Checklist

Bana Aassy

Sawsan walks along HaNassi Avenue, quick and determined in the jungle that is the city of Haifa at midday. In its own way, this is new. The sky, the trees, and the color of the concrete main road are so saturated compared to the nighttime setting Sawsan is more used to. She'd always leave work after her coworkers, taking advantage of the quiet stillness that the museum had to offer before taking a bus to her small apartment. The *dirah*, as she's gotten used to calling it, adopting the Hebrew word. She can't call it home yet, despite living in the city for almost two years now.

It's only when her body responds with headaches and bad mood swings that Sawsan neglects her coffee and sandwich-fueled meals for actual home cooking. She craves mujaddara. Her body is already bracing itself for the spices, the softly cooked lentils, and the fresh, vegetable-heavy salad rich in olive oil and lemon juice. Home or not, she still has to cook meals from time to time. And this time she miscalculated, staying in the city without getting her groceries from her trusted vendors at the farmer's market in her hometown. And it's too late to catch a bus to go outside the city on *Shabbat*.

The air conditioner slaps her skin at the entrance, evaporating the dampness too quickly for her body to handle. "*Sogrim ʿod khatzi shaʾa!*" A man yells out at one of the cash registers. Sawsan checks the time on her phone. Half an hour, that's forty minutes, tops. She lifts her hand to him in acknowledgment. It'll be short, just a few things, and she can get back to the apartment. Sawsan takes a basket, her eyes constantly avoiding the blue-and-white color combination and the new addition of yellow ribbons, from bake sales to insurance ads. Everything smells of plastic and the faint

chemical smell of cheap soap.

She walks past shelves and aisles, passing dozens of brands for every one product. One, two, three, four kinds of pasta, canned tuna, canned corn, pickles, tahini that doesn't have any Arabic written on it, chocolate, sour candy, chips, pretzels, rice.

The rice makes her pause.

It comes to her in a flash. An image of a little boy. No, not an image. A video. A little boy in the scorching heat, in tattered clothes, drops a pot of soup on a dirt road. No, he *has* dropped it, and now he's crying in a pleading Gazan Arabic dialect.

She takes a deep breath and continues down the aisle.

The bulgur is nowhere to be found. Her eyes scout for anyone in uniform. A woman in a navy-blue shirt in the next aisle is sticking price tags on air fresheners. "*Slikha*," Sawsan approaches, the change in her accent instinctive. The name tag on the woman's shirt reads *Rooti*. Next to it is a yellow ribbon pin. "Where can I find the *burgool*?"

"What?" Rooti winces. Sawsan repeats. "Ah, the *booghgool*. We don't have any." Her voice is a droning monotone. She turns back to her task, leaving Sawsan to doubt whether the small exchange ever happened.

Disappointment heavies her step as she returns to the rice section. *It's not that bad*, she consoles herself. *Well, the Lebanese make it with rice*, she thinks. *But we're not Lebanese, we're Palestinian*. And it's not the same. Sawsan bounces the sealed rice bag in her hand.

The little boy wouldn't have complained. Neither would his mother, father, grandmother, nor grandfather. Whoever remains alive. She can see their eyes, deep brown like hers, vast, always wet at the edges. She can see their hollowed cheeks, glistening with sweat, tanned from lack of shelter rather than a fun day at the beach. What a stupid thing to do, to worry about preferences

when she can so easily imagine little ribcages protruding through thin skin.

The bag of rice drops into the basket. Momentarily, its weight brings her down with it, and she holds the shelf with one hand. A kind of paralysis spreads from her toes, throughout her body, to her fingertips. Her stomach tickles, then goes numb, and instantly, Sawsan loses her appetite. Is this shame, or rage?

Her heart beats rapidly in her throat. The yellow ribbons mock her, everywhere, all the time. Her knees tremble. Her breaths are shallow. Her ears are hot. Her heart is still pounding. *Rage*, the word echoes in her mind. Rage that boils and threatens to burst at any moment whenever—

A little girl screams.

Sawsan shudders and immediately follows the sound. A woman with a head covering drags a crying little girl next to her. She yells that her little girl can't have any grape juice. Their long skirts and long-sleeved shirts match in design. "*Ima, ima...*" the little girl calls out through wet eyes and red cheeks. Sawsan's heart throbs. She's willing to buy the juice herself if it means a child stops crying. As she hears the mother marching on outside the supermarket with a full bag already in hand, Sawsan stares blankly and convinces herself that, surely, it's for the daughter's own good. Surely, not satisfying your sweet tooth isn't the end of the world. It's not the same. Unlike a little boy dropping the only meal he's acquired for weeks. Sawsan shivers.

The items run in her head like a checklist. Further into the supermarket, right next to the fridges, the fruit and vegetables are boxed together in crates. No more tomatoes. No more white onions, only green. Very few bell peppers, green more than yellow, no more red. Cucumbers that don't look particularly fresh. A few small heads of cabbage. Lettuce browned at the edges. Bouquets of parsley speckled with yellow across the tips. Some apples. Some

oranges, cartoonishly orange. The smell is pungent, like something beginning to rot at low temperatures. No citrus tang from the lemons or the oranges. No sharp scent of soil.

Sawsan's feet drag her closer, heavier still, and she inspects her options. That's the traditional Arabic salad out of the question, too. She toys with a cabbage head, wrapped in plastic. She can chop it thin, with cucumbers and green onions. But with lentils and rice? It's not the same. It's just not the same.

The white sticker pops against the fruit's dense color. The distributor's name is written in Hebrew, in black font, with a wavy Israeli flag sweeping through like a ribbon. The stamp glares at her like a declaration of ownership, jabbing at her like a needle in the brain. All the slogans that have been surrounding Sawsan every minute for the past two years rush back. She can't keep ignoring them anymore.

Sawsan stands in front of the courgette crate. The vegetables are small and pale, the bottom of the pile, in what begins to look like an open prison cell. There's a paper label wrapped around every crate: *Totzeret haaretz.* She measures the words, how they sound, and what they are meant to mean. *Homegrown*. It continues, *honoring the unbroken thousands-year tradition of Israeli farming*. The chuckle that leaves her lips is lifeless.

Haaretz. Al-bilad. She swims in the rhythm of the Arabic equivalent as if she were in lake water. It invokes the warmth of home. Fields and orchards she never got to see. Fields and orchards long burned and replanted with metal and concrete. Her grandfather's stories of running among the trees, guarded in the shade as he played with his neighborhood friends. His stories of the soil that offered in abundance, of courgettes plump and rich in color and taste, and of the ever-cooling sea breeze.

Now, Sawsan stands over the produce, and it feels like a death sentence. It's not the same. The shriveled items stare back from

their crates under an air conditioner that's too cold, like babies plucked out too soon now fighting for their lives in incubators.

The little boy returns, in the same tattered clothes: quiet, still. He stands next to her as if they were honoring the dead together. She imagines his eyes piercing through her, judging, perhaps, pleading. *So, this is how it starts.* Sawsan registers the apparition as if he were real. *Are you punishing me?* she thinks. *For my silence? For eating? For being alive?* The little boy only stands in silence, a mirror reflecting her own guilt back at her.

The basket drops to the floor. There is a growing stink engulfing her. She takes a deep breath through her mouth that quivers as it leaves her lips, shaking her insides. Her stomach pumps acid rather than gurgle out of emptiness. Her entire body aches to move, to leave, to taste real food. Out of sheer politeness alone, she picks her basket up again and returns every item to where it came from.

Sawsan walks out to the hot and damp Middle Eastern afternoon, unchanged and just as loud as when she'd entered the supermarket. The buildings overpower the trees, and the concrete roads are enough to forget this was once a mountain. The breath she's taking is not enough.