Take Nothing For Granted

By

David Stansfield
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Ouch! winced Hannah. Mummy was squeezing her hand so hard, she thought her fingers were going to break. Why was she so excited? She'd never seen her Eima like this. She'd just woken her up in the middle of the night, forced her into her dressing gown and downstairs into their basement living room and here were all the neighbors in their building she'd ever seen. And lots she'd never seen. Old ones, knobbly ones, smelly ones. And now her fingers were going to break off, she was sure they were. They were all in their pajamas too. They were all crouched down in a circle, crouched down round mummy's old radio set in the basement they'd brought all the way on the boat from Poland, at Heaven knows what time it was in the morning, listening to that funny scratchy old man's voice with his funny accent that seemed to come from far away. She looked up at mummy. She tried to pull her hand away. But mummy didn't even notice. As if she wasn't here, as if she was somewhere far away too. What was going on? What was the old man saying in his funny voice? Hannah Berkowitz, she scolded herself, just listen and you might learn. She strained her ears.

“Afghanistan: no… Argentina... Argentina?... abstention… Australia: yes... Belgium: yes... Bolivia: yes…”

Was this a geography lesson?

“Brazil: yes... Belorussia: yes... Canada: yes... Chile: abstention…”

There was a squishy sound like the rude noise you make when you need to go potty and the radio went silent as the faraway man was flushed down the toilet. All the grownups were still staring at the battered old radio as if it was the most interesting thing they'd ever seen.

At last the scratchy voice bobbed up again: “…Soviet Union: yes… United Kingdom: abstain... The United States: yes... Uruguay: Yes... Venezuela: Yes...” The grownups' eyes were like Catherine Wheels. “Yemen: no... Yugoslavia: abstain…” The voice stopped.

A hammer banged on a wooden table.
“The resolution of the committee on Palestine... was adopted by sirtysree votes... sixteen against... ten abstention...”

Suddenly there was so much shouting all around her, Hannah finally had to snatch her hand away from mummy so she could cover her ears. Everyone was shouting about how wonderful, incredible, marvelous something was. Mummy was hugging her. Everybody was kissing and hugging everyone else, everyone was jumping up and down. Even the embroidered gold cloth on the loudspeaker of the radio was wobbling like the blancmanges the English officers were always eating in the cafés on King George Street.

A thunder of feet, everyone was running, running out of their house and into Malachi Street, and Eima had Hannah’s hand again and was dragging her behind her as they followed the great crowd of crazy grownups.

Their house wasn’t the only one. Other people in pajamas were streaming out of all the other houses on the street, hundreds and hundreds of other people and they were all singing something in Hebrew Hannah couldn’t quite understand.

It was only when Eima finally tucked her up in bed that Hannah had a chance to ask her what it was all about. “What were they singing, mummy?”

Mummy was still crying as she had been for hours and hours. Only not sad tears. Happy tears. She wiped her eyes with Hannah’s blanket and began to sing in her lovely soft low voice: “David, Melech Yisrael, Chai, Chai ve Kayam. Do you know what means, my darling, my little yakirati?”

“I think so,” said Hannah, not at all sure.

“It means David, King of Israel, Lives, Lives and Exists.”

“But what –?” began Hannah

“You remember how nasty people were to you in Poland because we were Jewish?”

Hannah shuddered. She did remember. They were always kicking her and calling her names. “Yes, mummy.”

“No one will ever be nasty to you again because you’re a Jew.”
“Never, ever?”

“Never, ever.”

Hannah gazed up at her mummy, who still seemed to be laughing and crying at the same time, only even more now.

“Why?”

“Because we just got our country back.”

“That’s good, Eima,” said Hannah as she closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

But it wasn’t.

A few hours later, Hannah was woken up again. This time by the sound of guns firing.

Their basement was crowded with even more neighbors than before, including some really, really old people who hadn’t even been there the first time. Some of them were very, very smelly. Nobody was kissing or hugging or jumping up and down.

Instead, the men were taking out all the windows and replacing them with bags of sand so it was always dark even when the sun was shining. They stayed in the dark like that for what seemed like forever and ever. They even had to go weewee and number two in buckets, which the men went out to empty when the guns stopped. Which they hardly ever did. Rifles snapping and machine-guns rat-tat-tating, and big guns booming and things called mortars going off like bombs.

One day one of the bombs hit the waterworks and all the taps in the building stopped working and they had hardly anything to drink except when the tankers went by in the street and someone brave went out to fill up a bucket. Then the food started to run out and every family got a ration book to buy bread and cabbages and sugar and milk and eggs. Then that ran out and all they had was powdered milk and rusks and egg powder. It just got worse and worse and worse. Another day the electricity went out and all they had was paraffin lamps. Then there was no paraffin and all they had were a few candles. It got darker and darker.

They were under something called a siege, Eima said, which meant that the whole of Jerusalem was cut off from the rest of
what people now called Israel.

It was the Arabs everybody said and the British weren’t doing a thing to stop them. From time to time, sunburnt young Jewish men in khaki shirts and short trousers came into the room with terrible stories of people who’d been killed. Nobody Hannah knew, thank goodness.

Until the convoy.

It was a line of buses, the grownups said, taking professors and doctors and nurses and medical supplies to Hadassah Hospital. As the first bus drove through the Arab part of the city, it went over a land mine and blew up and the Arabs came out of the houses and started firing at all the buses. There were lots of British soldiers around. But they just stood and watched. Then one of the buses caught fire. And still the British soldiers stood and watched. Until everyone in the bus was burned alive. Seventy-seven professors and doctors and nurses, they said. All burned alive.

One of the nurses was Hannah’s big sister, Delilah.

Hannah knew she would never, ever forget that.
Jaffa, January 4, 1948
Five weeks later, only forty-seven miles west of Jerusalem on the Mediterranean coast, Sabri al-Banna couldn’t believe it. He’d finally got the ball away from twinkle toes Abed, the World’s Greatest Dribbler and out of reach of Muhammad, the World’s Greatest Header. Now he’d show them. He raced down the long narrow lane that led to Jaffa’s Clock Tower Square ignoring the yells of the street merchants as he almost knocked over their fruit and vegetable stands in his skipping and swerving and tapping of the soccer ball just a few feet out in front of him. He loved doing this, more than anything in the whole world. He glanced back over his shoulder. His friends were far behind him. Abed might have magic in his toes and Muhammad in his head, but Sabri’s magic was in his speed.

He’d almost reached the end of the lane, when he spotted a huge three-ton Dodge truck piled high with golden oranges passing by along Bustros Street. Probably one of his father’s, on its way to the port. Or what used to be his father’s. He shook his head: how things had changed since Baba died. He would never have let his men drive oranges exposed to the weather like that. He always insisted that every al-Banna orange be wrapped in white tissue paper and packed in wooden crates. Sabri sighed. How he missed his Baba. Every time he caught the scent of an orange it sent him back to when he used to sit on Baba’s knee listening to wonderful stories like the one by the French writer who only had to dip a biscuit into his tea to smell his childhood again.

A foot shot between Sabri’s legs hooking the ball away from him. He spun round. Too late, Abed was already dribbling the ball back up the lane with a laughing Muhammad beside him. Sabri gave chase. Yallah! The game was on.

The very first friends he’d ever had, thought Sabri, as they tussled over the ball. The only real friends, really, since they’d met in grade one at St. Joseph’s, the local French Catholic mission school Baba had sent him to when he was six. But then after Baba had died of that horrible lung disease three years ago, Sabri’s family had transferred him to an Islamic private boarding school in
Jerusalem and he and his friends had drifted apart. Now a short winter holiday back in Jaffa had brought them back together. He almost danced with joy. There was no other place he’d rather be and no other friends he’d rather be with.

Soon they were back at the end of the lane much to the disgust of the doorkeepers who stood guard over Barclay’s Bank and the Serai, the Old Ottoman Town Hall. They could have played on the stretch of open ground at the rear of the bus station, but this was so much more fun. How many hours had Baba spent talking to the Arab National Committee in the Serai about what could be done about all the Jews who kept flooding into the country through the Port of Tel Aviv just three miles down the road, to help set up the new State of Israel. Not that Baba had anything against the Jews. He’d worked side by side with them all his life. But they were Jews from here; they were Palestinians. It was all these foreign ones coming in that had worried Baba and all the other members of the Committee. They knew these immigrants had been through the most horrible experiences in Europe, but it was hardly the Arab Palestinians’ fault was it? al-isti’mār, didn’t help either, said Baba, “The Imperialism,” as he called the British occupation he and his Committee were always plotting to overthrow. But they hadn’t, any more than they’d stopped Sabri becoming an orphan.

Strange how you could be an orphan when you had sixteen brothers and eight sisters. But they all had different mothers because Baba had had lots of wives. Nobody minded because he also had lots of money and that’s what you were supposed to do. At least nobody minded until wife number eight, Sabri’s mother, came along. Everybody hated her, not only because she’d started out as just one of their servants, but also because she was an Alawite, some crazy Shia sect who weren’t proper Muslims at all. Worse still she came from a peasant family in the Syrian hills who were as poor as the Bedu. At which point everybody in his family would slap their cheeks pretending to swat a fly and then mime putting it into their mouths and eating it the way the Bedouin did. They always thought that was very funny. The day after Baba died, they turned Sabri’s mother out of the house and started calling Sabri,
whose middle name was Khalil, “al-Khalili,” that’s to say someone from the Palestinian town of Al-Khalil – or Hebron as the Jews called it – which meant you were really, really retarded.

But these games with Abed and Muhammad made up for all that, thought Sabri, as they bobbed and weaved. It was certainly a challenge. Half the time Abed had the ball glued to his feet, and the other half Muhammad was bouncing it up and down on his head like a yoyo. His only friends, his real brothers; Muhammed Abdul Hallak was twelve now, one year older than Sabri, and Abed Ahmad Duknak must be ten. Perfect. The Three Musketeers. He could play like this with them forever.

Then the Clock Tower struck and Sabri remembered what he’d been sent here for in the first place: to buy the days’ groceries for his family. And he was already late! Was he ever going to be in trouble! They could have sent one of the servants, but it always had to be him running errands; they did it to spite him. He might as well have been one the servants, just like his mother.

He made his excuses to Abed and Muhammad and headed back up the lane yet again to make his purchases.

Fifteen minutes later his bags were full. He turned to wave goodbye to his friends.

This was strange: the truck with the oranges was back and was now parked outside Barclay’s. Two men dressed in traditional Arab clothes were climbing down out of it. Stranger still: Sabri had never seen them before. Although he shouldn’t be surprised, it was hard to keep track of all Baba’s workers. After all, he had built up one of the largest plantations of orange groves in the whole of Palestine: twenty-five thousand dunums surrounding the town of Jaffa on every side, as well as more orchards in Majdal, Yibna and Abu Kabir. The richest man in Palestine with his beautiful three-story Ottoman villa overlooking Jaffa beach and another one in Ashkelon with stables, Arabian horses and the only private swimming pool in the country.

No time for all these memories, he had to get home. But wait. What was this?
The two men were now hurrying out of the lane and breaking into a run across Clock Tower Square towards a saloon car with a driver parked outside the Central Police Station. They jumped into the rear seat and it sped away, tires screeching.

Three seconds later, the thousands of golden oranges in the back of the truck expanded into one big golden orange the size of the Dome of the Rock.

They never found most of Muhammad. In fact, not much of him at all: a hand here, a fragment of a thigh there, and a pink smear of his brains on the shattered plate glass window in the pile of rubbish that used to be Barclay’s Bank. As for Abed, he was still alive, but wished he wasn’t. The blast created by the explosion of the two thousand kilograms of dynamite the Israeli Stern Gang had hidden beneath the al-Banna oranges had hurled him straight through the windows of the Arab National Committee offices. After the doctors examined him in ad-Dajani Hospital, they said he was quadriplegic.

Sabri’s body was untouched by the explosion, but his soul wasn’t. When he got home at the end of the worst day of his life, he threw himself down on his prayer rug and swore to God and Baba that he wouldn’t rest until he had wiped Israel off the face of the earth.
Beirut, June 3, 1964.

The city below was a fairyland of lights in the darkness, winking and blinking up at him, fluttering its eyelashes at him as if it had been waiting for him all along, come on down, come on down. Simon’s first flight anywhere and the first city he’d ever seen from the air. Why didn’t everybody rave about this? Jump up and down about this? It was incredible, amazing, magical. What an adventure! As if he were arriving from another planet. And perhaps he was. The journey of a lifetime. Oh shit. Did he really have to go through with this? Why the hell hadn’t he said no? He could have made something up. You can always make something up. “Journey of a lifetime.” Oh, yeah, sure. Stupid twit. Your hands are shaking like an old man. You’re falling apart. When the plane tips to go down, little bits of you will roll down the aisle.

He’d gone through several of those miniature bottles of wine they give out that must have shrunk like Alice Drink-me’s along with the cabin that seemed to be squashing him like Edgar Allan Poe, but it was must have watered down because it hadn’t done a thing. He’d been trembling like this ever since he climbed on the Victoria train at Eastbourne, arriving in London much too early for his flight from Heathrow. Time to kill, go to the cinema. What was on? Well, well, it must be fate… Lawrence of Arabia had just opened with Peter O’Toole. Perhaps that would calm his nerves?

Peter O’Toole! What was he thinking? All those white robes and teeth, blue eyes, chiseled cheekbones and flaxen hair, galloping around on camels, waving his sword about in perfect Arabic. Who could live up to that? It made him feel ten times worse.

What had he got himself into? What the hell was he doing on this plane? It was going to be test after test. A whole obstacle course of hurdles to trip over.

First of all, how would the shaky Arabic he’d managed to cram into himself in his first two years at Durham stand up in the real world? Would they understand a word he was saying? More to the point, would he understand a word they were saying? It was all very well having those cozy little chats twice a week with his colloquial Arabic teacher, Mr. Dabbagh, in his cozy little flat above the
tobacconists on Durham High Street, with good olde England just outside the window, but this was the real thing. Test number one.

Test number two was far worse of course: would he pass muster? He knew he was as fair-haired and blue-eyed as any Brit – as O’Toole actually, without the cheekbones – his family having lived in England for three generations, but still… he was who he was, how long could he hide that? His great-grandparents had changed the family name from Finkelstein to Finley over a hundred years ago, but what if they somehow found out? What if it all came out? Would that matter? After all, it was the Israelis the Arabs had their problems with, not his people in general. At least that’s what all his professors said. But they weren’t his people, were they? Not a single one of them, goys to a man. Easy for them to talk. Oy vey.

Test number three: three months. How was he going to live three months with a strange family in a strange land? Where would he sleep? Where would he wash? Those horrible things he’d learned about the lavatories, just a hole in the ground. And what would he eat? Was there a Montezuma’s revenge for Arabs? How would ever get down to the pubs? Were there any pubs? No one’s allowed to drink, they say. What would it be like? He’d heard all sorts of odd things. Oh, God, here we go. We’re going down – “we’ve started our descent” as the Captain just said over the loudspeakers, which didn’t make it sound much better.

Why hadn’t he just refused to come on this trip? Put his foot down. He knew it was part of the Modern Arabic Studies course, spend a summer in the Middle East to brush up your colloquial like a pair of dusty shoes, but surely he could have wiggled out of it somehow? He could have given back the part of his scholarship they allotted for this, couldn’t he? Or he could have pleaded illness, over work, too much studying, fallen off a horse? Could have, could have, could have. It was too late now.

Oh, how did he ever get involved with this Arabic stuff in the first place?

It had all started with Jasmine of course. And a postcard. Two years ago, almost to the day. He’d driven her from Eastbourne to Dover in his father’s Ford Consul to catch her boat back to
Morocco, and they’d arrived early. Time for one last snog on the beach on the tar-stained duffel coat he reserved for such occasions when the au pair girls were over from Europe or beyond. But this was more than that, Jasmine was special, she was the one, he was sure of that, even if he was only eighteen at the time. You just know these things. Not that they’d gone below the waist of course, she wasn’t that kind of girl as grandma would have said, just a lot of kissing and caressing and cuddling. He’d never felt so tender towards anyone in his life.

Then on that last day she’d sat up and pulled out the postcard. Just a nice colored picture of Casablanca, but on the back – he could see it now – on the back, below some very touching words in French, she had drawn a curious, but strangely beautiful, pattern of swirling lines and curlicues that danced up and down on his skin. The design was foreign and yet familiar, like an elaborate frieze that had been hovering around the edge of his consciousness as long as he could remember. It was mesmerizing; if the call the sirens made to Ulysses had had a wave pattern, it would have looked like this. He wanted to dive into it, swim to the sirens, give himself up to them, be swallowed up by them, follow their every loop and shimmer wherever they led.

“It means I love you and I’m going to miss you terribly, mon amour,” whispered Jasmine, nuzzling his neck.

“It’s writing?”

“It’s Arabic. My other language.”

“You other language? I didn’t know you had another language. You come from French Morocco. You’re French.”

“I’m French and I’m Arab. I’m both.”

“How do you do it?

“I was born like that.”

“No, I mean the writing.”

She took out a pen and repeated the mysterious pattern, her hand moving from right to left across the card.

“But it’s backwards. Mirror writing.”

She smiled. “Didn’t you know, Simon? ‘Jasmine Through the Looking-Glass,’ that’s me.”
“What’s it sound like?”
She traced the undulations with her finger: “Ana wibbak wa sa-
astafiqiulak kathiran yahabibi.”
It was as if she had run her finger down his back. If the writing
was a painting, the reading was a song, the notes coming from deep
inside her. The “q” was a kiss from the back of her throat. The
strong “h” the hiss of a wave breaking on the beach, washing over
him, the ocean breathing out her soul. This tiny, beautiful, dark-
eyed girl, he’d always thought of as simply “French,” had suddenly
revealed another side of herself, another dimension.
But now she was about to leave. “Only for a short visit to see
my parents.” But deep inside him, suddenly he knew better. She’d
never settle into his soggy British blandness. There was too much
sun in her soul.
He gazed into her face, at the dusky smudges round the eyes he
loved to kiss. The French – and now Arab – bruises that never
healed. Was he kissing them to make them better or to touch their
darkness? There was more mystery here than he could fathom. She
was a visitor from another planet who had exposed a subliminal
glimmer of her true self. And behind that self another world, a
parallel universe.
He’d heard once on BBC Brains Trust that you could have a
precognition of an event that hadn’t happened yet, or conversely, a
déjà vu feeling about an event that was currently happening. They’d
talked about Dunne’s Time Theory: think of your life as an
escalator, only there were many – perhaps an infinite number – of
parallel escalators, all out of sync with your own to varying
degrees, either ahead or behind. Occasionally, it was possible to
catch sight of one of these parallel elevators and see into another
time dimension.
He was bursting with questions: why had she never talked to
him of this other life? What was this other world? Why had they
spent so much time exploring each other’s bodies and so little time
exploring their backgrounds? How could you be both French and
Arab at the same time?
The boat’s foghorn sounded. She kissed him quickly, “Je t’aime, mon amour, je t’aimerai toujours,” and then ran up the gangplank and out of his life. Or so he thought.

Two months later, Simon won a scholarship to go up to Durham University to start a B.A. program in Modern Arabic Studies.

Now, two years after that, here he was, about to jump in at the deep end.

He’d chosen Arab Jerusalem – or rather, the Jordanian/Palestinian sliver of that partitioned city. Painstakingly, he’d written out a want ad in his best classical Arabic explaining what he was looking for and posted it to the local newspaper, al-Quds [The Holiness], the Arab name for Jerusalem.

He’d received dozens of replies, all of them saying essentially the same thing: he was welcome to stay with their family for as long as he wished, on one condition: that he swear on the Koran never to pay for anything himself. Baitna, baitak, our house is your house.

That was very touching. If it was really true, and not just Arab rhetoric. But still, three whole months? Hiding who he really was, living cheek by jowl, and so on and so on. How was he going to get through this?

He turned in his seat to look about him at his fellow passengers. None of them was even glancing out of the window at the runway they were about to touch down on. Most of them fellow Brits by their looks, either too pale or too red; probably jaded oil company employees for whom this flight from London to Beirut before going on to the oilfields of Saudi Arabia or Kuwait had long ago lost its novelty.

Then they touched down and these same blasé passengers suddenly burst into a flurry of animation as they jerked their luggage out of the overhead racks and elbowed their way to the exit door as if someone had just cried fire.

When he had at last gathered his own wits and belongings together and finally arrived at the exit himself the metaphor didn’t seem so farfetched: the blast of hot air that met him could have issued from a furnace. How could people live in such a climate? He
should have checked the local weather before he left. What had he
got himself into? he thought yet again. On top of this, unversed as
he was in the art of getting off planes before everybody else, he
soon found himself at the tail end of a long line of impatient
oilmen waiting to go through Customs.

From the outset of his trip, he had promised himself he would
speak exclusively in his limited Arabic, come what may. If anyone
addressed him in English, he would reply in Arabic he was terribly
sorry he didn’t speak a word of the language since he was from
Finland, reasoning that the chances of encountering a bilingual
Arabic-Finnish speaker were fairly slim. Now was his chance to
start making good on that promise.

An official-looking Arab man was passing close to him. Simon
summoned up his courage and asked him in the best Arabic if he
was in the right line for Customs.

The man stared at him open-mouthed as if Simon had asked
him to drop his trousers. Then he gasped, “Alhamdulillah!” [God be
praised!]

He grabbed his hand and pulled him to the head of the queue,
where he gabbled away to the Customs man in a rapid Lebanese
dialect Simon could hardly understand a word of. After a series of
exclamations of surprise and wonder, the Customs man embraced
him, kissed him on both cheeks, and shouted something at a small
boy, who disappeared for what seemed like an instant to reappear
with a glass of hot tea. By now a small crowd of Customs officials
had gathered around him, also marveling at his command of their
language as they cried Ahlan wa sahlan! Ahlan wa sahlan! [Welcome!
Welcome!] over and over again, meanwhile completely ignoring
the forty or so other irate passengers who had been ahead of him
in the queue.

While he sipped his tea and the oilmen fumed, the Customs
men bombarded him with questions. How had he learned their
language, where, when, and above all why? Why had he wanted to
learn to speak their language? No foreigner ever did.

He didn’t tell them that it was because of Jasmine from
Morocco, the first girl he’d ever truly loved. But he did now
understand that to learn a language was also an act of love; you had to love someone to master that person’s native tongue, whether it was your mother when you were a baby, or your first girlfriend or boyfriend from another land. And these wise men from an ancient culture, disdained by generations of monolingual colonialists, had come to know this truth profoundly.

Things began to slip into place in his mind. The blast of hot air that had hit him hadn’t been walking into a furnace at all. It hadn’t been a hostile Third World heat; it was a warm bath to soak away his British stiffness, to bring about some deep alchemical change in his bones as it drew him into another reality, that same reality he’d first glimpsed with Jasmine.

Once he’d finished his tea, he was whisked through Customs – they never even asked to see his passport – and then through the baggage area, on a magic carpet of helping hands. From then on the carpet rolled out before him: finding a taxi, a hotel, a restaurant, then sharing a communal taxi to Syria, where he floated across the desert border on a tide of yet more small brown boys bearing brass trays with miniature glasses of sweet hot tea, buoying him past further visa and luggage inspections like a pasha. Armed with little more than Salaamu alaykum, Inshallah and Alhamdulillah, he had a verbal passport that sliced through the densest tangle of red tape.

By uttering those first few words of Arabic, it dawned on him, he might as well as have been pronouncing Open Sesame, because from that moment on, his life changed, all obstacles fell away, as if he’d let a hundred willing genies out of the bottle.

Then it was on to Jerusalem and the family he had chosen from the stack of offers he had received: the Haidamis. Would the bath still run warm?

The taxi dropped him off in front of a tiny pink one-story house just across the road from the Damascus Gate to the Old City where a young man of about his age was waiting for him. More smiles, embraces and kisses. Simon relaxed even more.

Enunciating the lovely sounds slowly and clearly to make sure he understood every word, the young man introduced himself as
Ahmed Haidami, the younger of the two men of the house, the other being his elder brother Mahmud, who was so sorry he couldn’t be there to greet him, but he just couldn’t get away from his work.

Insisting on carrying all of Simon’s luggage himself – no guest was ever allowed to carry anything – Ahmed led the way up the little garden path. As they approached the front door, he put the suitcases down and bent to pick a couple of sprigs from a bush of delicate white flowers, one for Simon and one for him.

_Jasmine, of course, what else could it have been?_

Ahmed began to rub the white petals together in his palms and then cupped his hands over his nose to breathe in the scent. He nodded to Simon to do the same. It was the custom, he explained in Arabic, _Ahlān wa sāhlān._

Different sensual modalities, Simon realized. Now he was not only soaking in warmth, he was breathing it in. Talk about a different world. Where he came from, when you were invited to someone’s house, they offered you something to drink, here they offered you something to smell.

There were five of them shoehorned into the three-room house: widowed mother, Mahmud and Ahmed, and two girls, teen-age Nur and five-year old Laila. They were so poor with only Mahmud working they couldn’t even afford sandals for little Laila.

In spite of this poverty, never once over the course of his stay with the Haidamis was Simon – whose generous scholarship made him a twenty-year old millionaire by his hosts’ standards – to be allowed to pay for so much as a morsel of pita bread or a slice of melon.

Ahmed, and his two closest friends, the tall, skinny, intellectual Abd al-Haqq, whose hair was already thinning, and the wonderfully muscled weight-lifter Ibrahim, whose standard way of showing affection was to pummel you with his great fists, had tried to apply the same hospitality rule to Simon’s daily afternoon outings with them. Wherever they took him, on explorations of the Old City, to Jericho and the Dead Sea, to Hebron and Nablus,