When I was a child it seemed that everywhere I went I came across traces of my family’s history in Jerusalem. My father once told me that we Nusseibehs came from a long line of thieves. All family dynasties, he explained with an expression between earnestness and jest, can trace their histories back to some act of brigandage. I think he said this because of the pride Arabs often take in their ancient roots. You have to live in the present, Father lectured to me over and over when I was a child. Whereas I never pinned down precisely who the thieves were, I had no trouble finding old gravestones with names chiseled into the eroded limestone that in my imagination magically connected me up with 1,300 years of forbears, all the way back to the hot sands of Arabia.

My family’s story in Jerusalem begins with Mohammed’s Night Journey. By the time the Prophet took his legendary pilgrimage to Jerusalem, he and his few companions had already been forced out of Mecca to Medina. It was on the outskirts of this desert town that he was met by his first followers: fourteen tribal leaders who pledged their allegiance to him and to Islam.

Surprisingly, given the way the contemporary world views the role of women in Islam, four of the fourteen tribal leaders were women, and one of these was Nusaybah, from the warrior tribe of Khazraj. (She was also called Umm Umarah al-Maziniyyah, which is short for Umm-Omara al Maazinia al-Khazrajiyyah min Bani-Amir al Ansaria.) After the Prophet returned from his Night Journey, he and his followers, including Nusaybah and her
clan, directed their prayers toward Jerusalem.

Nusaybah, the progenitor of my family, was a fierce fighter who, on horseback, skillfully defended the Prophet with life and limb. In one battle she lost two sons and a leg, yet continued fighting. Islamic chronicles tell us that Mohammed was so taken by her bravery that he promised that she and all her offspring would always have a place in heaven.

When dealing with more than 1,300 years of family history, there are bound to be some fuzzy points. Much of what I breathed in as a child as irrefutably true is no doubt an innocent mixture of fact and fiction. But in Jerusalem, the source of the magical relation between man and city is precisely the beautiful mosaic of tales rooted in events both real and imagined.

One of my favorite childhood yarns is the story of the caliph Omar’s entry into Jerusalem in A.D. 638. By then Mohammed had already died, as had his first successor and hence first caliph (caliph meaning “successor to the Prophet”), Abu Bakr. Omar the Just was the second caliph. Humble, pious, and ascetic in his living and his style of dress, he was also a general on par with Alexander and Napoleon, and led armies to one conquest after the next. Following his lead and the banner of Islam, the hitherto chaotic bands of Arabian raiders and camel herders swept across the lands of Persia, Egypt, and Byzantium; with a mixture of bravery, strategy, and brutality, they brought old civilizations under the control of Islamic armies. Damascus, Baghdad, and Cairo fell. Peoples and religions were coming to terms with this dynamic force shaking up the ancient world.

Eventually Omar’s army reached the walls of Jerusalem. Panic broke out
inside the city. Less than a century earlier, Persian hordes had sacked Jerusalem, burning most of its churches and monasteries and slaughtering thousands. Invoking similar atrocities in their imaginations, people feared the worst.

For me, the most intriguing part of the story when I was a child was how Omar took the city. Like every boy, I liked tales of noble riders bearing arms cutting and slashing their way through hapless foes. But Omar’s conquest of Jerusalem was different.

Omar’s Muslim faith led him to consider Jerusalem unlike any other place. It was there where his teacher, the Prophet, was miraculously transported on the Night Journey, and he had prayed with Abraham, Moses, and Jesus next to the Rock of Ascension. This was no city conquerable by man’s sword. Violence and bloodshed, which had worked wonders elsewhere, were not to defile Jerusalem.

Thinking that their lives were at stake, the people of Jerusalem endured a long siege. But after two years, with their supplies running out, and faced with the specter of starvation, they asked for the terms of surrender. Omar, fighting skirmishes in the north at the time, sent back his reply. He requested that Sephronius, the Byzantine bishop of Jerusalem, meet him outside the gates. Meanwhile, at Omar’s instruction, the armies ringing the city walls refrained from all attacks.

At the determined time, Sephronius, dressed in the gilded raiment of his office, came out to meet Omar, expecting to find a royally armored conqueror. He was surprised to meet a simply dressed man leading a camel
mounted by Omar’s manservant. The two had traveled together from the north, taking turns riding the camel. The humbly attired commander of the Muslim army promised Sephronius that the people, property, and holy sites of the city of Jerusalem would be spared. Moved by his pledge, the bishop handed Omar the keys to the city gates, and to the Holy Sepulcher.

Sephronius ushered Omar to the Holy Sepulcher, the holiest church in Christendom and a repository of divine history. Adam, the first man, was buried there. This was the place of Christ’s empty tomb, and it was there that Helena, the mother of Constantine the Great, had discovered the true cross and the crown of thorns. For centuries, legends of the salutary effects of a visit to such sites—just a touch of the sacred stone of the tomb was said to cure deadly diseases—had been luring pilgrims throughout the world.

As the story goes, when the time came for the Muslim prayer, Omar refused to pray in the church, for fear of setting a precedent. If he prayed there, he feared later Muslim leaders might be tempted to turn the glorious church into a mosque. Instead, the caliph chose a spot outside the church to perform his ritual.

Omar then asked the bishop about the site of the Holy Rock and of Solomon’s Temple. The bishop didn’t know exactly where the temple was, as the plateau where it had once stood was now a vast garbage heap. There were piles of bones and human dung, animal skins, and—most shocking of all for Muslims and Jews—pig carcasses.

Out from the nearby crowds, says Muslim legend, a Jew stepped forward. It was he who now offered to help Omar locate the site of the temple and the
rock. And so the two burrowed their way through the rubbish until they came to the spot. “It is here,” the Jew said to Omar. “This is the place you seek.”

Omar began digging with his own hands. Once he had cleaned away the debris and wiped the Holy Rock clean with his robe, he performed a prayer.

One of Omar’s companions to Jerusalem was Nusaybah’s brother, Ubadah ibn al-Samit. Before leaving the city, Omar installed him as the first Muslim high judge of Jerusalem, and handed him the key to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. He then charged Ubadah, along with five other heads of families, with keeping the Holy Rock clean. (As a child, I liked visiting Ubadah’s tomb, in the southern corner of the wall enclosing the Holy Sanctuary.)

Ubadah’s sons were the first Nusaybahs (now spelled Nusseibeh) born in Jerusalem. Over time, the family became wealthy, with vast landholdings. Centuries run into one another here: for long stretches, our family is not much more than a list of names and titles neatly divided into judges, Koranic scholars, Sufi sages, and landowners.

The family’s political fortunes have always depended on the particular empire that controlled Jerusalem. Whether in favor or not, though, the family has fastidiously performed its duties of dusting off the Holy Rock and safeguarding the key.

Keeping the rock clean soon got easier. Within a few decades of the Muslim conquest, the construction of the Dome of the Rock was begun. The Islamic
The caliphate had moved to Damascus in A.D. 661, setting off an architectural revolution. The Umayyad caliph, Mu·wiyah, wanted to construct a magnificent mosque on the site of the Holy Rock. But unlike other mosques, it was not to be designed to face Mecca. As the place of the ancient Temple of Solomon and of Mohammed’s Night Journey, it didn’t need to point anywhere. Some storytellers say that the son of the Jew who pointed out the Holy Rock to Omar was the architect charged with the mosque’s design. As a Jew, the storytellers say, he constructed the new house of God, the Noble Sanctuary, or Al-Aqsa, with the original temple in mind. The Dome of the Rock was completed in A.D. 691.

As control of the church of the Holy Sepulcher was the main bone of contention between Latin Christians and Muslims, possession of the key was a matter of supreme diplomatic importance. And so, over the centuries, my family performed its duties: an ancestor opened up the door, the Christians filed in, at night they left again, and the door was locked until the next morning.

During the Crusades, with the Franks in control of the city, the Nusseibehs yielded up the key. The clan’s only survivor from the Crusaders’ conquest of Jerusalem was thankfully pregnant, and she fled to the north of the country. A century later, in 1187, after the Kurdish warrior Saladin drove the Crusaders out of the city, her offspring returned to Jerusalem.

Back in Jerusalem, the leader of my family clan, Sheikh Ghanim ben Ali ben Hussein al-Ansari al-Khazrajy, took up a leading post in government. For the first few years after the defeat of the Crusaders, there was no need to unlock the door to the Holy Sepulcher, because Christians weren’t allowed
back in Jerusalem. In 1192, the Muslim governor of the city returned the key to the Nusseibeh line after Sultan Saladin and King Richard the Lionheart concluded an agreement to allow Christian pilgrims to visit the city.

These were the salad days for the family, especially during the reign of the Malmuks in Damascus. The clan lived off vast tracts of land that Sheikh Ghanim had received from Sultan Saladin. This may have been where my father came up with his story of the Nusseibehs having been “thieves.” Peasants worked the soil and paid tithes to us, their feudal masters, who in turn used some of the proceeds to benefit the Dome of the Rock.

Financially, the family fortunes slid precipitously after the Turks expelled the Malmuks in 1517. One of my ancestors wasn’t happy at all about the new overlords and decided to join up with a Malmuk prince in his hopeless guerrilla campaign. Both he and the prince lost their heads, and the Nusseibeh family lost its lands and most of its rights. The one major property they kept was the Suq al-Khawajat, the Goldsmith’s Souk, one of the main markets within the ancient walls of the city.

A few years ago my cousin Zaki, the family historian, stumbled across a good example of our declining fortunes. It is in a four-hundred-year-old document painted in gold on deerskin and sealed with the sign of the Turkish sultan, declaring that henceforth the Nusseibehs had to share the rights to the key with the Joudeh family, a local clan on far better terms with the Turks. And so it was. For the last half millennium, a Joudeh has brought the key to a Nusseibeh at 4:00 a.m., and the Nusseibeh has proceeded forthwith to the church.
Chapter Two

The Pan-Arab Nation

I shouldn’t give the impression that ancient history lurks in every corner of our lives. Quite the contrary. I was raised by a modern, forward-thinking man who adored ancient and modern Arabic poetry equally, and was as pleased with my elder brother’s stellar marks at Cambridge as he was with my sister’s pursuit of painting in Paris. While proud of our ancient matriarch’s desert exploits, Father always kept an eye on the here and now.

A modern sensibility first began to stir among aristocrats in Jerusalem in the late nineteenth century. Times were changing, not least because the Ottoman Empire had by then become the “sick man of Europe.” As with every despotic system, the first signs of weakening set off political grumblings in every corner of the empire. Urban groups were demanding the rights and freedoms enjoyed by Europeans. Inspired by the Italian Risorgimento, in 1909 the Young Turks (officially known as the Committee of Union and Progress) captured the Sublime Porte in Constantinople, sent the sultan packing, and set up a new administration. The Young Turks tried to snap the empire out of its lethargy by promising the rule of law, industry, and progress.

In Palestine, the movement for more European-style liberty was particularly intense because the place was already shot through with European influence. By the time my grandfather’s generation came onto the scene, in the 1880s, the scramble for Palestine had begun.

Ironically, it was the ancient legacy of the Holy Land that brought much of
the change. In Europe, a new romantic sensibility regarding the Holy Land—you can sense it in George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*—was combined with photography and cheap package tours to stir up interest in the area. It was common to see eccentric English explorers traveling the country with a Bible stuffed in their saddlebags. A good example of the craze was the way the war hero General Charles Gordon, one of Lytton Strachey’s half-mad “eminent Victorians,” discovered what he swore was the Garden Tomb.

Governments, organizations, and entrepreneurs were equally caught up in the fashion. In Jerusalem, Czar Alexander II built the Russian Colony to accommodate the flood of Russian pilgrims streaming into the city. (The Israelis later turned it into a prison.) Not to be outdone, the German kaiser built the Benedictine abbey on Mount Zion. Protestant churches threw up schools and hospitals by the score. The Catholics appointed their first Latin patriarch since the Crusades, and Baron Edmond de Rothschild erected windmills for a colony of Jewish farmers.

Among Arab Jerusalemites, the movement for political reform was indirectly emboldened by this building and missionary frenzy, in part because many of the reformers were exposed to modern notions in schools run by Europeans.

Students at the Arab College, and later at my alma mater, the Anglican-run St. George’s, discovered Pan-Arabism, a movement spearheaded by Arab Christians in Beirut and Damascus, and by figures such as Abduh and Afghani in Cairo. These intellectuals, many of them fine poets and thinkers, frowned on old local loyalties of clan, tribe, and sect as leftovers of the feudalism that had arrested Arab scientific and cultural development.
In Palestine, a main source of the nationalist fervor among Jews was Zionism. As seen in the legends surrounding the Dome of the Rock, Jews had always been an organic part of Islamic Jerusalem. (My cousin Zaki, digging through ancient documents buried for centuries in an old synagogue in Egypt, once discovered letters praising caliph Omar for allowing Jews to move back to the city after centuries of Roman and Christian prohibitions.) Around the end of the nineteenth century, most of the Jews in the city were either East European ultrareligious Jews, or Arabic speakers who had lived with the Arabs for centuries and felt themselves to be a part of Arab culture, language, and life.

The Zionist movement had very different roots. Theodor Herzl, a journalist and failed Vienna playwright, was an assimilated Hungarian Jew. At the time he wrote *The Jewish State*, Herzl hadn’t even visited Palestine; he knew it only through books. What he envisioned was a future state for those Jews who would not or could not assimilate into European societies. Arabs, he was convinced, would have nothing to fear. “The Jews have no belligerent Power behind them,” he wrote, “neither are they themselves of a warlike nature.” . . .

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