

ON THE HILLS
OF GOD

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In Palestine's last summer of happiness, seventeen-year-old Yousif Safi was awakened by the familiar voice of the muezzin calling man to prayer. It was not six o'clock yet and he lay warm and comfortable in his bed, but the moment he opened his eyes he was fully awake. He could hear the chirping and twittering of his birds in the aviary in the next room. On this day early in June 1947, the new house was to get its roof. His parents and relatives and all their friends had been waiting for this occasion. He could hear the workers gearing up for the mixing and pouring of concrete on top of the house. The iron grid, which would hold the roof together, had been fastened atop the nearly finished villa a week or two earlier.

He stretched in bed thinking of the ten years his parents had spent waiting to build such a house. Thank God it was nearly finished. He admired them for their foresight and determination. They had divided and landscaped the whole mountaintop long ago. Trees needed years to grow and his parents had wanted the house and gardens to be ready at the same time. And while the trees were growing, they were saving the money to build their villa. Not satisfied with a good income from his medical practice, his enterprising father had invested wisely over the years, buying and selling real estate at a good profit.

Luck must have been with Dr. Jamil Safi. Young as Yousif was, he could tell that scheming and making money were against his father's natural instincts. What did interest the doctor was building things and making them grow. It was he who had thought of developing the only real estate agency in Ardallah. It was he who had invested in the first cinema. It was he who had advised the Chamber of Commerce to send men on a public relations tour of the surrounding Arab countries to promote Ardallah as a summer resort. It was he who had conceived the idea that Ardallah needed a hospital and had started raising money for it. No wonder,

Yousif thought, the townspeople had wanted his father to be their mayor.

In every municipal council election he had entered, Dr. Safi had always come out on top. The British, who effectively ruled Palestine and with whom he was on relatively good terms, had offered him the position of mayor several times. But the doctor had always declined, satisfied with being just a council member. After all, the major decisions for the city were subject to approval of the British authorities, and they consulted him on important issues such as zoning and opening new roads. Anyway, from the doctor's point of view, who needed a job of worrying about paying garbage collectors and inspectors and a dozen or so policemen, or threatening with legal action people who were delinquent in paying their local taxes, or issuing building permits, or listening to citizens' complaints about the need for light posts on dark street corners? No, the doctor felt he had better things to do than be a bureaucrat, no matter how exalted. And now, in the summer of 1947, Yousif's parents were realizing their dream of building their own villa and Yousif, their only son, was happy for them.

Yousif shaved, took a quick shower, and stood by the window tucking in his shirt. It was a beautiful morning, without a cloud to mar the blue summer sky. He could see the maid, Fatima, spreading white tablecloths on the fifteen long tables that had been set under the trees the night before. Fatima's husband and two teenage sons were bringing in dozens of chairs borrowed from relatives and friends or rented from cafes. Two or three workers were picking up odd pieces of wood or scrap metal off the ground. Others were inside the house, hammering at the scaffolding.

A large pile of cement was already on the ground and another big truck was being unloaded, raising a cloud of dust. The builder, a stout man with a grayish beard, was on top of the roof for a last-minute inspection. The two workers with him were bent down, welding. The gravel-voiced blacksmith and a couple of helpers were at the far end of the driveway installing the huge wrought-iron gate before the crowds arrived. Only Abu Amin and his six stonecutters were relaxed. Their job done, they looked awkward in their clean ankle-length robes. They had done a beautiful job on the house, Yousif observed, and he was glad to see them with no dust clinging to their clothes. It would be nice, he mused, to see drinks in their hands rather than hammers and chisels.

By the time Yousif finished eating breakfast and feeding his birds, the old house had begun to fill up. Aunt Hilaneh, Uncle Boulus's wife, and other women were already stuffing three large lambs with rice, chunks of meat, pine nuts, and spices. Two or three of these women took great pride in their cooking, and Yousif wondered which one would appoint herself as supervisor. At other occasions he

had seen them make faces behind each other's back and bicker about too much cinnamon or not enough nutmeg. But not today. Today, everyone was working in harmony.

Maha, cousin Basim's wife, was hard at work with a crew of women on the balcony. Aunt Sarah, Isaac's mother, was helping to chop parsley, mint, lettuce, tomatoes, and to fry meats and mash garbanzo beans. One and all, they were preparing *maza* for the guests to nibble on while drinking. *Kabab*, *falafel*, fried kidneys and dips—*hummus* and eggplant—cheeses, pickles and olives were piled up in dozens of small dishes to be placed on the tables throughout the yard.

Yousif was in charge of drinks: whiskey, beer, *arak*, *kazoze*, lemonade, and water. By ten o'clock, his best friends, Amin and Isaac, were with him. They helped him crush the large ice block which had been laid in the bathtub, and they helped pass around drinks as the guests began to arrive.

Yousif's father was in constant motion, giving last-minute instructions and greeting well-wishers. Around 10:30, Father Mikhail and Father Yacoub of the Roman Catholic Church joined the small knot of guests under the trees. Soon scores of men were in the garden. Some sat around on chairs with high backs or small short backs with straw bottoms; the younger ones stood watching by the sparkling-white, colonnaded house. Yousif and his two friends brought out the drinks and the *maza*. The rest of the clergy followed each other, as if by plan. Then came two more priests: one Melkite Catholic, the other Greek Orthodox. Five minutes later they were joined by an Arab Anglican minister and two Muslim *shaykhs*. Then came the suppliers and sub-contractors. They were followed by the mayor of Ardallah, the entire municipal council, attorneys Fouad Jubran and Zuhdi Muftah, Dr. Fareed Afifi and his wife, Jihan. Even Moshe Sha'lan had closed his shop for the occasion.

Half an hour later the moment of excitement was at hand. The grayish builder wove his way through the crowd until he found the doctor. Yousif saw him signal with his forefinger that the ceremony was about to begin. The doctor in turn signaled Father Mikhail.

Suddenly there was a flurry of activity. Everyone stood up, silent. A laborer was ready to haul the first leather bucket full of cement up one of the many ladders placed against the exterior of the house. But before he would start, the crowd waited expectantly for the Roman Catholic priests to say a prayer.

As everyone watched, Fathers Mikhail and Yacoub put their vestments around their necks and smoothed them down their chests, looking resplendent with their large crosses. The priests alternated saying short prayers, giving thanks to God for all his blessings and exhorting all the saints and angels to look after the Safi family

and make their home free of jealous eyes or evil spirits. Their prayers were augmented with a profusion of incense from the two large censers they kept swinging back and forth over Yousif's head, over the heads of his parents, the guests, over the cement mixers, the hands of the laborers, over the balconies and doorsteps, and throughout the finished but unplastered, unpartitioned house itself.

The last to be blessed was the laborer at the bottom of the ladder who was poised to haul the first bucket. No sooner had the priests stopped praying than the laborer lifted the leather bucket to his side and began to ascend. The moment his sole touched the first rung, a woman's voice burst out in a ululation halfway between a yodel and an aria. She had a powerful voice that managed to startle quite a few. Yousif turned to look. An unsuspecting man standing by the singing woman had both of his hands over his ears. His mouth puckered. His eyes closed. At the end of the customary four verses, the woman began trilling. She pursed her lips as if she were about to whistle, while the tip of her tongue darted left and right like a piston. She electrified the crowd; they burst into applause.

Other women now broke out in song. The men atop the walls of the building and those mixing and transporting the cement started a chant that Yousif knew from experience would last for hours. The eighteen or twenty workers, reminiscent of those who had toiled to build the great Pyramids, were divided into two groups: those on the ground and those on top. One would start a verse and the other would repeat it, and so on and so forth until more than a hundred verses had been exhausted. But the robust, rhythmic, joyous singing was uplifting to Yousif.

Yousif stood by his parents and put his arm around his mother. Well-wishers approached them and shook their hands.

"*Mabrook*," they all said, smiling. "Congratulations."

There were hugs and kisses. The guests were full of compliments and good sayings.

"It's a beautiful house."

"May you see nothing but happiness in it."

"*Mabrook*. May we visit you next at your son's wedding."

"May your son fill your house with grandchildren."

Yousif broke away to tend to his duties. He rushed inside to be with Amin and Isaac. The three were soon joined by Salman and other young relatives who helped carry out trays of drinks. Glasses were touched and the guests moved about, sampling the variety of *maza* laid out on the tables.

The maid, Fatima, came out of the old house carrying on her head a large tray of stuffed lamb. She was followed by two women carrying two more lambs.

All three were headed toward the neighborhood bakery to have them cooked and browned. At the sight of the lambs the men on top of the house cheered louder—and within moments the festivities increased to a new level of gaiety.

By 11:30, no less than forty or fifty women began to arrive from all directions carrying *manasef* on their heads. This substantial meal, Yousif knew, was most appropriate on such occasions. All his life he had seen some of the town's women carry such large wooden bowls filled with layers of thin sheets of bread soaked in delicious *maraka*, topped with heaps of rice and fried pine nuts, all covered with chunks of spiced lamb meat.

This was the meal to be proud of—the one to serve a multitude of honored guests. Normally eleven or twelve such bowls would arrive on similar occasions. Today, Yousif counted up to thirty and stopped. They were so many, half the town could have been fed. They were brought by Christian families and Muslim families; by rich and poor; and by quite a few patients of Dr. Safi's, grateful to be alive. Of the three Jewish families in town, the family of Moshe and Sarah Sha'lan, Isaac's parents, was the closest to the doctor and his family, and they too chose to participate in the celebration. Instead of contributing the usual *mansaf*, they had ordered two large trays of *kinafeh* from Nablus—a town twenty miles to the northeast and famous for its pastries—and paid a taxi driver an outrageous fare to drive all the way and pick them up. The arrival of the two reddish trays was met with more cheers.

For Yousif the bacchanal was incomplete until he saw Salwa Taweel arrive with her tall, handsome parents. In her yellow dress, she stood out like a goddess. Yousif had been in love with her ever since she came to his house, almost two years ago. She and her mother had been attending a women's meeting. That day Salwa wore a white cashmere sweater and a brown pleated skirt, her hair tied in a bun behind her head. She was only fifteen then, but was as tall and mature looking as a girl of eighteen. From that moment her image had not left his mind. One day he would move heaven and earth to marry her, of this he was certain; but until then he knew he would have to endure all the agonies and obstacles of a romance in a sheltered society.

Yousif had been carrying a tray of cold beer around the garden when he spied Salwa. He stood frozen, unable to take his eyes off her. He could not move until she looked around. Then he beamed, causing Amin and Isaac and some of the men to laugh at him. Embarrassed, he moved on but his foot got caught in the leg of a chair and he almost stumbled. The beer bottles on the tray began to bang and rattle.

At noon, a black limousine arrived, escorted by two jeeps full of British

soldiers. Yousif watched many of the older men in the garden rise and line up to receive the dignitaries. He saw his father also weave his way through the crowd to welcome them. A very tall, uniformed man, with cap and baton in hand, stepped out of the limousine, which had been opened for him by a slender chauffeur with a birthmark the color of raw liver on his right cheek.

Yousif recognized the distinguished man with the matted hair as Captain Malloy, the British chief-of-police for the entire district, which consisted of Ardallah and thirty villages. The smallish, bespectacled man who got out next was the Appellate Court Judge Hamdi Azzam. The rest of the retinue was made up of British first and second lieutenants, who stood out like gold statues compared to the dark Arabs.

These men had been to Yousif's house before on religious holidays. Still, he felt conflicting emotions at seeing the Britishmen again. He knew the troubles brewing between the Arabs and the Jews would not be there had Britain not acquiesced to the Zionist demands. Should a representative of that colonial power be welcome at an Arab home? On the other hand, could a hospitable Arab turn a guest away?

"I'm sorry we're late," Captain Malloy said to Yousif's father.

"You're welcome any time," the doctor answered, shaking his hand.

"The District Commissioner planned to be here," Malloy explained. "But at the last minute something came up and he couldn't make it. He asked me to convey to you his regrets and his congratulations. *Mabrook.*"

"Thank you," the doctor said.

"The house is truly magnificent."

"You're very kind."

Yousif did not care for his father's politeness, even though he knew it was no more than formal good manners. At least his father was not kissing Britain's ring, nor was he fawning around her representative as others were doing. What was wrong with these Arab men? Where was their dignity?

It bothered Yousif that many of the women also seemed impressed. They raised their voices and the men atop the building waved their hands in salute, without ever stopping their chant. Captain Malloy smiled broadly and attempted a few words in Arabic, his pink complexion turning red. He even stopped and watched the singing and dancing, tilted his neck backward, and nodded his head to greet the men above. The town's elders, including the mayor and his council, lined up to shake hands with the British guest who towered almost a foot above them.

Cousin Salman walked toward Yousif, frowning. Yousif read his thoughts. Ardallah's bluest sky could not conceal from these two the troubles that were

gathering over Palestine in 1947. Nor did they miss hearing the rumbling of conflict between Arabs and Jews over whose ancestral land was Palestine.

“Good thing Basim isn’t around,” Salman whispered. “Look at them scrambling to meet that Englishman.”

“Can you believe it?” Yousif asked. “And I don’t care if he’s the chief-of-police. He’s still an Englishman. Look how we receive him. Like royalty. It’s disgusting.”

Salman nodded. “No one hates the English as much as Basim,” he said. “He thinks they are the root of all evil.”

“He’s right,” Yousif said. “Where is Basim anyway?”

“Who knows,” Salman said. “Just don’t tell him how some of these men behaved.”

“Thank God my father kept his *karameh*—his dignity.”

THREE WEEKS later the family moved into their new five-bedroom house. Ever since they had settled in their new residence, there had been an uninterrupted stream of visitors bearing gifts. They received enough sets of ornate coffee cups and ceramic ashtrays and crystal vases and silver trays and imported table lamps to fill a small shop.

One night Yousif stood with his parents on the balcony. In the prized aviary the birds were singing themselves to sleep. “The one word I keep hearing from people when they talk about the house,” Yousif said, “is magnificent. And I really believe it is.”

Colonnaded and well-lit all around, it brought to mind the Dome of the Rock when viewed from the Mount of Olives. It thrilled Yousif to know that people actually drove long distances just to see it.

“There’s one more thing for me to do in this life,” his father said, puffing on his pipe and pressing his wife to his side.

“To see Yousif married?” his wife guessed.

Yousif was taken aback, and the three exchanged glances.

“No,” the doctor said, smiling. “We have plenty of time for that. Yousif still has a lot of studying to do.”

His father was referring, Yousif knew, not only to his last year in high school, but also to medical school, which the doctor hoped his son would attend.

“I wish I had a brother,” Yousif said, “so he could carry on in your footsteps, father.”

“We do too,” Yasmin said, sighing. “But we have no right to question God’s will. If He wanted us to have another child, we would’ve.”

Yousif could sense that his parents were disappointed but resigned to the fact that life had denied them other children. Living in a world that exalted big families, they too would have welcomed and enjoyed a bigger brood.

“When I think of all those who don’t have any children,” Yasmin said, “I’m thankful we have you. Look at Dr. Afifi and Jihan. Look at my brother Boulus and Hilaneh. What wouldn’t they give for someone to carry on their names?”

“That’s true,” Yousif said. “Nevertheless, you *are* disappointed, are you not?”

Yasmin put her arm around her son’s waist. “We’d be both lying if we said we weren’t. There were times when I was bitter. All my life I looked forward to a house full of children and grandchildren. I wanted to cook for them. I wanted to open my arms for them when they returned from schools. I wanted to knit sweaters and scarfs and gloves for them. I wanted to shower them with gifts and love. But . . .”

“Don’t forget,” his father said, chuckling, “it took five years for your ‘majesty’ to arrive.”

“But you made up for all that we may have missed,” Yasmin told her son, giving him an affectionate squeeze. “You brought us joy that wiped out all our sadness.”

“Even if I don’t become a doctor?” Yousif teased.

“No matter,” she told him. “We’ve always been and we’ll always be proud of you.”

Should the troubles escalate into war, Yousif thought, it would be impossible for him to even contemplate leaving for school. He would stay and defend his country from the Zionists. How he would serve he still did not know. And if the threat of war was removed, he would rather be a lawyer than a doctor. He hated to disappoint his father, but he had no interest in medicine whatsoever; he was squeamish at the sight of blood.

“I guess,” Yousif said to his father, “the one thing left for you to do now is build the hospital.”

“Yes, that indeed,” the doctor agreed. “But construction work being so expensive nowadays, I don’t see how this town could afford it. Yet we can’t afford not to have it either.”

His wife snuggled against him. “It doesn’t have to be big. If you wait too long you may never be able to build it.”

The doctor nodded. “It needs to be at least five times the size of this house, and you know how much this cost.”

“How much?” Yousif asked, holding the railing and looking at the opposite

mountain. From a distance he could hear an orchestra playing at the Rowda Hotel's garden. He could imagine vacationers dancing under the full moon.

"Nearly ten thousand pounds," the doctor answered. Then, turning to his wife, he added, "What do you think? You keep up with the figures more than I do."

His wife shrugged her shoulder. "I don't care. It's worth every bit of it."

"That we know," her husband agreed. "In any case, today I contributed another hundred pounds to the hospital fund."

"Again!" his wife protested.

Her husband looked at her reproachfully. "I should've given more, but right now that's all we can afford."

"It's enough," his wife assured him.

"I wouldn't say that," the doctor replied, stroking her back. "Some paid as much on lesser occasions."

Yousif knew what his parents were saying. Ever since his father started the community fund to build a hospital, people had contributed at all happy occasions: weddings, childbirths, baptisms, the building of a new house, returning from abroad. Weddings had always been a good source of income, but of late people had learned to make donations in the loving memory of their deceased. How many times had Yousif seen his father take out his small black book to register five pounds here or ten pounds there?

What would the political troubles ahead do to all these plans? The thought nagged at the back of Yousif's mind. Was there a solution that could satisfy Arabs and Jews? He would not bring up the subject tonight with his parents; there was no need to spoil their happiness.