

from Cactus · Sahar Khalifeh

UM SABER slapped her son's hand, stretched out toward the crate of *askadina*. "Leave it. This food isn't ours."

"Let him take one, Um Saber, God is Great," the salesman said cheerfully, giving a few fruits to the child. Um Saber protested, "*Askadina* is so expensive, Abu Hamdi!" But the salesman was riding the crest of his generosity. "God bless you, Um Saber. Nothing is expensive for good people. Eat, my child, healthily, in God's name. Before the occupation, *askadina* was food for the birds, now it's aristocratic! A kilo is 90 piasters. Damn this life! Eat my child, eat. God damn the occupation and all its days."

Overwhelmed by the man's generosity, Um Saber began thanking and blessing him. She nudged the child, shaking her finger threateningly in his face, "If you tell your brothers, I'll catch your soul!" The child did not respond. He continued enjoying the fruits, the juice streaming down his chin and hands.

An officer came to the shop. Pointing at the oranges, he said in broken Arabic, "How much *hata puseem*?" A commercial smile spread across the salesman's lips. Rubbing his hands, he said, "At your service, Adon. God is one and the price is one. Twenty-five a kilo. *Tapuseem* like gold."

The officer turned to his young wife standing behind him and conferred with her in Hebrew. She shook her head while her blonde teenage daughter, standing behind them, muttered, pointing at the *askadina*.

Um Saber turned to the family, glaring through her veil. "I hope you vomit. I hope it'll poison your hearts. My children love the taste of *askadina*, but you people lust for it like wild beasts! God sweep away Mohammed's people who let such villains wander around, settle and play about in our country's streets! May seventy eyes of the devil pierce your bodies, you enemies!"

She tugged her son's hand. "Come on, Mohammed. Come, let's go home." The child stamped on the ground, pointing at a bunch of bananas. She continued to tug his hand, glancing at the Israeli woman. The woman looked at the boy sympathetically. Her gaze angered Um Saber. She slapped the boy, making him wail. The Israeli woman shook her head and stretched out a hand to block the slaps. "No good, no good!"

Um Saber adjusted the veil on her head. The veins in her neck were throbbing fiercely. . . . What business is it of yours, you bitch? You pity him? Ask your husband about my husband's maimed fingers if you are really sympathetic.

She examined the stars on the officer's shoulder. . . How many prisoners did you castrate? You smile! God damn you and your Dayan! Don't worry Odon, the country is yours, grace is yours; why pay for fruit? You laugh at us! All the world laughs at us, why not you!

The smile on the officer's face faded as he met Um Saber's eyes. He began mumbling Hebrew to his wife who was sorting out fresh *askadina*.

Suddenly the ground opened up as though it was giving birth. A young man, head covered by a white *kufiya*, raised a lightning, gleaming hand and struck the back of the officer's neck. He gave a deep "Ah" and collapsed on the *askadina* crate, blood gushing out like a spring. Eyes wide open, the wife screamed in terror. The teenage girl covered her face with her hands. Her blonde hair streamed over her forehead and hands. Um Saber yanked her son's hand violently and exclaimed, "God bless your hand, Oh hero!" The young man looked into her face for a moment and said through his *kufiya*, "Go home quickly."

A voice she knew! Eyes she knew! Who was he? Who are you? I know you! I've seen you before. Where?

The young man flew away like the wind and nobody stopped him. Um Saber stood beside the wall breathing hard. She pulled her son's head close and hid it between her knees. The salesman beat his head, moaning, "Your home is destroyed, Abu Hamdi!"

The officer was gasping. A crowd of people looked at him. People ran rampant in the streets, shoving every way. The street was full of runners. The wife screamed, pointing where the young man had disappeared into the crowd. "Catch him . . . catch him . . ." she cried. But nobody went after him.

The blonde girl raised her hands from her face and saw her father lying still on the box with a dagger in his neck. She drew her hand back, her tongue knotted in fear. Her head struck the umbrella rung of the shop. She fell to the ground in a faint.

Um Saber's eyes met the woman's. The terrified look was calling, pleading, promising. Something shook from behind the closed doors of her heart. The white, wailing eyes were cold winds. Um Saber's depths swayed and whispered, "Your mercy, God." Her child between her knees was screaming with fear, turning his eyes away from the victim, the woman and the young girl. The uncovered thighs of the girl reminded Um Saber of her own daughter's thighs and then of all women's daughters'. Without thinking, she took off her veil and draped it over the naked thighs. She kneeled over the girl and whispered, "My heart aches for you, my daughter."

Mohammed, clutching onto her, was still screaming. People were pushing and shoving. Some closed their shop doors, some ran into the narrow streets and hid in dark corners. Abu Hamdi stood in the middle of the street calling for help. But no one stopped to help.

Mohammed tugged at his mother's dress for the last time, then ran into the crowd of people. Um Saber called out to him, torn between her son and the girl. She followed him and grabbed his collar as he resisted, shouting and wriggling.

Um Saber held out her hand to the woman, who was wailing in Hebrew. She touched her shoulder gently and said, "God help you, sister. God help you!"

Suddenly a firm hand drew her back. "Go home, Um Saber." She turned. Aadel was directly behind her. She exclaimed, "Aadel!" He pushed her through the turmoil and ordered her to go home to her children. She touched the Israeli's shoulder, puzzled, and walked away.

The Israeli woman buried her head in Aadel's shoulder. He whispered consolingly, "Beseider . . . Beseider."¹ He splashed water on the young girl's face. She moved. A passerby shouted at him, "Leave them alone, Aadel. Army jeeps are coming!" He did not turn. He moved toward the dead man. He held the arm and felt for the pulse. Another man grabbed his shoulder and shouted, "Army jeeps. Leave the pig, don't you see his stars?"

Aadel tore the stars off the dead man's shoulders, flinging them to the ground. He picked up the body and walked into the empty street. The woman and her daughter followed him silently.

Translated by Marilyn Chin, Mary Jane White, and Peter Nazareth.

1. Hebrew, "It's all right."