

HUBERT HADDAD

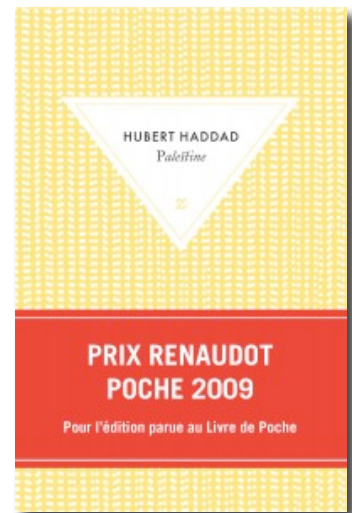
PALESTINE

TRANSLATED FROM FRENCH BY EDWARD GAUVIN

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Biography: Born in Tunis in 1947, Hubert Haddad has never forgotten his Jewish and Berber origins. He was raised in Paris and published his first book of poems at the age of twenty. In his work, more than fifty novels, plays, and essays, he explores the behaviour of human beings in extremis.

Recent publications:

Nouvelles du jour et de la nuit, Zulma, 2011

Vent printanier, Zulma, 2010

Géométrie d'un rêve, Zulma, 2009

L'Univers, Zulma, 2009

Le Nouveau Nouveau Magasin d'écriture, Zulma, 2008

Oholiba des songes, Zulma, 2007

Le Nouveau Magasin d'écriture, Zulma, 2006

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Summary

Somewhere in the West Bank, an Israeli patrol is assaulted by a Palestinian commando. One Israeli soldier is killed and another is kidnapped. Wounded, in a state of shock, the hostage loses hold of reality and forgets everything, even his own name. Eventually he is rescued, taken in by two Palestinian women and his wounds heal. He becomes Nessim, brother of Falastin, an anorexic Law student; and son of Asmahane, the blind widow of an official who was shot dead in an ambush. Nessim passes through the looking glass, suffering the daily anguish of the inhabitants of the colonized West Bank.

In this poignant novel, Hubert Haddad makes Falastin a modern Antigone: proud, untamed and the victim of man's cruelty. Reflecting the beauty of the setting in his style, he models a modern tragedy in all its horror and absurdity.

CHAPTER 6

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A dream always woke her in the middle of the night. They'd machine-gunned the car. Her father's brains were splattered all over her dress. She was dying herself. The horn was stuck and kept wailing. In the blood red light, one of their attackers stepped out from the flames. He advanced toward them empty-handed, yelling for the others to stop shooting. She recognized him; she could have picked him out from among all the angels in heaven. Nessim came towards her in the sudden silence. Her brother was breaking rank, coming to help. Why was he dressed as an enemy soldier? The morning sun shone through a hole in her father's head. She herself was most grievously hurt. *Al Alb al Alb*, a voice murmured, *the heart on the heart...* The entire night flashed before her fluttering eyes. Falastin remained dreamy, her pain wide open. Nothing in this world would ever come to save her. Hers was too intimate a wound: inside her, in the immateriality of her flesh, and so far outside her too, in the strange inhumanity of things.

Half asleep, in a haze above her bed of veils, Falastin rose smoothly and felt her way to the window. She undid the latch to open the heavy shutters, which creaked. A cat in the night answered their complaint. Over the heights of Hebron shone a crescent moon. Leaning against the railing, she thought she could make out the clustered vaults among the cypress and eucalyptus.

A scent of intermingled rot and incense rose from the dark streets.

By the mystic stronghold where Jews and Muslims stood watch back-to-back over the empty tombs of the Patriarchs, two floodlights swept the façades of Ottoman palaces and unwholesome buildings where, after common folk had fled in great numbers, the poorest and stubbornest hung on in the stable climate of curfew. Along Shuhada Street—down from the construction site of the new private road linking the suburban community of Kiryat Arba; in Hebrew, the Town of the Four—a number of apartment buildings were disfigured by the raised blockhouses of tiny settlements, with their concrete pillboxes, sprawling barbed wire, and steel mesh stretched across roofs and terraces.

Beyond the old city and all over the hillsides twinkled lights barely distinguishable from stars. The only sound was a stray dog barking, or the wind beating through the minarets and crenellations of Haram al-Khalil. A few bats fluttered absent-mindedly over a shriveled palm. Constant threat made the peace of night more intense, like the silent waiting of the condemned.

Falastin shivered, troubled by a subtle shift in the air.

“It’s me, Layla,” a voice behind her murmured. “Still having trouble sleeping?”

“It’s so beautiful tonight. The earth has found its little place again among the stars.”

“You’re trembling!” said Layla, wrapping one end of her scarf around Falastin’s shoulders.

Knees swaying, Falastin let herself be embraced, her hair undone and falling on her aunt’s breast. “Do you think someday they’ll go, and

leave us free at last?”

“It is written, my love. Soon the occupiers will retreat, so not to be occupied in turn. A simple question of demography.”

Falastin repressed a shrug. She knew well the petty disputes of Palestinian intellectuals. A history professor at a polytechnic shut down once more by the enemy, Layla lived alone in this house high in the old town, in defiance of misfortune or contempt for adversity, despite the army’s constant security checks and the colonists’ crude threats. An associate professor of moral philosophy at the universities of Nablus and Hebron, her husband had been in administrative detention for more than six months now for his active part in dismantling several roadblocks around Bethlehem. Shuffled through prisons in Kadomim, Hawarah, and Betah Takfa, he had suffered at the hands of jailers who saw him as middleman between pacifist networks and international support movements. Falastin remembered him as an easily angered man, ready to burst into tears or tear his shirt off at the slightest provocation, yet gently beaming with joy when he spoke of Sufi masters Ibn Arabi, al-Hallaj, or Suhrawardi. She laid her head on Layla’s shoulder.

“I’d give my life—”

“Give your life? Others have, to no avail. What we must do is save your life, save all lives. As you know, Jews were once slaughtered in this city: poor people, glassmakers, leather craftsmen whose families had lived here for generations, for centuries. In 1929, my grandfather saved a whole family from massacre, hiding them in his house for several days. They weren’t the only ones. He always regretted not being able to do

anything for his old friend, the pharmacist Ben Tsion Gershon, who was killed with all his loved ones. There were many other victims of the pogrom, residents of long standing, rabbis descended from rabbis who'd settled in Hebron in days now distant. Left to their own devices, the survivors all fled. Other Jews came back much later, after the Nakba, full of rancor, and many Westerners, all religious fanatics and descendants of the victims. Do you remember the carnage at the Ibrahim Mosque? That happened right outside my window. The superintendent of my building came home covered in blood, his arm shattered. Now he's a Hamas activist. There are thousands like him. All because a fanatic, a Kiryat Arba colonist, Dr. Goldstein, showed up in the uniform of a reserve officer with two submachine guns and a bag of extra rounds. He mowed down the crowd gathered at prayer while shouting "Happy Purim!" This was in 1993, the middle of the fast of Ramadan. After the rioting and legitimate protests that followed, the occupying forces sealed off all access to the old city and demolished dozens of houses. The victims are always the ones who are punished. Since then, there's been no escaping the curfew, and the colonists sow terror, believing themselves in conquered territory, shooting children on sight and throwing trash at us. Dr. Goldstein is a hero to them. Those of us who haven't left have boarded up their doors and windows. The only relatively safe way to get around is along planks between the terraces, at the risk of a stray bullet. See those flags on the rooftops? Soldiers have seized the best vantage points."

Layla had reeled off her usual refrain in a single breath, without

demanding attention. Everyone in Hebron endlessly rehearsed a litany of such acts: history at an impasse. And yet, in the face of general hysteria, Layla tenaciously resisted narrow-mindedness.

“All this to say that reason will triumph over intolerance and fanaticism. Even if the truth has no... aroma.”

“The truth?” murmured Falastin.

“Your uncle loved to quote Ibn Arabi’s saying: ‘The nature of the dung-beetle is offended by the incomparable scent of the rose, and so it is with men who are offended by the truth.’”

The wind boomed in the chimneys. Beneath the faded moon swayed ghostly carob and eucalyptus trees. For a moment, the shadows in the gardens of the Tombs of the Patriarchs were riddled with light. Muffled cries rang out. The bluish stipple of a burst of submachine gun fire, the yapping of many dogs all at once, and then silence again, spreading outward in concentric waves.

“We should close the shutters and sleep now,” Layla said.

“No, not yet—did someone die?”

“How would we know?”

“Someone could die right nearby without anything changing. The stars would shine just like before, and the wind whisper in the trees... Layla?”

“Yes?”

“I’d like to die.”

“Oh hush, *habibi*! You’re so young—you’re our hope. How dare you?”

Her aunt pulled Falastin to her and hugged her tightly, unable to hold back her tears. Falastin, her eyes dry, let herself be hugged. Her aunt's heavy breasts pressed flat against her ribs. Freed, she leaned against the rail and breathed in the night's bitter emptiness. The surrounding hills exhaled the dull odor of the blood of overripe olives. A bird's cry pierced the cool night. From time to time, a tinkle of bells accompanied the formless cry of a flock of sheep stirring with the coming dawn.

Falastin followed her aunt back toward the bed.

"Sleep now," whispered Layla into her niece's hair.

Falastin closed her eyes, immediately plunging into the chaotic depths of her dreams. A turmoil of slow, confused images drew her back to the hospital room at the edge of her memory. The anesthesiologist had had just enough time for a quick smile.

"Everything'll be fine," she'd said, "we're just going to remove this metal shard."

But an icy chasm had suddenly opened and her father's brains were leaking out. In one fell swoop, everything she'd lived, loved, and learned changed meaning and color. Analgesia had paralyzed her body without dousing her consciousness. At that moment, something very sharp and subtle, like an intuition of the end, had begun struggling madly. She refused to let go of this last living link to her father, as though the imposed unconsciousness might close the book forever. As a little girl, she'd already been convinced that a thought clung to unfailingly had the power to keep a man alive, no matter how far away. But he'd been killed

by accident, murdered on a bright road between Ramallah and Bethlehem. Since then, she'd begun a vigil within. Even in her sleep, even from beyond the grave, it seemed to keep time the destroyer at bay. A mute tension in her, both in sleep and in her glum daytime activities, was as a guarantee on an unspoken vow of faithfulness. She had been given a glimpse of the great secret and left with the taste of human brain on her lips, rendering her unfit to judge. She had let herself be invaded by the world's silence and, since grown, no more than skin on bones, merely awaited a bit more light. Most men, with their imperious voices and strong odors, exhausted her. And the way the women always started in again with their complaints set her on edge. To what dark ends did bodies so mortally mate, huddle together, and tear each other apart?

She understood nothing of either desire or hate. She had barely lain down when the urge to disappear seized her stomach. She would have liked to dissolve all at once, like a handful of snow in the ocean. But her dreams overflowed, a nauseating well, often forcing her from bed to vomit. How could she escape this dread embrace, reaching from the grave? Monsters usually fled at the approach of daylight; then a downy tranquility settled over her for a few hours. She would sink into deepest, darkest sleep, or go back to crocheting a lace placemat that reminded her of Asmahane's gentleness.

In the uncertain dawn, a sudden racket jerked her awake. Falastin ran to the shutters and flung them open with both hands. The rooftops and terraces mirrored a marmoreal sky veined with mauve all the way to

the horizon. Violent impacts, followed by a muffled detonation, shook the building. She had just enough time to catch sight of the armored jeeps of the special services and customs police. A firm grip pulled her away from the window. It was Layla, in her nightgown, trembling with terror.

“They’re going to break everything! They’ve surely come for the superintendent. But what can we do?”

Falastin slipped from her aunt’s arms and ran for the door. She’d grabbed her jacket on the way and hurtled barefoot down the stairs despite the pleas from her aunt, who’d remained on the landing. She stopped at the threshold of the mezzanine, out of breath. The main door to the building dangled from its hinges, half upside down. Soldiers had just blown their way through the superintendent’s reinforced door. There were a dozen or so, submachine guns in hand, tramping through wood and rubble. Children in tears screamed from the back of the apartment while a man thrown to the floor, his face powder-white with plaster, was handcuffed by a laughing noncommissioned officer. The terrified young woman looked on as though at a scene risen from the wreckage of her slumber. For a second, through the floating dust, Falastin glimpsed wallpaper with a yellowed pattern of palm trees and seashells, furnishings, the framed sura in calligraphic script, and rope mats, stacked trunks, laundry on the chairs.

“Stop!” she cried, rushing forward. “That man hasn’t done anything wrong!”

She almost felt like laughing as she screamed these words. Did God not know there was evil in the world? She burst, a tiny figure, from the

crumbling building emptied of its inhabitants, calling out in her impossible accent: “Leave him! He did not do anything!”

The members of the commando intervention unit all looked up, astounded by the sight of this diminutive native beauty in bare feet. Momentarily disconcerted, the officer, an olive-skinned Sephardic Jew, ordered the girl be taken away with the handcuffed superintendent. They were already being pushed into the street toward a van with grilled window when Layla suddenly appeared at the foot of the steps. She’d taken the time to don a severe western-style business suit and put up her hair. She called out to the officer in perfect Hebrew.

“First of all, who are you?” he grumbled, ready to give the order to leave.

“I am a professor of history,” she said, her voice trembling. “Let my niece go!”

“Too late! We’re taking her in.”

Layla remembered the pass that never left Falastin’s jacket pocket. She took off her shoes, then, and handed them to the incredulous soldier.

“Don’t let her catch cold,” was all she said.

The convoy took off at a fast pace through the old town. Dawn sliced up the shadows into blue, geometric shapes amidst the empty streets. Flags of the occupiers billowed here and there, from rooftops and facades. Boutique awnings, slogan-scribbled walls, charred construction sites, streets blockaded with concrete or scrap iron, gave way to the silent, ancient residences at the heart of the city. Throughout the voyage,

behind the window grilles, Falastin couldn't tear her eyes from the sobbing superintendent. Was it fear, rage, or humiliation? Slowed by the barricades, the military vehicles at last reached the base at the edge of the western quarter.

She was separated from the man with the plastered face and led to an administrative block in a commandeered hotel, a gloomy building wreathed in barbed wire on spikes from which fluttered many plastic bags, ballooned by the wind. The olive-skinned officer signaled to two young uniformed women nodding off behind a counter. Their kepis were hung instead of keys on the board of polished wood behind them. Led into a small lounge that double glass doors made visible from the lobby, Falastin was told to undress behind a screen. The younger of the two soldiers, a corporal with frizzy hair and eyes of a singular transparency set too widely apart, apologized for this necessity.

"I'm used to it," said Falastin.

"You study law?" asked the other girl, checking Falastin's papers.

"I try to. As best as I can."

"I did two years of economics in Jerusalem," the younger one confided. "Then I lost my dad in Lebanon last year."

"Why do you live in Sector H2?" her colleague interrupted sharply: a tall blonde with large breasts and tired features she'd just flicked with her walkie-talkie antenna.

"I help my aunt, who lives alone, and look after children in trouble," Falastin answered without betraying any emotion.

"The husband of Layla Souss, who lodges you, has been convicted

of deliberate and repeated defacement of maintenance structures.”

Falastin couldn't hold back a laugh. Scrawny in her open-collared nightgown, her black hair strewn across her shoulders, she surprised the warrant officer, who stiffened to keep from laughing herself.

“Fine,” she said, “I'll recommend to my superior that you be locked up as a precaution. What do you say to that? Straight to Neve Tirza women's prison!”

“But you have no charge against me,” replied the young woman accustomed to intimidation techniques.

“Haven't you ever heard of administrative detention?” said the warrant officer sardonically. “While we get to know you better.”

In her nightgown, her jacket trailing from her hands, Falastin studied her feet with interest, suddenly confused at having robbed Layla of her shoes. At that moment, someone entered the lobby: a tall, slightly stooping figure who headed with a ringing step toward the lounge. The women on duty snapped to attention and saluted, vaguely embarrassed, an eye on the accused, who stood exposed to view.

“What's going on here?” demanded the major, who had not yet recognized Falastin, almost wholly turned away from him, shoulders bare, her face slightly downcast beneath a veil of hair.

“Official inspection of an uncooperative subject!” the blonde stated, jaw set and chest outthrust.

After a few seconds, assailed by a silent, uneasy feeling of déjà-vu no doubt as much from the harsh light on the uniforms as from the bent and frail young woman, the major at last placed her snow-white profile

with its smooth brow, eyes of darkest night, and crimson lips almost jutting like a rose between her teeth.

“Why, it’s Asmahane’s daughter!” he exclaimed. “I know her well! What idiot dragged her in here?”

The only high-ranking officer in the camp at this hour before his relief at the main south Hebron checkpoint, he took it upon himself to drive the subject home in his jeep.

“That’s against the rules,” one of the female soldiers thought it wise to observe.

Once in the armored vehicle, the officer began to laugh.

“You remember me, I hope? How could you forget Major Mazeltov? That means ‘good luck’ in Hebrew.”

Falastin, who from discretion had taken the backseat, of course remembered the dashing young man who’d come to her mother’s house and offered his services. She found him older, ill-at-ease with himself, with a nervous, almost feverish air half-masked by the light-hearted attention he tried to show her.

“I’m leaving my post,” he said abruptly. “I’m turning in my stripes. They’ll throw me in jail.”

“You shouldn’t,” Falastin murmured.

“Kids are being shot by soldiers, foul-ups multiply in clear defiance of the law despite orders and sanctions from the Supreme Court. You’d think the new recruits only obey colonists and the worst activists on staff.”

“You should stay.”

“I’d rather join the refuzniks, damned though they may be!” He began again, in a lower voice, “Did they have time to record your information at the base? If so, your usual identity card will be revoked, and you’ll be issued another one, stripping you of rights to leave your place of residence. It’s just like in the territories: whoever gets caught, even if it’s just for breaking curfew, goes on file with intelligence.”

“I know,” said Falastin. “The girls at the base returned my papers, thanks to you.”

“You can bet they’ll write up a report. Another report!” Major Mazeltov slowed near the Tombs of the Patriarchs. Armed soldiers patrolled the length of its walls.

“Funny,” he said with forced liveliness. “You Muslims and we Jews only manage to agree about myths and legends. This is the only place in the world where you’ll find a synagogue and a mosque under the same roof. But do you really believe Adam, Eve, Abraham, and all the rest are buried inside?”

At these words, the call of the muezzin rang out. The jeep rounded the gardens and reached the heights of the old town. The only traffic was bikes, delivery tricycles, and a few mules loaded down with baskets. The silence of the young woman so close behind him moved the major like a kind of complicity or secret harmony. He spied on her in the rearview mirror, troubled by the youthful gravity of her features.

“Did Adam and Eve love each other?” he mused distractedly. “You must have noticed. Apart from the Song of Songs, there’s no love in the

Bible. Same goes for the Koran...”

As his passenger remained quiet, he stepped nervously on the gas, and began to mumble. “I could love you so, Falastin! I could be yours and yours alone, yes, the tenderest, most devoted of companions...”

“Love? Love?” she faltered, emerging from a bitter reverie. “Isn’t to love to die?”