

Dream Parasite

The boy smeared black on his shirt. His fingers still felt sticky. It wasn't coming off.

Look at what you've done, his mother smiled. You made your shirt all dirty.

The boy whispered an apology and held up his painting. The falling sun brightened the jagged shapes. It wasn't done, but it was close. Jackets rustled behind him. The scent of dying leaves drifted in as the teacher opened the door. School was over. He needed to finish.

The boy focused on the image. It was supposed to be an inverted dagger. But he couldn't remember the exact shape.

It wasn't always a dagger, his mother said. It was the land of olive trees. Olive trees can live for thousands of years. They're sturdy.

The boy remembered it was held between a river and the sea. He quickly slid his paintbrush into the blue and began colouring the bodies of water.

Sky blue — my favourite. The colour of the heavens.

It's for the water, the boy replied.

The teacher began calling names while the children cackled behind him. One by one, their voices dwindled. Soon it was just the boy and his mother.

A hand gently patted the boy's shoulder. "Wow, what a beautiful painting," the teacher said. "Get your coat, c'mon. Your father's waiting for you."

The boy saw his father. His broad shoulders filled the entrance, blocking the sun. He recognised the gloom in his father's eyes. It was the gloom from this morning; the kind even the shade cannot hide.

The boy fetched his coat and school bag while the teacher exchanged words with the father.

“...very distracted...I know...doesn't smile...we're getting by...is there anything else?”

Don't forget to finish the story, the mother said.

The boy quickly turned and grabbed the paper.

“Look at your son's beautiful painting,” the teacher said and pressed her hands to her chest. “It's a wonder what gems children create. Do you want to tell us what it is, dear?”

It's a dream, said the mother.

“It's a place,” said the boy. As soon as the father laid his eyes on the gentle shapes and roaring colours, his face melted. The boy felt his spirit shift. The large man looked at the boy and quickly raised his brow. The boy was unsure what that meant.

“What place?” asked the teacher.

He didn't want to go. He was hurt before, said the mother.

“Mama called it the land of olives and dates,” the boy said with a glow. “She loved olives and dates. She only bought olives and dates from there.”

The teacher took a closer look. Her eyes scanned the painting as she smiled.

Then, suddenly, her mouth made a circle. The sparkle in her gaze disappeared.

“Oh,” she said.

She straightened and glanced at the father, raising an eyebrow. The large man lowered his head and shuffled his feet.

We could go one day, said the mother.

“She never visited. She wanted to,” said the boy. His chest felt heavy, and a gentle stream rolled inside his eye sockets. The boy held it back. He was afraid to spill all over the floor.

“Really? Are you Palestinians?” the teacher asked the father.

It's the home we never saw, said the mother.

"No, we're not," replied the father. The words grazed his throat. "I'm not sure why Palestine's on his mind. It was his mother's wish—the boy never spoke of it before. Thank you, we'll be leaving now."

"That's completely understandable," said the teacher, her grin fading. "Children will remember all sorts of remarkable things. Have a wonder—"

He said it'll never be safe enough, said the mother.

"She was scared," said the boy. "I'm scared too. But look, I made it safe for us. See?" The boy held up his painting. He pointed at the green and the blues.

Green like olive trees, flattened on the ground, said the mother.

"That's nice," said the father. He grabbed the boy by the shoulder and turned towards the sidewalk.

"What do you mean by safe?" asked the teacher from behind.

"It's OK," replied the father. "The boy's just grieving."

"It might be important to hear what he has to say. Getting a better picture of his preoccupations might help us help him better."

A person who hits to steal will hit to keep what they've stolen, said the mother.

"Mama said it was taken. She said the people who took it never wanted to share." The boy looked up with a glimmer in his eyes. His chest lightened as he spoke. He wished he could talk about his mother forever. "I gave it all back to her. See?" His small finger traced the edges of the shape. "It's all back as one."

"As in, for your mother?" asked the teacher. "Or for everyone?"

There is only one. It can be one. We can be one, replied the mother.

"For Mama. So that she's safe."

The boy was suddenly floating, his body gliding behind his father like a kite.

“Thank you!” his father shouted with his hand raised as he walked. The teacher replied but the boy couldn’t understand. He turned to catch a glimpse of her while a force, heavy and determined, pulled him forward. The teacher’s gentle smile had all but disappeared.

The father walked his son around the corner then stopped. The boy’s heart fell in tandem with his father’s sudden descent. The big man brought his face close; *oud* overwhelmed the boy’s perceptions. He felt his shoulders squeeze together.

“You can never speak of this here. Do you understand?” the father whispered with a gentle fury.

You can always dream, said the mother.

“I just wanted to draw what Mama—”

“Do you understand?” said the father. He was squeezing more tightly now.

“It’s just that Mama—”

“Do you understand!?” said the father, squeezing even harder. The boy couldn’t hold back. It wasn’t because his shoulders hurt. It was his heart. His heart felt too big in his tiny chest.

You can always dream, said the mother.

The boy’s mind disappeared in a whirlwind of grey and black. He didn’t know how to stop it. He didn’t know where he was. He only knew one thing for certain, alone in the dark.

“I’m scared,” said the boy.

Then, like a curtain, darkness fell. The boy could hear the voices of children and birds and cars. Balls of red and yellow refracted in his eyelids. His realised his head was pressed tightly against his father’s neck.

“I want you to always remember one thing,” said the voice beneath his face. The father held his son’s head inside his giant hands. “The safest place

in the world for you will always be the space between my shoulder and chin.
OK?

The boy's felt his chest open, making space for his heart. The woody scent of his father's beard returned, as did the chirping of birds and the blueness of the sky. The boy could breathe.

Two shadows approached the father.

"Excuse me?"

It was the teacher. A stranger stood by her side. The boy had never seen the man before. He squeezed his father's hand and the father, whose hand sheltered his son's, squeezed back.

"I was discussing the painting with my colleague. We want to speak to you about your son's Palestine."

"Hi," said the stranger, raising his hand. The stranger shook the father's hand, then crouched to the eye-level of the boy. "Nice to meet you, young man. I heard you're an amazing painter. May I see it?"

The boy hesitated. The stranger's presence was unsettling. He didn't want to give the painting away—it was his mother's. Darkness bled into the corners of his vision. The father squeezed his hand and the darkness pulled away.

The boy gave the man his mother's Palestine.

"It's very well painted," said the stranger. He smiled as he searched the picture, as if studying it for secrets. The boy did not feel the kindness that usually accompanied smiles. His was the kind of smile the boy practiced in front of a mirror.

"Is there a problem?" asked the father.

"This is not that big of an issue," said the man, still holding the painting. "It seems your son painted a Palestine that, in fact, takes *all* the land there. Children paint the silliest things. We know Palestine is an important subject

for families of your background. We were just wondering, is this something you often discuss at home?"

Never be afraid to dream, said the mother.

Before the father could answer, the boy spoke.

"My Mama said she always wanted to go. But she wasn't going to be safe. People came and took it away. They didn't want to share. I had a dream it belonged to people who shared. People like Mama. Now Mama can go one day."

The father gazed at the stranger with great intent. The stranger couldn't seem to return it. He turned to the teacher instead.

"The mother?" he asked her.

Our story isn't finished, said the mother.

"She died," replied the boy.

"I see. I'm sorry to hear this." The stranger adjusted the collar of his meticulously ironed shirt. He tilted his head in all directions before turning back to the father. "I must say, it's a little disconcerting to hear your son's description of the area. I'm afraid I'm going to have to report this."

"You're reporting him? For a painting?" asked the father asked, his voice cracking.

"I'm afraid we must. You'll hear from us again. In the meantime, I have to take the picture. I'm sorry. You'll hear from us."

The stranger and the teacher walked away, leaving the father without an explanation and the boy without his dream.

The loss of the painting broke the boy's heart. His face felt full as they walked home beneath silver clouds that gathered to block what remained of the sun.

But then he realised: he can just paint it again. He squeezed his father's hand and the big man squeezed back.

*Finish the story, the mother said, walking alongside him.
Then it'll be ready when we meet again.*