

Strangers in the House: Coming of Age in Occupied Palestine

by Raja Shehadeh

An excerpt:

(My father) climbed the steps to his own house and opened the door. It was dark and stuffy inside. His wife had closed all the windows and shutters and draped the new furniture with white sheets. It was strange to be alone in this empty house, moving from room to room without the usual sounds of his family. He could not stop thinking about what this house meant to him. It represented years of very hard work. It was the first house he had established. Until he had married he had lived at the Continental Hotel, which was owned by his uncle, my mother's father. But after twelve years as a successful lawyer in Jaffa he had been able to establish himself, marry, and furnish this attractive home, where he would finally live a happy settled life with his young wife and two-year-old daughter. Images came to him of his wife in her pink satin dressing gown, moving elegantly from room to room, peering at him with her Greta Garbo look. Had he come to bid all this farewell?

What should I take back with me? he asked himself. Nothing. Nothing at all.

He was resolute: I want it to stay as is, covered and preserved during our short absence so that when we return we will undrape the furniture, air the place, and resume our happy life. At this point his eye rested on the porcelain statue of Buddha. It was the only object that had been left uncovered. It stood on a wooden ledge in one corner, presiding benevolently over the scene below. He came close and saw the calm, squinting eyes, the mocking smile, the fat round belly with the aquamarine belly button. It comforted him to look at it. Perhaps this would be the best thing to take, he thought. He placed it under his arm and walked out.

This porcelain statue of Buddha has remained in my family's house ever since. We have taken it to every house we have moved to and kept it prominently displayed. And it has remained on its wooden base exuding a calm presence in the midst of the many disorders and tragedies that have befallen us. How furious my grandmother was when she saw that he had returned without a truck full of her expensive furniture.

'I lend you my car and this is all you bring? I told you I wanted my china tea set back. Did you forget? And my silver cutlery, you forgot this too?'

'What did you bring with you?' my father said in his defense. 'Only a sack of lemons from your tree in the backyard.' He could not count on her sympathy.

The only person who bid Jaffa a proper farewell was my grandfather, Saleem. How often I heard the description of the way he lingered by the gate of the house as they were leaving, seemingly lost in reflection.

'What are you doing?' my mother asked him.

'Bidding this house farewell,' he answered.

'But why?'

'Because we shall never return,' he said with a finality that left no room for doubt.

'How wise he was, how perceptive,' my mother would say. I always wondered what he knew that the others did not, why he left his family and went to settle alone in Beirut. Perhaps that silent moment when he stood by the gate taking a last look at his house was the only moment of closure. Everyone was rushing about, thinking of trivial matters, and there was my grandfather with his self-absorbed, distinguished look, his thick round spectacles, and pipe, taking the time to bid farewell to his house in Jaffa and to the life he had enjoyed in it. He alone seemed to have the resilience to refuse to be led by the voice around him calling this a two-week departure. In his quiet, self-assured, almost mystical silence, he seemed able to experience the final flight from the city, which he had insisted they were seeing for the last time.