

The Agreement

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When the shooting starts, the tourists stay home. No tourists, no business—Mamoun Aboulafia knew the situation all too well. There was a lot of shooting in the early days, around the time that he built his café in the dead, dusty valley that separated Silwan, his village, from Jerusalem. With little else but his own meager savings and the force of his will, Mamoun Aboulafia made the Valley of Hinnom—ancient site of sacrifices, fire rituals, child-offerings to Molek—the sun-scorched anchor for the walls of his small café, the root source of his livelihood.

He opened the café in 1968, shortly after the Israelis took control of the valley, along with Silwan and all lands east to the Jordan River. He knew they would be coming, the archaeologists, the students, the tourists. There was history hidden behind every rock, within every cave, beneath the dust that he kicked up with each stride of his sandaled feet, and he knew that now that the Israelis had the land, they would be coming, and they would be thirsty and hungry, and they would have money, and he would be waiting for them.

In the early days, they—his own people—shot at him as he descended into the valley each morning. They screamed at him from the Silwan cliff top; they called him a traitor, a lover of Zionists. At first he would hide behind old, neglected olive trees, behind the large rocks that littered the sides of the steep path into Hinnom. Then he

just stopped hiding. They could have killed him at any time they wanted. But bring them enough money, he learned, and they won't kill you, no matter how you earned it; they may shoot at you, but they won't kill you. Mamoun brought money back to Silwan. He built his family a small, clean home. He built the village a school, a playground. And he gave money to the masked, faceless men, sometimes boys, always at night. They don't have to bother wearing masks, he thought, as I give them this money with my eyes closed, always with my eyes closed.

"Mamoun, another bagele, if you please." Jacob Ben-Zion leaned forward on the tabletop, raised his arm and pointed a finger, as if the gesture were necessary to draw attention to himself, the only customer sitting at one of the three tables on the dusty concrete patio outside Mamoun's café. When there are shootings the tourists stay home, but Mamoun knew that Jacob Ben-Zion was no tourist. If you asked Jacob how long his family had lived in Israel, he would answer you with a shrug, meaning there was no answer to it. If you persisted in your questioning, he might say something like, "I don't know, exactly, but they say my forefathers were here to greet King Richard with arrows upon his arrival." "Mamoun, another bagele, if you please, and some tea."

Mamoun appeared in the doorway behind the counter, a doorway that led to the small kitchen in the back. "You have some appetite for a dying man," he said, his short, nervous laugh betraying his reluctance to believe the news that Jacob had shared with him just a week before.

"They say I am dying," Jacob said. "I don't feel like I'm dying, so why should I listen to them? When I feel like I'm dying, maybe then I'll lose my appetite."

Mamoun disappeared again into the kitchen. Jacob stared down at the tabletop; his thick arms surrounded his plate, now empty but for scattered sesame seeds. He did not feel his age as much as see it, in the dense mat of curly gray hair on his arms, in the wrinkled, loose skin and brown spots on the back of his hands. He did not feel like he was dying, but his doctor assured him this was the case, that his liver was full of cancer, that there was nothing left to do but wait.

Mamoun reappeared, one hand carrying a zatar-dusted circle of warm, crusty bread on a glass plate, the other an amber cup of steaming tea. He placed these down on the table along with a thin paper napkin and stood next to Jacob. "If you want anything else, my friend, you call me."

"Come, sit with me," Jacob said. "We have something to discuss."

Mamoun glanced nervously around the empty café. "I would like to, my friend, but I have a restaurant to run."

"A restaurant to run? I will be your only customer today, your only customer this week, perhaps even this month. And, unless you have a girlfriend hiding back in the kitchen, we are alone, so let's talk."

"No, no girlfriend in the back room, but if there were, could I trust you with such a secret?" Mamoun allowed himself an uneasy smile, then sat down opposite Jacob.

"Your secrets are good with me, Mamoun, just as your father's were good with my father's, as your grandfather's were good with my grandfather's. For how long, now, Mamoun?"

"I don't know, Jacob. I don't know."

"Very long."

"Yes, very long."

Jacob sipped his tea. "Where is it, Mamoun?" he said.

"What, Jacob? Where is what?"

"The papers. The agreement."

Mamoun closed his eyes for a moment, as if in doing so the question might go away. "It is safe. Hidden. The contract, the dates, everything."

"Your father showed me the agreement, when we placed Dani to rest. In 1967—he was just thirty-two. I've seen a lot of war, a lot of killing, but how could I be ready for the death of my son? If not for the agreement, I don't know what I would have done. It took great courage for your father to abide by it, especially at that time. The doctors are right, Mamoun, I am dying, and when the time comes I must be with him."

"Jacob, my friend. I would like to help you, but the times are different now." He lifted his eyes toward Silwan, to the honeycomb of houses pasted high upon the steep cliff side. His home was somewhere there among them, lost and unrecognizable in the shimmering heat, in the blinding glare of the sun. He could not see his own home, yet he was sure that there were those in the village who could easily see him; that there were those who, now as always, would be watching. "If I go through with this, who knows what might happen to me, to my family?"

Jacob clenched his fists against the fury rising within him. "You cannot break the agreement," he said. He spoke his words slowly, his tone reflecting less his anger than the deep sense of betrayal that fueled it. "You cannot not separate me from Dani, from the others. You cannot, Mamoun."

Mamoun hesitated before pushing himself up and out of his chair. He could have said no and been done with this obligation that landed hard, but not entirely unwanted, upon his shoulders when his own father died. He could have said that this was the end of it, walked into the kitchen, locked the door, and simply waited for the heat to drive the old man away. His eyes focused upon a sudden swirl of dust, kicked up by the hot wind. For a moment it stood, ghostlike in the shimmering distortion of the heat, before collapsing again upon the valley floor. "What does your family say?" Mamoun asked. "Will they agree to this?"

Jacob bowed his head. "No one needs to know anymore," he said. "It ends here, with us."

Mamoun turned back to the table, rested his outstretched arms upon it, but did not sit. "No one?" Mamoun said, incredulous. "Not your grandson?"

The memories of his last meeting with Matan, Dani's only child, raced through Jacob's mind. The 16th floor office, overlooking Zion Square; the red-lipped secretary, blond and tight-dressed, who would not offer him the courtesy of lowering the phone from her ear before speaking with him. "He's in a meeting down the hall," she told him. "Go in, but don't touch anything."

Jacob recalled standing behind his grandson's large, wooden desk and looking out the thick windows, down onto the square. He danced in the square on that night in May 1948 when Israel declared statehood; danced, shouted, laughed, cried, along with so many others, a swirling sea of sweaty soldiers and civilians, men and women, hundreds, thousands of them, spilling out of Zion Square, squeezing

into the surrounding streets. He held Dani high on his shoulders that night; Dani, already big at 13, but not too big for his father to put on his shoulders, on the night when Israel was born.

He stood in the office with the square far below, its streets filled with silent traffic; he heard nothing but the buzz of his grandson's telephone, smelled nothing but the odors of new carpet and wood polish.

Jacob had come, finally, to talk about the agreement known and even cherished by long-passed generations; a true source of comfort for countless numbers of his own flesh and blood, yet unknown to the living, save for himself and Mamoun. Jacob had come to talk, but Matan had not been willing to listen. Jacob recalled Matan's hurried entrance, straight past him and into his high-backed leather chair with only a narrow-eyed expression of impatient disdain as a greeting, then his sudden, fierce gesture with his left hand, a rapid thrust forward that exposed the gold watch from his starched white cuff. "I've got a meeting in eight minutes with Israel Telecomm," Matan said as he glanced at his watch. "Better make this quick."

Jacob had not planned to start with Dani's burial; he had not planned to begin by telling Matan that the body that most had thought was buried in a closed coffin in the military cemetery on Mount Herzl actually lay in the timeless resting place of his ancestors, in a small, hand-cut cave hewn into the cliff below Silwan. He had not planned to begin this way, but under the circumstances, he felt he had no choice.

At first, Matan sat without speaking, stunned, his face twisted into an expression of disbelief and outrage, then brought his open hand down hard on the desktop. The sudden sound echoed like a

gunshot through the office and beyond. Matan's secretary burst into the room open-mouthed, but retreated with a wave from her boss and closed the door behind her.

"My father led a charge up to the Golden Gate of the Old City and was shot through the head before he set foot inside the walls," Matan said, his voice no louder than a whisper. His words came slowly, deliberately, as if spoken to an uncomprehending child. "My father left an eight-year-old boy at home who, to this day, still can't forgive him for being so stupid, for leaving me with a mother who could do nothing but dress in black and cry for the remaining years of her life, for saddling me with a grandfather who filled his head with grand ideas of history and duty and heroism until some Arab blew all those ideas away with one well-aimed bullet. And now you claim that, for this service to his country, he's buried not with honors on Mount Herzl, but in some stinking cave, and on Arab land?"

Jacob recalled how he remained seated as Matan rose his chair and walked past. "You have something wrong with you, old man, to come in here and say these crazy things," Matan had said as he paused at the door. "The next time you have something to discuss with me, make an appointment."

The heat of the valley, the heat of the memory, brought sweat out on Jacob's forehead. He pressed the napkin against the wetness, then unsnapped his pants pocket, pulled out a 20 shekel note, and placed it on the table. He waved away Mamoun's attempt to make change, stood, and slowly walked from the patio onto the time-hardened pathway on the valley floor. "Last night I had a dream," Jacob said.

"A ladder, with angels," Mamoun joked, but there was no laughter from Jacob.

"I came to the cave. The lock was broken, the gate pulled open. Inside there was nothing. Dani's bones, all the bones, stolen, carried away."

"It was only a dream," Mamoun said. "I pass the gate each day on my way into the valley. The lock is strong, the gate closed. Short of blowing the doors off their hinges, no one can enter the grave without the key, and only I hold the key."

"I will not sleep until I see for myself," Jacob said. "Meet me there, tonight."

"But Jacob—"

"It ends here, with us, Mamoun," he said. "If you care anything for the agreement, be there, tonight."

Mamoun considered the words and knew there would be no dissuading him. "At the time of the evening prayer," Mamoun said.

Jacob nodded. Mamoun watched in silence as Jacob disappeared into the shimmering heat of Hinnom.

Mamoun heard the footsteps coming up the trail from the valley. He gave a poor excuse to leave the house that evening, and he knew it. "They already suspect you," Ahmed, his elder son, told him. As if Mamoun didn't know how Ahmed spent his time at night. How often he wondered how many times Ahmed stood among the masked boys to whom he gave his payments.

Mamoun crouched lower in a niche behind three large rocks just off the trail to Silwan. His body trembled against his own fear, against the chill of the Jerusalem evening; the daytime heat of the valley far below seemed to be something from another world. He pulled his

worn leather jacket tightly around him; he took deep, silent breaths, as if he could simply empty his lungs, his heart, his mind of his own stupidity in agreeing to this. The old man said he had a dream and this is what I do, Mamoun thought. We will both be killed because of the fears of a dying man.

The first sound of the evening prayers came to him on the wind, a soft wailing from a distant minaret. The chanting spread like a great wave across the ancient and troubled city, a cry passed from minaret to minaret, echoing off the great Ottoman wall surrounding the city and filling Mamoun with an all-too-familiar mixture of reverence and dread. He was one who prayed in silence, undirected by the prescribed words of clerics. He closed his eyes against the call from the minarets and offered his own prayer to the image of the god that was his own making, a god of peace that, it seemed, only he knew. When he next opened his eyes, he saw the figure of a man approaching up the steep trail.

"Jacob," Mamoun whispered. The voice startled Jacob; he pulled a pistol from his jacket pocket and pointed it at the rock. Mamoun saw the gesture and ducked back into his hiding place. "It's me, Jacob. Mamoun. Your friend."

Jacob's hands trembled as he lowered the pistol. "I'm sorry," he said.

Mamoun came out from behind the rock. "I've never seen you carry a gun before," he said.

"Times are different now."

"Yes, times are different now."

Jacob slid the gun back into his jacket pocket. "Do you have the key?" Jacob asked.

"I have it. But I assure you, the gate is secure."

"Take me," Jacob said.

Mamoun led Jacob a little way farther up the trail to an area honeycombed with small, square caves. He stopped before one where a thick, metal door guarded the entrance, a door chained and locked to a ring firmly embedded in the rock. Mamoun pulled a large key from his pocket, opened the lock, removed the chain and eased the door open. Jacob squeezed through the opening, followed by Mamoun. Mamoun reached behind him and pulled the door shut.

For a moment they crouched in the darkness, surrounded by the deep musty smell of rock and dust and time. Mamoun clicked on his flashlight and swept the beam around the cave. It was exactly as he had remembered. Directly in front of them, a pit, three or four feet deep, its floor blanketed with human bones. On either side of the pit there were two ledges, hewn roughly from the soft limestone. It was on the ledge to his right that Dani's cloth-shrouded body lay as his skin and muscles withered. Mamoun recalled how, after the prescribed year of waiting, his father and Jacob had gently taken hold of the corners of the cloth and lowered Dani's remains into the pit, placing Dani's bones at rest with countless generations of Jacob's ancestors. In the beam from his flashlight, Mamoun could still see the scratches in the dust made by Dani's body as his father and Jacob slid it off the ledge and placed it into the pit.

Mamoun steered the light back over the bed of bones. The skulls lay at the near end of the pit, pointing toward the walls of the Old City just across the valley. On top lay Dani's skeleton, unmistakably new yet already showing signs of decay after more than 30 years.

Countless bones from countless generations, thought Mamoun, the remains of an entire family entrusted to his own family, an ineradicable bond, born of an agreement between ancestors remembered for nothing but one simple deed, a contract maintained in good faith until this very day.

“You see, Jacob,” Mamoun said, “you had nothing to fear. His bones are there, on top, untouched. Nothing to fear, my friend, nothing at all.”

“Mamoun.” It was as if the voice was coming from the rock itself.

“Mamoun, help me along. Let me lay one last time where my son’s body lay.”

Mamoun trained his light at the voice. Jacob was crawling up upon the ledge to his right, Dani’s ledge, inching his way forward, snaking along in the dust on his cancer-filled belly. A fear took hold of Mamoun, different from the fear he felt as he crept down the hillside toward the cave, but a fear nonetheless. “What are you doing, Jacob?” Mamoun whispered. “What do you think you are doing?”

“It is the greatest honor, you know,” Jacob said as he inched himself forward. “The greatest comfort, for my bones to rest with my forefathers’, with my son’s.” He stopped moving. For a moment they waited in the tomb together, silent but for the sound of their breathing, dark but for the narrow beam from Mamoun’s flashlight.

“Mamoun?” Jacob said.

“Yes, Jacob.”

“Will you help me?”

Mamoun breathed a heavy sigh. He crawled toward the ledge, reached across the pit and placed his hand upon Jacob’s thigh. He

could feel the warmth of his old friend through the cloth of his pants, his muscles twitching as he struggled to move forward. He could feel his own heart beating fast and hard inside his own chest. Mamoun closed his eyes and pushed; Jacob slid forward a few more inches, then stopped. "That's good, Mamoun," Jacob said, his voice quiet and breathless from the effort. "That's good. You know I am not a religious man, but in dealing with death, our ancestors showed great wisdom. Mamoun?"

"Yes, Jacob?"

"Will you wait outside? Just for a moment."

"We must go soon," Mamoun said. "They will miss me in the village."

"Just for a moment, my friend. Just for a moment."

Mamoun clicked off his flashlight and crawled backward and out through the door. The air outside was fresh, cool, clean. Across the dark valley, the ancient walls of the Old City glowed soft and beautiful beneath the lights. A City of Peace with no peace, Mamoun thought. A City of Peace, but never with any peace.

"Mamoun?" The voice was distant and soft, ghostlike from inside the cave.

"Yes, Jacob," Mamoun whispered.

"Remember me, my friend."

The gunshot was swallowed by the cave, by the night. Mamoun sat in the darkness amidst an acrid smell of sulfur, his head in his hands. It ends here, with us, Jacob had said. He thought about locking the door, taking the key and throwing it as far as he could, far down into the valley, another trinket for the archeologists to discover

and ponder who knows how many years from now. He thought about the yellowing paper that set forth the terms of the agreement, words written and signed by the hands of forgotten ancestors, a story begun in an unknowable past that culminated here, now, upon this hillside, beneath a sky full of stars that would be burning long after the memory of any of this—any of this—would be forgotten. And then he recalled the agreement, his obligation to return in a year, to lower Jacob's bones into the pit, to place his friend at his final rest. Mamoun eased the door closed, locked it, and slid the key into his pocket. It was his duty, his family's duty, an agreement in force through generations. It ends here, with us, Jacob had said. And so it shall.

Mamoun Aboulafia left no footprints as he ascended the trail to Silwan, as he would leave no footprints one year later, upon his final return. □