

Living In Doorways

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Most of Jacqueline's letters home to Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, touched upon the airbrushed glory of Jerusalem, the picturesque *shuq* and the indistinct rolls of desert, its haze of dust and sand obstructing a view beyond. There was little description of the apartment that she'd chosen, and certainly no details of the white, squared homes below her view from French Hill, an Israeli enclave in Arab East Jerusalem.

She lived on Bar Kochba, a winding street of apartment buildings set like boxes diagonally on boxes, and were inhabited by Israelis, Americans and various Europeans. Her building was indistinguishable from the others, and she lived on the one second-to-the-top. There was no elevator, and she didn't mind much, unless she had to go shopping, or carry up a package sent by her parents from the post office. The reason that she'd agreed to such a place was first its price and second its small but charming terrace that extended off the living room. When the weather was nice, she'd drag out a chair and look out into the distance, wondering if the homes below belonged to the Arab village Issiwiyyah or if they were part of French Hill. Even after almost a year of living there, Jackie had never found out, nor had she thought to ask someone.

She had brought quite a few suitcases with her, filled with things from home. The door to her bedroom she decorated with wicker reefs, and there were little pillows in places where one would otherwise sit down. And the way she had hung velvet curtains over the toilet in the bathroom suggested to some of her Israeli neighbors that she wanted to run a hotel. The rest of her belongings were somewhat of a geographical compromise: though she drank Nescafe like the locals and had no air conditioner in her bedroom, her freezer was stocked with Haagen-Dazs and she spent a fortune at Steimatzky to obtain the latest edition of *Marie Claire*. Often she chided herself for not being able to "leave America behind," and for choosing so many American Jews studying at the university as her friends. But sometimes it wasn't a choice: most of the Europeans seemed to congregate according to country of origin. And since she was studying at the International School, she didn't meet many Israelis, aside from her neighbors whom kept their distance, not because of their general distaste for Americans, but for her roommate Abir. They couldn't believe their landlord had leased to someone like her in the first place.

Abir was Jackie's tie to her new and strange life, a bona-fide native who could claim an Ottoman great-grandfather. She was also everything that Jackie was not: abrupt, stubborn and overconfident, with parents whom were proud of such an attitude, an older brother who said she behaved like a man, and a younger sister who said she behaved like an American. Jackie would tease her that her English was too good to be that of an American's, and Abir, although laughing as well, would regard such a comment sometimes as a compliment, other times as a means of separation. She rarely went out with Jackie and her American friends, always citing sleep to catch up on or papers to write. Jackie never tried to persuade her, for she was asking only out of politeness, and was quite relieved that Abir understood these things.

In fact, for an only child, Jackie was quite polite in general. She respected one's need for privacy from those outside family, and expected just the same, as she was taught by her parents. For most of her life, she was terribly close to them and told them—and only them—almost everything, but then they sent her away for the year, to "live Zionism." They were honoring a promise that they made to her Great Uncle Gabriel who became an atheist whenever he'd gone to visit Israel. He'd told Jackie and his other grandchildren that Jews needed faith when they lived in the Diaspora, or otherwise "a Jew is only a Jew when reminded by intolerance." Growing up in a predominately Jewish neighborhood, Jackie could never accept that Anti-Semitism still existed as it once had, yet she tried to understand when Uncle Gabe would say that "looking for middle ground will cost Israel everything." He himself had never made *aliyah* because he would've missed the luxuries in the States, but instead he worded his reasons as "The Land and the Jew as one: away it's the dream. But once on it, you only have too many taxes, nasty inflation. Strikes. Raids. It brings me *back* down to earth. How *could* I believe in God when I'm in the Homeland?"

Uncle Gabriel was the smartest man in the family and the pillar of their faith, so certainly no one wanted him to lose his way. But toward the ends of his life, he began to reconsider his decision, for he wanted to be buried in Jerusalem. In death, none of those earthly nuisances could bother him. But as he grew more ill, the determination that had so marked his life faded away, and he put off the decision until his entire family was gathered around his deathbed. That was when he gathered up what life remained to him and chose Jackie, only because she was the closest to his right side. Had his nurse been there, one can only wonder if he would've snatched her hands as if she'd try to take them away from him, and said for all to hear, "go to *Eretz Yisrael, b'vaksha*. Go and tell them the middle is not the heart of our future." Then he let go, and they buried Great Uncle Gabriel next to his wife in Bloomfield Hills right before a thunderstorm hit.

While Jackie's parents weren't sure if they wanted her to live there for good, they did want her to become more independent. But right away she found living in the dorms at the university on Mount Scopus unbearable. The rooms were small and only had a sink and refrigerator; the bathrooms were shared and the showers had no curtains. Desperate for space and privacy, Jackie answered an ad for a room on nearby French Hill within her price range, and informed her parents of the change only after she moved. It was then that their daughter's newfound independence backfired on them, and they

called her so often to check on her that she decided that it was best not to tell them that she was living with an Arab girl from the Galilee—had he lived to see it, Great Uncle Gabriel would've been insulted. That was the first thing that she hid from them in her letters. It was, in fact, the first secret of a life not quite new, but the beginning of a responsibility that was hers alone.

As the months passed, something more than distance pulled her apart from her family. She'd learned to stretch one minor experience into several pages to cover up what she'd really been doing. One took great lengths to explain the tongue of the *shuq*, where a lot of the immigrants knew only the feminine numbers. *If you were here*, she'd write as trying to persuade them on a serious matter, *you too would register "shalosh" as "shlosba" if you'd hadn't eaten all morning and today someone in Mahane Yebuda was selling 10 pitas for only 2 1/2 shekelim...*

Instead, they called her, worried that such linguistic indiscretion would harm her knowledge of the culture. When she asked Abir what she thought, her roommate laughed out loud and said, "tell them Hebrew has swallowed up a lot of Arabic. They'll like that even better. Like the word *yalla*, right? So, let's go already!"

When Jackie ventured into nearby East Jerusalem, the Arab side, to please Abir, she cinched her purse in both hands as if the rather empty streets were swamped with shoplifters. She turned up her nose at old, lazy men playing *shesbes* outside their shops, and dodged the hoards of children racing on bikes that squeaked like the crackles of Masada. Though she wanted to see this side of Jerusalem, the more *authentic* side in her opinion, she actually loathed such outings, especially in August. There were no relief from sunup to sunset, no summer showers as in her beloved Bloomfield Hills. Abir knew that her friend was uncomfortable, but she was good company and a good haggler unlike most Americans whom were sheepish and apologetic in their purchases—even though they always wanted things for nothing. She wanted Jackie to see where *she* was comfortable. Besides, at their apartment Abir had to tolerate all those little pillows and huge, red velvet in the bathroom.

"What is it that you need again?" Jackie moaned, sweating in her long-sleeved cardigan. They were walking down a quiet side street off Nablus Road.

Abir smiled. "Aren't you hot?"

"Of course. But..."

"You could dress cooler like me," she said gesturing to her indigo, short-sleeved cotton sundress that hit a few inches below the knee.

Suggestions like this exasperated Jackie, and the dress's bright color added to her uneasiness. "But, Abir, I'm not *you*."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning.. you are from here. Meaning people won't harass *you*."

Abir let out one of her sharp hoots that always surprised her friend. It was so brazen. "You're afraid people will talk about you. Ridiculous. It's nothing."

"Nothing?" Jackie had always believed that reputation was everything, and was surprised someone from a place like here would take it so lightly.

Abir changed the subject. "Are you going to study in that new building?"

"What building?"

"The ugly one. The one with all the cranes and ropes."

She meant the World Center of Jewish Studies, a new institute at the university.

"Maybe. If they finish the building by next year," Jackie said. It had been a mere skeleton, rows and columns of steel, just a year ago when a *sherut* had shuttled her from Ben-Gourian, an airport more empty than usual of incoming travelers. Her *sherut* driver had waited for over an hour to fill his van with passengers. She'd been told by the driver that these days they were always waiting, waiting for more passengers to Jerusalem, Haifa, Beersheba...

Half an hour after they'd taken off, the *sherut* had been stopped at a checkpoint and it'd been there that Jackie fell into what Great Uncle Gabriel had called "Israel's bilateral rhythm," as an apprehensive soldier who couldn't have been more than twenty poked his head into the van with its curtains drawn around the windows (*for the heat*, the driver had winked in the rearview mirror). It'd been there that Jackie fell into the rhythm of the Israeli who'd ask for identification and the one who'd speak for newcomers like her: "*hakol beseder*, don't worry, *hakol beseder*." And as if pleasing a son who was seeking his father's assurance, the elderly driver placed a hand on the soldier's shoulder before they'd driven on and Jackie had to readjust the curtains on the windows.

"So you might stay," Abir stopped suddenly on the street to open her purse.

"If they finish it in time."

Abir pulled out a pair of white sunglasses and put them on. "They will," she said. "They always finish in time. It's bright today."

Jackie wiped her brow, annoyed. "Just like every other day."

"Not so in the winter, Jacqueline. It's cold in Jerusalem."

Why was Abir telling her that? "I know. I was here, wasn't I? And it's *Jackie*."

Abir smiled and said, "Jacqueline's better. Sounds nicer. Anyway you can see where I live from that building. The new, ugly one where you'll be studying. My family's house is right under, to the east. My family can see it. They hear the workers and the cranes all the time."

"That's too bad."

"No," Abir shook her head and walked quickly into a jewelry store that looked dark and closed. "We're used to it."

After Abir haggled for an old watch with a little, rotund man who offered them too much tea and conversation for her taste, they took a bus into West Jerusalem, to please Jackie. Abir took off her sunglasses so the other passengers could see her eyes. But no one looked at her, and instead of feeling relieved, it upset her. When Jackie tried to talk to her about getting a tree lamp for their apartment, Abir merely nodded as if she couldn't understand. Then her cell rang out shrilly, and she fumbled for it in her purse to turn it off with a sense of urgency, all the while looking at the other passengers. Her hands robbed of the usual wild gestures, she then took the watch out her bag and put it on with a steady hand, and wound it.

"Aren't you going to take the call?" Jackie found herself whispering.

Abir shook her head, and turned to the window.

They went straight into an empty cafe near Zion Square, and took a table in the back, near a dirty window. Even before she even sat down, Abir grabbed a small, blue vase with a single rose on the table, and inhaled deeply, and then passed it to Jackie who was embarrassed by the gesture and did not want to take it. She wanted Abir to put it down, and sit there quietly with her hands folded in her lap.

A waiter, who'd been sitting at a nearby table put out his cigarette, strolled over to their table. His jeans threatened to fall off his hips, and he walked as if he knew it but didn't care. He was smiling at Abir, who looked down at the table as Jackie ordered two cold glasses of white wine in Hebrew.

Still smiling at Abir, he nodded and stood there for a moment, as if waiting for her to do something. Then he shrugged and strolled over to the bar where a tall, buck-toothed woman was cleaning an espresso machine. The waiter whispered something to her, and she glanced over at the table, and let out a short, sharp laugh. Abir glared at them, but Jackie was studying the tall woman. She reminded her of her high school French teacher. She'd studied the language for three years and had gained nothing but the sympathy of the teacher who'd given Jackie a B because she looked she had the potential to deserve an A, but wasn't a "professional" student. Suddenly Jackie was angry that her teacher hadn't failed her and angry that the woman was laughing at Abir, and looked back over at her roommate who tracing Arabic letters on the dirty window.

"Stop that," Jackie whispered.

Abir stopped, and looked at the grime on her fingers before wiping them on her napkin. Then she whispered back, "Of course. I could be writing codes to the *others*."

Jackie rolled her eyes, and said in a normal voice, "that's *exactly* what I meant."

"That's why he was watching me when you ordered."

"He was *looking* at you."

"Because I could have a—"

"Because you're pretty."

Abir laughed. "We are the only ones in here."

"Seriously. Don't tell me you don't know it. Because I know you do."

"Vain like an American, my sister would say."

Jackie laughed with her. "Or arrogant like a man, according to your brother." Then used the line that she used every time they went into this part of Jerusalem. "Relax, and they'll think you're Sephardic."

Abir stopped laughing, and said, "you know, I only drag you out when I need something. And even then, you don't have to come with me."

"I thought you needed light bulbs for your bedroom."

"What, I can't buy myself something special? I needed a watch too, and I went out to that instead. I don't go out to *sit in cafés*. And besides, I don't drink alcohol."

"You do at home."

Abir picked up the vase again and turned in it her hands. "Not in my home."

"Our home isn't your home?"

"No, the apartment is temporary."

Jackie sighed. "So then I'm temporary."

"If you go back to Michigan, yes. But if you stay, then you'll go to that building and be able to stand over my home."

"Your parent's home."

"My home."

The waiter came with two glasses of water and two goblets of wine, and asked if they needed anything else. Abir put the vase back on the table. Jackie shook her head.

"At least try a little," Jackie said after he left their table.

"No. I don't drink."

Jackie smiled at her patiently, and then said, "I like the watch you got."

"It's very old," Abir said, as if apologizing, which wasn't like her.

"Still, it's nice."

"Outdated. But not old enough to be an. . .how do you say. . . extinct"

"I think you mean antique."

"I can never remember that word. Whatever, I like it."

"Then wear it."

"I am," Abir thrust her wrist into Jackie's face, laughing. "Can't you see it?"

"Have some wine."

"I don't want any, Jacqueline."

"*Jackie*. It's Jackie. *No one* calls me that, you hypocrite. Who's gonna see you drink? You're just acting like this 'cause we're out in public." She took a sip. It was very dry.

"It's good," she told Abir, who shrugged and looked out the window.

Then her roommate said, "you call me a hypocrite, but when we go to my side of the city—and only when I *need* something—you act like someone will attack you."

"It's your imagination."

"Someone like *me*."

"Nonsense," Jackie said, irritated. "I love going with you. It's just seems when we go, we always seem to be the only women on the street."

Abir let out a subdued hoot, and stroked her glass of water.

"It's hot. Aren't you thirsty?"

Abir looked down at the table.

"Drink something," Jackie urged. "You're acting like a child."

"Of course, that's what you always think of people like me."

"I do not. You're just—"

She was cut off by the loud steaming of the espresso machine.

"I'm just being difficult," Abir shouted over the noise, "and you don't like that."

Jackie shouted back, "so don't drink. Fine with me. Get dehydrated, I don't care."

"Besides, wine isn't good for heat like this."

Uncle Gab had once told her that, but she answered, "Thanks for the concern."

"Stop mocking me."

"I'm not."

"Yes, you are!"

"*Stop*," Jackie hissed, and undid a few buttons of her cardigan. The room was becoming warmer, and wiping her damp forehead with a napkin, she waited for the steam of the machine to subside before she said anything else.

But Abir beat her to it. "At least my family knows who you are."

"Lower your voice please."

Abir said quietly, "At least I told them about you."

"So you tell your folks everything? Do they know you drink?"

"Do yours know I even exist?" Abir was messing with her watch again. Forcing it to wind. Jackie was afraid she would break it, and wanted to take it away from her.

Instead, she joked, "what are we, married?"

Abir said, "I know you haven't told them. This is just an experiment for you."

Jackie bit the inside of her cheek. "They know where I'm living."

"But not with who."

Jackie did not know what to say, so she took a few sips of her wine. Abir would not understand her parents. She wouldn't understand that ever since Uncle Gabriel died, most of her family no longer observed the Sabbath. That her mother admitted to working on Yom Kippur this year because she was up for partner. That her father had forgotten to say Kaddish for Uncle Gabriel, his father's brother, but surely someone else in the family would do it. The truth was they no longer called her every day to fight with her, but with each other. She only half-listened to them because Great Uncle Gabe had told her that was how you got along with those closet to you. Her parents' arguments would begin united, their concern for her safety, but then they'd collapse into quarrels over whether the housekeeper was stealing, if their two-time Best in Show Tibetan Spaniel should be put down, if her father should sell the property in Southern Mexico that he'd never seen

for himself, and perhaps her mother *was* addicted to the pain medication from an ancient skiing accident. *Hakol beseder, Everything is fine*, Jackie would offer, to remind them that she was still on the line.

"And why does your family send you toilet paper?" Abir was asking.

"What?" Jackie asked, distracted.

"In those package your mothers sends you. Toilet paper. Pens. Bandages."

"Oh, that. Well, she's worried about the situation—"

"Situation? What, you can no longer buy such luxuries here? No, wait. That's right. Even our watches are extinct."

"You mean antiques."

"*Antique* is just a nicer name for an old thing you haven't thrown away."

"You called the watch an antique, not me. And you're crazy."

"You call me crazy, Ms. Toilet Paper Lady? Your mother preparing you for the *situation*? That's just a nicer name for war. But it's not like the media makes it seem, no?" Abir's voice was calm and even, and Jackie thought that she trying to trick her into listening to her and was about to cut in, but there was no place to do so. Abir's words were not only words, they were truths just a step in front of the two girls, behind them, all around, and there was no escape now. Abir was simply giving them shape and form, giving them a chance to step out into the open. "There's no *situation*. There's no change, it's nothing new. It's still stuck in the cracks of our houses. Stuck in the pipes and in the doorways. Begging to be noticed, understood. Like an uninvited guest they—" she jerked her head over to the waiter and the buck-toothed woman—"try to ignore. But we exist, *Jackie*. I exist. I *matter*. But you too get used to *situations*, don't you?"

Jackie said, "Look, my mother is like any other mother. She assumes only the worst for her children," and tried to laugh.

But Abir didn't. "Thanks a lot."

"I didn't mean you—"

"But does she know this situation has become a sort of. . . standard procedure? It's normal now. It's *official*. And now you too are used to it. You just go about your way as usual. Still *Jackie*. Haven't changed at all. You're not any different. Might as well be in America. You didn't even ask me if I *wanted* wine."

"Look, I just wanted a quiet day out—"

"But when we go back to the apartment," Abir reached over and grabbed her hands, clung to them as if Jackie would try to take them away from her. "You know what you'll do? You'll go into your room with your boxes of toilet paper and velvet curtains and all those damn pillows on your bed, and you won't know what to do with yourself. *Then* you'll come knocking on my door. I'll invite you in, but you'll just stand there in the doorway, as always, turning the doorknob back and forth. How can you just stand there, fiddling with something that's not even yours? You could break it. Why do you do that?"

"I just wanted a quiet day out," Jackie said, pulling away and turning around to see if anyone was listening. The woman who looked like her French teacher had joined their waiter at the table, and they were holding hands, content, occasionally sipping their cappuccinos. Oblivious to everything. She watched them, but they never looked over at her once.

"Why?" Abir asked her again, her own tone of voice faltering into the silence. She folded her hands in her lap, and asked quietly, "why can't just you tell them?"

But they both knew her question was not one that Jackie could answer. Or one that even expected a reply.