

PALESTINIAN STILL LIFE

by Omer Friedlander

The archivist from East Jerusalem keeps a record of all the Palestinian belongings that were looted in al-Nakba. He collects photographs and testimonies. He keeps all of his archival material in organized piles of notebooks and loose-leaf papers. His dream is to open a museum exhibiting the stolen treasures of his people, an ever-growing memory palace. He hopes the visitors will one day reclaim their lost possessions. He will carefully arrange the objects on floor-to-ceiling shelves and in glass display cases: rusted teakettles, spoons, candle holders, hookah pipes, binoculars, a worn photograph of two moustached men working in a dry field. Usually, when he collects the testimony of the elderly, they have stories attached to their things. An old woman once told him of the time her mother used a sewing machine to stitch together a ten-metre-long dress for her wedding.

Both the dress and the sewing machine were stolen.

The idea for the project came from his grandfather, who fixed cars for a living until he died underneath one, tinkering with the engine. His grandfather used to tell him stories about their stolen home. After it was all gone, he had to make do with very little. He collected junkyard cars for free, fixed them up, and sold them at bargain prices. Before he was a mechanic, his grandfather was a rich man. He lived in Yaffo, in an enormous home with limestone walls and balconies overlooking the sea. The balconies were so close to the water that sometimes fish would jump inside and flop around on the carpeted floor, and they would grill them for breakfast. Everything was taken during the war: the paintings, the rugs, the vases and silverware. The house itself was gone, and the strip of beach was now home to an expensive restaurant. When his grandfather died, the list of his possessions was very short: a broken-toothed silver comb, a rancid bottle of milk, a half-empty tube of toothpaste, and

thousands of paper receipts going back years and years from the same kiosk down the street.

On the way back from work at Al-Quds University Library, he passes the McDonald's where Leila sits with her niece every Monday evening. She orders fries and licks the salt off of each one and feeds it to the little girl as if she were a baby bird. Leila dresses all in black. She wears boots, flecked with paint. The construction workers hovering around the McDonald's with coffee in Styrofoam cups jokingly call her one of their own. When the archivist imagines asking her out to see a movie, her lips are still greasy from the fries. She will lick her lips and say yes. They will agree on a film. They will meet at the cinema at seven. She will ask him to bring a backpack full of popcorn from home, since it is so expensive at the theatres, and he will not be sure if she is kidding or not. He will decide to play it safe and bring the popcorn.

They met at the McDonald's two weeks before. He sat on one of the mushroom stools across from her and wrote one of his lists. She spilled a Coke on his papers, and they ended up talking. When she discovered he worked at the university library, she asked him about a children's book for her niece, about a bat that is adopted by pigeons. The next day, he gave it to her. Leila told him she had been looking for that book for weeks. He told her about his project, showed her the lists of people's possessions: necklaces, rings, sugar packets, handkerchiefs, matches. The little girl emptied out her pockets and showed him her things: miniature wooden figurines, marbles, plastic seashells, chestnuts. I stole them, the girl said, wide-eyed. Can they be in your museum?

Leila tells him she has started working on a series of paintings called *Palestinian Still Life*. At the moment, she is working on a painting of *muhalebi*. She calls it the most beautiful dessert, with the pink of rosewater, the green of crumbled pistachios, the pristine white flakes of coconut. In another painting, she tells him, there is an aluminum pot of steaming dark coffee, scattered cardamom pods, an arabesque-patterned tiled turquoise tabletop. Her

favourite is one of a tea-stained cup. The viewer can see only a part of the brown-leaf pattern at the bottom of the chipped cup; the future is unclear.

She tells him that her father is also a painter, but he's in prison. She used to be able to talk on the phone with him, and he used to tell her stories about painting his prison cell walls. Now, he is unreachable. His story sounds like a fairy tale, but she believes it is true. The Israelis let him paint the prison walls, because they, too, are caught in the spell of shapes and colours. She wants to believe he paints the walls, that he has a view of rolling green hills, not a concrete wall.

The archivist desperately wants to ask Leila out. He could leave a note for her at the McDonald's. He knows that she will go to the bathroom to wash her hands after eating the fries. He just has to get his timing right. He could wait until she is almost finished with her fries, then sneak into the woman's toilets and write on the bathroom mirror. He is too scared. He does nothing. At home, he pretends he is preparing for the date. He cannot decide what to wear. He tries on twenty shirts, three pairs of pants, boots, sneakers, and sandals, takes his watch on and off, on and off. He makes a list of all of his clothing items and crosses them off one by one, until he is left with nothing. In the end, he decides on cargo pants and a button-down pale blue shirt. He goes with the pants because of their large pockets, which can easily fit his archival notebook. As he predicts, he is very early for his non-existent date. He takes a walk around the block, his notebook and pen in hand.

He will make lists in the meantime, before going into the cinema on his own.

His favourite kind of list is imaginary. Frequently, when a person has nothing strange or interesting on them, the archivist will make up an alternative history of objects for that person.

Sometimes, he will imagine their childhood collections, or the objects they have

amassed in old age and have bequeathed in their will. This time, he doesn't have to imagine. He sees an old woman at the grocery shop purchasing crooked carrots and wearing a child's pink backpack. On her pants bottom is the most interesting detail. Written in an English she probably cannot read or understand is the word "JUICY." The pants were probably donated to her from a rich teenager who has outgrown them; or perhaps the teenager's more conservative parents, who could read and understand English, forbade her from wearing them. An Israeli soldier, no more than eighteen, stares at the bold white letters inscribed on the old woman's bottom. The soldier laughs, shakes his head.

The archivist imagines the soldier's childhood. All of the soldiers carry the same objects — a uniform, a rifle, heavy boots — so the lists involving them are always imaginary. Instead of a uniform, he gives the soldier a pyjama set with giraffes on it. Instead of the rifle, the archivist gives the soldier a red toy truck. Instead of boots, bare feet. The boy who will grow up to be a soldier makes car engine noises and drives the red truck around on the carpeted floor of a home in Jerusalem. It is an ordinary home, with magnets on the fridge holding up pictures of the family and their dog. And they don't even know that their home was built on another person's home. The mother makes hot chocolate for the boy. A thin layer, like skin, at the top of the cup, is broken by his lips. Soon, he will be using those lips to kiss girls at school. He will use those lips to shout commands, to curse, to spit. Without noticing, the archivist has doodled a little sketch of the soldier with big lips, chasing after an old woman bent over a walking cane, trying to kiss her. In a bubble above his head, comic-book style, the word "JUICY" appears in bold lettering.

Suddenly, the soldier is beside him and he is shouting. He is pointing at the archivist's notebook. The archivist smiles, the way you do to appease a predator, and begins to explain about his project, but he is cut off almost immediately. The soldier, his face a bright red, grabs the notebook from the archivist. He flips through it quickly, until he reaches the

caricature. He rips it out of the notebook, crumples it into a ball and tosses it on the ground. The soldier calls for another uniformed man and they talk in Hebrew. The archivist cannot understand a word. His notebook is confiscated. His hands are pressed behind his back.

“I am meeting someone!” the archivist says. “A beautiful girl. We are going to see the new Star Wars movie.”

He is in a holding cell, who knows how far away from the movie theatre. There are no clocks on the walls. He knows they are allowed to keep him there for four days without seeing a judge. In the small room there is a single toilet, unseparated by a curtain or a wall. There are bunk beds, with mattresses as thin as a sheet of paper. Many inmates crowd the floors, but none lean against the walls, which, strangely enough, look freshly painted. The prisoners are allowed to cook their own meals in a communal kitchen. His phone was not confiscated, and soon he realizes the reason why.

There are devices installed in the prison to sabotage cellular signals, making it impossible to contact the outside world. This must be the reason Leila can no longer contact her father. In the bunk bed above his own, a seventeen-year-old boy who threw rocks and Molotov cocktails at soldiers during a protest whistles a slow tune. The boy’s front teeth protrude slightly out of his darkened gums. He has already been here for eight days.

“Have you seen the new Star Wars movie?” he asks the boy.

The boy shakes his head. He tells him that his favourite movie is about fast cars. They have made seven of them already, he says, and they are all incredible. When he gets out of here, he wants to save up to buy a Ferrari. More like a battered Subaru, the archivist thinks.

“Do you think we can escape from here?” the archivist asks. “I have a date.”

This gets the boy’s attention. Not the escaping part, because that’s ridiculous, but the date. “What’s her name?”

“Leila.”

The boy repeats the name several times, as if testing it out, then nods to no one in particular. “So, what did you do?” he asks.

The archivist wants to tell him the truth, which is nothing, but instead he invents a story in which he is a revolutionary leader, a dangerous man of the underground, a freedom fighter. He is not sure if the boy believes him or not. The boy tells him that at home he has twelve German shepherds. His mother cooks lamb bones and potatoes for all of them, and the village jokes that they are the best fed dogs in the world. The boy’s older brother is studying to become a lawyer in London, he says.

Only two more years of school.

“He’ll get me out of here,” he says.

“Hopefully, you won’t have to wait that long,” the archivist says.

“Don’t you know? They keep making the sentence longer and longer. You’ll never get back home. You’ll be lucky if the trial is in Arabic.”

On the second day, he is taken to a separate room for interrogation. They have his notebook. The interrogator does not wear a uniform and speaks Arabic fluently. Every time the interrogator asks a question, he taps his knuckles on the tabletop. At first, it is a light touch. Steadily, he increases the pressure. He asks him about the incredibly detailed lists of objects. What are you planning? Is it a code? Which terrorist organization are you a part of? Why did you have so much popcorn in your bag when we found you? When the archivist doesn’t say anything, the interrogator recites the lists of objects, hoping for a response. *A dining room chair, a paintbrush, a chamsa bracelet.* The interrogator slams his hand down on the table. You will talk, he says. When the interrogator leaves the room, another soldier comes in and kicks the archivist in the ribs repeatedly, until he can hardly stand.

When the archivist returns to his cell, the boy is gone. He doesn’t know if he has been

released or transferred to a different prison. Maybe his brother, the lawyer from London, got him out. He almost believes it. The boy's empty bed has already been filled. His replacement is a heavy man, and the springs creak every time he moves. The archivist finds it difficult to breathe. His entire body hurts. His head spins. He can see Leila sitting on his bunk bed, licking the salt off of her fries. She slides off the bed and hangs a painting on the wall. In the picture, the archivist lies on the floor of a cell, alone. The walls are filled with scratch marks, and he realizes they are lists, carved by his own fingernails. His bare feet are tinged dark blue. Had she run out of other colours, or is he meant to be dead?

On the morning of the third day, he is brought before a judge. The trial is conducted in Hebrew, and the archivist can understand none of it. At the end of the proceedings, he is unsure whether he has been pronounced guilty or even what crime he has been accused of. He returns to his cell and stares at the wall. He sees the floor covered in letters written in black ink, red ink, blue ink, stamped with wax, tied with a string, stapled together, folded in half or in quarters, torn to shreds. Old gas lamps burn by the steel beds. One of the lamps is knocked over and the letters begin to burn, to lick up the peeling walls, to engulf his mattress, his clothes and hair, his skin and bones.

That night, they deep-fry potato slices in the kitchen and sit to eat together during their allotted mealtime. The table, which used to be white long ago, is a plastic fold-out. The archivist notices a man licking the salt off of his potatoes, one by one, before eating them, and he knows immediately who he is.

“I know your daughter, Leila. She eats her fries just like you. She is also a painter like you.”

“I used to tell her a story.” He wipes the grease from his chin. “I paint all night, cacti and olive trees, and in the morning, the soldiers come and erase the whole thing.”

“But where do you keep the painting supplies?”

“Oh, the soldiers turn a blind eye. It’s all a game. Everyone is bored, you see.”

“Is it a true story?”

“Stay awake tonight, see for yourself.”

The archivist does not sleep that night. He watches how everyone gathers around Leila’s father as he reaches underneath his thin mattress and retrieves a filthy brush. He fills a plastic cup with tap water. He unscrews the toilet and sticks his hand into the piping, coming up with tubes of paint wrapped in trash bags. He uses the floor as his palette. And he begins working, recreating the landscape of his childhood from memory. He grew up in Majd al-Krum, a village in the Galilee, at the foot of Jabal Mahuz. The village has mostly been confiscated by the state. He begins to draw the stolen village. At its centre is an ancient well. On the outskirts, pits were built so that residents could press grapes with their feet to make wine.

As he begins to paint, some of the men crowding around the drawing on the prison wall make suggestions. This does not seem to surprise him. Their work is always collaborative. They work together to paint what used to be. *The olive tree next to the well was taller*, one man suggests. *The grass wasn’t as green*, says another. *Half of the shops were closed. The old men would sit outside with their hookahs, in their tank tops, and play backgammon. The boys would throw away their cans of Sprite in the alleyway behind the car repair shop. At the windows of the bakery, you could see trays of baklava.*

“Enough,” the painter says after a while. “We must let it dry for the soldiers to erase.”

On the morning of the archivist’s fourth day in prison, the soldiers come to the cell with long rollers and erase the landscape. The white paint takes over the hills and obliterates the houses and the village, the olive trees, the grass, the old men and soda cans, the backgammon boards, the car repair shop. It is a blank slate. It was never there. In the afternoon, the archivist is

released without any explanation. His clothes are returned to him, but not his archival notebook. He wanted to take back a piece of the painted wall for Leila, but it's too late. He takes the bus home. He sits by an open window and the sun warms his face. The driver puts on loud Israeli pop music. There are three soldiers at the back of the bus, and the archivist avoids making eye contact. When he finally gets home, he knows that something is wrong. Something is missing. The door is unlocked, and all of his archival work is gone. Thousands of detailed lists and written testimonies don't just vanish into thin air. They were stolen. He sits in his empty apartment and weeps for what is gone but was also never there in the first place. Then he remembers Leila's father painting, and the soldiers coming in the morning to erase it all. The struggle never ends. And so he begins his work all over again. The first stolen item on his new list is his own archive of stolen items.

On his way back from work on Monday, he stops at the McDonald's. Leila is sitting in her usual spot next to her niece, a portion of fries between them. Her hair is dark blue in the fluorescent lighting. There's the smell of grease and the sound of sizzling in the air. A man is slurping a Diet Coke in the corner. The floor shines with a chemical gleam.

"You look different," she says.

"Prison changed me."

She laughs, although he did not mean it as a joke. Little did she know. He tells her about her father painting the prison walls. He swears it is true. She grips his hand and there are tears in her eyes. He surprises even himself by asking her out to see a movie.

"I have a better idea," she says.

Her home is filled with paintings of her father. In most of them, he is wearing his prison uniform, wielding a brush, and painting a cell wall. The landscape on the wall looks to be almost translucent, like a portal between one world and the next. In one painting, which is divided in two, Leila's father seems to be able to walk through walls. He slips his way out of

the prison through the painted wall and emerges in the landscape of his childhood, a boy again. He leaves behind his uniform and his old age, his beard and wrinkles, and emerges unblemished, raw, full of a desire to climb trees and whistle through blades of grass. In another, the painted landscape escapes its confines and overtakes the prison, growing out of the wall and filling the cell with hibiscus and honeysuckles.

In Leila's studio, a converted basement, the archivist sits with his back straight and his arms crossed. She goes to him and gently releases the pressure in his shoulders, tells him to relax. Her touch is gentle, warm. He takes deep breaths. He's not even naked. He shouldn't be so worried. He unclenches his hands, rubs his knuckles against the wood of the chair. His palms are sweaty, and he feels the urge to sneeze. The room is small and smells of turpentine and linseed oil. Along the walls and on the floor are various sizes of canvases and sketchbooks; dirty brushes are kept in jars, tubes of paint are scattered around a large industrial desk made of cheap wood. The floor is dusty and flecked with colour. She stands close to him, by an easel. He could almost reach out and touch her. As she sketches out his proportions, he looks at her and tries to memorize her face, to store this moment in the archive of his mind. He imagines an invisible paintbrush tracing the contours of her aquiline nose and flared nostrils, full lips slightly agape to reveal large teeth, dark hair falling down her back, frizzled with electricity, her eyes taking him in and translating the image in her mind to the movements of her hand across the canvas.

The idea comes to him as Leila is painting. He will open a museum and exhibit her drawings of stolen Palestinian belongings and of her stolen father. When he tells her his idea, she is so excited she jumps up and down and nearly bangs her head on the low ceiling of the studio. They sit close together, their knees almost touching, and picture the headline: "A Stolen Archive: Palestinian Still Life." The gallery space will have high ceilings and large windows to let in natural light. The pictures will be framed with simple, industrial wood. One

wall will be left bare, untouched. On the day of the grand opening, her father will come, and he will be dressed in linen and smell of aloe vera soap, and in front of the audience, he will paint directly on the blank gallery wall, and no soldier will come to erase the landscape of his childhood.