

SUSAN ABULHAWA

WE'RE GOING HOME, MY BELOVED

راجعين لدارنا يا عزيزتي

A story from the archives of the United Nations unrelated to this novel but somehow embodying the spirit of this book, in the fullness of its absurdity, cruelty, and the struggle of all sentient beings to live free in their native homes.

IN 1962, before Israel erected the separation wall between the Lebanese village of Kufr Kila and occupied Palestine, a donkey belonging to a Palestinian refugee named Laila crossed back into Palestine from a refugee camp in Lebanon. She disappeared for nearly one year in the new colonial Jewish state, until the day she returned to Laila in Lebanon, pulling a cart loaded with fruits and other produce. Children followed the lone donkey as she made her way to Laila, who immediately welcomed her donkey back to the family. The joy of their reunion was short-lived, however, as the United Nations emergency personnel descended on Laila's home, demanding she relinquish the donkey because it was carrying a foal fathered by an "Israeli" donkey. Of course, Laila protested. The donkey was part of their family and had returned to them on her own. But Laila could not win against the UN and had no choice but to relinquish her donkey to the recent colonizers in Palestine until she gave birth, whereupon they would keep her foal and the donkey would be returned to Laila. The UN took the pregnant donkey to the Israeli authorities waiting at the border.

However, after three months, the donkey escaped again and returned to Laila. Again the donkey arrived pulling a cart, but this time her foal ran alongside. Mere hours later, the UN and local authorities arrived again at Laila's house, demanding the foal. Terrified and crying for its mother, the foal was dragged into a military jeep and driven off toward the Naqoura observation towers, where it was delivered to the Israelis while its mother lived the rest of her days displaced and brokenhearted with her displaced and brokenhearted human family.

CHAPTER 1

HAJJE SARA AWOKE with intention and resolve on this day, exactly one year since she left the hospital. Doctors had assured her it would all be okay, that she need only trust in God.

Usually the first to stir, she was awakened in those first days after the hospital by arthritic pain, but now she arose early out of habit, moving easily from her bed. Her body had become more agile, growing younger, her physical age adjusting to match her mind. Even her eyesight had improved, bringing into focus what had been blurry. Doctors said the mind has power over the body, though they could not explain how. *Subhan Allah*, people said.

What had been daily morning aches and pains were now sublime communions with a departing moon, an approaching sun, and the God who managed it all. She grew to love that peaceful time alone before dawn, when she would perform the fajr salat, then sip her coffee with Aziza by her side in the enchanted silence of a sleeping world.

Hajje Sara opened the metal door to the courtyard slowly, trying to outsmart the squeaky hinges. As always, Aziza was waiting for her on the other side, her face eager with morning joy. Her eyes were big black marbles circled in white fur, as if wearing eyeglasses. Hajje Sara thought her the most handsome of donkeys.

“Morning Blessings,” she whispered as she kissed and caressed Aziza’s face, giving her a carrot. She always kept carrots in her thobe’s chest pocket, at times accidentally washing them with the laundry. Hajje Sara’s four chickens emerged from their coop, pecking at the seeds she sprinkled on the ground. She fetched lettuce, spinach, and handfuls of barley from the wheat sack in the dark courtyard and laid them on the donkey’s food shelf, which Hajje Sara had had built so Aziza didn’t have to eat from the ground, an indignity for such a marvelous creature.

She continued in her morning routine, performed wudu and the first rakaats of the day, rolled up her prayer mat, and made a small ibriq of coffee, the nectar of her ritual. As she sipped from the demitasse in this cherished privacy with Aziza, Hajje Sara felt her chest for the charm of Ayat el Kursi, which had hung around her neck since childhood. Bringing it to her lips, she kissed it gently, the seal of a promise made long ago. *I put our lives in your hands, O Lord. Keep us safe if it is Your will.*

The neighbor’s rooster crowed into the winds of the cramped Rashidieh refugee camp. The sky was an unusual gray, and the air was tinged with

a faint burning scent. Hajje Sara's potted vines of morning glory, climbing up the concrete walls of her house, would stir into bloom soon, just as her nocturnal jasmine flowers would close their petals. Bougainvillea climbing the courtyard walls had tangled itself in the chaotic web of electric lines above and poured its crimson blooms like gentle offerings from the sky.

I'm going to miss these flowers.

Her flowers, her chickens, the neighborhood cats, and stray animals she had rescued over time had kept her there this long after the accident. But it was time to go.

Rustling came from inside the house. Hajje Sara sighed. Rawya, the woman who claimed to be one of her daughters, would come out soon, lavishing her with unwanted attention. Hajje Sara had tried, truly tried, to find some iota of recognition for that woman, but she could not muster more than pity and annoyance. Much as she struggled to remember or connect with this woman who clearly loved her, Hajje Sara could not reciprocate the intensity of her affection, even though she believed they had been close—that Rawya had been her favorite daughter. But one year after leaving the hospital, she could not find those connections. Not in her heart or any organ of her being. In fact, she could barely connect with her own body. Her smooth, supple arms and legs had been replaced with flabby limbs that moved on rusted hinges. Even her scent had changed into a nondescript, stale puff. Her skin that had once sweated vigor and life was now desiccated leather loosely draping her bones. Even her hair wouldn't get oily after days of not washing it.

However, as time moved backward through her body to meet her mind since the accident, dew began to collect around her neck and black hairs appeared amidst her silver top. Sweat patches even appeared under her arms. It delighted Hajje Sara to feel moisture there again, and she could often be seen happily sniffing the stink from her armpits, much to the embarrassment of her family. Everyone chalked it up to brain damage. In reality, Hajje Sara was trying to get to know her new body, searching in it for the young woman she knew she was. But here she remained—a nineteen-year-old new mother, trapped in the body of an eighty-year-old grandmother with five daughters and dozens of grandchildren and great-grandchildren—too many for her to remember or tell apart. Not that she cared to anyway.

It had only been a year since Jewish soldiers broke in at five in the morning, dragging her father, grandfather, and uncles into the center of

town, ransacking their belongings, stealing their gold—her mind would stop there; go black, unable to replay the rest of what they did. Still reeling from the abrupt end of those days, the trauma of closing her eyes one day and waking up the next in another world, Hajje Sara didn't have enough room in her mind or heart for sixty-plus years of living, complete with sprawling offspring from two husbands, both dead now. So many strangers dotting on her, bothering her, prodding her nonexistent memory of them. Worst of all, there was no escaping their devotion in the cramped maze of the Rashidieh refugee camp on the coast of Lebanon. She tried being mean and rude, but that seemed to only spur more concern and doting. Once she even faked a heart attack to have a few days away in hospital, but they were all there—hordes of people crammed into her hospital room until tests showed she had the heart of a young woman. Those were the doctor's exact words, which delighted Hajje Sara and confirmed what she already knew about herself.

No matter what she did or how hard she tried to accept her fate, the impulse to find the world she knew would not subside. It grew. All she could think about was the steady ground of the familiar—the people and places inhabiting her memory. The only tangible anchor to the life she remembered was Ayet el Kursi inscribed on a gold tablet charm that hung round her neck, gifted to her when she was a little girl.

"Morning Blessings," Rawya said, just as the neighbor's metal door clanked open. Hajje Sara immediately called Aziza as loudly as she could, and Aziza in turn began braying.

"How long do we have to put up with this foolishness!" the neighbor called out, and Hajje Sara giggled.

"Mama, please stop. Why do you keep causing trouble with the neighbors like this?!" Rawya whispered pleadingly. But Hajje Sara only laughed.

The neighbor was the daughter of one of Hajje Sara's schoolmates back in the day in Deir Yasin. Hajje Sara hadn't liked that particular schoolmate much when they were kids, but the war and refugee camp had brought them together. They had been the last of their generation to survive in the camp, but her schoolmate died before Hajje Sara went into hospital and came out a younger woman. The woman's name had been Aziza, and it infuriated her daughter to hear a braying ass called by her beloved mother's name. Of course, Hajje Sara knew this, but no one could dissuade her. She thought the name suited her dear donkey. Annoying her neighbor for no good reason was an added bonus. Aziza

was her greatest pleasure and true love in this strange new world, and she was going to call her whatever she wanted.

None of that would matter soon anyway.

“You’re all so dramatic,” Hajje Sara waved off Rawya. “I am going to the market today. Can I have some money?” She hated asking for money, like a little girl.

“Yes, of course. Let me get Ziyad to take you.”

“NO!” she yelled. “No, no, no! Stop treating me like a child. I’m going alone with Aziza to the market to buy some food for the house.”

“But you don’t have to do that, Mama. We have everything we need already.”

“I don’t have everything I need. Goddammit, I’ll borrow things from local merchants if I have to. I don’t need your permission.”

Rawya hated how this new version of her mother cursed. But she knew better than to push. The last time she tried to keep her mother from going out (let alone to stop cursing) ended up a scandal that engulfed the whole neighborhood. The camp council even came to inquire about all the screaming. Of course, Hajje Sara had jumped at the opportunity to make up wild stories about being beaten by her daughters. But as she wasn’t a good liar and couldn’t remember what she said from one minute to the next, the camp council apologized to Rawya and went away.

“No need, Mama,” Rawya submitted, alternating between chewing on her lip and biting her nails, worn habits of her nerves. “I’ll go fetch some money from my drawer. But will you at least take this mobile phone so we can reach you?”

Hajje Sara took the phone, though all she knew to do with it was to tap the green circle when it rang. She thought for a moment and handed it back to Rawya.

“Fix it so it only vibrates. I don’t like things ringing in my pocket. It scares me.” Hajje Sara paused to refine a sudden idea. She could take advantage of a recent argument between Rawya and Warda, the older sister. “I’m going to Warda’s house after I leave the market,” she told Rawya.

Rawya adjusted the phone so it would only vibrate and handed it back to her mother. She had sold one of her gold bracelets to pay for the fancy mobile, because she was told it was the only kind with the new tracking feature.

Assured that she could find her mother with the mobile phone tracking, Rawya gave Hajje Sara some money, saddled Aziza to carry bags

from the market, and watched her mother step out into the alleyway, walking alongside her beloved donkey. Rawya closed the gate and went back inside, chewing her lip all the while.

CHAPTER 2

HAJJE SARA WAS GONE less than an hour before Rawya asked her son Ziyad check his grandmother's location on his computer. The blue dot blinked over the market. But just in case someone in the market had stolen her mother's phone, Rawya messaged AbulBanat, the spice merchant, who texted her back immediately—"Yes, el Hajje Sara came by the shop and is still in the market. I can see her ahead buying carrots and barley, I suppose for her Aziza. May God keep you well."

"May God keep you well and extend your life, Haj," Rawya said, but something still gnawed at her. They already had enough barley and carrots to last a few days. She furrowed her brow and chewed the side of her lip.

"Mama, Sitti is fine. She's eighty years old. Where is she going to go?" Ziyad said.

"Mind your business," Rawya shooed her son away.

Mama's coming to your house after she's done at the market. Can you please message me when she gets there? Raywa texted her sister Warda.

Never one to miss an opportunity to be indignant, Warda shot back that she would let her know if their mother did not show up. She reminded Rawya that she was not an only child; she had four sisters who cared about their mother just as much as she did; Warda did not need lessons from her on how to look after their mother, and Rawya should stop being so controlling.

Fine if you don't want to tell me when she gets there, but can you tell me when she leaves? Rawya pleaded.

Stop it, Rawya! Just stop. You're suffocating everyone, Mama most of all. Nothing is going to happen to her. We're all here. Stop acting like she's your child. So, no! I am not going to text you with Mama's every move. Leave us alone. Warda responded.

You're a bitch, Rawya typed, but she considered her sister's words. It wasn't the first time she had been accused of trying to control every detail of her mother's life, even before Hajje Sara lost memory of her family. Rawya's worrying intensified when their father died many years

before, leaving Hajje Sara alone with five unwed daughters. After all the girls married, Rawya worried about her mother being alone in her apartment, even though they all lived in the same four-story concrete box. Three of the daughters had taken separate floors with their husbands, while Hajje Sara lived alone on the first floor and Warda moved to her in-laws.

Rawya deleted her text and put her phone away. In the days to come, she would reproach herself for not insisting to speak with her mother.

CHAPTER 3

HAJJE SARA AND Aziza walked through the narrow alleyway, a trench of sewage rivulets running alongside. A full year into this new world, she still could not get used to it. A lonely young sycamore hemmed in cement cast a shadow against a cinder block wall, a daily prayer for a forest of kin. Alone, plucked from its lush birthright into a prison of concrete. Hajje Sara touched its bark. *I know how you feel*, she thought.

She reached Warda's home. A brightly painted wooden object leaned against the wall by the door. Warda rushed to greet her mother, kissing her forehead and both cheeks.

"Do you like it?" Warda said, pointing to the wooden thing.

"What is it?" Hajje Sara eyed it.

"A donkey cart! It's just upside down. Here's where you sit, and here's where it would hook to Aziza's side," Warda said, raising her eyebrows as if the gesture provided greater clarity, a habit Hajje Sara thought made her look ridiculous. "Mama, elhamdulillah, today is one year since you were injured and, mashallah, tomorrow is your 80th birthday. We wanted to get you something to mark the special day."

"Oh!" Hajje Sara perked up. "It's perfect! Look what we got!" she said to Aziza. "It's another sign," she whispered to the donkey.

Warda looked around to see who might be watching. Hajje Sara's conversations and affectionate displays with her donkey embarrassed her family.

"We are going to take this cart for a spin," Hajje Sara announced.

"Don't speed," Warda joked.

Hajje Sara forced a laugh. "I might go back to Rawya's house afterward. So don't worry if I'm not back before dark."

"Okay, Mama." Warda liked to prove she was not controlling like her sister Rawya.

“May God keep and protect you always. May He bring you great fortune and brighten your days with the joy of your children’s happiness,” Hajje Sara said, as her grandson began unloading bags from Aziza’s saddle onto the cart.

The sun was descending. Hajje Sara kissed Aziza’s face and whispered in her alert ear, “We’re going home, my beloved.”

Hajje Sara had heard people in the market talking about the forest fires in Palestine. She had indeed smelled a tinge of smoke that morning. They said Israel had been planting fast-growing nonindigenous pine trees throughout Palestine for decades to conceal the remains of depopulated Palestinian villages and transform the landscape into familiar European forests. But the pine needles had acidified the soil over time, killing most native flora and turning the forest floors into a tinder box, ripe for the region’s heat to ignite. And so it was. Plumes of smoke now darkened the skies.

It saddened Hajje Sara to think of the scorched earth. She felt deep grief for the thousands of wildlife species dying or suddenly losing their homes. “The sons of bitches are burning the sky,” Hajje Sara said to no one, even though she felt the fires were a sign from God and from the land itself. Palestine was beckoning her. The Jews were surely distracted by the catastrophic fires, and the smoke would obscure their views of the border. Her daughters were too busy quarreling with each other to check on her.

Knowing that God, the angels, and the land were on her side, Hajje Sara could hardly wait to be on her way. She needed to be where time had to account for itself and reconcile with the history she had leaped through. In this new era, new place, new body, it was memory that haunted and beckoned Hajje Sara. The horrors of Deir Yasin. Their expulsion from Sufsaf. Men lined against the wall. Jews with guns and hate, and the poor neighbor’s boy. An insane anguish heaving from her aunt. The screams of a woman with torn clothes. Blisters on her feet in a long terrifying walk. Baby Aminah, her surprise, crying in her arms. The bus that carried them the rest of the way to Lebanon, bobbing on uneven roads. The crushing silence on that bus, except for the cries of her newborn. Then one day she opened her eyes and found herself in the wrong body, the wrong year, and the wrong place among strangers. There had to be a reckoning, something to make sense of her world—this layered reality where each face contradicted the other. She needed to go home.

CHAPTER 4

IN THE YEAR since she awoke in another place and time, Hajje Sara hadn't felt such joy as she did heading south on el-Bahar Street toward al-Naqoura with Aziza pulling her in their new cart. From there she would take the winding street through the wilderness of Labboune, into Palestine.

But blaring horns immediately disabused her of that joy. The el-Bahar Street was not meant for donkeys or old women, and she quickly realized she might well get crushed by a car or truck before she got anywhere near the border. Aziza was likewise terrified. As Hajje Sara descended from the cart to comfort her donkey, a kind trucker pulled to the side of the road and got out, approaching her.

"Salaam, Hajje," the man called to her. "It's too dangerous for you to be on this road."

"You don't think I know that?"

Such surly sarcasm, unbecoming of a woman her age, surprised the driver. It was something he'd expect from a younger woman, perhaps. "I'm sorry, Hajje. Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"Unless you can take me and Aziza and all our things to al-Naqoura, then no."

He contemplated the elderly woman stroking the head and face of a donkey, speaking tenderly to it. Horns blared from cars speeding by. Now drivers were yelling at them. Hajje Sara wasn't afraid of soldiers stopping, detaining, or even shooting her. But these drivers were reducing her to tears. This was the first time she had ventured out of the refugee camp.

The truck driver bent to meet her eyes. "I can take you wherever you're going," he offered.

"I'm going to Labbouneh."

"Labbouneh?! There's nothing there."

"I meant al-Naqoura." She tried to figure out what could safely be said to this stranger. Everyone knew Labbouneh was nothing but a forest with a UN lookout post.

"Hmm," he nodded, his eyebrows rising.

"Where will Aziza ride?" she asked.

"Who is Aziza?"

Hajje Sara pointed. "We can't be separated. Never!"

The man laughed. Truly laughed. "Hajje, by God you have brightened

this dark day,” he said, looking toward the wildfire smoke menacing the skies. “May God give you long life. There is room in the back of the truck for Aziza.”

“You’re a good man. May God bless you and bring you good fortune the size of your vast heart and compassion,” Hajje Sara said.

With Aziza and their supplies loaded in the back of the truck, the driver helped Hajje Sara into the front seat. He started the ignition and began to laugh as the truck rolled onto the road, leaving the cart on the roadside.

“My heart was so heavy today. I think God put such a lighthearted grandmother and her dear Aziza in my path to remind me that love and kindness is all there is.”

“I just look old. Deep down I’m a young girl,” Hajje Sara said, and this made him laugh all the more.

The blue of the Mediterranean peeked through buildings they passed on their right. Hajje Sara could tell by his calloused hands and the toolboxes rattling in the back that he was a working man.

She saw a crushed pacifier by her feet. “You got kids?”

“No,” he answered. “God didn’t have that in His plans for me.”

“Whose pacifier is that, then?” She spoke as if she had caught him in a lie.

It belonged to his niece, he explained. “I’m divorced. She left me.”

“Well, I’m apparently widowed, but don’t get any ideas just because I got in your truck.”

The driver erupted in laughter. “By God, you are delightful, Hajje. And what about you? What’s your story?”

Hajje Sara told one lie after another. She was going to visit her son in al-Naqoura; Labbouneh was just a place where they used to go walking before it became a no-man’s land; she lived in Beirut and her family was rich, but she didn’t like them and lived alone with Aziza. That much was almost true. She was sorry, but she couldn’t divulge her family name.

“I don’t have money to pay you, but you can have this fancy phone my rich daughter bought for me,” she said, offering her iPhone.

“Well, they must be rich to afford the latest model.”

“Take it,” she said. “I don’t like it nohow.”

“I will not accept a thing from you, Hajje. Your company is payment enough. You might need it if someone calls, or for an emergency.” He noticed the battery was low, but she didn’t have a charger.

He rummaged through the glove box. “Ah, here!” He pulled out the

cord. "Look at that. My ex-wife used to criticize me for hoarding junk, but look how sometimes my random collections are useful," he said as he plugged the charger into her phone. "Just keep the damned thing." She waved it away.

The phone was only half charged as they approached al-Naqoura. The driver considered taking it to try to reach the hajje's family but decided it was better she keep it so they could reach her.

"STOP!" Hajje Sara yelled, and the driver slammed the brakes. "Here. Let us out here."

"Hajje, let me take you right to your son's door," he pleaded.

"It's not proper for my son to see me with a strange man. You know that!" She gathered her thobe around her and opened the door.

Too stunned by the insinuation to respond, the driver watched her exit his truck. Only when she banged on the side did he remember the donkey. He got out to unload Aziza and saddle her with their supplies. Hajje Sara's tenderness toward that donkey moved him. What a splendidly strange old woman, he thought as he watched her cross the road and head down an obscured side road, which he knew led to Labbouneh. He had half a mind to follow her but decided it was none of his business. He would look for her family in Rashidieh. In the web of her lies, she had let it slip that it was her first time out of that camp. He would ask around for the home of an old woman who spoke to her donkey.

Watching her in the side mirror as he pulled off, something occurred to him, and he immediately stopped on the side of the road. He couldn't risk losing sight of her and had to be quick. He fumbled through a bag on the seat.

"Hajje, wait!" he called. But she kept walking with her donkey, unable to hear him. He quickly climbed onto the truck bed and with shaking hands sifted through a messy box of tools.

There. He found it—her discarded iPhone. He ran across the road calling to her. His own mother had made the same journey when he was a baby. She had gone back to retrieve her gold, hidden in their home when they were chased out by Jews during the Nakba, believing they would return in a few days when things calmed. But as days turned to months and destitution set in, she went back for the gold to feed her family. She never returned. It was assumed the Jews had killed her, but her only son, now a truck driver in his sixties, never stopped hoping she was alive somewhere in Palestine.

He knew what Hajje Sara was doing, and she knew that he knew. And that mutual knowledge bound these two strangers in an intimacy that was at once lovely, dangerous, and suffused with the kind of hope that traversed generations and borders.

“You’ll need these,” he gasped as he caught up to her. He held out a set of metal cutters, binoculars, and her phone.

“There’s an electrified fence and barbed wire when you get to the border. You can cut it with these.” He handed her the cutters. Hajje Sara wrapped her small hands around its thick rubber handles.

He described an area where the fence sensors were disrupted. “The electric circuit will not be broken when you cut there because it’s already rerouted and will not set off any alarms,” he said. “And you should keep this, too,” he added, returning her phone.

Hajje Sara studied the man’s face. He seemed about to cry. She snapped the cutter open and closed, trying out the motion. “Thank you,” she said. Again, strange language for an elder. Most hajjes would have at least added “my son.”

“Take these too,” he said, handing her the binoculars.

Hajje Sara knew what they were, though she had never held any before. She brought them to her eyes, the wrong way.

“Like this,” the driver turned them around.

“Oh!” Hajje Sara shrieked, alarmed and delighted. She raised the binoculars toward the smoky sky. “My God! You cannot even see it with the naked eye, but there’s a sparrowhawk just there,” she pointed. “It’s like the bird is next to me!”

She turned the binoculars toward the driver’s face and erupted in laughter.

The driver laughed too.

“I don’t know how to thank you,” Hajje Sara began. “I know I sound very forward in saying this, but . . .” she was interrupted by the driver laughing again by an implied romantic possibility, which made her laugh too.

Days later, a passerby from Rashidieh would tell Rawya that he hadn’t recognized her at first, but in hindsight, and with the memory of the donkey, he was sure it had to be Hajje Sara laughing heartily on the side of the road with an unknown man.

Hajje Sara and the truck driver stood silently for a moment.

“You know . . . they will probably shoot you and Aziza both,” he said.