

## 1: The Scout

A young man in a new suit crossed a street with a real passport and a fake name. This was in the first month of 1948, the rainy season in Haifa—Mount Carmel rising behind the port in one shade of green, the Mediterranean stretching off in another, the sky low and gray above them both. The man carried a suitcase and moved with intent. His flight left shortly. His dress and manner suggested he wasn't a worker, but was no professor either, perhaps the son of a shopkeeper in an Arab city, which indeed he was. He was calling himself Yussef, so let's call him that for now.

The young man tried to look purposeful, but his composure was a bluff, like his name. He needed to pick up a ticket and get to the small airport outside town, that was all, but he knew he might not make it. The war was barely six weeks old, but the distance between alive and dead had already become negligible—the length of an incorrect verb, an inconsistent reply to a sharp question. Or it could be a detail of dress—a villager wearing shoes better suited to a clerk, for example, or a worker whose shirt was too clean. There was a new and hazardous electricity on the street, a fear of spies and saboteurs. On the walls that Yussef passed were posters put up by the Arab National Council that began like this:

To the noble Arab public:  
Beware the fifth column!

Another read:

Noble Arabs!

The National Council is sparing no effort to fulfill its obligations to you, and understands the size of the responsibility it carries on the road to saving the homeland and liberating it from all enemies.

In the archives there's a photograph of Yussef that will help us imagine the scene:



Haifa was the main port of British Palestine, half-Jewish and half-Arab and less a coherent whole than a collection of neighborhoods beginning at the docks and climbing up the Carmel slopes, linked by winding roads and stone staircases—Arabs by the water, Jews up the hill. Unlike Jerusalem, which drew most attention and sentiment, Haifa wasn't a city of disputed holy sites but a practical place with a refinery, warehouses, and the hustlers and furtive activities usually found around ports. You heard not only Hebrew, English, and dialects of Arabic but Greek, Turkish, Yiddish, and Russian. The Union Jack still flew over the docks, as it had since the British conquest three decades before. But now everything was breaking down.

As Yussef walked toward the travel agent's shop to collect his ticket out of Haifa and out of the country, the normal bustle was subdued, the Arab streets bleary and tense. There had been sniping all night along the new barbed-wire line dividing the Jewish and Arab sectors, and people were frightened. The preceding weeks had seen a bloody operation by Jewish fighters in a nearby neighborhood of Arab refinery workers, a reprisal for the killing of Jewish refinery workers by their Arab coworkers, triggered by a Jewish bombing at an Arab bus stop outside the refinery, a reprisal for—you could be forgiven for losing track. There had always been free movement between different neighborhoods in Haifa, but now you couldn't be caught on the wrong side of the line.

Looking at these events from our own times, we understand that these are the early weeks of a conflict that will come to be known as Israel's Independence War, or the 1948 war, and that the Arabs will call "the catastrophe." In early 1947 the British had announced their impending withdrawal from Palestine, their energies and coffers sapped by the world war that had just ended,

their willpower broken by the impossibility of governing two peoples hostile to Britain and to each other. In a dramatic vote in New York at the end of that year, on November 29, the United Nations resolved that after the British Mandate for Palestine ended the following summer, the country should be partitioned into two states, one for Jews and one for Arabs. The Jews had rejoiced like drowning people thrown a plank, the Arab world responded with the fury of a civilization dealt one humiliation too many, and the morning after the vote the war began.

It might seem that events are flowing inevitably toward the history we've learned and the present that is familiar to us, but on the day Yussef appeared in Haifa in the middle of January 1948, nothing was inevitable, and no one knew anything yet. There was no state called Israel, nor did it seem likely there would be one. The United Nations had no way to enforce the partition plan. British soldiers and police were still in evidence on the streets, and the Royal Navy blockade in the Mediterranean was still keeping out weapons and Jewish refugees to placate the Arab public. But British power was fading as the pullout approached, and it was replaced by a civil war between Jews and Arabs. There had been waves of violence before, but this time the decisive collision had arrived. The result would be a catastrophe—that seemed clear. But it wasn't yet clear for whom.

I have been to Haifa many times, and have walked around the old neighborhoods trying to summon the life of the place as Yussef would have seen it. The Great Mosque, which once drew masses to the carpeted room beneath its Ottoman clock tower, huddles by a vast new tower of curved and gleaming glass. The graceful stone buildings are outdone by the giant cranes of the modern port. The streets where Yussef walked are still there, and still lively, but now they have different names.