

# Fractured Destinies

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# First Movement



# 1

## Ivana Ardakian Littlehouse

AS SOON AS JULIE'S FOOT touched the first step of the rusty iron staircase leading up to the door of the house—pale blue, like a sky hesitating between winter and summer—the bells of Acre's old churches began to peal, announcing a funeral for which a procession had already been held. The voices of the shopkeepers chasing customers in Acre's old bazaar fell silent. Widad Asfur looked out from the balcony suspended on four wooden columns on the second floor of the adjoining building. "Let's see who's died today!" She spilled her bosom out over the iron edge of the balcony and started to collect her dry washing from the dingy-colored lines strung between two old metal posts on either side, throwing it into a metal basket. She noticed Julie climbing the staircase with a porcelain statue in her hands, whose details she could not make out. "She must be a stranger. What's she doing in our part of town?" she muttered, and pursed her lips. She picked up the basket and turned around to go back inside with her washing. She shut the glass balcony door and murmured a short prayer for the deceased, whoever it might be.

Julie was trembling. Her feelings were confused. Today she was holding a third funeral for her mother, entirely on her own. She wasn't expecting anyone to offer her condolences. She had even refused an offer of participation from her husband, Walid Dahman, as she was getting ready to leave the Akkotel Hotel on Salah al-Din Street where they were staying. She had

claimed at that moment that Ivana had secretly conveyed to her a wish that she should be alone when she put half the ashes saved from her body, which the porcelain statue contained, in the house that would be her last resting place. She had walked toward the hotel's front door, as Walid, who was standing in the small hallway, watched her. He had been nervous for and about her, and hurried to catch up. Before she could push open the heavy black metal door of the hotel, which retained some of its original decorations, Walid had put his right hand around her shoulders, and with his left hand had pushed the door open. "Might you need me?" he'd asked in English, in a final attempt to persuade her to change her mind.

Julie had shaken her head, said goodbye to him for a second time, and gone out. Fatima had been waiting for her in her silver Rover at the street corner. Walid had whispered to himself: "If you hadn't been an Englishwoman, with an English father, I'd have said you were stubborn, with a head more solid than the Khalils!" He'd turned to go back in. From somewhere outside had come peals of laughter, growing softer as they moved away toward the eastern gate of the city wall.

Now, Julie heard a song from a street nearby:

Calm, sea, calm.  
We have been in exile too long.  
I long, I long for peace.  
Give my greetings  
To the earth that reared us.

Julie stopped. She didn't understand the words. Suddenly, she shuddered. She brought the porcelain statue, cradled in both hands, close to her chest, and raised her head a little toward the sky. *Ten more steps, Julie!* she thought. She considered going back and contenting herself with placing the statue at the foot of the staircase, then hesitated: *But then Ivana's soul will be neglected and forgotten.* She was ashamed of

the thought she had just had, and couldn't bear it. She pulled herself together and solemnly continued upward. When she reached the final step, her intermittent panting stopped, and she began to calm down, and breathed normally again. She made the sign of the cross over her breast with feeling. The pealing of the church bells stopped, and Abbud Square surrendered to the noonday siesta that visitors to the city never noticed. In the old bazaar, the shopkeepers' cries resumed, echoing weakly and breaking on the edges of the quarter like exhausted waves reaching the shore.

Julie turned around to look behind her, and saw Fatima al-Nasrawi where she had left her a few minutes ago at the bottom of the staircase near the corner of the house. She had clenched the fingers of both hands together over her belly, below the belt of her slightly too large jeans, from which dangled her car keys.

Fatima looked back at her, sensing that she was torn between her wish to complete her task and her fears. She started to say something, then hesitated. She was relieved to have done so, for it spared her the need to say what she was going to say (though if she had said it, the account that Julie later gave to Walid when she got back to the Akkotel Hotel would certainly have been different). In the end, which came quickly enough, Fatima merely gestured to Julie to knock on the door, then turned around the corner of the house and walked away, without waiting to find out what happened after that.

It was Fatima who had shown Julie the building that had been the house of her mother's father, Manuel Ardakian, and had taken her to it. In Acre, they knew her as 'Fatima the Know-all' and sometimes called her 'Sitt Maarif.' People referred to her in her absence as 'Lady Information' and correctly described her profession as 'popular guide.' Some said she knew all the features and details of Acre better than any history or geography book. Others praised her philosophy of

distributing historical facts to foreign tourists free of charge, and kept on the tips of their tongues her saying (as well known as she was herself): “We give them accurate information free of charge, it’s better than them buying lies from the Jews for a price!” The people of Acre would make use of this quotation of hers when they needed to.

What a rare resident of Acre she was! She had passed through Julie and Walid’s life like a gentle breeze, although a raging storm could not have borne her away. Walid had got to know her just a day before Julie visited her grandfather’s house. He had introduced her to Julie on the advice of Jamil Hamdan, his old friend from a period with a leftist flavor, when they had been students in a school that trained Communist Party cadres in Moscow, where they had shared a passion for the Russian Jewess Ludmilla Pavlova—Luda, now Jamil’s wife.

“My dear Walid, there’s no one who can help you except ‘Sitt Maarif.’ Here’s her telephone number, keep it on your cellphone!” Jamil had said as he drove them—Julie, Luda, and Walid—to Haifa.

He went on: “You’ll love Fatima, Walid. A woman from Acre, dark as coffee roasted over coals. She drives you crazy and blows your mind! True, she’s round as a truck tire, but she’s an encyclopedia, my friend! And her tongue’s quicker than a Ferrari!”

Everyone in the car had laughed.

When Walid and Julie reached the Akkotel Hotel in Acre, after a night spent at Jamil’s house in the Kababir district of Haifa, Walid phoned Fatima, then took a taxi to Rashadiya in New Acre, where Fatima lived in an apartment in a building outside the city walls. When he got out of the taxi, he found Fatima waiting for him at the bottom of the building. It wasn’t difficult for him to recognize her. Jamil’s description of Fatima was enough. Her friendly smile fitted the description perfectly.

With no hesitation, she kissed him on both cheeks, and before withdrawing her lips—slender as plucked eyebrows—whispered in his ear: “A kiss from a girl in your city will keep you in Acre for the rest of your life!”

He was astonished. “Do you want to lock me up in the Old Acre prison?” he asked her. She laughed.

*Most of the men of Acre left the city in '48 and are in exile, he thought. What use for them were all the kisses they received before they left, or even all the wild parties?* He smiled with a sadness as wide as the distance that was later to separate them.

Walid outlined to Fatima the reason for his and his wife’s visit to Acre. He explained that Julie was half English, and that her other half was from Acre.

“And is the Acre half on top or underneath?” she asked him.

Walid laughed. “You must have been watching *The School for Scandal!* In any case what I see is the genuine half!”

“Very diplomatic,” she commented, and rolled her eyes.

He talked to her a bit about his late mother-in-law, the British-Palestinian-Acre-Armenian, Ivana Ardakian Littlehouse, and about her will, which was why Julie would be visiting her grandfather’s house. They quickly arranged the details of the visit in the street, Walid politely refusing the cup of Acre coffee that Fatima invited him to take in her apartment.

Walid learned from Fatima that after Manuel and his wife Alice had left the city on 16 May 1948—two days, that is, before the city had fallen into the hands of Jewish forces—the Ardakian house stayed closed up for several years. The house was one of around 1,125 houses that had remained in good condition after the end of the war. Half of them were by now in need of repair, and a few of them were in danger of collapse. One of them had fallen in on the occupants the previous year, and five people had been killed. He also learned from her that a Jewish family by the name of Laor, comprising five people, had taken the house from the Israeli housing

company Amidar, which together with the Acre Development Company had responsibility for managing eighty-five percent of the houses in the city that the state counted as ‘absentees’ property.’ It still controlled 600 properties, and was keeping another 250 properties closed up to prevent Palestinians from living there.

The Laor family was one of several Jewish families, refugees from the Nazi genocide, who were living in the Old City—the previous occupants having fled under the pressure of the Jewish artillery bombardments that had preceded the occupation. The family included two sons and a daughter, all three of whom had been raised in the Ardakian house. They had all left the house and the city, one after the other, after completion of their compulsory military service and their transfer to the reserves, which usually continued without interruption until the age of forty-five. So the young Laors—or ha-La’orim ha-tas’irim, as Fatima called them in Hebrew—disappeared from the register of information circulating orally in Acre. ‘Sitt Maarif’ thought that their elderly parents had stayed in the Ardakian house until the end of the 1980s, after which she had not seen them. None of the Palestinian residents of the Old City remembered anything about them. No one claimed to have seen either of them, alone or together, in the city or outside it, for years.

Walid asked Fatima who was living in the house now. She gave a laugh to hide her slight embarrassment, and replied, “I know that the house has been lived in for about a year, but to tell the truth no one I know has any information on who’s living there.” She said nothing more. Walid, too, was silent, in the hope that she might add something useful to what she had already said. Fatima took advantage of their conspiracy of silence to change the subject.

“By the way, Mr. Walid, I’d like to apologize to you, and I ask you to apologize for me to your wife as well about tomorrow—I shall have to take Julie to the Ardakians’ house

and then come back. I have a Swedish tourist group that I want to take around the town before they fall into the hands of Jewish guides.”

Walid made no comment. But when she noticed the sudden look of surprise on his face, she quickly suggested to him that he postpone the visit for three hours, after which she would have finished her tour with the Swedish delegation. Walid told her that time might not allow it. Fatima expressed her regrets and renewed her apologies. Walid thanked her.

“The Swedes, and Scandinavians more generally, like the Palestinians a lot,” he said. He asked her not to worry about Julie and to take good care of the Swedish group. Then he said goodbye to her with a few light-hearted expressions, asking her to bring her information on Old Acre up to date “so that they don’t strip you of your title ‘Sitt Maarif.’”

He watched as she went back inside.

Julie took a single step forward. The house door, garbed in heavy mystery, stared at her. She raised her gaze up to the sky, and took in a bright blue expanse full of quiet summer clouds, and a sun that had been enjoying the sea breezes since the morning. She considered what ‘Sitt Maarif’ had said to her as they had made their way toward the house, and recalled her own comment in response: “You love Acre a lot, Sitt Maarif!”

And she remembered Fatima’s reply: “Who doesn’t love Acre? God willing, anyone who hates it will go blind in both eyes! Acre is this world and the next, my dear! An Acre man who goes outside the wall becomes a stranger, darling (“stranger, darling, stranger,” she repeated in English), and an exile as well, I swear.”

Julie was touched by Fatima’s words. And although she hadn’t understood the expression ‘go blind in both eyes,’ she had felt the exile of the people of Acre. Then in a whisper she had sighed for her mother: “Poor Mama Ivana, she was another resident of Acre who died a stranger.”

Later, she recalled how Fatima had picked up what she had whispered between her lips and found it strange, “What, my dear? Your mother died in London a stranger from Acre? Well, just look at us here, strangers and refugees in our own country. So there’s no difference between the dead and the living where we’re concerned, praise God and thank Him.”

## 2

ONE LATE, LAZY MORNING, INCHING its way toward noon, Ivana called her daughter Julie, and asked her to come with Walid to her home in the Earls Court area of London that evening to have a home-cooked supper, for an occasion that she said would be extremely private. She would be saying something that neither of them should hear without the other being there.

The couple reached Ivana's house just before seven. Walid parked his Peugeot behind Ivana's old black Mercedes, and they both got out. As they turned toward the entrance to the house, Julie noticed a silver Jaguar beside Ivana's car.

"It seems Mr. Byer has beaten us here, Walid!" she said.

"I suppose he must have been invited like us," he replied.

"I thought this was supposed to be a private affair."

"I guess we'll know what it's all about soon," replied Walid, as he pressed the bell by the front door.

"I've a feeling that Mama has decided to sell her house and move to a smaller apartment. It can't be a coincidence, Byer being here. Perhaps Ivana has really started to feel lonely. Her housekeeper is really important to her. She emailed me last week to say, as a joke, that the house—which is so warm that it doesn't need central heating—had started to shiver with cold. I told her off for letting Amanda take a holiday without telling me. If she'd done that, I could have arranged a stand-in for her, or at least visited her myself."

“Don’t forget that we . . .”

Ivana opened the door before he could finish the sentence. She spread her arms, embraced her daughter, and kissed her with an intensity that exceeded her usual compassion. Then she embraced Walid, kissing him in a way that confirmed that her pleasure in him was a little more than he would have liked. She invited them both to come in and meet the others.

First, Mr. Byer, whose car had shown he was there, and his wife Lynn. Walid recalled Julie’s wondering why they had been invited to a meeting that Ivana herself had said was private and confidential.

William Byer was renowned as a lawyer representing a large number of well-known middle-class people who perched at the top of their class and breathed its exclusive air. He had been a close friend of Julie’s father, the late John Littlehouse. The two men had served in their younger days in the British armed forces in Palestine, and they had both reached the rank of major. They had been brought together by both their military rank and the death they had escaped at the same moment: when the Jewish Irgun organization, under its leader Menachem Begin, blew up the King David Hotel in Jerusalem—used as headquarters by the British Mandate authorities—on 22 July 1946. Forty-one Palestinians had been killed, as well as twenty-eight British, seventeen Jews, and five people of other nationalities, and forty-five people had been injured in various ways. The two British officers had escaped from the incident, and new features of their relationship became apparent after the dust of death had settled. But fate, which had saved John from death during the great explosion, returned to frustrate his life’s key ambition, for he died before his daughter could marry Walid. Ivana inherited John’s possessions, including the house that she lived in, his black Mercedes, a sum of money, and the friendship of Byer, whom Ivana had gotten to know during one of her secret romantic meetings with John before she had left Palestine. He

continued to remind her of the most beautiful days of her life, stolen from the period of the British Mandate, so she kept him beside her later, and entrusted him with her financial and legal affairs.

Walid and Julie shook hands in turn with the short man with the classic spectacles, then shook hands with his wife in a matter-of-fact way. Julie didn't like Lynn, and had never understood her relationship with Ivana, beyond the fact that she was Byer's wife. Lynn was mean, pretentious, and more grasping than a tabloid newspaper.

Julie hid her shock at Lynn being there and didn't give anything away to upset Ivana. She calculated that her mother might have done this on purpose to publicize whatever took place that evening to the whole of British society.

Then Walid moved on, followed by Julie, and shook hands with Leah Portman, Ivana's friend, the Jewish poetess to whom she had introduced them more than ten years previously. Although they were happy to know her, they were nervous at the presence of Kwaku, who had lived with her for years. They were both wary of developing a close friendship with him, for reasons that had some logic to them. Kwaku was a strange character, though he was nice enough—despite often seeming as obscure as a password, and as puzzling as a riddle, raising unconventional questions. That sometimes made Walid uneasy, though Julie sensed some exaggeration in his attitude and was more inclined to think that Kwaku was just nice. She thought that sitting with him once or twice a year added some enjoyment to the events of their life.

Kwaku talked about himself in elegant language, in tones of royalty. From time to time, hints of aristocratic attitudes flitted across his face, even when he was confessing to others that he had no roots himself. Walid remembered how, during dinner together at the Suq Moroccan restaurant in Covent Garden, he had told him and Julie a murky story about his parents, the details of which were difficult to grasp. He said

that he was the son of a Nigerian father—whose religion was unknown—and an Argentinian Christian mother. His father had divorced his mother when he was five years old, so she had taken him to her family in Buenos Aires. But she hadn't put up with being single for long; she had married a Mexican immigrant, who took them both with him to New York. His new stepfather didn't put up with Kwaku's presence for long, however, but threw him out of the house before he was ten. He had wandered for years before settling down as a worker in a fuel station.

Kwaku had a habit of giving away a lot of details about himself that he wasn't obliged to relate, as when he confessed in front of Walid and Julie on another occasion that he had been born with one testicle, saying that this fact hadn't worried Leah at all, because he didn't need a second testicle to make love, and as for having children, she didn't want them at all. At this point, Leah had laughed and praised his one testicle, saying that he was a rare man as a result. She had also confirmed what Kwaku had said about her not wanting children, claiming that if she'd really wanted children she would have had a whole battalion of them.

According to Kwaku's revelations on that occasion, he had already had six children with a former wife, though he could no longer remember when he'd married her, or where and when he'd left her, or even his reasons for doing so. Or maybe he preferred to be evasive about a family that in practice no longer belonged to him, and perhaps had never really belonged to him at all.

But Leah loved Kwaku a lot, with his mysteriousness and his ambiguities whose complications were difficult to unravel. In fact, their first chance meeting had been as ambiguous as his personality. They were standing in a queue in front of a young check-out girl in the Sainsbury's store in Holborn. She was in front of him, and he stared at her long, soft, blonde hair. His glances took in her shoulders, from which hung arms

worthy of a dancer. Suddenly, as she stood there, Leah shuddered, and staggered backward a little. Kwaku instinctively put out his hands to catch her. In a few seconds, she was in a swoon in a pair of strong ebony arms. Her swoon didn't cause much of a commotion, but a whisper went around those standing nearby. Kwaku asked the girl on the till for some water and a bottle of perfume. The young girl left her place behind the computer, another employee in the store ran to fetch a plastic water bottle, and a lady standing in the queue got out a bottle of perfume. She opened it, shook it a little, and some drops fell into Kwaku's outstretched hand. He touched the perfume to Leah's face, and she began to recover from her short fainting spell. She opened her eyes in the man's arms, to see his face scrutinizing hers, with a smile all over it. When she was completely conscious again, and straightened up, his arms were still around her. Leah turned around as his arms dropped away from her, took a sip of water, and let out a sigh of satisfaction. The customers applauded the moving scene. Leah wished she had stayed longer in Kwaku's arms, even if it meant fainting for longer. She was embarrassed to be wishing it. She lifted her head to look at him.

"Thank you very much. You saved me from falling. I don't know what happened to me."

"The main thing is, how are you feeling now?"

"I'm fine, just a slight headache."

"An earthquake of emotions usually leaves behind an aftershock, because of its internal laws," replied Kwaku.

Leah smiled, and trembled slightly. As Kwaku took her back into his arms, she apologized to him for her aftershock, and then gently withdrew toward the check-out girl.

They both made their purchases, put them in plastic bags, and paid. Leah reached the door before him, and paused. She turned around and looked at him over her shoulder. She saw him smile, and his smile awoke her whole life, cleansing it of the suspicious thoughts that had surrounded her since

childhood, when her mother Jennifer had impressed upon her: “Don’t mix with strangers, Leah. Keep away from black men, Arabs, and Muslims, my dear.”

He stretched out his hand, and Leah did not hesitate to take it. She was consciously taking him back, reproducing the moments she had lost when she’d fainted in his arms. At that moment, she felt her wall of fears collapse.

“My name’s Kwaku. Kwaku Wol.”

“I’m Leah, Leah Portman. An expressionist poet.”

“Wow, that’s exciting! I’m a guitar player. We could work together, then. We’d make a fabulous artistic duo.”

She invited him for a cup of coffee in the Café Rouge near the supermarket. He accepted, and they walked together, carrying their plastic shopping bags to the café like old friends. When he had finished his drink, she took his cup, turned it over, and said, “If there was Arabic coffee in your cup, I could read your fortune in it.”

Kwaku laughed and asked her, “Have you really learned to do that?”

“Yes. I was taught it by an old Palestinian woman I met during my visit to Jerusalem two years ago. It’s just an amusing way of uncovering what is in people’s hearts.”

Since that first meeting, Leah had opened up to Kwaku a long corridor that she strewed with her emotions, which Kwaku walked through contentedly to her heart. Every time they met, the corridor became wider, until it became a way of life that effaced all the hatred that Jennifer had inflicted on Leah’s childhood.

Leah really surprised herself. She had never imagined, it had never occurred to her, that she would make friends with a British man like Walid, who had sown Palestine in the cells of his body and made them into pools of mint, or that she would live a real love story, the only real one in her life, with a black man like Kwaku, whom she really loved. She never asked him about his origins or his religion, or about his one

testicle (which didn't bother her), or about any of the other details she had heard from him which were the subject of gossip but never quite added up. At least, that is what she several times said in front of Walid and Julie.

The guests didn't stay long in the sitting room before the hostess invited everyone to make their way into the dining room. The six guests sat around the rectangular table in the middle of the room, three on each side of the table facing each other, while Ivana, as was her habit, sat at the head of the table, beside the window that looked out over the street, opposite John's seat, which had remained empty since he died. She gazed at it for some time.

"Where are the wine glasses, Mother?" asked Julie. Ivana apologized for her unintentional lapse, and asked Julie to fetch seven glasses. Julie excused herself and went off into the kitchen, with Walid following her, pretending to be wanting to help her.

In the kitchen, she whispered some thoughts to him that she had quickly put together.

"Mother is planning something big, Walid."

"What do you mean?" he asked in a whisper.

"It seems that it's more than just selling a house."

"Listen, darling, if it's to do with your mother's estate and her property, leave her to deal with them as she wishes," he said forcefully, though still in a whisper.

"I've never thought about that at all, Walid," she replied, then corrected herself with a measure of seriousness, as she put the seven ribbed glasses on a silver tray. "Oh, I remember . . ."

She hesitated a little before finishing her sentence, raising the tray between her hands and lifting her eyes toward him: "Mother is thinking of . . ."

Ivana's voice interrupted her: "Come on, guys!" she called.

Julie picked up the tray and went out, leaving the rest of her sentence between her lips. Walid took a bottle of wine from a shelf in the bar and followed her.

Ivana welcomed her guests formally, and asked them to listen to her without interrupting. The lawyer nodded to show he understood. His wife Lynn smiled at an anticipated feast of words sufficient for gossip to fill all the remaining months of the year. Kwaku lowered his chin onto his clenched palm, watching expectantly as he waited for what Ivana would say. Julie's green eyes were fixed on her mother's lips, ready to pick up her words the moment they were formed. Walid contented himself with following the expectation on their faces.

When she spoke, Ivana surprised everyone. She summoned up her distant past, relating her stories with her eyes fastened on her dead John's seat. She made them listen to a lot that they knew already, as well as some things that they had no knowledge of. She spoke about her early youth: she had been a teenager when she had fallen in love with the young medical officer John Littlehouse, who had given his daughter Julie his surname, together with the green color of her eyes and other details that anyone who had known him while he was alive could recognize in her features, even after she had turned sixty. She turned to Julie, as if to reassure herself that John's features were still there on her daughter's face. As if looking at the dead man in his seat opposite her, she said that he had been a handsome man, whom it was difficult for a girl of her age to resist at that time. Then she sighed, so deeply did she miss him, and started talking about her happy memories in detail. She said that a look from John's eyes was worth the whole blue sky of Acre, and that she had never for a moment thought about the madness of her relationship with him, in case her reason might make her lose the best love story she had ever lived. She said that from the moment she had fallen in love with John, he had no longer been for her a hated British colonizer or a medical officer, but rather

the only young man who had knocked her down with his first smile. The young men of Abbud Square and the Sheikh Abdallah and Fakhura quarters, as well as her colleagues in the Terra Sancta School, would scatter their morning smiles at her feet as she walked along with the coquettishness of a teenager, showing off the power of her beauty over others, never turning to pick any of them up. She was ready to do anything to bind herself to John forever, even if a great war should break out between Great Britain and Abbud Square, engulfing all the Armenians of Acre.

She said all this and more, but was silent about the details of the real war that had flared up at the time in St. George's Church between the members of the Ardakian family and the residents of the quarter, which had inflamed their feelings and darkened their spirits. She didn't tell them about her last moments in Acre, the details of which some local residents still remembered and gossiped about decades later.

One calm July morning, the officer John Littlehouse arrived in Acre in a military jeep, which took him and a companion to Old Acre, where the driver stopped in Fakhura Street near al-Hadid Tower. John got out and walked toward the Fakhura quarter. He passed quickly through several narrow, winding lanes to the Maaliq quarter, and from there to Abbud Square. He walked to within a very short distance of the fountain in the middle of the square, and put his foot on the marble base.

Ivana was ready to leave the house of her parents, who had gone out to church in the morning. At that moment, she heard the sound of a heavy shop door being closed. She opened the front door of the house and heard Mitri, the shoe shop owner, shout: "I'd like to know who brought this Englishman here to us! What's he doing in our quarter?"

Ivana realized that John was early and had already arrived in the square, and that his arrival must have upset Mitri and the owners of the other shops that were open. She closed the

front door and ran down the twenty steps of the staircase. She peeped around the corner of the house and surveyed the neighborhood. She saw Mitri standing in front of his shop with his face in turmoil, like someone emerging from a fight that was still unfinished. But she didn't see John in the square as she had expected. Instead, she saw little Ata, the son of Widad Asfur, kicking a small stone and chasing it. John had left the square quickly after hearing Mitri's shouts, sensing the man's anger. He was hiding in the alley that led to the Sheikh Abdallah quarter. Ivana left the house and walked past Mitri, who quickly displayed his emotions in front of her, and warned her: "Tell the man who brought you up at home, the residents of the Abbud quarter will not marry off their daughters to the British—they've been riding the country for thirty years, holding on to our shoulders and kicking their feet. And now they have to ride our women as well?"

Ivana hurried off without a word and soon spotted John, calling to him in English, "Hurry up, John! Let's go, darling!"

The young man grabbed Ivana's hand, and they left the quarter, hurrying through the quarters of Maaliq and Fakhura to the jeep that was waiting for them, leaving Abbud Square to continue its clash of tongues on its own.

John and Ivana were married a long way from Acre and its people. They had a small, untraditional party at a British base near Haifa, where the couple spent their wedding night amid the officers and men of the base.

Then Ivana became pregnant, and in due course was delivered of a beautiful girl who looked like her father and whom they named Julie. In March 1948, Ivana left the country with her two-month-old daughter in her arms. She disappeared from her parents' lives and from Abbud Square, where she had grown up. She became a mirage that visited the square on occasions to remind them of the scandal, a wind that blew somewhere else whose sound no one heard.

People said, “Ivana’s in the custody of the English!” People also asked, “Wasn’t Palestine enough for them? Did they have to take its daughters as well?” As for her father, Manuel, and her mother, Alice . . . they announced that they had disowned their only daughter the day after she left the quarter.

When 15 May 1948 came, Britain finished winding up its camps, leaving Palestine to Jewish military groups, who declared the establishment of the state of Israel. John went back to Britain, along with the other soldiers of the Empire who were withdrawing from most of the country.

On 18 May 1948, Acre fell into the hands of Jewish forces. Antranik Ardakian, Manuel’s brother and Ivana’s paternal uncle, was killed in the last battle to defend Acre, along with a number of volunteers armed with old rifles, who gathered in the police station under the command of Ahmad Shukri Manna.

Manuel and Alice fled to Lebanon by the coast road two days before the city fell. They stayed in a forest near the district of Furn al-Shubbak. The forest was later sold, and in 1952 the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and the Lebanese government leased a piece of land in the region of Jisr al-Basha, where they established a camp, which bore the name of the locality. Manuel and Alice moved to the camp with more than three thousand other Palestinians, a mixture of Orthodox and Catholic Christians who had been forced to flee from Haifa, Acre, and Jaffa.

Manuel lived a wretched life in the Jisr al-Basha camp—a life that ended with his death two months before the outbreak of the Civil War in April 1975. He died in a state of grief for himself, for his brother Antranik, and for his daughter, all of whose attempts at a reconciliation he had refused. He didn’t reply to her letters, which continued to reach him for the first five years after their elopement. Ivana implored him at least to accept and recognize his granddaughter, Julie, but she received no reply from him. On 29 June 1976, Alice

was killed during a raid by the Lebanese Phalange on the Jisr al-Basha camp, the remaining inhabitants of which were forced to leave.

Ivana fell silent as she surrendered to an enormous wave of sadness that broke over her face. Her lips reacted with a tremor, and she clasped her hands tensely. Tears flowed from her eyes, as if stored up during the years of her loneliness since John had died. Everyone else—Byer and his wife, Leah and Kwaku, Walid and Julie—remained quiet as they contemplated her sadness, which had spilled over as her story had unfolded. She had never told it in such detail before, though it was still incomplete even now.

Eventually, Ivana dried her face with her hands, wiping from it the pain of her past, some of which she had recalled herself, and some of which had appeared despite herself. Then she spoke in a voice thick with suffering: “If I’d just said that my parents had died without my seeing them for more than fifty years, you wouldn’t have believed me.”

“Oh, Mama!” Julie let out a wail of sympathy for her mother. She got up from her chair, and moved behind Ivana. She took her head between her hands, then bent over it tenderly and kissed it. As she returned to her place, she said, “It’s enough for me that my father and you were great lovers.”

Ivana’s lips parted in a smile that she hadn’t displayed for a long time.

“Forgive me, my friends,” she said. “I’ve upset us all. Perhaps my past has returned to bid me farewell.”

She sat up straight and went on: “My friends, I invited you here today to say something else, which has nothing to do with my past or with my inheritance.” Then she turned to Byer and addressed him in a business-like tone: “Mr. Byer, we will add some further details to my will together. I will come to your office for this purpose at a time that we will agree on later.”

Byer nodded, as Ivana calmly continued:

“I may not live much longer. I want my body to be cremated after my death, and my funeral eulogy to be delivered to the John Lennon song ‘Imagine.’ I would like this song, which does not die as mortals die, to be the last thing my ears hear before the fire consumes them and they are turned to ash. Anyone who wants to deliver a eulogy shouldn’t speak for too long, so as not to have to make up things that aren’t among my attributes. Funeral eulogies, my dears, are usually nothing more than a recalling of the deceased, through advertised and prearranged parties, which the speakers use to wipe out the wrongs they did to the dead person during his or her lifetime. If I knew the exact time of my death, I would ask everyone who was going to mourn me to write down for me on a piece of paper what they were going to say, so that I could revise it before I passed away forever, with no questions afterward and no possibility of introducing amendments. After the end of the cremation formalities, you will scatter a handful of ashes from my body over the River Thames, which will carry them throughout the waters of the ocean. You, my dear Julie, and you, Walid, will be responsible for that.”

Walid made no comment. Julie’s fingers did it for him. They stretched out to Ivana’s hand lying on the table and came to rest on top of it. Ivana put her other hand on top of Julie’s, and they contented themselves with exchanging glances.

Ivana continued speaking, giving instructions that another handful of her body’s ashes should be placed in a glass jar thirty centimeters high, the color of the sea in summer, and the shape of her own body in every season: a neck of haughtiness (she raised her head); a chest of pride (she pulled herself upright in her chair, revealing the elegance of her prominent, aristocratic nose); a waist encircled by a lover’s hands (she put her two thumbs and her two forefingers together so that they formed a small circle); the belly of a virgin; and a Bedouin behind. She asked for the container to be taken to her parents’

house in Abbud Square in Old Acre. “Take part of me and all of my spirit to Acre, so that they may apologize to it quarter by quarter. Take my remains and carry them in procession where I was born, just as London will carry me in procession where I die. My friends and loved ones, one day soon I shall die. I want to be buried here and to be buried there.”

She fell silent for a minute and the whole company shared in her silence, before turning to Julie and Walid. “If it’s too difficult a matter for some reason or other, I should be very happy for you to take half of my remains to Old Jerusalem. I know that Walid has friends there, and you may like to visit them and arrange to deposit the statue with them, or with any Palestinian family who will accept it.”

Walid and Julie nodded their agreement. With a smile of satisfaction, Ivana added, “I want you to visit the Church of the Resurrection if you visit Jerusalem, which I think you certainly will. Pray for me, for that may purify my soul. And if things go smoothly, hold a small party with the mourners in the house that is to receive my remains. Burn sacred incense, and listen carefully to Fairuz raising the flower of cities to the highest heavens, and let her voice fill the city. I am sure I will hear it as well, because I shall be there in heaven.”

Everyone understood Ivana’s wishes. Each in their own way, they all showed a deep understanding of what she had said. Mr. Byer was thinking of his legal role in drawing up her will in relation to her wealth and the possessions that she still had; Lynn was preoccupied with finding the best way to remember the details of Ivana’s instructions and to spread them around; Leah was thinking of the loss of a dear friend, which might happen at any moment; Kwaku was awaiting the next scene. And while Walid was thinking how careful his mother-in-law was being in arranging the rituals that would follow her death, Julie was hesitating between Ivana’s two options; she had instinctively understood that her mother was afraid that Acre would curse her in death exactly as it had

cursed her in life, so she had opened another window for her soul in Jerusalem, seeking mercy.

Walid poured out the wine. Before Ivana could raise her glass to signal the end of her instructions with regard to her funeral and the start of the party she had promised, Walid teased her: “Do you know, the Jews believe that anyone whose body is buried in Jerusalem will be the first to be resurrected, and will be at the head of the queue of people waiting at the door to paradise on the Day of Resurrection?”

“Then allow me the opportunity to reserve myself a place in the queue with a handful of ashes before the heavens are filled with settlers who have forced the Palestinians out in this world and want to appropriate their places in the next.”

Everyone laughed and exchanged toasts amid the clink of glasses. With one voice they cried, “God bless Ivana!” They wished her a long life, then began attacking the food.

It didn’t occur to any of them that the gathering that evening would be the last time they met with Ivana. She died just one week later.

## SELECTED HOOPOE TITLES

*Embrace on Brooklyn Bridge*

by Ezzedine C. Fishere, translated by John Peate

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