A FAMILY MEMOIR

Two Houses and a Shop

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Two houses made of earth and wood inside the city walls, and a shop for selling and tailoring shoes in the old Masyaf market. We shared food, provisions, expenses, and life.

01

Our Ground Floor Home

My dear father, Ahmed, and the best of names are those that express servitude and praise (and my firstborn son, may his memory be blessed, proudly bears his name). He was the eldest, a man of faith, work, and knowledge, striving with all his might for academic achievement. However, hardship, need, poverty, and the loss of a loving mother at a young age prevented him from realizing his dreams. Nevertheless, he was an avid reader and a skilled accountant. He was also adept at reciting the Quran from memory and was responsible for our primary education.

My father would wake me and my cousins every morning for prayer and to recite verses from the Holy Quran. Whoever didn't make a mistake received a reward from the shop. Prayer was nourishment for both body and soul.

And the crown of our home was our kind and compassionate mother. She would go to the mountain before dawn, gather firewood, and bake bread in the oven. She would spread the bread on the floor to cool, and we would wake up to the aroma of freshly baked bread and a delicious breakfast ready, filled with love and affection.

Badriya: She was the eldest sister, named after my grandmother, Badra al-Jedi, who was as radiant as the full moon, her hand outstretched to both rich and poor. She was intelligent and perceptive, but she learned sewing from my aunt, Umm Yusuf (our second mother), to contribute to supporting our large family. The joy of Eid was incomplete without her kind hands and generous heart, as she sewed us new and beautiful clothes for every occasion.

Khadija: The youngest sister, named after Khadija the Elder. She was born in a transparent, fleshy sac, mirroring the transparency of her heart, her fair complexion, and her boundless kindness. She was our home tutor and became the first distinguished science teacher for the secondary level in the region and the family. With her first paycheck, she bought us a television. But we lost her too soon to an illness, and her loss left a scar that will never heal.

Hassan: The eldest of the sons, named after my grandfather (Hassan, who traveled to America but died poor but rich in spirit). Due to his early rebelliousness and boundless energy, he left school early and joined the Fatah movement for a while. He worked as a mechanic and was skilled at his trade, but his hand was hard to hold. He crossed the seas as a ship's laborer, traveling between many countries, and returned empty-handed. He settled in the town, burdened by life's hardships and worries. He wished for me to become a captain, sailing the seas like him, but fate had the final say.

Mohammed: The youngest brother, nicknamed "Abu al-Daw" (Father of Light) for the radiance of his face and the purity of his heart. His love for nature knew no bounds; wherever you looked, you would find him in its embrace. We lost him too soon to a stroke after he had worked at the Zawiya factory following his high school graduation.

Fatima: The middle sister, named after Fatima al-Zahra. She was like a blossoming flower, nurtured by patience and silence, her fragrance lingering summer and winter. She was an outstanding primary school teacher.

Kamal: I am the humble servant of God, named by my uncle after Kamal, son of the poet and lawyer Muhammad Kamil al-Salih, nephew of the poet Badawi al-Jabal, whose mother was the poet Fatat Ghassan, buried in al-Qulay'ah near the Cave of Life. He was a

friend of my uncle and the family. I was passionate about reading, music, and sports, and I loved work and was diligent in my studies. After high school, I enrolled in dentistry in Hama and rented a room in al-Baghati with my cousin Abdul-Razzaq, who was studying veterinary medicine. This was in 1982. That evening, clashes broke out, and I noticed sandbags on the roof of the garage. I sensed impending danger, so the next morning I took my papers to Damascus and enrolled in the Faculty of Pharmacy, continuing my studies. My intuition, or perhaps my mother's prayers, proved correct, as Hama was completely shut down in February. Universities were closed, movement was paralyzed, and the al-Kilaniyah neighborhood was destroyed. The Apamea al-Sham Hotel was built in its place following indiscriminate shelling of the city.

Afraa: The youngest, the darling of the house, brimming with life and energy. She was named after Afraa al-Adhriyya, the beloved of Urwa ibn Hizam, who did not marry her and subsequently died. She was a beloved science teacher in middle school.

Ma'ruf: The youngest, named after Ma'ruf ibn Jamr, an Ismaili freedom fighter who fought alongside al-Zahir Baybars and is famous for his iron chainmail, which hangs on the gate of Antioch in Aleppo. My mother gave birth to him with the last loaf of delicious, hot bread she had baked after returning from the oven. She would spread the bread on the floor of the house to cool. The midwife, Umm Hassan, an Arab woman, arrived late and cut the umbilical cord. My mother nursed him with a flood of milk, overflowing with love and tenderness. He worked at the pharmacy and was with me from the beginning, his hand in mine and his heart with me, in addition to his regular job at the shoe factory in Masyaf.

02

My Uncle’s House

The First Floor

My uncle Abdullah—who was like a second father to me—was the youngest of his siblings. His mother passed away when he was only about two years old. He was a man of work, knowledge, and politics. He had longed for an education, but harsh circumstances stood in his way; he was forced into the workforce at a very young age just to survive. He worked in the northeastern regions, transporting wheat— the "breadbasket" of Syria—where he met honest, self-made men who were members of the Communist Party. He joined them, hoping to secure his own rights and the rights of others, taking this heavy burden upon his shoulders. He eventually became a member of the regional committee for Homs and Hama. During the era of the union between Syria and Egypt in 1958, he was imprisoned twice; he was tortured— even having his fingernails pulled out—in an attempt to force him to confess and name his comrades, but he remained steadfast and unyielding. He left the party in the early 1970s, though he remained a friend to its members for the rest of his life. I was by his side until the very end, and we were close friends; his absence has left a scar on my soul that will never heal.

Mahmoud: The eldest, named after our great-grandfather—the original Mahmoud who, following a dispute with a notable figure in Al-Qadmus, arrived in Masyaf with his father and four brothers. He was an agricultural engineer who worked at the Arab Center for the Studies of Arid Zones and Dry Lands (ACSAD), under the Arab League. He also had a permanent spot in the shop, where he served as a key assistant.

Khaled: Named after Khaled Bakdash, the Secretary-General of the Syrian Communist Party. He resembled my grandfather Hassan in both his handsome appearance and his kind heart. He was an agricultural engineer and worked for various units in Masyaf.

Anwar: A name derived from the word for "light" or "radiance." We lost him prematurely to a stroke; he is buried in Saudi Arabia, as his passing occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. He was an electrical engineer. He is brimming with vitality and energy.

Hazem: Characterized by determination and strength of spirit; he is calm, an avid reader, and diligent in his studies. He holds a doctorate and works at a scientific research center. Having graduated from France, he was the first in the family to earn a PhD.

Abdul Rahim: A mathematics graduate who resides outside of Syria.

Fadwa: Lives in Australia and is married into the Al-Amouri family (one of the old families of Masyaf that later migrated to Lebanon).

Suad: The eldest of the daughters; she is a seamstress who brings happiness and joy to the home.

Abdul Karim: An engineer and officer who works at Damascus Airport; he is kind-hearted and pure-souled.

03

The Shop

A shoe shop, selling ready-made shoes and custom-made ones, in the heart of the old Masyaf market. My father and uncle were there, each with his own counter and hammer.

It was our summer retreat during school holidays, where we worked like a beehive day and night. It was a beacon of culture and dialogue, a meeting place for the poor and the powerful, frequented by intellectuals, scholars, religious figures, and politicians. It was a hub for those arriving and departing, a repository for valuables, newspapers, and a variety of books for the city and countryside. A cup of tea was always available for anyone who came or went.

We bought copies of the Kuwaiti magazines Al-Arabi and Osama, as well as newspapers, for every household from the Al-Nahda Library.

My uncle also had a second shop, with its own entrance, consisting of a room and complete facilities, to receive guests from the countryside or lecturers at the cultural center in case of traffic disruptions. It was also used by students coming to take their preparatory and secondary school exams. We would chat together as if we were one family.

My uncle was characterized by unlimited activity and enthusiasm, as every morning he would sweep the shop and the street and sprinkle water, so the shop would look clean, along with the cleanliness of his heart, hands, and tongue.

04

Two Oak Trees

And in conclusion, an elegy for my father and uncle, the owners of these two houses:

Two oak trees... in a time of oblivion

Spirit and tranquility from my father

And pride and dignity from My uncle

A bright morning dawned

In the darkness of night and gloom

From the vineyards it dripped

And the two bodies of love gathered

And from them we drank the wine

And the honey and the honeycomb were sweet

By a hand that beats The nail

A hand that leans on the shoulder

An eye gazing at the sun And the horizon

And an eye upon the Quran and the books

They were our glory and pride

And we were their gift and support

On the occasion of the fortieth day of mourning for my uncle Abdullah (1934-2016)
And approaching the anniversary of my father Ahmed (1931-2015) January 20, 2025