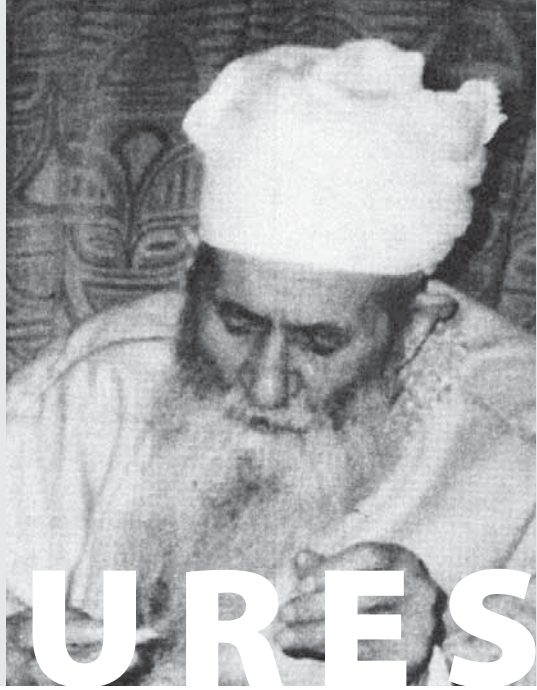


Historical FEATURES



Sheikh Hassan al-Labadi & Seven Acts of Lost Memory

Nazmi al-Jubeh

Some may think (and have every right to do so) that this tragic play of seven acts is a figment of the writer's imagination. But the narrator did not intervene in any way in the composition of its actual events, and merely contributed to its conclusion. All of the events, names, places, and dates here are real, although they may be the only things that are real in this tragedy. As for the mind's ability to believe them, this is not my duty to critique. In any case, eventually we may be able to pen the remaining scenes of this epic if any reader is able to add information to help me complete the narrative. Otherwise, this unfinished testimony will remain one of many narratives: a scene in the Palestinian tragedy that has not yet come to a close.

Act One

Sheikh Hassan Muhammad al-Labadi, like many other residents of his village Kafr al-Labad, located south of Tulkarem just a stone's throw from the town of Anabta,

This photo of Sheikh Labadi was taken in Abu Dis at the Labadi family home, date unknown. It was published in one of the many newspaper articles about him, this one in al-Quds newspaper, 29 July 2007.

left home to work as an imam in the mosque of Abu Dis, which lies on the eastern border of Jerusalem and near al-Aqsa Mosque. Since the end of the nineteenth century, Kafr al-Labad had been famed for (in addition to its olives and almonds) its educated residents who migrated in search of work. Palestinian cities had begun to attract villagers, especially those who could read and write. Jerusalem, in addition to Jaffa and Haifa, was one of the prime destinations for the villagers of Kafr al-Labad, who usually worked in education or religious institutions.

We don't know for certain when Sheikh Hassan arrived in Jerusalem, but he probably arrived with his wife and only child, the infant Ghazi, around 1936. He was later joined by his brother Abdullah, who worked as an accountant in Jerusalem and married a woman from the Jerusalemite Khadr family. I later married one of the fruits of this marriage.

Sheikh Hassan spent most of his free time at the al-Aqsa Mosque, teaching and reciting the Qur'an, or participating in study and discussion circles. Discussions held within al-Haram al-Sharif were surely intense during that period, for a revolt broke out in 1936. Due to his village origins and the region he was raised in, it is probable that Sheikh Hassan was an integral part of this peasant-led revolution, which was concentrated in the hills of Palestine. As to the specifics of his involvement in politics, we know very little.

It was probably the beginning of 1939 when the British Mandate police surrounded al-Aqsa, pursuing revolutionaries who took refuge inside. As is their custom even today, the people of Jerusalem defended the mosque's sanctity and prevented the British police from entering. Among those defending the holy site was Sheikh Hassan al-Labadi, who stood at the mosque's gate, barring the path of the Mandate army and police. When one of the military officers insisted on crossing the threshold, Sheikh Hassan unsheathed the dagger he always carried with him and stabbed the officer to death.

Sheikh Hassan was arrested and sentenced to death, as was the norm at that time. This sentence was subsequently commuted to life imprisonment, due to his status as a religious figure, and to the protests that flared following his sentence. Sheikh Hassan was then sent to Acre Prison, where he joined the hundreds of prisoners crowding its dungeons during the 1936-1939 revolution.

Sheikh Hassan's only brother, Abdullah (my father-in-law), and his wife, Umm Ghazi (who died soon after), and his child Ghazi, all visited him whenever circumstances, whether material or political, allowed them to travel from Jerusalem to Akko. Thus far, there is nothing unusual about this story, for this was the experience of many Palestinian families who made pilgrimage to the numerous detention centers

throughout Mandate Palestine. Following the death of his mother, the sheikh's son, Ghazi, was raised by his uncle Abdullah. I have not been able to collect much information about this period, for Abdullah died as a young man in 1967. His memories of his brother, Sheikh Hassan, were not passed on to his children due to their young age and the sudden break in communications with Sheikh Hassan, as we shall now see.

Akko fell into the hands of Zionist forces on 18 May, 1948, and the al-Labadi family was prevented from visiting Sheikh Hassan because they lived in an area that came to be known as the 'West Bank' controlled by Jordan. The family was unable to learn the sheikh's fate, either through the Red Cross or any other means. They considered him among the lost, in the best case scenario, or among the dead, in the worst. His son Ghazi grew up and moved to Amman for work, and the sheikh's brother died during the June 1967 war, leaving behind a handful of children, the oldest of whom was only 18. People were thereafter preoccupied with the difficulties of life under Israeli occupation, and had no time to consider Sheikh Hassan or anything related to him.

Ghazi didn't come from Amman to Jerusalem except for important occasions, such as my wedding. I had never heard the story of his father and his disappearance. No one had ever mentioned it in front of me; I don't know why. It may have been completely forgotten, or it may have been simply that no one, other than my mother-in-law, had known Sheikh Hassan personally. Nothing that I heard suggested any anomaly or open question. The wheel of life crushed us all, and the worries of living under occupation did not leave us free for other concerns. If they existed, they were marginalized entirely. The al-Labadi family, in particular Abdullah's children, became closely connected to the Palestinian cause and national resistance at an early age, starting in the early 1970s. The family's agenda no longer had room for anything else.

Act Two

On a rainy January night in the winter of 1982, my wife Haifa' and I were on an ordinary visit to her family in Abu Dis. The large family, its numerous spouses and their children, gathered around the gas heater called 'Aladdin'. Our gatherings were never free of national concerns. Until the wee hours of the morning, we would talk about where we were, who among us was in prison, and which of us was a candidate for arrest. Like many other 'political' families, imprisonment was a common theme in the fate of the al-Labadi family. During the 1970s, it had become customary for marriage to take place within political organizations, a practice known as 'inner-marriage'. This strengthened political ties, on the one hand, but increased family problems on the other, since it was not unusual for many members of an extended family and their spouses to be detained at the same time. It certainly was not unusual in our case.

On that ‘very typical’ evening, a young man from Abu Dis entered the house. He was accustomed to visiting the family from time to time, and this visit, like all others, was not on any special occasion. My in-laws always had guests, for the entire family was involved in politics. The family was known for being socially liberal, meaning that one could visit without prior arrangement or even without reason other than to socialize, check up on each other, or learn the latest political developments.

Abu Mahmoud, however, was not a typical guest. He was an outstanding storyteller. He loved to enter into fibbing competitions—none of the joking fibbers in Abu Dis could beat him. Whenever he had new tales in the pipeline and heard that I was in Abu Dis, he would come straight over to relate stories so full of oddities, lies, and exaggerations that we sobbed with laughter. And whenever I went to Abu Dis, I always anticipated his visits with excitement.

On that night, after we were satiated with laughter, he prepared to leave, having to work early the next day. Before closing the door behind him, however, he turned and asked, “Do you know an old sheikh in the mental hospital of Deir Yassin” (the Palestinian village that was renamed Givat Shaul after 1948) called Sheikh al-Labadi?” I didn’t pay attention to the question and I didn’t think anyone else had noticed. But my mother-in-law jumped out of her seat and asked Abu Mahmoud, “How old is he?”

“I don’t know. He’s surely past 80, but his health is remarkable,” Abu Mahmoud responded. “He prays constantly. He is light-complexioned and small framed. He is tiny, but charming, exactly like an angel.”

My mother-in-law’s eyes grew wide and she mumbled a few unintelligible words. I asked what she had said, and she mumbled again. She is a woman who speaks seldom, having spent her youth raising her children after her husband left her a young widow. She rarely expresses her point of view, and we usually discern her interjections through the smoke of her cigarettes she lights up day and night. I had just raised my eyebrows at this unusual when she said more clearly, “My brother-in-law. He might be my brother-in-law.”

Like the rest of those present, I understood nothing. After posing dozens of questions, however, my mother-in-law told the story of Sheikh Hassan, as it was known up until 1948. But no one believed that a relationship existed between that al-Labadi ensconced in the Deir Yassin mental hospital, and Sheikh Hassan, my wife’s uncle. Haifa’ did not know anything about the sheikh, other than that he was the father of her cousin, Ghazi. (Ghazi had become like a father to her following her own father’s death in 1967. It was he who escorted my wife to me on our wedding day.) Neither my wife nor my mother-in-law nor any of the children remembered this sheikh who was to enter our lives. I discovered that they knew little of this resistance fighter, other than that he had been imprisoned and died.

Act Three

So as to replace doubt with certainty, I accompanied my wife and mother-in-law the following day to Deir Yassin. Fluent in Hebrew, I have some ability to deal with the Israeli administration.

The mental hospital in the village is located on Deir Yassin's northwestern slope, and looks out over the ruins of the deserted village Lifta. The hospital building is one of the few Arab structures that remains, a witness to Deir Yassin and the infamous massacre of its inhabitants by the Irgun led by Menachem Begin in April, 1948. The building was transformed by Israel into a mental hospital (as if that was all Deir Yassin was missing!) with some additions that clash with its historic design and make it difficult to guess at its original appearance. The rectangular building is made of solid Jerusalem stone that remains a brilliant white, refusing to allow time to take its toll.

I rang the doorbell and a young Israeli opened the door. He asked us in Hebrew about the purpose of our visit and I asked to meet Sheikh al-Labadi, who was staying in the hospital. He asked our relation to the patient, and this was easy to prove with my mother-in-law's identification card. We entered a clean, square, brilliant white room with an Arab split-arched ceiling. Its walls were lined with simple wooden chairs incongruent with the height of its soaring ceiling and the splendor of the building in its glory days. A few minutes later, a woman in her late 50s entered the room and asked if we spoke Hebrew. After affirming that I do, she introduced herself as a social counselor working in the hospital. Then she asked if we were visiting Sheikh al-Labadi for the first time. We responded in the affirmative, and she then asked why we had not visited him before.

I wasn't able to tell the story I had heard the night before, for I was afraid that it would turn me into a laughingstock and I, too, would be committed. Nothing seemed normal. I replied that we wanted to make sure he was the right person first. Then we would tell her the story from the beginning, even if seemed odd and its narration was lengthy, and even if it turned me into an object of ridicule. If she had no objection, we would like to visit him first, she said. "Nothing harms the sheikh, for he is hardly aware of what's around him. It might help him to see new faces."

Act Four

Only a few minutes had passed since our arrival, but it seemed as if it had been all of time, or at least a drawn-out epoch. What if it really was our hero sitting in the next room? What could he say to us after this absence? Was he truly crazy, and is that why he was here? What would he look like after all these years? And would my mother-in-

law be able to identify him? Dozens of questions spun around in my mind, but they were distorted. I couldn't understand myself, and so how would I be able to lead a conversation with whoever stood behind these walls?

After long minutes, a small, thin man came into the room wearing a white jallabiyya. It was impossible to guess his age, for he had surpassed all the years that I could comprehend. A snow white beard hung from his chin, stretching from his face to his navel. He had wrapped his head with a piece of white cloth, making a turban in the style of a mosque imam. His back was somewhat bent, but much less so than was to be expected in someone of his age. His steps were steady, indicating confidence, pride, and a strong build. He had a natural, innocent smile painted across his face that appeared as if it had not left him for centuries. His eyes were small; I couldn't discern their color because they were sunken into deep valleys, although he didn't have many wrinkles.

I couldn't get a hold of myself; the ground spun until I nearly fell. At first I didn't recognize what I was seeing—he was an angel, exactly like the familiar images of Gabriel. He was truly a copy of the images painted by Leonardo De Vinci on church domes.

I couldn't grasp where I was or why I was there. But I quickly drew myself up. My wife had lost the ability to speak. Her face turned red and she stopped breathing. My mother-in-law, on the other hand, fell onto a chair. She seemed to me extremely angry, and she is not of the sort that becomes angry or appears to be so. I looked from her to the man before us, who did not understand why he was there, why we were there, or what had brought us together. He didn't say a word, but an expression of surprise appeared on his face. Finally, my mother-in-law told us, "It's my brother-in-law. That's Sheikh Hassan. He's Ghazi's father."

"Is this right? Do you know what you are saying? Are you sure of this?" I asked her tersely, feeling fear and hesitation, almost wishing she hadn't recognized him. Her eyes filled with tears.

"Of course. It's him; it's him. It can't be anyone but him."

I pressed my palm to his and shuddered. I yearned with all my heart that this was not him, if only to flee from a story that would remain with me for all my days. After observing this extremely unusual scene, the old man allowed me to seat him in a chair between myself and my mother-in-law. He continued to stare at us, and his smile widened. I greeted him, and he responded in eloquent Arabic, in the manner of al-Azhar scholars and clerics, with clear, full enunciation.

“This is the wife of your brother, Abdullah,” I told him. “and I am their in-law. I’m married to your brother’s daughter. This is Haifa’. You don’t remember her because you were in prison when she was born.”

The sheikh peered closely at us, one after the other, with a clear focus on my mother-in-law. His smile then expanded, as if to ridicule me or mock my claim.

“Abdullah’s wife is a young girl, and this is an old woman,” he chuckled, his thin, translucent body shaking as it was practically only a skeleton covered by the white jallabiyya.

I quickly grasped the situation. He had said the name of his brother, and my mother-in-law had recognized him. This, then, had to be the forgotten sheikh who the Nakba had left behind, along with so much else, on the shores of the Mediterranean behind the walls built by Akko’s ‘Butcher’, Ahmad Pasha al-Jazzar.

I didn’t know what had happened to his memory, where it stopped or at what stage. But that had to be discovered, for the sheikh had awakened my curiosity. It was no longer a matter of relation that brought us together, but a matter greater than all familial ties. Sheikh Hassan had piqued the curiosity of a historian, into whose hands had fallen a rare ‘document’ never before seen. He also woke within me the nightmares created for the people of Palestine by the catastrophe of 1948. How often had I listened in my youth to stories of families devastated, losing members without even knowing when or where. It was rare for such stories to end happily, as in the movies, but this case seemed to be the exception. The historian within me viewed the situation analytically (as much as I could think straight), seeing Sheikh Hassan as a time capsule or a manuscript filled with rare information. Would I succeed uncovering that which was concealed?

Following a discussion with the doctors and hospital administration, I surrendered to reality. There were no documents or records in the hospital confirming his identity.

“So did Sheikh Hassan fall from the sky into your hands?”

“No, he was transferred to us from the mental hospital in Tel Aviv.”

“Wasn’t a file transferred with him?”

“No, just a transfer form.”

“Can I take the address of the Tel Aviv hospital in the hopes of finding his file there?”

“Of course.”

“Doctor, can I take him home with me?”

The hospital’s supervising doctor did not hesitate. “Most certainly. Sign and receive.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. “Sign and receive.” Picking up a package from the post office in Israel requires greater effort, numerous documents and proofs of identity. What was going on? And was what I was receiving really my wife’s uncle, whom she had never met and whose story she knew nothing of? What was I getting myself into?

“Sign and receive” has rung in my ears ever since. “Sign and receive.”

The hospital director turned his back and walked away. I then, indeed, signed and received, and we left in the company of Sheikh Hassan. It was an indescribable feeling, one of immeasurable pride. If the story was right, I was liberating the oldest Palestinian prisoner! My mind was teeming with questions, a headache, conflicting emotions. Was this a play, a Hollywood fantasy?

Oh, I tire myself so. No matter how often I promise myself not to get involved in new stories, I always seem to fail at the first test.

Act Five

In the car from Deir Yassin to Abu Dis, Sheikh Hassan avoided looking at us, although he snuck glances from time to time. He stared without comment out the car window at everything we passed: buildings, cars, and people. The further we got into Jerusalem, the more he stared. Our own conversation did not exceed the rich, complementary phrases customary in Arabic. It seems that we all, with the exception of Sheikh Hassan, were in shock, or disbelief.

We arrived in Abu Dis shortly before noon. No one was there to greet us, and there were no ululations of joy, feasts of a sacrificed lamb, or congratulations, as is customary among the people of Palestine on the release of a prisoner. No one knew what spoils we had returned with. Even we did not know what we had returned with.

“This is Abu Dis, Sheikh. Weren’t you its sheikh and imam?”

He looked at me, bringing his small eyes close together and wrinkling his brow, until it grew even smaller than it had been. “Yes, indeed, I was the imam of Abu Dis, but what

I see is not Abu Dis. This is Japan. Abu Dis is a ramshackle village, and this is a town, praise God for His works. It's big.”

Abu Dis was a small village until the final quarter of the twentieth century, when it became a large, expansive town. It was not strange that the sheikh did not recognize it following his lengthy absence. No problem. I would surely succeed with subsequent attempts.

“Look, Sheikh. This is Fedwa, and this is Magda. This is Aisha, this is Muhammad, and this is Haifa’. This is Majid, and this is Hana’. These are Abdullah’s children.”

The sheikh seemed a little distracted, deep in thought. I don’t know where his memory took him. Was he trying to urge it to remember? But what would he remember? What memory was he trying to bring back after an absence of 44 years? Only my wife’s nephew, still in his first year, commanded the sheikh’s attention. He held the baby in his lap and the baby played with his long white beard. Wasn’t Ghazi, Sheikh Hassan’s son, this age when the sheikh was arrested? The sheikh made light of us all, ignoring our questions. He searched in our faces and the house’s walls for something, but for what? To this day, I do not know.

I told myself that the truth must come out. I contacted the Israeli prison authorities and even went there myself to find out what had happened to the sheikh. There was nothing in the records. Then I went to the Israeli ministry of health, and there was nothing there. Even his transfers between hospitals, including Bardis Hanna Hospital (northwest of Tulkarem), took place with nothing more than a transfer memo. Was there really no file, or were they concealing information so that this would not become a legal case? I don’t know the truth. Where was Sheikh Hassan all those years? What happened to him? Wasn’t there some way to jog his memory? Or did he not want to remember? Did he want to punish us for leaving him behind all those years? Did he know about the Nakba and what happened to the people of Palestine? Did he realize that visiting him in prison had been impossible?

And yet I had to keep on trying. Time is ours, as we say when there is nothing to do. I did not give in to fate. Those who do not search find no answers. I had to know the truth, or, shall we say, at least come closer.

And then came the brilliant idea—Jerusalem’s holy mosque, al-Haram al-Sharif, had not changed, and the sheikh would surely recognize it. We went together, and I was filled with hope. We entered al-Haram from the direction of Lion’s Gate (Jerusalem’s eastern gate, which leads to a gate of the mosque bearing the same name), the very path the sheikh had traveled between al-Haram and Abu Dis. His step picked up once we entered al-Haram al-Sharif, and he looked around in all directions with interest,

raising my hopes of stirring his memory. We climbed the steps leading to the Dome of the Rock, until the entire dome soared shining before his eyes. Despite my promise not to intervene, I simply couldn't contain myself.

"Isn't this the Dome of the Rock that you know, Sheikh?" I asked him.

"Of course. This is it exactly."

My heart danced with joy over this dramatic advancement. I told myself that the truth was finally within reach. Now I would have him narrate. I would prompt his memory and record it in detail. The missing scenes of the story would be completed, and I would gain an enviable revelation.

But before my thoughts could continue in this vein, Sheikh Hassan surprised me. "But this is Japan... Look, the people are dressed like Franks. Not only the men, but even the women are wearing pants... Japan has also built a Dome of the Rock? What a scandal."

I didn't understand this insistence on Japan, or what Japan meant to the sheikh. His words shattered my hopes, and I cursed Japan, which inexplicably seemed to follow our every move. Later, I learned that in some areas of the Palestinian countryside, strangers, even if they were from a neighboring village and had settled among the residents, were called 'yabanji', meaning 'Japanese'. This is probably a term that entered colloquial Arabic through Ottoman Turkish, in which 'yabanji' means 'stranger'.

Nevertheless, the sheikh sat against one of the many columns in al-Aqsa Mosque, spread out his handkerchief, and performed his ablutions with the soil contained within. Then he intoned the call to prayer, prayed a greeting to the mosque, followed by numerous sets of prayers that I did not count. He did everything but what I wished he would do: remember.

We contacted his son Ghazi in Amman, and he couldn't believe the news of finding his father after all these years, now that he was in his 50s. He came to Jerusalem filled with anticipation. How could Ghazi have a father after all this time?

The sheikh did not recognize his son, but Ghazi's joy surpassed all limits. Could one imagine what it was like meeting the father he had never known, after believing that he was an orphan? The one-sided scene was indescribable. Ghazi kissed every spot of his father's body, his tears streaming. His crying reached the ears of the neighbors, who witnessed part of the scene. Everyone was crying and wiping their eyes; no one was shy or holding back. The sobbing united all those present, except for the sheikh,

who stood still in the center, confused and not understanding. I saw pity in his eyes, but his surprise was more obvious and pronounced.

Ghazi's screaming dominated the situation—"Baba, I'm your son! Baba, I'm Ghazi! Say something, Baba!" The more he wailed, the more sobbing there was.

The first days following the 'release' of Sheikh Hassan passed without achievement. A relative familiarity developed between himself and his new surrounds, but he would not stop asking to return to the hospital. "Guests are for three and a third days," he told us. "And here I am, having spent longer than that with you. Take me back."

I don't know what the sheikh's living conditions were like during his imprisonment or in his transfer between hospitals. In his pocket, he carried a handkerchief wrapped around a handful of soil. Before praying, he would unfold it and perform his ablutions with this soil rather than with water, as dictated by Islamic law in cases when water is either unavailable or impure. When he finished this soil ablution, he would wrap the handkerchief with the utmost care and tie it up like a parcel, carefully placing it back in his pocket. We never knew where this soil was from or why he carried it with him wherever he went. When we offered him to perform ablutions with water instead, he firmly refused, although he bathed daily and was very particular about cleanliness. After completing his soil ablution, he would climb onto the bed and intone the call to prayer on schedule. Then he would pray atop the bed. I never saw him pray on the ground, even when we spread out a prayer rug for him.

Act Six

I did not yield to the sheikh's refusal to open up his memory for me to record. I began to think of a different approach, and believed that I had hit upon the key.

"Let's travel to Kufr al-Labad," I told the family. "The village hasn't grown or developed because its residents always leave for the city in search of a living. Surely the sheikh's memory will be awakened there."

We left, the sheikh, Ghazi, myself, and other family members. Nothing stirred the sheikh in our trip from Jerusalem through Nablus to the road leading to Tulkarem. Yet he watched carefully, observing everything extremely closely. Sometimes he would look hard as the car passed a field planted with olive trees, and his eyes would remain glued to the spot until it disappeared behind the turns. When the car entered Nablus, I didn't feel as though anything had changed, but he grew more focused on the buildings and people.

Still, nothing indicated new feelings; everything seemed normal, as though the sheikh passed by every day, seeing the same scenes. We reached the town of Anabta, and there was still nothing new. In the middle of the town, we turned to the southwest and ascended a hill in the direction of Kufr al-Labad. It was a difficult, narrow road that rose suddenly and sharply between the buildings of Anabta. Its upper section cut olive fields in two. The car had not ascended more than 200 meters when the sheikh grabbed my wrist and screamed, “Stop here! Stop the car!”

I slammed on the brakes in the middle of the hill. The sheikh opened the car door—I don’t know how he learned to open them—and began to run uphill. It was as though a strange force were pulsing through him. We caught up with him, leaving the car in the middle of the road.

After climbing more than 50 meters, the sheikh suddenly flung himself on the ground and scattered soil on his head, wailing so fiercely that his eyes became red. Our eyes, too, filled with tears. This was a shock we were not prepared for. It’s true that with this journey we sought to help the sheikh regain the memories suppressed by years of loneliness, isolation, abandonment and suffering. But we were not prepared for this kind of drama, and it affected us deeply.

Then, just as suddenly as the sheikh had stretched out on the ground, he got back on his feet and began to run anew, just as fast as the first time. “This is the property of my aunt Zarifa, and this is the property of my uncle Ahmed. This is the *maris* [planted field], this is the *jidar* [wall], and this the *hakura* [vegetable garden]. Here are the *sabrat* [cacti] and here the *louzat* [almonds].” (He was naming the various topographical features that demark the Palestinian countryside and plots of land.)

I was nailed to the spot; I couldn’t pull myself together. I burst into tears, again, although not as profusely as the sheikh. At last we had reached our goal. The sheikh had spoken, and set his memories free. All that remained between us and the truth was a recording session. At least that’s what I hoped.

The sheikh continued his ascent until we reached the peak of the hill. When the houses of Kafr al-Labad appeared and the ground flattened out, his step picked up until we reached his house. This was the house he was born in, and the house he lived in whenever he returned to Kafr al-Labad, most often during the annual olive season. He pushed the door open with his hand and entered as though he had never left it. He sat cross-legged in the middle of the floor, under the Arab arched vaults. Had the time come to narrate the story? Was there nothing left for me to do other than uncap my pen and record it, now that we had returned to his beginnings?

Not minutes had passed before news of our arrival spread throughout the village like fire eating at straw. Crowds surged as though it were the Day of Resurrection; no one remained in his home. Everyone told each other the tale; I don't know how many versions of the story were narrated. They all tried to sneak a look into the wide seating area, while the elderly swarmed around the sheikh, filling the spacious room. And everyone tried to prove their relationship to the sheikh:

“I'm the son of your paternal aunt Fatima.”

“And I'm the grandfather of the son of your maternal aunt.”

“And I'm...”

“And I'm...”

I no longer remember all the family members that suddenly appeared, but the village united that day as one family—everyone was related to each other in some way. All the residents of Kufr al-Labad were connected to Sheikh Hassan—he made them one family, something never seen before in Kufr al-Labad's long history. Each person jostled to remind the sheikh of something they shared, something that tied them to each other. The young residents of the village did not understand what was going on. It was like a circus or a museum, with the sheikh standing as a curiosity or a work of art that people paraded by. Even those with no relation to Sheikh Hassan passed before him, simply to survey the scene.

Hours passed like this. The sheikh said nothing, except to greetings. He nodded his head, his gaze turned inward on hidden thoughts. Despite everything going on, that childlike smile never left his mouth. And even today, after all this time, I still cannot interpret that smile. My characterization of it may have been naive—was it childlike or was it in fact sarcastic? I'm no longer sure.

The sheikh had recognized the land but not the people, and he did not connect the two. With all its divisions and ownerships, the land had not moved or changed. It had not become Japan, although the people had become 'Japanese'.

The sheikh slept in his house, in his birthplace. I hadn't seen him sleep so deeply since his 'release'. Was it a sense of comfort and of returning home, or was it exhaustion from the shock of all that he had seen in one day—more than he had seen in forty-some years? The next morning was no different from the evening before. I did not write much more than a description of the events. There were no new facts about the past.

The next day we all went to visit the sheikh's land, which lay a few hundred meters from the center of the village. The same scene was repeated—the tossing of earth on his head, caressing and kissing the olive trees. The sheikh's tears gushed, as did those of everyone who joined that trip to the fields. The scene was momentous—a mass procession by the village residents, as if this was a festival of a village saint. There were hundreds of young people, elderly and even women. Everyone cried, as though this was an occasion to shed tears suppressed for decades. On occasions such as this, sobbing is permitted without judgment. And once again, the sheikh did everything expected except talk, which only increased my frustration.

The Seventh and Final Act

Ghazi insisted on taking his father to Jordan to spend the rest of his days. This was a right no one, including I, could deny him. So eager was I to find a happy ending to this tale that I was ready to write its conclusion, even if it was incomplete.

And this is where the problem began. In order to travel, identification papers were required. The sheikh had no personal documents. When Jordanian passports were issued for West Bank residents in 1951, the sheikh was not a resident. We don't know where he was, but he was certainly not in the West Bank.

Where was Sheikh Hassan?, I wondered. What happened to him? It's possible that he remained in the Akko prison when it fell into Jewish hands during the 1948 war, its doors subsequently opened, and those who remained departing. But the sheikh hadn't had a memory to help him return. He most likely lost his memory not long before 1948, but certainly before then. When the Akko prison was taken over, the Israelis had no choice but to transfer him to a mental hospital to begin a new journey through dungeons unknown to him and to us. Sheikh Hassan slipped out of history, and we don't know where he traveled on this solitary journey.

Sheikh Hassan had little difficulty remembering things that had not changed. But he could not even remember those he met later who had been his contemporaries. Did he really not remember, or did he reject his memory, holding us responsible for what had happened to him? Sheikh Hassan did not know that Jews had taken control of most of Palestine's land, creating from it the state of Israel. He harbored no hatred towards them; all of his hatred was directed towards the British, those responsible for everything. He did not understand when we explained the 1967 Israeli occupation that had allowed us to get to him. In fact, I can compile a long list of what Sheikh Hassan did not comprehend, but I can only record a short list of what his memory could still bear. Still, by all standards, it was a heavy weight. The land remained Sheikh Hassan's only reservoir of memory.

With the help of the village head, we obtained the identification papers necessary to request a Jordanian passport that would allow Sheikh Hassan to enter Jordan. But how would we get him out, over the bridge, when he had no Israeli identification? I had to return to the hospital to obtain a document confirming his identity and his residence. With the help of this document written in Hebrew and addressed “To whom it may concern”, we were able to obtain an exit permit for the sheikh to cross the Allenby Bridge, on the basis of his having permanently resided in Israel. And indeed, with the help of these papers that had no legal basis or relation to the truth, Sheikh Hassan left for Amman following a well-attended farewell in Abu Dis.

I never saw Sheikh Hassan again after that, and everything I know comes from what his son Ghazi and his grandchildren have told me. They said that every day after the sheikh would leave his son’s home located in Tal’at al-Masdar leading towards the Wehdat area in eastern Amman, and walk in every direction, searching for something unknown to all. They weren’t even sure that he knew what he was looking for. One of his grandchildren would follow him until he got tired and then take him back to the house in a taxi. The same scenario was repeated the following day, and so on, without him tiring.

It seems that Sheikh Hassan missed the routine of his quiet, calm life in the hospital, and was trying to return to it. He was trying to return the self that had been lost among the welcoming and the faces that meant nothing to him; the self that was lost in the immense pressure of trying to remember what had been forgotten or what he had chosen to forget; the self that fled from reality and soared on horizons we can never attain.

The public reception in Amman was the same as it had been in Abu Dis, Jerusalem, and Kufr al-Labad, except on a larger scale. News of the sheikh spread through the city of more than a million and the press flocked to him. Everyone wanted the truth, but no one found a greater portion than I. Just as official and grassroots institutions did not hesitate to visit the humble family home, the sheikh’s arrival at his son’s house turned it into a pilgrimage site. Delegations and the curious poured in. The Jordanian newspapers printed coverage filling entire pages—“Sheikh Hassan returns from the dead”, “Sheikh Hassan al-Labadi is liberated from occupation prisons after more than 40 years”, “Amman embraces the liberated prisoner Sheikh Hassan al-Labadi”, “The tragedy of Palestine is embodied in Sheikh Hassan”, and so on. Sheikh Hassan was no longer unknown, and had in fact become one of Amman’s prominent personalities, a symbol of the Palestinian cause (at least that was what the Amman office of the Palestine Liberation Organization insisted). No one sought the opinion of Sheikh Hassan on his new standing, but it was surely not comfortable for him, and he continued to flee to a place we knew not.

Only three months passed following Sheikh Hassan's "liberation" before he departed this life. Thousands of mourners walked in the sheikh's funeral procession and the Jordanian papers were filled with condolences on his death. I don't know what they were mourning—the symbol, the sacrifice, survival, catastrophe, the *Nakba*, the Mandate, Akko Prison, Israeli hospitals. I don't know, but Sheikh Hassan departed without my being able to discern what important part of Palestinian history lay buried within him. Did the sheikh truly lose his memory? And if so, when? Or did he simply refuse to remember? Did the freedom he had never been blessed with kill him?

He departed, bearing with him secrets and precious tales of our tragedy. He departed, and with him, or perhaps not, were the answers to a thousand and one questions.