

Jaffa Coffee

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The waitress placed the cappuccino down carefully on my left, next to the open computer. I glanced into the mug and noted that there was no design in the foam. My anticipation for the caffeinating process dropped immediately by several degrees, along with my belief in the basic goodness of mankind.

“Anything else?” She was pleasant, but cold. She knew that I was going to sit there for four hours on the merit of one cup, and she resented it. I reached for a brown sugar packet. What had happened to solidarity among young people?

In Gaza City, Zeinab ran into her sister’s room. It wasn’t really her sister’s room. It was their cousin’s Hadija’s room. Their own home was now a pile of gray sand, courtesy of a D9 IDF bulldozer.

Six-year-old Alya wailed, emptying herself of bad dreams through a sewer line running from mind to mouth. She was spitting out old night ghosts: soldiers and bodies. Hadija’s head was hidden beneath a pillow, her hands clamped down on either side to try to block out the noise. Zeinab checked the mattress to make sure that the sheets didn’t need to be cleaned, then wrapped her arms around her sister’s shoulders and sang the song she had learned in class on Monday. She liked it because of the verse in the middle. For the children without houses. Listen, Alya habibti, Fairuz made a song about us. Actually the song was about Jerusalem, but Jerusalem was Gaza was Palestine was Zeinab. Alya’s shrieks subsided into sobs. For those who resisted and were martyred at

the gates. Alya began to breathe again. Her cheeks sparkled beneath a shiny saltwater glaze. Zeinab flicked one large, perambulatory tear away from Alya's nose and sighed silently when it landed on her own arm. And the peace was martyred in the home of peace, she sang. Alya buried her head in her sister's chest and closed her eyes. "I want tea," she whispered.

Zeinab kissed the top of the small head burrowing into her shirt. "Tea. *Tayib*. What else?"

"That's all for now," I said, and smiled pleasantly at the waitress. Her lips twitched to the right and she moved away to more profitable tables.

A pair of stocky hipsters strolled in, arguing. The one with the cowbell nose piercing spoke English with a New York accent. The Village, I guessed. The other, a balding specimen with an unlocked birdcage tattooed onto his upper bicep, lisped his r's and gesticulated violently as he searched for words. I decided that he was a new Jaffaite, an emigre from Haifa or the prodigal son of an ultra-Orthodox family in Bnei Brak who had traded tousled side curls for an elegantly landscaped beard.

The New Yorker's voice was a high-pitched mixture of self-righteousness and irritation.

"You can laugh, but all of these little things actually make up the sum total of human interactions. Like interrupting a woman at a meeting, you'll definitely be like, hey, it wasn't because she was a woman, it's because she didn't have anything good to say."

"Yes, maybe she didn't," said his friend, spreading his hands wide to convey the meaning he was not sure he could express in his second language.

“Oh my God.” The American rolled his eyes. “Okay, when you consider that the vast majority of people who are cut off in work meetings are female, you start to see a holistic picture. That’s what a microaggression is. The evil of the unintentional.”

“No, no, no,” responded his friend. They took seats facing one another at the square table in front of me and pulled the laminated menus towards themselves like shields. “It is the thing that makes the left look so fucking stupid today.”

“It’s not...”

“Listen to me, listen. There are women who have, how you call it, ehmm... You know, a *brit mila* for girls.”

“FGM?”

“What?”

“You’re talking about female genital mutilation.”

“Yes. I think... Yes. Listen, listen. In Africa, this surgery happens. Even here. In the Negev, with the Bedouin, you know? It’s disgusting. So then you say, ah no, she is not allowed to talk in a fucking work meeting? Who fucking cares?” He slapped his open palm on the table for emphasis. “It’s distraction from real things, okay? Real problems.”

In Qaryut, Ibtisam lowered the water bucket carefully from her head to the ground and leaned over to inspect the tree. Her face was a little pale. She was angry. Once, she would have run back to the house in hysterics. Burnt, dead, she would have cried. Aiiiiie. Our trees. Our children. They murdered our children. Allah have mercy.

She had seen too many uprooted trees. It was only one this time, unburnt, lying on its side. The soldiers would say that it was an accident. Maybe a big storm had blown it over. They would say, why

would the settlers attack one tree? It's not even picking season. And her husband's face would turn red and he would tell them in the shards of Hebrew that he had picked up working on Tel Aviv construction sites in his youth, do not ask me why a settler this or that. There is no why. There is no why for kill tree. And the soldiers would look over her husband's shoulder, at the sky, at the ground, cradling their guns and shifting impatiently from foot to foot. We'll look into it, they would say. Go home. Standing in her husband's family's grove, looking at the dead tree that his great grandfather had planted, the soldiers would say, go back home.

I was so caught up in the conversation opposite that I didn't notice when Lena walked in. The American hipster was trying to explain, his vocal pitch and eyebrows radiating exasperation, that FGM had been almost completely eliminated in the Bedouin community down south. It was racist to imply otherwise. The Israeli shook his head vigorously. "No, no, no," he said. "Now you are changing the subject."

Lena lay a slim, tan hand on my shoulder. She had a new layer of paint on her nails: something between red and pink, a color that shouted. "How are you, *habibti*?"

I rose to my feet and embraced her. "*Marhaban*, hello, peace, good morning, how are you? Is everything good? Is anything new?" The litany of Arabic greetings rolled smoothly off of my tongue. I could pass as a near-fluent speaker if I stuck to blessings and the weather.

"How are you, my darling?" she asked again, checking her phone one last time (although she would come back to it throughout the meeting, I knew, compulsively scrolling through new notifications and apologizing with the embarrassed laughter of an addict).

“Good,” I said. “My boss promised me...ah...more money last week.”

She told me the Arabic word for a raise. I pulled my computer to me and typed it in, painstakingly tapping out each unfamiliar curly letter with my index finger. Lena clapped her hands and told me how happy she was for me.

“You deserve it,” she told me. “When you are a millionaire, you’re going to buy me a ticket to Paris and we will spend the week there together.”

She had never been to France. Sometimes I asked her to come to my neighborhood on Bograshov Street for our language lesson. Little Paris, I called it. All the immigrants milling around, setting up kosher patisseries and complaining bitterly that Israelis didn’t speak French. But it made her uncomfortable to sit in the center of the city. When she spoke Arabic outside of Jaffa, she told me, people looked at her like she was wearing a suicide vest.

“How do you say suicide vest in Arabic?” I asked her, trying to change the subject.

She ended the lesson early that day.

In Jabalia, two girls walked home from school. Nusreen, her ponytail gathered into a pink scrunchie and her cheek a matching mauve where her father had slapped her a week earlier, skipped manically as she told Marwa about the party that their teacher was planning for the end of the year. Her knapsack levitated every time she launched herself into the air. The wall to their right was covered with the mural of a masked fighter, a rocket resting on his left shoulder and the opposite foot perched atop a human skull. Marwa did not ask about

the mark on Nusreen's face. That was good. Almost, she had forgotten. It wasn't so important.

She had asked her father why he stayed home all day (not like Marwa's father, who worked), and his hand had flown at her face. Fast, very fast. She ran to her room, tears in her eyes and fear in her mouth. Her mother walked into the bedroom. She covered the welt on Nusreen's cheek with a wet cloth and explained in a soft voice that Baba was not angry with her. All of his anger was for the Jews. God would punish them. Even for this, her stinging cheek, God would punish them deeply. Baba loved her, of course. But she must not ask such things.

When Lena's coffee came, she ordered me to switch languages. "Enough Hebrew," she said. In Arabic, I blurred and stumbled over verbs, although we had been meeting for almost a year. We discussed her husband, my boyfriends, the quality of the coffee, and the upcoming elections in the United States. I tried to explain the intricate workings of the electoral college, and soon slipped into Hebrew, then English. But her English was weak. Finally, I shrugged.

"It's very complicated," I said in Arabic. She smiled forgivingly.

"Like all politics," she agreed. "Complicated and bad."

In Bil'in, Maryam told her son that she didn't want him to attend the Friday protest. Not this one. Not this time. Her nephew in Balata had just been arrested. It was not the first time. But she was frightened. She had a feeling. She had bad dreams. "I don't want you to go," she said.

He drank the coffee that she had prepared for him, stood, and kissed her cheek. "It is good coffee, Mama," he told her. "I tell everyone that you make the best coffee in Palestine."

This means that he will go.

The hipsters stood, their quinoa salads and arguments finished. As they headed toward the door of the cafe, one of them – the Israeli – stopped by our table. “Excuse me,” he said. “You were speaking Arabic?”

Lena looked at him. I immediately sensed that she didn’t like him, although I didn’t know how I knew it. I hadn’t watched her with other people enough. Our friendship was a strangely decontextualized collage of coffee shops, grammar rules, and occasional inspirational Arabic stickers exchanged on WhatsApp. Some of her facial expressions were familiar: there was a particular eye roll that she reserved monogamously for stories about her husband, and the faint smile when she spoke of the next generation of Jaffaites meant worried pride (“they’re not afraid of *anything*,” she told me fiercely, as if I had been trying to frighten them), but all of these relationships and reactions were just words to me. I had never seen her with her own people.

Not that the bearded hipster with the birdcage tattoo was one of hers.

“Yes,” Lena told the beard. She looked squarely into his face, her eyes slitted, and then looked away.

“But... Sorry if this is rude, but are you Arabs?” He glanced at me, at my sunburnt neck and freckles.

“Why would that be rude?” asked Lena. Her voice was even. Her skinny leg shook up and down, up and down on the floor.

“I’m American,” I said, leaning forward protectively. I wasn’t sure whether I was protecting Lena or the hipster. “We do a language exchange together. Thirty minutes of Arabic for thirty minutes of English. Or sometimes French.”

“But you, you’re Jewish?”

“Yes.”

“Great,” he said enthusiastically. “That’s so great. This is what makes a difference, you know? Not the politicians, but real people and real connections.”

I blinked at him. Lena played with the salt shaker, her eyes on the table, the corners of her lips stretching downwards like gravity had come to collect payment for all of her past smiles.

The American called impatiently from the doorway and the birdcage bicep left. I grimaced in a vague, embarrassed way at Lena, a nonverbal apology for my people.

“He’s right,” she said.

My eyebrows jumped. “Right about what?”

“That what we’re doing is important. That you learning Arabic makes a difference.”

“To whom?”

“To you. To me. To your community, maybe. Who knows?”

“To that guy who asked if we were Jewish or Arab.”

Her eyes rolled all the way around her face, a full 360. “He’s a donkey. But okay, yes, *habibiti*, to him too. To all of the donkeys here. If it were up to the women, there would already be peace.”

In Bet El, Ya’arah adjusted the microphone and thanked the women for coming to the memorial ceremony. “This is the fourth year since he was killed,” she said. Ya’arah was tall. She had a silver nose piercing and she wanted to dye her hair purple, but her parents would not let her. The words tumbled out too quickly when she spoke, creamed together like someone had taken a blender to them.

Her mother smiled encouragingly from the front row. Ya'arah looked away. They had fought that morning, and fiercely, because Ya'arah wanted to join the army. Her father laughed. Then he grew angry. Army service was bad for all girls, and unthinkable for religious ones. He knew, he had served. The way soldiers talked about girls. The way they talked to girls. And there were the cigarettes, the drugs. Her mother added, did she want to end up like Dena Azoulin, who was living with (God protect us) a German boy in Tel Aviv? Did Judaism mean so little to her?

"Every girl in my class learned a chapter in his memory," Ya'arah explained to her audience of high school girls and married women in bright headscarves. "We chose the Book of Judges because that's where his name comes from." Shimshon died in Gaza. Sniper's bullet. In the picture that his cousin lifted up to show the women, he smiled with his mouth closed. His eyes crinkled at the corners and his neck was covered in a carpet of stubble that made him look a little less like a nineteen-year-old. Ya'arah held the edges of the frame tightly to steady her fingers.

"This picture was taken right after he started training," she said. "We almost didn't recognize him, because he always had long hair. Since he was three. He had longer hair than his sisters, even. And he had to cut it for the army. And he said that it was his sacrifice for the State." Her eyes filled. "But it wasn't."

Several of the senior girls hid their faces in their hands. Ya'arah looked at her mother. The older woman was also crying; she pressed her fingers to her lips and flicked a kiss to the front of the room.

"It makes a difference," repeated Lena. "When you see the other side, when you speak their language, you know that they are human."

I looked at Lena and opened my mouth to say, it is more complicated than that. Because even if we met for coffee over another fifty years, and even though next week I will learn to say “power imbalance” and “cultural appropriation” in Arabic and I will also eat half of your chocolate soufflé when you insist, and even though we agree that you are human and I am human and Maryam and Miriam and Alya and Ayelet and Yara and Ya’arah are human, still it cannot be denied that Ya’arah’s house is on Yara’s father’s land, Alya’s uncle stabbed Ayelet’s sister, and Miriam arrested Maryam’s son last Thursday. These things would still be true even though Elana and Lena should drink a thousand and one coffees together in Jaffa.

Instead I told her, “Yes, of course. It’s very important.”

In Jaffa, two women paid for their drinks and stood up to leave. They hugged each other tightly. One headed south into Ajami, while the other returned to Tel Aviv. And in the burgeoning darkness the city of Jaffa, ancient story-strewn golden-walled bleeding Jaffa, winked into lights that cast long shadows in small alleys. If one stood on the bridge at the city limits and looked back, one could forget for a moment all of Jaffa’s unhappy sisters calling her name, clawing at her veiny legs, begging her to fly their banners – blue stars or red triangles – over the muezzin towers. In the briny twilight, Jaffa shook off her family chains and froze into the seeming of a lonely lovely city on the sea. □