

Gift of Goat

Adam Luebke

It was just going to be Baba and me that day, but I woke up wishing I'd not agreed to yet another trip with him. Hoda and I had only been in Jordan for a week, but I was already exhausted. I never knew what I'd be diving in to with Baba. Would a short jaunt for falafel turn into a fevered drive deep into the desert to visit a crowded, dusty outdoor market, which would then turn into wandering the back roads for eight hours zipping across endless arid land to seek out the spot in the muddy Jordan where Jesus was baptized? You just never knew what Baba, bounding with energy, had in store.

Sure enough, six on the dot, and outside a horn honked. Two quick taps. I shivered into my thermal underwear, pants, and shirt. If I didn't come out immediately, Baba would pummel the neighborhood's ears with sharp blasts of the horn.

Hoda said Baba acted that way because of his hypertension, and that he'd never used to be so aggressive. At the last second, she threw off the layers of messy covers and dressed nearly as fast as I had. She wouldn't force me to go alone.

"I think Dad's taking us to buy a goat," she said suddenly.

"A goat? But we don't even eat meat," I said.

Baba laid on the horn.

"Did he really say he's taking us to buy a goat?" I asked. "Crap, I don't want to do that."

"Would you go out there and just wave to him?" Hoda said, pulling on her black tights. I could see her breath as she talked. "Otherwise he'll keep honking."

Just then we heard the glass door slam. Mama's strained voice ripped off what sounded like an evil curse, powerful enough to cut Baba's horn mid-blast.

We met Mama tottering in the hallway, wrapped in her robe and heavy blanket, on her way back to bed. "God, my God, can I never get rid of him?" she muttered.

They were in the midst of a prolonged separation, all of it, from what I understood from the stories I'd heard, swirled around how they'd spent each other's retirement money. They tortured themselves together and apart. They had dreams of the other, weeping over their splitting up, but whenever they met in person, it was like throwing an armful of fireworks onto a campfire. Sometimes it took a few seconds for the first fizz, but then there was a pop, a bang, and they all caught fire and you wouldn't know in which direction to flee. Dishes would break. Door jambs would get busted. The brawl would never hit the street, though. They were restrained enough to keep it indoors. But the neighbors had come once, probably feeling it was their duty to check up, and at that point Mama and Baba had to stop in the middle of their row, so Baba sat with the neighbors and started up a conversation, still wiping sweat from his brow, while Mama was in the kitchen preparing cakes and tea.

"It's catastrophic," Hoda muttered as we stepped outside, where it was warmer than in the sunless house. She scanned the new apartment buildings along the sloping alleyway, some of them still being worked on. Shirts, pants, underwear, and blankets hung from so many of the balconies, strikingly colorful against the tedious white and tan cement blocks. I glanced at Hoda, to see if she felt like I did, like all the neighborhood and its laundry was at peace while her parents were at war, but her eyes were already down, peering into

the backseat, and she'd drawn her lips into a smile.

When we got into Baba's little yellow hatchback, the scent of fresh lemon and Baba's bald, polished head greeted us. He patted my leg and jumped straight into his standard, tyrannical Arabic lessons, which always came on the fly about whatever was around us. Today, vocabulary for a pleasant morning—sun, fluffy clouds, cold wind.

"You must learn it!" he shouted, already buzzed on the fresh air.

We jerked down the narrow alley and out into traffic, cutting off a large truck. I didn't bother looking for the seatbelt since none of the cars had them, except for the driver's seat. It was always *tawakkul Allah* driving in Jordan.

Trust in God. Make a prayer. Or don't.

The prevailing wisdom seemed to be that if you were meant to die that day, it didn't matter if it was from a dump truck rear ending your little yellow hatchback, or you decided to stay in bed, warm under your blankets, just to have the roof collapse on you instead, or get washed away in a flash flood. You couldn't frustrate the Angel of Death. But it did seem like he'd be more tempted to crack down upon finding someone without a seatbelt, careening down a two-lane road handling three to four lanes of traffic.

We squeezed into a roundabout. An old tire filled with cement held a sign that labeled the neighborhood. Other cars jerked to stops mere centimeters from our doors. For all the awful things I'd done in my life, if I were to suffer a traumatic death on a pitted road in the Holy Land, I hoped it would be enough for absolution.

On a previous trip, I'd once pressed Baba about why none of the cars in Jordan had seatbelts. It took him a few tries to get my gist. "They are nice, but not must," he finally said. "Worst case, the man dies in the car, he's *shaheed*. Straight to *Janat al*

Firdous."

"But what if he's just mangled and halfway paralyzed? That's got to be the worst case," I argued. We'd been skirting what had once been Palestine, where Baba wasn't ever allowed to return, but just to look and imagine his childhood home somewhere distant over the hazy Dead Sea, past the circular settlements, walled off and climbing up the sides of the mountain. Baba looked at me, shook his head a twitch like he was getting water out of his ear, and then said, "Yeah, yeah, not good."

Now, Hoda leaned in from the back. "Tell Dad about the shower," she said.

I told him the shower in Mama's apartment wasn't draining properly and leaked onto the floor. I tried to explain to Baba the way the drain had gotten slower since we'd been there.

"Martin," he said loudly, "you must get man to fix it."

"Two hundred dinars," Hoda said to Baba. "When you could fix it."

Baba shifted the car and we slowed down. Into the side of a steep hill was a broad, jagged space blasted out with dynamite. Square cement pillars poked up from the rocky earth and clusters of rebar shot out the tops like tassels.

"This man," Baba said, pointing past me so that his arm hairs tickled my nose, "he find precious jewels and left to America." He grabbed the wheel just in time and whipped it so we didn't collide with another car. Horns honked, Hoda scolded him, but Baba drove on unfazed.

"What kinds of precious jewels?" I asked, already fantasizing about the Romans and the Ottomans, and treasure chests filled with diamonds and rubies.

"He found gold," Hoda said.

"He leave the house like this. Say no need to build. He take the jewels to America."

"To do what?" I asked.

"To abandon his wife," Hoda said.

Baba braked hard in front of *911 Coffee*.

Emergency caffeine. It was in a dusty suburb where there was only gravel for sidewalks with trash piled up beside the buildings. Pale animal carcasses hung in windows, almost seductive like the extended thighs of women advertised in an illicit part of town. I ordered *cahwa sada*, which meant plain coffee without cream or sugar. The owner of the shop had an open flame over which he dangled a metal container hanging off a long metal handle until the coffee and water foamed up and nearly spilled over. He dumped off the creamy top layer into a cup and did it again, foam and dump, until he filled the cup.

"This is Arabic style *cahwa*," Baba shouted, slapping down one dinar for our drinks. He thanked the man and wished on him God's blessings.

"Amerikie?" the owner asked, nodding.

"N'am," Baba said. "His first time in Jordan. Three weeks staying." From what I understood, he then told about how I'd married Hoda, how we'd met at the university, and how it took us four years to finally visit her family in Jordan. Baba had visited us once, and so he described to the coffee man where I was from, telling him there were green fields and hills for as far as you could see in Dakota, where water flowed freely in the ditches, and the heat in the houses blew up from under the floors.

"*Alhamdulillah*," the owner said, shaking his head and gazing outside at the street. All praise goes to God.

We hurried over to the car where Hoda waited, swatting flies back out the open windows. We scooted off again and Hoda said, "Now Dad will take us to get the goat."

I was dreading the goat thing, hoping Hoda

had been mistaken about Baba's intentions, or that he'd forget about it and we'd just do something simple like drink our coffee and maybe visit the tomb of a saint. "What do we need a goat for? Do we need a goat?"

"To start a goat farm," Hoda said, giggling. Baba laughed deeply from his belly, so brassily that he didn't see the speed bump ahead. The car jolted and caught some air. The front bumper plunged forward and scraped the asphalt. Hoda screamed, and we banged our heads against the roof. Our coffees splashed everywhere, filling the cup holders and mottling the stained seats.

Baba swerved to the side of the road so we could recover as a steady caravan of traffic passed by. The small engine of the car purred then rumbled, sending a shiver through the frame. "It is no problem," he said, putting us back in gear. "Many bumps."

I sipped what was left of my coffee until the grounds touched my lips. Baba's car had taken up a squeak that increased with the speed. We blew through another downtown, where the streets weren't paved and the dust was swept off and piled along the sides. The road opened up into hills and rocky cliffs with veins of green velvet patches running flush in between. Baba braked suddenly, strangling the recurring squeak. Hidden from view until the last second were the goats standing in a disintegrating wooden pen beside a jutting rock face.

The sun was warm but the wind cool as we made our way to the animals. A musky scent along with the smell of fresh feces blew off the tribe. Two herders wearing layers of tattered clothing approached us. Baba was instantly haggling, slapping a thick finger against his palm. The men verbally tussled back and forth. The only word I understood in Baba's hasty speech was *dinar*.

"Dad is saying they owe him one goat for his

work on their truck last year,” Hoda said. “The man says he can have a medium one, but Dad thinks he should get a large one.”

The other herder pointed at a smaller goat, patting it on the rump and raising his eyebrows.

“This is baby,” Baba said to me, then waved dismissively at the herder.

Eventually one goat was agreed upon, so the men lifted it, baaing and maaing over the fence. They kneeled on its side while wrapping its legs with twine. The goat’s useless keening bounced off the rock walls and filled in the spaces between the sounds of engines and tires cruising by.

They hauled the animal to the car and swung him in the back. Baba merged into traffic, our squeak picking up steam. The goat launched into a series of bleats until they sounded like screams. Soon we were splitting the lanes and darting past cars. The smell of a beast—dust, sweat, adrenaline—lingered in our nostrils until Hoda said she had to vomit.

Baba rolled down his window all the way, and she felt better. In the back, the goat finally quieted down. We made it to the meat factory and two men unloaded it and carried it inside.

“They will cut his neck,” Baba said, mimicking the knife across his own throat. And then, as if disgusted he forgot, he added, “But first they say *bismillah*. They must say ‘In the name of God!’”

In the backseat was a basket covered with a cloth. Hoda brought it out and we crouched at the side of the road, across from the meat factory, to spread a blanket on the gravel. Baba had brought hummus and falafel and salad and drinks. There was a thermos of tea and Styrofoam cups.

Deep down in the valley were long white structures with rounded roofs that looked covered with canvas tarps. Baba said that was the Palestinian camp, for the refugees. “Many man,” he said, “living there.”

Hoda was explaining something. She stood, turned her back on the food, and waved a hand out at the valley. I tried following her gaze, and all the while her voice kept rising, louder, until she swore by the Prophet.

“*Khalas!*” she said when Baba tried to talk. She was telling him *enough*. She’d heard enough. I realized then that she wasn’t talking about the camp, but about Mama.

I stared off at the buildings. I had a dozen questions of how the people there lived, if they found work, if they had realistic chances of climbing to a better lifestyle. The cities seemed way too full already, and looking at the camp made me feel all was hopeless in the world. I wondered about all they’d lost.

Baba became agitated the more Hoda talked. She was questioning him, challenging him, using some of the same language I’d heard Mama use when she complained about Baba. When he could, he belted out a couple words at a time, “*La! La-ah!*” to shield himself from her onslaught.

I didn’t have to know much Arabic to understand what she was saying. Why are you neglecting Mama? Why can’t you get along? You’re already old, so why fight about material goods, the house, the car? Will those things help you in the grave? Haven’t you understood anything from the Prophet?

She flung all of those points and more I didn’t understand at Baba, who sat stone-faced in the breeze, shifting his jaw as if savoring the words he’d like to pitch back at her.

“*Hal tathun anak sa ta’esh lila’bad?*” Hoda asked. You think you’ll live forever?

Baba stood suddenly, casting a shadow over us. His eyes were fierce, his fingers grasping at the breeze. I worried he was going to slap her. What would I do if he did? Step in, wrestle him, try to restrain him? She’d pushed him too far. She knew

how to needle the sorest spots to make her point. But Baba stalked off to the battered guardrail and disappeared over the edge.

I sat speechless beside the hummus and falafel, my heart pounding as I watched the cars go by. I thought of my own quiet family living in their peaceful rural countryside, hardly ever raising their voices or expressing excitement. Showing even a crack in their composure was considered an embarrassing overstep. But I knew I wasn't taking everything into account. I wasn't being fair. My family hadn't been expunged from their homeland, nor faced with a constant uncertainty. Nobody had brushed them off their birthplace and taken their livelihood. And as viciously as Hoda's family interacted at times, they expressed the same intensity in love and devotion, forgiving quickly and fully.

A few minutes later Baba, picking his way past the cacti, dead brush, and patches of green leaves, popped up from behind the guardrail with two gigantic handfuls of *khubasi*, without room in his fist for even one more stem. He and Mama liked to cook the wild green leaves and eat them. Baba stuffed them into a bag and dropped them on the blanket.

"For Hoda's mother," he told me. When he noticed he hadn't started eating, he said, "Eat! Eat! There is no meat here."

We smeared hummus on bread and scooped up crumbled pieces of falafel. Hoda poured olive oil from a small container over the hummus. Baba poured hot water over the fresh mint leaves he'd packed to make a cleansing tea.

"Dad plans to give part of the goat to his friend who lives down there," Hoda said, nodding toward the valley. "They don't have enough money for meat."

"Six children," Baba said, sliding his hand over his head. "Not good."

About an hour later the goat had been magically transformed into carefully wrapped pieces, all of them jumbled in a bulky carton and packed with ice. I carried the box to the back of the car. The goat rode with us, considerably quieter than before except for the occasional rustle of one paper covering vibrating against another, down the perilous sloping road, winding in and out of view of those endless white structures where it was hard to believe people actually lived.