

Odeh BISHARAT

Extract from the novel *The Streets of Zatunia*
and two articles

Chapter One

When his relative asked him to sit with him privately, and after he told him that he wanted to consult him on a serious subject, Khalid al-Mussily felt extremely tense and curious. The relationship of Khalid al-Mussily with this relative does not go beyond exchanging greetings, and is naturally limited to participation in wedding days and funerals shared by the family. This participation does not hold in its folds any special meaning, whether it is in his hometown, Zatunia, or in other towns, as everyone participates in weddings and funerals, especially when the event concerns one's relatives, even if the acquaintance is superficial.

That relative is counted in the active side of the family in social and public issues, and therefore, when he asked that the meeting should be bilateral, without fuss, and at al-Mussily's home, which is not frequently visited, doubts started to affect al-Mussily's soul. He considered a number of subjects that could be grounds for this meeting. Finding nothing that might require such a meeting, his tension and curiosity grew. The speculations crowding into his head in the six hours since he the meeting was set up and its actual time (from two to eight in the evening) were enough to occupy his mind for days, and probably for months, if not more.

Spring had started to wake up in Zatunia after a long period of rainfall; severe cold left that night and a strange feeling prevailed, which aroused a stimulating worry that something serious would inevitably occur. It was the kind of a night al-Mussily wouldn't be able to forget, and indeed, he certainly never would.

After the relative exhausted him with a countless number of subjects, ranging from children through education to local conditions, he added; "There are some people in this town who are thinking – just thinking...!" The relative included the restrictive clause in his speech but in order to not be misunderstood, he added: "Let me stress, *it's just a thought.*" Then followed the crushing sentence inscribed in al-Mussily's mind: "the family should nominate you to run for office and represent them in the Local Council." These words, which appear to be simple on paper, just like millions of others poured without consideration, caused an upheaval in al-Mussily's life, an upheaval he later compared to a second birth.

Al-Mussily did not pay attention to his relative's emphasis on the words: "*They think*"; neither did he pay attention to the stress on "*It's just a thought.*" Pushed by a childhood habit, his imagination soared.

Naturally, his wife Hiyam, who considered the 'thought' to be a real fact, did not understand that what was said to her husband was *just a thought*. Most likely, her husband, who was a teacher, also didn't feel he should tell his wife about this remark, and thus she started her journey of planning and performance.

Though the time was spring, it was impossible to notice this in Zatunia because both the fallow and the cultivated lands had shrunk in a large and worrying way, especially for

nature lovers from the village, who were not many. New buildings were growing on the lands allocated to housing as well as to agriculture. Above those buildings, new apartments were erected randomly. Beside them, more new apartments were built, and below them, there were fewer modern ones. Therefore, it is implausible to talk about land covered in green.

Zatunia can be considered a village insofar as it has a village's disadvantages, and a city insofar as it has the disadvantages of a city. On the one hand, it lacks the facilities and pleasures of a village; on the other, it has all the city problems-- the indiscriminate overpopulation caused by high birth rate combined with the unavoidable immigration of people from the neighboring villages taking refuge here. Still, any thought of expanding the building areas of Zatunia is out of question. On the contrary, people say; "Thank God we did not lose the lands we are sitting on!"

Khalid Al-Mussily has been teaching in Zatunia High School since he graduated from the University in the city, a long time ago. He grew up in the village, got married, had children, and found a job in the village – not because he was the best but because *'relatives are more deserving.'* Besides, no one else in the village applied for the job.

Khalid Al-Mussily is a very ordinary man; his behavior at school did not show him as someone with a bright future in any field, especially not in the field of politics or public affairs. At school, he was the last teacher to object, the last to express his opinion, and the last to draw attention when a topic was introduced for discussion and comment.

Al-Mussily was good at elaborating thoughts. One day he arrived at school and was told by the principal that the students were on strike, and he should stay at school until the end of the day even though not a single student was in the school building.

He wondered: But the students are on strike!?

The students, yes, but we, the teachers are not!

The principal replied harshly; from his impatient tone Al-Mussily inferred that it was better to stop the argument. The teachers will soon convene, and decide. The principal will tell them that since the students are on strike, there is no point in staying, but if one student wants to learn, the teachers should be ready to teach.

But should we 'sit' until that 'son of a bastard' who 'wants to learn,' out of all the creatures of God, shows up? That is what he will say to the school principal, who is too cowardly to dare take a decision against the Ministry of Education.

He is always like that: his thoughts create scenarios in which he plays the hero role, in his confrontation with the school principal, or his wife or any other clash. His heroism ends with the end of his elaboration. In actuality, he was the last teachers to leave school in defiance of the principal's instructions.

Khalid al-Mussily does not take initiatives, and avoids challenges. The words of those who are above him in work or society persuade him most of the time. He does, however, possess traits that are praiseworthy: good listening, politeness, and good faith. These contributed to the enrichment of his social life, and the interest of his closest circle.

During the days that followed, the teacher's home was suddenly agitated. The wife warned the children to be extremely polite and keep their clothes tidy. She asked them to be calm. Yes! Completely calm, for their home is about to witness important events. There were those who said that they later heard her describe the night in which the news was broken to her husband (without mentioning the words *'just a thought'*) as 'the

historical night.' She mentioned all details, every word that was said, where the relative sat, and where the teacher sat.

Hiyam al-Mussily is not from the al-Mussily family; she is from an ordinary family from the big city. Her father comes from one of the nearby villages. He took the city as his residence after he went to work there a few years ago. His marriage, however, was complicated, a dilemma. He knew a Christian young woman from the city, and naturally, her parents objected to her marriage and considered it forbidden, an 'abominable action,' they said. In a stormy moment of emotion and anger and tears, her father said:

-Where can I hide my face from people now?

His young daughter said, with all the power that God gave her:

-Why should you be ashamed of me? Am I one of 'those' girls?

-More than! Her father said, feeling between a revolution and a breakdown.

Her mother said: -Oh you! Have some pity on your father! You broke his heart!

In the end, her father said to his relatives:

-Enough, relatives! This girl is stubborn. If I could, I would kill her, but I can't. Go wherever you like. From now on, I do not know who you are, and you do not know who I am!

Two years later, or probably less, her little daughter Hiyam was playing in her grandparents' home, respected and spoiled, and even haughty! Little Hiyam was pleased; her Mom is a Christian, her Dad is a Moslem. She could celebrate all the feasts and get gifts both from her grandparents in the city and her grandparents in the village.

Hiyam had lived in this house the years of her childhood and her youth. She was beautiful, and young men rushed to win her heart. She knew that in her early youth. Even in her girlhood, she held a special position among her sisters, and felt bright future waiting for her.

The first time she fell in love in was in eleventh grade. Her classmate, the shopkeeper's son, a year older than she, was a tall young man with a smiling face. He would meet her at school and arranged his return home for her time. That love was the kind with a lot of romantic feelings, general talk, heart-refreshing ambiguous hints regarding commitment, affection, and loyalty, and the qualities that should bring two in a 'faithful relationship,' in addition to philosophical talks focusing on the one point concealing a relationship of admiration, and probably some sexual appeal emanating from human nature.

This admiration led her, or was leading her, to the 'fault,' as her mother told her later. The 'fault' was what happened behind the tall eucalyptus that remained relatively forgotten after the schoolyard had been widened. What happened was that she 'did not feel' that they were behind the eucalyptus tree. That was the safe place where he intended to approach her following a long poetic talk. She retreated spontaneously, but he approached, insisting. They met in a kiss at first hesitant, then stormy, which made her head turn a little bit, and then turn a lot, with a pleasure she had never known before.

At home she told her mother that he only 'tried' to kiss her, but she refused, of course. As was said before, the mother thanked God that the 'fault' did not occur. Later, this amorous situation broke up and nothing of it remained except sweet memories. She felt he was looking for something she would not agree to. In this way, the relationship waned and everything ended.

In her youth, she had been a captive of her mother's lessons about 'those youths' or rather 'wolves,' who care for nothing except having their way with the woman, the meek lamb. While she did not feel she was a meek lamb, the talk scared her and made her suspicious of men all the time, despite the overwhelming desire that occasionally swept over her. This fear increased when she came across what was published up front in newspapers and on tv, and more so in the somewhat daring movies shown on tv after midnight, when her parents had already gone to bed.

At the University, she studied History. Her mother continued to busy herself searching for a groom. The hard experience the mother went through was probably what made her constantly think and look for that 'thing' that would protect the future of her daughter, who, for her, remained a little girl in need of constant care.

In that period, the University carried all the components of a small society, such as a lively and wildly throbbing political movement and active social life that included coffee evening gatherings, *labaneh* and *tabbouleh* sittings, evening gatherings in the dorms that continued into the early hours of the morning, and intimate relationships between male and female students.

Hiyam found herself in this ocean, and never felt a stranger in it. Rather, she felt at home there, more than in her real home. She felt protected by a velvet frame that gave her right to freedom, including sexual freedom, far away from the roughness of injury, so that the relationship would appear to be natural, between two adult people who realize the meaning of their emotional and sexual feelings.

Hiyam does not know how she rose against her mother's teachings when she was at the University. At home, she felt she was a prisoner; at the University, she felt she was free. The wolves her mother frightened her with turned out to be something else. She discovered friendship and intimacy growing with those young men. It was possible to trust them in such a way that the fearful obsession she was dealing with, someone was trying to devour her, no longer dominated her. She discovered that it was possible for her to be a partner in an equal relationship, that she was not a poor creature waiting for someone to devour her.

That was where she met Khalid Al-Mussily. In the beginning, the relationship was academic; then it developed into a kind of admiration, and later, became personal, with long conversations about life and its philosophy. Finally, it became deeper. Khalid's room, which he shared with Nabil, a student from the South, became their meeting place and later a shared "nostalgic place" with her future husband. The room was called the "nest," because "it witnessed the best relationship in recorded history", as Khalid said in a moment of passionate love, assuring her he would write about this in books and, 'you will see!' Though she did not see any book or article written about her, this elevated literary flight, the most important way into her heart, intoxicated her, and later on, led her into all the faults her mother had warned her against in high school.

Following her marriage to Khalid Al-Mussily, right after she finished her studies Hiyam was able to adjust to the life of Zatunia. Here her house remained unvisited by the new relatives, unaccustomed to a strange woman from the city.

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Making visits to the neighbours' homes without previous introductions, or without showing concern about the condition of the children was an unfamiliar thing. In the

beginning these visits were met by a shower of gossip and critical remarks, but in the course of time they too became something familiar. To her husband's reservations about these visits Hiyam said:

- Do whatever you want, but courageously and confidently, because this society knows nothing but courage and confrontation. After that, take it, and deal with it kindly and with sweet words.

The teacher's house witnessed a lot of visits Im Majed arranged for her husband's colleagues including their wives and husbands: "we are immersed in our jobs and we have to find time to relax." Such relief was accompanied by eating *tabbouleh*, fruit and sweets. Dresses and short skirts were taken out of the drawers, including the dresses of their daughter Ahlam, because "anyone who adopts the public road as his path should take care of the feelings of others", as Im Majed said in a serious voice.

The "historical invitation" of Al-Mussily's relatives offering him to represent the extended family at the local council delighted him. Hiyam on the other hand wanted to determine things in a different direction:

Membership is not enough! Head of Council -now! She said firmly, in a confident tone.

--Head! Yes, but why now? Let things ripen. Climbing the ladder is done step by step. Khalid was frightened by his wife's haste.

Hiyam did not care about her husband's hesitation:

- You are far from the atmospheres of politics. You are new, still shining, and corruption has not stained you. People do not look for experience, practice, or credits. People look for someone who is not stained. You are not stained! Who knows how your condition will be after four years? Better sooner than later.

Khalid knows that his wife is an opportunist but not to that degree! This amazed him. He sat down with a yellow face.

- Why not? Are the others better than you? The only difference is that they have a family behind them. You, too, have a family behind you. The important thing is that you should know how to deal with politics. How to ally with other families, yes, but most importantly, you should wrap that alliance in big effective slogans, such as, "public interest," "freeing the energies of the individual," and "my village is my home." There are many people who refuse the clannishness. You should mix the list. The core should be from the *clan*; the allies of the family should be from smaller families; anything that comes from outside, thanks to such slogans, is welcome.

Hiyam talked while Khalid was listening, caught between conscience and amazement.

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There were many rumors about the visits Khalid and Hiyam made abroad. Everyone felt, however, the great change in Khalid's character. It was said that he bought eight three-piece suits and that they were distributed among three passengers at the border-crossing lest the customs office charge him more taxes, since the quantity, Al-Mussily said, would be more suitable for retail than for home use. It was also known from a reliable source that Im Majed bought twenty dresses, and took care they be decent and appropriate for public events.

In his elegant suits, which became the talk of the street in Zatunia, Khalid A-Mussily took to speaking so slowly that he caused confusion. One day, his listeners thought he had finished his speech, but minutes later he resumed his talk just when the audience started talking. In addition, his vocabulary expanded to include bombastic words : "general condition", "public temper," "nascent society," "releasing the potential of our village."

His speech became resplendent with phrases related to fatherhood: the young generation in his dictionary became "our sons and daughters." There were "our people," and "our kinfolk." His topics became numerous and varied, moving from 'gossip' and 'constant complaining' to 'globalization,' 'individualism' and even 'nativism'. At bottom of his heart, he did not count the linguistic value of these bombastic words, but found that their addition made his speeches more impressive, graver, more magnificent. He considered that an entrance into a world he had not known before.

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Journey into the Past

In Maalul, both nature and people joined forces to cover up
what happened here 62 years ago

Every time my 6-year-old daughter Hala sees a few trees through the car window - just ordinary bits of nature - she calls the place "Maalul."

I don't recall exactly how old I was, Hala's age or younger, when my father carried me on his shoulders, moving cautiously and with determination among the big rocks. I do remember that there were many people there, men and women, people my father's age, or so it seemed to me. They all spoke quickly and vehemently, but in low voices; maybe they were looking for something. The walk was burdensome. It reflected suffering. At least that was the impression of a young boy.

The event first took place in the early 1960s, on Israeli Independence Day - or as it is called in Arabic, "Independence Vacation." It wasn't until some 15 years after that burning-hot day in July 1948 that the residents of Maalul plucked up their courage and marched publicly back to their old village, located just west of Nazareth. At the time, in the shadow of the country's rejoicing, the authorities turned a blind eye to the total prohibition on Arab residents moving from one area to another. And so those who had resided in Maalul, and who for the most part had moved to neighboring Yafia, took advantage of this occasion - hesitantly during the first years - to visit their destroyed village. With time, the hesitant visit transformed into a march in which many participated.

Thereafter, the journey to Maalul became an annual event. And when the teacher asked us first graders, in the spirit of patriotism, "What do we do on Independence Day?" I, a son of the uprooted village, replied in a no-less patriotic tone, "We go to Maalul." This reply became a mantra: Time after time teachers jokingly asked me the same question, and I in turn replied, time after time, with the same answer and with the smile of someone who understands, though I didn't understand the meaning of the loud laughter that would erupt afterward.

Some went on foot. But my Uncle Suliman, who had an ancient jeep, drove the extended family: He would load on passengers in Yafia, let them off next to the main street in Maalul, and go back to bring others. We would sit beneath the carob tree on the outskirts of the village. On one of the visits my mother found her coffee pot under a rock, a pot she had not had time to take when fleeing in 1948. Tears rolled down my father's cheeks. At least that's what my sister Nahla, who is three years older, told me.

My father would light a bonfire, and the others prepared tea and coffee. They explained that this was where my family worked their land, while the women prepared the food in the field. Grandma Salma, we heard, would squeeze sour grapes onto the okra she cooked, instead of the lemon that was unavailable.

"Was it tasty?" I asked Aunt Khasneh with the amazement of a child, and she answered bitterly, "We worked all day long, in the evening we were very hungry, and we ate whatever they prepared."

After breakfast the division of labor was clear: The women - like all the women in the universe, who are preoccupied with feeding the family - began the work of picking the za'atar (wild hyssop). By evening they had collected several bags, which would supply the family for months.

Meanwhile the men, exempt from petty daily concerns, were busy teaching the younger generation about the tribulations of Maalul on Israel's Independence Day. We marched to the spring during our annual trips there; there was still a lot of water flowing in it at the time. The women used to carry pitchers full of water on their heads, from the spring to the houses on the mountaintop. An exhausting journey in itself, even without the burden of carrying the pitchers. To this day it is hard to understand why they didn't build the houses of Maalul right next to the spring. Apparently suffering is not taken into account when it's the suffering of women.

Above the spring, to the west, looms a very steep mountain. Here of all places, on the mountaintop, 8-year-old Khasneh, a relative of mine whose father had died, was walking with her cousin Saeed, a year younger than she. The older village children gave up annoying little Saeed and Khasneh, and went to search for wild plants.

Meanwhile, Khasneh wanted to see a cave that, according to legend, is where salt is created. She was marching in front and Saeed behind her. One step before the entrance to the cave Khasneh slipped, and her small body fell, rolling downhill - over 100 meters. When she reached the spring in the *wadi*, the shepherds summoned the village residents. My uncle Saeed, who is now 76 years old, says he returned home only hours later. Khasneh was already there, black and blue all over, but without any serious injuries. Nobody yelled at Saeed, since Khasneh admitted that she was the one who had slipped. She enjoyed a special status, and was allowed to do whatever she liked, and said, "Lucky me, I'm an orphan."

Khasneh was 22 days old when her father Oudeh, my grandfather's brother, was killed in 1933. He died in a collision between two train engines while working at the railway station in Haifa. Placing his open coffin at the entrance to the house was how the family marked the tragedy. Twenty-five years later when I was born, I was given his name; Khasneh calls me "Dad" to this day.

So I was named after Grandpa's brother (Khasneh's father); my eldest brother was named after our grandfather, Khalil; and my younger brother was named after another relative who died, Eissa. My mother, with her barbed comments, wanted to know if there were other dead people in the family, so she could bring more children into the world who would be named after them.

A few shy fences

On the mountaintop, where the residents lived, it is hard today to discern the traces of houses. Only a thorough search reveals a few fences that testify, with apologetic shyness, that people used to live here - perhaps happily. Aside from that, everything is perfect on the mountaintop: The vegetation is thick, the trees are tall, the air is pure and the landscape is pastoral. And there is a mosque and two churches, which are all in need of immediate reinforcement, testimony to having coexisted for hundreds of years.

As we stood next to the remains of my grandfather's house, people told me how, in 1928, there was already a small-scale family "uprooting," after certain relatives were accused of a murder that took place in Maalul. The family then moved to Shfaram, where my father was born a year later. That same difficult year the herd that had wandered with them fell ill, Grandma told me. Once the family's innocence vis-a-vis the murder was established two years later, they returned to Maalul, along with someone else - my maternal grandmother, whom Grandpa had met in Shfaram. A year later they were married in the Maalul church. When the priest asked Frieda, the young bride, whether she agreed to have Salim, my grandfather, as her husband, she replied with sweet chutzpah: "Why else would I drag myself away from Shfaram?"

Among the ruins my family also led me to the room that once served as a school. One day, during the Palestinian Strike, in 1936, a sign was hung on the door informing everyone in garbled handwriting that the institution was closed on orders of the "revolution." Hours later they discovered that a bored child, not so different from today's children, had simply grown tired of school and "enlisted" none other than the revolutionary headquarters to close down the despised institution.

A few weeks ago I visited Maalul once again, and sketched out some scenarios in my imagination: What would have happened had the residents stayed? Would Maalul look like the other villages today - with narrow roads, dense populations, a shortage of land and growing violence? Both my heart and my mind tried to imagine a different "future."

What actually remains is only the past: I found a few piles of stones, the rubble of houses that were demolished. Everything else is now covered with greenery, lovely greenery, signs of treacherous nature.

In Maalul, both nature and people joined forces to cover up what happened here 62 years ago. Thus, for my daughter Hala, "Maalul" means "nature." In the future, slowly but surely, she will burrow into her memories and perhaps into the land as well. She will discover the stones and ponder the years that have passed, which for her are as though nonexistent.

Published in *Haaretz*, Apr 19, 2010

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The Arabs of the Negev Are Not Israel's Enemy

The Negev Arabs are fighting to protect their land, demanding some 600,000 dunams - only 5 percent of Negev's land.

After endless discussions, the demolition of thousands of homes and the establishment of various committees, the last stop regarding Arab land in the Negev was the National Security Council. That's the body that discusses the Iranian nuclear program.

In both cases, the Iranian nuclear program and the Arab land in the Negev, the parties under discussion were absent. In the Negev case, no Arabs served on any of the official committees. Only an enemy receives such treatment.

And so it was that the head of the National Security Council, Maj. Gen. (res.) Ya'akov Amidror, came armed with the pressure from the extreme right-wing ministers. And even the 183,000 dunams (45,750 acres) that the Prawer plan was to leave to the Arabs was cut almost in half to about 100,000 dunams. After all, war is war and there is no room for sentiment.

The Negev Arabs are fighting to protect their land, demanding some 600,000 dunams - only 5 percent of the Negev's land. The Arabs want to legalize all the unrecognized villages, which lack the most basic conditions. And the worrisome question is what will happen to this generation, which grew up without infrastructure, water and electricity. Its members know nothing of the state except for the bulldozers that demolish their homes and the inspectors who punish them. Later, people will wonder where the hatred and extremism came from.

With this cabinet decision it's as if the summer of social justice never happened. Where's Prof. Manuel Trajtenberg when you need him? Some 30,000 inhabitants are threatened with uprooting from their homes and land, and some 20 villages are threatened with demolition. A new, miniature version of the nakba is lurking by the door.

The inhabitants of these villages, who have been living there for generations, are not objects to be moved from place to place. After all, "history," "nostalgia," "memories" and "human emotion" are not just the province of people who come from distant places. The people of Al-Arakib have a history and nostalgia for their land and for the cemetery that contains the bones of their loved ones.

The majority in the current Knesset, and even in less extreme Knessets, is prepared to approve any injustice against Arabs. But Al-Arakib has been destroyed 29 times, and Tawil Abu Jarwal has been destroyed 51 times. Each time the people return and rebuild. The Arab inhabitants of the Negev will not come to terms with their expulsion.

Australia, Canada and many other countries are racking their brains about how to compensate their indigenous peoples for the loss of their lands in order to build a civil partnership. But here, they are galloping happily down the hill of apartheid.

The cabinet decision is a painful blow to proponents of social justice, because enthusiasm for social justice wanes without justice in the Negev.

Sept 12, 2011

Translated from the Arabic by Nazih Kassis