

My Aunt's Mamilla

Helga Tawil-Souri

My father's eldest sister has always served in my mind as a potential family encyclopedia. "Potential" because I never had the opportunity to spend much time with her. She had come and visited us in Beirut once in the mid 1970s – I vaguely remember. My grandmother, with whom I spent much of my childhood, would often mention Auntie M. under a nostalgic haze, perhaps regret, that her first-born was so far away. That longing tone for her eldest led my other aunts, my father, and my uncles to joke that Auntie M. was their mother's favorite.

For years Auntie M. endured only in my imagination. Whatever tidbits I had caught about her were extraordinary, a fusion of new world mystery and old world obscurity. She lived in faraway places that sounded utterly exotic: Sao Paolo, Etobicoke, Toronto; that they always rhymed only added to their enigma. The haphazard trail I constructed of her life seemed improbable too: old enough to remember family life in Jerusalem; married and sent off to Brazil; had a daughter ten years older than me who didn't speak Arabic.

Auntie M. hovered behind a veil of unanswered questions: How old was she? Did my grandparents marry her off or did she choose to wed Uncle A.? How is one "sent" to Brazil? Could one even fly to Brazil back then? Did she flee with the family to Lebanon first? Did she really have another daughter besides the one I knew of? What happened to the other daughter? How did Auntie M. end up in Canada? (Is that why one of her younger brothers, my Uncle S., also ended up in Canada in the 1960s; and why his daughter, only a few months older than I, was born in Montreal?) Did Auntie M. go to college? Did she finish high school? Did she yearn, like my grandmother, to be rooted again?

My Auntie M. and I overlapped geographically for a year when the rest of the

family left Beirut, resigned that there would be no return to Lebanon either. Living with my grandparents in an alien American suburb, home life was perpetually penetrated by stories from “back home” and “back then” related by the old timers coming in and out of the house. People visited from Amman, Beirut, or Paterson, New Jersey, speaking of Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Jericho, and Jaffa. My “old aunt” and her husband, Uncle A., fit right into these gatherings, which I attended out of duty, boredom, and the misfortune of being an only child surrounded by others decades beyond me. I would politely say hello, help my grandmother and Auntie M. serve tea, and upon my grandfather’s request reluctantly kiss the wrinkled hands or golden rings of the cloaked, thick-bearded men with heavy accents. I never really listened to their talk of the inner politics of the church, financial troubles, family issues, sibling disagreements about inheritances, the potential visit of an archbishop from Aleppo, and on and on.

I would drift into a dream-like state, lulled by Uncle A.’s cavernous tenor voice. A six-foot-plus man with dark freckles on his face arranged in a holy constellation, he would join in the Syriac chants when the priest rattled his thurible to sanctify the house. Myrrh swirled around my nostrils, incense smoke attempting to rise to the heavens, but, like the Aramaic that sounded both foreign and familiar, remained trapped under the ceiling, its echo lingering in the living room for days. I’d stare at Uncle A., unable to reconcile the tensions of him being the only person in my family who knew how to pray in Syriac (and knew what it meant) and yet also the only person who would happily take me to McDonald’s. It was a paradox that my childhood mind could not overcome, and I’d wonder: could this really be a man who accepted a wife shipped across the world to him?

Only when the pious rituals slipped back to chit chat about life “before” would Auntie M. re-emerge, adding her share to the stories narrated by my grandparents and the visitors of the day. Under the dopey mix of myrrh and boredom I would feel the uneven footsteps on the staircases of the family house in Mamilla, push open the creaky wooden door to my grandparents’ bedroom, pick the orange blossoms and figs from the trees in the shared yard, tease the Swedish sisters at the convent, run home under the threat of British-imposed curfew. The(ir) stories became the formation of my own memory: delayed, indirect, secondary, what Marianne Hirsch calls “postmemory.”¹ I grew up dominated by narratives that preceded my birth, shaped by the stories of that generation who knew Palestine “before.” I could not understand or link these unbridgeable distances, but I would come of age with my grandparents’, Uncle A.’s, and Auntie M.’s truths assembling my own genealogical and political foundation.

A name would come up in conversation. Later that evening, if my grandmother wasn’t too tired, Auntie M. would pull out stacks of old photographs from my grandparents’ closet. Auntie M. would randomly open a frayed brown folder of photographs bound together by a rubber band that had lost its elasticity. *That’s B.*, my grandmother and aunt would confirm to each other. Auntie M. would launch into a biographical narrative. *Yes, he was the third son of Abu M. B. went to the same school as Uncle S. His sister married F. B.’s younger sister moved to Chile and he ended up marrying a woman whose mother was Mama’s uncle’s sister-in-law. And the sister-in-law’s father was in business with our Uncle E., when he was running a taxi “servees” to Jericho ...* She would situate every

single Palestinian, and along the way mention how we were related. Doubt would surface again and again about individual trajectories. Despite that, I became part of an entire nation. The skittish arcs did not culminate in a historical record. Every ghost-like face from every photograph entailed larger organizational questions of the ways people and places were related. The biographies of those ghosts, just like the biography of Auntie M., were partial. Like the fantasy of nationalism, they never quite fulfilled their promise. They taught me, however, that I was Palestinian.

I would look at Auntie M., simultaneously attracted and repulsed by her anachronism. She didn't know how to drive yet had lived for decades in sprawling urban and suburban spaces; she was a stay-at-home mother hidden under the shadow of her husband, yet the only person I knew of that generation who went by "Ms." She had been the first to leave the "old world" and so it didn't jive in my head that she was the most "Palestinian" of all of my father's siblings. Her old-fashioned behavior emerged when she made coffee in old brass pots, when, for example, she spoke and referred to chewing gum as *Iban* rather than *'ilkeh*, inspiring bouts of laughter on my part. She was also undoubtedly more cosmopolitan than any other family member: she spoke Portuguese, she always worked on and finished these things called crossword puzzles (in English), she was abreast of the latest trends in literature, fashion, and popular culture. She talked of things I couldn't understand but found implicitly avant-garde or modern: *latifundia* and *camponesa*, architectural movements and *juntas*, Pierre Trudeau and Quebecois separatism, universal healthcare and public transportation, Queen Elizabeth and Andy Warhol.

I'd get lost staring at her, high on boredom and incense. I'd suddenly be jarred awake as my grandfather convinced a fellow congregator not to arrange a marriage. It wasn't my grandfather's belief in the agency of love that surprised me – after all, my father and my uncles had married (and even eventually divorced) foreign women of their own choosing: one of my aunts married a blue-eyed Italian-American man from Connecticut; one of my uncles had run off to join the Spanish Civil War with a French woman a decade his senior. I would look at Auntie M., intent on finding hints in her face that would confirm or deny her "arrangement." A grimace, an expression? I'd wait for her to uncomfortably shift in her chair, fold her hands over, blink, something. But she never offered me a clue.

Mamilla on the Phone

In 1948, my dad was five years old. He remembers being on the road somewhere in the Jordan Valley, a few days before Easter, in the overbearing heat, crammed with smelly old ladies on a bus, then walking through the desert landscape, begging one of his older sisters to carry him, that his eldest brother wasn't there ... not much else. That was all he recalled of their departure. My aunts and uncles, older than my dad, had provided a slightly fuller picture over the years: my grandfather was not sure whether they should head to Jordan or Lebanon, or whether there was even a choice in the matter. One aunt remembers a neighbor's severed head left on their staircase sometime that spring, claiming it was the event that spurred their exile. Another aunt remembers that most neighbors had

already escaped while my grandparents held on to the notion that they could remain safe in their home, despite surrounding areas of Jerusalem already emptied of Palestinians by Palmach, Irgun, and Stern gangs. My grandmother always recalled the lady who offered them water and shelter for the night somewhere in the Jordan Valley.

Fifty-five years later, almost to the day, my cousin and I were seeking a measurable remnant of our family's existence in West Jerusalem. By then we had all already been players in a permanent hop-scotch game of exile, jumping in different directions: Amman, Beirut, Brazil, Canada, and also Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Nicosia, London, Paris, Athens, the U.S. ... (My cousin, who considers herself French, was born in Canada to a Dutch mother.)

Standing on a boulevard with cars buzzing on one side and the Jerusalem YMCA on the other, Auntie M.'s stories gushed in my head. Uncle B., the eldest son, two years younger than Auntie M., had been an obsessive frequenter of the YMCA. During the King David Hotel bombings everyone feared that Uncle B. had died as he hadn't come home for two days; he had been held by British police for two nights. *This* was the event that marked the beginning of the end of Jerusalem as they had known it, after which daily life was increasingly saturated with violence, scarcity, uncertainty, and fear. The night that rumors of the choking of all roads to Jerusalem buzzed in the courtyards of Mamilla, Auntie M. and Uncle B., teenagers by then, held each other tight as they witnessed their parents' first screaming fight about the family's future. A few days later, when my grandfather received confirmation that one of his cousins had been forced to flee Haifa and that the city had indeed fallen, came the eve of the rest of our lives. The next morning my family set out eastward on foot and by bus, arriving in Jordan on *Sabt al-Nur*, and heading north by foot, taxi, and bus a few days later, reaching the outskirts of Beirut in time to hear radio announcements broadcasting the birth of Israel.

I was overwhelmed by Auntie M.'s long-winded anecdotes about the photographs in my grandparents' closet. I saw them all: Auntie M. and Uncle B. as toddlers standing on the *jabal* (a hill by the cemetery); my grandmother posing by a car in front of the bath house; my three eldest aunts lined up on the house's staircase; Auntie M. smiling in a field of roses; my grandfather awkwardly standing in a spring with his pants rolled up. The memories rolled on: my grandfather's taxi business, family weekend rides to Jericho, Auntie S.'s car sickness, my grandfather's brother's escapades with Jewish women and Uncle B.'s loss of virginity with one of them. Through Auntie M., I remembered the walks uphill to the Old City, the layered echoes of church bells and calls to prayer, the overpowering smell of the magnolia tree on the corner as we turned left towards the market, secretly fondling the gold-threaded damasks at the *khayyat* when *Mamma* shopped for cloth to sew matching dresses.

Standing on a corner at Mamilla, my cousin and I were now seeking to see, touch, smell, even just trace the material of memories. If the memory of the house had been permanently wedged into my grandparents, aunts, uncles and father's stories, the stones, archway, staircase of the actual house too remained wedged in its neighborhood.

My cousin and I had spent our entire lives moving from one country and one language to another, always reassured by our velocity. At a young age, we had internalized the



Auntie M. and Uncle B. on the *jabal*. Source: Auntie M. 's personal collection.

ability to keep track of the position of our bodies in space, of roads on a grid, charting our movement through time and the selves we'd been at different moments. We always knew where we were standing in relation to other points. As the generation born elsewhere and therefore firmly at home hovering under a disrupted "here," we had never gotten lost: neither in the deserts of Saudi Arabia nor in the courtyards of Paris, the bland American suburbs, or the airports where we so often met and parted ways. That we were now disoriented standing in Mamilla made no sense to us.

Around us were Hebrew signs, yellow license plates, Israeli flags and bumper stickers, people walking on the street speaking in a language we did not understand. We had become trespassers in our own skin. Would someone call the *Shabak* – the Israeli internal security service – and claim that two suspicious women were walking through the neighborhood? We weren't the first, nor the last, Palestinians looking for, wanting literally to hold, the evidence that places us in our homeland. That we felt fear, uncertainty, trepidation, and a sense of hostility was testament to the dispossession that befell our family's house and our family itself. Mamilla was now squarely re-allocated into Western, Jewish, Israeli Jerusalem. The flourishing of Palestinians in its midst had long ago become an erased story, as if West Jerusalem had always been Jewish. As if my Auntie M.'s stories of growing up in Mamilla were pure fabrications!

Making our way back to the King David Hotel, we called my cousin's father. Uncle S. must have been eleven years old in 1948, surely he must be able to guide us. *You're wasting your time*, he scoffed. But we needed to affirm the past's existence. The only way to regain our footing, we knew, was to see and walk Mamilla through the mind of our family historian: Auntie M.

We remained intent on our demand: *001 1 416* We dialed Auntie M.'s number.

My cousin held the phone; I held a video camera. I was going to revive our house in my camera lens. I left to my cousin the role of linking us across time and space through the telephone.

Seven time zones, three languages, and about five or so decades unhinged themselves:

- *You mean behind King David Street?*
- *King David Street?*
- *Tu m'as bien dis que c'est King David Street?*
- *Ouais, c'est écrit là: Ha-Melekh David. Dis-lui que c'est le grand boulevard, au ouest de la vieille ville.*
- *Well, uh, that's what it's called. The big boulevard leading up to the Old City. The same street the hotel and the YMCA are on.*

There was nothing odd in the telephone obliterating our spatial and temporal discontinuities. These technologies had played a constitutive part in our life-world as Palestinians. It was through the intimacy, intensity, and immediacy provided by the telephone that we had constructed our affiliations as family members to begin with. I knew Auntie M.'s voice before I ever heard her in the flesh. It was through images – still, and later also moving – that we recognized ourselves as displaced people. The architect-like handwriting that I encountered on postcards and birthday cards sent by Auntie M.'s daughter was one

I emulated my entire childhood, long before meeting cousin L. I saw myself as if in a mirror in all of my cousins' pictures mailed back and forth across continents. Telephones, telegrams, photographs, videos, letters, postcards: they allowed us to be with one another, to re-imagine an elsewhere, to transgress to another time.

- *No, Auntie. There is no such building on that street ...*
- *Well turn around to the other side. It should be right there, to your right.*
- *Mais t'es sûre qu'elle veut dire à la droite? Il 'y a pas de rue là.*
- *Uh, there is no street right there. On the right. No, no street.*
- *You walked down from the cemetery? So it should be to your right, next to the baths.*
- *Les bains. Mais oui, on a décidé que c'était là les bains. C'était bien des bains, non?*
- *Yes, yes, we did. We walked down from the cemetery. I think these are the baths, but ...*
- *Pass the triangular building. And then on the left. It's right there!*
- *Ça doit être là, à gauche ... J' sais pas.*
- *Écoute, on a déjà passé à gauche. Il y avait un cul-de-sac. Derrière le bâtiment rose, à côté des poubelles. Peut-être elle veut dire à droite?*
- *Mais non, la droite c'est l'autre côté du quartier. Ça doit être de ce côté-là ... Il faut peut-être retourner vers le bâtiment rose ...*
- *Pink building ... pink building? ...*

Time expanded. Our multi-directed conversation was piecemeal, at best. Non-linear, non-chronological; irreconcilable, really.

- *Et si tu lui parlais, toi? En arabe. Ça pourrait aider, non? Elle doit se rappeler des endroits en arabe, pas en anglais.*
- *Boh, tu crois vraiment que ça fait une différence?*
- *Beh ...*
- *Bon, allez, passe le téléphone.*

Time shrunk. Auntie M. was utterly confident of where we were: Summer 1945 standing with her neighbors in the courtyard two streets down watching her brothers play hide and seek. A little farther behind were the markets. And over there the *jabal*, and there, the cemetery, the Mamilla "pool," the conservatory, the monastery.

- *Kunna nitfarajj 'ala la'ib violin min il-shubbak ... ou marra, lamma kan abooki honak ma 'sahbo S., yil 'aboo kurat qadam 'al-hayt el-ma 'had, ana ou mamma kunna raji 'een min ...*
- *Alors?*
- *Hmm. Des histoires.*

From time to time, the Auntie M. we were familiar with surfaced:

- *Et?*
- *Shhh. Elle raconte.*
- *C'est pas le moment de raconter des histoires!*



Auntie M. on the street in Mamilla. *Source: Aunti M.'s personal collection.*

We were transposed to Auntie M.'s living room following her mind in the past tense, listening to her in the present tense, wandering. The three of us it seemed were in a slipzone, gripped between the old and the new, between the here and the there, between the before and the after.

There were long moments of inert silence, perhaps loneliness, as she dug through her memory and we dug ruts into the same little streets, back and forth. All that space was inhibiting both her and us.

- *Ah, ah! Mazbout! Hadda beit Jamila!*
- *C'est la maison de Jamila!*
- *Jamila!? C'est qui Jamila?*
- *Une voisine? Je sais pas, mais ça fait rien. On doit y être. On est proche. Tu vois des escaliers?*
- *Okay, beit Jamila ... stanni shwaiy, rayheen 'al-shmal ... But what staircase are you talking about?*
- *Tu filmes les escaliers là, d'accord?*
- *Mais c'est pas les bons!*
- *Écoute, tu sais jamais. Tu crois vraiment qu'elle s'en rappelle! C'est des escaliers. C'est à côté de la maison de Jamila. Il y en a pas d'autres!*
- *D'accord, d'accord je filme ... Mais c'est pas eux.*



Auntie M. and my grandmother posing in Jerusalem. The car belonged to my grandfather's brother. *Source: Auntie M.'s personal collection.*

My cousin and I switched back and forth between telephone and camera, between hope of finding our holy grail and standing back in an attempt at objective distance. We walked the same streets and corners back and forth. We argued with each other as if each one of us had been speaking to a different Auntie M. We repeated street names and wondered how we could figure out what they *used* to be called because surely streets weren't named after the likes of the Tzahal or Gershon Agron then.² Like two archeologists, we peeled off layers of signs and paint to measure the age of buildings to gauge which were part of Auntie M.'s Mamilla and which were not.

Mamilla still had pockets of the old (we had found Jamila's house, whoever she was!). But Mamilla was also a construction zone that would in the near future host high-end hotels, open-air Orientalist-styled shopping malls, condos that only super-wealthy elite Jews from other parts of the world could afford or were permitted to buy. Moshe Safdie³ and the Israeli government were already undertaking their "urban renewal" process in what they saw as an eyesore on a valuable piece of real estate that could attract more tourists and urbanites alike.

I did not want to admit that my Auntie M., my cousin, and I were on differing journeys. My Auntie M.'s Mamilla came to a pause when it became a no-man's land, an indeterminate zone where the armistice line would be drawn in 1949. Her walk preceded the barbed wire, rubbles of ruins, and hurriedly built stone walls, preceded the

web of reality I was confronting with my camera, surrounded by urban changes driven by Zionism, capital accumulation, consumerism, real estate logics, and time. She kept referring to the *jabal*. For me there was no *jabal* at all, there was just a neglected hill on the periphery of downtown. If for her homeland was timeless, for me it was increasingly about ephemerality, claustrophobia, anger.

It never occurred to me that our search would remain unresolved, a continuously posed question. Just as it would never occur to me years later that Auntie M. would be diagnosed with cancer. One simply doesn't think these things happen until they do.

Projecting Mamilla

A cacophony of sounds reverberated: cars, mopeds, guttural voices rising then fading, hands fumbling. Disconnected fragments of conversations screeched over the speakers like a nail on a chalkboard. Sometimes they were clear, in French. Sometimes they were incomprehensible. Sometimes they were overshadowed by what sounded like one-way conversations in English, in Arabic. The chaos of noise was accompanied by an equally changing mess of images. A scene would suddenly shake, swinging as if hanging on a thread: a blurred close-up of pants, a few fingers, the sky – these were often moments when my cousin and I were switching roles. Aesthetically and aurally, it was a disastrous production.

My aunt sat upright, her hands on her knees, lips pursed. The film transformed her into a statue. Her eyes and ears transfixed. We were thousands of miles from Jerusalem in my dad's living room, watching footage that was now eight months old.

Her eyes still on the screen, her body erect on the sofa, then leaning slightly forward, Auntie M. suddenly shrieked: *turn left, turn left!* The footage continued straight. She looked at me, scolding me, *I said turn left, Helga!* I was stunned, and managed a meek, guilt-ridden answer: *but Auntie ... uh, it's a video. It's too late to turn left.*

Had it already been too late a few months earlier, I wondered.

Auntie M. retreated slightly in her seat, said nothing else, and kept watching. Following the movements on the screen, she didn't know which way she was going, but she knew where she was. She began to speak a garble of reflection, introjection, projection ... A young girl half the world away, living inside a screen of a video taken by two people who were not part of the past. So many layers collapsed: time, her exile, the city's decades-long construction, video technologies, language, generational balances.

She would stop her murmurs. *Go back, go back, go back to that alley.* An illusion would transform from an absent figure into a presence, hovering in the shadows of the film. *G.! Here's your school!* she'd say to my dad. She would suddenly pause, considering the out-of-body bridge-crossings made possible by modern technology. She would break off, catch her breath, gasp at names ...

Ok now, can you pause? Can you zoom in? She would command or plead the footage to do something different from what it was doing; she would ask me what was on the backside of the footage as if I were still standing there, forcing me to retreat back into my

memories. But were they my memories that I had to retrieve now, or hers? The subject in the experience shifted constantly. She, sitting on the sofa, inhabiting a space decades back, was the site of knowledge. I, behind the camera screen but also sitting next to her, was the site of knowledge production. But Auntie M. was losing her authority here: she was no longer the site of those convincing narratives I had grown up with, which documented a lived past. If as a child I had confronted myself as a fantastic, chimerical other in the stories told by Auntie M. and my grandparents, now Auntie M. was constructing – and losing – herself as the fantastic, exiled other removed from the materiality of Jerusalem and from the virtuality on the screen.

Her tone would shift from melancholy to excitement and back again, there seemed to be no difference between the disparate visions of what she saw on the screen and what she saw in her mind. *There, on the right, that's where the A. M. family lived. You remember their daughter D., maybe she was a year older than you?* she'd say to dad and, without a breath, launch into a mini-soliloquy: *they fled to Amman a few weeks before us. That was before Baba's cousin left Haifa. Maybe it was March. Or earlier ... One of the sons, you remember him, he was about B.'s age. B. used to say he was dumb and he couldn't stand him. Poor kid. Really he must have had dyslexia, but you know, back then, we didn't think like that. I had students in my class who now I think had dyslexia too ... And D., I think she married H.'s neighbor in Amman. And her grandchildren are now in college in Sydney or maybe Melbourne; where is it that our cousin P. ended up? Oh, how beautiful was the mother's crochet work! ...* She would linger over an unspoken memory. Auntie M. has always related stories and followed other family's arcs across exile and diaspora. This time we were jumping much bigger chasms. Her autobiography was migrating across media, across spaces of self-reference, inextricably connecting her narratives, her body, and her memories to mine and to those of my dad, the other spectator in the room, the youngest brother who couldn't possibly remember any of what she was pointing out. She was not in my film, my father was still unborn, but her body was the text.

We would have to rewind. Auntie wanted to see the same scene over and over and over again, shuffling through more memories. She had to tell us about the time she and my Auntie S. *picked fresh figs from the tree whose branches always reached above the wall and down onto the street on our way back from school ... and do you remember the fresh fig jam that we used to get from the deir? ... and oh, the toot tree! How Mamma used to get so excited and anxious when it bore fruit. S. would come home all stained in red! And you remember that time he'd stood on B.'s shoulders and fell on his nose and ...* my father and I would stare. There was no fig tree, no *toot* (mulberry) tree, no *deir* (convent) on the screen. Her memories were lifting us to re-imagine, re-live, what was behind the surface of this moving image in front of us now in a time before either one of us was born. Home was being carried by the act of imagination, triggered by its cinematic specter.

My cousin and I knew that we had unearthed the entire neighborhood. We understood that one can return and find that one's house is not the home that one had hoped for. Certainly home could *not* be the structure that (another's) memory had built. My aunt was convinced otherwise. What had fallen through the splices of the video were not the

ellipses of her memory. It was, after all, a *virtual* experience. We were interlopers into her native Jerusalem.

Auntie M. did not accept the omniscience of a narrator. She had learned throughout her life to question historical documents, institutions, and all kinds of narrative systems. Letters, photographs, telephones had created rapports between us; but they were also the very same technologies, along with maps, identity documents, tape recorders, and video footage, that had *mis*-represented Palestinians. Her house's substance would be the testimony that she had experienced it. She had actually lived in Mamilla: she could retrace the house's creaks without ever having gone back. I on the other hand, needed more. My walking past the house, bracketing it out of my camera's field of vision, was the very limitation of technology itself. My camera had constructed Mamilla, predetermined its terrain, and by doing so, boxed home out of the frame.

I was stubborn. For me, film was just a representational record. It is fixed and cannot be transformed by the memory of a lived experience, which is anything but fixed. I had faith – not in what I had seen or not seen, but in the projections.

I did not understand then – neither when filming, nor in that living room – that I was seeking the impossible. That in seeking to place the house in my field of vision, I was also dissolving Auntie M.'s being. I didn't grasp her resistance.

We moved on to a different screen. It was Auntie M.'s first time experiencing Google Earth. Multiple looks circulated in the living room as the whole apparatus of Jerusalem was projected onto my computer screen. She skipped over the new street names; turned a deaf ear to my readings. She shifted in the new seat, adjusted her bearing from a bird's eye view ... *There are the baths!* It didn't take long – despite the newness of it all – to pinpoint the conservatory, her old school up the hill, yes, even Jamila's house. We continued our archeological expedition in reverse: adding information layer by layer, fostering a sense of mutual recognition, between her and me, between 1948 and 2003, between film and map, between camera and satellite, following each mouse-click.

Listening to her was riddled with problems of meaning and being: she was imposing and projecting post-dated ideas, feelings, and thoughts. *No, no, this is not the name of that street. Mish heyk, G.? Look, over here is where the baths are, and from there ...* Was she not seeing the same map I had pulled up on the screen? Home, Mamilla, Jerusalem had been emancipated, hanging in the abstract void of a satellite camera shot reproduced on a 13-inch screen. Her eyes shuttled back and forth, she asked me to zoom in and out on her behalf. *Oh these computers, how do you move the mouse!?* She was abruptly annoyed. The reflection of her face on the screen was not simply a matter of technological discomfort, but a magnified inner state. Her thoughts were being replaced by the moving images before her. Where does collective history abandon an individual to a space of historical amnesia?

Our Mamillas contradicted each other. It seemed that no amount of technology, of recordings, of Kodachrome, video tapes, telephone calls, satellite maps, would be able to fill in all of those gaps. They were only messages from a now-vanished world, having only a ghostly presence. This was exile. *I need some tea*, she murmured.



Auntie M. and Uncle B. playing in a tree on the *jabal*. Source: Auntie M. 's personal collection.

Amorphous Biography

Auntie M. now lives in a suburb of Toronto named after an Anishinaabe tribe.⁴ I visited her not too long ago. I arrived late at night after a long drive. When I got up in the morning, she had already prepared tea, a plate of cheese, *labneh*, and *zaatar*, and warmed up some Arabic bread. As we sat down for breakfast, she unfolded the newspaper and completed, in ink, the crossword puzzle in less than twenty minutes, all the while carrying on a conversation with me.

I had not admitted that I was considering writing something about her. Or that maybe, I would ask her, once and for all, as if it were so simple, the family history *min il-awwal lal-akhir!* Auntie M. was more than eager to speak of the past, however. She had put aside photographs.

Our bond, just as our family, had no center to hold, no house to touch, no home to gather in. She could pick anyone out of a photograph, tell me their trajectories: Safad to Athens, Bethlehem to Sydney, Jerusalem to Amman. The axes intersected in the past, but I wasn't sure anymore what held them together in the present except flight. We were in Brazil one moment, she's peeling an avocado and dousing it in lemon and sugar; then we're at the nun's school in Jerusalem; later we're in her apartment the time I accompanied my grandmother on a visit; then we're in the suburbs of Toronto sitting on the side of a pool while she waits for her daughter to finish her swim lesson; she's unwrapping layers of cloth from her brandy-doused British Christmas cake. We go through old recipe books; she takes out Uncle A.'s briefcase ... By the end of the day, I'd been catapulted across continents. And with every anecdote, picture, scribbled text, official document, everything she had set aside to share, the spaces between us expanded. Neither memory, nor language, nor people, nor places were reference points that brought us together.

It was not fair of me to expect a story from Auntie M., as if History had not yet collided with her life. I could neither complete the family trajectory nor Auntie M.'s in a linear way. Her stories were discontinuous and fragmented. The pictures were faded by time and geopolitics. Following the immeasurable synapses of her brain, we would jump between decades, stories, and other countries. There was a young woman on skis, *a girl scouts' trip in Lebanon* ... And in the next breath we bounced by a decade and a few continents: *Yes, these are all of Uncle A.'s sisters-in-law, there is his mother, me. A group of dark-haired women standing under a palm tree in Sao Paulo surrounding the seated matriarch in her thob* ... Apparently one could get from Lebanon to Brazil by plane back then. *Oh, I changed planes six times. I still have the silver spoon I bought from the airport in Milan. And in Cape Verde I had gotten a placemat ... Do you want sugar in your tea?* I'd thumb through the stack of Uncle A.'s passports and immigration documents: British Mandate, Brazilian, Canadian, American ... *Oh no, my mother-in-law never allowed me to become a Brazilian citizen!* Auntie M.'s documents didn't parallel her late husband's. A visa from the Brazilian embassy in Beirut, 1956. A renewal from the Lebanese consulate, crossed out, hand-written notes in Portuguese in the margins of her passport. *We lived in that big house in Sao Paulo together. All the wives, all the sons. I was promised that I was only going to be there for a little while, maybe a year. You*

see, J., who had married Uncle A.'s older brother managed to get a Brazilian passport. Pull out that photo of us on the convés; she's the one on the far left. But she was happy living together. I, you know me, I couldn't stand it. But what was I going to say? Through the disorganized stack we would continue the journey, peppered along the way with Portuguese, silences, Arabic idioms, translations, Canadian expressions, even recipes.

She would get up to make a cup of tea. *I have to have my tea, my sugar. Otherwise my blood level ...* There was not a single picture of her other daughter. She had lived until the age of ten or so. I refrained from asking. A picture of a teenager in a field: we're back in Jerusalem. My aunt must be twelve or thirteen. We go back a little farther: there's my two-year old aunt standing in the middle of a street in West Jerusalem. I take a bite of her cake and have a sip of tea, all of them so British in their essence. I could be anywhere. And then a picture of one of my Uncle S.'s ex-wives, *the French one. You remember her?* There's my grandfather and his brother E. standing in what is obviously Bethlehem ... *Here we are. This is the jabal we used to go to. You see, it's all greenery, trees. It is an open space. The Old City was up that way ...* I recognized the little faces of my elder aunts and uncles, lined up on the staircase. My grandmother striking a pose in front of a church, little Auntie M. barely able to stand up. Another group of young women in their bathing suits: my aunts. We're back in Beirut, it must be the 1950s?

Almost twenty years older than my father, her tales of her littlest brother suspended loosely in my mind: she would tie his curly blond hair with a bow. Five other siblings between them – not including the miscarriages my grandmother had – what ever held them in common, I wondered. My own understanding of her, my own limitations in writing her story now, were necessarily born of a lack of intimacy, intimacy made impossible by migration and exile. We dreamt in different languages, we held different passports. We didn't share the same intonations of Arabic, we each held that our own taste of a particular mix of *zaatar* was the best one, even if we all liked to sprinkle some on our *labneh*. We would later remember certain experiences together: my grandmother's funeral, my cousin's baptism, the time I knocked on her door for trick-or-treating and she didn't recognize me, her visit to Berlin when I introduced her to the Bee Gees ... I wanted her to be representative, but we were singular individuals. How then to recapture the effaced relations out of which the notion of the individual and persons themselves emerge?

The pursuit of objectivity became more and more impossible. Like a camera's jammed shutter that overexposes film so that you can't tell what you're looking at anymore, there were too many probabilities, inconclusivities, choices to be made. *Do you want to have Chinese or Indian for dinner? I know it's very cold, but let us try to go out. You can drive us, eh?* I'd let her guide me through whatever she was laying on the table. I ached to draft a clear line: a young woman who finished high school and taught in Jerusalem. A woman who pursued a secondary education, who helped her mother take care of her six younger siblings while my grandfather worked in Jordan. A woman who taught at an all-girls school. A woman who married a young man from the Mea Shearim neighborhood – *tab'aan Arabs lived in that neighborhood. You don't hear about that today. Ka inno il-yahud always lived there or it was always only a Jewish neighborhood. Pfff!* She had been to his house and played with the younger siblings. She hadn't really spent any time



Auntie M., third from the right, with two brothers, one sister, and neighbors. *Source: Auntie M.'s personal collection.*

with him. A sense of courage, a question would slowly form in my gut, but then she'd find another picture.

My dad, newborn Auntie R., Auntie S., Auntie H., Uncle S., Auntie M. ... All the children except Uncle B., looking tired and disheveled. It was not one of those lined-up-by-height pictures I'd grown accustomed to seeing. I turned it to see if there was a scribbled indication. Nothing. No place marker, no month. *Auntie, where was this picture taken?* Her eyes glanced downwards, diverting her gaze from the memory, from me: *the day we arrived in Amman.* I was hit by a bullet. The messiness of (our) chronology and geography was right between my fingers. The picture I held in my hand marked the beginning of the "after."

It is my moment to attempt to rethread some evidence: car bombs, mortars, snipers, soaring prices, closed shops, suspension of bus service, looting, scarcity of food, explosions, barbed wire, arson, unemployment, and the thousands of well-to-do Palestinians from Jaffa, Jerusalem, Haifa packing up and moving, farther inland, outside the country, the survivors of Deir Yasin paraded on the streets close to home to cheering Jewish crowds ... There is no plausible way to tell these stories. Descriptive holes riddle her account. Her memory was like everyone's: pocketed, layered, divulging only what she wanted. A sensory part of her had shut down (either it did back then, or it was shutting

down now, or both).

I was seeking an improbable linearity, some logic, some nexus of the untarnished by Zionism, by colonialism, by patriarchy ... Auntie M. was in an entirely different place: a widow, a cancer patient who memorized the bus routes and schedules to get her to the hospital, to the mall, to the bank, to the post office ... *It's going to be minus 17 degrees tonight*. We are sitting in a living room thousands of miles away from any home in a disjuncture. Her apartment is furnished with relics from continents and decades near and far. I may be the one – my grandparent's grandchild – of the generation burdened with the impossible task to understand and record that past.

I was suffering from needing some kind of beginning, climax, and denouement. The whole time I needed to embrace those gaps for what they were: part of human nature and the fleetingness of memory, part of diaspora and exile, part of Zionism's success ... Whatever tidbits I had gathered as a child or even now *was* our family story. It was messy, without a chronology or geography that I could chart out in a linear fashion. Our scrambled compass could not return us home. We were cut off from each other, each of us swirling around a constantly deferred point. That inability to fill those gaps was precisely what made us quintessentially Palestinian.

Endnotes

- 1 Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).
- 2 *Tzahal* is the Hebrew acronym for the Israeli Defense Force. Gershon Agron, founding editor of the *Palestine Post* (renamed *Jerusalem Post* in 1950), served as an envoy of the World Zionist Organization, and was mayor of (Israeli) Jerusalem from 1955 to 1959, during which time he played an important role in the development of the western sector of the city.
- 3 The Israeli-Canadian architect designed the Mamilla Mall in 2009. He is also the architect of the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum (2005) in Jerusalem and one of the new terminals of Ben-Gurion Airport (2003). Safdie gained world recognition for Habitat 67, a modernist three-dimensional set of pre-fabricated living units, as part of the 1967 Expo exhibit that took place in Montreal, Canada.
- 4 Anishinaabe, in its own dialect of the Algonquin language, means "First Peoples" or "Original Peoples," but is directly translated as "Beings Made Out of Nothing."