

Scenes from Nablus

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Lurching and bumping, our yellow taxi struggles over great kneaded humps and dips, baked mud scraping the chassis. We climb steeply up towards the blue sky, passing through a flock of sheep on more even ground as the horizon retreats to the next hill. It is a warm, still day in February. Red poppies dot the wrinkled back of the West Bank.

At the end of my first week in Nablus, I am on a visit to the nearby Roman ruins at Sebastia, together with Eric, my French roommate at the Project Hope apartment, and Amir and Salem, two students from Nablus's An-Najah University who suggested the trip. Two more passengers share the old Mercedes: middle-aged women who interrupt their rushing conversation to ask in English where we are from, smile, and say, "Welcome to Palestine."

A little way on, the tracks of previous vehicles diverge across ground softened by a mountain spring. One of those vehicles is still here: a goods van, possibly on its way to Jenin, its front wheels ground deep into the mud. Safely past, our driver pauses to shout a question in Arabic through his rolled-down window. Putting down his mobile phone, the driver of the van briefly spins its wheels and raises his hands in a what-can-you-do gesture.

There are roads, of course. However, many are cut off by trenches or concrete cubes. Others are reserved for Israeli soldiers and settlers: Palestinians attempting to use them can be arrested and have their vehicles confiscated. Where road journeys are possible, all involve passing through checkpoints at frequent intervals. Our cross-country grind across fields and scrubby hillsides is no insane shortcut, but simply one of the rough detours forced on the local population.

It was at the court of Sebastia that Salome asked for the head of John the Baptist. A tourist spot once operated by the Israelis who charged an entry fee for the ruins, it is now a sleepily quiet, untouristed village. We walk at random through trees and yellow weeds around the hilltop, pausing frequently to admire the surrounding countryside through the afternoon haze. On another hill can be seen a

line of identical modern houses, roofed with red tiles. Beside them, the cylindrical watchtower of an Israeli settlement stares back at us.

We return by a different route, walking much of the way from a neighbouring village down a broken rocky path to a place from which road transport towards Nablus is possible. As we descend through bushes and olive trees towards a grassy Muslim graveyard, a family of Biblical aspect are slowly climbing up: a young couple, the woman scarved, the man bearded, with an infant and a donkey, heavily laden. No everyday greeting seems appropriate. We pass closely in silence, donkey and humans each attending to his next step.

Back at Beit Iba, one of the military checkpoints controlling all access to and from Nablus, we leave a taxi to join a queue channelled by waist-high slabs of concrete. Except for the few who have special, hard-to-get permits, the Israeli army allows no vehicles into or out of Nablus, an island in the fragile archipelago of the Palestinian Authority. Once through the checkpoint, we will have to get another taxi to the city centre, about four kilometres down the road. For Amir and Salem, who come from a village to the north west, Beit Iba is part of every journey between their homes and the university.

Like all the soldiers I encounter at checkpoints, the man with the M16 hanging at his waist is young, about nineteen: compulsory service age. Some equally young women in the queue to our left have blue plastic wallets ready to present. When he waves them on they lower their heads and hurry past. At Huwwara, the checkpoint to the south of Nablus, people can walk north through a turnstile without inspection. Getting out of Nablus is harder.

The pages of my foreign passport are turned slowly with guarded perplexity. After a wordless perusal, it is passed into the concrete cubicle where someone else can decide what to do with it. A request for my visa is relayed: to avoid evidence of a trip to Israel on my passport (something that would prevent me travelling to most Arab countries), I asked at Ben-Gurion to get this on a slip of paper. I keep the visa separate now partly so it won't fall from my passport during an inspection, partly to give the soldiers something harmless to ask for. Nevertheless, there is usually at least one more question: what am I doing in Nablus?

I am here for a month with Project Hope, a charity which organizes classes in English, French, art, drama, and other subjects to be given by foreign volunteers in Nablus. Some programmes are for children in the city's refugee camps, others for any interested adults. Currently, seven of us are here, from Canada, France, Germany, Holland, Ireland, and two from the United States. None of us has any particular experience or qualification in teaching. We all made our own way here and pay our own living expenses – though in Palestine these are modest.

Naturally, I don't say any of this. "Tourist" is the standard formula to avoid a prolonged engagement with an uncertain outcome. Occasionally, it provokes a

mild, “No ... activity?”, sometimes an incredulous “In Shechem?!” To Israelis, Nablus is known by its ancient name, Shechem, or its new name, the Capital of Terror: with more than 40,000 people living in the city’s refugee camps, many of Palestine’s militia men – “the fighters” – come from here. This time, as more often happens, my passport is returned without further enquiry.

The missing tourists are missing out. On the following weekend, three of us stand atop Mount Gerizim, one of two mountains between which Nablus lies in a long valley. It’s a more seasonable day, with cloud and breeze drawing a patchwork of shadow across the pale slopes. Our height of about 900 metres is diminished by the general elevation of the West Bank, and the city’s apartment buildings crowd up the steep mountainside, all clad in the same white limestone tiles. Below, slightly to our left is the Old City: stone buildings with a warren of narrow alleys, arches, tunnels, and covered markets. Just beyond it are the streets where, lost on my arrival in Nablus, I strode with fake confidence through the bustle and beeping horns, dismissed a taxi driver’s extortionate offer to drive me to the Hotel Yasmeen, my rendezvous point, and immediately afterwards met a friendly teenager who walked me there through the souq. A little to the left is the city centre, or *dewar*: traffic circle, clock tower, banks, and other corporate buildings; traders crowding out onto the road, their tables bearing socks and watches and plastic goods, with cardboard boxes marked “China” underneath. Beyond that is the big covered fruit and vegetable market where sellers bellow out their prices from behind trailers and crates: a kilo of strawberries for five shekels, or even four.

Out of sight beyond a line of trees at the top of Mount Ebal, not too far above our apartment building on the other side of the city, lies an Israeli military base.

Looking down to our right, the valley opens and the eastern end of Nablus spills north and south. Here are the city’s two main refugee camps: Balata, with a population of 22,000, and, to the north, Askar. Both were established after the 1948 war. Though now engulfed by the city, the camps are easily distinguished from altitude, each one a stark square of low and very tightly-packed concrete buildings. Adjacent to Balata, on the road opposite the camp’s Happy Childhood Centre where I am later to have a class of ten-year-olds, rises the red-brown dome of one of Nablus’s Christian churches. This one is Greek Orthodox and built over Jacob’s Well: in John’s gospel, the place where Jesus asked a Samaritan woman for a drink of water.

Mount Gerizim itself is home to half the world’s 600 remaining Samaritans, who believe it to be the sacred mountain on which Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac. The village synagogue is kindly unlocked for us, evidently the only

visitors on this pre-Shabbath morning, and we are shown a Torah in the ancient Hebrew script the Samaritans still use. We wander on to the summit to see the remains of fortifications from different eras and to survey the landscape. Then we return to visit the museum. This is the result of the extended labours of one man, Hosney Cohen, who shows us his exhibits and instructs us in the genealogy of the Samaritans and the world. Cohen, who may one day become High Priest, speaks with the didactic emphasis of one who suspects us of secret, unorthodox beliefs – that, say, the Chinese are descended from Ham rather than Yafet. Afterwards, he softens, giving us postcards and showing us pictures of himself taken with notables, including Yasser Arafat. The Samaritans are accepted by the Palestinians as well as the Israelis: in Nablus, younger Samaritans are students in the university and the traditional white robe and red brimless hat sometimes worn by older members of the community are occasionally to be seen.

We descend back through the quiet checkpoint with its bored Israeli soldiers, taking the high road westwards around the folds of the mountain through a mixture of buildings and steep fields. Getting past the boisterous what's-your-name harassment of a gang of boys of seven or eight, we pass above the Old City and arrive out at the steep road which we climb each day to the Project Hope office. On the left is a peaceful Muslim cemetery shaded by many trees. Inside the wall, several white tombstones are decorated with posters of armed young men in defiant poses. Martyrs: Palestinians use the word to describe anyone killed by the Israeli army, whether adult or child, fighter or complete innocent.

In the minefield of friendliness that is Nablus, the streets on the other side of the road are already a hazard to timekeeping. The day after my arrival, Brian, one of the other volunteers, brought me this way to his friend Raed's family home and woodworking shop. On a concrete floor under a low ceiling, we sat on chairs and boxes arranged around a punctured old metal can serving as a brazier, sipping thick coffee with Abu Raed ("father of Raed") and their old friend and neighbour Abu Sulman, with Raed's younger brothers in curious attendance. Brian, dubbed Ibrahim by his Nabulsi friends, conversed easily in Arabic, answering or interpreting for me after my handful of words and phrases ran out. When we finally emerged from our bath of goodwill Brian was already ten minutes late for a class.

Up the steep hill westwards, before the university, is a community centre called Darna – Arabic for "Our House" – funded mainly by the French Foreign Ministry. Halfway down the short hallway is a framed poster of a glowing, freckled Rachel Corrie, *écrasée par un bulldozer israélien*. Beside it is the door to the Project Hope office: at this time, a small, unwindowed room. Shelves are stuffed with

records and photocopied teaching materials, and a whiteboard shows our timetable of classes. Three desks are squeezed into the room, bearing three computers: one that works and two that look like they might – kept, as our director Hakim privately admits, for appearances; for internet access, we generally use one of the ten computers in the shared lab down the hall, through the window of which can be seen clusters of lemons on the tree just outside.

The office is Hiba's domain. Hiba schedules our classes, supplies us with attendance sheets and, when she thinks we are about to be late, tries to look severe and tells us to get moving. She wears her long chestnut hair unscarved and banter with the constant stream of casual visitors, many of them students from the university. Some local students also volunteer with Project Hope, either giving classes themselves or working as assistants and translators.

Although, as a native speaker, I expected to be giving mostly conversational English classes, I am also assigned two children's classes in the refugee camps: one in Balata, where I often end up teaching without an assistant, and one in Askar, to which Bassam, a first year student of English, usually accompanies me. As we walk down the hill, we discuss various things. Bassam thinks I should visit the Dead Sea, part of which borders the West Bank. For him, however, it is no more than a happy childhood memory: like most young adult male Nabulsi, Bassam is not allowed to leave the city by the Israeli army. When he was born, the military occupation was already over two decades old; now, until he serves a long sentence imposed only because of his age and place of birth, Nablus itself is an open-air prison. He thinks he may be allowed out at 35 – a remote age, more than half his life's years away.

Bassam, an earnest young man, looks strained and clucks for my safety whenever we are separated by the crowds and traffic at the dewar. There, just beyond the fruit and vegetable market, we get a *service*: pronounced as a French word, these are shared taxis travelling fixed routes, common to Middle Eastern countries. The fare within the city is two shekels, regardless of distance travelled. Each of us tries to pay for the other: being a Palestinian who regards me his guest, it is an argument I must let him win at least half the time in order to avoid an uncomfortably serious, we-must-talk discussion.

After a journey of five or ten minutes through the wide streets beyond the city centre, we alight at the Hani pharmacy. The street we are on is the western boundary of Askar Qadeem: in English, Old Askar; there is a newer, unofficial camp beyond it. Opposite the UNRWA distribution centre, a little way down the hill from the street, is a concrete building with a brass plaque: "Hewar Childe Hood / Oxfam Solidarity Belgium". At my first class here, just seven girls turn up, a number which means each can have a chair with an unbroken elbow desk. In neighbouring classrooms at different times, Alicia teaches drama, Michael discusses social jus-

tice with young adults, and two francophone volunteers from a theatre group teach circus.

Even a small class is a handful. It is two o'clock and their normal school day, which I am told begins at seven, is over. Plainly, their teachers haven't tired them. Each girl pleads, desperate to be the next to tell me what she wants to bring to the Moon; arms shoot up and strain forward, heads and trunks soon following until I have to get them all to sit down again. Brought along by her older sister Ruhaf, only little Reema sits quietly, sometimes drawing me a picture in rapt concentration, more often sitting in silent awe, brown eyes wide to catch the wonder around her.

Sunia, one of the local workers at the centre, gives me paper and pencils for the children. Like some of the other refugees I see in Askar, she is black, an ethnically African Palestinian. Sunia is small of stature and, communicating with me through Bassam, her demeanour is friendly and polite. Nonetheless, when some of my classes become excessively raucous, she does not hesitate to enter the room and roar at the children at a volume to stun the building. I stand and marvel at her vocal ability, knowing I am neither the first nor the last she will deem to be in need of such assistance. Even Alicia, who jokingly answers to the family name Fortissimo, describes Sunia as *scary*.

Sadly, Sunia's resourcefulness and energy are not matched by the abilities of her senior male colleagues: my first scheduled class hasn't been arranged because, unaccountably, they didn't know about it; diligent notes are taken and yet the same thing happens the next day; the children arrive half an hour late, or not at all, apparently because of activity clashes; the key to the classroom cannot be found; the pupils change so that I give many first lessons; halfway through a class, I am told I am in the wrong room and shunted into another. Bassam pronounces his verdict twice, repeating a pleasant English word: Chaos. From the others in Project Hope, I learn that the Hewart centre has a history of such problems. After complaints that are patiently suffered and ignored by the centre's senior personnel, Hiba finally tells me my classes at Hewart are to be abandoned.

Balata's Happy Childhood Centre is a happier experience. This is a class I take over from Lisa, a long-term volunteer who is still doing more hours than me. Twenty brightly coloured jumpers dwindle to about fifteen, most of the casualties being from the minority of boys. Their previous teacher misses them too. However, when I mention the intelligent but demanding Jenan, Lisa laughs, swearing she's seen an I'm-gonna-make-you-cry look in that girl's eyes. Though the children in Balata are just as loud as at Askar, the young women working at the HCC are quiet and solicitous, offering me a whiteboard marker before the class and, with shy, grateful smiles, a glass of sweet tea after it. Much later, I am embarrassed to discover that my HCC classes of one hour were all supposed to last one and a half hours; the local staff were far too polite to tell me.

Back out on the main street, about 50 metres away, a mural stretches along a wall up the hill: an exodus; crowds of people behind barbed wire; a refugee camp of numbered UN tents – as Balata was before the concrete shelters were built. There is also a great keyhole and, beyond it, their homes. Or perhaps heaven.

As always, I've walked only a few steps up this hill before a *service* appears. This one is empty apart from the driver: an immobile, mountainous man who seems to be part of the vehicle. A grey religious-looking beard tumbles down over a jellaba. "Dewar," I say in the usual way, letting him know how far I will be going. "Salaam alaykum," smiles the benevolent mountain in greeting, a gentle rebuke for starting a conversation in the middle. Clearly, this is not Nablus's most stressed driver. On a straight stretch, I give him the two shekels. Back comes a half shekel in change. I wonder if this man is in the right line of work. Although one and a half shekels is – or at least was – the nominal rate, I've never seen anyone pay less than two before.

I doubt he has a word of English. Although the silence is an amiable one, I point as we pass the rubble of some demolished buildings, asking, "Israel?" Of course, I already know the answer. The bearded giant merely nods. When we stop, I try to leave the unpocketed half shekel. His smile widening, he extends a great hand – only to close mine around the coin.

From the city centre, our apartment is a ten minute walk up the northern mountain, Mount Ebal. The streets on both mountains all run more or less parallel to the valley, tackling the slopes only obliquely. Even so, it's a steep climb up the quiet, mainly residential roads. As I pass apartment buildings and construction sites there is usually at least one boy or a small gang of them to demand, "How-are *you*?", sometimes shouting this question from the other side of the road or a wall above. An answer – even in Arabic – leads to "What's your name?" and "Where are you from?" Often, provided I am far enough away, the final demonstration of language skills is a universally-known English obscenity, delivered with impudent delight.

A pause at a level spot before reaching the apartment is rewarded with an arresting view across the western, valley-bound side of Nablus. Below, in an open parking area to the right of the city centre, the rows of yellow dots are taxis; to the west of this is a farm, an outpost of horticulture now surrounded by the city's streets; farther west, a run-down city park. After dark, the mountainside opposite becomes a miniature galaxy of domestic lights. In the mornings, I stop to look at the ever-changing light across the valley, sometimes under a clear, brightening sky, sometimes with clouds roiling above the ridges or drifting gently along the slopes.

Near the apartment is an empty site where a fat and generous fruit seller sets

up his crates. A little way up the hill are a place where you can get fast food (fe-lafel) and a series of cramped little shops selling domestic essentials, canned food, bottled water, and, in unmarked blue or yellow plastic bags, bread; Israeli products like milk and yogurt share the shelves peacefully with Palestinian equivalents. Just a little farther is the local hospital, Mustashpha al-Itihad, outside which is an Arab Bank ATM – sheltered by a glass panel which will not survive the disturbances to come. Notes of 200 shekels from the ATM I break in the small supermarket opposite; offered for 12 shekels of groceries in a smaller shop, they are met with a sigh and an invitation to come back and pay tomorrow.

In the evenings, the fruit seller is gone and groups of youths loiter with vague intent, making the two-minute walk to the supermarket less comfortable. Their behaviour is like that of the younger boys but with added teenage bravado. I answer any questions, return reciprocal questions in Arabic when I can, and shake firmly any offered hand; any request for shekels is met with a short “no” in Arabic and any shout or jeer as I walk away is easily ignored. On a couple of occasions, small pieces of grit are aimed harmlessly at me as I walk past: the penalty for the slight of failing to acknowledge a shout from the hill above.

All this is fine for a tall male, but what about the female volunteers? Though they clearly put up with a lot they don’t consider worth talking about, the girls, it seems, can look after themselves. Ina, a petite blonde who teaches art, was followed by an adolescent who actually dared to pinch her. To general laughter in the apartment, she mimes the boy’s shock at the slap that left him standing mute and gaping.

Only the brave or foolish would mess with Ina. Along with gymnastics and other evening entertainments recorded on Alicia’s camcorder is a swordfight between Ina and Lisa, her roommate. Lisa, wearing my boots – she calls them “combat boots” – and with a saucepan tilting from her head, is soon in running retreat, her smiling savagery no match for Ina’s murderous determination.

Our four-bedroom flat, taking up half the third floor of the building, is comfortably large enough to accommodate its four male and four female occupants. One end of the tiled living room is spanned by a large aluminium-framed sliding window. Stopped from rattling in the wind by a wad of paper, this admits a view of the west of the city and a nearby apartment block. At dusk, two clothes pegs hold the broken curtains together to avoid scandalizing the neighbourhood: the idea of unrelated males and females living morally in the same apartment is only marginally credible, and there is from time to time a politely circumspect enquiry to deflect, a curious glance to ignore.

The wall at the other end of the living room is papered with pictures made by the children in Ina’s classes: Palestinian flags, flowers, smiles, tears, hearts, barbed wire. Scattered around the sofa and chairs are Arabic dictionaries and other

books in precarious, hastily-tidied stacks, chess and backgammon sets, a nargileh, juggling balls, and laptop computers with tangled cables leading to taped-together adapters. Beside the TV, which is rarely turned on, is the lamp broken in an indoor soccer kickabout. Normally caged on the gas fire but often allowed out for exercise are Ina's two Palestinian prisoners: the nervous but adventurous Batzi, green and yellow, and her new companion Binti, blue and white and dopily inclined to fly into walls.

The two parakeets are now perched beside a houseplant on top of the press. Muriel, a French journalist who shares the flat, stands looking up, trying to coax them with a look of emphatic astonishment. Michael walks past, announcing he's going to take a shower. Brian stands looking at the floor, lost in meditation. His phone beeps. It's a text message from Michael: "I'm in the shower now." Alicia is at the table, talking about something shocking. Does she know that she says "I know" just like Sybil in *Fawlty Towers*? Yes, *she knows*.

The gunfire usually starts at about 8pm: single shots or short bursts which echo across the valley. Nobody takes any notice. This early, it's defiance, not fighting: the Israeli army will not enter the city until later tonight.

Being an extreme lark, I am awake before the muezzin broadcasts his call to prayer from the nearby minaret, a sound sometimes made less alien by the interruption of a cough. Eric sleeps through it, like a good Christian. As it gets light, the birds outside pipe up. Inside, Batzi and Binti fly around, agitated, calling to their invisible fellows.

A shower is a luxury not to be had every day. Standing in it now, I face a minor dilemma: do I turn off the water before reaching for the soap? The Israelis take almost all the water in the West Bank and what remains is precious: people here stand in a bucket when they shower, saving the water to flush the toilet. On the other hand, our gas-fired water heater, out on the smokers' balcony beside the kitchen, is a temperamental beast that might not restart when the water is turned on again. This time, I choose virtue; when I rinse, the water is bone-crackingly cold.

The water tanks on the roof are refilled twice a week and our apartment is relatively well supplied, having two. However, a plumbing problem can still leave us without running water for days at a time. Hence the reserve of refilled plastic bottles lying beside the fridge in the kitchen. Many are oddly deformed: the girls have been using them as hot water bottles.

At Za'atara, a checkpoint about eight kilometres south of Nablus, a young soldier stands looking through a handful of identity wallets. At the bottom of the pile is a passport; looking towards the *service*, he holds this up and waves it. I hesitate. The

car – a Mercedes sedan with two rows of back seats – is packed solid. I work my way out and stand near the cab. The soldier holding my passport is flanked by two others. I first confirm my mispronounced name, then my country.

“You are coming from Nablus?”

“Yes.”

“How did you find it?”

Looking at him, I suddenly realize he is genuinely curious. In other circumstances, I would be willing to talk to him.

“It’s fine,” I say simply.

He gives me a sceptical, wondering look. Resting one hand on his semi-automatic, he extends my passport, the other men’s wallets folded inside it.

Our journey south continues. We sink into narrow valleys where olive trees grow from rusty soils in stone wall terracing, see new road signs for Israeli settlements, and pass regularly under the eyes of military observation towers: situated on elevated ground along the roadside, these are grey metal cylinders; flared on top, they frown over the landscape.

At Qalandiya, a checkpoint in the Wall on the southern edge of Ramallah, there there is a wait of about half an hour before our bus is allowed to continue to Jerusalem. Eventually, at around noon, I am again on the other side of the Wall in a bus navigating the steep, twisting roads through the conurbation that surrounds Bethlehem.

When asked where I should get out for Manger Square, the man in his early twenties sitting next to me offers to take me there himself. His name is Kamel and he politely assures me that he has plenty of time, it being Thursday – the first day of the weekend in Palestine. In the increasingly warm afternoon, we make our way along busy pedestrian streets, passing traders and locals. Kamel is evidently a popular figure in Bethlehem, and we are continually interrupted by people keen to exchange friendly greetings. After a while, he explains that he does social work with children who have been traumatized by the conflict and in this way has come to know many families. His work, however, is voluntary: a graduate of sociology, he is seeking a regular full-time job – as in Nablus, the employment situation is mentioned in sombre tones and the subject is changed.

At Manger Square there are tourists – a group of middle-aged Americans off a tour bus who will soon be whisked back to Jerusalem – as well as a few hawkers selling postcards and rosary beads, possibly the only locals who will benefit from their visit. After showing me around the Church of the Nativity and the museum, Kamel invites me to join him on a visit to the university. Near the entrance, we meet his sister, Samar, still a student here. She offers to give me a tour of the university while Kamel meets his friends.

Bethlehem University is a small one of about 2000 Christian and Muslim stu-

dents, run by “the brothers” – the De LaSalle Brothers, to whom Samar refers several times in respectful tones. Though a Muslim, she tells me she sometimes visits the chapel for its silence and solitude; she also shows me inside the library and the pale stone buildings housing the different faculties. The central plaza has paved, tree-lined paths and a small fountain where students congregate in chattering groups. In this oasis of apparent normality, I answer Samar’s question about where I have been in the West Bank and then catch myself asking, with stupid lightness, “Have you been to ...” – knowing the answer before I finish. Sitting in the shade, I ask her how the Wall, restrictions on movement, and the occupation in general are affecting life in Bethlehem. In a quiet voice, Samar tells me she knows many students who have had to give up their studies. For each of them, it is a story of hopes crushed: an expensive university education is a prize for which families plan and save from the time their children are born.

No one leave the apartment the israel army are everywhere in the city

It’s a text message from Hiba early on the morning of Sunday, 25 February. Yesterday the Israeli army made a daytime incursion into Nablus to raid the Old City. Today they’re back in numbers. Just up the road from us, their armoured jeeps are blocking access to Al-Itihad hospital, just as they are at hospitals elsewhere in Nablus. There are the sounds of explosions in the city, shouting nearby; excited children peer around the corner of the apartment building next to us. A curfew has been imposed. The local television channel has been taken over and now shows a list of names of seven wanted men. The Israeli military are calling it “Operation Hot Winter”.

The next day they are still here. Local medical relief workers need international volunteers to help them deliver food and medicine in the Old City where the residents can’t get out because of the curfew. All of us are glad of the opportunity and at 11am we find ourselves outside the fire station, waiting for things to be organized. It’s a cloudy day and when it starts to drizzle, we join the sleep-deprived firemen watching a television news channel inside: after some initial resistance, the fighters have vanished and the Israeli soldiers are moving through the Old City.

At about noon, we go on to the municipality building where we take random seats in a large meeting room. People talk in small groups while the mayor gives an interview to the media at the other end of the room. Lisa and I are sitting near a middle-aged woman who greets us warmly, enquires eagerly where we are from, and asks about our work and our experience here. She turns out to be Mona

Mansour, a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council.

Mona is the widow of Jamal Mansour, a prominent political leader in Hamas. After spending several years imprisoned without charge or trial in the 1990s, Jamal Mansour was assassinated in 2001 by Israeli Apache helicopters. The missiles which struck the media centre where he worked in Nablus also killed seven others, including two freelance journalists and two children outside the building. Israel claimed that Mansour was involved in planning suicide bombings but offered no evidence. Mona denies this charge, as did Palestinian sources at the time. The attack – a “targeted killing” – drew condemnation from governments around the world, including the United States, with Amnesty International and others also pointing out that such extrajudicial executions are illegal under international law.

Mona tells us she felt it was important for her to come here today to show solidarity with the people. However, she has had to travel secretly: since Hamas’s victory in the election last year, 37 of her colleagues – the equivalent of members of parliament – have been imprisoned in Israel. She speaks without bitterness, as if the events of her life were wrought by some unconscious force of nature, impossible to reason with, pointless to hate. When, to convey an idea of the rough route she took to avoid arrest, she starts to lift her long coat to show us the state of her shoes (a gesture cut short out of delicacy), she could easily pass for someone complaining about the poor state of the roads.

One man – apparently a member of the municipal council – tells me he is sceptical of the stated reason for the incursion: the Israeli army has long known that the men they’re looking for were living in the Old City; why then, he wants to know, do they invade just when the Hamas-Fatah unity government looks finally to be on course, when the municipal authorities are agreeing positive steps to improve things in Nablus?

Presently Hakim, who left earlier, returns with some high-visibility vests. Before we go, the mayor, Adli Ya’ish, makes a point to come around and thank each of us individually. Though elected mayor on the Hamas list, Ya’ish is not a member of Hamas and he attracted votes from Nablus’s Christian and Samaritan communities, among whom he is recognized for his charitable work. In a Jerusalem Post article after his election, he was also lauded by a Jewish Israeli business associate. Unknown to us, he too is destined to become a political prisoner in Israel.

We leave and walk down streets now empty of the usual crowds and traffic and instead carpeted with rocks, the ammunition of the teenage stone throwers. Although many of the stones are large – apparently taken from the rubble of a demolished building – they will have made little impression on the armoured vehicles that passed this way.

In the Old City, the Israeli soldiers are not keen to let us pass. Jeeps with caged windcreens accelerate suddenly from stationary positions, sometimes to turn and

face a different direction, sometimes evidently to intimidate. Their klaxons seem to draw the air taut and their loudspeakers hurl commands as indistinct as they are imperative. Sometimes it is a matter of persistence: advancing slowly, repeatedly calling out in English that we have bread, milk, baby formula; holding these up, insisting that families need them. Sometimes we are forced to retreat and find another route.

Our group of about twenty breaks up and reforms, with smaller teams periodically going off in different directions, each with at least one international volunteer. In our determination to feel and look useful, most of us foreigners are somewhat jealous of the supplies we carry. Our main function however is a very modest one: to be conspicuous Westerners, making it more likely that the Palestinian relief workers will be allowed through and less likely that someone will be shot for breaking the curfew.

Normally filled with noisy, jostling life and commerce, the Old City's sloping alleyways are now almost silent. On all sides, heavy sliding and folding metal doors are closed. Tattered posters of stern politicians stare at each other across deserted spaces. Higher up, where weeds grow in the stone wall above the arch of a tunnel, children's faces are dimly visible through a grilled window. Occasionally, a window above us opens so someone can tell us their situation. Emboldened by our presence, curious youngsters emerge from behind adults in the shadows of a vaulted entrance and are gently ushered back. Down at the far end of the tunnel, where a white cat lies wet and dead, is an Israeli jeep; in the light of the street beyond, soldiers in green battledress and floppy camouflage headgear move past, heavily kitted and gripping bulky weapons.

Soon lost, I eventually get my bearings when we pass a site familiar from an earlier visit: a factory which made olive oil soap, a traditional product that would still be produced here were the ancient building not now lying in rubble, having been destroyed by the Israeli army during a previous incursion.

With our hands free betweentimes, many people are smoking. After offering me a cigarette, one of the younger Palestinian relief workers teaches me the Arabic for "I don't smoke." I immediately forget it, and he laughs at my efforts.

As we move around the Old City, so do squads of soldiers. Sometimes they ignore us. At other times our passports are gathered up and examined while we are asked where we are going and receive a lecture on why we can't go there or don't need to. During one such encounter, I notice a soldier filming us with a camcorder. Wary of getting into some kind of security video, I take a step sideways as he pans the camera across our group. Only then do I notice the eighteen-year-old's giddy smile: some time from now, it seems, a proud family will assemble in a flat in Tel Aviv to watch "Uri's Raid on the City of Terrorists".

"So, did they have horns?"

Michael means the soldiers.

“Couldn’t tell with those floppy hats.”

I had a worried look, he explains. I tell him I’ve never seen him smoking before.

Later, as we pass through a crossroads of wider lanes, there is a loud gunshot. Our group splits: most, already partway across, rush forward; three of us at the rear hang back. From the corner, I see two Israeli soldiers by the wall down the lane to the left, looking our way along the barrels of their guns. Those of our group who ran forward are now standing in safety and shouting at me to run, *run!* This seems neither dignified nor wise. Didn’t I read somewhere that running in such circumstances was a bad idea? Earlier, when some of our group ran from a menacing jeep, didn’t everyone – with me joining in – shout at them *not* to run? So I keep walking. But when my slow traverse is complete, the others – Palestinian volunteers – sprint across. I feel like a six-year-old who’s been caught out on the Safe Cross Code.

In the late afternoon, we walk back to the fire station. Mahmoud, one of our local co-ordinators, and others take us in several cars towards the apartment. We get no farther than the supermarket: a little below us, an Israeli jeep preventing access to the hospital is under sustained lapidary fire from the sloping patch of waste ground. Some of the rocks reach their target and produce a dull, indifferent clang. Fortunately, the supermarket has managed to open – we haven’t eaten. When we’ve stocked up, the jeep has adjusted its position and the stone-throwing has abated, allowing us to get home.

Later, four members of the International Women’s Peace Service arrive. We met them earlier in the Old City and they’re staying in the apartment tonight. These are the professional activists: Jewish vegans who immediately hold a meeting among themselves about what they’ve witnessed today and what they’re going to do about it. One of them, a young American named Anna, borrows Michael’s mobile phone to do an interview with a US radio station. Michael tells me she’s written a book about Palestine. Fortunately, in keeping with their cheerful, hippy names – Yara, Nova – they’re also able to relax afterwards, allowing the rest of us to feel less frivolous.

On Tuesday, the army are gone and resilient Nabulsi return, where possible, to work and school. However, everyone knows the Israeli military will be back: they are withdrawing only to give the wanted men a chance to return to the Old City so they may catch them off-guard the next time. The men, Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades members, are indeed back, if they ever left: Alicia, while going through the Old

City with a local volunteer, reports passing a group of them giving an interview.

On Wednesday, the army returns. Before entering the Old City this morning, we assemble in the bar of a hotel to get instruction from a fired-up Palestinian who acts as if he's training shock troops. If two members of a volunteer team enter a building then two others will stand post; if an Israeli soldier throws a sound bomb, we will shout a warning and bend over, covering our ears and opening our mouths. Some of the Peaceful Women have brought along onions which they share with us: biting on one, we are told, helps remind your body that it can breathe when tear gas makes it feel like you can't. An experienced activist, apparently joking, advises the girls not to flirt with the soldiers. I glance across at them, ready to duck and cover as we've been taught, but they show admirable restraint.

When we get to the Old City however, there is little for us to do: another incursion was expected and people have prepared as well as they could, though medical help is still needed. There are at least three television crews about – from Reuters, the local station, and an Arab satellite channel. Alison, a journalist who has volunteered with Project Hope but who isn't living in our flat, keeps us entertained with her wry sense of humour. An in-joke new to me is that MTV doesn't stand for Music Television: it's "Mosque TV". I've already seen it of course; together with impossibly bad Egyptian melodramas, it is the reason the single-channel TV in our apartment is rarely turned on.

Our services not being required, we go on a protest march near the dewar. After walking around for a while with our newly-made placards, we stage a sit-in near the entrance to the al Wattani hospital. There aren't many of us. But the TV crews are happy. A single Molotov cocktail is thrown from the vicinity of the petrol station on the far side of the dual carriageway. It breaks unimpressively near one of the Israeli jeeps blocking access to the hospital. Later, a small black sphere is dropped right beside us from another jeep. The slight breeze is enough to bend the shivering grey plume of escaping gas away from us. Towards the hospital.

On Thursday, Operation Hot Winter is over. The Israeli army haven't found their wanted men, something which seems to surprise nobody. Instead, they say, they found several bomb factories. This seems plausible – after all, bombs are made and they must come from somewhere. But then so do the denials. A human rights activist with Machsom Watch, a group of Israeli women who monitor checkpoints in the West Bank, said in an interview last month that she no longer believes Israeli army claims about finding bombs: "too often" Nomi Lalo has monitored a checkpoint all day without seeing anything happen, and then gone home to hear a news report that suicide bombers were intercepted that day at the same checkpoint.

A 42-year-old man was shot dead in the Old City on Monday: believing there were no soldiers nearby, he went on to his roof to try to fix a problem with his water supply. A photograph of the victim, Anan Tibi, shows a wide-eyed, placid, balding man. His son Ashraf, who went to try to warn his father after he saw the soldiers, was wounded. Anna, who spoke with Ashraf in hospital, reports that he was allowed to be taken to hospital only after an hour and a half, during which time he endured the boasts of the soldier who killed his father. Another man in his forties, Ghareb Selhab, suffered a heart attack after inhaling tear gas in his own home. Now in a coma, he too will soon lie in a grave. He might have been saved had medical relief workers been allowed to get to him in time.

Tamir is one of the paramedics who were not only prevented from attending the sick and injured but were themselves detained by the Israeli soldiers. Despite his official identification and clothing, he was forced to strip – “Even this,” he says, lifting his jumper and shirt to show me a light vest. He is evidently surprised at my being unaware of such business-as-usual events. Tamir now has a very bad cold and maybe something worse, the result of his clothes having lain on the wet ground and an immune system impaired by prolonged lack of sleep.

Many adult males were rounded up randomly and taken to the nearby military base. Though I was familiar from human rights reports with previous mass round-ups and mistreatment in the same location, some details of this mistreatment are new to me: kept for very long periods without access to a toilet, in dirty, extremely overcrowded and then very cold conditions, their food being some bread thrown on the ground for them to eat like dogs (they refused).

Also unwitnessed by us, the soldiers used human shields, two of whom were children. This has continued to be routine despite Israel’s own court rulings against it in 2002 and 2005.

I leave early for my trip to Jericho, perhaps too early: at Huwwara, there is no queue. Though perhaps better than a crowd and a long delay, it also means the soldiers have nothing to do but stare at me as I approach. To my left is the fence, to my right, on stilts, a covered observation platform draped in camouflage netting. I am soon under the metal roof, nearing the remotely-operated cage turnstile; the green light above it comes on immediately. I push through it and give my passport to an impassive female soldier in the central cubicle. She takes it off to a laptop computer. Meanwhile, I step through the metal detector and open my knapsack for inspection by a second soldier. Having nothing else to occupy him, another helmeted teenager steps into my path and takes exception to me. How long have I been in Nablus? Where are my bags, my suitcases? Don’t I know I shouldn’t come

here? I should go to Tel Aviv! To Eilat!

On the other side, I get halfway to the Palestinian taxis waiting in a crowded concrete pen when there is a shout from another soldier across the road. The shout becomes louder, impossible to ignore. I turn and weakly indicate that I have passed through the checkpoint, but he beckons with the conscious authority of an armed man. He is standing next to a concrete barrier on the other side of which stand his audience: half a dozen Jewish Orthodox boys, aged about fifteen or sixteen, possibly waiting for transport to Har Bracha, one of the settlements around Nablus. Under their curled peyot and broad black hats, they are like shuffling teenagers anywhere – venturing uncertain mockery, ill-timed guffaws. The soldier showing off to them is not much older and, now that I am here, seems less sure what to do. After going through a passport examination routine accompanied by a derisive joke in Hebrew, I am allowed to continue. As I cross the road, pleased with myself for having maintained an indifferent tone, there is a shout from behind me. It's one of the Arabic formulations of "goodbye". Sarcasm.

Or a test. In my first days in Nablus, as I dodged my way through a joint Hamas-Fatah march, a young boy looked up at me with a clever smile and said, "Shalom!" We've been told youngsters do this because Israelis are the only foreigners they are familiar with. It's not an explanation given much credence.

The *service* to Jericho races like an ant over a giant's landscape: bare, eroded mountains jostling together, rounded backs falling to vertical drops. In the dimples of the hills, we pass the black tents and corrugated iron roofs of Bedouin encampments. A herd of goats bounds across the road in front of us, confident of their right of way. Then the ear-popping descent into the sudden immense flatness of the Great Rift Valley, the earth's floor below us stretching away into the heat haze, the Dead Sea swept into white oblivion.

After passing the Israeli checkpoints, we are waved without fuss past the only Palestinian checkpoint I've seen in the Occupied Territories: Jericho is the only Oslo Area A part of the West Bank where the Israelis allow full Palestinian control. It is also the only part of the Jordan Valley where there is still any Palestinian presence to speak of. Most of the Palestinians in the rest of the valley have been driven out over the past 40 years; some of those who remain manage to do so by working as day labourers on the fertile land that was stolen from them by the Israeli army and then given to settlers.

I get out at Jericho's tourist centre, outside the town. A téléphérique runs from here, a point over 200 metres below sea level, up to a terminus near the Mount of Temptations monastery clinging to the cliff in the west, just 50 metres below sea

level. It should start running from 9am but it's late. I spend the time looking up at the cliff, imagining the distant sea somehow breaking into the rift: the dusty, bleached spot on which I stand changing to cold, inky depths; the stone monastery far above also submerged.

A tour bus from Ramallah arrives and disgorges women of every age, some of whom join me in the first cable car. An old woman in a black robe and scarf begins chatting happily to me in Arabic, unconcerned by my limited comprehension: her heart, her advanced age – she is terrified, she assures me. Younger members of the group smile, assist with translation, and ask polite questions. When the cabin finally starts to move, the old woman puts her hands firmly over her eyes as her companions shift around, peering out in all directions.

At the upper station is a restaurant with benches and tables on terraces offering a view over the oasis below. This is far as the Muslim women are going. I follow the steps around the cliff, leaving the restaurant's Arabic pop music behind.

The monastery's heavy metal door is closed. After a minute, I try the bell a second time. Finally, a stout face wearing a long grey beard looks over the parapet above, tired and disgruntled, wanting to know where am I from. Two minutes later, the door is opened and I follow apologetically as he climbs with arthritic effort up the steps inside. He refers repeatedly to the hardship of life's short span, and the inevitability of death. From time to time, he points upwards significantly.

"Ah, so this is what you want to know? How many of us are here?" he says, wearily resigned to the merely temporal curiosity of visitors. The number fluctuates, sometimes five, now only three. We pass a kitchen where I see one of the others: an old man who regards me with surprise, his clothes hanging loosely from a gaunt frame.

The monastery's hallway is the gap between the cliff face and the succession of rooms built on the ledge outside it. As we pass a cave narrowing to a shrine, birds flutter out past the rocky overhang into the sky. In the little wood-panelled chapel are various icons and paintings, old and new; on the other side of the chapel, steps lead up to another shrine at a depression in the rock: the place where Jesus is supposed to have put his foot when, after being tempted, he cast down the Devil.

North of Jericho is Hisham's Palace. After touring the archeological site, I walk curiously down to the nearby building where ancient mosaics are restored and new ones made. It's closed, this being Friday. However, a young man emerges from an adjacent doorway and offers to show me around inside anyway. His name is Nidal and he has qualifications in both art and archaeology.

Sitting outside afterwards, I ask Nidal why he's here on a Friday. He explains that he comes from a village in the vicinity of Tulkarm, next to the Wall; because of the checkpoints, he goes home only every third weekend. In normal circumstances, Nidal's journey home by road would take less than two hours. However, because of

the route he must take and the checkpoints he must pass through, it typically takes five hours. That is, all going well: with temporary, “flying” checkpoints in addition to permanent ones, there may be eight or nine checkpoints between Ramallah and his home. Once, he counted twelve.

After swelling early on, the numbers in my adult class at Darna have fallen off dramatically, possibly a reflection on my teaching abilities. Unlike my new class of electricians in town – for whom each lesson is a social event filled with jokes and ribbing – this one has been difficult to teach: though nominally intermediate, the students have ranged from one with English hardly better than my Arabic to a few who can speak quite well.

Today, only three young women turn up. Though we always get along well, the most outspoken one is suspicious of my political views. Noelle – a Christian – tells me that when she last tried to go to visit her ill mother, she was stopped at Huwwara checkpoint and refused passage; when she demanded an explanation, the soldier said he didn’t like the colour of her coat. This is no surprise: arbitrary refusals and humiliations are common. Noelle tells me, not for the first time, that the way the Israeli soldiers treat Westerners like me is completely different to how Palestinians like her are treated. Preferring to encourage them to talk, I don’t want to say too much; misinterpreting this, she launches into accusations beginning, “You think ...”

Despite my reluctance, Noelle succeeds in drawing me into a discussion. In the course of it, I ask if they know about the Israelis who participate in the protests against the Wall at Bil’in. They smile and shake their heads at my innocence: those are only a tiny minority. Then Tariq, one of the local volunteers, drops in.

“Michael, you know we’re not supposed to discuss politics in class!”

Annoyed at being caught out, I tell him that we’re all adults and we’re not observing that rule today. Helpfully, he changes the subject – to Saddam Hussein.

Later, Noelle says that in recent years the Israeli soldiers have gotten worse and that new immigrants to Israel are the most openly racist of these.

“And,” she avers, “the Irish and the Poles are the worst.”

Whatever their countries of origin, a survey for the Center Against Racism in Israel published later this month will confirm a steep rise in anti-Arab racism among Israeli Jews. However, when Noelle also tells me that Ariel Sharon was born in Ireland, I know that in this at least she’s mistaken.

It's a Thursday and extra classes are being held at An-Najah to make up for time lost when the university was closed during the Israeli incursion. Tariq has brought me in as a guest for his conversational English class. Their lecturer is a friendly, paternal figure who invites me to take over and exchange questions.

They want to know about Ireland, what people in Ireland think about Palestine, and how Palestinians are portrayed in the media there. Their questions on politics are lively and sometimes flattering. What are my thoughts about how Jerusalem should be governed? Why do I think there is a conflict? Why am I interested in Palestine? Why do I think it's more important than other conflicts, other injustices they know about? How do I think it can be solved? Then there is the question all find staggering: How can people in the West possibly take the side of Israel?

When I ask the students about their own hopes they don't express any: they see nothing in their future but an indefinite extension of the occupation. I think of some of the graffiti I have seen on the Wall at Qalqiliya – "Retournez la Terre aux PALESTINIENS"; "UNA PALESTINA LIBRE" – reflecting only now on how much of it was put there by foreigners rather than Palestinians. I try to say some positive things and find myself pronouncing banalities. Now that the occupation is 40 years old, how can they be blamed for their despair, let alone by someone from an outside world which has failed them.

A pair of Indian elephants have been held up at Huwwara checkpoint and prevented from entering Nablus. The elephants are part of an eco-tourism project, their transport from Bangladesh partly funded by the French government. There have been wild allegations by the Israeli army of the possibility of the elephants being used to smuggle explosives. After being kept in unsuitable conditions for two days now, the animals are reported to be in some distress. A demonstration is being organized and media crews are on their way; we must make "Free the Elephants" placards. VSF have been informed. Meaning *Vétérinaires Sans Frontières*. With deadpan delivery, Eric briefly manages to convince one of the girls in the apartment that it is true. After being recounted for a few days with serious but increasingly suspicious embellishments, the joke finally dies out.

My last days in Nablus are marked by thunderous downpours: a debt for the almost rain-free weather of the past month now repaid with interest. The road outside Darna turns into a river, the water racing down the steep hill with such force that it threatens to lap into my waterproof boots. Stranded in sneakers on the other side, Michael wants to know what he should do.

Then my last morning. After the party last night, I passed my Project Hope vest on to Ryan, the new volunteer, after demonstrating its bullet-proof properties with some spent cartridges picked from the city's streets. Now I step out into the grey drizzle, stop an empty taxi, and drop my heavy bag onto the back seat.

"Huwwara," I say. On dubious grounds, the driver plans to charge me an extra five shekels. An argument ensues but I am not in the mood to sustain it. His victory puts him in good humour. He looks to be in his early twenties. He wants to know where I come from, where I am going now. Then he tells me he wants to leave Nablus. Thinking of other things, I say something trivial. He becomes animated, trying to make me understand: he doesn't care, he wants to leave, to go anywhere. He lives, it seems, in one of the camps. The Israeli soldiers keep coming, he says. The children are terrified of them, every night they wet the bed.

English is difficult for him but he is struggling hard to make himself understood, filling in with Arabic words and gestures. What he tells me next is the kind of incident I have often heard and read about. But all I know are words.

Seven years ago, he and a younger friend heard the shout of an Israeli soldier. He stood still; his thirteen-year-old friend, for no reason but blind fear, ran. The soldier shot the boy dead.

The driver describes how, after being forced to the ground, he pleaded in disbelief: "Why did you shoot him? He did nothing to you!"

The reply was the butt of a rifle between his shoulderblades and the words, "I want to kill all Palestinians."

We have stopped at the usual distance from Huwwara checkpoint. The driver seems to be reliving that day: seeing not the checkpoint ahead of us but the soldier who shot his friend. He is leaning forward, palms upward in supplication, seeking some explanation, some meaning; grasping only air. He talks about Allah, tells me twice he doesn't want to kill anyone, not even soldiers. He doesn't want to be like that soldier, he doesn't hate the Israelis, there are good Israelis – women, doctors.

"But this man," he says, "this man – I don't want to kill anyone – but this man, I pray to Allah, for Allah to take his life."

His eyes are moist with tears. Suddenly spent and limp, he stops talking.

We sit in silence for a while. Then, not knowing what else to do, I shoulder my bag and start crossing the empty space to the checkpoint. The sky is like lead. Behind me, the taxi reverses into grit and pulls away.