



IBTISAM BARAKAT

# Tasting the Sky

A Palestinian Childhood

Melanie Kroupa Books

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Permission to include the lyrics of “Ya Dara Douri Fina” and “Salami Lakom,” by the Rahbani Brothers from the album “Jesr El Adwa,” has been granted by Mansour Rahbani.

An earlier version of the chapter “Shoelaces” was published by Pocket Books in 1998 under the title “Marked for Destruction” in *Children of Israel, Children of Palestine*, edited by Laurel Holliday. An earlier version of the chapter “Shelter” was first published by Alfred A. Knopf in 2002 under the title “The Second Day” in the book *Shattered: Stories of Children and War*, edited by Jennifer Armstrong.

The Sinai Peninsula, indicated as an occupied territory on the 1967 map, page viii, was returned to Egypt in 1979.

The origin of baklava, disputed on page 9, is widely believed among food historians to be neither Arabic nor Greek but Assyrian, dating to the eighth century. Various nations in the Middle East claim this pastry as their own and have contributed to perfecting it.

The quotation on page 172 is primarily attributed to Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 B.C.E.–c. 50 C.E.). However, Philo scholars continue to debate its location in his writings. Plato occasionally is credited with having said it.

1981, Surda, West Bank

*Like a bird clawing  
The bars of a cage  
And wishing them branches,  
My fingers grasp  
The bus rails before me.*

*But I wish for nothing.*



I'm midway from Birzeit to Ramallah, at the Israeli army checkpoint at Surda. No one knows how long our bus will stay here. An army jeep is parked sideways to block the road. Soldiers in another jeep look on with their guns. They are ready to shoot. A barrier that punctures tires stands near the stop sign. I regret that I chose to sit up front.

The window of the bus frames the roadblock like a postcard that I wish I could send to all my faraway pen pals. They ask me to describe a day in my life. But I do not dare. If I told them of the fear that hides under my feet like a land mine, would they write back?

A soldier leaps into the bus. He stands on the top step. His eyes are hidden behind sunglasses, dark like midnight. "To where?" He throws the question like a rock. I pull my

head toward my body like a tortoise. If I don't see him, perhaps he won't see me.

He asks again. I stay silent. I don't think a high school girl like me is visible enough, exists enough for a soldier with a rifle, a pistol, a club, a helmet, and high boots to notice. He must be talking to the man sitting behind me.

But he leans closer. His khaki uniform and the back of his rifle touch my knee. My flesh freezes.

"To where?" He bends close to my face. I feel everyone on the bus nudging me with their anxious silence.

"Ramallah," I stutter.

"Ramallah?" he repeats as if astonished. "*Khalas. Ma feesh Ramallah. Kullha rabat,*" he says in broken Arabic. The words sound like they have been beaten up, bruised so blue they can hardly speak their meaning. But I gather them. "There is no Ramallah anymore," he says. "It all should be gone by now."

I search for the soldier's eyes, but his sunglasses are walls that keep me from seeing. I search for anything in his face to tell me more than the words he's just said about Ramallah. What does he mean? Are the homes all bulldozed down? And the people? My father and my family, will I find them? Will they wait for me? Fear is a blizzard inside me. A thousand questions clamor in my mind.

It was less than an hour ago that I took the bus from Ramallah to Birzeit. Now I am returning. How could everything disappear in less than one hour? Something must be wrong with me. Perhaps I do not know how to think, how to understand my world. Today I chose to sit up front when

I should have chosen to hide in the back. I should have known a front seat lets one see more of what lies ahead.

I want to open my mouth and let my feelings escape like birds, let them migrate forever. I am waiting for the soldier to step off the bus. But he doesn't.

He counts us, then takes out a radio and speaks. I don't understand, and I am somehow content that I do not. I do not want to know what he says about me or the bus, or what he plans to do.

He switches back to Arabic, takes the driver's ID, tells the driver to transport us all—the old passengers, the young, the mothers, students, everyone—to the Military Rule Center. He means the prison-court military compound on the way to Ramallah. I know where that is. It sits on the ground like a curse: large, grim, shrouded in mystery. In ten minutes our bus will be there.

New soldiers wait for us at the entrance to the compound. One walks to our driver's window, tells him to let all the passengers off, then turn around and leave. The driver apologizes to us. He says if it weren't for the order, he would wait for us no matter how long it took. I wonder if he is afraid to continue on to Ramallah, to be alone when he finds out whether it's really in ruins.

"Wait a moment," he says. "I will return your fare."

But no one can wait. "*Yallah! Yallah!*" a soldier goads. "Hurry!"

After a second head count, at gunpoint, we form a line and walk to a waiting area. We stand against a wall that faces the main door. The compound feels like the carcass of a gi-

ant animal that died a long time ago. Its exterior is drab, bonelike, and hostile.

We take out our IDs. Two soldiers collect them to determine if any of us had been caught in previous confrontations with the army. Our IDs inform on us. The orange-colored plastic covers, indicating that we all are Palestinian, pile up on the table like orange peels.

Two college students, with thick books in their hands, are quickly separated from the group. For a moment, my dream of going to college feels frightening.

“Hands up!” someone says, and one of the two soldiers now chooses the people he wants and inspects their bags, pockets, bodies. He skips the girls and women. All is quiet until he raises his hand to search a teenage boy standing next to me.

Even before the soldier touches him, the boy starts to giggle. The sound breaking the anxious silence is shocking. At first, the giggles are faint, then they grow so loud that soldiers from outside the yard hear and come to see. The boy’s laughter is dry and trembling. Worried. I know what he feels. He wants to cry, but in spite of himself, in spite of the soldiers and the guns, all he can do is giggle.

Angered, the search soldier punches the boy, but like a broken cup that cannot hold its contents, the boy continues to laugh. The soldier punches him again. The boy’s laughter now zigzags up and down like a mouse trying to flee and not knowing which way to turn. But a kick on the knee from the soldier’s boot finally makes the boy cry. He folds down in pain and then is led inside the building.

We stand still like trees—no talking, no looking at one

another, no asking questions, no requesting water or trips to the bathroom, no sitting or squatting. We do not know what we are waiting for or why we are waiting.

The hours stretch like rubber bands that break and snap against our skins, measured by the ticking of boots, going and coming across the yard, in and out of the building.

I keep my eyes on our main guard, who now sits by the door. Lighting a cigarette from the dying ember of the one he has just finished and filling his chest with the flavor of fire, he makes frog cheeks and blows smoke rings that widen like binoculars as he glances at us through the smoky panel. He looks at us as though we are only suitcases in his custody.

I want to ask him if I can take out a pen and paper. If he lets me, I will empty myself of what I feel. I will distract myself from my hunger, for I have not eaten all day. And I will record details to give to my mother in order to avoid her wrath—if Ramallah is not really gone.

But something in my mind wags a warning finger not to ask, not to do the wrong thing. It's a finger like Mother's, telling me to get home in a hurry, not ever to be late. But I am already many hours late.

Mother tells me not to speak about politics. She is always afraid that something bad could happen suddenly. "*Khalas, insay, insay,*" she demands impatiently. "Forget, just forget." And I do. I know less about politics than do most of my classmates. I never even learned how the colors of the Palestinian flag are arranged. Sometimes I glance at the outlawed flag during street demonstrations. I see it for seconds only,

before the hand that holds it is shot at by Israeli soldiers. At times, I see the flag drawn in graffiti on walls. Someone does it at night and leaves it for us to discover in the morning. The soldiers spray over it during the day. Anyone caught with the Palestinian flag is punished.

Mother does not want me or any of my siblings to do anything that could cause us even the slightest trouble with the army. "*Imshy el-bayt el-bayt wu qool yallah el steereh,*" she says. Walk by the wall. Do not draw attention to yourself. Be invisible if you can, is her guiding proverb.

If I see Mother again, I will tell her what happened to the bus at the checkpoint. "Why go to Birzeit?" She will slice at the air with her hands, half wanting to hear my answer, half wanting to hit me.

Birzeit is where students go to college after finishing high school in Ramallah. Some also come from Gaza, Nablus, and other cities, towns, and refugee camps. In Birzeit, many students become active in politics and have fights with the Israeli army. They chant on the streets that they want freedom from the occupation. But I did not go there to chant for freedom. I have my freedom. It is hidden in Post Office Box 34. This is what takes me from Ramallah to Birzeit.

Post Office Box 34 is the only place in the world that belongs to me. It belonged to my brother Basel first. He left Ramallah and did not want to give up the box, so he passed it on to me. On the days I don't go to Birzeit, I bury the key in the dirt under a lemon tree near our house. If I die, the key for the box will be under the ground with me.

Having this box is like having a country, the size of a



tiny square, all to myself. I love to go there, dig the key out of my pocket, turn its neck around, open the door, then slowly let my hand nestle in and linger, even if the box is empty. I wish I could open my postbox every day. I feel that my hand, when deep inside it, reaches out to anyone on the other side of the world who wants to be my friend.

Some postal worker in Birzeit must like me, perhaps because I put “Thank you to the postman” on all my envelopes. When many days go by without my coming for letters, I sometimes find a stick of chewing gum in my box. Someone has opened it first, written a line of cheerful poetry, then wrapped it again. Smiling, I skip out of the post office. I chew the line, taste its meaning. Paper and ink, poems and my postbox are medicines that heal the wounds of a life without freedom.

On some days, I wish I could stay inside my postbox, with a tiny pillow made from a stamp with a flower on it. At the end of the day, I could cover myself up with one pink-enveloped letter and sleep on a futonlike stack of letters from my pen pals:

Dimitri from Greece. He writes of a Greek holiday called No. I reply that all teenagers in the world should celebrate this day. Dimitri and I argue about baklava. He insists it's Greek. I assure him it is Arabic. Perhaps it is both, we finally decide to agree, since both our peoples love it.

Luis from Spain. He is unhappy for reasons I do not understand. His country is not occupied, and he does not have a strict mother like mine. But I like it that he always writes something about basketball. He says when he gets out on the court he forgets all his worries.

Hannah from Great Britain. What if I wrote “Great” next to “Ramallah” when I send my letter? From Great Ramallah to Great Britain. We would be equals then. Hannah’s letters are always egg white, with the queen stamp, which I stare at for a long time. The crowned queen is beautiful. Hannah writes about the trips she takes with her family and the books she reads. She loves *Gulliver’s Travels* and *Emil and the Detectives*, books that I, too, love, because Gulliver and Emil remind me of myself. Gulliver knows exactly what it is not to be free. And both Gulliver and Emil form fond friendships with strangers.

Sally, a grandmother from America, speaks about eating turkey on Thanksgiving. “Eating a country?” I write back. She explains. And I laugh because Mother dislikes the “Roman rooster,” our name for turkey. She would never let one in our house, much less cook it for a celebration.

I have many pen pals: tourists, Holy Land pilgrims, and students who join pen pal programs to see the world through other people’s words. Some write only once in a long while. Others write often. But all of them send me scraps of their lives translated into English, which I have been studying for six years, ever since I turned eleven.

In return, I tell my pen pals about my school, friends, teachers, studies. I describe the seasons, the land, the wheat and olive harvests, and the Eid celebrations. Looking into a hand mirror, I describe myself if I don’t have a picture to send. Translating many words and sentences, I also write about the Arabic language. I explain that verbs in Arabic form roots that create trees of nouns and word structures. *An yaktub* means to

write. *Maktoob* means a written letter. *Katebah* is a female writer. *Ala-katebah* is a typewriter. *Kitab* is a book. *Maktab* is a desk for writing. *Maktabah* is a library, the place where one finds books. All these words grow from the root verb *kataba*. Making words in Arabic is like planting a field with seeds, growing an orchard—words hang on the vines like grape clusters, leaves throw shadows of meanings to the ground.

I am eager to answer all my pen pals' questions about language. But when they ask me about my childhood, suddenly I have nothing to say. It's like a curtain comes down and hides my memories. I do not dare part it and look. So I skip all childhood questions and reply only about the day.

Today, I wish I could tell my pen pals that I was going to Birzeit to open my postbox, to meet their words. There were no letters from anyone. Maybe they were on their way, but the postal trucks were unable to get to Birzeit. The roads and mail system here are like our country, broken. Letters are like prayers; they take a long time to be answered. What would my pen pals say if I told them that I am standing at a detention center because I went to open my postbox for their letters?

Now, gazing at the ground under my feet, I remember that I need to make up something ingenious to convince Mother that I did not go to Birzeit to talk to college boys or do anything related to Palestine or politics. I usually cannot convince her of anything. She is cleverer than I am. She is cleverer than anyone I know. Perhaps ten mothers in Ramallah are not clever at all because she has gotten their share of cleverness.

When unsatisfied, she pokes my chest and curses me. To answer her, I write poems about the cruelty of mothers. “What difference is there between a mother and a soldier? None.” I underline my answer. “Mothers and soldiers are enemies of freedom. I am doubly occupied.”

I post the poems on the wall like freedom graffiti or tuck them in “her journal,” a journal that I keep only for my mother. She reads it when I am gone.

Often, however, I write good words in her journal, hoping that when she sees them she will know that I care about her and be gentler with me. “God, I feel terrible for Mother because she works so hard. And I don’t know what it is to be a mother in a land filled with soldiers and war. Please make her happy. Take from my happiness if that’s the only way to help.”

“Liar,” she pencils next to my words, then erases it. The faint traces remain. I see them. We never speak about her journal, but we meet there to say the things we cannot say out loud.

My true journal is written with no pen or paper, but in my mind, with an invisible hand in the air. No one will ever find it. When Mother says to come home, I write in my mind that I feel at home nowhere. I want to wander the streets after school, walk forever, walk away from a world I do not understand, a world that tells me daily there is no place in it for me.

And it is not just Mother who is afraid and watches over me. Father does, too. My parents, Suleiman and Mirriam, whom I call Yaba and Yamma, often disagree on things, but when it comes to me, they act as though they never dis-

agree. My father copies his feelings from Mother the way one copies homework. On some mornings, they whisper a few words, then my father pretends to go to work early. But he waits outside until I walk to school, and follows me.

He must want to see how I behave on the streets when I am alone. He does not know that I read him the way I read a street sign, and that I watch for him every day the way I watch for the snipers on top of the large buildings in Ramallah. They, too, watch how we walk and what we do. Without looking at them, we know exactly where they are. When my father walks behind me, as if he thinks he can outwit me, I feel sad. How little he knows me.

“Yaba, why not wait outside until I leave?” I said one morning.

“What for?” he asked.

“So that you can follow me,” I fumed. He became outraged and charged after me. I bolted into a room and locked the door.

“Why do you challenge me?” he shouted. I opened the door and walked right up to him. He only shook his head, blamed my defiance on my schooling, and blamed himself for sending me to school.

“You dig your head into your *Nakleezi* books like a sheep, grazing all day,” he said, and sighed, perhaps wishing he, too, could read English books.

I know that my father does not really want to put down my schooling, especially because of the way he treats the word *chair*, the only word in English he knows. He says it with pride, moves it around in his speech as though to gain

a better view of things. He sits on it like it's a throne. Yet it is a lonely chair. My love for language and words seems to come between us. It takes away his authority over me. The books, not he, are my references.

The soldiers are another force that separates us. Father knows that they, not he, are the ones who control every one of us. We are not free to be a family the way he wants, with him a lion in our lives. He is like a lion in the zoo. Any of us can be taken away any day. No one can stop that, no matter how hard he roars from the fenced space allotted to him.

I compare my father with the fathers of other girls. He is poorer than many, and war lives inside him. Every night, he wakes up shouting that someone is going to kill him, kill us all. He punches at the air, kicks with his feet to free himself, and cries for someone to help him. Mother sleeps on the farthest edge of the bed to avoid getting hit. She pretends she does not hear his cries.

But every night I run to comfort him. I bring him a cup of water and sit beside him. I ask him to tell me what he sees. Catching his breath, he mixes words and tears. My father has no language for the pain and loneliness he feels. Is that because he has lived all his life not knowing freedom? Or does he hide his freedom somewhere, the way I hide mine in Post Office Box 34?

It is late afternoon, and we are still standing, still waiting at the detention center. My feet are aching for rest. Then, unexpectedly, I am released.

My tears drip onto my shoes. Tears are my secret ink, in

the absence of real ink. Liquid stories. On the air that comes into and leaves my chest, I write all the things that happen to me. “Now the soldier hands me my ID and tells me that I can go home . . .” I run toward the center of Ramallah, my heart heavy, as if it has stones in it. Questions rattle in my mind. What did the soldier on the bus mean?

But . . . Ramallah . . . is . . . still . . . there. *It is there.* Juabah newspaper shop, Salaam taxicab office, Fam boutique, Abu Azmi grocery shop, Zabaneh market, Salah pharmacy are all closed, but all are there. I want to hold Ramallah the way one holds oneself when there is no one else to touch.

Quickly, I realize that some fight between Palestinian protesters and Israeli soldiers must have taken place. The streets are deserted, except for speeding military vehicles. I walk cautiously. I feel afraid and alone. “Walk by the wall.” Mother’s proverb now guides me like a map. I hurry up until I get to the street near our home. But there, my heart begins to race, and my mind begins to fill with soldiers. Suddenly, I can see the kinds of things that my father describes in his nightmares. With every step I take, more images of war appear.

I stagger through the door under Mother’s scrutinizing eyes. She is filled with fury. But one look into my face, and all turns into worry. “What happened?” she gasps.

I tell her that the soldiers detained me with many others. I tell her that, like Father, I have become ill with war. I describe to her the images I see. But I do not say I had gone to Birzeit. Perhaps she does not really want to know. For this, I am grateful.

“When a war ends, it does not go away,” she says. “It hides inside us.” She knows. “Do not walk that road,” she warns me. “*Insay. Insay.*” “*Just forget!*”

But I do not want to do what Mother says. I cannot follow her advice. I want to remember.

*Sinking in the sea  
Of forgetfulness  
I reach for the raft  
of remembering.*

*Where the small girl  
I once was  
Stands alone,  
Holds a key  
to the postal box  
of memory,  
And awaits  
The day  
When she will  
Find her home  
By asking  
Her heart to  
Take her there.*

*Listen.*

*Today is that day.*



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