“Say goodbye.” This is what the doctor said softly to us in the middle of the night. We had telephoned him in panic and he had come out in the dark to his friend’s apartment, despite the eerie emptiness of Ramallah’s streets in the midst of the Second Intifada. He had followed the stages of our father’s illness from the first crisis in February. Mercifully, he had some morphine with him, which stopped the shuddering pain. My sister and I awakened our aunt. “Come say goodbye,” I whispered. Shocked, she ran into her brother’s room. She’d been praying hard for him. She felt betrayed.

It was May 23, 2001. As dawn lightened the sky, people began to arrive, so many of them who had shared the nine years of my father’s rich new second life in Palestine. My father, Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, had moved back in 1992, after more than forty years of exile, most of it spent in the United States. After struggling to get a college education, then going to graduate school, he’d led a busy life as a scholar and professor of political science, teaching at Smith College, McGill University and then Northwestern, with interludes on educational projects in the Arab world. He had raised a family with my mother, Janet, a sociologist and urban planner, who came to do research in the Arab world through him but whose commitments to justice were her own. His life had
revolved around Palestine and he had instilled in us, his children, a sense of our Palestinianess despite our American lives and his own vivid participation in everything from academic politics (what he referred to as “village politics”) to an intense and stormy marriage, suburban lawn-mowing, and the challenges of shepherding teenagers into adulthood in the US.

Ever since he’d felt the stinging humiliation of what he perceived as Americans’ glee over Israel’s defeat of the Arabs in 1967, he had thrown himself into public speaking and organising in the US about Middle East issues – he wanted to combat the deep hostility and ignorance he found all around him. He was heckled. He was attacked. Fortunately, his university protected him under the banner of academic freedom, but also because he was such an engaging teacher and colleague. Eventually he focused his energies on the Palestine question. He talked and wrote about the historical injustice of Palestinian dispossession; he dreamt of liberation. He also spoke pragmatically about politics and worked to establish Arab-American intellectual institutions as alternatives to the mainstream. At the back of his closet in Ramallah we were to find a small leather suitcase stuffed with yellowed newspaper clippings documenting his appearances at everything from a press conference at the US State Department to Arab community meetings in obscure middle-American towns. His international speaking had taken him from Ghana to Australia. A soft little kangaroo skin in his Ramallah apartment was the out-of-place memento of this last trip.

What had brought him to Ramallah was a medical crisis in 1990 that forced on him a sense of mortality. He told people he feared he might die before seeing Palestine again. He decided to return. First for a visit, then to live. But not in Jaffa, his birthplace – that was part of Israel now and he refused to submit himself to direct rule by those who had taken his country and city. (He did try to get a post office box there, just for the thrill of having a Jaffa address. He was refused.) He could not claim his birthright, which
Israel does not recognise, even though any Russian or Ethiopian who claims Jewish roots (and even some who don’t) can get housing and financial support from the state, and thousands of American Jewish teenagers get free holidays as their birthright. Instead, he moved to the Occupied West Bank, to Ramallah. His status: tourist. Although he came to take up a long-standing invitation to teach at Birzeit University, work permits are rarely given by the Israelis, so he used his American passport. He had to leave and re-enter the country every three months to renew this tourist visa.

Like many 1948 refugees, my father had no family left in Palestine. They had been scattered by the fighting of 1948 and the general expulsion. His world in Ramallah consisted of friends and colleagues, not relatives. It was they who came to his apartment when they heard the news that he was dying. These were all people who shared his commitment to Palestinians and to building Palestinian institutions. They appreciated his optimism in the face of grim realities. He had lightened up a tense world of curfews, insecurity and humiliation with his affection and humour.

From the moment he arrived, he insisted on travelling around his Palestine, refusing to recognise the borders of the Green Line that marks off what was taken in 1948 from what was occupied in 1967. He made friends in Haifa and ‘Akka and Nazareth. He made a special point of going regularly to Jaffa, taking anyone who had the right kind of travel documents to get through the Israeli checkpoints. He loved the defiant but embattled community that kept Jaffa alive. Most of all, he liked to swim in the sea that he had loved as a boy. He felt he was home.

Since his arrival in 1992, he had dedicated himself to one project after another that he saw as part of nation-building. Most of the people who arrived one by one at his apartment for the sad vigil were those with whom he had worked on these projects. First, his colleagues and friends from Birzeit University, the first Palestinian university, founded in 1972. There, he had sought to revive and
contribute to academic life after years of closures. My father had described to a colleague what it was like to teach at Birzeit in the early 1990s when he first arrived:

I started teaching at a very exciting period. The Israelis were still in Ramallah. Every few days there was a curfew and I could see the tanks and the jeeps. It was an occupied country, no question about it. I saw people being arrested and beaten by the army on a daily basis. Ramallah would close around two o’clock…Because of this environment, it was impossible for the university to function as other universities do. Birzeit could be closed at a moment’s notice after being surrounded by the army.¹

Some of the other friends who arrived at my father’s apartment as he lay dying had been part of the committed team he had assembled to design the first unified independent Palestinian national curriculum. For the past few years, my father’s passion had been the planning of another major national institution: a Palestinian national museum. Not one that would focus on the Nakba like a Holocaust memorial that dwelt only on the tragedy of one historic moment of loss and devastation, but a museum that would, as he insisted, communicate the continuous existence of the Palestinians on the land, assert a living national history, and serve as a resource for historical research and archiving.

So many others were there in the Ramallah apartment: people who had worked with him, studied under him, or simply enjoyed the animated political discussions he always engaged in, accompanied by the good food he relished and often cooked himself. Mahmoud Darwish, Palestine’s great poet, had come to visit nearly every day of my father’s illness. In a few days he would eulogise his friend, complimenting his warmth, his pragmatism and his vision. “Like other great men with missions,” he would say, “he did not write as much as he was actively involved in daily intellectual discussion, defending a hope besieged by powers that could only be defeated by optimism of the will.”²
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Many, especially the women, had waited until daylight before coming, fearful of the insecurity of the Second Intifada triggered in late 2000 by Ariel Sharon’s provocative visit with soldiers to the Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. It was May 2001 now and the intermittent gunfire on the outskirts of Ramallah between the Israeli army and locals reminded us all that one never knew what was going to happen. Just a week earlier the Israelis had bombed a house across from the Grand Park Hotel, a small establishment only a few blocks away from my father’s apartment. The explosion had set off the alarm on his oxygen machine and panicked him. “Quick, get in the corridor,” he’d ordered my sisters and aunt. “That’s what we did in Beirut when the Israelis bombed. It’s the safest place.”

In the stories my father told about the past, especially when he was spinning them for his younger political admirers, he presented a seamless myth of his political trajectory back to Palestine. His mother was a surprisingly strong presence in these stories. Two sets of interviews, one in Arabic and one in English, the first recorded in August 1982 while Beirut was under siege and the second between 1999–2000, by Hisham Ahmed-Fararjeh in Ramallah, suggest that her inclusion in his own story of expulsion from Palestine and in the larger epic of the Palestinians’ losses had a symbolic dimension. She was certainly a strong figure and herself a storyteller, like him. She was, my mother explained to me, his real link to what everyday life in pre-1948 Palestine had been like. But in his stories, she seems to stand for what they had all lost, and to justify his own politicisation.

He was only eighteen years old when the fighting broke out in Jaffa in 1947 – fighting that would, with the British departure, result in the Zionist forces seizing Jaffa, the cultural and economic capital of Arab Palestine, despite the fact that the UN Partition Plan that recommended the division of Palestine into Jewish and Arab parts had designated Jaffa as part of the Arab Palestinian
state. When their neighbourhood of Manshiyya – on the border with Tel Aviv – became too dangerous, they moved out to stay with an uncle. He lived in downtown Jaffa, in ‘Ajami, over the gold market and near the ‘Palace’ (the local municipality building), but after a Zionist paramilitary group set off an explosion in the Palace, killing sixty-nine people while my father was sitting in the Islamic Youth Club nearby, he was badly shaken and decided to move the family to another place.

He liked to tell the story of how he found a modern apartment as a temporary home – an apartment whose owners, like most of Jaffa's bourgeoisie with money and connections, had fled abroad in the early days of the fighting. This couple had allegedly gone on their honeymoon. What he most vividly remembered was his mother’s response: “My whole family started cursing: ‘What brought us to this house?!’ It had a western-style toilet. And a shower! They wanted the ordinary familiar things. We told them, ‘Let’s thank God we found somewhere to live.’ But there were more complaints: ‘And on the third floor? How are we supposed to go up and down?’”

His mother, he said, didn’t like the modern neighbourhood and berated him for separating her from her friends. “She was upset. There were a million problems. There was no public bakery [most families in traditional neighbourhoods made the dough at home but took the loaves to be baked in communal ovens]. We had to buy bread, but my mother refused. ‘This is inedible!’ She wasn’t used to this kind of life.”

As the fighting between the Zionist forces and the Palestinians intensified, with skirmishes between Jaffa and Tel Aviv getting worse, he and his eldest brother (both of whom by April were working with the hastily formed, disorganised, and barely-armed National Committee to Defend Jaffa) told the rest of the family they should leave the city. There was hardly any food and no end in sight to the fighting. He and his brother were finding it almost impossible to scour the city for food. Everyone had heard of the
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massacre and the rapes in Deir Yassin and they feared for their young sister, Raja. My father said to his interviewers in Beirut:

My mother didn’t want to leave, she was a fighter. But we told her, ‘No, you have to. You can go to Nablus, it’s not far and we’ll soon follow. Things are sure to calm down.’ (We were just leading her along.) So we brought them a truck and we put them in it…My brother was only fifteen. There was no one who could take charge except my mother. We thought it would be a matter of a week or two. It never occurred to me that we would never return.

My father himself finally left in May on what was rumoured to be the last boat out of Jaffa. As he described it, the shooting was all coming from the other side – there was hardly anyone left in Jaffa. His mother’s experience symbolised all that was lost when they lost Palestine. My father told his interviewers in Beirut:

I’ll tell you something. I asked my mother many years later, maybe it was 1976. I said, ‘Ya Hajja, we’ve heard that they might be giving compensation. What do you think? Would you take compensation for what you lost?’ She answered, ‘God damn them…How could you compensate me? I want to live with my community, they destroyed my community. What do I want with the money?’ There were a few families from Jaffa who lived near her in Amman, this was why she wanted to stay there. She’d come and visit us all [her sons] but she refused to live anywhere else. There were three families, her friends, who had been with her in Jaffa – on the same street, in the same neighbourhood. They stayed together, they would visit her, she’d visit them. And when she died, they were the same families that came together. For her, Jaffa and the whole country, meant this community.

My grandmother was also a recurring figure in the story of his political awakening which, as he told it in the late 1990s when he himself was approaching seventy, culminated in his finding his community as a Palestinian. This happened first in
the politics of liberation and later in his return (‘awda) to live, work and, as it turned out, to die on Palestinian soil. She appears in an early memory of going to his first demonstration in Jaffa. He thinks it was in 1936, around the time of the general strike to protest the British failure to halt Zionist colonisation. He says the British called it a riot, as was typical of colonial politics. But he understood it now as an uprising, an intifada. He remembers taking his young brother on his shoulders.

It was a huge demonstration and I saw…the British army and British police mounted on horseback with big batons, beating the heads of our people. I saw blood streaming from the heads and was so scared by the sight that I kept saying to my younger brother, who was just an idiot, four years old: ‘Did you see that!! Did you see that?’ I was trying to reassure myself but he was screaming, the poor thing, ‘Yes, yes, I see, I see’.4

He recalls the chants: “‘Down with British imperialism!’ ‘Down with the Balfour Declaration.’ ‘Down with Zionism!’ It was all down with this and that.” He jokes, “We never heard the word up!” The lesson for the present that he drew from his childhood story is that those who now accuse Palestinian mothers of sending their children out to throw stones in the intifada are absurd.

I remember that in my case nobody pushed me to go to the demonstration. I knew exactly that it was anti-British and anti-Zionist. There was no doubt at the age of seven who were the enemies of the Palestinians…The interesting thing is that when I came back from the demonstration after the British had succeeded in overcoming the uprising and beating the hell out of our people, arresting our people, injuring our people, my mother opened the door for me and began to scold me. She wasn’t scolding me because I went to the demonstration, she was scolding me because I took my younger brother with me. ‘How dare you take your younger brother?’ You see, he didn’t understand anything. So, it was okay for me at the age of seven to go, I was old
enough to understand. His commentary then turned to the present: The mothers understand what their children are doing. They cannot restrain them or imprison them at home because this is a national action for liberation.  

His life story of political activism oscillated between marvel at the absurdity of his own ignorance and pride in his efforts and transformation. As a high school student in the final days of the British Mandate, he was active in mobilising students around the country. Sometimes he had to lie to his mother and tell her he was off studying. He talks about his disillusionment later, when it dawned on him in the months after they were all forced to flee Jaffa, that the Arab armies had no plans to take Palestine back. He talks of the humiliations he endured as a refugee in Jordan when his family finally settled there in 1949, Nablus not having turned out to be workable because of the huge influx of other refugees. Not only were they living crowded into one room, with no glass in the windows so that they either got wet in the rain or suffocated by stuffing the windows full of blankets, but they lost all the economic security they had had in Jaffa, as well as his dreams of future education. He had dreamt of being a lawyer; his grandfather had been a judge. The sudden loss of social standing was the worst. He said, “You are in a place where no one knows you.”

Because Amman was inundated by hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees, the monarch was afraid that Jordan would be destabilised. The Jordanian police would round up the refugees and insult them. As he told his interviewers in Beirut, it pained my father to hear what they said:

‘All of you are pimps, sons of bitches. You sold your land to the Jews. All of you collaborated.’ And I don’t know what else they said. We had never thought of ourselves as part of a mass; we had been living in Jaffa; we were from such and such family; our family’s home was in such and such a place; and we were connected to these other people. And we were
respectable…My father was respected, a nationalist. People knew us. We had dignity.

No more.

My father finally escaped to the United States in 1949, by boat, on borrowed money. My uncle tells me that he left just in the nick of time as the authorities came to the house looking for him soon after, having arrested some of his political friends. In the US he pursued his education while working menial jobs, like any immigrant. By 1954 he had married, had his first child (me), and was doing a PhD at Princeton.

Antagonism towards the Palestinians reappeared as a strong theme in his description of one of the most significant turning points in his political life: attending his first meeting of the Palestine National Council. On a visit to Egypt in August 1970, he met his friend, the noted Egyptian journalist, Mohammad Hassanein Heykal, at the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies. Heykal invited him to lunch in the cafeteria, mysteriously saying there were some people he might like to meet. To my father’s utter surprise, it turned out to be Yasser Arafat, accompanied by some key figures in the recently formed PLO. He was stunned. “I was shy: My God! This was our leadership!” After some small talk, he says he summoned up the courage to ask a question. Looking straight at Arafat, who was wearing his dark glasses and kuffiya, he asked, “Mr. Arafat, what role do you see for people like us who are living outside [in the diaspora]? We are intellectuals, we work with ideas at universities. What role do you see for us in the revolution?” He remembers that Arafat looked at him quizically and replied, “Doctor, when we began our revolution we didn’t ask anyone. We were Palestinians sitting in Kuwait or Qatar thinking, what can we do for Palestine? We decided to make a revolution…It is for you to decide how to contribute to this revolution, which is yours.”

As the group got up to leave, Arafat hugged him and told him
he should attend the special meeting of the Palestine National Council in Amman. My father had read about it in the newspapers but it never occurred to him that he could attend. At that meeting in Amman in the summer of 1970, however, the tension on the street was palpable as he walked with some old friends towards the meeting hall. The Jordanian army with its armoured personnel carriers stood face to face with the Palestinian resistance fighters; it was unclear who was protecting whom from what. He was afraid that the Jordanians planned to surround and slaughter those gathered for the meeting, and his apprehensions at that time were well-founded – this was just before Black September when the armed Palestinian resistance was driven out. It was a decisive time for the Palestinian armed struggle, betrayed and forced to move to Lebanon, only to be expelled again twelve years later by the Israeli invasion of 1982.

It was also a decisive moment for him personally. My father says he had a strong reaction to the meeting:

This was the very first time I had ever attended anything—official, unofficial, or popular—called Palestinian. Since 1948. Arab yes, with Palestinians, yes, but something Palestinian? I was so happy, so thrilled, even though this was the worst meeting, a terrible moment, and the tensions were unbelievable…But for the first time I truly saw my people. They talked just the way I did, we chattered and talked, and we kissed and hugged each other.

What was so incredible to him was that there was no other topic except Palestine. Everything was discussed in terms of its impact on Palestinians:

And then in the evening, you’d sit and eat Palestinian foods…Foods I’d forgotten!

In a dramatic conclusion to the narrative he told his young admirer, he said:
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I had found my identity. I became part of the movement…My loyalty was now with the resistance. Nasser died and I shifted my affection to Arafat. I became a full-time functioning Palestinian.

To say that my father became fully Palestinian then is not to say that his cultural identity as a Palestinian had not always been central, or that he had not cared about the land of Palestine. My mother says that his deepest fear was that if they did not have their land, the Palestinians would end up like the Armenians or the Native Americans. He had long made analogies between Israel and other settler colonial states in North America, Africa and Australia and had even published a book on the comparison.8

My father explained to his interviewer, Hisham Ahmed-Fararjeh, that he didn’t talk to his children about what had actually happened in 1948 as much as about Palestine, about his family: who he was and who his parents were. Indeed, he was glad that we lived in the Arab world in those early years. When we lived in Egypt in the late 1950s, we knew our Palestinian relatives there, his maternal aunt and a cousin’s family with whom we were extremely close. Our grandmother often came to stay and, even after moving back to the US in 1960, we frequently went to Amman where at least I, the eldest, felt at home with the whole extended family. We always stayed with his mother, sister and his brother’s large family who all lived together in a few rooms. We laid out mattresses on the floor at night, picked grapes off the arbour, and ate wonderful food. I sewed dolls’ clothes in the old storeroom with my cousin, fell off a swing, went for Quran lessons, and had crushes on the boys next door (a family from Jaffa, of course).

I don’t remember anything of what my father insists was his other important way of binding his children to Palestine. He tells his interviewers in Beirut that before 1967 we would go to Amman and then visit Jerusalem.
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What I was doing was, first I was tying my kids to our whole big tribe, uncles, aunts, cousins. They knew that I had relatives, that we were all Palestinians. But the second thing is that I was always determined to take them to Jerusalem. We’d rent the car and we’d go. This is our country. In Tulkarem we’d go to a high place and I’d say, ‘There, there’s my home.’ You could see Jaffa, you could see the sea from there.

This was before the Israeli occupation of the West Bank.

As the daughter of a 1948 refugee who never herself experienced expulsion and grew up mostly in the US and with an American mother, my most intimate sense of belonging to Palestine consisted not in any connection to this territory that meant so much to him, but in the embodied closeness to relatives who shared my name and who gave me a childhood taste for special foods and an ear for a familiar dialect. The limits of my belonging came in moments like those, much later, when I learned that the language that filled my young life as my father talked affectionately to friends on the phone or argued political points was a dialect specific to Jaffa, the city of his birth and dreams of return. How would I know that?

But even if I had not had these childhood tastes and memories of family, there would still be no way not to be drafted into being Palestinian. You see the news of terrible events affecting other Palestinians and know that they are connected to you, somehow. You carry a name that raises eyebrows. When I was young, people often asked where my father was from. Before the hijackings of the 1960s that made Palestinians famous, people sometimes were puzzled by my answer. “Pakistan?” they would ask. Later, one would encounter strong views about Palestinians. Living elsewhere than among Palestinians both in the US and in Egypt, I would see myself through the eyes of others. Sometimes this meant bathing in support, sympathy and solidarity. This happened often in Egypt. In the US, it is different. The lies one reads lash the flesh and one is constantly stunned by what people say and believe.
Blind to the everyday violence of checkpoints, imprisonment, racism and death; complicit in the rhetoric of retaliation and security; silent about the primal injustice of 1948 even when, in the best case, they are righteous about opposition to the Occupation or the settlements. To be a Palestinian in America is to learn to navigate this chasm in understandings of the world, to feel the hostility. For much of my life, being Palestinian could be put in the background. The luxury of the diaspora. The fruits of being second generation. The consequences of being mixed. But it was always there, to be managed.

For the generation that lost Palestine things are different. My father’s younger brother, Said, now approaching eighty, confessed recently that he harbours a new hope that he’ll be chosen among the 100,000 Palestinians that rumour has it the Palestinian Authority bargained could retain the right of return. He insists he’d move to Jaffa in a minute. He says simply, “I love it.” My father’s cousin, the relative we’d been so close to in Egypt and who then went to America, now lives in Amman. Widowed, she wanted to live near her brother and sister. She shares this longing for Palestine. She sang for us one day:

I’m a wounded bird
Living in the world, a stranger…
I search, for my country
But I have nothing but my laments…

These are relatives we loved as children, who wanted us to know, to make us Palestinian. They were not, like my father, political. It was only after my father’s death that I discovered that their attachments to Palestine and their sense of exile were as deep as his.

It was his mother again who my father would invoke in his stories of political commitment to suggest later his political independence from Arafat, despite the flattery and his own loyalty to the cause. My father liked to present his mother as
radical. She read the newspaper, he said, as he did, though I rem-
ember her in her later years more often sitting on her bed cross-
legged and reading the Quran. Her husband had taught her this
habit when they married. My father got a kick out of telling people
that she supported the more radical Popular Front for the Libera-
tion of Palestine, though it was only because she liked George
Habash, its leader, because she knew him personally and admired
the fact that, as a physician, he had generously treated the refugees
for free. But my grandmother was also more cautious than my
father about politics. She talked politics in a whisper; she had seen
her husband jailed by the British, one son shot dead in Tel Aviv,
and her eldest son later jailed in Jordan, then exiled to Kuwait.
My father insists, though, that she never stopped them from work-
ning for the liberation of Palestine.

“As a Palestinian,” my father would explain, “you can’t escape
politics.” He had thrown himself into it. What that meant had
shifted over his lifetime. From the demonstrations against the
British to the humiliations of finding himself a politicised refugee;
from pouring himself into research and scholarly writing about
the Arab world and the Palestine question to his passion for the
visions of national liberation shared in the 1960s by anti-colonial
and anti-imperialist groups across the Third World. From the
brutality of the Israeli bombardment of the captive Palestinian
population of Beirut during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in
1982 (when he refused my mother’s frantic offers to try to get him
evacuated as an American) to the violence he witnessed in the
Occupied Territories when he moved back – violence that made
him (only partly tongue in cheek) urge disarmament of the whole
Middle East as the only solution to the conflict.

When I met him at the airport in New York after he had survived
the siege of Beirut in the summer of 1982, he was shaken. He had
gone to set up an Open University for Palestinians and instead
encountered a cluster bomb on his balcony. He seemed hollowed
out. He had seen things that he didn’t want to talk about with me.
When he started lecturing and writing again, he said he had concluded that, “the question of Palestine cannot be answered through violence.” He was sobered by the damage that the Israelis caused to both the Palestinians and the Lebanese. “They had weapons of incredible power: bombs, cluster bombs and all sorts of weapons of destruction.”

My father began to lecture in the 1980s about the impasse. His message: the Israeli military would never produce the surrender of the Palestinian people. He was right: the two Intifadas were still to come. But he also insisted that the opposite was equally true: no matter how much power the Palestinians might acquire, they would never produce the surrender of the Israelis. “They cannot impose their will and we cannot impose ours. Therefore, we have to figure out a way to reach a solution that both people can live with.”

Never one for introspection, my father had little patience for people who “looked at their bellybuttons”, something he teased his American children for doing. He always looked outward, whatever the personal cost to himself or to those close to him. He spoke, he wrote, he edited books, he started a publishing company in our house, he attended meetings and conferences. He travelled. If he told his friend, Edward Said, in his last days that, “In the end, there’s only family,” he had not lived his life as if this were so. He lived for Palestine, demanding that my mother live in its shadow. Then he left his marriage to return to Palestine. His children’s visits with him became more difficult to manage, though he kept close to us and to the grandchildren he adored. He was driven by his conviction that people – as individuals and together – could shape the world, make things happen, change history. He created organisations from nothing. He was bent on realising his dreams for Palestine, even if they kept being dashed.

Yet everyone who knew him intimately knew that my father was always haunted by another kind of dream. “The truth is,” he
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told some liberal Zionist colleagues at Northwestern who always wanted to discuss “peace” and the situation “over there” with him, “I don’t dream. All people dream, but not me. I have only one dream that recurs: a nightmare.” Commenting to his interviewers in Beirut in 1982 that he had had this nightmare regularly since 1948, he continued the story of his conversation with his Northwestern colleagues:

The dream never changes. And I have no other. Always, I am living by the sea – the house I grew up in was in Jaffa, right by the sea. A thief comes, a burglar. He starts pushing open the door and I try to shut it. A struggle that doesn’t end. He pushes and I try to shut the door...And I scream but no one hears me. I’m shouting to the people in the house that someone’s breaking in, but no one hears.

Even without understanding much about psychiatry (for which he had no patience), he said it isn’t hard to interpret this dream. This is the Palestinian experience. “The struggle,” he added, “is never resolved; the door always remains half-open.”

He did what he could in his lifetime. After his death, I began to feel, hesitantly at first, that I had to take his place at the door. But how? Without his charisma and his passion for politics, I could not expect to inspire. Political argument makes me feel helpless. Defiant cultural expression – hip-hop groups from the ghettos of Lyd who sing about who the real terrorists are; graffiti artists who paint on the Wall; eloquent poets whose language sears – thrills me. Yet I’m ambivalent about angry modes of political action, even though I sympathise with the sentiments.

In part this is because I live in the US and am forced to see Palestinians through the eyes of others. I take my children to demonstrations in New York and Washington when there is a crisis. I feel gratified when I find people walking side by side with Palestinians. I feel moments of discomfort when I’m overtaken by unshaven young men with green headbands waving Palestinian
flags and shouting angry slogans about spirit and blood. I know they have relatives who have been killed or maimed. I know they may have grown up in refugee camps. I admire their passion but I know that I don’t have to live, as they or my father did, as a “full time Palestinian”, even if my attachments are real. (And my daughter’s attachment strong enough to make her want to play for the Palestinian National Women’s Soccer Team when she turned eighteen.) What I long for is a presentation of the truth of our story that can convince the kinds of people I know in the US who do not know what we know.

I was overcome by a calm determination when I finally found my voice. It came through a welcome invitation from someone I met at my father’s funeral. We ended up working together with other scholars on a book, poignant and truthful, about the event that has defined Palestinians as a people who could not be at home. Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory was a work of mourning and a labour of love, rooted in the way I want to be Palestinian. I was taking my father’s place at the door, while he rests by the sea in Jaffa.

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Notes
4 Hisham Ahmed-Farajeh, op.cit.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
9 Shahla Abu-Lughod Nakib composed this song.
11 Hisham Ahmad Farajeh, op.cit.