

Where home is

by Chris Rose

Fouad sits in the café that looks out over Jaffa Street listening to the sad, sad music playing on an old tape recorder. "Oum Khalsoum", says one of the other men sitting in the café to nobody in particular. "This is Oum Khalsoum singing".

Fouad takes another sip of sweet mint tea and nods in agreement without saying anything. Fouad's uncle lives in Egypt, and every time Fouad visits him, he tells Fouad the story of how he saw the legendary singer at one of her concerts in Cairo in 1970, not long before she died. The song seems to go on forever, and it's very sad. Fouad thinks it's beautiful, but he doesn't want to hear it now. It's too sad for him. It makes him think of his uncle in Egypt who he hasn't seen for many years now, and also about the reason why his uncle lives in Egypt while his aunt lived in Lebanon and why he, on the other hand, lives in Jordan, and why he is in Jerusalem now.

Fouad's father had died a few months ago. After that, Fouad found that there were so many things that he had wanted to ask his father, but had never asked. He realised that he knew very little about his own family, and decided to try and find out more about the place where his father had grown up, and where his grandparents (who had died when he was very young) were from.

He has now spent a couple of days wandering around Jerusalem with an old, torn photograph in his hand. The photograph shows the whole family, his grandparents standing proudly at the centre of a group of four children in front of a house on a busy street. Next to the house there seems to be a garden with what look like cedar or olive trees in it.

Fouad, though, can't find anywhere in this modern Jerusalem that looks much like the street or the house where the photograph was taken. He feels sadder than the sad song playing in the café, thinking now that he might never find the place where his father had been born and the place where his grandparents had lived until they moved away in 1947.

At first they had gone to Lebanon, then to Jordan and finally to Egypt, always staying with some distant relatives or old friends, trying to find work and a place to live. They left parts of their family, sons, daughters, cousins, uncles and aunts all over the Middle East. Some of them went to France or Britain or America. None of them ever lived in same place for long, never being able to find a home.

Oum Khalsoum keeps on singing her sad, sad song, and Fouad decides to head back home over the bridge into Jordan, hoping the checkpoint hasn't been closed. He pays a few shekels then goes out onto the street.

As he walks out he accidentally bumps into a young man about his own age hurrying in the opposite direction. They look at each other in the eyes for just one second as they both apologise, then walk on, in different directions along the street.

Yossi is in a hurry because he has to get to Tel Aviv to catch a plane. He thinks he'll probably take a taxi as it's the quickest and easiest way, and nobody really likes travelling by bus at the moment. He's going to Poland to visit to his great aunt who has just moved back to Warsaw at the age of 93. His great aunt has spent most of her life in America, but said that she wanted to come back to the place where she was born before the end of her life. Yossi thinks she's a silly, sentimental old woman. Surely she's much better off in America than in Poland! However, he understands her need to find her home again. Yossi's great aunt was one of the lucky ones in his family. His grandparents, too, had been lucky - in a way. They had stayed in Poland, and were still alive in 1945. Many other people in their family hadn't survived. After that, they moved to Israel, and had never been back to Poland again. "This is our home now" they said to Yossi.

As he finally gets on the plane, Yossi thinks about his friend Agnieszka who he had met in Poland the last time he had been there. He went to see the small village near Krakow where his grandparents had been brought up, and to see the small Jewish Quarter in the old part of Krakow. He thought it was very beautiful, but was amazed at how different it was from his life in Israel. He found it difficult to imagine how different his grandparents' lives had been from his own.

He had been hoping to meet up with Agnieszka again, but unfortunately he had received an email from her a couple of months ago. Agnieszka was leaving Poland. In the small town where they were from it was too difficult to get a job, she said. She had managed to get a visa to stay in Britain.

After she had arrived in London, she had written another email to Yossi. "I feel like a refugee" she said. She had found a job working in a café in Finsbury Park in north London, she said. It wasn't the job she really wanted to do, but it was OK while she studied English and looked for something better. Yossi remembered the name of the café, which was run by Turkish people: "The Oum Khalsoum".

Fouad is walking back over the bridge to a land which is where he lives but which he doesn't feel is his home. Yossi is on a plane going from one home to another, more distant, home. Agnieszka is in London, feeling homesick, thinking about making a new home in a country she knows will never be hers, in a place where nobody seems to be at home.

She cleans another table and looks at the people who come into her café: from Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Zimbabwe, Bosnia, Iran, Iraq, Congo, Sri Lanka, people who have looked for refuge from famine, oppression and poverty from all over the world. They spend time listening to Oum Khalsoum singing sad, sad songs and wondering if they will ever go home, and wondering where home is, and thinking that they could all sing songs that are even sadder than those of Oum Khalsoum.

THE END

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