

# Within the Walls

There was screaming coming from the kitchen.

Nisreen found Aviva already in the doorway, rolling her eyes. "Guess now's a bad time to make a sandwich."

Their mothers were facing off over the counter. Nisreen's mother had her lips coiled, arms only uncrossing to tuck a stray hair beneath her scarf. Mrs. Ackermann was red-faced, waving sweet cheese in one hand and goat meat in the other, shrieking, "You've ruined it! It's not kosher!"

Oops. Nisreen's ears burned. She always forgot that the Ackermanns needed meat and dairy in separate ice boxes. She knew she should admit her mistake, but the fight looked like it had been going on for a while. Nisreen's mother was only this silent when she was seething. The quieter she was, the more enraged Mrs. Ackermann became.

"Mama!" Nisreen's older sisters were thundering downstairs. "Mama, the Ackermann boy peed in the hallway!"

"It's not my fault!" Mica had tears in his eyes and a dark spot on his trousers. "They wouldn't let me use the toilet."

"It's not your hour for the toilet," said Selma.

"We never use it during your hour," agreed Fatimah.

Mrs. Ackermann was beside herself. She screamed that it was harder for a boy to hold it, that the girls were just being cruel, and now there were clothes to wash and no hot meal to look forward to, she finished in a screech.

Nisreen was wondering if anyone would notice if she slipped away, but then a bedroom slammed open and her father was roaring, "Every time I try to get a wink of sleep, all I hear is that insufferable voice, you damn woman!"

Mrs. Ackermann did not know much Arabic, but she did know when she was being insulted. She met Nisreen's father with a tirade about lazy bastards who sleep at six in the evening. Individually, she and Nisreen's father were loud. Combined, they were earth-shattering. Nisreen didn't mind. She was rather used to it.

She was beginning to wish she had spoken up sooner, though, especially when she felt Mr. Ackermann behind her. He gently pushed past, and she caught sight of the first of a series of numbers on his forearm. Like her father, Mr. Ackermann had a beard that curled at his collarbone and a face wrinkled far beyond its years. From far away it was hard to tell the two apart.

Mrs. Ackermann seized at her husband. "Daniel! Daniel, these people are torturing your son. And they ruined our food! What are you going to do about it, Daniel?"

Mr. Ackermann looked from his wife to Nisreen's parents with long eyes. "Well, Mr. Tahar, Mrs. Tahar," he said. "What has happened?"

Nisreen thought this was as good a cue as any. "It was my fault. I was cleaning up after dinner and I forgot."

She couldn't look at her father; all she heard was his clenched, "We'll call the butcher in the morning."

Mr. Ackermann nodded gratefully. "And Mica will go outside next time," he said, nodding at his son. He led his wife out the kitchen, to the bedroom they shared with their children. Mica followed, trying to cover the damp spot, still sniffing.

Aviva lingered, eyeing a bowl of oranges. Mr. Tahar had brought them home, and judging by the glare he was sending his youngest daughter, now was not the time to ask. Nisreen caught her parting smile of encouragement.

Then her father started in on her. "This is the second time in three weeks, Nisreen! Do you know how expensive meat is?"

Nisreen tried to swallow the lump that was forming in her throat. Selma and Fatimah were shooting her looks. She wanted to stick her tongue at them, but her mother would see. Instead she apologized, insisting it wouldn't happen again.

Her father wasn't paying attention. He was at the table, his face in his palms. Her mother's hand hovered over his shoulder, then fell to her side.

Nisreen's sisters decided they could leave. Nisreen grabbed an orange before scrambling to the basement, where Aviva was waiting.

"Sorry about that," she said, tossing the orange to Aviva.

Aviva peeled the skin and gave Nisreen half. "It's ok. I don't like goat, anyways."

Nisreen liked that about Aviva; she didn't get mad easily, and she forgave quickly. Shortly after the Ackermanns began living with them, Nisreen watched Aviva give her brother the only chocolate they were going to get in months. Nisreen thought that was superhuman. She started testing Aviva. When no one was looking, she'd pull a strand of her thick, blonde hair, hard. Aviva would gasp and stare at Nisreen with wide eyes, but she wouldn't retaliate. She wouldn't even tell. After the third time, Nisreen felt pretty bad. She apologized and promised she wouldn't hurt Aviva ever again, and if her sisters did, she'd box their noses. That made Aviva laugh, and after that they were friends.

They were ten years old. None of the others got along half so well, but that wasn't surprising. All the Jewish and Arab families being crammed into houses together were prone to hatred.

The house the Tahars and Ackermanns shared was made of cement that must have been white once but was now rain-worn and bitter with rust. It sat on the side of an impossibly steep hill. The first time Nisreen saw it, she thought it was going to topple right off. It had a foyer, a sitting room, a kitchen, an upstairs with two bedrooms and a bath, a basement that was empty except for a mildewing sofa. A little smaller than Nisreen's real home. A little older, too, or maybe just not as well taken care of. It

might have been just like any other house in Palestine, except it was in a neighborhood surrounded by a barbed wire fence.

No one could leave al-Ajami without the military commander's permission. Nisreen and her family were walled inside in 1948, along with the handful of other Arabs who had managed to stay in Jaffa City during the war. They had been told they had to leave in the middle of the night. They weren't given time to pack. Everything that was left behind was quickly occupied by settlers.

That was why when the Ackermanns arrived two years later, they were told they would have to share a house in the ghetto, at least temporarily. The news extinguished the small breath of hope that had filled their lungs. They were exhausted and looking for a place to call home, and that was what they heard Israel was going to be.

Nisreen remembered when the soldiers informed them that the house they were just becoming used to was being split into apartments. She and her sisters spent the day moving all of their belongings into what had been their parents' bedroom. Their father burst over this new piece of injustice. Their mother was just numb. "No more privacy," she said. "A house with the same people who might have--" She stopped then because she was about to bring up Sami. No one talked about Sami.

The Ackermanns moved in the next day. War was declared immediately. The screaming matches between Mrs. Ackermann and Nisreen's father became the house's soundtrack. A mixture of loyalty and boredom motivated Selma and Fatimah to constantly torment Mica, who was always eager to fight. There was a time when Nisreen's mother might have played peacemaker, but now she only glided through her daily routines. Only Mr. Ackermann made a real effort. He was as gentle-hearted as his daughter, maybe even more so.

He was prone to nervousness, though. Aviva said it was because of the camp. At first Nisreen thought he went to a bad summer camp. Concentration camp, Aviva corrected. Once Nisreen saw him

stare at the numbers on his forearm for a long time. Then he put his hand over them, as if to make them go away.

Work was scarce within the wire walls. Food was, too. Nisreen's father brought home a few handfuls of change a day, without pride. He'd taken to long naps in the afternoon. Nisreen and her sisters tried to tip-toe around him. Mr. Ackermann was allowed to leave al-Ajami during the day. He would go door to door, selling anything he could get his hands on. Mrs. Ackermann didn't think it was enough. Nisreen could hear their hushed arguments at night, Mrs. Ackermann moaning that they were never going to be free, not really.

The last five months had been bearable only because of the treaty the Tahars and Ackermanns managed to negotiate. They ate in the kitchen on alternate days. Bathroom use was scheduled. The sitting room was off-limits, unless there were guests. Food could be shared if both parties paid for it, but it had to be split carefully, and it had to be both halal and kosher, and anyone who violated the terms would accept responsibility.

That was why the butcher's wife arrived the morning after the kitchen incident. She brought racks of beef, chicken, lamb, and goat, all fresh. Nisreen's mouth was watering before the door was fully open.

"Miriam!"

She hugged the woman around her ample middle. Miriam patted Nisreen's head before kissing her mother on each cheek. The small gold cross on her chest danced sunlight across the peeling sitting room walls.

Nisreen's mother disappeared to count out money from the savings jar. Nisreen and Miriam fell into easy conversation that was only interrupted when Aviva poked her head around the corner, armed with toys. She reddened when she realized Nisreen had company, but Miriam smiled.

"Your name Aviva, yes?" she said in broken Hebrew.

Nisreen said that Aviva understood Arabic, that she spoke three languages, actually.

“Almost four,” said Aviva. “I’m learning English, too.”

Miriam was impressed. She motioned for Aviva to sit next to her and began telling her about how she and Nisreen used to be neighbors on farms just outside Jaffa. Miriam didn’t have children, and she liked Nisreen’s company, especially after walking to the city became dangerous. She and her husband were removed from their home the same night as Nisreen’s family. Miriam held Nisreen’s hand the entire way to al-Ajami.

“I like your cross,” said Aviva, pointing to the pin on Miriam’s chest.

“Thank you. It was my mother’s.”

Nisreen squinted. Miriam used to wear the cross every day, but this was the first time it appeared since the occupation. “I thought you lost that?”

Miriam bit her lip, placing a hand over the pin. When she looked at Nisreen, her eyes were shining. “I was able to go back.”

“How?” Nisreen was leaning forward, her small hands clenched into fists. She half expected Miriam to be joking. Aviva was looking at her with raised brows.

“They let me out of al-Ajami last week, to sell to the settlers,” said Miriam. “There’s a meat shortage. No one followed me. I could go anywhere I wanted.”

“You went to your house,” said Nisreen. Something strange was spreading through her whole body. She felt exhilarated.

Miriam nodded. “I had to try,” she said. “A boy was at the door. His parents weren’t home. He told me to come back later. He told me he wasn’t allowed to talk to strangers.” Miriam’s voice was far away. Her eyes trailed over Aviva. “He was small. He looked scared,” she said. “But I could see my furniture behind him. I could see the cabinet we kept the photo albums in. I told him I’d give him as much food as he wanted if he would let me inside. I knew Hazam would be mad, but I didn’t care. I took

anything that fit in my pockets. My cross, Hazam's razor, one of the napkins with the flowers embroidered on the corner."

"He wasn't angry?" said Nisreen. "The boy?"

"He was laughing," said Miriam. "He said I'd made a bad trade." She smiled, her wet eyes blinking rapidly. "I only wish I had bigger pockets."

Nisreen's mother was back, her fist closed around the money. "Did you hear anything of prisoners? Before you returned?" Her hopeful lilt drained Nisreen's excitement.

Miriam shook her head, her smile falling.

Nisreen's mother forced her cheeks up. "Well. That's to be expected." She counted out the change into Miriam's palm. "Here you are, *habibti*."

Miriam began fussing about it being way too much. She and Nisreen's mother engaged in the traditional squabble, each refusing to acknowledge that money was far more precious than it used to be. Eventually Miriam accepted it all but insisted on gifting an extra carton of goat. Nisreen's mother closed the door behind her, thanking her again and again.

Nisreen put the meat away. When she came back, her mother was still standing against the door, looking at her empty hands. Nisreen thought about hugging her, pressing her face into her blouse so that she could smell the all-spice and coffee always lingering there. Instead, she trooped past.

The basement was the only place Nisreen and Aviva could be away from their bickering parents and prying siblings. At first, Aviva had been afraid. She said she never wanted to see a basement again. She and her mother and Mica hid beneath a friend's house during the awful time Mr. Ackermann was in the camp. When he finally returned, Aviva said he looked like a corpse that had come alive again. She even had a nightmare about him. It took a long time for him to feel like her father again, for any of them

to feel like a family, even. Nisreen watched them eat dinner through the cracked kitchen door once. They moved around each other, in silence.

Eventually Nisreen was able to entice Aviva down with dolls made out of newspapers and a deck of cards she found in her father's coat pocket. Now they escaped to the basement whenever they could.

Nisreen could feel Aviva's eyes on her. She raised her brows.

Aviva put her doll down. "What would you get from your house? If you could go back?"

Nisreen didn't have to pause. "My necklace."

"Oh," said Aviva. She picked the doll up. Put it down again. "What kind of necklace?"

"Glass."

"*Glass?*"

"Yeah. My brother gave it to me."

"Oh," Aviva said again. She only knew about Sami because once she and Nisreen caught Nisreen's mother asking Mr. Ackermann if he knew anything about prisoners, about what happened to them. Mr. Ackermann said he did not. Nisreen's mother might have left then, but she turned around. Begged Mr. Ackermann to find out, to talk to the soldiers in Hebrew. She looked like she was going to fall to her knees. Mr. Ackermann said he would try. He hadn't brought it up since.

Nisreen hadn't, either. Any time Aviva came close to asking, she would become far away. Even now she was staring at the doll in her hand without really seeing it.

She had been in the orange grove when Sami gave her the necklace. It looked like a misshapen arrow, skinny on top and wider at the bottom, with one side pointed. A green ribbon was wrapped around the edge.

Nisreen couldn't help but make a face.

Sami laughed. "I found it on the street," he admitted. "But I thought it was pretty. Especially after I cleaned it. See the way the light shines through? And I had the ribbon, anyways."



Nisreen's arms were around him before he could finish speaking. It had been ages since anyone gave her a gift.

Sami spun her around, tying on the necklace. "Don't take it off, okay? It'll be your *zakra* of me."

"*Zakra*?" said Nisreen. "A memory?"

"Yeah. So you can always remember you're my favorite sister." Sami was grinning his usual infectious grin. Nisreen smiled, too.

"Am I really your favorite?"

"Of course." Sami leaned in. "Selma and Fatimah always smell like sheep dung."

Nisreen laughed. She didn't stop until a gunshot screamed through the distance.

Sami stood, trailing the smoke across the sky. He started to run.

"Sami!" Nisreen stood on her tip-toes, watching her brother turn around. He already seemed far away. "I promise. I won't take it off!"

She saw him give a thumbs-up, still wearing that grin. Then she watched him run until he was gone. He was seventeen.

She tried to keep the necklace on after that. But the pointed side kept cutting her collarbone, and after blood stained one of her dresses, she placed it in her bed stand. She opened the drawer every night, watching the glass turn her bedroom light into rainbows. She could never be sure why she left it closed the night they were forced from their home. She hadn't remembered the necklace until she could not sleep in the new, strange house. The promise was broken, and Sami, she knew, was lost forever.

Nisreen's family would have lost their minds to sadness and boredom were it not for the garden. It wrapped around the house, bursting with apple trees and date palms and ivy that spilled over the clay fence. It would have been chaotic, but the Tahars expertly coaxed the herbs into straight lines, raked the

fallen leaves, and relieved the trees of ripe fruit. It was therapeutic; they worked in the evenings, silent but side by side.

Nisreen could always feel Aviva and Mica watching from the window. She usually fought the impulse to invite them; she didn't want to spoil the fragile peace created by her family patting soil and passing water.

That day, however, the Tahars and the Ackermanns were managing well. After Nisreen's mother gave Mrs. Ackermann the goat, Mrs. Ackermann made so many kebabs, there were leftovers. She presented the extra food to Nisreen's mother, who was so surprised, she barely managed a thank you. Nisreen and her sisters didn't hesitate to help themselves. Even their father could not help but mention that everything was very well seasoned.

That was why when Nisreen beckoned to the Ackermann children, she did not feel uneasy. The October air was cool with good will. She and Fatimah began showing Aviva how to tend to the mint leaves. Aviva was a good learner, already eager to be doing something with her hands. Mica hovered above the girls, pretending to not pay attention. He made guns out of his fingers and chased an invisible villain around and around.

It felt good to be out of the house. Even Mr. and Mrs. Ackermann wandered over. They commented on the weather and the clearness of the sky. Nisreen heard her parents agree that it was all very beautiful. She smiled.

Then the roar of a military truck broke across the street. Everyone became still. The roaring grew close, then stopped. Footsteps up the drive. Someone was knocking.

Nisreen watched her parents' eyes become wide. She wanted to hold her mother's hand, but she was already running to the house. Her father motioned for the girls to stay back before he followed. Nisreen made her hands into fists, made them flat again. Aviva asked her what was going on twice. She

snapped that she didn't know, and Aviva tried not to look hurt. Mr. and Mrs. Ackermann stood in the doorway, unsure.

They all heard the front door hinges squeak. Then Nisreen's mother screamed. Nisreen bolted inside, her sisters at her heels. The Ackermanns followed, Mrs. Ackermann scooping up Mica, Mr. Ackermann wrapping his arms around his chest.

Two soldiers stood in the doorframe. When they saw Mr. Ackermann, they began speaking in fast Hebrew. He only nodded, brows furrowing. Nisreen turned from them, looking wildly for her mother. She and her father were standing a little apart. It looked like they were embracing, but when Nisreen got closer, she saw that there was a boy between them, tall and skinny, with moonlight skin. A wave of dizziness erupted over her.

"Sami!"

Nisreen's sisters clouded around, trying to get at their brother, to feel him and to know he was real. Nisreen copied. *Sami!* The name felt strange on her tongue. She and her family formed a wailing ball of hugging limbs, not yet realizing that Sami stood unmoved in the middle. His hair was thin and fell in overgrown wisps. Odd patches grew on his cheeks. His lips were dry and long and slightly parted. He stared with empty black eyes at a point on the ceiling and did not look down.

Nisreen shifted from one foot to another, contemplating the figure on the mattress.

"Don't wake him," her sisters warned.

They were crowding above the apparently sleeping Sami like dwarves guarding Snow White. Sami lay on his stomach, cradling his head. He kept moving his feet, and he was breathing fast. Nisreen didn't think he was asleep. She became impatient. She wanted to look at his face, to talk to him. She wiggled onto the mattress, ignoring her sisters' furiously whispered protests, and placed a hand on her brother's back.

Sami waited a moment. Then he lifted his head. A scar curved from the end of Sami's eyebrow to his nose. His jaw was tight. He stared at Nisreen through lidded eyes, as if he was determining who she was.

Nisreen sat up. She started to say something, but her words caught in her throat. She tried again. "I really missed you, Sami."

She felt pathetic. She should have let him rest. She looked at her sisters, red.

Selma pulled her up by the shoulder, a little roughly. Sami flew up. For a moment Nisreen thought he was going to defend her, as he usually did.

"Water," he said.

Nisreen stood dumbly. Her sisters did, too.

Sami looked between them and through them. One side of his face convulsed. "Water," he said. He was growing angry. "Water!"

"I'll get it," said Nisreen. She wanted to be out of the room.

Sami acted like she hadn't spoken. She heard him continue to beg even as she dashed downstairs and filled two glasses to the brim. A tight ball was forming in her throat, making her breath rattle. She thought she might be sick.

That night, the Ackermanns sat at the dinner table and the Tahars on the kitchen floor, among pillows from the sitting room. "We're eating traditional style," Nisreen's mother had said, but by the dirty looks Mrs. Ackermann kept shooting, Nisreen realized this was more of a sit-in protest.

It was the Ackermanns' night to eat in the kitchen, but Nisreen's mother had rallied for an exception. Mrs. Ackermann wouldn't budge. Nisreen's mother wouldn't, either. Her son was home, she insisted, and he was going to eat a meal in her kitchen. She was so bent on the idea that she was willing to break the rules. She made spinach pies and baked lamb and pita pockets and mixed every kind of

vegetable into a delicious rice, using up half her family's food supply. She looked extremely pleased watching Sami eat. He was shoving everything into his mouth as quickly as possible. Nisreen wrinkled her nose. She wondered if he was even tasting anything.

Conversation was dulled by the anger in the room. Nisreen looked up at Aviva. "Can you pass the salt?"

Aviva had to lean so far down, she almost fell out of her chair. Nisreen tried not to laugh.

She was sobered by Sami's loud chewing. Her father chuckled. He hadn't taken his eyes off his son the entire evening. He patted him between the shoulders. "Pace yourself, *habibi*, slowly."

Sami didn't look up, just kept eating as fast as he could. It was as if a hungry ghost had invited himself to dinner.

"Gross," said Mica, not loud enough for the parents to hear.

Nisreen could feel Fatimah bristling. She shot a glance at Aviva, who kicked her brother under the table. He only giggled. He said Sami looked like a pig.

Selma turned around. "Don't call him that, you brat."

Nisreen's shoulders were hunched to her ears. She was mad at Mica, but she was somehow angry with Sami, too. He was embarrassing, she thought, and then she felt guilty for thinking it. She wished dinner would be over.

Mica was laughing like he had come up with the best joke in the world. He look straight at Selma and said with a gap-toothed grin, "He's a disgusting, slobbery pig."

This time everyone heard. The silverware stopped clanging. Nisreen's father said that if he ever heard something like that come out of the boy's mouth again, he'd slap the mouth right off him. That sent Mica into tears. Mrs. Ackermann made a scraping noise against the tile and said that if the Tahars had stayed out of the kitchen like they were supposed to, they wouldn't have had their feelings hurt.

Then everyone was up and screaming into someone's face, except for Nisreen and Aviva, who were avoiding eye contact, and Sami, who was swallowing his last bite.

Then he stood. He shouted, in a voice that was not his own, "Shut up you damn, filthy Arabs!"

He appeared to be addressing not just his family, but the Ackermans, as well. His wild black eyes darted everywhere but did not meet anyone's gaze. He was holding a dinner knife.

Nisreen blinked at Sami. The insane thought crossed her mind that they had been tricked, that this wasn't Sami, after all. She saw her mother cover her mouth with her hands. Saw her father unclench his fists. He placed a palm over Sami's eyes, slowly taking the knife out of his hand. He led his son out the kitchen, still covering his eyes. Nisreen could hear Sami mutter the strange mantra the entire way up to the bedroom. "Filthy Arabs. Damn, filthy Arabs. You all need to shut up."

Nisreen didn't say anything when Aviva found her in the basement. Aviva didn't, either. She just put her hand over Nisreen's, sitting with her in the dark.

"He doesn't remember us," Nisreen said after a while. She hated that she sounded like water. "He doesn't remember me at all."

"Maybe," said Aviva. "Maybe you could do something to remind him."

Nisreen grew quiet. When she thought of it, she looked at Aviva with new light in her eyes. "The necklace!"

She stood, letting go of Aviva's hand, and began pacing. "When he sees it, he'll remember how he made it for me. How it's our *zakra*."

Aviva didn't look as excited as Nisreen felt. She only said, "But how will you get it?"

"Miriam got stuff from her old house. I'll go and ask."

Aviva sucked in her cheek. "You don't think whoever's living there threw it away?"

This had never occurred to Nisreen. She always pictured her house looking exactly the way she left it, everything from the books on the shelves to the marks on the wall that measured her height.

“They couldn’t have,” she decided.

Aviva was not as enthusiastic as Nisreen wanted her to be. “What if they don’t want to give it to you? What if they want to keep it?”

Nisreen crossed her arms. “Why wouldn’t they? It’s a piece of glass, it doesn’t matter to them.” She stopped pacing. “What’s wrong? It’s a good plan. You’re the one who said I need something to remind him.”

Aviva stood. She tried to choose her words carefully. “It’s just that I don’t think they’ll like you being there very much.”

Nisreen looked down. “I have to try,” she said. She bit her lip. Looked back up. “What if you came with me? They’d like you.”

Aviva crossed her arms behind her back. “I don’t know if my parents would let me.”

“We’ll go tomorrow night, then, when everyone’s asleep.” Nisreen was staring hard at Aviva.

“Okay,” Aviva said finally. “I’ll go with you.”

At midnight, the guard at the gate went home and the next took his place. There was usually a five minute delay, and some of the older al-Ajami boys took the opportunity to hop the fence and steal cigarettes from the corner store nearby. When Nisreen and Aviva asked for help getting over, they shrugged and complied.

Aviva’s father had taken her outside of the neighborhood a few times since they arrived, but this was Nisreen’s first time in two and half years. She took a deep breath, starting at the stars. They were somehow different on the other side of the fence.

“It’ll take thirty minutes to walk there,” she told Aviva. “But maybe if we run, it’ll be faster.”

They broke into a sprint, their hair wild in the wind. When they arrived, cold air had filled their lungs and chilled the sweat climbing down their arms. Nisreen's old neighborhood had one street lamp, and it made a column of welcome light.

Nisreen stood on the porch she spent her early years napping on. The rocking chairs were still there, between them the little table her father had made for ash trays. The curtain in the door window was still the pink one with the swirling pattern. Nisreen had to fight the instinct to let herself in.

She had a sudden thought, and Aviva voiced it. "They're probably asleep."

Nisreen clamped her jaw. She didn't care. She knocked three times, extra loud. She remembered when she had been woken at night in the same house, in the same manner. She knocked again.

The porch light turned on. The curtain on the door slid open. "My husband isn't home right—oh!" The young woman in the window blinked when she saw Nisreen and Aviva. She opened the door. She was in a night gown, her hair loose and falling in smooth curls. One hand rested on her protruding belly. She looked surprised and maybe a little cross, Nisreen thought with some guilt. "What are you doing here?" she said. "Are you lost?"

Nisreen could not understand her. She looked at Aviva, but she was looking at her shoes, sweat still sliding down her arms. Nisreen tried in Arabic. "I left something here, and I was wondering if I could have it back."

The woman's eyes widened. She couldn't understand Nisreen, but she didn't have to. She let go of her belly and gripped the door knob. "You shouldn't be here. Where are your parents?"

Nisreen nudged Aviva, shooting her a pleading look. Aviva only gazed at the woman, petrified. Nisreen was beginning to regret bringing her at all.

The woman began to close the door. "I'm calling the police."

Nisreen wasn't sure if she should run or hide or just cry.



“Wait,” Aviva said in Hebrew. Suddenly she was standing determinedly straight. “We just want to get something that was forgotten here. It won’t take a minute. Then we’ll be gone.”

Nisreen still saw doubt in the woman’s face. “I don’t know if I should. My husband wouldn’t like it.”

Aviva stepped forward. “Please,” she said.

The woman’s hand was back on her belly. She glanced at Nisreen, then looked at Aviva. Then she opened the door just wide enough to let them in.

No one was using Nisreen’s old bedroom. The necklace was still in the dresser. She grabbed it, careful to avoid the pointed side. She did not pause to rifle anymore through the drawer, which was filled with birthday cards and other treasures, did not take a second glance around the room or out the window from which she used to watch her father water the orange trees, back when he was up before the sun. She only ran down the stairs and out the house forever. Aviva was beside her the whole time.

They didn’t stop running until they reached the gate. Then they stood, panting numbly. Nisreen hadn’t thought about how they were going to get back inside.

“We could sleep in the bushes until morning,” said Aviva wildly. “And then we could, I don’t know, catch a ride with the first person who comes out.”

Nisreen tried to think. She looked at the necklace, the ribbon a little old but still a deep green, the glass already catching the sun’s first rays.

Then a heavy palm lifted her by her hair. She howled in pain and fear. Aviva screamed, and the soldier pinched her arm.

“You two are in deep trouble.”

Maybe it was because Nisreen had just seen her home, but the al-Ajami house looked worse than ever. It sat crookedly on the hill, the rusted cement like fire in the breaking dawn. The soldier did not let go of Nisreen and Aviva until they were standing on the porch.

The door was open wide. All the Tahars and Ackermanns stood in the foyer, like they had been about to leave. They were so still and silent, they could have been statues of themselves. Nisreen realized they were all staring at Sami and Mr. Ackermann, who were so close, the tips of their noses might have been touching. Sami was grasping Mr. Ackermann's beard, holding it up. Nisreen squinted against the now fully risen sun, and that was when she saw the knife Sami was holding to Mr. Ackermann's neck.

She only saw it for a moment. Then a bullet flew through the left side of Sami's skull and came out through the right. He let go of Mr. Ackermann's beard, and the knife clattered against the tiled floor. Nisreen looked up at the soldier. She hadn't even felt him aim the rifle. In the commotion that followed, the necklace fell from Nisreen's hand, slicing the skin on its way down. It shattered in an explosion of glass and blood.

Nisreen's mother told the story like this: She had woken to check on Sami, but realized Nisreen was missing. She turned on all the lights, and that of course woke everyone else. The Ackermanns found that Aviva was gone. The families scoured the house, first as a unified group, then, when they couldn't find the girls, as warring parties. They wanted to leave the house and continue the search but somehow ended up in battle lines before they were out the door. They attacked each other with the worst words they could think of. Mrs. Ackermann was in hysterics. Nisreen's father could have had an aneurism. But worst of all was Mr. Ackermann. He was in a fit. He pulled at his beard, wringed his tattooed wrist, swayed from side to side. Then he howled, a loud, painful sound.

That was too much for Sami. “Shut up! You damn, filthy Arabs, just *shut up!*” Then he unveiled his retrieved dinner knife. He grabbed Mr. Ackermann by the beard, and that was when the soldier found them.

Looking back, though, Nisreen thought it must have been more complicated than that. The scene in the foyer had been too still. It had been as if all of them were standing in place for a long time. She couldn’t understand why no one was reaching for Mr. Ackermann or trying to hold Sami back. Why wasn’t Mr. Ackermann resisting? Why wasn’t Sami taking the plunge into his neck? For a while she thought a magic spell must have frozen them right there, right in the entrance of the house.

But the more she thought about it, the more she decided it must have been more real than that. She went through it over and over, thought about it even when the Ackermanns left for good, even when her family was able to move, even when the barbed wire around al-Ajami came down.

Eventually she decided that when Sami lunged at Mr. Ackermann, and they locked eyes, they must have really seen each other. Mr. Ackermann saw Sami alone in a black cell, he saw the knife that scraped through his face, he saw him being yelled at, being spat on, being blindfolded and burned, battered, beaten, being thrown around so much that his brain was knocked out of place, being deprived of all his youth in the span of two years. And Sami saw Mr. Ackermann become a walking skeleton. He saw the legs like needles, too thin to support anything. He saw him fall into a heap of snow and almost not get up and not want to, either. He saw the smoke that smelled of burning flesh and never went away, even after it dissolved into the sky. They saw each other, and their families did, too, and that was what Nisreen was sure she had discovered. All of them silent, unable to move if they wanted to, all of them in total awe of their sameness.