




A coffee shop in Jerusalem. Photo by tarik Bakri.

JERUSALEM
my BELOVED *city*

"I can be a treasure chest,
for all your stories, ones
from before the hurt,
before before everything
stabbed you with its edges."
From the poem *Jerusalem* by Tala Abu
Rahmeh



A Valentine Letter to Jerusalem

By Riyam Kafri AbuLaban



Dear Jerusalem,
Will you be my Valentine?

Somewhere in my distant childhood, there are countless afternoons spent in the Old City. There is the smell of sweet *qater* oozing onto *knafeh*. There is me trying to manage Zalatimo's *mtabaq* as it slips and slides out of my hands and onto my clothes. There is my mother's look of dismay as she chides me, "*Lissa talee' min al-ghaseel*" (*I just washed this*), and rushes me to the small bathroom to wash my hands. There is the smell of incense and the hot glow of candles lit at the church of the Holy Sepulcher, and there is the shimmering Dome of the Rock in the warm spring sun. There is the taste of *shawerma* and the dripping of *theeniyyeh* all over my clothes again. In my distant childhood, there are memories of me, us, all of us, visiting you often and loving you very dearly. There is the taste of *halaweh*, and gummy bears, and there is the shopping for tennis shoes at the beginning of the school year on busy and central Salah al-Din Street. There is my blissful ignorance of your pain and your significance, and my childish love of your pleasures.

Dear Jerusalem, you and I have a very troubled relationship, written with the disappearing ink of separation, punctuated with distance, and illustrated with

forgetfulness. It didn't help that I had a chance to visit you only in 2010, more than 15 years after the last time I walked your stone streets. It did not help that the only part of you I saw on that visit was the inside of Al-Makassed Hospital, the sight of my mother being shuttled to the operating room for a stent, then the hour-long wait that extended infinitely; the sound of my mother's friend on the phone asking if my mother was out of surgery, and the change in her tone when she asked me if I was ok. The burning tears I pushed back as I assured her that I was fine, that this would end soon, and that we would be home. It did not help that I spent the rest of the day in the Cardiac Care Unit, fashionably abbreviated CCU, sitting on a plastic chair, with all kinds of plastic

bags around me filled with snacks I did not eat and would never eat. It was definitely not in your favor that all the smells and tastes of you were erased by one cold sandwich of over-fried falafel, washed down with a Diet Coke that left me with horrible stomach pain for the next two days. And it did not help at all that, when I finally dared to look out through the window as my mother lay stretched out on her bed, moving in and out of sleep, I saw Al-Aqsa right there, so close, shimmering gold under the sun, aloof to my own suffering at that moment, unaware that it would have been easier to take my mother to Jordan for her catheterization and stent than come to you, the Holy City, city of Peace, to Al-Quds, the Holy Sanctuary. It also was not in your favor that when



the nurse asked me to leave at the end of the day and come back in the morning, it felt like I was being exiled to another country, like I was leaving my mother on another planet, not just down the road to another city, less than 15 km away. See, my dear, on that visit, all those sweet memories disappeared. They took one final bow as the curtain fell. They were thrown into a barbed wire cage as we stood waiting for our turn at Qalandiya Checkpoint, also fashionably called Ma'abar Qalandiya to trick people into thinking that their path is not obstructed at all, that caging people into steel passages like chickens getting ready to be slaughtered is absolutely normal and necessary for the security of a free nation that has fenced in another nation.

Truth is, they were fading slowly as my distance from you grew greater, and my access to you became more restricted. They faded as I drove past an exit every day for six years clearly marked Al-Quds, and was never able to take it. They faded, because the one person I want to share you with is

unable to reach you, and to him you are not more than an illusion, an image, a metaphor to a lost land.

I wanted to pretend that I still loved you, that I still was very passionate about you and everything you stand for, but I could not. And so many are like me. You have become the unattainable, out of reach, too much trouble to get to, reserved only for sickness and rarely in health destination. You are accessible and open to everyone in this world except us, your own children, who rose from your belly and only wish now for a minute of prayer or meditation in your warm center. *They* [the Israeli occupation] won, with their wall, and chicken-coop-like checkpoints, with their permits and magnetized cards, they made me unlove you, and I fell for it and forgot you.

It wasn't until September 2014 that I fell in love with you again. I had an appointment at the new American Consulate for a visa to the United States. I took the day off and agreed to meet my sister in the Old City after I was done. I needed to make peace with

you again; I needed to love you again. When I finished early, I took a cab down to Bab al-Amoud, and I sat in the sun reading, listening, smelling, and people-watching. I looked up from my Kindle to take the place in; I breathed you in, and as I did, I felt you bloom into my blood again. Your holiness covered me with a veil. I loved you again. I was ashamed to have unloved you; I was ashamed to have forgotten your smell, your taste. I loved you again with *tahineh* dripping all over my clothes as we ate Al-Shu'leh *shawerma*. I loved you again as I bought "tennis shoes" from Salah al-Din Street for Basil and Taima, and *halaweh* from the Old City; as I contemplated purchasing the handmade leather purse and then decided against it. I loved you again because I was a little girl one more time, and I wished so hard I could bring my own children to visit you. I felt your pain too. Your streets were emptier, your shops quieter, your shopowners bored with silence, elated when a customer walks in, deflated when they buy nothing. Your Old City is still as beautiful as ever, but devoured by the hustle and bustle just out "West."

I tasted all that is sweet and all that is sour about you in the lemonade I bought in front of Bab al-Amoud, and I fell in love with you again. Please forgive my forgetfulness, forgive me for not visiting you. Forgive me for not claiming you every day, all day. But how could I claim you, when I do not really have you? I want to extend my arms through the Wall and strangle you with a big hard hug. I want you to love me again. I want to find peace in your courtyards and sanctuaries. I want to shimmer under the sun with your golden dome; I want to breathe the incense and light a candle in your churches again. I want to love you again and not forget you this time. I want to pass you on to my children, and they on to their children. I want you to be, if just for a few hours this year, my Valentine.

Love,
Riyam



Photo by Shareef Sarhan.