

Hope Lives in the Garden

By Fayrouz Fakhereddin

The crack near the knob from last year seems to be growing, but that could be my imagination. Staring at the door for far too long, night after night, can play with a person's mind, so I probably shouldn't pay it much attention.

The floorboards creak beneath my feet in the quiet of the night as I rise from my bed and move to the door. Hard, cold, dirty; still, I glide my fingers along the moulding in the frame and long to turn the knob, knowing the release from the safety of my cold, damp, lonely room, would only mean danger.

I peer through the side window, wondering what dangers await me on the other side. How many soldiers? How many steps could I safely take in the small alleyways of my beautiful village before turning a corner to a firearm, a push, a threat, an arrest? Still, what I wouldn't give to smell the spices lining the street carts, feel the fabrics woven and embroidered with care by hajjeh Siham, taste the knafeh dripping in sweet syrup, hand-cut and shoved onto a plate by ammo Maher.

"Sahtain ammo."

It's as if I can actually hear his kind voice.

"Noora, please sleep habibti, you need your rest." Mama's voice interrupts my thoughts.

I sigh and cross the creaky floorboards to return to my bed. She limps into the room and gently sits herself down on the side of my bed, lowering the side of the mattress just enough that I roll into her and wrap my arms around her waist. She leans

down and kisses the top of my head, warming the area of my hair that's still damp from my nightly shower.

"What's wrong habibti?" she asks, as though she can read my mind.

"When can we leave again mama?"

"When it is safe, habibti."

"What is 'safe'? When will that ever be?"

"One day. I know it feels like that day will never come, but I think people see it now more than ever. Why don't you try to imagine it? That's what gives me hope on hard days. We need hope to keep going. Close your eyes and imagine it, and when you drift off to sleep, dream about it. I promise, one day, not only will we open that door and walk safely and freely in the streets of our village, but we will go beyond just that open door. We will travel and see new countries. We will visit our friends and family in neighbouring towns and villages. We will swim in the sea. We will pray in Al Aqsa. I promise you."

Her words paint a picture I can't even begin to dream of, but the word hope echoes in my ears. That is the problem, isn't it? I've lost hope. If what she's saying is true, if I can rebuild that hope by dreaming of a world where our freedom and safety one day come, then that is the key, I suppose.

Instead of staring at the crack in the door and remembering the soldiers busting into our home last year, taking my brother in the night, I will close my eyes and try to imagine something new, something I've never known but that my mama promises me one day I will.

She leans down and kisses me again, this time on my cheek. I feel embarrassed for some reason, knowing she probably got a salty taste of a tear that fell down my cheek, but she doesn't mention it. Why would she? She is the most comforting thing I know in my little world. She lifts her heavy, hurting body from my bedside and limps quietly to the other room.

I turn to the other side of the room, sinking into my pillow and returning my gaze to the door. As I drift off to sleep, the moonlight shining in through the window, I try to remember mama's advice. I push away the scary, doom-filled memories of the soldiers banging on the door and taking my brother away. The thought of him spending his fifteenth birthday sitting in a jail cell, probably staring at the moon at this exact moment and longing for his freedom while I whine about sitting safely in the comfort of my home.

Instead, I try to remember what hope feels like. I try to imagine a world beyond just an open door.

My thoughts and fantasies turn into dreams, and it all blurs together. I trip over Mishmish getting out of bed; she squeals and runs to her scratching post. The sun is shining for the first time in weeks. I hear mama calling me from the garden.

"Noora, come help me pick some figs. There are some delicious looking ones up high that I can't reach."

Mama is outside in the garden?

I look through the window and see baba and Firas sitting on the plastic chairs in our garden. An entire breakfast spread laid out on the small round table: fresh oranges, grapes, mashed fava beans swimming in olive oil, eggs, labneh. Steam pillows from the little cups filled with hot mint tea. What surprises me more than seeing Firas sitting there

is the fact that we haven't been able to buy eggs and labneh for months. Mama is standing nearby, picking fresh figs off the fig tree in our garden.

I can hear the call to prayer even though it's after fajr, and I'm certain I didn't sleep in until duhur. I slowly reach for the handle and turn the knob. No one yells at me to stop. I open the heavy door, and it lets out a creak as though sighing with relief after being closed so long. I can feel the crisp air hit my face. One foot on the warm garden stones, then the second.

I run to hug Firas.

I look up to see the wall is gone.

Hope, beyond the open door.