

One Summer in Gaza

written by Samina Najmi | May 20, 2021



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Sometimes you fall for the narrative. You fall so hard that the narrator, the conduit through whom the story reaches you, escapes your scrutiny. That's how I ended up married to a curly-lashed Palestinian student in the Journalism Department while still an undergraduate English major at the University of Karachi, in Pakistan.

His was a gripping narrative of home and the sudden violence of its loss, a communal loss of freedom and autonomy for an indigenous people. The narrator had a six-year-old's memory of the 1967 annexation of Gaza—of people fleeing helter-skelter, of his not being able to carry the baby brother, of laying him down in the stampede. Is every detail true? Probably not. After all, this storyteller often favored the genre of fiction in his day-to-day conversations. But teaching and writing memoir now, I'm more adept at identifying something between fiction and nonfiction—a fictionalized memory that is, in the main, true. Later I would meet the narrator's mother and learn for myself that the loss of this baby boy in the Six-Day War with Israel was among her many heartbreaks.

At twenty-one, I defied the expectations of my elders and married this bearer of the story, a testimonio from a faraway place that made the headlines of the *Dawn* newspaper real to me. The one good thing I owe directly to that too-long marriage of six years—from which I had to literally sneak out—is that it enabled me to visit the foreign and forbidden land of Gaza. What seemed like a feat in 1986 is almost an impossibility for any non-Gazan today.

Ghaza in Arabic, as in Urdu. *Ghazawi*, the one who belongs to *Ghaza*, and to whom *Ghaza* belongs. You make that initial consonant sound as you would the French “r”—from the throat, the back of the tongue almost closing off the windpipe, cutting off breath. Almost.

Ghaza as in “ghazal,” the genre of Arabic poetry that dates back to the sixth century and, in another six centuries, had found its way to my ancestral land, the Indian subcontinent. In India the ghazal thrived in the courts of the Mughal emperors; it witnessed the arrival of the Europeans in the seventeenth century, their fierce competition for the resources of a bountiful land and its gradual colonization by the British. It became the favored form of urbane Urdu poets in the nineteenth century. The ghazal is a genre that has traveled beyond its place of birth to find a home in other languages, including English. From the sixth century to the twenty-first. And little surprise, as this lyric tradition speaks a universal language of love and loss. Subtract the final “l” and *Ghaza* is that language.

I visited Gaza in the summer of 1986, having just graduated from Karachi University—a couple of years later than I should have because the school shutdowns of the past decade had interfered with what was once a precocious trajectory. It was two years after my Nikah to the storybearer, and a year after we lost my cousin Rubina to suicide. Four years after the massacre in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila. It was two years before I arrived in Boston as a graduate student at Tufts. And just a year before the first Intifada, when children raised under twenty years of occupation rose up in protest.

We were a young married couple in Karachi, living with my mother but sharing lofty dreams of a wider world. The storybearer had no passport, only the Travel Document issued to refugees. He had a home without a homeland, the refugee camp of Khan Younis in the Gaza Strip, a twenty-five mile long strip of land that borders the eastern Mediterranean, measuring seven-and-a-half miles at its widest point and separated from the West Bank by the state of Israel. Before Israel, Egypt occupied the Gaza Strip, and before that the British, and before that the Ottomans, or Al Othman in Arabic.

Today almost two million people live in what has been described as the world’s largest open-air prison. It has no army. Although technically Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip in 2005, it maintains control of air and sea access, and six out of seven points of entry by land. Egypt keeps its seven-and-a-half miles of border with the Gaza Strip sealed for the most part. The tunnels into Egyptian territory, which, like any conduit, may be used for good and bad, have been destroyed. Hamas remains in power since 2007, at loggerheads with Al Fatah. Since then, Israel has launched three air wars to punish Hamas for rocket attacks, causing mostly civilian deaths. Its fierce fourth attack is happening at the time of this writing, in response to protests against the force evictions of Palestinians in East Jerusalem, including Hamas’s rocket fire. While power relations remain acutely

asymmetrical, all sides seem locked in their sliver of the story. Meanwhile, generation after generation of ordinary people wanting ordinary things like water, electricity, medicine, building materials, education, jobs, and mere mobility—to work, visit loved ones—must do without them. And extraordinary people with extraordinary talents, like the gifted soccer player Mahmoud Wadi, who waits year after year for permission to leave this twenty-five mile strip so he can avail of the opportunity to play the sport he loves on international fields, remain unknown. Gaza is a throttled windpipe. Almost.

In the summer of 1986, Israeli officials sent me back from the border with Jordan twice before they allowed me in. We had flown from Karachi to Amman, Jordan, and stayed with friends before making the road trip to Khan Yunis. A mere hundred or so miles, but worlds away for most. The first time we crossed the Allenby Bridge over the River Jordan, which separates Jordan from Israeli-occupied West Bank, I wore my best Western clothes: a rayon burgundy dress with paisley design and gathers by the waist, its hemline hitting just below the knee. It was picked out for me by my brother's girlfriend Debbie in Palo Alto, a young Jewish American woman who would visit us in Karachi later that year. Less to accessorize than to transport safely, I wore my incongruous South Asian wedding jewelry: 22-karat gold jhumkis dangling from my earlobes, a close-fitting filigree necklace, and an assortment of rings with little rubies, emeralds, and other gems studded in them. They were gifts from my parents, and I was going to wear them for the reception that my parents-in-law were surely planning in our honor. (The latter had no phone and couldn't read or write, so we seldom had news of them, or they of us, except via Palestinian students traveling between Gaza and Karachi.) Amma, my grandmother, had sewn me a silk purse pieced with triangles of vivid colors and golden edging, and in it I carried my eye pencil, blush, and lipstick, and a few U.S. dollar bills. I don't remember much about the bus ride from Amman, beyond the fact that I was sitting next to a blond, ponytailed woman in blue jeans who looked out the window as we crossed the River Jordan and said, "It looks more like a creek."

Bridges fascinate me. They seem so vulnerable, suspended in the air, a narrow spine over a body of water or a roaring highway. And yet they perform the Herculean task of linking two divided spaces, a conduit for connection that wouldn't be possible without them. They pay the price for this role: because of it, they become targets in times of war.

The Allenby Bridge goes by other names, depending on your orientation; it's also the Gesher Allenby, the King Hussein Bridge, and Al-Karameh. I don't know what it was called under the Ottomans, but it became the Allenby when the British rebuilt it in 1918. Since then it's been destroyed by an earthquake in 1927 and by two targeted destructions: the first in 1946 by the Palmach (who were freedom-fighters or terrorists, depending on whether you sympathized with the Jewish activists or British imperial power), and the second by Israel in the Six-Day War of 1967. It was then rebuilt as a truss bridge, and that's all it was in 1986 when my bus drove over it from Jordan into the occupied West Bank.

Once we arrived at the Israel border, the storybearer and I were separated. I was directed to Passport Control with other tourists and visitors, and he joined all the Palestinians holding the Travel Document for refugees.

When it came my turn to approach the window, I handed the Israeli official my emerald-green passport with gold lettering that read ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF PAKISTAN in Urdu, English, and Arabic. The man, who appeared to be in his late thirties and had a phenotype and coloring that was not unlike the many Palestinian students I had come to know in Karachi, looked at it closely.

I wonder now what he was thinking. Did he know how often the Pakistani passport had changed in appearance since the first, beige-colored one issued in 1947? Within seven years, green had become the favored color, based on its traditional association with Islam, the color of Paradise as described in the Quran. Over the decades, the passport became a lighter or darker shade of green depending on where we stood between secularity and theocracy as a nation. Initially there were two flags, one each for West and East Pakistan, until Pakistan recognized Bangladesh in 1974, at which point the flags were dispensed with altogether in favor of Pakistan's coat-of-arms, and the Bengali script disappeared. In various eras, English and Urdu have vied for the top line of the cover, reflecting a familiar struggle of postcolonial linguistic identity, as neither language is native to all Pakistanis. In an illuminating 2016 *Dawn* article on this history, Nadeem Paracha surmises: "The Pakistani passport has been a mirror of the persistent existentialist tussle in the country itself."

The passport I handed to the Israeli official in 1986 was the latest iteration, under the religious orthodoxy of General Zia-ul-Haq, of the face we presented to the world. Although Pakistan's first constitution had declared the country an Islamic Republic, the religious qualifier had not appeared on our passports until 1984. Also under the General's regime, the Arabic script was added on the passport cover and, within its pages, a declaration of the holder's religion. While the former was abandoned in the 1990s, the latter remains. And there also remains an explicit notification that the passport is not valid for travel to Israel.

Pakistan and Israel: Abrahamic siblings and two post-World War II countries envisioned as a religious ideal that materialized on the map within months of each other. True, the creation of Pakistan did not become an open invitation for Muslims from all over the world to immigrate to the land at the cost of the indigenous population. Nor does it possess anywhere near the kind of power Israel has in its region, armed and funded by the United States. Over the course of seven decades, Pakistan's territory has contracted rather than expanded. Still, families like mine—Muhajirs from India—though they brought much with them in the early years after Partition, can not be said to have integrated with an eye toward the equitable distribution of resources. And whatever vision of inclusiveness the founders may have had, Pakistan's religious minorities, including some non-Sunni Muslim sects, have been marginalized by a combination of policy, public sentiment, and vigilante violence. Those who can have fled. Pakistan and Israel, penned into existence by the British imperial hand in its dying days. A greedy, grasping hand, lazy and careless at the end, and consummately self-serving to the last.

Now the Israeli official furrows his thick, dark brows as he peers into my passport. His voice is calm and curious as he looks up at me.

“You know that your country does not have diplomatic relations with Israel?”

I did know. But I had assumed that the marriage papers, testifying that my spouse was from the Occupied Territories, would be enough to grant me a visit visa upon arrival. They were not. And there I was now, a scared 23-year-old woman, by myself, with no idea what would happen next.

I was told to return to Jordan. But I had no idea how to find my husband. I knew little Arabic at that point, and it was clear that most people around me, Israeli or Arab, did not speak English. I was told to wait in a specific area, and wait I did. An Arab man in Western attire offered to drive me to Amman in his cab. As I weighed my options, an elder shuffled up to me in his long jalabiya and chequered kufiyah, and, in a low voice, advised against trusting the younger man. He said I would be safer with him and his family. Until I finally saw a soldier approach with my husband in tow, I stood there, terrified.

Back in Amman, everyone told us my mistake had been to attempt to enter with the tourists; as the wife of a Palestinian, I should have lined up with the Palestinians. A few days later, we tried again.

This time I was among Palestinian women, as we were segregated by gender. This time I received very different treatment. No pleasantries exchanged, no courtesy or curiosity. I have an Arabic name and could pass for Arab, so when I didn't heed a command—was it to come here or go there?—a soldier yelled at me, and I cowered. This time I was searched bodily. This time they took away my eye-pencil as a potential threat to security. This time they confiscated my wedding video. I pleaded. The officer screening my belongings explained that entering as I was “on the Arab side,” video cassettes were not permitted. He averted his eyes as he said this. He was from New York, and we had language in common.

But after all that, I was denied entry for the same reason: my passport wasn't valid for travel to Israel and the proof of my marriage to a Travel Document-bearing Palestinian was worth nothing.

By this point enough officials understood that I wasn't Arab and that I spoke English. I was told, not unkindly, that it was illegal for me to be standing there at all. A soldier who had been witnessing my interactions was assigned to stand with me while they located my husband again.

This young man was about my age but at least a foot taller, light-skinned, with reddish brown hair. He didn't say much as we stood side by side in the heat of the day, both of us looking straight ahead as though hope would arrive from that direction. But he must have asked for my story because I told him why I was there. It was a small wish, really, to meet the family of the curly-lashed man you had married.

The soldier was silent at first. Then he said softly, in clear and slightly

accented English: "This is against humanity. This is not what Israel was meant to be."

I glanced up at him then and saw his clenched jaws and moist eyes.

His name was Endal. Thirty-five years later, this brief encounter remains a defining memory. It cautions against collapsing a people, even soldiers, with their governments. It's a reason to read the *Ha'aretz*, to support the human rights work of B'Tselem, to follow Jewish Voice for Peace.

We very nearly gave up on my ever meeting the family in Khan Younis after that. We decided to make the best of it and played tourist in Amman, an inviting modern city where you might walk casually by Roman ruins. In another two weeks I had acquired enough Arabic to follow the gist of a conversation in the Ghazawi vernacular of our hosts. And I loved the food, including shawarma bought from street vendors—these were my carnivore days—carved hot off the vertical spit and bundled up in pita with a well-seasoned salad and yogurt dressing.

Then one day someone suggested that I present my case to Jordan's Ministry of the Interior, which issued permits to West Bank Palestinians. Nobody had ever heard of the Jordanian government issuing a Travel Document to the spouse of a Ghazawi (as opposed to a West Banker), because Gazans were Egypt's responsibility. But what had we to lose?

I walked into the big stone building at the appointed hour and awaited my audience with the Minister (at least that's who I remember him to be). The meeting was brief. He sat in a large, imposing room full of portraits, behind a daunting desk, while I stood twenty feet away from him. I said my piece in English.

The man eyed me without a smile. But his tone, when he spoke, was incredulous.

"You really want to go that badly to *Khan Younis*?" he asked. And I nodded.

As we approached the densely populated refugee camp, the taxi driver had to honk to disperse the crowds and thread his way toward the unpaved road where my in-laws lived. Big, seemingly unfinished cement houses sat next to much smaller ones. None was painted. Our taxi stopped just beyond the alley where my husband's family lived; it was too narrow for a car. Immediately, children ran up to us, asking excited questions. As we walked, they surrounded us, leading me as though in a reverse enactment of the Pied Piper fairytale. A couple of men who had been sitting outside rushed toward us. There was much laughter and embracing as they grabbed our bags. We walked up to a humble home, constructed with sandstone blocks and plaster and topped with a tin roof. Several children ran inside to tell the parents that their son and his bride were home.

We stayed in Khan Younis for almost three months, until September.

I came to love the family—the parents, the six brothers and sisters who spoiled me and wouldn't let me lift a finger to help with anything. I grew fleshier for lack of exercise but devoured the food anyway. My favorite meal was our breakfast of fava beans (*fool*) and homemade hummus and feta, with a dash of zartar in olive oil or red chilis on the side, all scooped up with pita bread. While the storybearer was out telling other stories to cousins in the neighborhood, I got to know his youngest sibling, Isa (Arabic for Jesus), whose physical and mental age you'd guess to be five or six years old, though he was twelve. His mother had been sick while she was pregnant with him. Isa's head was disproportionately large for his body. He had big eyes that often looked amused, with thick lashes like the rest of his siblings. When we first met, he held back, taking a few days to size me up before flashing his wide, dimpled smile at me. After that, he and I would sit beside each other on the floor mattress. Isa had what we call emotional intelligence. Although my Arabic quickly outpaced his, he understood more than he could convey in words. He understood the language of hugs and valued the moment, the physical presence. When I'd emerge from the bathroom, I'd often find him waiting for me quietly outside the door. Together we made our way back to the floor mattress, to family chatter, while Isa's older sister made strong, sweetened black tea with mint leaves on the two-burner stove, poured it into miniature glasses, and brought them out to us on a circular aluminium tray.

Life was hard in the refugee camp, and prospects for anything more than a basic education, wage labor for the young men and marriage for the young women, were almost nonexistent even before the Intifada. Every home knew loss, and some knew horror. But it was life nonetheless, and people found ways to tailor their dreams and joys to their circumstances. To hope, to anger, but not ask for more.

Looking back, I realize that I grasped only the surface of things. Just beneath it lay the despair that would erupt the following year in a shower of rocks from the fists of children.

At the time, movement was still possible, though it seemed circumscribed to me. Some of us could drive not just to Gaza City but to Ashkelon and beyond, as long as we carried our papers on us at all times. I visited Tel Aviv, Nazareth-Al Naasira, Bethlehem, and Jerusalem-Al Quds. Also many towns in the West Bank: Jericho-Ariha, Hebron-Al Khalil, Nablus, Ramallah. I learned to address my husband loudly in English when we stopped at military checkpoints because it meant less harassment for the driver and others in the car with me. Invariably, the sound of English aroused curiosity and shifted the tone. When it was my turn to produce documents, I'd look the checkpoint soldier in the eye and make small talk. I was treated with courtesy, and by extension, everyone in the car was let off without the customary humiliations. On one occasion a soldier smiled as he handed back my papers and said, "Speak well of us when you go back to your country."

I never saw Isa or the rest of the Khan Younis family again. Four and a half years later, I stole out of my Somerville, Massachusetts, apartment while the storybearer was at work because he would have barred my exit had he known. I took no photographs with me. Only the bit of earth I had scooped up from outside Isa's home the day we left and poured into a small glass jar. A bit of Gaza I had carried with me from Khan Younis to Karachi to Boston. And which, fifteen years later, I would carry with me to Fresno, California.

Yet every time Gaza appears in the headlines, and sometimes during the long spells when it remains forgotten, I think of Isa. Watching the World Cup with my children in July 2014, I froze when I read of the bomb dropped on Khan Younis that killed eight members of a single family. It was during Ramadan, the month of fasting, at 1 o'clock in the morning. They were watching the World Cup, as we were in Fresno. I could tell from the victims' last names that they were not Isa's family, but I grieved as though I had known them.

This morning there's news of fifty-two air attacks on and around Khan Younis. With five minutes of warning, a house that was home to forty members of the Al-Astal extended family was destroyed. The Associated Press article describes the scene in the words of Ahmed Al-Astal, a professor like me. Splayed across my laptop screen is the image of men in jeans and t-shirts gazing down at the rubble. What did it take to build that home? And given the scarcity and staggering cost of construction materials due to the blockade, what will it take to rebuild? Why even try when this will likely happen again in a few years, probably during another Ramadan and Eid season? In the background, unnoticed by the men, a boy about ten years of age balances himself on the rubble. He wears a black t-shirt and black athletic pants with RAVE printed in white letters on the side. His facial expression is absorbed and focused. Right foot on the ground and left leg bent, he raises his arms at different angles—cautiously, as if walking a tightrope; gracefully, as though poised to take flight.

In *The Truth About Stories*, Cherokee writer Thomas King says that stories are all we have. They shape who we are and how we see others as well as ourselves. It's a truth that many Indigenous Americans besides King, like Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko, have long known and tried to share with us. We must be careful which stories we tell, they say, because once we put them out into the world, there's no taking them back.

It matters, too, how we hear a story and how we give it meaning. When we let a story in, it takes root in us. It grows with us, its stems and branches extending upward from our core to frame our vision, and reaching into whatever new stories we will tell. It's possible to feel seduced by a narrative, to regret the years of your life you invested in the narrator, and yet to cherish what the story itself gave you: the humanity of a people dismissed as roadkill, not worth stopping for. It's possible, during a global pandemic, for the heart to drop when you learn that an occupying power that boasts the highest vaccination rate in the world denies the life-saving vaccine to the occupied. It's possible, long after the storyteller himself has become an almost-forgotten history, to think of *Ghaza* with tenderness, to

read the headlines in Fresno and weep.