

Gaza Weddings

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Translated by
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It was one of those heavy nights

AND THAT'S PUTTING IT MILDLY.

I thought of writing a journalistic report called “Who could sleep?” but I didn't. It was enough just to scribble my thoughts down night after night to realize what was going down in Gaza.

It was one of those heavy nights.

I don't know when I managed to shut my eyes, although I've begun to wonder whether I actually close them even when I'm asleep.

And who could have stayed asleep anyway?

The knocks on the door would have jarred me awake.

Everything gets all mixed up in this puny head of mine. My mother used to say to people, “Look at that one with the little head, and her sister. One of them alone has more sense in her noggin than the whole lot of you. If God had given me nothing but daughters, I'd be the happiest person in Gaza!”

I liked to hear my mom say that. But it bothered me, too.

It's a bummer to have a little head in a country that's full of big sticks and people who point gun barrels at you all the time.

But in the end I decided I was fine with my head, small as it was, and, unlike my twin sister, I took the appropriate precautions.

I did my best to keep my head out of the billy clubs' range, since a single blow would have been enough to smash it to smithereens. At the same time I said to myself, "As long as it's no bigger than this, snipers will be sure to miss it." (Time would tell, though, how wrong I'd been about that.)

These are the sorts of thoughts I used to have during the first intifada. But now I'm not sure whether I still think the same way, or whether I'm just remembering the way I used to think.

The bombing had been going on for so long—with shells, missiles, tanks, helicopters, and even fighter planes—I couldn't tell the different sounds apart any more. A lot of people used to brag that they could tell you exactly what kind of weapon they were hearing. But I wasn't one of them. In fact, I was always amazed at people who could do that. I mean, when all the sleep you get is a tiny snooze that you manage to fall into by a miracle in the wee hours of the morning, how are you going to be able to tell the difference between banging on a door and bombs going off?

"They've started shelling again," said my mom. "Or is that somebody pounding on the door?" (So, then, I wasn't the only one.)

I got up. I knew nobody else would. The only other person in the house was my grandmother, who was holed up as

usual in her room because, according to her, the sound of the gunfire didn't reach it so easily.

"Good morning."

"Good morning to you."

"Is your mom home?"

"Yeah, she's here."

"And your dad?"

"My dad? He's in prison, you know that!"

"Oh, I forgot, damn it all."

"On account of the occupation!"

"Of course. What else is there?"

"Come on in."

"Sorry, I can't right now. But I wanted to make one request." After a pause, she went on, "Well, I've always dreamed of having a daughter like you or your sister. And with your help, I can make the dream come true!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, your sister will be my daughter!"

"And who said she wasn't your daughter already?"

Ignoring my question, she went on, "My son's grown up now, and your sister's a sweet young lady. And nice-looking, just like you! As you can see, the world's a stinking mess. But still, I was thinking this would be the best time to find him a wife, and I was wondering if you could talk your mom into letting him marry your sister. With your dad being in prison and all, some people might say it isn't proper, that the timing's not right. But what can we do? If we wait till things get better—till

the occupation's over and Palestine's free and we get our land back—we'll be waiting forever. Nobody will ever get married and have families!"

I was tongue-tied. I just stood there in the doorway, feeling limp as a rag. Some time later—during which I suppose she must have said a lot—I found myself mindlessly nodding my head. And she must have interpreted my nods the way she wanted to.

She took a couple of steps forward and planted a kiss on my forehead.

"Like I said," she went on, "you're the only one who can help me, and I have a feeling everything's going to be just fine."

Then she turned to leave. I reached out to stop her, taking hold of her long black dress. She looked back at me.

"Come in," I urged. "We can have a cup of tea together, at least, and some breakfast."

"No, no," she protested. "We can have the tea later. And I'm not hungry. I'll go home now and get some things I need, and then I'll go put his mind at rest. You know, the kid's been sweet on her for a long time now. I'd just been waiting for him to get old enough for me to do something about it. I know she's a little older than he is. But now he's sort of caught up with her, if you know what I mean. Have you ever seen anybody so in love? Today's his birthday, and I'll have a little party. Why don't you come over? After all, you and she have the same aura."

She stopped talking, lost in thought.

I stood there gazing at her. She seemed worn out, and looked older than usual. All the burdens she'd had to carry would have crushed an oak tree, but she still stood as tall as ever.

"I'll give the boy the good news, and you can tell your sister. What do you say?"

For the second time I found my head nodding without knowing what this meant. And like before, she took my nodding to mean what she wanted it to. Rushing toward me, she gave me another kiss on the forehead. Then she stepped back a bit, looked me over thoughtfully, and said, "You're all I have in this world, bless your heart. I feel better now. Believe me, if I had another son, I'd marry you to him!"

"Seriously, Auntie Amna? I don't need proof of how much you love me!"

Her eyes filled with tears. She turned to go, and I watched her walk away, her headscarf flapping in the breeze.

"Who'd come knocking on our door this time of the morning?" wondered my mother out loud, her eyes still half-closed.

"It was the sound of shelling," I told her.

"I knew it must be. But I thought maybe I'd been dreaming. To hell with them all! They've turned our nights into days! Don't they ever get tired? Are they so deaf they can't hear the bombs they set off?"

After my head was under the comforter, she asked me,
“What time is it?”

“Six.”

“Six? Get up, then! Haven’t you slept long enough?”

I told them it was nearly noon

MY HUSBAND, MY SON, AND my brother were still asleep. I told them over and over again how late it had gotten, but none of them even budged. “What is this?” I said. “How did you get so lazy all of a sudden? You didn’t used to be like this! Now up and at it. It’s time to wake up and see the sun, at least, and talk with me a little before I go.”

I told them the tea and breakfast were ready, and that we needed to talk, since I’d had some things on my mind for a long time. But they just went on snoozing.

How in God’s name had they gotten to be such sleepy-heads? I swear, if I were just a tiny bit meaner, I would have yanked those covers off them and tossed them across the room! But I didn’t have the heart to.

You’ve been a softie since the day you were born, Mustafa! Who could have wished for a more tender-hearted brother? I mean, you stayed with me when everybody else left me behind. Some went to Jordan, some to Syria, and some even made it as far as Sweden.

When my other brothers started getting wanderlust, you told them, “I know every one of you hears himself being called in one direction or another, and that that’s the only voice he can hear. Then he’ll follow the voice until he disappears into it.” Who else would have talked that way, Mustafa? You sounded so wise—like a philosopher or something! And when they made fun of you, saying, “And you, Mr. Mustafa, what direction are you being called in?” you just pointed to the ground.

“Come on!” they said. “The ground isn’t a direction. It’s a place!”

“Well,” you told them, “all directions meet here, on the ground, so whoever’s on the ground owns all the directions, too.”

God, what you said that day made me so happy! And it wasn’t because it meant you’d be staying here in Gaza with me after I got married. No, it just made me happy. It made Randa happy, too, when I told her about it.

She liked it so much, she said, “Can I write that down?”

“Sure,” I told her. So she scribbled it in her notebook.

I mean, how many Mustafas do I have? You’re the one who insisted that I go to school and get a college education.

Forgive me, Mustafa, but I have to say this: if you’re not taken away from here by your concern for your children, you’ll be carried off by your hormones—by the urge to chase a dream far away from this misery of ours on the Gaza Strip. But don’t get me wrong: I know that even if you were married

and had twenty kids to worry about, you'd stay here with me. You said so yourself, though not directly, when you asked, "And Amna, who'll be here for her?"

I know I didn't hear it with my own ears, but I'm sure that's what you must have said. And I'll bet they were glad to hear you talking about some other reason to stay. I heard them whispering, "At least there's somebody who'll stay and take care of our sister."

And you did stay. You told them, "According to a certain Palestinian legend, God creates people out of two kinds of soil: the soil in the place where they were born, and the soil in the place where they'll die. You and I were made from the first kind: this is where we were born, and this is where we'll die. The soil that's calling my other brothers might be in the places where they'll die. But what's calling us is the soil right under our feet. That's how it's been from the very start. And who of us can't hear a call that's that clear?"

You remember the story of Muhammad Musa Abu Jazar? It confirms what you told them. I mean, how else could you explain it? A man goes away for forty years, and while he's gone he fights battle after battle somewhere else. Then he finally comes back to Palestine, and dies defending Rafah—right here in our back backyard!

So now I understand what you were saying to them. I get it now, Mustafa. Like, all of a sudden the light went on. I know now why you pointed to the ground. It's because you could hear it calling, even though you weren't telling me so.

It doesn't matter whether I'd heard that legend before or not. What matters is that we feel it, since it's inside us. I can hear it running in your blood.

So why didn't they get it, too? You were always at least ten steps ahead of them. I don't mean to exaggerate, of course. But I remember how, when Jamal came to ask for my hand, he got all flustered over a question that shouldn't have come as any surprise, since it's the question every dad asks somebody who comes wanting to marry a daughter of his. He said, "How do you know the girl?"

Well, the poor guy didn't know what to say! He told me later that when he heard that question, the sky fell in, and it was full of clouds. He used to laugh whenever he told the story again: "Like, all of a sudden I was sopping wet. And it wasn't sweat! If it had been, I would have felt it trickling down under my clothes. As it was, though, it was coming from under my clothes, and from on top of me, too!"

"So," my dad said to him, "you mean to say you're in love with her?"

Then the idiot had the nerve to say, "And is a man supposed to marry a woman he hates?"

"Are you making fun of me?" my dad roared. "In that case, I haven't got any eligible daughters!"

You're the only one who stood by me, Mustafa. You tried to make me feel better. You told me not to worry.

"Don't worry!" I yelled. "What do you mean, don't worry? If we don't get engaged now, then when will it ever happen?"

When he gets back from Egypt? He's not going to graduate for another four years, and God knows what might happen between now and then!"

But you just said it again: "Don't worry!"

I thought: since you said it twice, you must know what you're talking about. So I didn't bring it up again.

Then you told me, "Don't lose touch with his family. Go visit them. They like you. Go on acting as though you're one of them—their son's fiancée, his future wife."

"You think that would work?" I asked.

"Of course," you said.

"But Baba would blow his top!"

"Blow his top?" you said. "I don't think so. That would only happen if Jamal were here in Gaza and not away in Egypt. Then again, he might. But only at first."

And things happened just the way you said they would. Just exactly. He ranted and raved. He fumed and he fussed. You told him, "She's visiting his sisters. They're her friends. Jamal's in Egypt, and the only people home are his mom and dad and the girls," but he just shouted, "Regardless—she's not going to see them. She's not going to see them, you hear?"

Even so, I spent more time at their house during those years than I did at home. After a while he stopped asking me where I'd been. He saw how happy it made me to be with them. I don't know why he felt the need to act the tough guy. Maybe it's just because he was a father, and we were up to our ears in worries.

Then one day he called me and said, “Listen, Sweetie, I think you should marry the guy. The best place a girl can be is in a household where her in-laws love her more than they do her husband. I see now how much they care for you!” He paused for a second or two. Then he added, “As for him coming and saying that he’s in love, we can’t have that! You get me?”

“Yes, sir,” I said. Then he burst out laughing. “What? Do you really think I’m serious?”

Then he went on laughing, and he kept laughing until he died. May he rest in peace.

When I think back on that, I laugh so hard that things get out of hand, and I have to cry a little. But now that I’m crying, I don’t know if my tears are tears of joy or sadness. You guys have got me all confused.

Anyway, it’s nearly noon! How did you get so lazy all of a sudden? You didn’t used to be like this. You’ve way overslept. So up and at it. It’s time to see the sun, at least, and talk with me a little before I go.

Mustafa, don’t forget—you’re the boy’s uncle. And you, Saleh, get up and see your birthday sun. Don’t let it pass you by! This is the start of your new year, your lucky year. Come on, silly boy! Does anybody in his right mind let his own sun pass him by, the sun that’s rising just for him? Look out the window! There’s no haze today. No smoke, even. Do you know how long I’ve been waiting for this day to come?

I counted the days for so long that I'd lost track of time. Then I woke up one morning and, lo and behold, you were all grown up! And now I'll tell you a secret. But don't tell anybody. Don't even tell the ground, since then the wind will find out about it. I've been thinking this over for a long time now, and I've decided that the best thing is to have you and Lamis get married.

You still don't want to get up?

The tea's getting cold while you three lie around like lazy bums. By God, I don't know why I even go to the trouble to make it every day!

As for you, Mustafa, listen: if you don't get up, I'm going to go ask for the girl's hand myself.

...

You're not going to? Fine, then! If Saleh wakes up before I get back, don't you dare say anything to him. I want it to be a surprise.

Sometimes days go by

SOMETIMES DAYS GO BY WITHOUT my seeing my brothers Jawad and Salim—in fact, without my seeing anybody at all.

They come by the house quick as lightning, usually in the dark. They kiss our mom's hands and check to make sure we're all right, not realizing that we're the ones checking up on them.

But sometimes it's quite a while before I see them again.

That doesn't mean I spend my days behind some locked door. In fact, I may be the only one who can't stand to stay in one place longer than I've got a mind to.

My mom says to me, "You're always in such a hurry. Why can't you sit still?"

"I don't know," I say, "I just feel as though I'm sitting in a frying pan over a hot fire."

I go out into the street and look around, but I don't see anything.

There are so many of us squeezed into this little strip of land, I can hardly see anybody right.

We're crammed into our houses, into the streets, into the schools, into the marketplaces. In fact, we're so starved for

open spaces that if we looked at the sea even for a moment, our eyes might swallow it up.

And we've got more sorrow than we can bear. One time my grandma said, "In order to hold all this pain, we'd need bigger hearts." It took me a long time to figure out what she'd meant by that. When I did, I asked her, "With life being so hard and all, how do you explain the fact that our dreams have never gotten any smaller?"

She turned to look at me. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"Well," I went on, "some years ago you said, 'In order to hold all this pain, we would need bigger hearts.'"

"I said that?" she exclaimed, incredulous.

"Yep. You did. I've even got it written down in my notebook."

"Well, if I said something like that, and if you wrote it down, then it must be true."

"So then," I pressed her, "what about our dreams?"

"Our dreams have never gotten any smaller because they were so small from the start. They were born small and they've stayed that way. And that's why we go on taking care of them all our lives. If dreams were big, they'd be the ones taking care of us."

"Can I write that down?"

"Sure. But don't add anything of your own."

Of course, I didn't get to hear her spout wisdom like this at just any old time. I had to create the right mood for one of her epiphanies. But that wasn't super hard to do. All I had to provide was eight ounces or so of roasted watermelon seeds and a big cup of coffee, which she would follow with a shell-cracking session

and a long soliloquy on how much stronger her teeth were than girls these days. It also had to be between nine and ten at night. This was the only time when she'd be willing to say the kinds of things I wanted to hear. And then she'd go to sleep.

"Nothing relaxes me like a cup of coffee!" she used to say to me.

And then, sure enough, she'd be off to the Land of Nod.

Some nights she'd wake to the sound of bombs exploding. She'd come and wake me up, too, and say, "Where did you buy the coffee last time?"

"From Abu Masoud," I'd tell her groggily.

"Well, then, don't buy it from his store again. His coffee's so weak, a single bullet whizzing through the air is enough to wake me up. Next time buy it from al-Maghrebi—theirs is the only kind that'll keep me asleep till seven in the morning."

My sister had tons of girlfriends, but for a long time my only friend was my grandma—at least, until Amna moved in next door. Grandma said, "Thank God for that nice new neighbor lady, since now I don't have to put up with your questions all the time!"

My mom added, "The girl can't sit still for more than five minutes at a time. She's always running around the neighborhood, but she can't make a friendship that lasts more than a couple of days. If she can't find somebody to pick a fight with, she picks one with her shadow!"

"Well, what do you want me to do?" I retorted. "Put on a polite front all the time? When I get to know a girl, I find out

that what she needs is a babysitter, not a friend. They're all so dumb and immature!"

"Well, if it isn't the genius of the century talking!" my mother mocked.

"Yeah," my sister chimed in. "She thinks she's Taha Hussein."

"Taha Hussein who?" Grandma wanted to know. "Is he a relative of ours?"

"He's a famous writer, Grandma," replied my sister.

"Oh, like a notary public?"

"No, he wrote books."

"You mean, like the registers people have to sign when they get married?"

"No, like the books we read in school."

"Oh, well, then, why didn't you say so in the first place? You didn't have to embarrass me like that."

"Sorry, Grandma," my sister apologized. She looked daggers at me out of the corner of her eye as if to say, "See? I passed the test, and you failed for the zillionth time."

Amna was like a breeze that blew down our street one day, slowed up a bit, took a liking to the place, and decided to stay.

When she knocked on our door, I was the first person in our house to see her.

She was so beautiful she could have been a movie star, and she looked a lot like the Egyptian actress Athar al-Hakim.

"Are there any houses for rent around here?" she asked.

"For rent, no," I told her, "but there's one for sale."

“For sale? We hadn’t thought about buying a house, and I don’t think we could afford to.”

The way she spoke to me made me feel as though we’d known each other for years. And she talked to me the way she would to a grownup, not to a little girl staring out a half-open door. Emboldened, I opened the door all the way.

“So,” she said, standing there uncertainly, “where’s the house that’s for sale?”

I pointed to the house next to ours. “It’s that one,” I said.

She took two steps back and looked blankly in the direction I was pointing. Then she crossed the street and gazed at the house as I gazed at her.

She walked back toward me. “It’s got a palm tree in front of it!” she exclaimed.

“Yeah,” I said. “There’s another one, too, but you can’t see it from outside the wall.”

“Thank you,” she said, and left.

Long days passed, but I didn’t forget that face. I told Grandma about the lady who’d come asking about houses for rent, and how she looked like Athar al-Hakim.*

“You mean she looks like the doctor?”

“Grandma, al-Hakim is her father’s name.”

“Whose father?”

“Athar’s.”

“Oh, so do antiquities have fathers the way people do?”

* *Al-hakim* means ‘the doctor’ in the Levantine dialect in Arabic; *athar* in Arabic means ‘antiquities.’

“Grandma, Athar al-Hakim is the name of an Egyptian actress who stars in movies and TV shows.”

“Oh, really! So do people have to buy names for their kids in Egypt? Is ‘Antiquities’ the best he could do? Supposing they did buy names there, he could have afforded one a lot better than that, especially if he’s a doctor!”

“Grandma, people don’t buy names.”

“You think I don’t know that? Of course they don’t! But that’s how the saying goes.”

“But honestly, Grandma, her first and last name together, don’t you think they’re pretty?”

“If you want to know the truth—and don’t get mad at me now!—no, I don’t. But take my name, for example—Wasfiya—don’t you think it’s prettier than all the names they’re giving girls these days?”

“Of course!”

“Well, there you have it. You said so yourself.”

One day I heard a knock on the door. I went out, and there she was, right in front of me. I was over the moon. And when I saw men unloading a truck in front of the house next door, I got so excited that I forgot to invite her in. I just left her standing there and ran back inside screaming happily, “Athar’s going to be our neighbor! Athar’s going to be our neighbor!”

“Athar who?” my sister asked.

“Athar al-Hakim.”

“Are you crazy? What on earth would bring Athar al-Hakim to Gaza?”

Even so, she jumped up and ran to the front door.

A minute or so later she came running back shouting, “It’s true! It’s true!”

In response to the unexpected squeals of delight, my mother headed for the door, grumbling, “It would be nice to see you two half this energetic when I ask you to do something for me. What’s all this silly jumping up and down?”

“Hello,” we heard her say.

We stood behind our mom fuming over the fact that she didn’t recognize the celebrity who’d graced our doorstep, and was greeting her the way she would have greeted any old neighbor lady. “Hello”—was that all she could think of to say?

By this time I’d forgotten our new neighbor was just somebody who looked like Athar al-Hakim, and not Athar herself, especially now that my sister believed what I’d said. “Boy, what a dummy I am,” I thought.

“Hello,” Amna replied. “I just thought it would be nice to greet my neighbors before I settle in. Like they say, *al-jar qabl al-dar*.” Then she added, “I’m Amna, Umm Saleh.” As she spoke, she pointed happily to her rounded belly, which I realized I was noticing for the first time.

“Welcome,” murmured my mother. “I’m Umm Jawad. Come on in.”

“Another day, hopefully.”

“Umm Saleh!” my sister cried suddenly.

“Umm Saleh!” I parroted.

“And pregnant too!” she added.

“And pregnant too!” I parroted some more.

“So, then,” my sister mused, “she can’t be Athar al-Hakim after all.”

“She is too!” I insisted. “She must have given up her acting career to take care of her family.”

“But her name’s Amna, not Athar.”

“Yeah, that’s her real name for sure. Don’t you know that actresses and actors take stage names? Just wait, and you’ll see that I’m right.”

When we saw her husband a few weeks later and found out he’d studied in Egypt, that cinched it for me. “See?” I crowed to my sister. “So do you believe me now? They must have met and gotten married there. Then she decided to move here with him.”

“Do you really think Athar al-Hakim would be crazy enough to leave her acting profession and come here, of all places? And for what? To get married? Don’t you suppose they’ve got enough eligible bachelors in Egypt?”

“Seriously, now,” I argued, “if you were an actress and met somebody that looks like her husband, wouldn’t you leave your profession?”

She was quiet for a while. Then finally she said, “Yeah, I would, actually. In fact, I’d leave acting and the whole shebang for a guy like that.”

“Aha! So you admit it. She *is* Athar al-Hakim!”

“No, I didn’t say that.”

When my mom decided to pay Amna a visit and take her a set of coffee cups, we begged her to take us with her.

When she opened the door, I was so excited I was shaking. Even my sister, who’d kept on telling me our new neighbor wasn’t Athar al-Hakim, was all pumped up.

“So,” she wanted to know, “which of you is Randa, and which is Lamis?”

“I’m Lamis,” my sister announced.

“No, I am,” I contradicted.

“Here we go again!” groaned my mother.

We sat quietly in the tiny guest room while the two women talked about all sorts of things, but we didn’t hear a word they said. We were too engrossed in our new neighbor. When our mother signaled that the visit was over by standing up, the two of us burst out in unison, “Are you Athar al-Hakim?”

As we stood there, clinging to our mother’s dress from opposite sides, she looked at us oddly and said, “Athar al-Hakim? Who’s that?”

“Don’t you even know who she is?” we cried, crestfallen. Then we didn’t say another word.

When she saw us standing there frozen like statues, she responded with a giggle that brought us back to life.

“Of course I know who she is! But do I really look that much like her? This is the first time anybody’s asked me that question.”

She bent down and gave my sister a kiss. Then she circled around my mother, found me in my hiding place, and gave me a kiss, too.

“So,” my sister snorted as we got to the door, “are you finally convinced that she’s not Athar al-Hakim?”

“Well, yeah, but only because she’s prettier than her.”

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by Khaled Khalifa, translated by Leri Price

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