

26. THE MAPS HERE ARE USELESS

The art of cartography is surely a colonial art, which hails from the earlier Age of Discovery, when the Americas are mapped, quite inaccurately, and the unknown lands of Australia are marked twice, on the left-hand side of South America and again on the right-hand side of the Dutch East Indies. Maps tell a story, as many have observed before me, like what do you put in the centre, and what the periphery? And sometimes powerful figures are depicted on top of a map, like in the Ditchley portrait of the first Elizabeth, or the Cape to Cairo image of Cecil Rhodes, to communicate in more than a metaphoric sense their assertion of ownership. And sometimes also a place that has been depicted for centuries and known for millennia disappears from the maps overnight, as if inexplicably, and this marks how maps serve colonial narrative. So what I can say is that maps are a poor measure of knowledge in place, and all the old Palestinians knew place better than any map – that conceals their home – can relate.

We all of us now, in the twenty-first century, form impressions that precede our visits to some several great cities, like London and Paris, like Rome or New York, and perhaps when you visit you feel like you know them, the buildings, the rivers and monuments and how they connect together. But for me this is how I find Jerusalem to be, or Al-Uds as the Jerusalemites say it, dropping the sound of the Q, a hometown I

have never seen, until my thirtieth year when I arrive at long last in a city I know like the back of my hand, and although I consult not one map I have a geography of stories, and I am never lost in it. And I look at the city, and the city at me, and we both say in our way *Ahlaan*, which is the sound of a welcome that lights up your eyes and tells the recipient that you couldn't imagine anyone better to see: *Ahlaan, Al-Uds, ahlaan!*

My dear Pa, who attended services at the Williamstown Gospel Mission on Electra Street after Nakba (where his funeral was held and fifteen years later, Ellen's) enjoyed church in the Jerusalemite spirit of mixed denominations. For instance, when visiting my parents he would go to the Mass with my mother, who said, 'Mr Sahhar, communion is for Catholics', and to which Pa would say, 'Don't worry, Maxine! God recognises me!'. And what I think he liked most is the way that the Bible so very immediately evoked the landscape of his youth, in whose descriptions he revelled until the end of his life. I particularly like a story of Pa attending a service with the Baptists on Sydney Road, where he turned to heckling the minister who was describing an oration presented by Jesus, and to which Pa intervened, 'No, brother, no! If you're standing facing down from that mount then the olive groves are surely not on your left but to the right!'.

In Jerusalem, I walk a city demarked by Old and New, not East and West, when I am walking our history, and I walk to the re-built King David Hotel and the YMCA building opposite. And I am reminded of a story from when the infamous bombing occurs, and I have seen an image of the explosion that resembles a mushroom cloud, which is held in the Imperial War Museum collection, in that now-faded metropole, London. What I hear is that on the day of the explosion, Juju and Tony are sent home

from school (early) and they are neither adults but also not children, and they make their way together over and through the crime scene which is as Jerusalem appears on July 22 of that year.

Tony tells the story that on the corner beside the King David was a boy who the schools did not require, and during the day, all day every day, he would go to this corner and set up a game of marbles. And as Tony tells the story, the boy is here again on this July day of 1946, playing marbles before the explosion, and he is one of the casualties after it, and as Tony and Juju pass by what they see is a corpse blown to pieces, his skull (literally) open on the pavement. Tony says he recalls that some of the marbles had rolled into the boy's exposed brains, and the force of the bomb was so great that when they walk past, the marbles are still moving inside the skull of a boy who is remembered by Jerusalemites everywhere. When Tony tells this story Juju says, 'I must have seen it too but now I don't remember', and later again when I ask Juju what happened she says she was at home on the balcony at Asa Street eating grapes, and what she saw was the plumes of smoke that hung on the skyline for hours.

This story places my uncle and aunt in the landscape of a particular day that is an important catalyst to the unfolding national trauma to follow, and when I return from Jerusalem, I recount it to Ahmad on his Flinders Lane balcony and he stops me halfway and says, 'I know that story too! My aunt was there and she saw it'. And I store these anatomical details of the boy and the marbles into myself and recount them on the hotel pavement to my Hebrew translator; and later in the Liberty Bell Park I will say, 'This city is alive with stories that only we know', appalled by the hubris of colonial ignorance, that can swallow a city without even seeing it.

I have walked many times on Salah Ad-Din Street, and if you are facing towards the Old City you will arrive at the turn for my cousin's bookshop, who when I ask for the address simply says, 'You don't need it! If you are lost, ask anyone, everyone knows where I am'. This is the confidence of geography which people who have been in a place a long time are born with, like all the great families of Jerusalem in the cemetery registries. I am always delighted when the Palestinians recognise my name, inside and outside Jerusalem, like a Palestinian ambassador visiting from London to whom Sahhar means something, who engages me in pleasantries at a conference, that suspend one reality we live in for the one that we wish to be in. Jerusalem is a city I know in my heart, that makes the map useless, whose geography I inherit as a memory and that I remember (like the Donkey) and which, like my surname, is something fused into my being that nothing, not even a bomb, can succeed in wresting away or parting me from.