

A Nakba of Olives

The West Bank Wall

“We don’t have flower sellers in Jayyous because the fields are full of flowers,” Mohammad Othman told me as he knelt to photograph a gathering of wild camomile blossoms.

Together we climbed the southern hills of the village through orderly rows of olive trees whose leaves shone silver in the Palestinian sunshine. Such sunny days had been rare that February, and Mohammad took advantage of the brightness to snap photos. He planned to send the pictures to his girlfriend, Rose, who lived in America and loved to dance. “If I remind her that Jayyous is beautiful, maybe she will come and visit me again,” he said. He stopped again and aimed his lens at a red anemone growing alone in the tall grass.

This was Mohammad’s favourite spot in Jayyous. From here he could see the whole village. Below us, cactus and weeds tangled in the shallow valley that funnelled the complaints of donkeys and the clatter of boys on bicycles. Most of Jayyous rose on the other side. Old homes were built of stone, new ones of bare cinder block. Rebars protruded like antennae from half-built pillars on unfinished top floors. We spotted workers climbing wooden ladders to cement pale white tiles over the grey brick of a new mosque. The old mosque, blue domed and modest, stood in the centre of the village. The pale minaret pointed into the sky where, more than a decade ago, the Jayyousi had watched Saddam Hussein’s Scud missiles fizzle past on their way to missing their targets in Tel Aviv. You could see Tel Aviv from this hilltop too — it was only a few kilometres west — and on clear days you could see the Mediterranean.

Mohammad knew every inch of these hills. His family owned olive groves not far from here, and he used to camp beneath the trees with his brothers when they were all boys. When Mohammad was ten years old, his father assigned one olive sapling to his charge. He told Mohammad to mark the tree’s growth with his own. “If you are growing faster than the tree, something is wrong,” his father said. “It means you have to give it more water. Take care of it more.” Both Mohammad and his tree reached adulthood in unison from Jayyous’s fertile soil.

The olive trees of Jayyous heralded the coming of the Wall, and they would be its first victims. In the autumn of 2002, villagers found land acquisition orders from Israeli authorities pinned to the trees’ grey trunks. The papers declared the land would be confiscated and the trees bearing the orders uprooted. There was no further explanation. When the Israel Defense Forces, the IDF, arrived with their guns and armoured bulldozers, villagers met them in the fields. They fought hand to hand with the soldiers but could not stop the trees from being wrenched from the ground. In all, more than four thousand trees fell in Jayyous during the early days of the Wall.

The preceding spring had been bloody in Israel. The Second Intifada raged and violence against Israeli civilians swelled. Terrorists blew themselves up in horrific explosions. They scattered bodies on the ground in nightclubs and restaurants and on the streets alongside charred public buses. More than 650 Israelis had been killed since the violence began two years earlier. The Israeli populace, terrified, demanded protection from their government. Increased checkpoints and armed incursions into the West Bank did not staunch the blood. The Israeli military needed a new strategy.

They adopted, instead, an ancient one. They decided to build a wall. The National Security Council had already approved in principle a year-old proposal to block Palestinians from crossing into Israel by foot. In 2002, the Israelis expanded the plan, designing a system of barriers that would stretch for more than seven hundred kilometres around, and into, the West Bank. For most of its route the Wall is a three-metre-high fence equipped with pyramid-stacked barbed wire, electronic sensors, and night-vision cameras. IDF patrols smooth the strips of sand next to the fence to better reveal the footprints of anyone who makes it over. Few do. Just touching the fence alerts soldiers in nearby command posts, who dispatch troops along the patrol roads that flank the fence in order to intercept the intruder. The border police can reach any part of the barrier within eight minutes. Red signs on the fence in Hebrew, Arabic, and English threaten “mortal danger” and warn “any person who passes or damages the fence endangers his life.”

Alongside the larger Palestinian centres, and anywhere the IDF deems threatened by sniper fire, the Wall is a wall. Great grey slabs of concrete rise eight metres from the ground and are bound so tightly together as not to permit a thread of sunlight to creep through. Floodlights and security cameras mark the length on top of the Wall, and cylindrical watchtowers pose like vertical cannons along the route. I followed the graffiti-tagged Wall in Bethlehem and Ramallah. What I found most striking about the barrier was its nerve. Its concrete conviction. The Wall makes no pretences towards grace or sophistication. The Wall is blue-collar and proud. It is cold and rude and hard and stone.

The Wall is also illegal. In 2004, the International Court of Justice issued an “Advisory Opinion” on the Wall. The ICJ concluded that the barrier’s route breached both humanitarian and human rights law. The court demanded Israel stop building the barrier, tear

After Mohammad took his photos of the flowers on Jayyous's southern hills, we saw an old man sitting on a stool in front of a shack near the fence. He smoked a water pipe and sipped tea prepared in a soot-blackened pot while his wife bent over the weeds in their garden. "The Wall has given me grey hair," the man said, lifting his wool cap and dragging his fingers over his head. The land immediately on the other side of the Wall belonged to him. The fields had been in his family for decades, but now he was without the permits to farm them.

When Israel disengaged from Gaza in 2007, the IDF soldiers destroyed the greenhouses the Jewish settlers left behind. Many Israelis, though, falsely accuse the Palestinians of the destruction, and say this is proof of Arab barbarism and hate. Yet here in Jayyous, Israeli bulldozers ripped up thousands of trees, including part of this man's family olive grove, to make space for the Wall. Some of the bulldozed trees were hundreds of years old. Palestinians call them *zeitun rumi*, "Roman olives," in reference to their antiquity. The man had some of his felled trees dragged behind his shack. Now he hacked them apart for firewood to light his pipe and boil water for his tea. Each day he sat and stared out beyond the barbed wire and the sign that warned of mortal danger to what was left of his land. His trees were withering from neglect. Weeds grew tall at the base of trunks that seemed to twist around themselves for self-defence.

The spring after my visit, the Israelis moved the Wall around Jayyous, returning some of the land and two of the freshwater wells to the village. The shabaab of Jayyous ripped out the abandoned Israeli fence posts and danced on the access road. They waved flags and shouted "Jayyous!" as if in victory. The largest part of what was once Jayyous, however, including the most fertile fields and all the village's greenhouses, remains behind the Wall. The man with the grey hair and wool cap got back some of his confiscated land, but I doubt he celebrated. His bulldozed trees are gone forever. New trees will take almost a decade before they bear fruit, but first he'll have to plough through the asphalt scar the Israelis left behind.

That fall, Mohammad Othman travelled to Norway to speak about the occupation and about the Wall. He returned home through Jordan and tried to cross the Allenby Bridge into Palestine, but the IDF was waiting for him. They arrested him at the border, interrogated him, and held him without charge. Mohammad spent four months in Israeli custody before the IDF returned him to his side of the Wall.

Then Mohammad received a call on his phone and left us. Aidan and I finished our tea and walked back into the rainy streets.

The melee had progressed farther into the village. We turned a corner, stepped over another row of boulders the shabaab had lined up across the road, and continued to a ledge overlooking the valley. Israeli soldiers assembled on the other side. I saw them ducking under the clotheslines on the rooftops and taking cover behind black water tanks. On the ledge, a half-dozen shabaab hurled stones at the IDF with homemade slings.

Mohammad told me that Palestinians are born knowing how to sling a stone. He joked that West Bank boys emerge from their mothers' wombs swinging their umbilical cords over their heads. I stood behind the shabaab, afraid of being hit by an errant rock, and watched as they co-opted King David's weapon against his own heirs. Some wrapped kaffiyehs around their heads to hide their faces, but most didn't bother. The rain slickened cheeks too young for beards and soaked through their blue jeans.

A boy in his late teens carried a sling made of denim and nylon cords. He threaded a finger through a loop on the end of one cord and gripped both ends with his right hand. He lifted a rock from the road, placed it in the cradle of denim, and held his arm straight out from the side of his slim body. The stone swung back and forth in its cradle as if being lulled to sleep. The boy bent his legs and turned to spot the soldiers over his shoulder. He paused for a moment in this taut, proud pose.

The boy swept the sling over his head and his hand spun on its wrist. The cords blurred and whistled as the stone strained against its cradle. He cocked his body back, twisted his face into a sneer, and snapped the rock into the air as his body lurched forward. When the sling released, it made a sound like a bird and, relieved of its turning force, fell slack at the boy's waist as the stone flew. But the boy did not watch to see it land. His eyes searched the ground. He lifted another stone and cradled it. The sling swung and whirled and whistled again. His movements possessed a furious, graceful beauty.

I didn't want to leave the boys. I couldn't resist their swagger, but I would've found no beauty if the rocks actually struck anyone. Mohammad told me about an older man in Jayyous — a veteran of the First Intifada — who was a sniper with a sling. He was not in action that day. I never saw any of these boys hit anyone. But this was not the point. For the shabaab, it was enough just to resist. To not cower. To fill a hard grey sky with hard grey stones.

The IDF insists the stone throwers trigger the army's reaction. The moment a rock gets thrown, the marchers become rioters and the protest an insurrection. Activists can hardly cling to claims of non-violence, the Israelis say, if the shabaab pelt soldiers with rocks. As much as I admired the shabaab's rebellion, I struggled to reconcile hurled stones with peaceful protest. A sling is inaccurate and archaic, almost as prehistoric a tactic as a fortified wall, yet it remains a weapon. A sling is designed to smash and crack. A slung stone can shatter a skull; dozens of soldiers have been wounded in this way. When I asked Mohammad about this, he told me rocks were all the Palestinians had. "Stones are the only way for us to show power. To show anger. To show togetherness." The sling boys were icons of resistance. Yet Mohammad insisted that "nobody in Jayyous is willing to kill another human being."

I believed him. Nothing about Mohammad or the boys on the ledge felt barbaric to me. The shabaab slung stones out of defiance not blood lust. Besides, the battle on the streets was hardly even. Far more Palestinians than Israelis have been injured in these weekly clashes. Mohammad himself took four rubber bullets in the back during one demonstration. The IDF has often been accused of using live ammunition against the protesters, and some Palestinians have been killed during demonstrations. One of these was 28-year-old Mustafa Tamimi. In 2011, an IDF soldier aimed a tear gas rifle out the door of a military jeep at Tamimi and, because he was chasing the jeep and throwing stones, shot him in the face. Tamimi died a few hours later. As I watched Israeli forces, clad in bulletproof vests and helmets, emerge from armoured jeeps to wage war on rock-throwing teenagers, the IDF claims of self-defence seemed absurd.

Just up the road from the stone slingers' ledge, Aidan and I entered a small community hall where a dozen men had gathered. They had built a fire in an indoor pit and a man offered us chairs so we could warm ourselves. Another man brought us hot coffee in tiny plastic cups and pointed to a table laid with pastries. "Welcome," he said.

I asked him why they had gathered.

"For funeral."

I felt I'd trespassed, but the man put his hands on my shoulders when I tried to stand. "Welcome," he said again, insisting I sit back down. Life goes on in the face of the IDF raid. So do the sacred rituals of death.

I finished my coffee and spent the rest of the afternoon in Mohammad's house, watching the siege from his rooftop. Eventually two IDF jeeps drove into the village with rotating blue lights and sirens. Soldiers on loudspeakers declared the entire village a "closed military area" and commanded the villagers not to leave their homes. A few hours later, the soldiers and the shabaab tired of their wet combat. The army jeeps left soon after the sun set.

Mohammad returned home. A few of the internationals arrived later. The house was damp with the cold, so he started a fire with dried olive branches in a brazier outside his front door, let the flames burn down to coals, and carried the brazier inside to warm the salon. After the curfew ended, Mohammad, Aidan, and I left to fetch food — fresh pita, hot falafel, plastic tubs of yogurt and hummus — while the others watched television and smoked cigarettes. The room smelled of burning tobacco and olive when we returned. Even though it was still cold, Mohammad left the salon window slightly ajar so the satellite receiver cord could curl out to the rooftop dish. We slapped at the mosquitoes that infiltrated the gap.

Julia said she wanted to fly kites over the Occupation and she wanted to watch *Chicago*. While the musical was not to anyone else's taste, the group relented. She and a few other internationals had spent most of the day's siege with Palestinian families, hoping to discourage arrests and home invasions by the IDF. They filmed the Israeli actions on hand-held cameras and posted the shaky video

down what had already been built, and compensate those who had suffered from its construction. Palestinians saw victory in the ICJ decision, but the “Advisory Opinion” was about as binding as it sounds. Israel ignored it. The next year, the Israeli High Court of Justice countered the ICJ with its own ruling declaring the Wall legal under their interpretation of international law.

Most Israelis refer to the Wall as a separation barrier or an anti-terrorist fence. The barrier was built to save innocent lives, its proponents claim. Certainly a nation has the right to secure its borders and the duty to protect its populace. But the route of Israel’s wall betrays other intentions. Only about 10 percent of the Wall follows the Green Line, the armistice boundary drawn in 1949 and internationally accepted as the border between Israel and the West Bank. Most of the Wall tracks east of the Line and inside Palestinian territory. In some areas, the Wall penetrates deep into the West Bank, swinging wide around Jewish settlements in order to keep them, and much of the land surrounding them, on the “Israeli” side. The Wall also divides Palestinian villages from both their farmland and neighbouring towns. In all, the route of the Wall annexes almost a tenth of Palestinian land to Israel. If the Wall can be admired at all, it must be for its audacity.

When the Wall rose in Jayyous, it carved away 70 percent of the village territory and separated farmers from their fields and greenhouses. Twelve thousand olive trees, twenty-five thousand fruit trees, and all six of Jayyous’s groundwater wells were exiled beyond the barrier. The farmland remains accessible in theory, but the Israelis insist Jayyousi farmers apply for permission to reach their fields through a pair of yellow iron gates, one south of the village, the other to the north. The gates are not always open and permits are difficult to obtain.

I could see the Wall from my vantage point on the hill, and I could also see the holes in the Israeli argument. If Israel fears infiltration of terrorists from the Palestinian side of the barrier, as proponents of the Wall insist, it would have made more sense to leave Jayyous’s farmland on the same side of the Wall as the men who cultivate it. This would have eliminated the need for the gates altogether, and a continuous barrier is more difficult to breach than a gated one. Furthermore, routing the fence between the village and the fields put the barrier right up against the houses of Jayyous, well within the range of the potential snipers Israel claims the barrier protects against.

But in Jayyous, the Wall has nothing to do with security and everything to do with Zufin. The Zufin settlement stands between Jayyous and its view of the sea. Lev Leviev, an Israeli diamond magnate, funds Zufin’s construction and expansion. Leviev is Israel’s richest man and is worth, some say, a half billion dollars. (Though Leviev had been a donor to UNICEF, the United Nations’ children’s fund couldn’t stomach Leviev’s settlement projects and so severed ties with him in 2008.) About a thousand settlers live in Zufin’s houses, which loom west of Jayyous on a hilltop overlooking the farmland and olive groves annexed by the Wall. Palestinians fear this fertile land will be cleared and granted to Zufin for the settlement’s expansion. Ancient trees, most now unreachable by the families that have always tended them, will be ripped from the earth. Hundreds of new homes for settlers will rise in their place.



It was a bad day for a protest. I stood in Mohammad’s kitchen and looked out of the window at the rain pouring down.

Mohammad’s second-floor apartment was only half finished, rarely cleaned, and smelled of new plaster and cigarette smoke. A week-old tub of yogurt sat on the countertop among spent Yellow Label tea bags and cigarette butts. Plastic soda bottles and falafel wrappers spilled onto the floor beneath the hole in the countertop where a sink should have been. The previous day’s pita had hardened into leather. One of Mohammad’s brothers brewed tea with water from the bathroom sink, the only running water in the place, for the small gathering of activists from overseas waiting in the salon. Julia, a German activist with the International Solidarity Movement, boasted about being blacklisted and strip-searched by the IDF. She advised me to remove my contacts. “The tear gas gets behind your lenses,” she warned, tracing on her eyeliner.

There was supposed to be a demonstration against the Wall that day, but earlier in the week the IDF had raided Jayyous. Soldiers entered the village at night, seized about a hundred young men, and penned them in the school gymnasium. The IDF troops also occupied several village houses and spray-painted a Star of David over a pro-freedom mural on a school wall. They took about a dozen men with them when they left; the men were still in custody somewhere in Israel. I wondered if the night action by the IDF would intimidate the young men out of their weekly protest. I asked Mohammad if anything was going to happen. He replied that he didn’t know. He said “the street will decide.” I didn’t believe him. His cellphone rang all morning. If anyone knew, Mohammad did.

All of Mohammad’s beloved family fields and olive groves, and the tree he grew up alongside, were exiled to the other side of the Wall when the fence went up in Jayyous in 2002. The seizure of his family’s land inspired Mohammad towards resistance. In 2006, he moved from Jayyous to Ramallah to work with Stop the Wall, a grassroots activist campaign that aims to stop and dismantle what most Palestinians term the Apartheid Wall. Since then, Mohammad has become a leading voice against the barrier. He is likeable and speaks eloquently in English — even though, as a schoolboy, English was Mohammad’s most hated subject. He meets with journalists and activists from around the world, tours them around Palestine, and speaks internationally about life under Israeli occupation. He told me he had Jimmy Carter’s cellphone number programmed into his phone.

Most of Mohammad’s work, though, centred on Jayyous, where his family still lived and where he kept the bare apartment where we waited for something to happen. He was the “youth coordinator” for Stop the Wall and organized the weekly demonstrations. Each Friday, Mohammad accompanied a throng of protesters through his village to demonstrate at the south gate, not far from where the

on YouTube. The film shows IDF jeeps driving into the village, soldiers firing tear gas and pushing foreign activists against a wall. It shows a Palestinian woman running after an IDF jeep holding her arrested son. It shows one soldier blowing pink bubbles with bubble gum and another scratching his ass through his drab fatigues. It does not show the stone throwers, nor does it show Mohammad.



“First the Israelis built a wall. Next they will build a roof,” Basel Abbas told me, smiling at his joke. “Maybe they’ll open it up a little during Ramadan so we can see the moon.”

Basel knows barriers. He grew up in Nicosia, the capital of Cyprus, where barricades divide the city into a Greek south and Turkish north along what is also called the Green Line. The barricades went up in 1974, and an entire generation of Cypriots came of age without ever stepping past the barriers. Basel’s parents worked for the PLO embassy in Nicosia. At the time, Cypriots from both sides of the barricades could not cross without special permission. But Basel and his family crossed all the time. They lived in the south and shopped in the north, where food and clothing cost less. They could go back and forth across the border because they were refugees. They had no nationality, and thus no national loyalties. They were not bound to the rules and prejudices of any country. On the divided island of Cyprus, the family’s statelessness granted an ironic and perverse sort of freedom.

I was anxious to hear Basel’s thoughts about living along two Green Lines, especially since a few days later I would head to Nicosia myself, but Basel had little to say about his time in Cyprus. He left the island when he was thirteen and hardly remembered anything apart from the blue helmets on the UN soldiers who stood along the barricades. “I didn’t really understand the conflict,” he told me. “Everywhere I’ve lived, something horrible had happened. Or will happen.” He was born in the shadow of the barricades in Nicosia and moved to Palestine in 2000 just before the first blasts of the second intifada. When Basel travelled to Belgrade to study sound engineering, the Serbian prime minister was assassinated at the end of his street. Now he lives in Ramallah, not far from newer walls on an older Green Line, and is a founding member of a sound-and-image arts collective called Tashweesh.

Immediately after the Wall rose in Palestine, artists from around the world swarmed the West Bank armed with stencils and spray cans to colour the greyness. In the few years since its construction, the Wall has morphed into a renowned open-air museum of graffiti and spray-painted political messages. The most famous graffiti is in Bethlehem, where Banksy, a reclusive British street art star, painted ironic murals of the occupation on the Wall. A Kevlar-wearing peace dove. A little girl frisking a soldier for weapons. A rat with a slingshot. The graffiti gave birth to a cottage industry among taxi drivers who earn extra fares by offering “Banksy tours” of Bethlehem.

Basel has an affection for graffiti, and he told me that writing on walls forms part of the Palestinian narrative. During the First Intifada, beginning in the late 1980s and before mobile phones, Palestinians under IDF-imposed curfews communicated by writing on their homes’ exterior walls. Spray-painted messages denounced Israeli incursions and announced demonstrations. The walls invited guests to weddings and mourners to funerals. Sometimes they threatened and called for revenge: “The PFLP will avenge the death of . . .”

Basel, though, distrusts the attention the Wall receives from artists from elsewhere. Though he understands the draw of the Wall, and concedes the barrier has inspired sympathy for the Palestinians, he fears the barrier is being commodified. “The Wall is not central to the Palestinian experience,” he insists. The artists who come to paint the Wall don’t always understand that everything the barrier represents — apartheid, injustice, racism — existed long before the Wall itself. “I’ve never been allowed to cross the Green Line into Jerusalem,” Basel said. “Not before the Wall and not now.” The Wall is a stark and sudden manifestation of the occupation. The barrier provides a potent symbol to rally around, a theatre for outsiders to stage their solidarity dramas, and a surface to both spray with paint and pound with fists. But only the physicality is new. “The Wall is not the point,” he insisted. “It is not all about the Wall.”

Basel ordered another coffee and I motioned for another Taybeh, the only beer brewed in Palestine. We were in Pronto’s, an Italian restaurant in central Ramallah. Even as Basel and I spoke of war and walls, I felt far from the conflict in Ramallah. No prophet or saint — be they Christian, Muslim, or Jew — ever lingered long enough in Ramallah to gild it holy. This lack of blessedness is Ramallah’s blessing. No one fights for this place. There was nothing sacred or ancient here to fight for. The city bills itself, instead, as the “new” Palestine. There are young people everywhere. They gather at the nightclubs and bars for cocktails and hookah pipes. Many study at Birzeit University up the hill, and few young women wear the headscarves of the devout. On the weekend, there are concerts, poetry readings, and performances by young Palestinian artists like Basel and his collective.

I liked Ramallah. I liked the city’s creamy stone buildings. I liked that the streets always smell of fruity hookah smoke and that the coffee was always good. Still, something rang false about the place. I didn’t understand why Palestinians, whose traditional cafés are such joys, decided to open a Starbucks knock-off called Stars and Bucks. I didn’t know why a region filled with olive groves needs an Olive Garden restaurant or why a faux French café called Café de la Paix boasts about pastries “fresh from Tel Aviv.” I didn’t understand why kaffiyeh-wearing internationals who crowd the smoky bars feel the need to compete with each other for the attentions of Palestinian hipsters. Ramallah is the centre of something, but I didn’t know what.

Basel knows. He calls it the Ramallah Syndrome. “People in Ramallah are disconnected from resistance,” he told me. Ramallah boomed after the Wall. Men from rural communities who found themselves separated from their farmland drifted to Ramallah to find work. I heard a theory that the Palestinian Authority has not acted strongly against the Wall because farmers displaced by the barrier

land alone, so he managed one or two greenhouses by himself and rented out the rest. He raised chickens in a coop beside his house to earn a few shekels from their meat and eggs.

If there is comfort to be had under occupation, it is in the fields of Palestine. There is serenity beneath the silvery olive leaves and downy young almonds. For the men who till this soil, each morning begins with a pilgrimage from the village noise and the clamour of the family home to something like peace. “The fields are a place to smell the flowers. To smell the fresh air,” Saleh said. The Wall soured this solace. Now Saleh started his day by facing uniformed soldiers and their guns at the gate. He would lift his shirt so a twenty-year-old conscript could see he wasn’t wired to explode. Farming his inherited land was no longer Saleh’s birthright but a fragile privilege that might be revoked three months from now. Or six months. He didn’t know. “I am nervous all the time,” he told me. The Wall infected Saleh with a Palestinian strain of the Wall Disease, one that manifests through humiliation, anxiety, and hopelessness. Many Palestinians believe the true intention of the barrier is to make life so difficult that they will eventually move away. They see the Wall as a silent notice of eviction.

The next day was Friday, and a good day for a protest. The sky was clear over Jayyous and the air warm, but some villagers were growing weary. An old man shouted at the passing protesters from his front door. “Go home! Stop causing trouble!” Earlier that day, inside the mosque, village elders had pleaded for a Friday without clashes. The village needs a break, they said. One family lost a coop of chickens to tear gas. But the shabaab would not be dissuaded. They ignored the angry man. His wife came out, placed her hand on his shoulder, and led him back into the house.

Once again, the shabaab launched their stones at the IDF beyond the south gate. And once again, the jeeps and soldiers rumbled in. I was starting to learn the rhythm of the siege. I learned I didn’t need to run if I simply stood aside. A few soldiers took up positions at the top of a hill from where they could look out over most of the village. I stood a few paces behind them, leaning against a wall, and they didn’t seem to care that I was there. After my previous Friday with the shabaab, it felt strange to watch the clashes from the other side, from over the IDF’s shoulders. The shabaab danced and taunted from the ledge across the valley and slung stones that had no chance of hitting anything. In response, the IDF fired sound grenades and tear gas. One of the soldiers in front of me, a female recruit in ill-fitting blue fatigues, appeared new and clumsy. A senior officer helped her load her tear gas rifle. If the siege sometimes seemed like a game for the shabaab, for the IDF it was a training exercise.

The soldiers left their post on the hill and advanced down the street towards the shabaab. Sound grenades exploded. Slung stones rattled on the pavement like popcorn. Soldiers showed their middle fingers to the boys who laughed and shout “Jayyous!” each time a tear gas canister fell short, the white smoke billowing amid weeds. The pale minaret of the mosque stood behind them. On the rooftops, women watched the action on the streets while draping wet clothes over laundry lines. The normal duties of a regular afternoon punctuated by shouts and explosions and arrests that had also become commonplace.



The fingers of Yusef Njim’s right hand were sore and black. “Some spray cans are more finger-friendly,” he said, and after spraying hundreds of messages on the Wall, he should know. Yusef found the neck of a broken bottle on the ground and discovered it fit perfectly on his spray finger. The ad hoc prosthetic eased the painting. At the same time, Yusef also found an unfired IDF rifle bullet. He tossed it to me. “A souvenir of Palestine.” I thanked him and put the bullet into my pocket but dropped it on the ground when he looked away. I could not imagine what would happen at Ben Gurion airport if I tried to board a plane with live ammunition in my luggage.

Yusef returned to the Wall and peeled away a few flaking Palestinian campaign posters from long-ago elections. The paste behind them had dried into dust and powdered Yusef’s long hair and denim jacket. He rattled his can and sprayed the next message on his list onto the grey concrete:

*Zahour ma femme
cherie, je t’aime*

The air smelled sweet with aerosol. Yusef moved half a concrete slab to his right, checked the paper in his hand, and wrote:

Hey Ruby, let’s get married

Yusef was a writer for Send A Message. The project allows people from anywhere in the world to relay a short note to a chosen receiver by having Yusef and his cohorts spray-paint it on the Wall. The sender pays thirty euros, and the recipient receives emailed photographs of the sprayed message. Money raised by the project funds a Palestinian youth centre in Ramallah. Send A Message was just over a year old when I met with the men, and already 1,200 messages had been sprayed onto the Wall, most of them by Yusef.

Many messages expressed a sort of long-distance solidarity with the Palestinian cause, but most didn’t. This surprised me. According to Faris Arouri, a coordinator with the project, a full two-thirds of the messages they wrote were “silly.” There were

end up working for the PA in Ramallah. The city has become the playground for a new kind of upper middle-class Palestinian, one who is enamoured of images of American-style wealth beamed into his satellite dish, spends his money on clothes and in cafés, and buys homes on credit — a phenomenon that has no history in Palestinian culture.

Basel told me about Rawabi, a manufactured suburbia rising out of the Palestinian hills near Ramallah. “The first new Palestinian city in recent history,” according to the Qatari real estate company behind the construction. When it is finished, and if Israel grants permission for an access road to be built, Rawabi will house forty thousand “New Palestinians.” Basel considered the project a slap in the face to the refugees and the notion of “right of return.” “They are saying ‘Fuck you to your old towns — we’ll make you a new one.’”

Rawabi was nearly complete. I’d heard the development described as “American-style,” but an artist’s rendering of its white stone high-rises reminded both Basel and me of something else. “It will look like a settlement,” he said. “Israelis love it. We are becoming settlers just like them.”

While they wait for their suburban paradise to be completed, the middle-class Ramallawi chase Western trappings, watch prices rise, and confuse wealth with peace. “It is an illusion,” Basel said. “Just because there are new cafés and bars doesn’t mean we have independence. Anything can happen at any time. We don’t control our own borders. We use Israeli currency. We buy Israeli goods. We are not producing anything. The West Bank is the number one consumer of Israeli products. Economic peace is bullshit.” Then he added, “These people forget that five minutes down the road there is a wall.”



On the other side of the Wall, I rode a bus to Neve Daniel, a settlement near Jerusalem, with a bottle of kosher wine in my bag. It was Purim, and a man I met in a Jerusalem café, Avraham Bechar, had invited me to celebrate the holiday with his friends in Neve Daniel. I’d never visited a Jewish settlement before and was nervous. I didn’t know what to expect. I’d only ever seen settlers on television waving Bibles and raging against anyone — Gentile or Jew — who dared suggest they did not belong on the land their god granted them. International law deems the settlements illegal, and even most Israelis believe the settlements stand as barriers to real peace. If the Islamic jihadists represented extremism on the Palestinian side of the struggle, then the settlers represented extremism on the Israeli side.

Avraham was in his early twenties, slim, and, like most of the settlers, born in America. He didn’t seem an extremist. He suggested I bring a bottle of wine for the family that was hosting us, then he called me back to warn me of some potential awkwardness. “Since you are not Jewish, you will not be allowed to pour anyone’s wine.” He was afraid I would be offended by this prohibition. I found his concern charming. Avraham knew about my interest in the Wall and told me that the settlers too were against it. They didn’t object to the route of the Wall, however, but to the notion that any of the West Bank — referred to by settlers by its biblical names, Judaea and Samaria — belonged to anyone but the Jews. For the settlers, Israel spans the land from the Jordan River to the sea and must not be divided. The Wall is a slur on their god.

Purim fascinated me. Jews dress in costume, sometimes as characters from the biblical story the holiday derives from but most often in disguises that would befit North American Halloween. They eat and drink to a reasonable excess. Drunkenness during Purim has a spiritual component: imbibing of wine inspires believers to express their joy and gratitude to God. The bus was filled with costumed young Israelis and American yeshiva students. I eavesdropped on their holiday plans and discussions of who was going to which party and with whom. I know little about Judaism, but I’ve always associated the faith with ancient and sombre devotion. I was surprised to see Judaism linked with glittered makeup, coloured wigs, and unabashed joy.

The Wall follows the highway to Neve Daniel. For the benefit of the settlers, I suppose, the Israelis have made the Wall pretty here. Some of it is built of textured stone in various shades of pinkish tan and ivory. The implications of the barrier — its effects on Palestinian life, its silent rejection of peace — are whitewashed by a pleasant, garden-wall aesthetic.

Avraham met me at the bus stop, and I followed him as he delivered holiday greetings to one of his neighbours, an English professor who invited us into her home. She stirred a spoonful of Nescafé into a mug of boiling water for me and listened as I told her about my time in the northern West Bank, about the Palestinian farmers who’d lost their land, and how the route of the barrier debunks any claims that Israel built the Wall for security. She nodded and conceded this “might” be true. Then she told me that, since some settlements find themselves east of the Wall and are excluded from Israel, “both sides are losing.” Avraham added that Arabs have contributed nothing to the world since inventing algebra and that Israel has “the most moral army in the world,” a bumper-sticker-worthy claim I heard repeated like a mantra by IDF apologists.

After my coffee, Avraham and I walked to the house where we would celebrate Purim. More than twenty people crowded around the table, most in costume, and at least half of them teenage girls. Rabbi Yitzchak Twersky and his wife Geula hosted us. Geula was a respected Israeli artist whose vivid paintings of religious and political scenes — Jews reading the Torah, Israeli paratroopers “liberating” the Western Wall — hung about the house. The Twerskys had ten children, the oldest a twenty-year-old woman, the youngest a three-month-old girl. The noise at the table was amazing. At times everyone talked at once, with one or two people singing

birthday messages, wedding announcements, and everyday pronouncements of love. There were also “ads” for personal blogs, radio stations, and the websites of favourite rock bands. Someone had a falafel recipe sprayed on the Wall, and Faris told me there had been at least a couple of marriage proposals in addition to the new plea for Ruby’s hand.

Yusef and Faris would not spray anything racist, insulting, or obscene on the Wall. They also refused messages they disagreed with. Messages that referred to the Wall as a “Security Barrier” would not be written. Neither would overtly pro-Israel messages. I told Faris I’d seen *This wall saves lives* painted on the Wall in Bethlehem. He frowned and said they would never paint a message like that. “We are not a service,” he told me. “Besides, it is not true that the Wall saves lives.”

Painting the Wall is illegal. The Israelis consider the barrier a “closed military area” and forbid anyone from walking near it. Yusef had had few problems with the IDF, though. Usually he could see them coming in time to toss aside the cans and pretend to be photographing the Wall rather than defacing it. The IDF had only detained Yusef once. They questioned him for six hours but didn’t charge him with anything. “I told the soldiers if painting the Wall was really a security concern, I would be happy because it would mean both sides were finally at peace.”

Yusef was still taking a few chances. The last message of the day ended up on a slab of Wall adjacent to a steel gate the IDF opened when they wanted to enter Ramallah. Yusef stared at the gate for a moment, shook his can, and sprayed *How about a window*. Tagging the Wall was one thing, but defacing the gate was risky. Faris shook his head. “Yusef is crazy,” he said. Yusef looked pleased with himself.

I had been skeptical about the project when I first read about it. I’d spent Friday afternoons amid the weekly tear gas and thrown stones in Jayyous, where young men risked injury and arrest resisting the Wall. I didn’t see the point in scrawling *Happy Birthday Jane* on it. Faris told me there were Palestinians who also questioned the purpose of the project. Ramallah’s “intelligentsia,” those who had grown comfortable under the occupation and no longer resisted it, remained the most cynical. Others complained that the project beautified a structure that is ugly and hateful. Faris scoffed at this. “You do not notice the nail polish on the hand that is beating you.”

The detractors are missing the point, I think. Send A Message inspires an ironic form of dialogue: the sender and the receiver are linked by a concrete barrier built to separate. The project exposes the Wall, and the system it represents, to people who might not be otherwise politically motivated. In this way, the banal messages are the most compelling. The senders who submit Nelson Mandela and Gandhi quotes mostly preach to the converted — or at least to the already engaged. But someone who writes a message of love, or a falafel recipe, brings attention to the Wall through a sneaky sort of whimsy. And the silliness subverts the Wall’s martial nature. By using this harsh military construction as a medium for a lighthearted exchange, the messages render the barrier no more imposing than a bathroom wall. I didn’t see any *For a good time call . . .* messages, but I’m sure they exist.

The messages also expose the Wall’s inability to block the narrative of occupation. For all its military might, the Wall cannot stop the stories from being told. On the contrary, the Wall itself becomes the medium for the story. The Wall is co-opted and hijacked by those who oppose it. Just like the cattle smugglers in India who refashion the barbed fences into pulleys to lift cows over the border, the Send-A-Messengers use the Wall to defeat the Wall. Of course, Yusef’s spray paint does not impact the Wall’s concrete reality. Nor do the messages tear the Wall down. But they mock the Wall and rob it of its emotional power.



There is no better way to mock a Wall, any wall, than by going over it. The concrete slabs stand especially high along the outskirts of Ramallah — but not high enough. In 2007, Mohammad Othman went over.

Mohammad had received an invitation to address the United States Social Forum in Atlanta as a representative from Stop the Wall. He applied for a visa through the American consulate website. After a few weeks, the consulate in Jerusalem called him and told him his visa had been approved and was ready to be picked up. “I told them that I did not have a permit to enter Israel so I could not pick up the visa,” Mohammad told me. He asked if the visa could be mailed to his home, but the consular officials insisted he retrieve the documents in person.

Mohammad paid a construction worker he knew in Ramallah a hundred shekels, about thirty dollars, to attach a rope to the top of the Wall using an electric crane. Mohammad found the rope at night and pulled himself, hand over hand, up the twelve metres of concrete. Then he pulled up the rope, tossed it over the other side, and shimmied down to where friends waited to drive him away. He might have been shot if discovered, but such breaches of the Wall were common at the time. Illegal workers from the West Bank entered Jerusalem over the Wall every day, and Palestinians with cranes made extra income setting up the ropes. Eventually the IDF grew weary of seeing ropes dangling contemptuously from the Wall every morning, so they added an electrified fence at the top of the barrier.

When Mohammad arrived at the consulate in the morning, the American officials fingerprinted him and told him to wait. Then they announced his visa application had been denied after all. Mohammad asked why. According to their records, the officials said, Mohammad had murdered a man in the United States thirty-five years earlier. Mohammad had never been to the States, but that did not sway them. Neither did the fact that Mohammad was not even thirty-five years old. “These are FBI records,” they said and told Mohammad to leave.

I travelled to Jerusalem through the Wall rather than over it. My bus from downtown Ramallah dropped passengers at the

Qalandiya checkpoint. I followed a line of Palestinians with entry permits through the grey gates and turnstiles, showed my passport to a bored IDF soldier frowning behind bulletproof glass, then emerged out the other side of the barrier. My passage through the Wall resembled any other border I've ever traversed. I crossed without rancour or resistance. After all I'd learned in Palestine, my passage across the line was too easy. It felt unearned.

I looked back at the Wall and pictured myself climbing over it. I had entertained these same fantasies of infiltration in the Western Sahara and the Spanish enclaves. To resist barriers is a human instinct. Walls and fences dare us to defeat them, to find a way over, under, or around. Those who defeat the walls — men like Malainin, Jeffrey James, Rocky, and Mohammad — earned my respect for doing something we all itch to do. I would never cross a minefield, crawl over barbed wire, or risk being shot climbing into Jerusalem. But part of me desperately wanted to do these things. I would never truly understand what it meant to live with the walls unless I tried to circumvent them myself.

My driver honked his horn, interrupting my fantasy. I sat down inside my bus, waited for the other passengers, and carried on safely and legally into East Jerusalem.

In 1967, once Israeli troops wrested control of Jerusalem's Old City from the Jordanians, they immediately charged their way to the Western Wall, the ancient retaining wall of Herod's Temple and the holiest site in Judaism. The Israelis flattened the Arab neighbourhoods close to the Western Wall to make room for a huge plaza where devout Jews, tour groups, and wedding and bar mitzvah parties could gather before praying at the Wall. The Arabs displaced by the demolition were transferred to the Shuafat refugee camp on Jerusalem's eastern edge. Now another wall, the Apartheid Wall, has excluded them again. At Shuafat, the Wall makes a rare turn west of the Green Line, taking land from Israel, to exclude the camp and its forty thousand residents from Jerusalem.

The Wall's route through Jerusalem is intricate and evolving, and its effects on the population are wide-ranging. Almost 170 kilometres of the Wall worms through what is known as the Jerusalem Envelope. The barrier includes settlements on its west side and isolates Arab neighbourhoods to the east. Thousands of hectares of farmland have been lost to the barrier. So has a third of the Al-Quds University campus. The Wall divides the Arab neighbourhood of Dahiyat al-Barid in half; now residents living on the Jerusalem side need permits to live in their own homes. In all, more than fifty-five thousand Palestinian residents of Jerusalem, close to a quarter of the city's total Arab population, have been excised from the city.

The Israeli government insists that security needs dictate the route of the Wall, but in Jerusalem it is clear there are demographic concerns at play. Since 1967, the percentage of Jews in Jerusalem has steadily shrunk. The Israeli government seeks to preserve a Jewish majority in the city by exiling Arabs to the other side of the Wall. This hasn't worked. As the Wall began to rise around Jerusalem, Palestinians living in the West Bank worried that the barrier would exile them forever. They feared being kept from their families, the markets, and the holy sites within the Old City. So Palestinians poured into Jerusalem in a dash to buy up homes in the eastern part of the city. Arabs from other parts of the West Bank quickly occupied the houses they had left on the other side of the Wall. As the percentage of Arabs in Greater Jerusalem went up, the ratio of Jews to Arabs decreased.

The Wall causes other problems for Israelis in Jerusalem. Palestinian hospitals in East Jerusalem lost their West Bank patients to the Wall and had to close their doors. Now East Jerusalem's Palestinians crowd the beds in Israeli hospitals. The Wall also severed the ancient connection between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, historically its sister city. Forty percent of the Jerusalem economy once flowed from Bethlehem's Palestinians, who visited Jerusalem to pray at al-Aqsa and shop in the souks. The Wall killed this trade. This is to say nothing of the resentment the Wall inspires in those it edits out of the city. The Wall casts historical hatreds in concrete and embodies the comfortable idea that Palestinians should be feared rather than trusted. The barrier fuels the rage that led to the sort of violence the Wall, according to its builders, was meant to protect against. Instead of easing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Wall has preserved it.

I don't know if most Israelis are aware of Jerusalem's divided neighbourhoods, its overcrowded hospitals, and the downward curve of its Jewish share. I don't know if they've heard about the farmers exiled from their fields or the martyred olive groves. Regardless of what they may or may not know, most Israelis favour the Wall because they believe the barrier protects them. There have been attacks since 2002 — three "bulldozer terrorists" drove their front-end loaders into Israeli cars and buses, and rockets continue to fly out of the Gaza Strip — but the blast of suicide vests has not been heard much in the last few years. The buses and cafés around Israel feel safe. Blood rarely splatters. The Wall is working.

Or perhaps it isn't. Members of both the IDF and Shin Bet, the Israeli secret service, have made the controversial claim that the Wall is not a major factor in preventing attacks. Terrorists can easily bypass the barrier by walking through its many gaps; less than 60 percent of the Wall is finished, and almost a third of the construction has not even begun. In fact, attacks began to taper off in 2002, long before there was enough of the Wall built to make a difference. There are other reasons for the recent ease in violence. Israel's security structure learned hard lessons from the United States, whose FBI and CIA agents failed to share enough of their secrets to prevent 9/11. Now Israeli intelligence works closely with the IDF. Also, since the death of Yasser Arafat in 2004, Israel co-operates more effectively on security with the Palestinian Authority. The most compelling reason for the drop in violence, however, is a counterintuitive one: the ascendance of Hamas. The Islamic organization, once a wellspring of suicide bombers, was elected to government in Gaza and shifted its focus away from terror and towards politics. In 2009, the head of Shin Bet flatly told a parliamentary committee there is no security reason for continuing to build the Wall. After all I'd seen in Palestine, I suspect there never was.

camomile and anemone grow. Since the protests began in November 2008, Jayyous had become a magnet for “internationals” wanting to express their solidarity with the Palestinian cause. A man in Jayyous told me that before the Wall, the only place he’d see a European was on television: now the Jayyousi were used to foreigners. When I had arrived from Ramallah the day before, old men in the village, assuming I was an activist, nodded welcomes from their storefronts where they peddled eggplants, cauliflowers, and peppers from plastic crates. Young boys rushed to shake my hand while their sisters, lacking the boys’ bravado, waited until I passed before calling out “Hello” and “How are you?” and “Where are you from?”

From Mohammad’s window we watched the road leading from the centre of the village to the Wall’s south gate. At around noon, just as the group in the kitchen decided there would be no demonstration, we saw a half-dozen young men walking up the road. Another group followed them. They didn’t have banners or flags or any other accoutrements of protest. “It is the shabaab,” Mohammad said. The word is Arabic for “youth,” but in the context of occupied Palestine *shabaab* refers to the bands of rebellious young Palestinian men, the stone throwers and troublemakers, who wage their miniature intifadas on the IDF. Mohammad pulled on a black coat with a fur-lined collar, pocketed his cellphone, and handed his camera to Aidan, a Canadian volunteer with Stop the Wall. Mohammad walked down the stairs and out the door. The rest of us followed him up the road.

We stopped at the edge of an olive orchard and watched the shabaab calmly lift stones from the road and hurl them over the trees. Aidan told me IDF soldiers were positioned on the other side of the grove. I could not see past the grey trunks and grey-green leaves, and the shabaab could not see where their stones landed. Eventually a clank of rock against metal signalled that someone had hit something. Probably an IDF jeep. The stone throwers turned to each other and grinned.

The response came quickly. A pop from behind the trees and a tear gas canister wheezed yellowish smoke overhead. I thought of Julia and feared for my contact lenses, but the wind whipped away the fumes. Then an explosion boomed so loud that my head vibrated. Everyone cowered. Sound grenades. I looked back and forth, suddenly breathing hard, wondering if and where I should run. I glanced over at Mohammad. He ducked from the noise and covered his ears with his hands. Like the others, he smiled nervously from his crouch. The shabaab laughed and reached for more stones to continue their assault on soldiers they could not yet see.

Someone yelled something in Arabic and the mood changed. The boys started running out of the groves. They still grinned but were obviously fleeing something. Aidan looked calm. I asked him what was happening. “The Israelis are coming,” he said.

I heard the army jeep engines rumble. The shabaab began to roll small boulders into a line across the road to slow the IDF vehicles: their own wall, for what it was worth. Mohammad shouted at Aidan to help. He ran forward and rolled a rock into the line. He was the only international among the barricade builders, and Mohammad reminded him to wipe the dirt from his hands afterwards. “Otherwise the Israelis will know you helped us.”

I envied Aidan. He was a Canadian like me but also, somehow, one of the shabaab. I wanted to join him. I believed in this cause. I wanted to be a part of this rebellion rather than a mere witness. The barrier these men fought against inspired me to write about walls in the first place. Cowardice, though, stopped me. I feared pain. The burn of tear gas. The red welts raised by a soldier’s baton. I imagined being arrested, blacklisted, and deported. I chalked up my inaction to an observer’s neutrality, but really I didn’t have the nerve.

There was not much of a barrier built before the men abandoned it. The Israelis were too close. The protesters ran down the road and joined the boys, who again gathered stones to throw. I didn’t want to run. I felt that running would implicate me somehow, but then another grenade exploded and rattled my head. I fled with the others up the road and around a corner where someone had written *Stop the Wall*. My muscles turned to stone and my legs shook. I cursed quietly to myself. Nothing in my experience had prepared me for this. I felt helpless and desperately wanted someone to guide me through, but I was no one’s concern. All I could do was imitate the others and trust that they knew how to stay safe. So I ran when the shabaab ran and stopped when they stopped. I spotted Aidan and sprinted to his side. Then a new sound, a crack I didn’t recognize. “Rubber bullets,” Aidan warned. We ran again. I didn’t look back. I was afraid to see how close the soldiers were.

A man opened the door to his house and waved us in. “You are welcome,” he said. Mohammad, Aidan, and I followed him inside and up the stairs to a salon. My breathing slowed and my muscles relaxed. Our host sprinkled cologne from a flask onto a rag and held it out to us in case we had tear gas in our eyes. Then he led us to the roof. From there I could see the mixture of panic and pleasure on the street. The shabaab laughed and collected wet stones, smiling as they fled the jeeps. They retreated and advanced. They gathered into gangs, scattered, and then reassembled. Their protest had a sort of ease, an instinctual cadence, and the hurled stones clattering on the street sounded like colliding billiard balls.

I could see the soldiers for the first time. I watched them creep around the houses and through the village gardens. The soldiers were probably not much older than the shabaab, but their bulky fatigues and military training made their movements seem measured and mature. We spotted a pair of them advancing through a cluster of greenhouses in a bid to outflank a platoon of stone throwers. Mohammad called and warned someone with his cellphone. Aidan took pictures. I heard another pop, and a tear gas canister sailed overhead trailing a ribbon of sweet-smelling smoke. It was close enough that I could see the red ember burning on the fuse. I watched the canister just miss the roof where we stood and realized the soldiers were firing at us. We dashed back inside.

Our host set up some plastic chairs for us in his salon. He put a teapot over a flame and turned the television to an English-language movie channel. His banal hospitality calmed me. If this man felt secure enough to treat us like everyday guests, then we must be safe. We sipped tea and listened to the blasts and shouts outside while Napoleon Dynamite mumbled on the television.

Purim songs at one end of the table or the other. With all their guests and the happy racket, my hosts had little time to talk with me about my project. This relieved me. I feared such talk would lead to talk of politics, and I knew my views would be as repulsive to them as theirs were to me. I didn't want to get into an argument while a guest at their holiday table.

Regardless, things grew uncomfortable. First, I touched the wine bottle I had brought. I thought I was only prohibited from serving it, but Avraham whispered that I couldn't touch the bottle at all once it was opened. I'd defiled it. "It's all yours now," he said, smiling. I felt terrible but lucky that only Avraham witnessed my transgression and that he didn't seem offended by it.

Then the family sang "Home on the Range" for a Twersky boy dressed as a cowboy. When they finished, Geula announced she had another version of "Home on the Range" she had written when the family lived in New York. Rabbi Twersky shook his head. "Please don't sing that song," he said.

"Okay. I won't sing it, but I'll tell you the lyrics." She turned to me. "You have to remember that I am from the inner city." Then she recited:

"Oh give me a home,
Where the cockroaches roam,
And the mice come out at night to play.
Where seldom is heard,
An English word,
And the bodegas are open all day."

Geula beamed at me. I turned to Avraham, who said quietly, "That was bad, but funny." I didn't know how to react. I wanted to say I found the song offensive. That it fit exactly with my image of what settlers are like. I wanted to thank her for showing her true colours to me and vindicating my discomfort at accepting her generosity and at being here at all. But I didn't say anything. Instead, my cheeks burned. I quietly ate my Yemeni mushroom soup and tender brisket and felt like a fraud.

After the meal, one of the children, a four-year-old girl dressed as an angel but with her wings tied on upside down, climbed into my lap. While the post-meal prayer distracted the rest of the family, the little girl reached across the table, grabbed a handful of cucumber and kohlrabi sticks, and stacked them like building blocks.

"What are you making?" I whispered in her ear.

"A choo-choo train," she whispered back.

The girl reminded me a little of my niece, Olivia, whom I always miss when I am away. Her immediate trust of me, even though I was a stranger, was touching. For a moment, it sweetened my discomfort. But as we both played with our food, something occurred to me. If I had been asked, in that moment, whether or not I thought this little girl's home should be taken away from her, I would have said yes. I would have supported the bulldozing of her house, of her school, of the playground down the road where she climbed the monkey bars and swung on the swings. They don't belong here.

I had a hard time reconciling my opinion of the settlers as a group with the hospitality of this family and the tenderness of this one child. I did not change my mind about the settlements. The Wall annexes Palestinian land, displaces farmers, and uproots olive groves to make room for settlements like these. The settlements are immoral. But even certainties grow complicated when confronted by individual souls.

Weeks later, I wrote about my experience at Neve Daniel on my blog. I wrote about the racist song, the little girl dressed as an angel, and my struggle to juxtapose the Twerskys' hospitality with the immorality of the settlements in general. In response, Avraham accused me of having it "in for the Jews." Geula Twersky wrote that her inner-city song celebrated contentment, not prejudice, and accused me of stabbing her family in the back. Rabbi Twersky charged me with harbouring "baseless and highly prejudiced racism against Jews" and made reference both to my Muslim wife and what he termed the "so-called Palestinians." What better way to deny the existence of Palestinians, I thought, than to hide them behind a wall?



I walked to Ramallah's taxi park, took morning tea from a stall, and waited for a ride to Qalqilya from drivers who always seemed like bullies. According to the day's newspapers, Hillary Clinton was meeting with Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian Authority leader, somewhere in town. The men at the taxi park didn't seem to care. Neither did the young students who, with bags hanging off their backs and exercise books folded in their hands, waited for rides to campus. It was the first warm day in a week. The streets smelled of fresh baking and cigarettes.

Our car lined up at a checkpoint on the one main road leading into and out of the city. Soldiers just out of their teens checked the driver's documents and peered into the car. Qalqilya's share of the Wall extends from the right and left of the road and encircles the city on three sides with tall concrete slabs. The city is almost entirely surrounded. Since Qalqilya is the capital of the district and the

only city of any size in the region, the checkpoint lines can be long. Villagers from places like Jayyous come to Qalqilya to visit the bank, to shop for housewares and furnishings, or to get their cars repaired. Sometimes, families come to visit the zoo. When a city enclosed by the Wall is also home to Palestine's only zoo, the metaphors come cheap.

The zoo was nearly empty that day. Only a couple of Palestinian families toured the cages. Leopards lazed in pens too small for them. A Syrian bear paced back and forth in a cage that reeked of urine. Baboons gripped the blue wire cages like convicts, and birds perched in enclosures with no space to fly. One row of cages housed a decidedly more domestic menagerie: rabbits, guinea pigs, and chickens. I wondered if the zoo purchased the latter at the poultry bazaar just up the street.

Despite the cramped and smelly cages, the bright colours and kitsch lent a cheerfulness to the zoo that was absent from the rest of my time along the Wall. Bill and Melinda Gates paid for the "safe playground" in the middle of the zoo. Women in hijabs with brown-eyed children wandered from cage to cage and ate ice cream at the painted picnic tables. The zoo's star occupant, a hippo named Dubi, reigned over the peacocks that shared his small concrete pit. A pipe continuously poured in water, and when Dubi opened his immense jaws to drink, the children cheered. They ran in terror, though, when he turned to fling his feces at them over the rail.

There used to be zebras and giraffes here, but they were killed in 2002 after boys at the neighbouring schools hurled stones at a passing Israeli army patrol. The soldiers responded by firing tear gas and rubber bullets. The smoking gas canisters missed their targets and clattered inside the zoo. The gas poisoned the zebras. And the pop of rubber bullets so panicked Brownie, a male giraffe, that he cracked his head against a door frame. Brownie fell down and died, and his pregnant mate miscarried a week later. It is cruelly apt that the zoo's veterinarian, Dr. Sami Kader, is also a taxidermist. He stuffs and mounts some of the animals he cannot save. A gassed zebra, a shrapnel-killed ostrich, and Brownie the giraffe and his stillborn calf are among Kader's glass-eyed dead.

After my time at the zoo, I found a café in the centre of town where I waited for Rafiq, a local activist. I sat at a dusty card table and ordered a hookah and Turkish coffee among the bearded men. Rafiq arrived late: he had been standing in front of bulldozers, demonstrating against the Wall in a nearby village. Israel was rerouting the Wall to include a cluster of Palestinian villages to the east side of the barrier. Seventy percent of village land, however, would remain on the Israeli side, to be annexed by Israeli settlements, and hundreds of olive trees would be destroyed. Rafiq and the other demonstrators had gathered between the bulldozers and the olive trees. Eventually the bulldozers moved on.

It was a small victory and likely a temporary one. Rafiq harboured few illusions. He knew the groves would eventually fall. Trees that stood for centuries would be torn down in minutes to secure land for settlers who had been on the land for two years. Rafiq spread out a map of Qalqilya district, dragged his finger along the line that marked the Wall's planned route, and showed me what would be lost in its path. Once the land and trees were gone, families would have to buy olive oil for the first time in generations — a great indignity for growers of olives. More than this, though, the olive trees represented the Palestinians' enduring presence and stewardship of the land. The trees and the Palestinians shared the same roots. Ripping out the trees symbolized a spiritual expulsion. "This is a new Nakba," Rafiq said. It is a word meaning "catastrophe" that Palestinians use when they refer to Israel's founding in 1948.

I took a taxi to Jayyous to meet a man named Saleh. He invited me into his salon, served me sage tea and bread with *za'atar*, and told me that in Jayyous everyone is a farmer. "Everyone has land," he said. "Even teachers and shopkeepers own fields and greenhouses." Before the Wall, Jayyous was famous for its tomatoes, cucumbers, and eggplants. People used to come from all over the region, some from Israel, to buy directly from the farmers. Saleh himself built greenhouses and tended guava trees on the land he inherited from his father. He reached his fields at dawn, paused at midday for food and rest, then worked until darkness. His operation was modest but profitable. He could afford to hire three workers and add some olive and almond trees to the family holdings.

He saw the notices posted to his grove in 2002 and then watched as bulldozers uprooted fifty of his trees to build the Wall. Once the Israelis erected the barrier, Saleh and other farmers worried that IDF-imposed curfews would keep them off their land altogether. The farmers did not leave their fields for a month. They ate their own produce and whatever their families tossed to them over the Wall and slept on the floors of the greenhouses between rows of tomatoes.

Israel insisted the farmers apply for permission to pass through the IDF-controlled gates to their fields. The farmers boycotted the permits at first. They couldn't stomach applying for permission to work on fields that had always belonged to them. But as October approached and olives ripened on their branches across the fence, the men feared missing the most important harvest of the year. They relented and accepted the "permit and gate" scheme. Bestowing validity on the system by participating in it was an error. "This is our fault," Saleh said.

At first, Israel granted permits to almost everyone, even children and long-dead farmers whose descendants filled out the forms on their behalf. The Civil Administration issued 630 permits in all. Then the Israelis began to demand proof of ownership of the fields. In rural Palestine, where land passes informally from fathers to sons, there is rarely a record of transfer. Land titles often remain in the name of an original owner who may have long since died. The Israelis do not recognize this undocumented inheritance, so permit applications can be complicated and are likely to fail, even for long-held family plots. Palestinians may register land officially, but this process is both expensive and risky: the Civil Administration can confiscate land from owners who don't have all the required documents.

More and more permit applications were refused, even for farmers who'd been granted permits in the past. Before the Wall, about three thousand Palestinian farmers used to work the fields around Jayyous. Between January and May 2009, Israel granted permits to fewer than a hundred. Saleh had one, but he could not obtain permits for his family members or hired hands. Saleh couldn't work his

Walling Absurd

Nicosia/Lefkoşa

The walls edge places that cannot be. In the Sahara, a berm tracks through a nation, the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic, that isn't real. Fences surround Ceuta and Melilla, cities that are in neither Europe nor Africa, neither Spain nor Morocco, but some unlikely and unknowable collision between them. The villagers who live along India's blurred seam with Bangladesh are nowhere people strung out along a zero line. Palestinians surely exist, but Palestine itself is less a place than it is an idea, an emaciated dream defined and denied by someone else's wall. After leaving Palestine, I travelled to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, another walled nation recognized by no one. Another place that does not exist. I spent a few weeks in the capital city — named Lefkoşa on one side of the Wall and Nicosia on the other.

I drank Turkish coffee in Atölye Cadı Kazanı café in Lefkoşa — the same drink is called Cypriot coffee on the other side of the Wall — and tried to keep Nilgün Güney's cat off my notebook. Nilgün wasn't paying any attention to her cat's affections. She was telling me the story of the island, and she wanted to start at the beginning.

Because she is a Turkish-Cypriot, the story begins on December 21, 1963. Nilgün's beginning even had a time: 2 a.m., the moment Turkish-Cypriot resistance fighters knocked on the door of her father's house. They told him the Greeks were invading and that he should go with them to help protect his people. Nilgün's father lifted his coat and hat from the closet and followed the soldiers into the Mediterranean darkness. Her mother grabbed a small handbag and Nilgün's school uniform, and they fled to her grandmother's house. They could hear gunfire, and the glow from burning houses coerced the sky to a premature dawn. Nilgün, eleven years old at the time, was upset she had to leave her dolls behind.

Cyprus had emerged from eight decades of British rule three years earlier. The path to sovereignty had been hard fought and bloody. Rival Turkish- and Greek-Cypriots were now co-founders of the new republic and partners in its government. The island should have been bathing in the nuptial afterglow of independence; however, the new constitution was a bloated and unworkable package of veto powers, special provisions, and minority guarantees. Among its assembled absurdities was the regulation of national anthems. The Greek national anthem was to be used in the presence of the republic's Greek-Cypriot president, while Turkey's anthem would be sung when the Turkish-Cypriot vice-president was around. I wondered what they would play if the two men were ever together.

But there were bigger problems with the constitution. The document allowed for the British, Greek, and Turkish militaries to station soldiers on the island, thus undermining any real sense of sovereignty. The constitution also called for unattainable ratios in the civil service and the army and bestowed so much power on both the vice-president and his Turkish-Cypriot minority in parliament that either could defeat any bill. And they often did. Outsiders joked that Cyprus was the only democracy in the world where the majority was officially denied the right to rule.

In December 1963, Archbishop Makarios III, the Greek-Cypriot president, presented a list of amendments to the constitution. He insisted that the changes would make cohabitation of the island possible. The Turkish-Cypriots suspected a trick. They feared Makarios's proposals would move Cyprus towards *enosis*: the union of the island with mainland Greece, which, according to Turkish conspiracy theorists, is the evil dream of every Greek. The Turkish-Cypriots rejected Makarios's amendments. The rejection provided enough of a reason for hardline elements on both sides — the Greek paramilitary faction, EOKA, and the Turkish resistance forces, the TMT — to start shooting at each other.

The women in the community did what they could for the fighting men. Nilgün helped her mother and grandmother cook meals for the Turkish fighters. They gathered sheets and blankets and brought them to schools where gymnasiums became hospitals. While they worked, the women shared gossip about who had been injured or killed. There was talk of massacres, of kidnappings, and of murdered children. Nilgün's grandfather, too grey to fight, listened for news at the cafés. Everyone dreaded hearing the name of a son or husband whispered over coffee or between lines of laundry. All of Nilgün's family survived, but the violence claimed Nilgün's favourite teacher. Later, the school was renamed after the teacher with the honorific *Shahid*, "martyr," placed before his name.

The street battles calmed after a few days, and Nilgün's father rejoined the family at her grandmother's house. The British military started to broker a ceasefire. To separate the warring parties, and in an inadvertent homage to Cyril Radcliffe, a British official dragged a green pencil across a map of Nicosia, drawing a line between the Greek- and Turkish-Cypriot quarters. The Green Line cut the city in half. Soldiers began to heave dirt and sandbags along the new boundary. Nilgün's family home stood along the line but on the "wrong" side, and by the time the ceasefire took effect on Christmas Day, every house on the street was off limits. Two years would pass before the UN moved the Green Line one street back and liberated Nilgün's house from south of the line. Her family returned to