

MAY I SHOW YOU MY CITY - A Short Story

by Dan Lieberman

The taxicab ride from Tel Aviv ended at the front of the Hotel Leonardo Ashkelon. Sliding from the rear seat on to the violet colored brick sidewalk, Professor Farad Al-Khatib looked toward the Mediterranean Sea and took a deep breath. This autumn air had lost its caressing touch, fish smells, and natural sounds. Just a steady drone from passing traffic. Different, yes, he expected differences, and they did not hide memories.

"Father, will we be able to swim; will we catch fish; can we go out a boat; is the sand too hot?" A pleasing look and comforting smile followed by the words, "Son, you want so much. God willing, I shall get them for you."

Following closely behind the professor, Vihaan Basu, Farad's associate at The Montreal Neurological Institute and Hospital, shouted "What's the hurry' we're here to rest, aren't we?" He followed his question with the words, "Surprisingly quiet here."

The men entered the hotel and looked to the registration desk at the end of an ultra-modern lobby. Sparse of any seats, a chandelier of low hanging globes reflected off a glass floor, and with no defined inside, the lobby had only a pass-through to the desk before reaching the outside. Two smiling ash blond haired women, gray eyes contrasting with their fair skin and lively faces, greeted the two Canadians.

Farad played his usual identification game of accent and appearance. "Ukraine?"

"Yes, Ukraine," said one woman, as the other interrupted Farad's quick registering and leaving by calling out, "Wait Professor Al-Khatib, you have a message."

A message, which had a name and phone number, and requested to be contacted, was from the graduate student that Professor Milstein from Tel Aviv University, the conference coordinator, did not personally know but was requested to introduce to Farad at the conference he attended. The student had asked where Farad would be staying in Ashkelon, if he might contact him at the hotel, and briefly meet and talk about a cooperative experiment based on Farad's work.

After settling himself in the temporary space, Farad prepared to leave the room for his walk. The note, which he had placed on the desk, stopped him. "Milstein's student, well not his student," he said to himself. After thinking for a moment, he concluded it would be impolite not to call. He called and a voice replied, "This is Brian."

Brian dispensed with formalities, eagerly explained his interest in autism and desire to be part of the re-sequencing study. If they met for about one-half hour, he could introduce himself, and obtain an assigned role in the study. Farad explained he intended to see the city, and they could communicate after he returned to Canada in two weeks. In an excited voice, Brian offered a walk and talk. He would be honored to show the professor his city. An enthused Brian ended with, "No worries, I can be at your hotel in five minutes. We can manage it."

"No worries? You are going to show me your city? Were you born here, Brian?"

"No, in Australia but I came here at the age of five. Grew up here. Love the beaches."

"And the kangaroos and Koala bears?" said Farad.

"Kangaroos. Koalas. You're humorous professor. Hey, I've seen geckos and lizards."

Farad pondered a moment. "Brian, I'll call you back in a few minutes." Going about a strange city could be troubling, and this city had problems. Rockets had landed from Gaza; the community was edgy, and people on the edge can easily misinterpret behavior. He preferred not to ask his associate to accompany him. Vihaan weighed almost 300 pounds, did not engage in strenuous exercises, and walked slowly. Local Brian could be worthwhile company. A troubling itch pushed him into caution — tales of Israel's Shin Bet apprehending Canadian-Palestinians and asking to have their relatives supply intelligence on Hamas activities. He called Vihaan and said that if he was not in the hotel lobby at 6:30 PM, the time they agreed to meet for dinner, he should call the mobile phone the conference gave him to use. He called Brian and agreed to meet at the hotel entrance in five minutes.

Farad recognized the student he had previously met, a blonde, tall, and muscular man who evidently worked out daily in the local gym and could

probably wrestle an alligator. He motioned for Brian to follow, and the two walked out the rear terrace, down a street and onto the beach. Not the beach that Farad remembered - no fishing boats and nets, the sand whitened and purified as if sifted through a strainer.

Brian talked continuously and energetically. Farad listened quietly, nodding occasionally, as if in agreement. The stroll led to Farad's intended destination — Canaanite Gate — the mud-bricked entrance to an ancient city from a walkway that connected the city to a port. More polished and partially reconstructed from what he remembered, the Gate, which his father revered, symbolized attachment to his family.

"We may not be direct descendants of the Canaanites, but surely their blood runs in ours and we are part of their heritage," he had said to Farad.

They arrived at Tel Ashkelon. Archaeological exhibits traced development of the area from Canaanites, Philistines, Romans, Arabs, Crusaders, and Ottomans to the present. As they left the park, Farad's muttering of the word 'Israelites,' startled Brian. "What did you say, professor?"

"Oh, was I thinking out loud? A common practice with me. Israelites, there was no mention of Israelites in this area."

"Our history shows our King David conquered the entire coast."

"Your history or biblical history? Is there any verified evidence of a King David or any Israelites along the entire coast?" said Farad.

"Well, there must be...there's..." A disturbed Brian paused for a moment, smiled at Farad, and said, "Who cares, it's all biblical stories."

Farad contemplated Brian's sudden change in behavior before he said, "Do you know the way to the mosque close to Al-Ustaj and Al-Shuk Streets?"

"Mosque? Al-Ustaj, Al-Shuk Streets? Are you referring to this city?" said Brian.

"You may know them as Herzl and Eli Cohen streets."

"Eli Cohen Street is not far from the park, and ends at Herzl. There is a museum close by, whose tower is shaped as if part of a mosque."

"Lead the way," said Farad.

They passed an area that Farad remembered had smells of melon fields and through a neighborhood with small cafes where men sat at tables, played chess, and read newspapers with Russian print. Shops featured tea, caviar, vodka, pork, and kielbasa in Russian and Hebrew. "Damn Russkies, they'll never be Israelis," exclaimed Brian.

The two men turned left, reached Eli Cohen Street, and then turned right. Upon recognizing the minaret, Farad looked at a row of shops, turned right, stopped momentarily at a cafe, looked around as if to gain direction, told Brian to wait, and hurried forward. Brian followed closely behind the heavily breathing Farad. After walking one block, Farad stopped at the corner and looked up at a two-story building with an orange tiled roof. He stood erect, sighed slightly, and held back the tear that shaped itself on an eyelid. The crescent shaped door welcomed him and he moved forward to it, then stopped and recalled the failures of others who tried to do the same. He turned, walked back to the cafe, sat down, ordered tea and falafel, and stared at green tables with blue umbrellas that covered a square across the street.

"I'll have the same," Brian said to the waiter. "What are you staring at?" he asked Farad.

"I'm looking at the donkeys and camels carrying turquoise and fuchsia dyed silk, being sold to weavers who made festival dresses with black and indigo cotton threads. Their 'ji'nneh u nar' - 'heaven and hell', 'nasheq rohoh' - 'breath of the soul' and 'abu mitayn' - 'father of two hundred' creations demonstrated the originality of our Al-Majdal weavers. Can you hear the rhythmic sounds of the looms?"

"Weavers, looms? You have imagination, professor. That house, what is it?"

"That house. I was born and lived there until I was ten years old. My father and his brothers own these shops. We had a restaurant here."

"Own these shops? Born here? I thought you were born in Gaza?" said Brian.

"We never sold them, and so we own them. Who told you I was born in Gaza?" replied a stiffening Farad.

"Oh, I...I do...do not know...exactly. Must be something I heard." responded

Brian. He paused for a moment and then asked in a confused tone, "Why did you leave here?"

"Why did I leave? You do not know," said Farad.

"How can I know?" answered Brian.

"In 1948, when I was ten years old, a Zionist force approached our town. We heard of atrocities, of Irgun leaders telling their comrades to take six villagers prisoner and shoot them so the others would become fearful and flee. My parents were desperate and thought it preferable to come back when hostilities had ended. Shells and bombs burst close to us, and we continued to flee. We walked 40 Kms to Gaza City, two days with a cart, a donkey, few possessions and 30 neighbors. When we attempted to return, Zionist armed men stopped us, and forced us to remain. Afterwards, trucks came, daily, from Beit Daras, Isdud, Tabiyya, Qastina, Hamameh, and our al-Majdal, filled with distraught people. We slept in tents for months."

With no display of emotion, Brian asked about Farad's remaining family in Gaza. Remaining family -- brothers, who were fishermen, had died, one of natural causes, the other by a bullet from an Israeli patrol boat. Sisters, nieces, nephews and many grandchildren still lived in Gaza.

"They must have needs. Are you able to help?" Brian did not wait for an answer and continued. "I'm part of a group that recognizes the difficulties of the Palestinians in Gaza, what with Hamas controlling the society. We have connections and can help."

When Farad looked at him with a questioning face, Brian said, "With work, food, travel, money. The group can funnel all of it through you so there is no link to the Israeli organization. Very simple and very helpful." Brian waited for a sign of agreement but only observed a questioning countenance.

"Obviously, we cannot assist anyone allied with Hamas, so we will have to make sure of that," said Brian.

"This man has no sensibility or sensitivity," Farad said to himself, and, in an inquiring manner, asked, "How do you make sure they are not allied with Hamas?"

"It's not in the best interests of any Palestinian to ally with Hamas, and so we'll expect them to inform us who is allied with Hamas. Do they know anyone who

is considering militant activities, things like that."

When he noticed fear on Farad's face, Brian raised his hands. Farad noticed a man at a table in the square look to his right. A man and a woman emerged from a car. The woman went to the driver's seat and the man walked toward the cafe tables in the adjacent square. Farad looked at his watch, which registered 6:25.

"You're fortunate to have this weather. At this time of year, Toronto is cool and soon cold. My aged bones relish the warmth," Farad said in a calm and sympathetic voice.

"Aged, you're 79 but do not seem that old."

"Lots of exercise and nutritious food, just healthy living, and maybe good genes."

'Could be another study for us," said Brian who was glad to develop a rapport, an important ingredient in what he was trying to do. His apprehensive posture turned to comfort. "How's the falafel, professor?"

Before Farad could answer, the phone rang. He nonchalantly looked at the phone, stood up as if to stretch his tired legs, and walked a few steps. In a low voice, Farad told Vihaan to come quickly with a taxi to the end of Eli Cohen Street, just before Herzl. He will see a cafe with blue umbrellas to his right. Should take about five minutes. Farad walked to his seat and, although Vihaan had ended the conversation, he continued talking into the phone. "All right, I'll have the article prepared before December." He paused as if listening. "Don't worry; I won't forget to return the phone at the airport. All right. Thanks for your considerations. Bye."

After sitting, a relaxed Farad talked about the conference and the new investigations he would be making, in which Brian might be interested. Brian listened quietly and finally interrupted. Evidently, the professor intended to visit relatives in Gaza before going back home. Knowing he would have to fly from Ben Gurion airport to Cairo and then obtain transportation to Gaza, which was a long trip, Brian had a suggestion. "If you're in agreement with this group, I'm sure they can arrange for you to go directly from here to Gaza. You can be there in one hour by car, go through security, and get a cab to wherever they are. Can't beat that," said a triumphant Brian.

Farad appeared agreeable and pondered until he noticed Vihaan emerge from a cab and come close. He quickly offered to pay the bill. Brian responded by placing his hand on Farad's hand and saying, "You are a guest in my city, and I insist on paying."

"No, said Farad, "You are a temporary guest in my city, and we pay for guests." He threw a 50 shekel note on the table, ran to Vihaan, grabbed his arm, and raced to the taxicab. After shouting a restaurant name to the taxi driver, Farad took a deep breath, remained silent for a minute, looked at Vihaan, and spoke. "I hope the restaurant has learned to prepare our sfihahat better than that cafe prepared our falafel."