

Last Day on the West Bank

by Starhawk

In Palestine I often think of those advent calendars, the ones with little windows that you open to reveal whole, small worlds. A doorway presents a blank face to the world, but open it and another reality is revealed. Take a hand, open and door, and be drawn ever deeper into hidden, secret worlds.

After the last day of the women's training, we go home with Arish to her village of Sarda, open the door in the blank cement wall that faces the street, and enter a walled garden, with mint and fava beans, fig trees and grape vines, sages and roses lining the paths. In front of the house is a wide porch, and on the sides and back are courtyards. Arish brings us inside, to sit and drink tea and admire a perfect model of the Al Aqsa Mosque made by her brother, the engineer. Arish is young, in her early twenties, not yet married, an artist and writer. She shows us her drawings of her nieces and her mother, She has a round, bronze face and half-moon eyes that crinkle up as she smiles. Then the women beckon us out back, and we crowd onto a low bench in a small, cement-block outbuilding. In one corner is a sunken oven, heaped with coals and ashes from burning olive pumice, what's left after the oil is pressed. Arish's mother presides, patting out flat slabs of dough, and Arish removes the lid which has a long, vertical handle so they can lay them in the pit., replace the cover, and heap the ashes on. After just a few moments, the bread is done. Wide sheets of flat bread dripping with olive oil, with flat leaves of zata sandwiched in, and thin pasties of crisp, sweet bread basted with honey. They fill our hands with it, and we eat as tea is poured. It's a warm, intimate women's space, heated by the oven, like a sauna or a sweat lodge, and we laugh and smile and eat. I have seen clay models of this oven in sculptures thousands of years old. Generations of women have patted the dough, baked the bread, gathered at these hearths to gossip and laugh--a warm and womblike female space in a male world. I feel so safe, so welcomed, that I'm lulled into being happy, a feeling I just can't shake as the afternoon goes on. In spite of the harsh realities we've been discussing in the training, the techniques for self-protection when facing tear gas, sound bombs, rubber bullets, beatings, the ominous approach of the Wall that will shatter the fabric of these villages, the overwhelming oppressive realities of the occupation, something strong and sweet as this honey bread survives. For a little while longer.

While I am training and visiting, back in the village of Biddu work has begun again, and the villagers and internationals and Israeli supporters have turned out to once again attempt to stop the bulldozers. They march out, are driven back with sound bombs and tear gas. Mohammed, one of our contacts and a village leader, is arrested. He's young and handsome and comes from a prominent village family, and I've grown deeply fond of him in part because he and his cousin Monsour have a wry, cynical humor and are a bit wild for Palestinians. I can see Mohammed, in another world, in Las Vegas in a silk shirt with a few too many buttons open and gold chains peeking out. While I am eating sweet bread, he is being beaten by soldiers in the hills near Biddu, batons striking his

chest and arms and back and shoulders.

Our party in Sarda moves out from the hut of bread and troops next door, where a very old village house has been restored, with money donated from a Swedish organization, and made into a village center. "This is my house," Arish says with great pride. It is, indeed, her childhood home. We are shown over every inch of it, from the walled courtyard hung with old farm implements, through the galleries and the meeting rooms for the women's club and the children's space, to the offices of the mayor, and the rooftop courtyards high above. The restoration is beautifully done and I can feel what life must have been like in an old, traditional house, when the courtyards were full of a vast, extended family and the women were gossiping on the roof. From the top courtyard, we could see over the old, inner heart of the village and out onto the fields beyond. Old stone houses have capers and wallflowers growing in the cracks of the walls, and on their roofs trellised grapevines jostle solar hot water heaters and satellite dishes. Arish shows me her old bedroom, a sweet, whitewashed room with a deep window and an arched ceiling. "This is my house," she says, again and again, laughing with a slight sense of incredulousness that this could once have been hers, that she slept in this room, that she had lived here.

While we are having our tour, in Biddu the soldiers move to a small house isolated on the hillside, preparing to destroy it. About eighteen of the internationals and Israeli peace activists advance toward the house. The soldiers have locked five Palestinians inside, and now they begin to fire tear gas and sound bombs and the rubber-coated steel bullets that hurt like hell but generally only kill you if they hit you in the head or the eye. The activists are driven back, advance again, are driven back, advance again, six times in all. Then the soldiers begin firing live ammunition. For two hours, they keep up the barrage.

In Sarda, I am beginning to worry about the time. I need to be in Ramallah by 5:00, for a meeting about the summer campaign. At about 2:30, we finally all crowd into a service that takes us bumping and jolting over the rough dirt roads out into the fields. Fatima wants me to see the effluent from the factories in the settlements that is being dumped on the Palestinians' fields, as well as the raw sewage that is polluting the water. The dirt road snakes through a tunnel under a wide, paved road that serves the settlements and that the Palestinians are not allowed on. The light is golden and the fields are wide and wild and beckoning. Arish tells me her sister lives in the next village and they now walk the dirt roads to visit her, three hours' hike, because to drive, skirting the settler roads and the roadblocks, takes too long. Secretly, I long to take that three hour walk even though I know for them it is a hardship, not a pleasure hike. But we don't have time. We can't even go to see the effluent from the factory, but we do track the murky, contaminated stream that winds through the fields, and talk to the shepherds whose goats are grazing the hillside. Sheep have been dying here, mysteriously, and no one knows why but they suspect the contamination. If it wasn't for the pools of putrid water, the scene would be entirely idyllic, and again I find myself feeling happy in spite of everything.

But our trip has made me late. The service takes me to the roadblock on the far side of Biddu. From there, I catch another service with the women from the IWPS house, who get off at Hares while I continue to the checkpoint at Zatara. I don't go through the

checkpoint but instead catch a third shared taxi which goes to the checkpoint at Qalendia. I get off there, and hoist my pack onto my back to walk through. The soldiers watch the path but don't stop people going into Ramallah. One, a young, blonde woman, has an open face and I ask her how long the checkpoint will be open, because Israel has switched to summer time while Palestine has not. She looks surprised to be asked, but assures me it is open until 10:00. She seems like a nice person, like someone who might be one of my stepdaughters' friends, and I find it hard to imagine her shooting live ammunition at unarmed demonstrators. By now the soldiers have departed from Biddu, leaving forty wounded: four from tear gas, four from live ammunition, the others from rubber bullets. The worst cases have been sent to the hospital at Ramallah. The house is still standing.

On the far side of the checkpoint, I decide to spend more money and grab a taxi straight to Neta's instead of taking a service to the center of Ramallah and getting a cheaper taxi from there. I am late for the meeting, and I haven't had dinner, and I still have a long way to go before the night is over, and most of all I'm feeling that sad, grief-torn ache of leaving this place. This is my last night in the West Bank, last visit with Neta, last look at newborn Shaden, last time to see sweet, one-year-old Nawal wave her little hand and smile her smile of infinite charm.

And after more taxis, more checkpoints, more services and long drives, I arrive at my friend Rena's house in Hadera near midnight. I am back in Israel proper, a land of highways and shopping malls and ATMs, another reality altogether. I check my email, and read about Biddu. I read that Mohammed has been arrested, and my stomach drops and my arms grow weak. I realize just how much I've come to care about him and his crazy cousin, and Arish with her proud and incredulous laugh, and Fatima with her dancing hands, and I feel irrationally but really terrible, as if my happiness throughout the day were a personal betrayal of all of them.

It's very late, but I decide to call Shoura anyway. She tells me Mohammed has been released--they think perhaps the calls from a member of the Knesset helped. I breathe a great sigh of relief, and she hands the phone to him. He tells me indignantly how the soldiers have beaten him, but he sounds all right. I talk to Monsour, and say goodbye. It is too soon to leave. It is always the wrong time to leave this place. Someone is always being beaten if you dare for a moment to be happy. There is always some terrible disaster lurking, some horrible wrong that you think maybe your vigilance or at least your presence could prevent, though you know better. But nevertheless, the time has come, and I am gone.

For more information about the International Solidarity movement, see www.palsolidarity.org.

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