

Palestine



Palestine



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Translated from the French
By Pierre L'Abbé



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The electronic barrier ran along the roadway where Cham, a private, watched the bus for Tel Aviv pull away. A few minutes before he had deposited his gun and kit at the command post and had come out smiling with a permit for a furlong in his pocket. His three weeks of freedom had begun with a lost day. So, instead of going up to report in, Cham, feeling a little at sea, dragged his feet down to the corner observation post where Tzvi, the Adjutant, was waiting in a concrete bunker for his relief.

“This is convenient,” the Adjutant said. “We can do the rounds together.”

“But I’m on leave. I don’t have my gun.”

“Don’t worry, everything we need is here.”

“It’s against the rules to eat into my time off like this.”

“And do you think it’s by the book to leave me on patrol by myself?”

Private Cham and the Adjutant patrolled along the outside of the security fence, Galil automatic rifles slung over their shoulders. Tzvi was smoking a Turkish cigarette. The dusk shed its rays across the pallid blue of the hills. To the west, the silhouette of a woman, balanced on a donkey, danced along the twisted and fading line of the horizon.

“Around here, anyway,” the Adjutant said, “there’s less trouble than around Ramallah.”

The Private acquiesced with a sigh. He looked down the metallic fence bristling with alarms and spotlights. It ran endlessly along these plateaus flanked by a paved road and a belt of sand which was further bordered by a ditch already in shadow, and marked off with coils of barbed wire. As the fence approached Jerusalem, by Kalkiliya and Tuikarem, tall concrete barriers had been erected for kilometres in place of the kind of highway security normally found in the open countryside. Cham turned a dazzled gaze towards the mountain landscape of Hebron where the abrasive sun created the impression of a sheer gap. The rocky hills were lost in the ripples of intense reflection. An explosion shook the earth, though far enough away to not be of concern; only a vulture left its perch and flew about 100 metres to the ruins of a sheepfold. Cham examined the sky. Death was looking down like the rocks. As were the stars in this crazed part of the day.

“Over there,” his superior shouted. “Over there, on the ass.”

“Nothing to worry about. It’s an old woman going back home. I saw her yesterday.”

“How long have you been assigned to the line?”

“Three months. This is all new territory to me.”

Tzvi looked at him with a concerned eye. He seemed to be calculating how thin the support would be from this recruit if there was a hitch. Muscular and all knotted up, the Adjutant moved about almost dancing, leaping even,

as if to ward off the hostile mood in the air. The locals, laden with sacks and tools, especially the women, moved unhurriedly towards the security perimeter three kilometres away. Tzvi instinctively grabbed his gun.

“Their way of life is ridiculous,” he said. “Olive trees on one side, village on the other.”

Cham shrugged his shoulders. He thought about his mother all tied up in her memories; about his friends in the zoology department; about Sabrina, the Russian, whom he could have loved; about everyone close to him in Jerusalem. And he thought about his brother Michael too, so distraught with loneliness since his divorce, sickened by the narrow-mindedness of the Parties in power and the military brass. No longer having the energy to paint, he had given up his studio in the new town and had gone to find refuge in a rickety cabin in an Arab suburb among the olive trees.

For no particular reason, Cham began to think about the events of the day before, in Hebron’s occupied zone. He had had a few hours off duty while accompanying a senior officer. He spent a long time walking around the Tomb of the Patriarchs. The square in front of the mosque had become jammed by a swarm of kids when suddenly, before he had time to react, he felt his wallet slip out of his inside pocket. One of the little urchins fell to the ground to escape through everyone’s feet. Despite Cham’s cries, within seconds, the shady little creature had slipped away into a crowd of pilgrims.

Cham squinted to look across the peaks. Beyond the security perimeter, below the plateau, flocks of sheep and goats moved over the hills. The colour of sand, they changed the countryside, a little like clouds casting shadows. A loop in the electronic barrier was under construction. It separated the Arab villages spreading out to the west from the colony of Ber Schov already firmly ensconced on its fortifications. The lights of Hebron were visible to the north and, just barely, a constellation in a corner of the falling sky. Towards the end of the horizon, beyond a swath of darkness, sat the Dead Sea. The evening haze, a shroud, mauve lace over the mountains of Moab.

“Everything’s good,” said the Adjutant. “We’ll go back, and down some cool ones.”

With that he turned on his heels and staggered, his face contorted in terror. The instant of shock hardly left him enough time to raise his gun. A bullet went through his forehead before he had time to shoot. His big body sagged like a cracking tree. As he sank, blood began to trickle down his head. In the eyes of the Private, the Adjutant had still not hit the ground. Cham was familiar with this kind of false time: a nameless stupor caught hold of each second. Paralysed by the effect of timelessness, he was able to capture each facet of the moment. A commando had managed to make his way across the dirt path right up to the “wall.” Two or three men spotted him in the dusk. He instinctively pointed his gun at one of them. Tracers lit up dark blue outlines of the night in silhouettes. The shot came out as a muffled blast and resonated far away in the hills. Several more detonations echoed in response.

Tzvi, on his stomach, fingers outstretched, was now spread out at Cham's feet. Dirt from the explosion was still coming down. But Cham no longer had the luxury of contemplating the subtleties of the moment. A bullet hit his left shoulder, another grazed his temple. It was not painful. A sensation of mute shock and of letting go. One of the assailants groaned. The violence was consummated in a strange sort of pleasantness. Everything fell into a loop of time that no appeal to reason could resolve.

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Someone had covered his head in a keffiyeh. A pair of arms shoved him along. A kind of ungrounded panic left him short of breath. With arms outstretched he searched for his gun. The same feeling of a senseless unravelling had come to him the day before during those few seconds when, in the square in Hebron, his wallet had gone missing, his bankcard, his identity papers, the photographs of his mother and of Michael. They were moving him away from Tzvi. Was he perhaps not dead? He had to save Tzvi, extract the bullet from his forehead and wipe away all the blood. He struggled to recover the time, a few minutes at most. He needed to put his little finger on the dial like he did as a child, push back the hands a thousand, ten thousand times, until all the dead were saved.

Someone jostled him like a sheep. Pain emanated from his head, acid from his shoulder. The pressure rang and whistled in his ears. Soon the pain would overtake him, like the night that shimmered, and he would lose all definition.

Cham wailed in someone else's voice. He called for his mother in Arabic. A nervous laugh choked his voice. Was someone mocking him? His eyelids scraped against a rough cloth. Everything was fading away, sounds, his sensations. A mist was rising, submerging everything. No one truly existed. He was sleeping. Perhaps he was dead.

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Someone is dragging around sacks of bodies or feathers. The last flashes of a dream are lost in cries, in gun shots. Everything goes out in the end, into complete darkness. Who might be speaking of almond trees, villages, the border? The blind man melts into the darkness. Without consciousness, one hour or two millennia are all the same.

Then all of a sudden, with a spike of pain, the world comes back to life. Awakening to the smell of a cave. Someone has taken off his mask. He emerges from the abyss with a stiff neck. He is lying on a mat, his arm in a sling, he doesn't know much more. Two figures drift about in the darkness. A third climbs laboriously up a ladder. The creaking of a trap door results in a flood of oblique light. Cham can see it all a little more clearly. His lips and his fingers shake uncontrollably like the down of a bird or the whiskers of a cat. He has trouble breathing. A sticky liquid runs along his temple. A shooting burning pain digs into his shoulder blade.

Illness and fear constrain his scope of vision. On the one hand, there are his wounds, the death of Tzvi, his being held. And on the other, this cave, these armed men,

and an old straw mat which he realizes he shares with another man, bent in two, groaning softly. The trap slams shut. Someone descends the ladder into the darkness and, having reached the bottom, nervously strikes some matches. One and then two little flames light up the surface of a rusty plate, the hands separate, a rough wall against which pale figures take shape.

“*Ind’ souda!*” complains the man who has just arrived.

“It’s because you are alive,” someone replies. “Look at him. He’s not complaining.”

In the candle light, the figures are fleshed out. Their faces take on shape and colour. Their voices reduce to whispers.

“*A tini oulbata saja ir ...*”

“In my jacket, next to you.” Pulled from a pocket and immediately ripped open, the packet of cigarettes is passed from one to the next. A match flares among the nestled faces.

“Would you like one?” the elder man asks.

Uncertain if he is being addressed, Cham is reluctant to respond. He holds out his free hand anyway.

The other Arab man lifts half way out of his seat to offer his own cigarette before lighting himself another. An MP5 machine gun on his lap, he is sitting on a case of fruit or preserves stamped with the insignia of the *African Egypt Co.* The cigarette smoke rises in swirling columns that only their breath in the stagnant air disturbs.

“We can’t leave him like that,” the man who is seated says. “He will die in the night.”

“We are all going to die because of you,” the other says. “He didn’t need to be shot.”

Crouched on the mat, Cham notices that the flames and the swirls are subject to similar disturbances. A disheartening odour of blood is pervasive throughout the cave. The two men carry on a dialogue punctuated by silences and sighs. Their injured companion, who is lying on the straw mat, keeps creeping into their conversation. And even though he is himself cast down beside the man, his left arm in a sling, no one seems to take any notice of him. Over time, he catches the names of the fighters: Tarek, the eldest, and Cha'bân, the guy with the MP5. Somewhat bigger and with a buzz cut, he has a closely cropped beard and round glasses. A scar runs from his neck to his left ear. He watches the greying fifty-something man intensely, as if searching for evidence of some connivance. Always on guard, a nervous hand caresses the handle of a revolver stuck in his belt. Shouts come down from the trap door. Cham thinks he recognizes a fourth assailant wearing a keffiyeh and a gandoura. By what stroke of luck were they able to get away through the alarm systems and the control towers? A breakdown, a propitious moment of confusion must have offered itself in the abrupt change of day into night.

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There were at least three of them up above. Was it already dawn? The pain came and went—it was the only thing he really felt. One evident truth: they would make use of him or they would kill him. Tarek lit another cigarette with the butt of the last which he then threw into the neck of a more or less empty beer bottle. The kidnappers did not

belong to Hamas, nor to Islamic Jihad. Perhaps a commando unit of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, or the Fatah Falcons. But the latter operated almost exclusively in the Gaza Strip. Or perhaps an armed dissident faction, a kind of revolutionary group, dozens of which could be found in the West Bank. But, in the end, what difference could it make to him? He put aside all propensity to combativeness, to resentment, or to speculating one way or the other. The cadaver beside him began to stiffen, open mouthed. Had he turned his face to Mecca? The distress of the survivors explained their neglect of him.

Cham wondered who it might have been who cleaned his wounds and bandaged his shoulder in the night: the uppity one with the MP5? Or the old distraught man? His chest all of sudden felt hollowed out with the hard thought of death. A chaotic sequence of images of summary execution went through his head. Of course, he wanted to make a run for it, but a sudden onset of panic set him straight before he could get to his knees. He could see that there was a cord around his ankles which rendered him a paralytic. Could they have drugged him? He wanted to call out. A state of shock sometimes had a narcotic effect. His cigarette, having burnt right up to the filter, rolled onto the ground. He picked out an ember close to the wooden case. His eyes squinted a bit. He held his breath without trying to. His head leaned against the shoulder of the cadaver. Sleep soon engulfed him in the cold odour of death.

He walk through the hills came to a stop after a few hours. It was Cha'bân who brought it to a halt. When the sun went down, the sleepy column made its way without a murmur, moving through olive groves and along goat tracks.

"Hounaka ila-l-yamin!" Cha'bân said.

But there was nothing in particular to the right that stood out. Tarek went to check it out, taking his time.

"Good eye!" he called from a distance.

The column fell in behind him seamlessly. A slender shadow came away from the ruins of a sheepfold and, with an easy gait, advanced to meet them. With his hands tied and face covered, Cham had stumbled for a long time through the damp before finding a blind man's balance. He was reminded of the howls of jackals or wild dogs, shrill awakenings of starlings in trees, the flapping of fabric in the wind against his hands or his throat. The moon was out. Now, he was following Tarek across gravel. The guide and the two others slipped into the interior of the building. One of them pushed him forward and untied the scarf that masked him. Another ordered him to sit in the middle of

the rubble. The dim light of an oil lamp illuminated the area. To one side of the room a tent canvas covered gaping holes in the half-destroyed roof and walls. The hostage crossed his fingers beneath the rope. Nearby, the chirping of crickets and the flickering of a star in a gap were enough to soothe him. Even if he were about to be killed, he would like to convince himself that it would be without hate. When it is without hate, perhaps there is less evil.

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The boy who has come to meet them stares him down with animosity. Handsome, despite his crooked teeth, he speaks softly without breaking off his gaze. At this point, Cham, looking down, discovers that his clothes have been replaced. Instead of his blood-stained uniform, he is wearing old grey linen trousers and a sort of long sleeved safari jacket. Even his watch is gone. But with an absurd emotion he recognizes his boots. Nearby, faces come together, marked by disturbing flashes.

“Ma’s mouhou?” the boy asks.

The heads turn to face the hostage. He understands the question but keeps this fact to himself out of distrust.

“Your name!” Cha’bân repeats.

Cham does not breathe a word, frightened, his head resting on his shoulder. It forces him once again to recall the episode from the day before, his papers stolen in front of the Tomb of the Patriarchs, the vain appeal to the commanding officer that he be allowed to make a declaration of loss or theft. “You’ll straighten it out during your leave,”

the man responded, suddenly eager to return to work in the border zone.

Luckily, a rustle of pebbles distracts the fedayeen. Tarek grabs his sub-machine gun. In the corner, in a space left by a makeshift door, a long head with yellow eyes and horns appears.

“The devil is paying us visit!” Cha’bân exclaims.

With the wave of a cloth, the young shepherd chases out the goat, which is already chewing on the edge of a rope carpet. His childlike laughter is soon shared. He passes round black tea in bowls. Cha’bân stares into the smoky lake between his hands.

“We shouldn’t hang around here,” he says. “Before long, the entire region will be under fire from the IDF.”

“What’s your plan?” his counterpart asks.

“What plan? We hide where we can, in caves, cellars, with the locals.”

“It will soon be crawling with soldiers; there will be roadblocks everywhere.”

“We’ve messed up; the two of us need to survive. Now, it’s a question of holing up somewhere around Hebron ...”

“And what about him?” the shepherd with the crooked teeth asks.

“No one knows anything about him. On the radio it said a Warrant Officer was killed, that’s all. Someone named Tzvi Sofaer ...”

“That is certainly strange,” a red-haired man who hasn’t spoken previously calls out.

The others don’t say a word, their eyes fixed on the flapping canvas.

“Fatah are looking for us,” he says. “And not so that they can save us.”

“At least here it’s quiet for the moment,” Cha’bân says in a gloomy voice. “The enemy is going to kick up a lot of dust ...”

The red-haired man tosses his head pointing to the gap in the roof: “We should let the storm pass.”

“We should split up as soon as we can,” Cha’bân says. “But first we need to get rid of that one. Who is going to do that?”

No one answers—jaws clenched—Tarek spits on the straw: “Bullshit. They’re denying us a bargaining chip.”

“Once again, this Jew doesn’t exist,” Cha’bân says. “He’s no good to us anymore.”

“Let’s wait a day or two,” the red-haired man says. “Something’s not right. Can we hide him around here?”

The young shepherd lets out a kind of chuckle.

“Yes,” he says. “Behind the hill, in the abandoned cemetery. All the villagers are gone. There’s no one around here but my goats and the Gypsy who collects scrap by the old olive press ...”

“You want to bury him alive?”

“In one corner, there is a pit under a small building called the Tomb of the Christian.”

“Five o’clock already,” Tarek says, fretting. “It’s almost dawn.”

“I’ll take care of it,” the red-headed man says. “The shepherd will help me.”

Suddenly overwrought, the two fedayeen get to their feet, quickly make their good-byes and disappear into the fading night.

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Using the butt of his rifle, the red-headed man shoved his hooded hostage out of the cave. The goat herder had left before them, moving sideways. With a half-closed eye he examined the hills. The silvery leaves of the olive trees shook in the early light of dawn. But their eardrums, along with the heavens, were suddenly ripped open: in the blink of an eye two fighter jets crossed the dome of the sky. The red-headed man knocked Cham to the ground and then fell at his feet. A double plume of smoke flared and spread out. The young shepherd, standing legs apart, shook as though he had been struck by lightning. With a hoarse cry he fell over backwards. His arms and legs stiffened, his eyes rolled back, and all the air in his lungs rushed out. His jaws clenched as though jolts of electricity rushed through him. Foam oozed out from between his bad teeth. Almost as quickly, his body relaxed. The current left him. And then he droned in a dead sleep and a choking gasp. The distraught fedayee shook him in vain. He took a furious look at the sky and along the depressions in the terrain where the grasses shook.

“Don’t move,” he ordered his hostage who was still lying flat on his stomach ten metres away.

Gun in hand, he got to his feet. The silence of the hills gave way for some time to the resounding roar of jet engines. A bird, calling, crossed a corner of the sky. The rustling of the eucalyptus and the sound of crickets slowly restored a sense of distance. The day hung in each speck of dust. Spots of fire broke out across the grass and stone.

“Come on, get up,” he said. “We are going to find that damn tomb.”

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The countryside fanned out in the ochre haze of the early morning, its meandering terraces lined with olive trees. The horn of a pale moon pointed to the obscure outskirts of Hebron. Around the lower elevations of a hill, the remains of a village and the limestone outlines of ancient enclosures running up against an escarpment, here and there cut by grottoes in geometric shapes. Spreading out to the left, a field of standing stones enclosed by a wall between two cracked roads covered in dust.

“A happy village, once,” the fedayee, getting nervous, spoke to himself, having seen undulating movements on the horizon.

He pushed his prisoner up the slope. Behind the wall, scattered headstones cast shadows across the parched earth. A palm tree shaded the white dome of a mausoleum. At the back of the cemetery, crumbling under a curtain of brush, a tomb with pillars in the colonial style pushed up against a railing in a corner, splitting the trunk of a large fig tree. After hearing the rattling of a board or tarp, Cham only had time enough to be shocked: the end of a barrel hit him between the shoulder blades, he bit into a piece of the scarf that blinded him. The stink of sweat through the cloth. An eternity passed waiting for the shot, punctuated by disjointed images. In truth, the pain in his shoulder gave him something to focus on. The call of the Muzzin, perhaps

illusory, came to him on the breeze, perhaps created by the wind through the fissures in the rock. Soon a rumble of motors, sharp and rising, quickly followed by the clacking of metal tracks. The man spat out a curse. A violent blow landed the hostage in the pit.

Fallen onto his stomach on a carpet of dust, Cham did not really understand his fate. Above, a door was folded shut. From under his blindfold, bound multiple times with cord, he had until then only seen through gaps in the cloth, bits of the world, odd words, fragments of landscape. For now lying stiff at the bottom of yet another pit, flat on the rock, he tried to regain his breath. The jolt from falling face first onto the ground must have broken bones, the bridge of his nose, ribs, or vertebrae. Blood in his mouth, he gingerly moved his neck, let out a feeble groan.

Outside the roar of engines grew louder. The unmistakable sound of armoured vehicles shifting across gravel was suddenly drowned out by the noise of a helicopter hovering over the area. The whirl of the rotors mimicked the blood bashing against his temples. Bursts of heavy machine gun fire rang out. Cham recoiled in the pit. With what little consciousness he had left, he sketched out a vague scene: the fedayee hunted down, the forsaken hill, the expected counterattack from the IDF. But he was no longer able to re-establish the order of events. The chronology was lost in the flow. His teeth chattered like gunshot. Ought he to let go of himself, the bodily phantoms, the memories more rarefied than air?

The frenzied hours passed by, reviving within him the slightest murmurs of the heart, the coals of delirium.

Caught in the grip of a fever, he spat out strange reptilian blood clots. A mortal threat bore into his organs. His eyelids burnt with an ancient fire. It would be said that jackals wept. His entire being, so shaken, left only pulverized images: the pit drank his blood and then his memory. From deep down inside him random names in stammered syllables: Mama Quilla, Sabrina, Michael . . . Who were Tarek and Cha'ban? The coolness of the earth came through the cloth wrapped around his face. His bound hands sifted a powdery material mingled with the residue of wood and bones—or perhaps the knots of rotted planks. The scent of spices: cloves and cinnamon softened the pungent smell of the cloth and mollified the milder one of the tainted blood coming from his body. At the end of his strength, his heart and limbs broken, he gave up and lost consciousness. Static shots, frayed mental images: grey rocks, black olive trees, crumbling walls, strings of mules, terraced vines . . . What life trembled behind life? Hebron, Jericho, Jaffa, Jerusalem—dark echoes of the names of towns.

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A weight crushes him; he gives in under an unidentifiable heaviness. His eyelids creak like the locust. There is nothing left to separate his innards from his face, the marrow of his bones from his skin. A lake shimmers in the desert, a mirage of tears in the bowl of his skull. His mother unreachable is the pain that drains his life.

He is no longer breathing. Something falls apart and spreads out in a kind of vague memory. Soon not a sound.

Even the pulse ceases to swell. A burnt odour rises from his clothes. Still, he shivers. Ice creeps from his feet up to the stomach. The thirst is overly cruel. A flickering of sparks takes the place of his memory. A whirlwind of moons and suns on his lips. Sleep of anguish. The all-encompassing night. Apart from the tingling in the tips of his fingers, all feeling leaves him. He does not hear the storm that strikes long after the bombs. An absence does not identify itself, nor take on a shape. Shadows barely discernible, it is the eye that blinks. A fine blade lands between this moment and the fathomless abyss of nothing. In one stroke nothingness swallows billions of years and randomly churns up a sigh of resurrection.

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The eye in fact blinked. One day and one night had washed away his fever and diluted his fear. Rainwater had passed through his keffiyeh and moistened his face. His lips sucked on the cloth. *Opening song*, the cry of the downfall—melody of crumpled paper. The noise itself was more quenching than the fabric. The electrifying pain seemed to have passed through to the ground. So overwrought, he no longer really hurt. The hood fell away by force of being bitten. Cham opened his eyes to the celestial bodies that sliced silver blue across the sky. His sight gradually came back to him, and then his hearing. The rain stopped; the birds called. Their sharp cry modulated in short notes: *dju-huii tchihu, tchi-tchi-tchi-tchj*. Where are you today? “Here, here here,” the bird of Palestine answers his own call.

About The Author



Born in Tunis in 1947, poet, playwright, short story writer and novelist Hubert Haddad has never forgotten his Jewish and Berber origins. He was raised in Paris and published his first book of poems, *Le Charnier déductif*, at the age of twenty and his first novel, *Un rêve de glace*, in 1974. His earlier work explored fantasy and magical realism in a fresh, hallucinatory light, while his later writings have focused on memory and a critical approach to history. In more than fifty novels, plays, and essays, he has explored the behaviour of human beings in extremis. The original French version of *Palestine* won the Prix des Cinq Continents de la Francophonie in 2008, and the Prix Renaudot Poche in 2009. It has sold more than 60,000 copies.

About The Translator



Pierre L'Abbé published his first book, *Lyon*, in 1996. A long narrative poem, *Lyon* weaves through the city's culture, geography and Roman history. He is also the author of *Ten Days in Rio, a novella in verse* (WatershedBooks), and *Kiss of the Beggar* (Guernica, stories), and is the translator of Benjamin Fondane's *Exodus* (Joseph Norman). Pierre now lives in Toronto.

Biblical quotations from the Douay-Rheims Bible with adaptations by the translator.