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Enter Ghost

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for my parents

I

I expected them to interrogate me at the airport and they did. What surprised me was that they didn't take very long. A young blonde female officer and then an older, dark-haired one took turns in a private room to ask me about my life. They particularly wanted to know about my family links to the place, and I repeated four times that my sister lived here but that I personally hadn't returned in eleven years. Why? they kept asking. I had no explanation. At points the exchange seemed to come bizarrely close to them insisting on my civic rights. Of course they were only trying to unnerve me. Why does your sister have citizenship and you don't? Right place right time, I shrugged. I didn't want to bring up my mother. They unzipped my bags, investigated my belongings, opened every play, flipped through my appointment diary with its blank summer months, and the two novels, one of which I'd finished on the plane, then led me into a different room for a strip search. Surely this isn't necessary, I said in a haughty voice while a third woman officer ran her detector over my bare flesh, as though I might have hidden something under my skin, and dawdled over the straps of my bra and knickers, which I had matched in preparation, blue lace, and as she knelt before my crotch the laughter began to quiver in my stomach. I put my clothes back on, surprised by how hard I was shaking, and ten minutes later they called me to a booth, where a tall man I hadn't seen before gave me my passport and told me I was free to enter, Welcome to Israel.

I passed a seating area and recognised two glum-looking Arab men and a young Western woman in red lipstick from my flight, still waiting to be questioned. Their eyes followed me to the automatic doors, and as the doors sighed apart I checked the time on my phone and saw only an hour had passed. This left me two more to kill, since my sister Haneen wouldn't be back in Haifa until half past six. I made a snap decision and asked a taxi driver

to take me to Akka. I had an idea I should see something beautiful first.

My adrenalin faded slowly in the car. As it did, the shadow of my bad winter returned, and I watched the passing farmland, the hills of the Galilee, through its darkness. My whole life I'd been aware of Haneen's stronger moral compass; it made me afraid to confide in her until the very last moment, until I absolutely needed to. I also wanted to resist her, the way a child resists a parent and at the same time absorbs their wisdom; I wanted to sulk in her second bedroom and feel better with the secret muffled gladness that someone was holding me to account.

I may not have locked eyes with this fact yet, but I wasn't only here for Haneen. After an hour and a half signs appeared for Akka, and my blood thumped a little harder, and then we turned off the motorway and drew up by the arches of the old city. I paid the driver and wheeled my suitcase down an alley, and when I saw the blue sky burning above the sea wall I stopped. I stared at the ancient stonework, at the dazzling water. I hadn't prepared myself for this bodily impact, the memory of my senses. A few red chairs and tables were arranged beside the pier. I approached the wall, leaned my bag against it, and stayed there a moment. The sun heated my face, my hands. My armpits began to sweat. I reached for the top of the wall and pulled myself up onto it.

Some forty feet below me, the water crashed against the parapet, foaming and jolting back. Where the wall curved on my right, a group of boys stood in a line. All elbows, hands on hips, shifting their weight from leg to leg, watching each other, waiting. Two were small and skinny, barefoot, with brown sunlit shoulder blades. Most of the older ones wore sneakers that left dark marks on the stone, and necklaces of drops fell from the seams of their shorts. The first in line took a running start and leapt, knees up. He seemed to fall for a long time, his body unfolding. Then he cracked the water and disappeared. When his head bobbed up again, the other boys didn't react. I guess I was expecting them to applaud, or something. The diver flicked his hair and swam for the rocks.

I had a vision of my own body flipping down from the boundary.

My thin cotton trousers ballooning, stiffening on the air like sails, receding as my figure plunged to the water. I both saw and could feel the wall scraping my forearms through my shirt. Legs parting, one hand reaching out, smashed in an instant and bloody on the rock.

The boys gathered closer together and were talking, eyeing me where I sat. Down below, the water drank the stones, leaving black circles dilating on their surfaces. In the distance, tank boats cut through the waves. The sea noise calmed me. After a while I jumped back onto the ground and dragged my bag away to hail another taxi. Could you take me to Haifa please? I asked in English for some reason. Maybe because I couldn't be sure he was Palestinian, not even in old Akka, or maybe because only two hours ago I'd been emphasising my Englishness in the hopes of smoothing my passage between the border police. The car was stuffy with the old day's heat. The radio was playing an Arabic song. A string of cowrie shells hung from the rear-view mirror.

'Wael Hejazi. You know him?' said the driver.

'No. Is he famous?'

The driver laughed. He sang along for a bit. 'Holidays?'

'I'm visiting my sister.'

'Jewish?'

I pretended I hadn't heard. I think he had guessed I was Arab or I doubt he would have asked. I didn't like these dances between drivers and their passengers, testing origin, allegiance, degrees of ignorance. In the final move before the jingle of change he would probably burst out with some story of loss and political alienation. I resisted the idea of being bonded to this person. I put a hand up to where the window permitted a hiss of air, the words on my lips to ask him to open it wider, but then if I spoke the language one thing would lead to another and I didn't feel like getting into it with – *Layth*, said the licence in Latin letters beside the Hebrew, under its cracked lamination, suspended on the taxi wall. A young photograph, a little smile, the moustache black, grey in the mirror, where his eyes flicked again to me and back to the road.

'Would you mind opening the window?' I said in English.

The breeze sliced through the taxi. Palm trees spiked the roadsides. Pine forests. Pylons.

The idea of coming to Haifa had arisen in January, in London. Haneen had come over for Christmas and when, a few days into the New Year, she dragged her bags back down our father's staircase, it struck me that she and I had not spoken all holiday, not properly. It was starting to rain. I handed her my pink umbrella and opened the door, gripped by guilt, and by a panicked sense that I needed her and it was too late to tell her so. We waved her taxi off and then I confided in my father, playing it down so I wouldn't agitate him. Why don't you visit her in Haifa? he said, he who had not himself been back to Haifa in just as long.

'Why don't we both go?' I suggested. 'A Nasir family trip.'

'Oh, no no no,' he said, picking up his newspaper and disappearing into the kitchen.

On the verge of turning seventy our father had finally retired, and was getting used to passing the time at home, in East Finchley. The house was on the opposite side of the city from me, and I'd arranged to stay there while Haneen was over so that the three of us could spend the holiday under the same roof. Throughout October and November I'd been playing Arkadina in *The Seagull*, and I was still riding the high after the run ended when Haneen arrived in December. There weren't many auditions happening then; instead it was parties I was preparing for, returning in the small hours and creeping up the stairs to sleep in my childhood bedroom. The theatre Christmas-bash circuit was not exactly my usual scene but I was having an affair with Harold Marshall, the director of *The Seagull*, and it was his. I spent a month drunk on subterfuge, hyper-aware of his large figure across full rooms, his rumbling voice, the black mane swept perilously back. He was the first person I'd felt strongly about since my divorce, and although I knew it was too early to call it love I can't pretend I wasn't using that word in my mind. The whole thing hadn't yet turned but I sensed it was going to and I was in denial. No doubt that added to the strength of my feelings.

Meanwhile, Haneen had covered our father's kitchen floor with

boxes excavated from his attic, making piles for rubbish, organising paperwork and photographs into box-files, her reading glasses holding back her hair, which was greyer than the last time I'd seen her. I cut a path through the mess in the mornings to make coffee, waving hello, bleary from lack of sleep. When my father looked at the chaos he threw up his hands and announced 'it's hopeless'; Haneen rebuked him as though he were her child, which for some reason he didn't seem to mind. In the afternoons they walked on the Heath, and sometimes I joined and listened to their conversations. I was under the impression I was keeping up a good act. We spent New Year's Eve together, toasted his retirement and crooned along to some of his favourite old songs. After a few more days, Haneen hauled six full black bin bags onto the kerb and left for the airport.

I retrieved my own little suitcase to return across the city and came to say goodbye. My father peered over his glasses.

'You have not been yourself,' he said.

Rain was tittering on the kitchen roof. I wanted to deny everything. Then I saw his lips pursed in his white beard and found myself saying, yes, I could sort of see where he was coming from.

A few months later, my relationship with Harold ended, and I wrote to Haneen suggesting a visit. I couldn't leave London immediately because I taught an acting class on Wednesday nights and a movement class on Thursdays, which, along with an advertisement I'd starred in a couple of years prior, were currently my principal sources of income. I booked a flight for June, after the end of term. The prospect gave me solace.

'You look very tanned,' said Haneen, between kisses.

'Must be the light.'

Ceiling-high windows stood along one side of her apartment, dull with early evening, full of trees. In the kitchen a strong bulb in a coloured glass shade dropped a complex beam across the floor.

'This is all your stuff, is it?'

She wheeled my bag somewhere out of sight before marching to the kettle and filling it from the sink. The kitchen was immaculate: no magnets on the fridge, no stray envelopes. Not even a newspaper.

'How was the airport?'

'They kept me an hour and a half, ish.'

'Lucky you. But you've been waiting for me, then. Why didn't you call?'

'I went to Akka.'

'That's nice. How's Dad? If you're hungry.' She placed a bowl of fruit in front of me. The lightshade was giving her a red moustache.

'He's fine. Swimming a lot.'

'We'll call him. Everything else, how's work?'

'Slow season.'

'Right. Right.' The filament drummed through the silence. 'I'm really glad you came. How long are you staying, again?'

'I thought a few weeks. But if you need the space I can easily—'

'No no, stay as long as you like. I'll be in and out. Some nights I stay in Tel Aviv, especially if there's a faculty meeting.'

'Right.'

'But you're welcome, of course, as long as you like.'

The kettle clicked off and breathed up the tiles. I stared at her. Something was wrong. She lifted her glasses and drew her thumb and forefingers over her eyes, pinching them together. Not the gesture of a woman who wore mascara. I set my elbows on the kitchen unit and tried to emit warmth.

'How are things at the university?' I said.

'To be honest with you, it's a pain. Increasingly. I feel like I'm dodging bullets. I don't know how to, how to *be*. I'm thinking about moving to England.'

'What?'

She leaned over her phone, stroking and tapping the screen, then placed it between us.

'Don't go back to England,' I said. 'England is awful.'

'Hi, Baba!' She met my eyes but the smile was for our father.

'Hi!' came his voice at a slight delay.

'Hi, Baba. This is Sonia.'

'Habibti, al-hamdillah 'asalamtik. How are you? Did you see the house?'

'Not yet.' I laughed. 'I just arrived.'

'They gave you a hard time?'

'Not too bad. It's good to be here in Haneen's beautiful place! I can see there's a great view. I feel nostalgic. Everything is good with you?'

'Take photos please, and some videos. I'm fine, I'm fine. I'm watching a film about Vietnam.'

'I hear you're swimming a lot,' said Haneen.

'Yes.'

'Front crawl is better than breaststroke, be careful with your back.'

'Okay, Haneen. Okay.'

'So we'll speak to you tomorrow, Baba.'

'Bye. Bye, my life. Bye, Sonia my love.'

It took me a long time to fall asleep that night. I drifted, thinking about our grandparents' house. I thought about climbing the stairs, which automatically brought to my nose the smell of overripe fruit wafting in through the windows from the garden, where, disobeying my father, I used to walk barefoot until my soles were sticky with fallen plums and had to be scrubbed with a nailbrush. Sore and clean, I stand wet on the tiles of the bathroom, and then in the old shower, and then rubbed dry with one of the blue bath towels, which shrank each year until they were too indecent to wear in the corridor, and I see the arches of the windows, and can feel the breezes off the harbour. And lying on a bed, on a sofa, on a floor, reading in the heat. The room we shared, Haneen's bed on the far side, mine near the door. I'd wake early and find my grandfather downstairs, reading a big book with tiny writing by the window. They always said Jiddo was where Haneen got her brains.

My strongest memories of Haifan summers, though, were less of specific things or events than they were of certain feelings, and of daydreaming, which was an activity I looked forward to when we packed our picnics and went to the beach. Stretched out on a towel, listening to my Walkman, playing out the drama of my life in my mind's eye, while the world around us remained boring and violent. And then, when I hit puberty, indulging in illicit, confused fantasies about the Israeli boys I spied by the water's edge, their

silhouettes of muscular ease like sun marks on my closed eyelids. I compared them with our cousin Issa, his friend Yusef, bow-headed and unpowerful.

I woke late with the sun on my face. There were no curtains or blinds but I'd still managed to sleep in and it was almost quarter to twelve. I shuffled into the kitchen in a pair of hotel slippers Haneen had left by my door. The windows were bright and full of trees. Beyond them, the industrial port, the water. I felt heavy with oversleeping.

'Morning,' said my sister from the sofa. She was balancing a laptop on one knee and a stack of papers on the other. 'We've got tickets to the theatre tonight. Mariam has two extra. You remember Mariam?'

'What's the play?'

'*Al-Moharrij*, The Jester. You know it?'

'I don't know any Arabic theatre.'

'Apparently it's famous.'

I didn't know what to say. I had come here specifically to escape the theatre. She bent towards her screen. I poured cold coffee into a mug and considered heating it up in her microwave.

My career had had its ups and downs, like those of most actors. At drama school I'd been one of two in my cohort with potential ingénue looks, and though at five eight I was on the tall side I had a marketably unusual appearance, or so they said. It's the kind of pronouncement that makes vulnerable young women atomise their features, upon which so much seems to depend. Mine: long asymmetrical nose, lips with high crests, heavy eyelids, curly dark auburn hair that lightened at the ends in the sun. My profile was slightly harsh; my instructor used the word 'striking'. Age softened me some, for which I was grateful, although on the other hand I was worried about losing out on character roles. Anyway, theatre is cruel to actors no matter how striking they are.

Auditioning had a painful addictive quality, made up of so much loss and at the same time the seeming constant spectacle of great roles happening to others by chance or circumstance. I landed a TV

job straight after graduating and then spent the majority of my twenties in a repertory group in London doing Shakespeare and Ayckbourn and Stoppard, taking jobs in detective serials, turning up tirelessly for auditions on the West End and occasionally being cast, accepting other quick telly jobs for the money and what I hoped was exposure. I did several gigs for a performance artist named Nile Banks, who created a series of walk-through pieces in and around art galleries in London and Manchester. I took a part in a TV series as a Yemeni spy and another as an Arabic-speaking extra in a documentary about Sykes-Picot, but Arab roles didn't come up often and when they did I usually lost out to someone with black hair, regardless of whether she could even roll an R. By the time I landed a job in *The Seagull* I'd been working for almost two decades. I'd had my share of high moments. *Noises Off* at Trafalgar Studios, an RSC production of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*; one year I played Fanny in *Mansfield Park* at the Royal Court. These moments passed; they did not accumulate. Most of my female friends in the industry had switched roles entirely, some moving behind the camera, or to script editing. They had babies, became teachers, housewives. One retrained as a barrister. Two women, *two*, out of all those I'd befriended at university and drama school and the early years, were still working: one was vaguely famous, by sight if not by name; the other had regular parts at the RSC. I had neither vague fame nor regular work of any prestige, and yet I hung on, powered by what? Vanity? Some outrageous lasting confidence in myself, propped up by a horror of what it would really mean if I gave in. Part of the reason I'd stopped spending summers in Haifa in my mid-twenties was a fear that too much time spent away from the universe of English theatre would injure my chances. I'd also met Marco, and embarking on my new life with him helped me push Palestine from my mind. Haneen was doing it for all of us, I was committed to the cause by proxy, I didn't need actually to visit. Besides, the second intifada was still going on and after Jiddo and Teta died it didn't feel like there was much point in coming back anyway. Han flew over to see us often enough. Ten years passed, during which time my marriage ended, and I stumbled on seemingly unable to right my

wheels, still auditioning, still getting parts, if fewer and farther between. I tried out for *The Seagull* with such low expectations that I addressed my speech to the director himself with a knowing look. Harold Marshall was considered up-and-coming even though he'd been around for a while. I saw his eyebrows quiver as I turned to go and the next day he called to say I had the part.

That play revived in me a dangerous joy, made worse by the fact that, in the final three weeks of rehearsal, a special energy emerged among the cast, thirteen-strong, in which none, miraculously, was an egotist; an energy that reflected a glow back on the director, whom we took, wrongly of course, to be its author. When reviews singled me out for praise, I felt nervous, like I was breaking my cast-mates' trust – but then was moved to find them backstage smiling on my behalf. My father, who never gushed about anything, beamed at me and called it 'a very *sensitive* performance', and Harold suggested that I'd make an excellent Gertrude in his production of *Hamlet*, which was going to be at the National, a significant step in his own career.

I showered, dressed, checked my email. I read a few pages of a book, cooked pasta, called our mother. When my phone ran out of battery, I left it inert and black on the sofa. Looking at the sea in the window, a flat stripe of soothing blue, I could feel my Internet addiction, the urge to click and scroll, nag at me like an insect bite. I sat cross-legged on the floor and did a breathing exercise followed by a twenty-minute meditation. Haneen must have been watching me because the moment I stirred, a radio burst into life, a British accent, BBC, *A five-storey apartment block in the town of Torre Annunziata, near Naples, has collapsed, with five or six people trapped inside.* Haneen began cleaning the surfaces around the sink and then she swept the floor.

After the sun had left the windowed side of the apartment to a late-afternoon shade, the buzzer sounded.

'I think that's her,' Haneen shouted from another room.

'Who?'

'Mariam.'