When I got home, I raced against time to pack and get to Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv. I was exhausted, and dreaded the usual three hours of questioning and interrogation by Israeli airport security.

Shalom, meh eyfo ata?
Hello, where are you from?

In a Hebrew accent, while gargling the R in Yerushalayim, I said,

Ani meh Yerushalayim.
I come from Jerusalem.

She continued,

Where exactly do you come from?

If I answered with "East Jerusalem," it would be assumed I was an Arab. And if I answered with "West Jerusalem," they would suspect I was Jewish. I replied,

Antonia Street,
The Old City.

She checked my passport, but my place of origin was still not clear to her. She asked me for my father's name,

Emile.
Your mother's?
Espérance.
Your grandfather's?
Antone.
What is the origin of the name Sabella?

Sicilian.

Do you celebrate Hanukkah?
Why not.

Do you celebrate Christmas?
Sure.

She was hesitant to ask if I was an Arab or Palestinian Arab. To speed things up, I told her I came from Jerusalem. The Arab one. All I wanted was to board the plane and close my eyes.

What is your occupation?
Artist.
I also work as a photographer for the UN.

I showed her my press card.

Where were you before you arrived at the airport?

I couldn't tell her I had just been kidnapped in Gaza. She would consider it a security threat and definitely not allow me to board the plane.

In Jerusalem.

And why are you going to Switzerland?
To have a holiday with my wife and daughter.
My wife is Swiss.

Why are you traveling alone?
Why do you work for the UN?
Have you traveled to Gaza with the UN?

Why do you live in Jerusalem?
Why don't you live in Switzerland?
When did your family settle in Jerusalem?

Why is your name Steve?

The questions were endless, and the first security guard was replaced by a second, and the second by a third, until the chief of security was called. I kept repeating the same narrative. Again and again. I had to be consistent and not make any mistakes.

Listen to me. This is my story. No matter how long you interrogate me, it will not change. Either you let me go home to Jerusalem, or you let me board the flight to Switzerland. Let's get this over with.

They gave in, allowed me to board after a conspicuous bag check and a full body search, escorted me to the plane like a VIP, and finally left me. I found my seat, sat down, and leaned back to close my eyes for the first time in two days. But every time I heard the click of a seatbelt, I woke up startled—it sounded like the cocking of the kidnappers' guns.

I opened my restless eyes and spotted a man watching me. He was black, and I imagined for a moment that he was the man the kidnappers released that morning. When he noticed that I spotted him, he unbuckled his seatbelt, walked over, and sat down on the aisle seat next to me. He spread open a newspaper and pointed to a photograph,

Is this you?

It showed a woman and me with guns and masks all around us. The bold title read, "UN Workers Freed in Gaza." I fell into my seat and said,

Sometimes, the answer is right there in front of you!

Up in the air, I traveled to the time I went skydiving in Haifa. On the tarmac, the plane looked like it hadn't flown since the 1967 War. After takeoff, the engine roared as if it could fail any second, wildly shaking as it reached the sky. When the time had come, I unbuckled my seatbelt and leaned out of the open door against the rushing wind. With little thought, I did it. I let go. I was flying in the air. I felt light, less burdened by what was happening below. I felt identity-less, free from all the labels and classifications, free from racism and discrimination. Free from the Israeli Occupation I was born into.

But I didn't open the parachute. I was in a tandem jump, attached to an Israeli. Over the years, I have come to see this situation in the air as a metaphor for what it means to be a Palestinian born under Israeli Occupation. Life under Occupation is like the reality of a Palestinian attached to an Israeli in a tandem jump. There is an Israeli on the back of every Palestinian, controlling all aspects of life—the Israeli is always in control. This impossible reality places the Palestinian under constant threat, in a never-ending hostage situation.

On the ground, I struggled with paralyzing depression that sank to new lows year after year. But I knew my journey would have to be one of self-interrogation and liberation. With the speed of the fall, I felt Francesca's presence. Over the years, we had built our own world, rooted only in our imagination.

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Let me take you back to 1996 when I sat alone in the back corner of Abu Shanab, a bustling hangout in the Old City of Jerusalem. I was only twenty. The First Intifada had ended three years earlier, but I was still tormented by severe episodes of depression, like aftershocks following an earthquake. Suddenly, my eyes caught sight of a face shining ethereally under a table lamp. Her bright face, blue eyes, and delicate lips, as though painted by a master, were shadowed by her long black hair. She was a sign from the universe. And I knew that my mission was to be with her.

Captured, I watched her, drowning in my own silence, mesmerized by never-fading beauty. And when the man next to her left, I snuck out and entered again. I sat down next to her and straight opened a box, pulling out black-and-white photographs I had just exposed in the darkroom. I leafed through them to capture her attention. She leaned over to look at the images. Her perfume was magnetic. I inhaled deeply, and its breeze of dewberries became locked in me forever. This dewberry never set me free. And when she looked into what I was searching for, my first words to her were,

A moment of truth.

To my surprise, she didn't turn away. She asked me what I meant, and I continued,

I'm tired of playing games. Why can't people drop their masks?

We talked, and the heavy conversation turned into a light one, where nothing mattered. Francesca was different. She didn't confront me with the origin of my name, ask whether I had changed it, or try to figure out my real name at birth. Those questions irritated me. They usually transpired within seconds of a first encounter, but when I asked people to name three typical Palestinian names, most realized the inanity of their questions.

The more I observed Francesca, the more I was falling in love with her. But how could I give her my phone number without coming on too strong? I hid my anxiety and left it for the universe to play its part. I said,

> *Here's my phone number.*
> *It's my age seven years from now, followed by the unlucky number, and the year I was born.*

Francesca never called.

Two weeks later, I was standing in front of Café Rimon, waiting for a Spanish girl who had just immigrated to Israel. It was our first date. I couldn't help but wonder what the point was. I didn't speak Spanish; she didn't speak English and hadn't yet learned Hebrew. Perhaps I preferred to date girls who couldn't ask me where I came from, about my name or religion. Such were my thoughts as I hid from the rain under an awning when I saw Francesca hurry by under an umbrella. I called out to her,

> *Francesca!*
>
> Hey!
> What are you doing here?
>
> *I'm just waiting for a friend.*
>
> How are you feeling?
>
> *I guess I'm on the wrong train, heading in the wrong direction. I'm stuck. Trapped.*
>
> Give me your hand. Let's jump onto another train.