

## The Tallest Man in Ramallah

*Michael Chabon Roams the West Bank with Sam Bahour*

By Michael Chabon

### I.

The tallest man in Ramallah offered to give us a tour of his cage. We would not even have to leave our table at Rukab's Ice Cream, on Rukab Street; all he needed to do was reach into his pocket.

At nearly two meters—six foot four—Sam Bahour might well have been the tallest man in the whole West Bank, but his cage was constructed so ingeniously that it could fit into a leather billfold.

“Now, what do I mean, ‘my cage’?” He spoke with emphatic patience, like a remedial math instructor, a man well practiced in keeping his cool. With his large, dignified head, hairless on top and heavy at the jawline, with his deep-set dark eyes and the note of restraint that often crept into his voice, Sam had something that reminded me of Edgar Kennedy in the old Hal Roach comedies, the master of the slow burn. “Sam,” he said, pretending to be us, his visitors, we innocents abroad, “what is this cage you’re talking about? We saw the checkpoints. We saw the separation barrier. Is that what you mean by cage?”

Some of us laughed; he had us down. What did we know about cages? When we finished our ice cream—a gaudy, sticky business in Ramallah, where the recipe is an Ottoman vestige, intensely colored and thickened with tree gum—we would pile back into our hired bus and return to the liberty we had not earned and were free to squander.

“Yes, that’s part of what I mean,” he said, answering the question he had posed on our behalf. “But there is more than that.”

Sam Bahour took the leather billfold out of the pocket of his dark blue warm-up jacket and held it up for our inspection. It bulged like a paperback that had fallen into a bathtub. When he dropped it onto the tabletop it landed with a law book thump. It was a book of evidence, proof that the cage he lived in was neither a metaphor nor simply a matter of 400 miles of concrete and razor wire.

“In 1994, after Oslo,” Sam said, “my wife and I decided to move back here.” They had been married for a year, at that point, and decided to apply to the Israeli government for residency in Palestine “under a policy they called family reunification.” He flipped open the billfold and took out a passport with a familiar dark blue cover. “As an American citizen, I entered as a tourist, on a three-month visa.”

Sam Bahour was born in Youngstown, in 1964. His mother is a second-generation Ohioan of Lebanese Christian descent; his father emigrated to the United States from the town of al-Bireh, then under Jordanian control, in 1957. After spending a few unhappy years working for relatives as a traveling salesman in the rural South (“Basically a peddler,” in Sam’s words, “selling cheap goods to poor people at like a 200 percent markup; it really bothered him”), Sam’s father settled in Youngstown, with its sizable Arab population. He bought the first of a

series of independent grocery stores he would own and operate over the course of his career, got married, became a citizen, had a couple of kids, worked hard, made good.

A few things Sam said about his father seemed to suggest that though the elder Bahour settled and prospered in Ohio, he did not entirely lose himself in the embrace of his adopted country. When Sam was born his father had named him Bilal, after the most loyal of the Prophet's companions. But when non-Muslim neighbors in Youngstown shortened Bilal to "Billy," Sam's father—whose name was the American-sounding but authentically Arabic Sami—had his young son's name legally changed to match his own. The freedom to return home that an American passport would afford, if only for three months at a time, had been among his motivations for marrying Sam's mother and becoming a naturalized citizen. Some key part of the man—words like *heart*, *mind*, and *spirit* are only idioms, approximations—never left the house on Ma'arif Street where he had been born and raised, in the al-Bireh neighborhood of al-Sharafa, which belonged not to the Ottomans, the British, the Hashemites, or the Israelis but only to the people who lived in it.

"I was brought up in a household that lived and ate and slept Palestine," Sam would tell me, a couple of days after our first meeting over ice cream at Rakub's. "I lived in Youngstown, where I didn't know most of my neighbors, but I could tell you everybody in my neighborhood here in Ramallah. That's an odd kind of way to grow up."

That enchanted blue American passport, part skeleton key, part protective force field, could work powerful three-month spells, both for Sam's father and for Sam, once he and his Jerusalem-born wife, Abeer Barghouty, decided to try to make a life in al-Bireh. For 13 years after his application for a residency card under the Israeli-controlled family reunification policy, Sam raised his daughters, built a number of businesses (telecommunications, retail development, consulting), worked for himself and his partners, for his clients and for the future of his half-born country, and lived a Palestinian life, all in tourist-visa tablespoonfuls, 90 days at a time. But in 2006, for reasons that remain mysterious, the magic embedded in his US passport abruptly ran out. Returning to the West Bank from a visarenewing trip to Jordan, Sam handed over his passport to an Israeli border officer, expecting the routine 90-day rubber stamp. But when the passport was returned to him Sam saw that alongside the stamp, in Arabic, Hebrew, and English, the officer had handwritten the words *last permit*. Once this final allotment of 90 days ran out, Sam would no longer have permission to stay in the West Bank or Israel, and when he left—left his home, his family, his business, his community, and everything he had worked to build over the past 13 years—he would not be permitted to return.

"So I lobbied at very significant levels," he explained, flipping to the passport's back pages, "but they were only able to get me renewals—somebody got me two months, somebody got me one month. Very troubling. And then out of the blue I got a call . . . and they say, 'Your residency card has been issued.' I applied in 1993, the call came in 2009. I said, 'Oh, yeah, I did apply, I remember.'"

He rolled his eyes upward in a pantomime of searching for a dim and ancient recollection, reenacting the moment. He waited, inviting us to find comedy in this epic feat of bureaucratic sluggishness, showing us that he maintained a sense of humor about his predicament, the way you might maintain a vintage car or a gravel road. It required diligence, effort, and will.

“So they say, it’s been issued, come down to the office and pick it up. And bring your passport. And I hung up the phone and I told my wife, ‘This is problematic. What do they want with my passport?’ Because like you, I travel a lot, and I actually read the fine print.” He turned to the fifth page in his passport, where the bearer was reminded that his passport was the property of the US government. “This isn’t ours. This is the State Department’s. So it’s not mine to give to anybody. But I took a chance. I took my passport, I drove my yellow-plated car to this office.”

One of the first things a visitor to the West Bank learns to notice is the color-coding of vehicle license plates. On cars owned by Palestinians they are white; the plates of Israelis (or licensed tourists) are yellow. Yellow gives drivers access, in their brand-new Hyundais or Skodas, to a system of excellent highways that bypass and isolate the towns and villages of the occupied, with their white plates, and their older cars, and their pitted blacktops thwarted by checkpoints and roadblocks. For the 16 years of his life as an American tourist in the West Bank, Sam drove a car with yellow plates.

“So I give the lady my passport.” He flipped through the pages till he reached a stamped and printed label some clerical hand had pasted in at the back. “It took two seconds. They stamp it, and they say, ‘Congratulations, here’s your ID.’ First, I look, I say, ‘*What the fuck did they just do to my passport?*’” He turned to one of the Israelis in our party. “You read Hebrew, I don’t, but I know it says, ‘The holder of this passport has been issued a West Bank residency card.’ And they take the number of my residency card, and they place it here, in my American passport. Let me tell you what that means. It means that for all intents and purposes, this lady with her stamp has just invalidated my American status here. Because say I get in the bus with you now, and go back to Jerusalem, and a soldier finds this stamp? He’s not going to find a visa anymore. He’s going to say, ‘Wait a minute. You’ve been identified as a Palestinian in our eyes. Where’s your ID?’

“At this point I have three options. One, play stupid American, I don’t know what you’re talking about. What do you mean, ID? Not too smart, they take my passport, look at the ID number here, enter it on the computer, turn the screen around, and say, ‘Does that person look familiar?’

“The second option: ‘I’m sorry, Officer, I forgot my ID at home.’ Not smart. Anybody that’s been issued an ID, especially if you are a male, has to have it with him at all times. Without an ID, I can be administratively detained for six months.”

Administrative detention—imprisonment without charge or finite term—is among the most feared of the specters stalking everyday Palestinian life. The Fourth Geneva Convention, the finest flower of the Nazi defeat, strictly and explicitly forbids it, except under the most extraordinary circumstances. One may safely assume that in the view of the convention’s drafters, having left one’s ID in one’s other pants would likely not merit the suspension of habeas corpus.

“So, third option, let’s say I show this officer my ID.” From the billfold he now took out a bifold plastic case, dark green, and unfolded it to reveal his identity card behind its clear plastic window. It looked like a typical driver’s license or photo ID, thumbnail headshot of Sam, text printed Hebrew and Arabic characters, moiré of anticounterfeit security printing. “He opens the ID, what does he find? Arabic so we can understand, Hebrew so the issuer can

understand. It has my place of birth, my date of birth, my religion—for some reason—and: what’s my cage.”

Most of us understood that he was joking, but it seemed like an angry joke. After a pause, there was a chuckle or two around the table.

“Actually it doesn’t say *cage*, it says *place of residence*. But there is no part of area A”—Sam was referring to the archipelago of major Palestinian population centers that has been strewn by Oslo II across the sea of occupation—“which is not an open-air cage, surrounded by fences, walls, checkpoints, military installations, et cetera. So I’m from the cage of Ramallah, actually it says the cage of al-Bireh, very precise. It means I can’t be in the cage of Gaza, but Gaza is just as occupied. I can’t be in the cage of East Jerusalem, but East Jerusalem is just as occupied. I can’t even be in 40 percent of the Jordan Valley, which is off limits to anyone who doesn’t live in the Jordan Valley.

“So there I am, in the office, with this new little stamp in my American passport. I can’t use the airport, I can’t go to Tel Aviv University, where I used to be a graduate student, even though as a US citizen, getting my MBA there, I had no problem going and coming. I went back to my car, and I thought, Do I take my car home? Or do I take a taxi? Why would I say that, right? It’s my car. It belongs to me, I paid for it with my money. Why? Because anyone that has one of these”—he pointed to the stamp again—“is not allowed to drive a yellow-plated car.

“And now, all of a sudden, I start to feel what it’s like to be a fullscale Palestinian.”

## II.

Two days later I met Sam at his house, in al-Bireh. In its present form it was a high, flat-topped box of pale gray stone, three stories tall, with nine arched windows—three per floor—stacked in a tictac-toe grid. It was the house that Sami Bahour, Sam’s father, had been born and grown up in, enlarged by the addition of the third story to accommodate the elder Bahours during their regular visits; the ground-floor tenants were Sam’s in-laws. I knew that traditional Arab houses, even those of wealthy families, often show a deliberately plain face to the world. Entering the home of a man who had been successful for a long time in a number of business ventures, I wondered if I were in for Levantine extravagance, or American-style glitz. But the interior of Sam’s home was no fancier than the exterior and not very different from the kind of thing I had seen in the homes of much less prosperous families in other parts of the West Bank: sparse stucco walls, rugs scattered on the tile floors, somber furniture, the surprising cool and shadow of vernacular houses in hot countries. I wondered if I ought to ascribe this relative austerity to local custom, personal modesty, or simply the relative nature of wealth in a culture of enforced scarcity where the readiest treasure is stored not in banks, but in black PVC cisterns on the roof.

While we sat in a small enclosed porch overlooking the street, and I drank the coffee that seemed to serve as emblem, vehicle, and baseline of hospitality in every Palestinian home, Sam presented the day’s schedule. We would be driving to Nablus, where he had an appointment to meet the owner of a soap factory, and along the way would be paying a visit to a newly opened Bravo supermarket there. Sam apologized; he was afraid it didn’t sound

like a very exciting day. I assured him, truthfully, that the most fascinating places to visit in foreign countries were often the ones, like supermarkets, that were superficially most similar to places at home, and that it was always interesting to see how common household objects were manufactured; but there was more to it than that. I was now sitting in a house, and soon I would be driving in a car, and then I would be standing in a supermarket, and after that touring a soap factory, in a country that was living under military occupation. Anything that we did today would partake of the novelty—to me—of that circumstance.

Flushing a toilet, for example. Before we set off for what might, depending on the whim of IDF roadblocks, turn out to be a long drive, I thought I had better use the Bahours' bathroom. When I pulled the handle I heard the water flowing down through the pipe from one of the cisterns on the roof. I considered the vulnerability and irregularity of the water supply in Palestine, and the disproportionate splurging of my fellow Jews, running their dishwashers and washing machines and lawn sprinklers, over in the hilltop settlement, amply furnished with water from confiscated wells and expropriated aquifers, that the Bahours were obliged to contemplate every time they looked out their back windows. We went downstairs and climbed into Sam's car, a maroon 2008 Mazda, with its white plates.

"We'll see what happens," Sam said. "Nablus is always an adventure. It could be almost a straight shot, it could be a lot of checkpoints, you never know. When I first relocated here, the telecommunications company I worked for was based in Nablus." Sam had studied computer technology at Youngstown State University, and had been tempted to make the leap, in 1993, by provisions in the Oslo accords for some degree of Palestinian control over telecommunication operations. "That's where the owners were, so that's where we built the company. I made the drive every day, morning and night. So for me, Nablus is 40 minutes away. It's supposed to be a straight shot, this road we're driving on is actually called the Nablus Road, it goes from here to Nablus. Only now it doesn't, not directly. We have to make a detour to the east . . . passing through checkpoints. And it's going to take longer than 40 minutes. Or it might not. You never know."

I checked the time on my phone and saw that, thanks to the cellular tower in the settlement on the hilltop behind the Bahours' house, I had a strong 4G signal through Cellcom, an Israeli carrier whose SIM card I had purchased on landing at Ben Gurion Airport. If I had been a law-abiding Palestinian I would have had only an Edge, or 2G, connection, since Israel would not allocate the electromagnetic spectrum necessary for Palestinian carriers to provide 4G or even 3G service.

"They say what they always say," Sam told me when I asked about Israeli restrictions on Palestinian bandwidth. "'Security.'" If part of the business of tyranny is to bankrupt certain words of meaning, then in Israel and Palestine under occupation the most destitute word is probably *security*. Sam's voice took on that Edgar Kennedy note of effortful forbearance. "Of course, any Palestinian can go to the store, buy an Israeli SIM card, plug it in, get a signal from a settlement. We have 3G, so what exactly is the security concern?"

Sam explained that American presidents, envoys, and secretaries of state, from both parties, going back as far as Condoleezza Rice, had seen the absurdity of the argument against licensing the 3G spectrum because of "security" and had, one after the other—"Rice, Bush, Obama, Kerry, Mitchell, the whole nine yards"—waded into the weeds of the issue, to no effect. "Meanwhile, the rest of the world is moving on to 5G now, here we are, still begging the Israeli side for 3G service. It's almost embarrassing."

I wondered if the “security” at issue in this instance might not be the security of revenue flowing from Palestinian pockets to Israeli cellular providers, whose advantage in bandwidth, at least, was being protected by the Israeli government. Sam conceded that might be part of it. There is no question that the near-total dominance over Palestinian markets enjoyed by Israeli companies, like Israel’s control over the exploitation of Palestinian land, water, and mineral resources, is an important source of revenue for Israel. The occupation of the West Bank and Gaza has been so incredibly expensive—in 2010, *Newsweek* magazine estimated the total cost since 1967 to be in the neighborhood of 90 billion dollars—that one could hardly blame the Israeli government, Sam observed dryly, for trying to make a little money off it. But his next words made me think that from his point of view my cynicism came a little too easily, that it might, in its way, be as unearned as my liberty.

“The politicians who are supposed to be solving the greater conflict have all, over time, been dragged into this, really, it’s a side discussion, with Israel,” he said. “‘Let the Palestinians have their 3G frequency.’ The Israelis, in their excellent strategizing, pulled the politicians away from the main topic, into something which is minor. Instead of . . . solving the conflict.”

Despite the restrictions imposed on Palestinian providers and the unfair competitive advantage of unfettered Israeli companies, PALTEL, the telecom company that Sam set up after his arrival in Palestine, managed to grow and to thrive, becoming Palestine’s largest private-sector employer. “It became overly successful,” Sam said, and its success was actually one of the reasons for Sam’s decision, in 1997, to move on and try something new. He was as uncomfortable “making excessive profit on a people who are occupied” as his father had been 40 years earlier, working Southern backroads and Appalachian hollers for the family business, getting 25, 30, or even 40 dollars, on a good day, for a five-dollar Japanese wristwatch. “I didn’t come here to make a million dollars,” Sam told me. “Not every businessman or investor has that kind of mind-set.”

### III.

The next stop on Sam Bahour’s pocket tour of his cage, after the Palestinian identity card and the stamp in his US passport that had put an end to his entering and leaving the occupied territories as an American citizen, turned out to be a slip of printed paper, heavily watermarked and intricately Spirographed, somewhere between an employee ID badge and a modern banknote.

“I’m a business consultant, right?” he said, signaling to the young man working the counter at Rukab’s. We had finished our strangely malleable, taffy-like ice cream, all those colorful little scoops dyed in a mad Muppets palette. It was time for coffee. “I travel. For the work I do, I have a lot of business in Jerusalem. Obviously, I’m going to want to go to Jerusalem. But now I’m a full-scale Palestinian, right? I have to stay in my Ramallah cage, I’m not allowed to go into the Jerusalem cage. So what do I do?”

The counterman approached, a certain deference unmistakable in his manner toward Sam. He leaned in with a soft Arabic word of inquiry and Sam softly ordered coffee around the table. Speaking English to his visitors—most of us Americans like him—Sam seemed entirely a businessman from Youngstown, Ohio, a perfect Rotarian, genial, expansive, eloquent, an unexpected touch of the professor about him. But ordering coffee in his soft-spoken Arabic,

or striding on his long stems through the center of Ramallah, at least a head taller than all the men around him, many of whom had seemed to show him the same gentle deference as the counterman at Rukab's, there was something princely about Sam Bahour. A prince in exile, I thought, then, No, that's wrong, of course; he's home, he's not in exile. Yet somehow the word seemed to accord with his demeanor. He had left Youngstown behind him—the city of his birth and education, where he had first met his wife, where his parents and his sister still lived—to come and live in the house of his forefathers, in the neighborhood that had been the home of his imagination as a child. But did he really feel that he belonged in al-Bireh? More important, did he feel—could any “fullscale Palestinian” feel—that al-Bireh, ringed by Israeli settlements and checkpoints, belonged to him?

“So I look around the Ramallah business community,” he told us, resuming the tour, “and look, I see people going to Jerusalem. I'm like, ‘How do you do that? I was told I could not go to Jerusalem.’ And they said, ‘No, Sam, there's something called the permit system.’ What's the permit system? You bring an invitation letter from someone in Jerusalem or Israel, fill out a stupid one-page application, go to the Israeli military, take your ID with you, and you apply, and either you get a permit, or you don't.”

He reached into the billfold again and took out a second note of the strange tender of his captivity. He took out another, and then a third. He dug around with his fingers and came out with a whole little pile of them, a jackpot of winning tickets in a bitter lottery, all of them expired.

“These are all permits,” he said. “I have many more tens of them at home. I've promised my kids that I would wallpaper my office with permits.” It was a laugh line—probably an old one—but he didn't sound like he really thought it was funny. We laughed at it nevertheless. “A permit is a single piece of paper issued by the same people that issued this.” He held up the green sleeve that held his identity card. “But a permit, usually, is only good for one day, from 5 o'clock in the morning until 7 o'clock at night. I can use it to travel to Jerusalem, as long as I'm back by 7. If I don't come back at 7 p.m., they could arrest me. If I got caught coming in late, and the soldier who caught me wanted to arrest me, I would never get a permit again.”

The counterman returned with a tray crowded with coffee in tiny cups. Sam watched approvingly as the counterman distributed them to everyone who had wanted coffee.

“So I start getting permits. It's a headache, and it takes a lot of time—the control of time is one of the biggest weapons of the occupation. It takes a day to apply, a day to get the answer. Imagine how hard it is to make an appointment for a business meeting when it takes two days to get the permit—and they might say no. And then a whole day for the trip to Jerusalem, because you have to go on foot. So I can never make an appointment for an exact time, I can't make a 2 p.m. meeting. I have to say, ‘I'll meet you between 12 and 3.’

“But it's not like I go to Jerusalem often. I have diabetes, you know what that means, right? It means, guaranteed, you have to use the restroom! If I get stuck at the checkpoint and there's 50 people behind me, and 50 people in front of me, I get frustrated, because when I have to use the restroom, I can't go back the way I came, and of course I can't go forward. You're in an area that is as wide as this.” He held up his hands separated by a gap the width of his shoulders. “There's a gate in front of you, a gate behind you. A fence all around you. You don't turn around when you have 50 people behind you, waiting, one by one, and start

pushing, saying, ‘Please, back up, I need to use the restroom.’ It doesn’t work like that. These are people who have to cross every day. I think I’m frustrated? They are frustrated to the nth degree.

“So, I don’t go very often.” He slid the pile of expired permits back into the billfold. “I stay in my Ramallah cage, right? The way I’m supposed to.”

If Youngstown, Ohio, had not felt like home because it was not al-Bireh, Palestine, al-Bireh could never feel like home as long as it was under occupation. Sam Bahour was an imposing man with a quietly arresting presence who towered over the people around him, but he was not a prince in exile. He was a giant in a cage.

#### IV.

Not long after leaving PALTEL, Sam was approached by some investors who had purchased land in Ramallah and were looking to build a Western-style supermarket. It would be the first of its kind in Palestine. They wanted Sam’s help putting the project together.

“The first thing I asked was, ‘Why me?’ They said, ‘We happen to have looked at your CV; the last thing on your CV before you came here is that you worked for ten years for your dad, and your dad is a grocer.’ I said, ‘Yeah, you’re right.’” In his recounting of the moment the admission sounded reluctant. “That’s a good lesson,” he told me, in a rueful aside, “always delete the last thing on your CV.” I laughed and Sam, just barely, smiled. “They said, ‘It’s a year-and-a-half commitment, put it together, just be project manager for us.’”

The property they had in mind was in al-Bireh. It was in a part of town called al-Balou that the municipality had slated for development as a commercial district. Land there was expensive. Sam realized that, given real estate costs, a supermarket alone could never be profitable. Palestinians bought their food in street markets and specialty shops, from butchers and bakers and fruiterers; one-stop shopping at a supermarket might take time to catch on. So he persuaded the investors to imagine something even more unprecedented: a shopping plaza, a minimall that would incorporate a number of separate retail outlets and restaurants of various kinds—a Cineplex, a consumer electronics shop, a Domino’s Pizza—anchored by the proposed new supermarket. There would be an indoor play area, a themed “fun zone” with climbing tubes and ball pits, where parents could amuse their children or safely park them while they shopped. In Sam’s vision, as he laid it out for the investors, this would be only the first of a half-dozen or more Plazas they might, in time, put up across the nation that seemed, after the intifada, to be imminent. As he re-created it for me so many years later, it was still possible, despite all the ensuing compromises, conflicts, heartbreaks, and disillusionments, to catch an echo of the audacity, the thrilling scope, the sheer hopefulness, inherent in Sam’s pitch to the investors.

“We decided to call the supermarket ‘Bravo,’” Sam told me, his smile less weary now, more sly. “Because with what we went through to build it, we deserved some congratulations.”

The architects’ original plan for the first proposed Plaza showed a U-shaped structure, but as the second intifada broke out and costs escalated—every nail and plank and length of rebar had to be imported from Israel, finessed through the labyrinth of checkpoints and regulations,

with deliveries constantly subject to delay, diversion, cancellation—Sam was obliged to amputate one of the U’s legs, and settle for an L. Then there turned out not to be enough money to engineer the structure adequately to include the Cineplex; the Cineplex was dropped from the plan. The architects’ design called for the Plaza, like any self-respecting building in Ramallah, to be clad in the locally quarried limestone known as Jerusalem stone, but it was going to take a lot of limestone to cover so large a building (even after it had lost a leg)—more limestone, unfortunately, than the project could afford.

The building site lay between two streets that had been laid out but not yet rezoned as commercial; one was set to be a main drag and the other a service road. Sam shocked the investors by suggesting that only the side of the Plaza facing the main thoroughfare needed to be stone-clad; nobody but teamsters and store employees was ever going to see the place from the back. After the investors had recovered from their shock, Sam went to the municipality to confirm which of the as-yet-unbuilt streets would be the principal thoroughfare. He oriented the unclad, plain-stucco rear of the structure accordingly. No sooner was the Plaza completed than, all along the alleged “service road,” glittery new office buildings and commercial spaces started to crop up. The municipality, it turned out, had misinformed Sam, or changed its mind; and so the first supermarket-anchored shopping plaza ever built in Palestine shows its naked backside to the world.

It wasn’t just artificially inflated building costs and the contortions of a stunted and questionable bureaucracy; every aspect of getting the first Bravo store up and running was made harder by the occupation. A properly modern supermarket must have a modern point-of-sale system, and while internationally there were many vendors to choose among, none was willing to take on the challenge of providing longdistance after-sale support to the occupied territory, not in the thick of an armed uprising. Through his solid business contacts—he holds an MBA from Tel Aviv University—Sam found a “local” firm, Retalix, based in Ra’anana, Israel, that was prepared to commit to Bravo. When the time came to install the software, however, none of Retalix’s Israeli IT staff was permitted to travel to al-Bireh to perform the installation.

“So, being an IT person, even though the GM of the company shouldn’t be doing this, I became the liaison by phone, by fax, by e-mail, between the supplier over there, and the technical people on my side. And we did it, it was the first retail bar code system in Palestine. The head of their company, a company with customers all around the world, he was so amazed that we could do something like that, in the middle of an armed uprising, they put it in their annual report; it said, ‘We have entered the Middle East.’”

The memory tickled Sam, though he said that if he were to do it today, he would not use Israeli suppliers, as he also did for the store’s refrigeration systems. “Today I would go to NCR, in Texas. Because today I have a choice, given that intifada conditions have waned, and I understand what it means to be dependent on Israel. That’s a political decision. If you go with the business decision, by design of Israeli strategy, it will take you to their market, because they’ve created all these obstacles to going outside their market. And I actually think that’s part of the reason, for them, for continuing the occupation. Somebody’s benefiting from it, to the tune of five billion dollars a year.”

As for the merchandise that was to be scanned and inventoried by the Retalix software, the same labyrinth of barriers—legal, military, and physical—that had driven up the price of construction also caused constant headaches with inventory. Shipments of goods from Israel

or Israeli ports arrived late, spoiled, or not at all. Even when they showed up whole and on time they still arrived freighted with politics and tainted by the bitter flavor of occupation. Sometime before the first Ramallah Bravo opened for business, Sam was approached by “local activists in town” who wanted him to guarantee that the store would not carry any Israeli products.

Sam—an activist himself, arrested for the first time in 1988, along with protesters who chained themselves to a fence outside the Saltsburg, Pennsylvania, headquarters of Federal Laboratories, which manufactured and sold the tear gas used by the Israeli army against Palestinian civilians—had been expecting a visit of this sort. Refraining from pointing out that, given the state of the Palestinian food industry, it would be impossible to stock a modern supermarket with only produce and foodstuffs manufactured in Palestine, Sam—who was the project manager, not the owner or operator—framed the matter to the activists as one of official Palestinian policy. He offered to accompany the activists to meet with the Palestinian Authority. Together, he suggested, perhaps they might persuade the PA to set a bold new policy prohibiting the sale by any Palestinian retailer of any Israeli products. They should in no way be discouraged, he further suggested, by the undeniable fact, in the unlikely event the PA were willing to take such a step, that it would be impossible to enforce.

While his fellow activists chewed over this mildly disingenuous invitation, Sam said he could assure them, on behalf of the investors, that unlike other grocers throughout the occupied territories, Bravo would refuse to carry any goods grown or manufactured in the settlements. He also came up with an idea he thought might appeal to them: Bravo would strive, whenever possible, to offer a local Palestinian alternative to every Israeli or foreign item, and would highlight these local products by means of end-cap displays and signage, in particular the small, detachable “shelf talkers” that his father’s Youngstown grocery stores had used to draw shoppers’ attention to specials, new items, and the like.

The activists went away reasonably satisfied, and the political pressure eased; construction proceeded. Costs were cut, frills discarded, workarounds found. The U became an L, the Plaza was left half-naked. Slowly, fitfully, the concrete-and-glass contours of Sam Bahour’s vision began to be discernible, a gleaming, air-conditioned foretaste of what the modern nation of Palestine might by and by become.

Then Sharon went to the Temple Mount, and the second intifada erupted, vastly more brutal, more violent, more destabilizing, than the first.

“That’s when it became not work, but a challenge,” Sam said. Given everything Sam had already told me about the reversals, obstacles, and difficulties he had faced on the Plaza project, this struck me as setting the bar awfully high for deeming something a *challenge*. The word must mean something different for him, I thought, at least in this context. It must have some more profound, or more personal, connotation. “So that’s when I told the owners, I will not leave this project until it’s up and running. And that took five years to do.”

He paused, as if allowing himself to dwell again, for a moment, in that challenging time.

“At one point,” he resumed, “the owners came to me and said, ‘Sam, we love you, but you’re ordering a glass facade for your mall, and if you haven’t noticed, there are F-16s bombing outside.’ So I made a deal with them, and I said, ‘I will not ask you for any more money. Let

me take the investment you've made and try to make something out of it. You're going to lose it, anyway.'”

I wondered if Sam had actually offered such an openly pessimistic assessment to the investors, or if he were paraphrasing what he had felt, what they had all felt but were perhaps afraid to express, about the probable fate of the Plaza project, and the investors' money, in that dark and violent hour. *You're going to lose it, anyway*: I wondered if any project manager in the history of real estate development had ever provided his investors with a more bleak, even nihilistic argument in the hope of keeping his job and ensuring that his budget not be cut any further. It went beyond nihilism, I thought; it summed up, with perfect succinctness, the existential quest on which, because he'd never deleted that line in his CV, Sam Bahour had embarked. He wasn't just trying to build a supermarket in what had become a war zone. He was making it out of glass. It made me think of Klaus Kinski's character in *Fitzcarraldo*, dragging a steamboat over a mountain in order to bring opera to the Amazon jungle.

“I think the investors just said to themselves, ‘Look, clearly he's just a little off balance. Let him work.’ And yes, I cut corners in the project, big time. But the project opened. And they were shocked. The place we're going to see today, in Nablus, I didn't do that one, but I think it's the ninth or tenth in the chain. To see it expand that way . . . there is a lot of pride in that.”

It seemed a funny way to put it—the pride lay unclaimed in the middle of the sentence like property forgotten in a locker. He said it quietly, with a hint of something that sounded like doubt, or maybe it was wistfulness.

After an hour and a half—slowing down for a few checkpoints, getting lost a few times—we came to the new Nablus Bravo. Built very much on the pattern of Sam's innovations in Ramallah—minus the minimall; apart from the “fun zone” for kids, that part of the vision was never afterward repeated—it had been open only a week. In the middle of a Thursday afternoon it was almost completely deserted. The staff of the new store made a fuss over Sam, who towered over all of them. The store manager seemed to be in awe, and confessed that several years ago he had attended a presentation for young people that “Mister Sam” had given, aimed at energizing and inspiring future business leaders of Palestine. He said that he had been energized, and inspired. Everyone agreed that the new location was off to a fine start. The grand opening had been jammed, and the store got extremely busy three times a day: first thing in the morning, at the end of the workday right before dinnertime, and in the evenings, when entire families came down from the surrounding neighborhood, on the booming outskirts of Nablus, just to hang, to see and be seen.

At the moment, however, Sam and I were almost the only nonemployees in the store. Sam showed me how to distinguish among Israel-, Palestine-, and foreign-sourced products, and he pointed out the shelf talkers all over the store drawing shoppers' attention to locally made fare. The decor was Euro-minimalist, white paint and exposed air ducts, big primary-colored signage in simple geometric shapes, sans serif type. The merchandise on offer—cold cereal, packaged rice, processed meats, snacks and baked goods, yogurt and canned soups—was all but indistinguishable from what you would have seen in a supermarket in France or Italy. The air-conditioning was first-rate and it was beautifully cool. Arabic-language pop music drifted from speakers all over the store. It was, convincingly and indisputably, a modern, state-of-the-art supermarket.

“Nice,” I told Sam.

“Yeah,” he said, and I thought I heard that uncertain, wistful tone again. “Very nice.”

Maybe he was just thinking about how long it had been, how distant the vision he had initially pitched to the investors in that time of relative peace and progress between intifadas. Maybe he was thinking about the darkest moment in the history of the project, in the first year of the second intifada, when the IDF, making a sweep, commandeered the construction site, confined Sam and his staff to the basement offices, and for three or four hours used the still-roofless, bare-concrete upper floor of the supermarket building to interrogate Palestinian detainees. Maybe he was reflecting on how he had devoted five years of his life, five years of near-constant struggle, negotiation, improvisation, and compromise in order to bring the convenience of one-stop-shopping and microwaveable suppers to Palestine. But, unlike Werner Herzog’s demented Fitzcarraldo, Sam had pulled the job off, without losing his sanity. He had kept his promise to the investors, to the people of the West Bank, to himself; there was a lot of pride in it. Or maybe Sam Bahour was thinking about how, after that first Bravo store with its Palestinian-pride shelf talkers and Israeli-made refrigerators had opened for business in 2003—finally, miraculously—he had gotten out of the supermarket-construction-and-management business, and had never gone back.

“Okay,” Sam said. “Soap factory.”

## V.

“I love soap,” said Mr. Tbeleh. We were sitting in his office, up a flight of stairs in the main building of the Nablus Soap Company’s headquarters and manufacturing plant. “Really, this is the truth.”

He said it very gravely, almost helplessly, like a uxorious man talking about his wife. He was a handsome guy in his mid-sixties, with Mastroianni cheekbones, a brush moustache, and a good head of dark hair. He had in general a sober and unsmiling demeanor, and yet he struck me as the happiest, or at least the most contented person, I had met over the course of a week in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. He was proud of his factory, a tidy compound of corrugated steel and cinder block structures behind a cinder block wall in Beit Furik, outside Nablus. He was proud of the machinery on his soap production line, the most advanced in all of Nablus, a town known since the early Middle Ages for the excellence of its soap. Most of all, he was proud of his soap. It was made, like all “nabulsi” soap, from three main ingredients: olive oil, water, and caustic soda (a mixture of lime and the refined ashes of the saltwort plant). Mr. Tbeleh’s oil, according to Mr. Tbeleh, was of the first quality, however, and organic, and his other ingredients were costly and pure. Traditional nabulsi soap, nearly odorless, is cut into small blocks, stamped with the soap makers’ trademarks on one side, and wrapped in crinkly paper, but Mr. Tbeleh had introduced fragrances and special ingredients into the recipe—mint, cumin, Dead Sea mud—and his product shipped in a bewildering variety of shapes and packages aimed at various markets around the world: Italy, Japan, France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom.

For the benefit of Sam Bahour, whose Palestinian American trade organization was considering whether it wanted to help fulfill Mr. Tbeleh’s dream of cracking the US market, Mr. Tbeleh went enthusiastically into considerable detail about his soap and its sale and manufacture, but I got the feeling he would have done the same if we had simply happened

by. He really did seem to love soap, which was probably a good thing, I reflected, since he seemed to have had relatively little choice in the matter. His family has been in the soap business since 1611. They have been at it for so long that in Nablus, in the trade, a cutter—the man whose job it is to score and break the giant floor-sized slabs of poured and hardened soap into bars—is known as a *tbeleh*. Mr. Tbeleh’s destiny seemed to have perfectly converged with his predilection, which was probably the recipe for contentment, I thought—with or without Dead Sea mud. It made me happy just to sit sipping coffee with Mr. Tbeleh, in one of the leather-covered chairs in his dark-paneled office, listening to him go on, in rough but fluent English, about soap. Even when he and Sam got down to business in Arabic I enjoyed the contented rumble of their discussion, though I couldn’t follow a word. I had met a lot of brutalized people and heard a lot of awful stories over the course of the week. What they did was overshadowed, what they needed was denied, what they carried was encumbered by the occupation, and what they owned had been broken, diminished, or taken. All the everyday hardships and obstacles they faced were as much the fruit of the occupation as the extraordinary and terrible ones. But the obstacles Mr. Tbeleh complained about were mostly the kind of thing that any small manufacturer anywhere might face: quality control, competition, access to markets, espionage of the purely industrial variety (apparently there were soap Slugworths out to steal his recipes).

Nothing seemed to have ever discouraged him or weakened his resolve, not even—especially not—the occupation. When, in the early days of his modernization plans, he could not obtain the machinery he needed, he designed and built his own. When settlers in nearby settlements seized wells and springs and cut off Mr. Tbeleh’s access to water—it takes a lot of water to make soap—he found new sources. He had a favorite English phrase, a kind of signature that he interjected liberally into conversation: *Of course!* Had he designed and built a soap-stamping machine himself, with his own two hands? *Of course!* Did the Israelis interfere with his supply chain, and his access to water? *Of course!* Didn’t it take a lot of water to make soap? *Of course!* Would they really pay 30 dollars in Japan for a bar of premium nabulsi soap in premium packaging? *Of course!* Everything, to Mr. Tbeleh, seemed to fall into its proper place—however disruptive or aggravating—in the course of things.

As I listened to Mr. Tbeleh talk, and toured the factory floor, where thousands of soap bars stood not in the traditional stacked cones but on special racks, for the months of drying required, I found myself thinking the same thing I had thought while touring East Jerusalem, where well-financed settlers were attempting to drive out the residents of Silwan; or in Hebron, where the local Arab residents had been banned from their own shops and main street; or in Susiya, where the people were forced into makeshift tents after their entire village was seized: These people aren’t going anywhere. Was the occupation a grievous injustice on a colossal scale, so brutal and unremitting that it would lead anyone to consider the appealing alternative of fleeing and never coming back? Of course! And yet here they still were, after 50 years of violence and deliberate degradation, listening to reggae music, shopping in their marketplaces, eating their sticky ice cream, and sending their children out to play. Of course.

## VI.

I had heard that Nablus, in addition to its soap, was known for its excellent *kanafe*. This is a traditional Ottoman pastry, similar to baklava but filled with cheese and wrapped in honey-soaked shredded wheat instead of phyllo. Before Sam and I returned to Ramallah, he said, he would take me to get some *kanafe*; he knew a good place. But before he could make the correct turn on the road coming back from the soap factory, we came upon a checkpoint that Sam had not been expecting.

A couple of IDF soldiers stood at a fork in the road, squinting in the bright sun, pallid young men with Tavor assault rifles slung over their shoulders looking, like so many Israeli soldiers, as if they had gotten dressed in a dark room and put on someone else's uniform by mistake. I had seen bored young men before—I had been a bored young man—but these guys took the gold. I was reasonably sure they were not going to shoot me or Sam, but if they did at least it would keep them awake. To get me to the promised *kanafe*, Sam wanted to take the right-hand fork; one of the soldiers—he looked to be about 20, and the elder of the pair—told Sam, in Arabic, that he would have to take the left. The soldier's tone was curt but not hostile. It bordered on rudeness but he was too bored, for the moment, at least, to step across that border.

“I have a foreigner with me,” Sam said, in Youngstown-accented English. “Why can't we go to the right?”

I was oddly relieved that Sam didn't mention the *kanafe*. Pastry did not seem like an adequate reason to irritate a heavily armed man. The soldier repeated, in Arabic, that Sam would have to go to the left and, in a more helpful tone of voice, he added something in Hebrew. After that he repeated the original dull formula, in Arabic: we would have to go to the left. Meanwhile a car with white plates was coming along the forbidden road from the other side of the checkpoint. The soldiers waved it and its Palestinian driver through without any show of interest, or even attention. That was when Sam did something that seemed to catch the older of the two soldiers by surprise: he asked why.

“Why can't we go to the right?” Sam said. “What is the reason?” The soldier roused himself from his torpor long enough to shrug one shoulder elaborately and give Sam Bahour a look in which were mingled contempt, incredulity, and suspicion about the state of Sam's sanity. It appeared to have been the stupidest, most pointless, least answerable question anyone had ever asked the soldier. *What kind of dumbass question is that, Shit-for-brains?*, the look seemed to say. “Why?” *How the fuck should I know?*

The soldier had no idea why he had been ordered to come stand with his gun and his somnolent young comrade at this particular fork in this particular road on this particular afternoon, and if he did, the last person with whom he would have shared this explanation was Sam. That was what the look said, in the instant before it vanished and the proper boredom was restored. We went left.

“What did he say, in Hebrew?” I asked Sam, after we had been driving away from the checkpoint, in silence, for almost a minute. The silence on Sam's side of the car endured for another few seconds after I ended mine. When Sam finally spoke, the strangulated Edgar Kennedy tone of restraint in his voice was more pronounced than ever.

“He told me—such a helpful guy—that this road would take us to the very same place as the other way, to the road back to Ramallah. Which is true, except we’ll hit it much farther along, and we won’t go past where we can get you your kanafe.”

I reassured Sam that I could live without kanafe. I tried to make a joke of it—my jones for kanafe, another victim of an unjust system—but Sam didn’t seem to be listening, or in the mood for laughing, just then. I had a sudden realization.

“Wait,” I said, “is the other road blocked at the far end, too?”

“Of course not,” Sam said. “You saw the car? They’re letting people through from that end.”

“So we could, hold on, we could just take this road to the Ramallah road, then backtrack to that other road a little way, and then come back to where the kanafe is from that end?”

“We could drive all the way back to the checkpoint on that road, and come up right behind those two guys, and then we could beep the horn, and say, ‘Look, here we are!’ And then turn around and go back. And it would be just like they had let us through the checkpoint. Except that it took 45 minutes instead of ten.” He laughed. It was an irritated-sounding chuckle, and it was followed by another silence. The checkpoint and the soldiers had definitely spoiled Sam’s mood.

There had been times, Sam said, at the end of the long pause, at other checkpoints, when he had actually enacted the abovementioned scenario of circumvention, including the defiant beep, just to point out to soldiers manning a roadblock how useless, pointless, and arbitrary their service was. I wondered how much more irritated he had been on those days than he was right now. Irritated enough to give in, at that level, to futility.

Because of course, I thought, pointlessness was the point of the roadblocks that forced you to make a stop at Z on your way from A to B. Pointlessness was the point of the regulations forbidding access to cellular bandwidth that everybody had access to, of the Byzantine application process to get a permit for a ten-mile journey that would take all day, even though everyone knew that the permit would automatically be granted, except on those days when, for no reason, it was denied. We tend to think of violence as the most naked expression of power but—*of course!*—at its purest, power is fundamentally arbitrary. It obliges you to confront the absurdity of your existence. Violence is just another way of doing that.

I tried to return our conversation and the remainder of our time together to an earlier, less infuriating and humiliating portion of that time. I told Sam how much I had enjoyed meeting Mr. Tbeleh, how encouraging it was to see that a single-minded and determined individual could, through hard work and a touch of obsessiveness, overcome all the difficulties and indignities of the occupation, and find a way to thrive. I was talking about Mr. Tbeleh, but I was probably thinking of Sam, too. I shared with him the sense that had occurred to me, over and over again in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, that the Palestinians were not going anywhere. Listening to Mr. Tbeleh, I said, had aroused the same certainty in my mind. He and his soap factory were proof of and testimony to the resilience of the Palestinian people.

“Yes,” Sam said gravely. “That’s our problem. We’re too resilient. We can adjust to anything. You put up a roadblock for a while, everybody complains, but then they get used to it. And then when you take it away, they say, ‘Ah! Progress!’ When all it is, they just got back what

they always had a right to, and nobody should have ever been able to take it away from them. That isn't progress at all."

I thought about that, about how much reassurance I had found in the soap factory and in Mr. Tbeleh. Obviously a Palestinian could find reassurance there, too. Look, the soap factory says, *it's bad, it's even very bad, but it's not all about administrative detention and collective punishment and bulldozed olive orchards and helpless, wounded men shot dead in the street.* The soap factory said that if you just kept your head down and focused on soap, if you loved soap, you could just make soap; and it would be excellent soap. You would be able to sell it to the Italians and the Japanese. Maybe one day you might sell it at Whole Foods, the way Canaan Fair Trade, a firm in the city of Jenin, does with its olive oil. You could have 3G, or 4G, or 5G. You could have a nice place to drop your kids while you shopped for yogurt from Israel, Nablus, or Greece. You could get from point A to point B, as long as you were willing to go through point Z, 45 minutes out of your way, for no reason other than it served Israel's purpose to force you to accept a pointless 45-minute detour. As long as you were willing to accept, consciously and unconsciously, the arbitrariness that governed every aspect of your life, you could actually get something done.

Suddenly I felt that I understood something that had puzzled me, so far, about the career of Sam Bahour. In objective terms, Sam had prospered at every business he had undertaken, and at every project he had put his hand to since coming to Palestine in 1993. And yet at key moments, it seemed, at the peak of success, at the moment of accomplishment, he had parted ways with his partners or investors. He had set the cup of triumph aside, stood up, and left the table. I had wondered about this all afternoon, but as we drove away from the pointless checkpoint, I thought I understood. In a Palestinian life there were checkpoints everywhere—crossroads, real and figurative, where you were obliged to confront the fundamental futility, under occupation, of any accomplishment, no matter how humble or how splendid, from opening a multimillion-dollar glass shopping plaza in the midst of a violent uprising to restoring your village's access to its ancestral water to keeping your child alive long enough to graduate from Birzeit University.

When Sam said that Palestinians' problem was being too resilient, I saw that accomplishments of this nature—accomplishments like Sam's—were not merely futile; secretly they served Israel's strategic goals. They lent the color of "normal life" to an existence that every day deliberately confronted four and a half million people with the absurdity of their existence, which was determined and defined by the greatest sustained exercise of utterly arbitrary authority the world had ever seen. Under occupation, every success was really a failure, every victory was a defeat, every apparent triumph of the ordinary was really a gesture empty of any significance apart from reinforcing the unlimited power of Israel to make it. That, more than any roadblock, checkpoint, border fence, or paper labyrinth of permits and identity cards, was the cage that Sam Bahour lived in. It was the limit of every reach, and the ceiling that he bumped against every time he tried to stretch himself to his full height.

"He does love soap, though," Sam Bahour conceded, thinking back to our meeting with Mr. Tbeleh, in his tidy little kingdom of olive oil and ashes. "He really, really does."

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