

The Sacrifice of Za'atar

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Like many Palestinian families, my family has a garden in front of our house, where we grow olives, grapes, figs, and peaches. I am not sure if it is simply a cultural tradition or a way to maintain land connection. My mom always insisted on teaching us how to garden. But, I always felt that planting was more of an intuition than a subject to be taught.

Planting has always been a part of my life, not as an extracurricular activity, but rather as a duty. I always wanted to plant Za'atar—a staple Middle Eastern mixture of herbs and spices; so, on one Friday afternoon, as I was visiting my grandma's house, I decided to take some roots back with me, hoping to see them grow under my bedroom window. Sunlight rarely entered that window, so my mom argued that I should try to grow them in another part of the house, where the environment would be more conducive. At the time, I didn't understand her reasoning. Despite not being able to convince her that they would survive, she agreed to let me try. *It's not the best location, but they will survive*, I thought to myself. *After all, Za'atar is known to be strong.*

I planted the roots as my mom watched. Although I knew how to plant, she still wanted to be there. While she was convinced that they would die, deep down, she was also hoping to be wrong. After planting the roots, she walked toward the grapevines and said, "My grandfather loved grapes, your grandpa does too."

My mom is originally from a city called Ram-



le, located in the center of occupied Palestine. My grandfather has a big house with a garden there. In 1948, during the Nakba (catastrophe), my great grandfather was forced to leave his home, so we now live in a small town in the West Bank called Bethany, or Al-Eizariya. My grandfather always described our house in Ramle as if he were describing paradise.

"Once you enter it, you find vines to your left with purple grapes hanging and two cats sleeping under the olive tree to your right." I always wondered if it was the green color that made it look like paradise, or if it was simply the relief he felt there. "Count your steps. On your tenth step, there is a dark grey door that leads to the living room where I spent my childhood."

My mom always dreamed of visiting the house, but as Palestinians, we cannot enter any of the occupied territories. However, after several attempts, she received permission to enter for 24 hours. She wanted to visit the house my grandfather described as paradise; she missed it as if she had lived there her entire life. Finally, she found the courage to visit. Her excitement reminded me of how I felt as I waited for my Za'atar to grow.

I finished planting and it was time to water the roots. I kept adding water until the soil couldn't absorb any more. I stopped, but my mom told me to add more.

"Why?" I asked.

"You took the roots from your grandmother's garden, where they used to live and had everything they needed," she said. "Now they're in a new environment, where nothing feels like home to them. The water is trying to force them to adapt and erase their memories of the past, fooling them with promises of new land. The more water you add, the more likely the roots will forget and just accept the new truth, so they may survive."

I continued to add more, looking at my mom and smiling. I wanted to prove her wrong. I want-

ed the Za'atar to grow.

Adaption, however, requires acceptance of a new state. Acceptance of dehumanization and displacement was never an option. Indeed, my mom followed my grandfather's description of the location, ignoring all of the new street names and numbers written in Hebrew. It felt like the streets were hidden under new names, new identities that they refused. Yet, they accepted my mother as if they knew her well. All roads welcomed and guided her. Finally, she found it, the same black gate, the same grapevines and exterior design my grandfather had described. Without hesitation, she opened the gate and entered the garden as if she had lived there her entire life. She noticed that the two cats were no longer there. It seemed that the plants were more capable of surviving than the animals, or even the humans. The plants did not die; instead, their roots dug deeper in the land as evidence of their permanence in Ramle.

As she was counting her steps, a man suddenly came out of the door.

"At the first glimpse, I could tell that he had moved in two or three months ago from a place far in the north," my mom recalled. "The sun hits the house so intensely, even the best sunscreen would not protect him from a sunburn."

He had to step back and wear his glasses to talk to her. Then, with a pure American English accent, he asked, "What are you doing in my home?"

My Za'atar did not survive. My mom was right. It needed sunlight.

Over the past 74 years, we tried to adapt in different places and speak different languages, and almost forgot our mother tongue, the way the water tried to erase the Za'atar roots' memories of the land. Though I wanted the Za'atar to live, grow green leaves, and make my room smell like paradise, I accepted it's sacrifice for us to prove that we must return.