

The Border between Jaffa and Love

By Khader Abu Seif



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efore I begin to discuss love or what's greater than love – Jaffa – I will briefly introduce myself. I'm Khader Abou Seif, 26, born and raised in one of Jaffa's biggest orchards. Or at least the biggest to survive the Israeli occupation.

A childhood in Jaffa is one of the best things anyone can have. The orchard provided me with friends to grow up with, play with, and learn with – a group of Jaffa kids who didn't fully comprehend their political existence in Jaffa or what Jaffa is or what the city symbolizes historically.

As I grew older, my understanding of things grew as well. Teachers at school never taught us about our Palestinian origins or values but rather stuffed us with tales about the Zionist conqueror while tolerating no questions, expecting us to think that this was our only reality. You would think that they had invented the ocean's hug of Old Jaffa or had bestowed on Jaffa her ability to contain and hold any stranger as if she had borne him herself.

They didn't tell us that Jaffa is the mother of every Palestinian, that no one had invented her but that she had invented us. We exist because of the mother of all port cities in the Middle East – and not only we but those who surround us as well.

At the age of 19, I decided to leave Jaffa to explore my limits, to see what the place that proclaims total freedom – the place we actually call Tel Aviv – is really about. Little did I know that the longer I spent in Tel Aviv, the more I would miss Jaffa – and myself. My love was big;



Jaffa orchards.

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my love was larger than life. It grounded me, it made me stand still without the ability to move or breathe in Arabic.

My love built me a beautiful house, equipped it with valuable furniture, gave me colorful flowers, held me at night and sent me postcards from abroad... But it didn't love me the way Jaffa did.

People on those streets were cold. They didn't say hi. They lived in a bubble that they thought was theirs alone, a bubble that grew and invaded the Jaffa space as if it were its own back yard, where it could do as it pleases.

Then one morning I woke up, and after having lived miles away from Jaffa I

decided to go down to her shore. And I started running towards Jaffa – she drew me like a magnet. And I saw the old cathedrals, and my heart started to pound, and when Old Jaffa rose in front of me in its full glory, I couldn't stop the tears. And I realized that Jaffa always did what she does best. Even in times of terrible housing distress, of rising crime, of a regime that insists on making us forget who we are, even in the worst of times, Jaffa waits, and not only for me. She has waited for and still awaits anyone who has ever gone away, or been banished or expelled ...



Port of Jaffa, photo by Maysa Al Shaer.



Jaffa waits, still pretty, still with her arms wide open, still willing to accept me and you together.

She greets me in Arabic, grants me a home, buys me flowers, and holds me at night, full of warm wishes. People on the street ask where I am back from, as if I had been abroad. Faces from my childhood overwhelm me everywhere I go, and here's my best friend sending me a "welcome home" message.

And then I head down to the sea. I look from a distance at the place I'd been – a five-minute drive from Jaffa and from my entire life. And then I'm reminded that no matter where I am in the world, no matter what I do or who I love or how much I hurt – Jaffa will lick my wounds like she does for all her offspring, lick them till they heal, and then push me forward, towards the big wide world.

Jaffa – an astute businesswoman who knows that she has the best produce – oranges and people. Jaffa's youngsters are the face of Palestine; we are the future, and the future will be good despite the rough reality.

So who are we without it? What do we represent? Standing at the old Clock Square, returning a favor to a city that is a cultural center, we raise our flags high, flags of a nation who has known no peace. We swim in her sea, we create her art, and we write on her behalf.

We are from Jaffa, we speak the language of love – from Agami to the Armenian "Tasso" Cemetery.

Suddenly everything is greener, even if it was a tough departure. Always remember that everything is prettier in Jaffa: the broken is fixable, the food is better, and the people kinder. The music is our music, the language is our language, the air and the old walls are ours... and not only Jaffa – Haifa is an hour away and stands ready to greet us with open arms; Acre is the twin in the same distress, both ready and willing to hug and to love.

So why should I discuss love or separation when it is clear to me that we never parted? Jaffa always waited and I always knew I'd be back. I might rent a house and build a life somewhere else, but I know that there's always someone waiting in Palestine and I can't wait to get back to her arms.

Those arms I've waited so long for. Maybe it's because I don't know enough about love. Believe me when I say I've had my share of relationships, which broke in my own hands. Maybe it was the feeling that I was unprepared or maybe I was rebelling, but one thing's for sure: we can't really talk about free love while we are living under occupation. We can't fully feel when we are being restricted. But we can break free of our shackles by reminding ourselves every morning that we are born free on a land that is unfree. And like Jaffa, perhaps someday we will be able to love again.

Khader Abu Seif lives between Tel Aviv and Yafa, and is a freelance writer for MAKO, one of the major news websites associated with Keshet, the leading television channel. Khader was born in 1988, and his mother tongues are Hebrew and Arabic, both of which he speaks, reads, and writes fluently. Khader describes himself as a very creative, vegetarian, openly gay Arab – all the necessary ingredients to develop brilliant ideas and maintain a sense of humor and a unique point of view, as a person and as a writer.