearance.]

Alaa

My mother ran out of the house after putting on shoes that didn't match. Her curly hair was tied back with a black band. The fear on her face was patent and her blue eyes seemed bigger. The edge of her white shirt hung over her grey skirt. I followed her out. She looked like a mad woman, roaming the streets of Ajami. She was searching for my grandmother. In a hurry, as if trying to catch up with herself. Hearing my footsteps she turned back and gestured with her broom-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 [Clock] Square. Look for her there.”

She went frantically from house to house like a lost ant. Knocking at doors so hard I was afraid she'd break her hand. It was not flesh and bones, but more like a hammer. Without even greeting, she asked whoever came out if they'd seen my grandmother. When no one answered she'd take a deep breath and weep before the closed door. Then she'd walk on to the next house, wiping her tears on her sleeves.

She walked, and I followed her like a child who had forgotten how fast her pace was. I was forty and had 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 by my insistence on following her. I don't know why I wasn't walking beside her but was staying a few steps behind. I felt too weak for this woman, my mother. I begged her to go home. I told her that I'd search Ajami, house by house, to find Tata, but she should go home. She gestured again with her arm as if I were a mere fly blocking her way and she didn't want to deal with it. She kept searching but 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 went twice a week usually two hours before sunset and waited until we were sleepy. Then I would go back to my apartment in Tel Aviv. Tata had moved to live with my father six months before. My mother insisted that she do that after finding her unconscious in her bathroom, her leg almost broken. Her house on al-Count St. was just a ten-minute walk from ours. Al-Count is the old name Tata still insists on using. I put Sha'are Namanor on the mailbox. What am I saying? She didn't insist on using this name. That was its name. Al-Count sounded like a strange name for me when I was a child. But I later understood from her that that was the honorific given by the Vatican to Talmas, the Palestinian who donated money to build the Maronite church in Jaffa. He used to live on this street and it took his name. Since she moved to live with my parents she insisted on going back every morning to water her roses and check on them. My mother insisted on accompanying her and would go back, or my father would, to bring her back home in the late afternoon before sunset. That morning she said she felt a bit tired and didn't go to her house. She went out an hour after my mother did. That's what my father said when I got home. I found it odd that she'd gone out on her own. 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. I left her and hurried to al-Sa'a Square, a spot Tata loved. "Tata" is what we called her and not "Sitti". She didn't like "Sitti". She wasn't there. There is no place from which to see Jaffa there. I thought to myself that she must've gone to the shore near the old city and not the Shatt al-Arab near Ajami. I don't know why she loved that spot. I went toward the sea to the hill where Tata 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 wondered and 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 was rushing up the old steps. As if my lungs had narrowed like the alleyways. When I walked through them as a child I used to see my shadow next to other shadows. Sometimes it would leave me as if it became someone else's shadow. I thought I was crazy. I kept this a secret to myself for years. I was with Tata once and I asked her to take another route not through the old city. She laughed, kissed my head, and held my hand saying: "Don't be scared, habibi. All the Jaffans who stayed see a shadow walking next to them when they go through the old city. Even the Jews say they hear voices at night and when they go out to see who it is they don't find anyone."

Her explanation didn't help me knock out my fear. I felt instead that it overwhelmed me, and haunted me until I got older. I reached the open square overlooking the sea. Part of it hid behind Mar Butrus church and Bahr Mosque. The sea surprises me every time I come here after escaping the jaws of the old city. I felt a dry wind touching my lips as though in a desert. I looked up to northern Jaffa; the glass windows of the other city shot their reflections back at me. The white city. The glass city.

I headed to the barren hill next to Mar Butrus church. I don't know why I felt that the citadel church was tired just as I was. I loved this name much more than the other name. I imagined that the citadel name is the one that kept it fortified. I found her.

She was sitting on the wooden bench looking at the sea. I yelled with the lilting happiness of my heart: Tata! Tata! Tata! I ran toward her. Her dark face was contemplating the sea. A strand of her black hair had managed to slip away from her headscarf as if dancing with the wind. A light smile sat on her lips. I sat next to her, held her hand and said: "You scared us to death!" Her fingers were wooden dry even though her body was not cold. Or that's how it felt to me. I shook her shoulder and she leaned over a bit. I held on to her shoulder again with my shaking fingers. Had she fainted? I placed my ear on her chest to see if she was breathing. I felt suffocated as if all of Jaffa was caged in my chest. I took out my cell phone to call for an ambulance. Words barely came out of my dry mouth. I was surrounded by all this water yet my mouth was so dry.

She was sitting on the old wooden bench gazing at the sea. Surrounded by the noise and voices of the children playing nearby. She used to say that children are the birds of paradise. My mother would shoot back: "God save us from such birds. All noise and no fun. Oh God, will there be noise in paradise too?" None of the passersby noticed that she had died. She died the way she'd wanted. Either in her bed or by the sea. She used to wish that she'd never get too old to need anyone's help. She kept saying: "God, please don't let me be dependent on anyone. Take me to you while I'm still strong and healthy." I got closer and held her to my chest. Perhaps she was holding me to her chest at a moment I knew would be our last alone before the ambulance came. I smelled the scent of her jasmine soap, her favorite scent. She surrounded herself with tiny bottles of it all over the house. I didn't shed any tears. Perhaps because I had yet to comprehend what had happened. Or maybe I didn't want to believe that she had died. The only meaning that word had at that moment was an odd and powerful feeling of emptiness. I called my father who was at home. He said my mother was back at home and going mad. We agreed that they would follow me to the hospital.

She had bathed before leaving the house! As if going to her own funeral!

Ariel

He felt his head as heavy as an iron ball. His neck couldn't lift it off the pillow. The aspirin he took twenty minutes ago hadn't helped. Even that litre of water he gulped down couldn't ease the pounding headache. He heard a rattle in the next room. He listened, then reached and lit the lamp next to his bed. His eyes roamed the room. He jumped out of bed and opened the door. He stuck his ear in the darkness of the living room to his right. Nothing. He turned all the lights of the apartment on. Still nothing. The rattle was gone.

He went back to bed, wrapping his legs around the white sheets. He felt his forehead to make sure he didn't have a fever and that the heat he was feeling was the weather and not because he was sick. His fingers combed his smooth brown hair. Now it had some white hairs. He remembered that he needed a haircut. He wondered again: Why did Alaa act so strange and stay silent? They sat for an hour and a half and then Alaa excused himself and said he had to go back to the apartment because he had to get up early. They both live in the same building. That was a coincidence. As was their first encounter. Coincidences have no meaning except the one we give them.

Their coincidental first meeting was at Natalie's party. The blonde German who didn't like the fact that she was German or blonde. Everything revolved around her guilt and the crimes of her ancestors. Her guilt was the shadow that haunted her so much one couldn't distinguish Natalie from her shadow. Ariel told Alaa once that she talked so much about the Holocaust he thought she was the granddaughter of one of the victims and not of a Nazi who did what he did.

Being blonde was a burden because many in the White City flirted with her. Here, people love life; a life in which everything rushes to the future. People in this young city are always looking for sex. As if sex is the goal to which they would cling to make sure they are alive during those respites between one war and another. Natalie realized or discovered that after living here for more than three years. She realized that it didn't have to do with her being a thin blonde with pomegranate breasts. It was that the young city's streets were filled with garrulous men waiting for something. Living in a state of perpetual waiting. As if the city were on tenterhooks.

The attractive German blonde worked as a correspondent for one of the TV channels and that's how she met Alaa. She used to seek his assistance every now and then when there was a crisis and the additional media coverage required more cameramen. Alaa was a freelance cameraman. He preferred it that way because it gave him a good income and allowed him to continue his graduate studies in Media at Tel Aviv University without worrying about finances. She got to know Ariel at first through the weekly column he wrote for an American newspaper. She wrote to the newspaper asking for his email. They corresponded and became friends.

When they met yesterday Ariel and Alaa recalled their first meeting at Natalie's. They both lost contact with her after she moved to work in another war zone. "Ariel! Come here. I want to introduce you to Alaa, the Arab I was telling you about. He's your neighbor. Isn't it a strange coincidence that you both live in the same building?"

Natalie said it in flowing Hebrew with an Ashkenazi accent. Alaa extended his hand to shake Ariel's. He said, in a deliberately exaggerated Mizrahi accent: "Shalom, Ariel. Let me introduce myself. Alaa the Arab. I am the token Arab of the party you all need so you can say you have an Arab friend. I think we met on the stairs of the building we both live in."

Natalie was red in the face. She said he was too sensitive and she didn't mean anything by it. Ariel laughed and shook Alaa's hand vigorously. They had met on the stairs, but they never exchanged more than those big city neighborly greetings.

The white city's parties, especially college student parties, never lack sexual energy. Or that's what the partygoers used to say. And that party was no exception. A dark girl with chestnut hair sat next to him. He still remembers her beautiful voice but not what he said to her. The numbness of the hash was spreading all over his body. He felt light and happy as if he was flying high above everyone. The big smile on his face translated that feeling. The boredom he'd felt earlier had now become fits of laughter shared by the dark-skinned woman. She inched closer with each laugh and joke, playing with her hair coquettishly and wetting her lips every time Alaa looked into her eyes.

Alaa kept laughing and Ariel joined in after the hash got to him too. He kept laughing on his way to the kitchen. He came back minutes later with a bottle of water, a plastic plate full of olives, cheese and salad, and two glasses. He poured water for both of them. They both drank and Alaa ate two olives and a piece of cheese he didn't like the taste of. He turned to Ariel and said: "You know what? I'm tired of those who call themselves leftists, and of foreigners and everything

in this city. I don't know why I came to this party in the first place. I'm leaving. I'll see you in the building. You should come for coffee if you like. I'm not working tomorrow. But don't come in the morning. I'm a night person."

"I feel tired as well. I have work tomorrow morning. I'd decided not to come, but changed my mind at the last minute. I'll use your leaving as an excuse to head out. Just give me five minutes."

They left the party laughing out loud. It was only a twenty-minute walk back, but it took them an hour. They took turns cracking jokes and stopped at each intersection to harass passersby and wave to cars.

How long ago was that? Three years? Maybe more? Ariel tossed in his bed recalling the previous night's details. They had spent most of it at Chez George reminiscing about that first meeting. A bit after eleven Alaa said he was very tired and couldn't continue drinking. He had to wake up early to work. They paid the bill and headed back to the building on Rothschild St. They walked from Chez George at 45 Rothschild to their building at 5A, in less than fifteen minutes. They'd downed a whole bottle of Nero d'Avola, but they felt neither tipsy nor ecstatic.

Ariel tried to fall asleep, but kept tossing and turning. He felt insomnia hovering around his bed. He carried out the usual rituals to ward it off. He drank a cup of camomile tea. Then he ran warm water in the tub and got into it and tried to read Amos Oz's latest novel. His mother had praised it and given him a copy. He couldn't finish a single page. He felt tired. He got out of the tub, dried himself, and went back to bed. But he still couldn't fall asleep. As if sleep had eloped. He turned on the radio. David Broza's voice came through singing "The Woman By My Side".

The song revived a bittersweet memory. It reminded him of his ex, Zohar, who loved this song and used to dance and sing along loudly whenever it came on. He still feels guilty about Zohar. They were together for a year, but she meddled too much in his life and minutiae. He felt he was suffocating with her. He didn't miss her any longer. Not the way he did in the beginning, but he still loved her. He realized that they were just different. He still thought of her often, but was relieved they broke up.

"The woman by my side doesn't insist on bathing her body in a sacred pond
She isn't for you, my mother would mumble
She's as thin as ice, my father would say
But she's more real than all of us
This is real love

From the time before we were born

. . .

I wake up in the morning for her
I grope my way to her lips in the darkness
I am hers now with everything I have
I have given up
My friends, dogs, and fucks
I have given them all up

. . .

But don't let her know what I said. . .”

He looked at his cell phone. It was three fifteen in the morning. He turned it off. His vacation starts tomorrow and there's no need to get up early.

Prison 48

Ravi's white face was the color of turnip. His eyes bulged and his jaw dropped when he opened the gate to cell number 5. He wouldn't have been that shocked had he seen the corpse of a prisoner who had committed suicide or died of torture. He's been at it for thirty years and his skin was thicker than a crocodile's, as he used to say sarcastically. He has no feelings towards the terrorists, as he used to call them. He might pity them at times, especially the young ones.

He called out “Prisoner number 3” into the silence coming from the cold cell. The silence didn't respond. He peered inside carefully while holding the gate with his right hand. He called out again with an anxious voice for prisoner number 3 to come out and stand in line for the 6 am count. He checked the cell and turned his head left and right. Holding his nose to avoid the stench he stepped into the cell's void. He stood perplexed in the middle and looked at the walls as if searching for an ant or a roach. Or something hiding in there, but not for Waleed. He was sweating now and felt his temperature rise. He could hear his heart pounding. He looked at the lock. Looked for a hole in the wall through which Waleed might have escaped. The guard was trapped in the cell.

He barked into the walkie-talkie he was carrying: “Prisoner number 3 is not in

his cell. Repeat. Prisoner three not in cell 5.” Other voices yelling numbers and similar phrases in disbelief followed from empty cells and wards which seemed to be chasing the guards.

Menachem was on his way to prison number 48, about seventy kilometers north of the white city. There was no sign indicating the prison’s existence. Those who drove on route 4 on their way to Haifa wondered about the side road branching off without a sign. There wasn’t a sign. Not even one of those indicating a closed military area. Nothing but pines and cypresses through which some dim lights appeared.

Menachem was driving his old Mercedes without paying much attention to road signs. He knows the road by heart. There were dark patches under his eyes carrying his fatigue.

“Why doesn’t this bastard die and give me a break? These idiots hit him like he’s some doll. I can’t believe I’m unable to finish my article for the third night in a row. All because they use excessive force and call me thinking he’s about to die. He didn’t die yesterday, nor the day before. I told Ravi to give him a break for a day, to rest. Let him sleep. He stinks. They didn’t allow him to go to the toilet. They call me for the third night in a row. As if mercy suddenly found a place in their hearts and they can’t wait for me to come for my usual appointment. When I got there yesterday he was frothing, and it was disgusting. How old is prisoner number 3? Seventeen? I don’t know why I am possessed by this one. Perhaps because it is standing between me and finishing the article. Miri! Do you hear me? Are you still there?”

Because of the time difference and being occupied with a series of articles about humane torture for a famous British magazine, this was the only time in the last few days when he could talk to his daughter who was studying in New York.

“Yes, Aba. OK. But you know that I have problems with you working as a doctor with political prisoners. A torture doctor. We’ve argued a lot about it and I don’t want us to talk now while you’re driving.”

“Were it not for me some of them wouldn’t be alive. Do you know that? I try to make prison conditions for these terrorists humane. I told Ravi that that young man will not withstand the shaking. Stop using that technique. He won’t. Even if you try it with eight thousand of them. Just as Rabin once said in a radio interview and wondered why the Shabak had to stop using this method. This young man won’t survive even if thousands before did. I told them that and I always warn them not to use inhumane methods in torture. That’s why my presence there is important. You know that!”

Her response to everything he said was “hmmm” and some tense breathing.

“Sweetie? Are you still there?”

“Yes, yes. And what did he say when you told him that torture won’t work with that prisoner?”

“We’ll shove a stick up his ass. That’s exactly what Ravi said. I’m sorry for the language. I just want you to realize that I had to be there. It would’ve been much worse if I hadn’t been. This time Ravi looked like he was serious about doing exactly that to number 3. I know you have some Arab friends and you’re against all these measures. I’m with you, but am not sure we have any other option.”

“Ok, Aba.”

“Oh, sweetie. I’ve arrived and I have to hang up. You know the security precautions. I’ll call you from home tomorrow. OK?”

“OK. Bye.”

“Bye. Take care.”

Once he got to the big black iron gate Menachem stopped the car engine as was required. He got out and went to the scanner where his face and palm were identified. He went back and turned the ignition again and waited for the black gate to be opened. The building’s courtyard was full of pines and cypresses. There were some rose bushes near the wooden benches where prison staff sat to sip coffee or smoke during breaks between torture sessions. Nothing in the courtyard indicated the nature of what took place inside. Everything looked clean and calm from the bench. Like the prisoners themselves, the building had no official existence. Neither guard nor prisoner existed. What mattered was extracting information. Whoever gets to prison 48 must be a dangerous target. Those who make decisions know what they’re doing.

Menachem parked his car in the spot designated for doctors. He left all electronics inside the car as per instructions. When he got to the prison clinic he found Ravi lying on a bed waiting for him. He was sweating profusely and screaming and complaining of severe stomach pain. Menachem fought a smile and thought for a moment that prisoner 3 had assaulted Ravi and injured him.

“What happened?”

“The son of a bitch has disappeared. When I catch him I’m gonna tear him to pieces. They’ve all disappeared. I’ll tear them to pieces when I catch them. They won’t get away from us!”

Translated from the Arabic by Sinan Antoon

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