



# ***THE DISINHERITED***

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### **SUMMARY**

In this sequel to Ibrahim Fawal's critically acclaimed *On the Hills of God* (winner of the Pen-Oakland Award), the young Palestinian Yousif Safi searches throughout Jordan for Salwa, his bride, from whom he was separated during their forced exodus after the catastrophe (*nakba*) of 1948. Amidst the squalor of refugee camps, and beside himself with anxiety for Salwa, Yousif joins his countrymen in trying to exist while waiting to be restored to their homeland.

Why, they ask, did this tragedy befall their country and its people? How could foreigners whose ancestors had not set foot in Palestine for centuries come back and claim as theirs homes they had not built and orchards they had not cultivated? Why had the holy land been turned into a battleground? Arabs, Christians, and Jews had lived in harmony

there for millenia, and the Palestinians had never invaded any of their neighbors. And now they were a people without a land.

As weeks turn to months and months to years, Palestinians' hopes dim, yet Yousif does find his beloved Salwa, and they joyfully begin their new life together. *The Disinherited* follows the young couple as expatriate workers in Kuwait, then as students in Cairo. Always they are working and organizing, joining with their fellows to develop schools, newspapers, and increasingly militant organizations. Their dream is to unite the Palestinian people around the world, and to regain their homeland. In measured, epic storytelling, Fawal masterfully weaves a second chapter in the Palestinian diaspora.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Ibrahim Fawal was born in Ramallah, Palestine. He moved to the United States to pursue his education, receiving a master's degree in film from UCLA. He worked with renowned director David Lean as the "Jordanian" first assistant director on the classic *Lawrence of Arabia*. Fawal permanently resides in Birmingham, Alabama, where he teaches film and literature at Birmingham-Southern College and the University of Alabama at Birmingham. His first novel, *On the Hills of God*, won the PEN Oakland Award for Excellence in Literature; *The Disinherited* is the sequel to that work.

# *The Disinherited*

VOLUME 2 IN THE PALESTINE TRILOGY



*a novel by*

IBRAHIM FAWAL

NEWSOUTH BOOKS

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TO MY GRANDCHILDREN,

GEORGE, MATTHEW, ELIZABETH, NICHOLAS,

LUKE, ROSE, PETER, ELIE, ELLA, RANIA, CHARLES.





*Previously in Book One . . .*

**J**UNE 1947 was the eve of the end of the world for eighteen-year-old Yousif Safi, for Yousif is a Palestinian. Book One of this trilogy, entitled *On the Hills of God*, described the year-long journey of a boy becoming a man, while all that he has known crumbles to ashes. When we first encountered Yousif, he was filled with hopes for his education abroad to study law and with daydreams of his first love, the beautiful Salwa. As the future of Palestine looked increasingly bleak due to the pressure on the United Nations from the international Zionist movement, Yousif was compelled to think like a man. He was frustrated by his fellow Arabs' inability to thwart the Zionist encroachment and by his own inability to prevent the impending marriage of Salwa to an older suitor chosen by her parents. As Palestinians faced the imminent establishment of Israel, on May 15, 1948, Yousif resolved to face his own responsibilities of manhood. Despite the monumental odds against him, Yousif won Salwa's hand and his own happiness. But then the war came and his world was upended. He and his neighbors, friends, and family were forced from the homeland they had occupied for generations. They lost their homes, their possessions, and in some cases their honor and their lives. They became refugees on a desperate flight to sanctuary in Jordan. In the chaos, Yousif and Salwa were separated. In his heart, he knew she was alive, but how would he find her? As he and his mother adjusted to refugee life in Amman, Yousif vowed to win back both his loves—Salwa and Palestine—and create his world anew.



  

# 1

**S**ALWA WAS ON YOUSIF'S mind the moment he opened his eyes. As if having haunted him in a dream were not painful enough. As if having turned the dream into a recurring nightmare were an ordeal he could tolerate. There she was again slipping in and out and reasserting her presence in his life as if he needed a reminder of the agony of their forced separation. Wasn't life in exile already hell?

Yousif and his mother left the three-bedroom apartment which they shared with Abu Mamdouh and his family to do some shopping. The bedlam in the narrow streets of Amman increased day after day. Masses crammed into the bottle-necked heart of the city. Veiled women, western-styled women, and Bedouin women with tattoos on their faces and rings in their noses mingled in the shops. Buicks and camels and donkeys vied for space. Trinket-selling pushcart peddlers jostled with pedestrians, shoeshine boys, beggars, and the lost. The jangle of traffic and the dour faces made an already coarse city more unsightly. Every shop, every cafe, every sidewalk was so crowded that within an hour both Yousif and his mother had lost interest in shopping. But pots and pans and mats and provisions were necessities. Beds were impossible to find and they didn't even bother to look for them. With fewer than eighty pounds to their name—and shrinking rapidly—it was ludicrous for them even to think about such luxuries.

After helping his mother carry back to their apartment a skillet, a pot to boil eggs, a kilo of rice, a kilo of lentils, two packages of spaghetti, a bottle of olive oil, and half a pound of zaatar (all of which cost less than three pounds), Yousif returned to the business district, hoping to run into anyone who could tell of Salwa's whereabouts. None could, nor could he tell them where to find their own loved ones. The marketplace seemed like a large football field full of searchers. People he had scarcely known in Ardallah embraced him. One tall, gaunt woman in ankle-length dress almost brought tears to his eyes. He remembered when he and his friends

Amin and Isaac had been returning from bird hunting back in Ardallah and had run into her coming out of the local bakery with a tray on her head. How sweet she had been, he recalled, to lower the tray laden with freshly baked loaves and offer each of them a piece. That seemed a century ago, when in truth it was less than a year earlier. What a historic day that was! The three teen-aged friends were a Christian, a Muslim, and a Jew who strolled down the road in hilly and peaceful Ardallah without a care in their heads. Yet that day had been the infamous November 29, 1947, when the United Nations passed a resolution to partition Palestine, thus torching the boys' destiny. Less than six months later, the Zionists had attacked, the Palestinians of Ardallah had been forced from their homes. And in the chaos, Yousif had been separated from his beloved Salwa, his wife.

THE NEXT DAY AFTER the shopping trip with his mother in the tangled center of Amman, Yousif ran into Uncle Bouulus smoking nergileh at Al-Hussein coffee house. And he discovered cousin Salman walking alone on an alley, his elbow almost scraping the wall. Poor Salman! He was still reeling from shock. Salman looked shabbier than most. His eyes were vacant, his hair uncombed, his face unshaven, and he was probably wearing the same wrinkled shirt he had on the day they were expelled from Ardallah.

A family "reunion" of sorts was within reach, if only Yousif could find Salwa. What had happened to her and her mother and her young brothers, Akram and Zuhair? He hoped they were together, but hastily built camps throughout the Middle East "housed" half a million families that had been torn asunder. Finding one's loved ones would be a miracle in a land that obviously had run out of miracles.

Meanwhile, crowded living conditions occupied their minds. Then one night Abu Mamdouh announced he had located some friends and was about to move closer to them. Did they want his room, or should he rent it to others? They had no choice but to agree promptly to take his room, even if they worried over how to afford the fifteen pounds rent. Next day,

Abu Mamdouh and his wife and three children packed their few possessions and were about to leave.

At the door, Abu Mamdouh paused and looked at Yousif. "Before long I'll have a place of business," he said. "I don't know exactly what it will be, but I'll do something. You can be sure of that. When I do, I'd like you to come and see me. You are a bright young man, and I'll have a job for you. At least for a couple of days a week. God knows we all need income."

Caught by surprise, Yousif could only thank him.

"Promise you'll come and see me."

"I promise," Yousif said, shaking his hand.

Yousif's mother was filled with gratitude and showered Abu Mamdouh and his family with God's blessings.

Within a couple of days Salman and his family, Uncle Boulus and Aunt Hilaneh, and Basim's wife Maha and their children all moved into the cramped apartment; Basim himself rarely came home. The first evening together reminded Yousif of life in Ardallah, except now they were cheerless. Before long, they hoped, when their "residence" became known to some of their friends and acquaintances, they would gather on the patio and sit till past midnight, reminiscing and commiserating with each other.

Salman was no longer the life of the party. He sat subdued in a mental fog. The radio was turned on and they anxiously waited for the 9 o'clock news. They were shocked to hear that unoccupied Ramallah was bombed by an Israeli air raid, the announcer said. So was Jericho. Caught in the line of fire was a group of Palestinians still staggering out of their occupied villages.

"They have a new name for us," Uncle Boulus said, flicking his amber worry beads. "We're now refugees."

"I've heard it on the radio," Yousif agreed, sitting on the floor.

"I've read it in the paper," said Wajeih Abu Hadi, a neighbor from the refugee camp up the street. He was an outsider from a nearby village who had lived in Ardallah but with whom they had never socialized. Prior to the expulsion, he always traveled the countryside to inspect water wells.

He used to wear a khaki uniform with a wide, shiny brown belt and parade through town riding a horse. His erect posture on that magnificent horse was always a figure to behold.

In most gatherings, the subject of the lack of participation in the fight to save their homeland was often discussed. Yousif was the first to broach the subject.

“It’s amazing how little fighting we Palestinians did,” he said. “Were you surprised?”

Wajeeh drew on his cigarette and looked at Uncle Boulus as if to elicit support. Resting on his left elbow, a cigarette dangling from the side of his mouth and constantly clicking his worry beads, Uncle shrugged his shoulder.

“No, I was not surprised,” Wajeeh answered.

“I know we were no match for the invaders, but . . .”

Wajeeh tapped his cigarette in an ashtray, seemingly irked by the implied criticism.

“Let’s hope your generation will do better,” Wajeeh answered.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to blame anyone. I’m just curious.”

“You recall, I’m sure, that we were under British mandate for thirty years.”

“And before that four hundred years under Ottoman occupation,” Uncle Boulus reminded his nephew.

Wajeeh nodded toward Uncle Boulus and then turned to address Yousif’s impertinent question, rather condescendingly. “Do you recall how they hauled us all off to churches, mosques, and empty school buildings and locked us there for a whole day while their soldiers searched our homes for weaponry? And you ask why we didn’t fight? Fight with what? Besides, we had no army, no resistance movement, not even a band of guerillas to join.”

Yousif was in an argumentative mood. “What about the Revolt in the 1930s? Our guerilla fighters hunted the British and the Zionists all over the country.”

“Yes, there was a revolt,” Wajeeh agreed. “And it lasted for a few years.

The best and worst part of it was the general strike throughout Palestine in 1936, which lasted for six months.”

Intrigued by the paradox, Yousif waited for an explanation.

“The fighting was the good part because it deepened our sense of honor and heightened our hope. That’s when our people had few arms to fight with.”

“It also showed the whole world the threat we were facing,” Yousif added. “What’s bad about that?”

“Ah, don’t forget that it also galvanized the British authorities to ignore that honor and crush that hope. They lost no time to clamp down on us, disband our guerilla fighters, and send the organizers into exile. Mostly to Iraq.”

Uncle Boulus chimed in. “And that’s precisely when they began locking us up and searching any cave they could find, even our homes, for armaments.”

“Exactly,” Wajeeh added. “By 1947 or 1948 we were in worse shape than in the 1930s. On top of that, from the start you knew that if you fought and got killed there was no one to look after your widow or children. Even if you were wounded while performing your patriotic duty, there was no doctor to treat you. You couldn’t afford medical attention because you were out of a job and had no money. No organization, no general command, no support, no financial or medical security. The Jewish underground had everything. We had nothing. So, my dear young man, it was a lose-lose proposition.”

Yousif knew all this, but his hunger for background information egged him on. “In other words, we were had from the beginning.”

“Long, long before the beginning.”

Cousin Salman spoke up for the first time. “It’s a done deal,” he said morosely, with his hands clasped between his knees. “What’s the use? As they say: big countries decide; small countries obey.”

Wajeeh expelled a deep breath and lit another cigarette. “And some of us think we’ll be back by Christmas!”

“What a joke,” Yousif said.

Another round of coffee, some idle talk, frequent sighs, lots of cigarette smoke, more worry-bead clicking, and the visit came to an end.

But to Yousif it was the beginning of his nightly brooding. He viewed the grotesque situation in colloquial terms: the menu was planned, the meal cooked, the table set, and the feast made ready to be served to the aliens. The hands of the big powers were there to see. And yet the pangs of not knowing enough to understand all the political currents unsettled him. At such moments he wished his father were still alive to guide his probing. There was so much to study and learn he wished there were a huge library for him to devour. And how he wished Salwa were there to alleviate his mental anguish.

After the visitors left, Yousif and his uncle and Salman slept on the balcony overlooking the street. The nights were usually hot and humid, but they did not mind the outdoors. The three bedrooms were for the women and children and occasionally to accommodate friends who had no place to stay. Congestion was the least of their worries. Yousif and the other two men went inside only to use the bathroom, stepping around the mats and sprawling children. Many a night Yousif heard his mother praying before going to sleep. She prayed for the war to stop, for Basim's safety in his travels, and for all the refugees sleeping in flimsy tents. Above all, she prayed for an early return to their homes. Sometimes Yousif would hear Aunt Hilaneh praying too. But never did he hear Maha pray for her own husband. Nor would she sigh whenever Basim's name was mentioned. She was too reserved, too modest, to admit her longing for him.

EACH MORNING YOUSIF STRUCK out on foot to look for Salwa. One day, he came across a hotel, a substantial old building on the edge of town, built of stone grayed with age. It was situated opposite what must have been a spectacular flight of steps on the slope of a hill. He was told that those steps were a remnant of the great Roman theatre which had been built in the third century B.C. The city of Amman, he soon learned, had been called Philadelphia after a Roman general—a name which had been later adopted by the Palestinian founders and owners of the best hotel in the country.

Yousif walked between the broken columns and up the steps to view the amphitheatre from a high point. The relics were relatively well-preserved, except for the inevitable cracks through which weeds were growing. The seating capacity must have been hundreds, he thought. From where he was standing, he could see atop another hill the king's imposing white palaces. But immediately to his right were clusters of mud huts and little shacks for the Jordanian poor—and now for the “luckiest” Palestinian refugees. Anything was better than a pathetic tent, he thought. He also remembered from history books that until the 1920s, this capital was no more than a desert outpost.

The light traffic in the courtyard emboldened him to venture inside the hotel. Perhaps Salwa and her mother were among the privileged guests. With a sudden burst of energy he crossed the street and climbed the short flight of steps up to the large front veranda. The dozen or more men and women sitting or standing around shared the same anguished look. And none of them had heard of Salwa.

The same was true in the crowded lobby. And the busy clerks behind the front desk were equally of no help. As he started to walk out, he looked inside the spacious and heavily carpeted sitting room to his left. Against the back wall and right in the middle of a big sofa was none other than burly Adel Farhat, whose arranged wedding to Salwa had been recklessly and bravely stopped by Yousif in the name of love. Yousif froze in place. The two rivals locked eyes but neither moved. Not a nod. Not a word. Even a national catastrophe, Yousif realized, could not override personal grudges or heal open wounds. Yet Adel's piercing stare was full of curiosity but no apparent rancor.

Bewildered by his morning encounter, and with no leads to finding Salwa, Yousif walked listlessly back to the business district, bought a newspaper, and headed home. The congestion had not abated, for more tattered refugees were still arriving. Headlines spoke of a second truce to be policed by UN troops. He found Uncle Boulus sitting just inside a warehouse not too far from the apartment. Two of the men sitting with him were from Ardallah, but the others he did not know. Except for a few

burlap sacks lying near the front, the cavernous store was empty and dark. And not a customer in sight.

He did not need an advanced degree in psychology to read the gloom on their faces.

“The way we Arabs do things,” the apparent owner, with rolled-up sleeves, was explaining, “there’s no way of knowing when we’ll go back. I thought I’d better try and have some income before we run out of the little cash we have.”

Those around him pondered his predicament and nodded.

Yousif could only admire the Palestinian men who had lost no time looking for something to do. The merchants among them, like the proprietor of this store, had rented warehouses in hopes of building up a trade.

“It’s better than sitting at a coffeehouse,” another stranger remarked, puffing on his rolled-up cigarette.

“I never sat at a coffeehouse more than once or twice in my entire life,” the wiry, high-strung proprietor added. “I never had time. I’ve worked all my life, and I can’t stop now.”

Yousif was introduced to the strangers. He shook their hands and remained standing, for there was no extra chair. The August sun was hot, and he was uncomfortable, even in the shade. He noticed that except for himself and the Ramallah man, Abu Fahmy, all were wearing native, ankle-length robes. Abu Fahmy was wearing a tailored brown suit, dark sunglasses, and a short red fez. To many he was known for his modest wealth, but to those who knew him well he was better appreciated for his sharp wit and sense of humor.

“What I love most are the rumors,” Abu Fahmy said, removing his fez and wiping his forehead which was half pale and half sun-tanned. “We Arabs love to spread rumors. We collect them, we embellish them, and then we believe them. We believe our own lies. First, Jewish cowardice. Then, Arab bravery.”

“Then people would start demanding invasion,” one of the men said.

“Imagine that!” Abu Fahmy added. “It’s too damned presumptuous

of us to even use the word. We're as capable of carrying on an invasion as a camel is of turning into a canary."

They all snickered. Other men, Yousif thought, could say these things and sound like traitors; Abu Fahmy could say them and sound funny. It was his smile and his tone. He looked at Yousif affectionately, took the newspaper from his hand, and began to read. An item caught his eyes and his smile widened. Glubb Pasha, the Englishman who headed the Arab Legion, was in London asking for a two million pound subsidy for Trans-Jordan.

Abu Fahmy chuckled. "We're not only weak—we are destitute. A nation of bare feet. *Hooffa*. And listen to this: 'Moshe Sharrett of so-called Israel—ha!—is saying that 'the phenomenal Arab exodus would change the course of history.'"

"To hell with that," one man said, pitching his cigarette in the middle of the street.

"Exodus? Forced exile is more like it," Uncle Boulus echoed.

Abu Fahmy was calm. "The whole world is full of lies and liars. You expect the Jews to admit they threw us out? Hell, no. The thing is: they lie and back their lies with action. We lie and think that's good enough."

Yousif watched the men purse their lips, click their worry beads, and nod their heads. Abu Fahmy, still reading the paper, stopped and handed it to Yousif.

"Here. Read us what the poet says. The Jews fought us with ten thousand guns and we fought them with ten thousand lines of poetry. Tell us who won. Read us the poet's verdict. Maybe he knows something we don't know. Maybe we won after all."

Yousif did not read the poem. Instead, he folded the paper and rolled it. His lips felt tight against his teeth.

"You disagree?" Abu Fahmy asked. "You think poetry is proper at a time of war?"

Yousif stood his ground. "There's always a need for good poetry."

Sensing a reservation on Yousif's part, the store proprietor pressed on. "But . . . ? Go on."

“Each of us has a role to play. And poets are fighting the best way they know how.”

Abu Fahmy was quick to redress his earlier position. “You’re right about that. I’m not ridiculing the poet. I’m ridiculing—even condemning—our Arab nation in general. We should be tired by now from allowing foreign powers to keep kicking our asses one century after another.”

Yousif returned the smile. “Amen to that.”

As he started to walk away, he heard Abu Fahmy tell his uncle, “Your nephew is a bright young man. I’m sure you’re all proud of him.”

“Yes we are,” Uncle Boulus replied.

WALKING HOME, YOUSIF THOUGHT about Abu Fahmy’s cynicism. At times, he admitted to himself, poetry (especially bad poetry) did sound pretentious, or superfluous. It even seemed indecent when front-page atrocities were staring one in the face. Yet he wanted to confront all those jokers who had done nothing to protect their homeland. How dare they sit now and criticize and blame and belittle! What the hell did they do themselves? He knew of one poet who was relevant, a Jordanian, living in Amman. Ah, he would love to meet him. Almost as much as seeing Salwa again, or finding out where Basim was. He knew of this particular poet from his own father, not from school. A rebel from birth, this impassioned and radical poet was a devout nationalist, and a pitiless critic of the king’s and his government’s policies. Above all, he was infuriated by the Allies’ breach of faith. The Arabs had been promised independence after World War I, but after helping the Allies win the war, they had been pilloried. The poet rebelled, attacked the throne and its allegiance to Britain, and was harassed and imprisoned. During his stormy lifetime he was in and out of jail as often as he was exiled. What a man! A true Arab who had refused to be silenced. A free spirit who aroused people with his impassioned, iconoclastic poetry. His poetry was more than relevant, Yousif felt. It was necessary.

At the end of the town square, Yousif turned onto a less-crowded street. It was a long street, full of small shops with considerable merchandise

displayed on the sidewalks. Sacks of wheat were next to rolls of colored cloth which in turn flanked big brass trays of pastries from adjacent stores. Porters were there too, with bent backs from the heavy loads they were loading, unloading, or carrying inside the stores.

Suddenly, several jeeps approached, each full of colorful Bedouin soldiers with their guns at the ready, looking in every direction. Pedestrians in the street hurried to the sidewalks for safety. There was a flurry and all eyes turned to the direction from which the jeeps had appeared. Applause broke out as a convoy of cars advanced.

“Sayyedna . . . Sayyedna,” the onlookers chanted.

A man noticed the puzzle on Yousif’s face and pulled at his sleeve to let him know that His Majesty himself was passing. Yousif caught a glimpse of his profile as the sleek black limousine slipped by them. His white turban, wound around his head with one end hanging rakishly loose, was a style unmistakably his. No one else in Jordan wore a turban that way.

Yousif wished he could have had a closer look at the face of the Jordanian monarch whose every whim had such an impact on the fate of his people.