

PALESTINIAN WALKS by Raja Shehadeh

Chapter 7

I met Louisa Waugh in Edinburgh. She is a writer, and had written a book about Mongolia, where she lived for three years. She told me of her interest in coming to Palestine as a volunteer, and I helped her find work with Palestine Monitor, an online human rights publication, which was established by my friend Mustafa Bargouthi. Before arriving in Palestine amid the crises and conflicts of June 2007, she was commissioned by the Glasgow Herald to write a piece to coincide with the publication of *Palestinian Walks*. Quite reasonably she wanted to take a walk with me. I thought it would be best if we walked alone in the hills, even though I was aware that this might not be prudent during these tense times. After some juggling of dates we arranged to do the walk on Friday, 13 August (some might say a bad choice). The weather was pleasant and we decided to leave late in the afternoon. It was not going to be a long excursion; Louisa said she just wanted to get a sense of the hills.

We could not begin walking from the starting point of many of the walks described in the book because the area is now chock-full of high-rise apartments some grandiose, some half-built, others still construction sites. Rubble from all cascaded down the hills. So my wife, Penny, drove us to the present edge of town, which overlooks the Jewish settlement of Dolev in the distance and, below it, the Palestinian village of A'yn Qenya.

We reached a promontory and looked down at the valley described in the second walk, bordered by that destructive settlement road which had been built in the mid-1990s to connect Dolev with Beit El, but which was now used only by Israeli army vehicles. For a long time the prospect of meeting with the army had deterred me from walking in this valley, but today was the eve of the Jewish Sabbath, the Jewish weekend. I thought there was less likelihood we would meet Israeli army jeeps. We stood looking down longingly at the invisible valley, and I asked Louisa whether she wanted to continue. I had enjoyed many pleasant walks with a Palestinian hiking group in the spring to more distant valleys, and now that we were here I was even less sure it was a good idea to descend this valley alone. But Louisa said she would very much like to, and I was curious to learn what had become of the land where I used to take weekly excursions throughout the 1980s. We began our descent down the steep track through the terraced hill cultivated with hundred-year-old olive trees.

The last rain of the season had fallen on these hills in early April. As expected, everything was dry, except for some succulents and the poterium thorn we call natsh, which covered the ground around the grey limestone rocks. In the distance we could hear dogs barking, and we exchanged ideas about the best way to behave should they be wild. Louisa said one has to run at them and scare them away, not showing any fear: 'They're so good at detecting fear,' she told me. I thought they should be approached with a many-pronged branch, which they would perceive as a number of attackers coming at them. The natsh, I said, could serve this purpose. She told me that the biggest problem of walking in Mongolia was being attacked by wild dogs, some of which were rabid. But the dogs we heard sounded far away and did not give us opportunity to test our different defence mechanisms.

We arrived at the spring of A'yn El Lwza (Spring of the Almond Tree), the abandoned qasr a little distance away. Across from us was the beautiful rock that early in the year is studded with cyclamens. The spring itself still provided much-needed water for the flocks of goats and sheep that grazed in these hills. The water had made a small, murky-green pond in which we heard frogs and saw thick growths of spearmint and the common reed. But the meandering path nearby was almost totally obliterated, blocked by the large boulders that had fallen from the terrace above when this illegal road had been built in 1992. A beautiful spot that had remained unchanged for centuries had been destroyed with no one raising a storm. I sat down on the dislocated rocks trying to recall how

it used to be, silently lamenting the destruction of our once-beautiful valley. I wondered how it must all seem to a newcomer like Louisa who had not known this valley before its ruin.

At any moment an Israeli army jeep might drive on the road above and see us. They would order us up and arrest us. This valley is part of what the Oslo Accords call area C, where Palestinians may not venture without a permit from the Israeli military authorities. Of course we did not have one.

But I did not want to dwell on this prospect, and instead tried to concentrate on those earlier memorable afternoons when I had sat by the spring after a long walk, watching the light from the setting sun shine at various angles against the terrace walls.

As we rested, Louisa told me of her impressions of life in the Palestinian Territories. 'You Palestinians,' she said, 'are always waiting. You wait at checkpoints, you wait for permits, and you have to get to the airport so early to make sure you can go through. Your life is a series of waiting episodes. How can you take all this? Why aren't you screaming?'

Philip Larkin addressed this question to 'the old fools' undergoing the indignities of old age. For me, it brought to mind Ghassan Kanafani's *Men Under the Sun*, a novella about Palestinian workers who are smuggled in the back of a closed container from Iraq to Kuwait and are eventually stifled to death. Kanafani also asked why they didn't scream? Perhaps we had screamed for too many years to no avail, and all that Louisa could see now was a silently enduring nation: all of Palestine waited.

There was an unusual sound coming from the terraces above, as though someone was striking the dry bushes with a hard object. It was not a sound that an animal could make. I wondered who was up there. A few minutes later, two young men appeared. Their faces were covered by a kufieh, the black and white chequered Palestinian scarf, showing only their eyes. They were armed with long, thick clubs, and came towards us.

First they asked us for water. Then, after drinking, they asked: 'Where are you from?'

'From Ramallah,' I answered, but felt I was not believed.

'Why did you come here?'

'To walk,' I said, and realized they were even less convinced. The prospect of taking a pleasure walk during times like these must have seemed preposterous to them.

'But you know it is dangerous to come here.'

'Yes, I know about the settler road and the army jeeps.'

'Then why did you come?'

'I've been coming here since before you were born, before this road was built. What business is it of yours?'

'It's our duty. We have to keep guard and know who comes here.'

A feeling came upon me that the familiar valley was no longer mine. The settler road above was quiet. No vehicles passed over it. It bordered the valley, framed it, but it was no longer the only despoiler.

The young men looked to me to be in their late teens. They must have been adolescents during the second violent Intifada. All they knew was upheaval and chaos. They could have no have memories of

this valley as the safe pastoral place that I had known for many years. They must have thought that anyone coming here could not be aware of the dangers, so could not possibly be from here. They repeated the question. 'Where are you really from?'

I again said I was from Ramallah.

'Can we see your identity card?'

I produced my lawyer's card.

'And hers?'

'She is English.'

'Can we see her card?'

But Louisa was not carrying an identification document. It was my mistake. Had we been apprehended by the army she could have been arrested. The law here requires that one must always carry identification.

I explained we had not planned on a long walk. She had come without a purse.

But they could not understand this. They grew up under the requirement that one had to carry identification papers. The privilege of being free of these documents was reserved for the occupier, so she must be one of them.

'How do we know she isn't from the mukhabarat [Israeli security service]?'

'Because she is with me. Would I walk with her if she were one of them?' As I spoke I eyed them directly each in turn. I noticed that the shorter one had a kinder face, the taller being angrier and more aggressive. I addressed my responses to the former. After a short pause, I said in my best drawing-room manner: 'It was good to meet you, but now we must be on our way.' And I proceeded to walk away with Louisa in front.

We had hardly walked a few steps when we were called back. This time the two young men were less polite.

'Where do you think you're going? We can't let you go without ascertaining who she is. It's our duty to our Tanzim.'

In Arabic this word can mean an organisation or the militant youth group within Fatah. I didn't know which they meant and did not want to ask.

'We have been appointed to keep watch over these hills and report on who comes here. We cannot let her go before we know who she is.'

'I told you she is English. She has come to Palestine to volunteer. Why would the Israeli Mukhabarat send anyone here? Can't you see she doesn't look Israeli?' I was thinking of Louisa's red hair, but having said this I realized that these young men had no way of knowing how an Israeli woman would look. The only Israelis they had seen were soldiers.

'Why then is she here?'

'I brought her here to show her our beautiful hills. When you came I was describing to her how the place looked before the settlers built this road. You are too young to remember it. But this place was like a little paradise. Can you imagine these boulders without the rubble that has been spilt over them from the road, and the path before it was concealed by these falling rocks?'

They listened to what I was saying but did not seem interested. They were consumed by the insecure, turbulent present. It was all they knew. The past was clearly another country.

Patiently, I argued with these masked boys that I could vouch for Louisa's innocence and that they must let her go.

'We cannot,' they said. 'Except for you we should slaughter her immediately. It is Halal [religiously justified] for us to kill the guilty English.'

I looked into their eyes imploringly. They were watery and unsettled like those of many an adolescent. 'What are you saying?' I asked. I was doing my best to control my fear and anger, not to let them know how I felt. Having lived under occupation for forty years I could rely on my long experience in this regard.

'Didn't you say she is English? The English are the cause of all our troubles.' Then they turned to Louisa and asked:

'Do you know Balfour?'

Louisa looked puzzled and asked me: 'What are they saying about Balfour? Concealing a smile, I said:

'They are asking whether you know him?'

The older one continued: 'Do you know Blair? Do you know Alan Johnston?'

I laughed. I wanted to make a joke of this. 'How can you blame her for what happened so many years ago?' I pleaded.

'Aren't the English killing the Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan? Tens of thousands of innocent children are being killed because of her. Except for you we would kill her right here and now.'

'But you can't hold her responsible for the actions of her government. She left her country to come to ours to volunteer her services. Does this not mean she is against these policies?'

'We don't know who she is and why you are with her. Is she your wife?'

I said she wasn't.

'Then how can you walk alone with a woman down here? Islam does not condone this.'

In as lofty a manner as I could muster, I replied: 'But I trust myself and you must not impugn any immorality or this would be disrespectful of me. Do you think I am here for an immoral purpose?'

'Are you Muslim?' they asked me.

I lied. I thought this way I could make more assertive rulings on what was allowed and what wasn't.

'Then she should go and you stay here with us until she brings her identification card to show us.'

'What are you asking?' I said, exasperated. 'She doesn't know the way.'

For the next twenty minutes I became a hostage to these club-wielding youngsters who would not allow me to continue on my way in the hills I had walked in for all my adult years. Louisa's words came back: 'You Palestinians are always waiting.' Now I was waiting for youngsters less than half my age to permit me to leave, Palestinian youth playing the same game as our oppressors. We might have shared the same view of the Israeli occupier, but my world had little in common with theirs. They seemed to define themselves more in terms of Islam than as Palestinian nationalists. Throughout their short lives they had always known danger and uncertainty. They had experienced no other life. The outside world was hostile. It had betrayed them and they had to guard their own. Arab generosity had so often been abused by the scheming colonizers first the English, now the Israelis. It was therefore right to take hostages. They wanted to take Louisa but didn't seem to know how to go about it. They were in training, stretching their muscles as adolescents are wont to do. Whenever they wanted to stress a point, they raised the club they held under their arm menacingly.

'We have duties,' the taller one continued to insist. 'We must report everyone we see here.'

I wanted this to end without nastiness or tragedy but knew it could go either way.

'Why don't you call your superiors and give them my name?' I asked. 'They will know who you are dealing with,' I said with confidence.

'But we didn't see your identity card,' they replied, meaning the one issued by Israel.

'You saw that I was a lawyer,' I said, and then realized that they were probably illiterate and couldn't read my Israeli identity card number or my name on the lawyer's card. At this point I changed tactics. I employed the authority of age and spoke like an elder in as paternal terms as I could manage.

'Let us remain friends,' I said. 'We must leave now. But before we leave I must let you know that it is important for Palestinians to walk in these hills and learn about them and experience their beauty. And by doing what you are doing you are discouraging others from coming here.'

'Beauty,' the taller one blurted out, looking offended. 'You're asking that we be concerned about beauty when so many are dying every day?'

'It is still important,' I muttered.

'Which way did you say you were going?'

I pointed to our path.

'It is full of wild boars.'

'We'll take our chances,' I said, and we began walking away.

'Wait. Stop,' they called. 'Before you go we must take your picture.'

And indeed they had mobile phones which they used to photograph us.

'Now you can go. But don't look back.'

We walked up the hill as fast as we could, Louisa's soft trainers not the best on our stony hills, but we both wanted to get away from these masked youngsters. After some distance we stopped and

looked back, and heard them shouting after us to go on. We continued to pass all the beautiful spots on this path, including one of the qasrs and that has survived and which I had wanted to take Louisa into.

When we were finally a good distance away we stopped and sat on the tumbled-down stones of a destroyed qasr. Now that I had time to think about the encounter I wondered whether these might not have been shepherd boys from the Bedouin camp near the A'yn Qenya spring who after a day with the goats were bored and wanted to play a game with us at our expense. And yet why would they wear these heavy kufiehs in this hot weather? The way they had wrapped them around their faces and the way they had wielded their clubs was more than I would expect of shepherd boys out by the side of the hill in a camp without electricity or television. And how would they know about Balfour and Afghanistan and have mobile phones that could take photographs? Still, who knows?

As I stood in the ruins of one of my favourite places in the valley, this valley near where I was born and have always lived, I felt the hills were not mine any more. I am no longer free to come and walk. They have become a dangerous place where I do not feel safe. This experience marked the end of a lovely epoch.

I cannot say I was not shaken by the encounter. I was. At every point I feared that it might turn ugly. They were two strong young men with clubs and I am small and not much of a wrestler. Typically I did not have a mobile phone with me, and neither did Louisa. Had they decided to be rough with us they could have got away with what they wanted and no one would have heard our screams or come to our rescue. Usually I am especially rattled when faced with masked people, but I realized that as long as I could see the eyes I was able to communicate and read what the other person was thinking, and reach out to him. As long as this was possible I could remain calm and rational, or at least keep my fears in check.

But when I turned to Louisa I saw that she was in tears. Naturally as a newcomer to this volatile part of the world and not understanding what we were talking about, she was very scared. 'I would not have minded being mugged,' she told me. 'But had they beat you up and raped me, I would have died.'

Before we left the hills I turned around. The sun was setting. The side of the hill we were on was shaded. Across the valley the limestone rocks reflected the muted light. I bid this valley farewell. I would not be coming back here for a long time. Perhaps not before this damned conflict with Israel with all its nasty consequences ends, if this should happen in my lifetime.