**Choctalking on Other Realities** ©

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**T**here is only one pigeon left in Jerusalem. It could be the weather. Perhaps his more clever relatives took refuge in the cities by the Red Sea where the climate is better. Jerusalem occupies a high plateau in Israel/Palestine. In January 1992, record snows have fallen here. Outside our hotel, ice-covered oranges weigh the trees down like leaded Christmas ornaments.

I’ve come to Israel as an academic tourist on a university-sponsored tour. We’re told that with few natural advantages and no indigenous raw materials, apart from stone, the economy of Jerusalem has always been supported from the outside. They’re entirely dependent on peace. If that’s true, we want to know why Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Jerusalem have adopted the stance of a “mobilized society.” Perhaps it’s their heritage. Each of these religious groups has always made great sacrifices to change the status quo. Recall the Jews taking Canaan and greater Israel; the Christians capturing the Roman Empire and the New World; and the Muslims seizing Arabia, Asia and Africa. The wars of heaven.

I leave the National Palace Hotel in east Jerusalem and meander down a narrow street. The pigeon comes and goes. He sails above my head. I pass a park where the benches are vacant and gray. As the afternoon light creeps behind another ragged wall of snow clouds I stop. The bird lands just beyond my reach, and I throw him the remains of my falafel sandwich. A late breakfast. We eye each other until he draws his head back as if his attention is fixed in the distance on something no one else sees. Eventually I see it too. A group of women march toward us chanting slogans in Arabic and the sky cracks open and the pigeon flies away.

They’re Palestinians. Seven women. Their arms are linked together in solidarity like a chain of paper dolls. I don’t understand what they are saying but I can guess. They want to change the status quo.

I follow the procession. After all this is what I’ve come for. To see who is doing what to whom. Like peeping toms or UN observers, we academics do very little except tell each other what we’ve seen. Always in dead earnest.

Soon tourists come out of the shops to see what all the ruckus is about. The women encourage us to join their protest. In a few minutes two blue and white truckloads of soldiers arrive carrying white clubs and tear gas launchers. The women stay together as long as they can until they are broken apart by the soldiers. Many of the tourists become frantic. They run into the soldiers or away from them. People scramble in all directions.

One woman breaks away from the others and runs in the direction of the American Colony Hotel. For some unexplainable reason I run after her.

Suddenly she’s behind me. I know her by the sound of her feet running. I run faster across the dirt playground. If she catches me I’ll never escape. I hear her panting loudly. Her weight and large frame knocks me down. I can’t breath. Her blonde face blushes red as she yanks me up by my arms.

I twist out of her grasp and run toward a fence made of chicken wire. Beyond it is the WA-HE Cafe in Bethany, Oklahoma. Indians are inside drinking coffee and gossiping about the weather. If I make it to the WA-He they’ll protect me. But she tackles me again. Hammers my head with her elbow. Sweat pours out of her body and wets my face. I gag trying not to swallow. A second white teacher comes to her aid. Together they carry me toward a small building, the kindergarten school connected to their church. They open the broom closet and shove me inside. The door slams shut.

I am still running.

**This Is The Story I Really Wanted To Tell**

It was so hot in the kitchen of the Oklahoma City airport cafe that the plastic clock melted. Time oozed down the wall just like Salvador Dali imagined. The metal pieces of the flimsy clock went, “clink, clank, ting” as they hit the floor. That’s because the steaks were burning, the beans were boiling, and Nina the Ukrainian, had pulled a butcher knife on Gretchen the German. There is a war going on. I am in uniform. But I race ahead of myself. This story begins in 1970.

First there are the characters.

Gretchen the German. A Catholic. The blonde cook with the white hairnet pulled down over her ears like a helmet. A Berliner, she escaped Nazi Germany during World War II to come to America and cook wiener schnitzels. That’s what she tells all the customers at the airport cafe.

Susan B. Anthony. The black, six-foot-tall-night-cook-in-charge, Susan B. likes the blues. Speaks choicest Gullah. Cooks like snapping fingers in time. Her great-great-grandmother was a slave. Every night at the airport cafe she says, “Honey, don’t mess with me.” And I don’t.

Nina. A Russian Jew from the Ukraine, she wears a white cotton uniform with socks held up by rubber bands. Nina’s thumb is tattooed and causes people to stare impolitely. She says she escaped the massacre at Babi Yar. Each night she chisels perfect heads of lettuce into identical salads and weighs each portion. She is quite insane.

And me. An Oklahoma Choctaw. The waitress in the yellow uniform at the airport cafe. I’m a union steward for the International Brotherhood of Hotel, Motel, and Restaurant Workers of America; I’m nineteen years old and have been baptized many times. The Southern Baptists, the Nazarenes, even the Mormons got to me. Finally, I’ve given up being a religious consumer to become a socialist. The AFL-CIO is going to send me to college.

**The Scene.**

The airport cafe. Feeding time. The fall of 1970. Nightshift comes through the looking glass walls of the airport cafe. Braniff and United Airlines roar out of sight to exotic places. Somewhere a radio blasts Leon Russell’s singing, “ *. . . Here comes Uncle Sam again with the same old bag of beans. Local chiefs on the radio, we got some hungry mouths to feed, goin’ back to Alcatraz*.”

At 6:30 p.m, one hundred Vietnam draftees drag into the Oklahoma City airport cafe. Afros, pork-chop sideburns, crew cuts,

Indian braids. After two years, hairless pimpled faces all look alike. Some smell bad. Some have beautiful teeth.

It’s not news at the airport cafe that the Vietnam War is being fought disproportionately by the poor. Every Monday through Friday we serve red and yellow, black, and poor white boys their last supper as civilians. They’re on their way to boot camp. They clutch their government orders and puke-belch to themselves. Their hands shake. My hands are steady. I want to tell them to run. But don’t.

*“No one gets hurt if they do what they’re told,” whispered the white teacher through the door of the broom closet. “Would you like to come out now?”*

“Curious,” booms a voice across the airport cafe’s dining room. Some of the draftees look toward the kitchen, others continue eating as if they’d heard nothing.

The voice gathers strength and explodes.  “There were no survivors of Babi Yar,” roars Gretchen. I rush through the kitchen door. The steaks are burning, and the

beans are boiling over the fire, and Gretchen is scrutinizing Nina in front of the gas grill.

“Your story is certainly unfamiliar to me. You probably branded your own thumb so people won’t accuse you. Very clever.”

Nina’s eyes make a circle of the kitchen. She examines her work; the stainless steel bins of freshly washed lettuce, tomatoes, radish flowers, onions, carrots, and watermelon balls. All are arranged, lined up in neat rows at her workstation. “I do what I am told,” she says pushing her head against the walk-in freezer. “The sins of my occupation.”

“What a wreck you are. Always building a pile of shadows,” says Gretchen grabbing a slice of onion.

Nina’s mouth is set in a fold of bitterness. “I know Babi Yar. It’s a ravine near Kiev where the Germans murdered 35,000 Jews in September 1941. By 1943, it had become a mass grave for more than 100,000 Jews.” She looks at something beyond us then screams. “I was there!”

“Yes, but what did you do?”

Nina charges Gretchen with a butcher knife in one hand, and a watermelon scoop in the other. Gretchen holds a small toaster oven in front of her like a shield. Together they dance around the room like a couple of marionettes being pulled by the fingers of God.

Eventually Susan B. Anthony interrupts the madness and Gretchen shouts, “schweig, du Neger!”

This is where I come in. I intercede like a good union steward should. Susan B. Anthony holds a hot pan of grease and is set to attack them both. The World War II survivors are screaming in languages I can’t understand and pointing their weapons. They all scare the hell out of me because I’m unarmed.

1970 is a terrible year to be a teenage Indian in Oklahoma City. Vietnam is on television, nightly. World War II is still going on in the kitchen of the airport cafe, and I’m losing my classmates to mortar fire in Asia. Emmet Tahbone is dead. Blown away, literally. Richard Warrior is MIA, and George Billy has a shrapnel mouth.

This past week there were sit-ins at a downtown department store where blacks are still being refused services at the lunch counter. For almost ten months American Indians have occupied the abandoned prison on Alcatraz Island. The word on the streets of Oklahoma City is that we’re fed up with colonialism. American Indians are finally going to change the status quo. Standing in the middle of the kitchen with my palms turned upward, a sign that I carry no weapons, I squint like a mourner who draws the curtains against the light. I feel powerless to change anything.

I look out the window and a moonbeam is crisscrossing a watery plain. It’s the Pearl River with its saw grass islands and Cypress knees rising out of the water like hands in prayer to Hashtali, whose eye is the Sun. This light once cut clear across the heavens and down to the Choctaw’s ancient mother mound, the Nanih Waiya in the Lower Mississippi Valley. Now it’s no longer visible except on special occasions.

I see a Choctaw woman, her daughter, and their relatives. They’re being attacked by a swarm of warriors from another tribe. Unfortunately bad weather has driven them into a little bayou.

They’re exposed from head to foot to their enemies, the Cherokees, who’ve been following them for days. The Choctaw woman shows her daughter how to be brave. Several times she runs and cuts the powder horns loose from her dead relatives in order to distribute them among the living. Finally the seven warriors, and the mother and daughter, seeing that they can no longer hold their ground rush head long upon their enemies.

A feminine voice interrupts my vision. “*No one gets hurt if they do what they’re told*.” I shake my head trying to drive it out of me. “*We fly daily non-stop flights to locations across America, Europe, and Asia*,” continues the recorded message on the airport’s loudspeaker.

I turn back to my co-workers who are drowning in a pool of tears. “No one will get hurt if we do what we’re supposed to do,” I say meekly. For a moment no one moves. Then they begin struggling with their kitchen utensils. Suddenly Nina is composed, Gretchen too, both of them square their shoulders the way soldiers do when called to attention. They promise it will never happen again, but no one believes them.

At midnight the lines on my face have melted like the clock in Salvador Dali’s painting. I resemble a sad clown. When Susan B. Anthony and I walk outside to share a smoke we eye one other wearily.

“What happened?” I ask quietly. “God knows,” she says lighting a cigarette. Together we watch as the lights of a crayon-colored Braniff jet leave a trail of stale dead air, and I think I’ll buy a mask and become someone else. The AFL-CIO can’t save me now.

**Choctalking On Other Realities**

I did become someone else. A mother, a teacher, a writer, a wife. When the opportunity came to visit Israel in 1992, I signed up for the two-week trip at the behest of my husband, a geographer and co-leader of the study tour. We are going to Jerusalem to learn about the affects of the Intifada on the region and its peoples. At first, I was hesitant. The very word Jerusalem connotes religion. Three of them: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, birthed in that order. They all look the same to me. They share one God known as Yahweh, Allah, or Jesus. They honor the same prophets. They share many of the same books. Their holidays center around religious and cultural victories over each other. Kind of like Americans celebrating Thanksgiving. Holidays are the masks of conquerors.

But wouldn’t you know it. On my first day in Jerusalem I met a Jewish woman who said her great-grandmother was a Cherokee. She tells me it is a long story — how one side of her family immigrated to America, then re-immigrated to Israel after 1948. I stand motionless and look at the woman across the glass counter of her gift shop. Listen skeptically to the ragged tenderness of her story. The weary but elusive Indian ancestry, the fawning desire to be related to me, at least my Indianness, is something I’ve experienced before.  I study the shopkeeper’s face.

We are remarkably alike. Black eyes. Dark hair. About the same age. As the shadows of Jerusalem invade her shop windows I grow nostalgic. The city looms under a delicious haze of smoke from the outdoor falafel stands, and I want to take this woman away with me. To cross time and the ocean together. To place her in our past, to put myself in her beginning, and intertwine our threads of history —for we are nothing without our relationships. That’s Choctaw.

I begin my story in the middle “Choctaws are not originally from Oklahoma. We are immigrants too.”

The woman whose ancestor was a Cherokee nods her head as if she understands, and I continue.

“Our ancient homelands are in the Southeastern part of the United States where we were created in the spectacular silken flatness of the delta lands. The earth opened her body and beckoned us to join her above ground so our ancestors tunneled up through her navel into tinges of moist red men and women. We collected our chins, knees, breasts, and sure-footed determination — long before Moses parted the Red Sea, and the God with three heads was born in the Middle East.

“Choctaws were the second largest allied group of peoples in the south east. Our population centers were clustered like wheels around three major rivers: to the east the Tombigbee River; to the west the Pearl River; and in the South the Chickasawhay River. We made trading relationships with other tribes in our regions whenever possible.”

She interrupts my story, asks me if I will come to her house for an evening meal. She talks on. Says that she went to school in New York City, and that she misses the company of Americans. Her own mother is dead, since she was a child. All she has left is her father, the one who owns the shop. She looks at me. “You promise to tell me more of your history?”

“What I can.”

Her home is west of Jerusalem. Opposite the old city where everyone walks instead of rides. There are great American-style streets full of Mercedes, Peugeots and Perrier bottles. Her place is elegant, an estate on a hill. There’s a dark studio with a mahogany desk, Navajo rugs, and an enormous basket made from the skeleton of a Saguaro tree sits near the stone fireplace. She builds a fire against the cold and opens the shutters to let in the city. She says she doesn’t feel anything in particular toward the Arabs, no hate, and no repulsion either. I asked her what about the Choctaws? She smiles, not knowing what I mean. She says she is where she has to be. Placed here. Of course she feels a tinge of fear. It’s as if this is not only what she expects, but what must happen to her.

She says she pays closest attention to the noise of the city. That the city shouts what is going to happen. The explosions, the bullets, the prayers, the celebratory demonstrations, they’re all part of it she says, like messages from God.

She begins telling me some rigmarole about how Jerusalem meets the needs of all its people. Throughout its four-thousand-year history she says the city was meant to be a place of unity. Her father believes that now the Intifada is over there can be peace between the Arabs and Jews. Behind her a shadow walks into the room. I see the image of a woman in darned socks. I think I recognize her face, but I can’t quite make it out, so speak up without waiting for a polite pause in our conversation.

“Then why, everyday, do Jews and Arabs try and kill one another?”

“Why did Indians sell Manhattan to the Christians?”

Night comes through the shutters. The din of the streets below grows louder. It’s more penetrating than the livid red streetlamps. We look at each other. Our expressions are suddenly changed. We realize we’re on the side of societies that have reduced us to grief.

All the same she rushes to tell me the story of her great-grandfather, a shoemaker, an outcast in North Carolina just like her great-grandmother, the Cherokee. “He was in exile, she was conquered. They fell in love because they had this in common. After world war two my grandfather, the one who was half-Jewish-half- Cherokee, made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. He never returned to America.”

“Indians are not conquered!”

“But your nerve is gone,” she says, sadly. “I was a student at New York City University when the Indians surrendered Alcatraz Island in June 1971. We would have never given up.”

There is a long silence.  “Who is we?” I ask.

“I’ve provoked you,” she says. “Now I give you the chance to give me a piece of your mind.” There was a trace of something odd in her remark, so I began with a metaphor. “Once a very ancient god came back from everywhere. Arriving at a banquet in his honor with a bundle of keys, he announced that it was closing time, and toilets around the world exploded.”

We laugh. It breaks the tension. “It’s from the good book. The missing pages.”

“And then what happened?” she asks. “You promised to tell me your history.”

“After the war ended between the British and the French in 1763 Indians in the Southeast couldn’t make the foreigners do anything. Soldiers went AWOL and married into our tribes. No one wanted to live in Paris or London anymore. That’s why so many Choctaws, Creeks, Chickasaws and Cherokees have British and French last names.

“In 1830, after the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek was signed, the Choctaw are the first to be removed from our ancient homelands. Many walked all the way with very little to eat or drink. The road to the Promised Land was terrible. Dead horses and their dead riders littered the way. Dead women lay in the road with babies dried to their breasts, tranquil as if napping. A sacred compost for scavengers.”

She stokes the fire to keep it from dying, and I know the more revolting the details, the less she believes me. Finally she says. “You are exaggerating.”

“Perhaps. But four thousand Choctaws died immigrating to Oklahoma.”

“It is late,” she says, ignoring my facts. “Time I returned you to your hotel. I’m sure your husband is waiting for you.”

“But you said you wanted to know about my history?” She gives me a fishy look but agrees. “Very well.” “It’s no accident that there are sixty-six Indian Nations

headquartered in Oklahoma. Oklahoma or Indian Territory was a forerunner of Israel. Choctaws were the first to be removed there, other Indian tribes from around country soon followed. We were supposed live together in peace. Form relationships. It wasn’t easy, but for the most part we did it because we do not idealize war. However throughout the nineteenth century more and more whites moved into Indian Territory. Followed by missionaries and lawyers who began converting us, or swindling us.”

“Then on April 22, 1889 the American government opened the unassigned lands to the whites. When the trumpet sounded, the Run of 1889 began. It was estimated that twenty thousand immigrants were waiting at the border to stake their claims. Today the Run of 1889 is an annual celebration in Oklahoma. Like a holiday.”

“I thought you were going to tell me *your* story.”

“I’m coming to it,” I answer, pausing to clear my throat. “There was no color in the broom closet. Light edged around the door. There may have been other teachers outside the closet, but I only knew of her by the smell of her sweat.

“The church had started a kindergarten program. She was a missionary. That morning the preacher said we were lucky to have a missionary lead us in a song. “*Red and yellow, black and white we are separate in his sight, Jesus loves the little children of the world*.” Then I sang it several times by myself. I was only repeating what I thought I heard. The words had no meaning for me, I was five years old. When she marched toward me shaking her fist, with that mouth of angry nails I panicked and ran outside across the playground and toward a cafe.

“Down, down, down, the fall crushes me, and I’m mucking around in the dirt. She oozed through my pours that hot afternoon in Bethany Oklahoma, and there she has remained whispering inside my head.”

I stare at my host. “It isn’t that we lost our nerve. Sometimes we’re just overwhelmed.”

After I finished my story, a strange quiet grips the Jewish woman whose ancestor was a Cherokee. Her face becomes attentive, as if listening to something that penetrated her soul.

When she drops me off at the National Palace hotel, I watch her drive away. All I can think of is that she’s right, that Jerusalem, “the city of peace” is what is meant to happen to her.

**There Is No God But God**

The next day I rejoin our study tour and we meet some Palestinian women from the Gaza Strip. In 1992 the Gaza Strip is still one of the Occupied Territories of Israel. The Palestinian women tell us their stories of lives through an interpreter. One woman says that the government prohibits them from displaying the colors of the Palestinian flag, which are green, red, black and white. She says her husband has been arrested for having a picture of a watermelon on his desk. Many others show us empty tear-gas canisters that have been shot into their homes by the soldiers. They are plainly marked, “made in USA.”

To show concern for the Palestinians some members of our study tour present the women with duffel bags full of used clothes and high heel shoes marked made in USA. I didn’t bring any used clothes, so I ask the Christian coordinator from the Council of Middle East Churches if I could give the Palestinian women money instead of used clothes.

“No,” she replies. “They’ll just come to expect it from us.”

The next day when the study tour leaves for a two-day visit for Nazareth, I stay behind at our hotel. I’ve had enough. I want to be alone, walk the streets of the old city, and eat in the small cafes.

Throughout the day prayers are broadcast over loud speakers. For Muslims, the first prayer of the day begins at the moment the rays of the sun begin to appear on the horizon. The last prayer in the evening ends at sunset. Devout Jews pray three times a day; devout Muslims pray five times daily. When I hear a man singing the prayers on a mosque’s loud speaker system I am sure he is praying to the Sun, just like Choctaws once prayed to Hashtali.

“The prayers are to Allah, not the Sun,” says a vendor outside the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.

“It looks like you are praying to the Sun, especially with your palms turned up toward the sky. The Egyptians once worshipped the sun God, RA. Since the Hebrews and the Egyptians once lived together, maybe your religions rubbed off on each other. Everyone in this country says “Yis-RA-el” for Israel. Maybe there’s a relationship?

He waved me away. “No, no, no, you have been misinformed! There is no God, but the God of us all.”

I Am Still Running

Palestinian men from around the community race past me toward the soldiers and meet them head-on. The protest explodes into a riot. Mothers, daughters, and grandmothers from inside the shops join the women in the streets. The soldiers begin dragging people inside the blue and white paddy wagons, one or two at a time, amidst weeping and bleeding fists.

I run toward the leader crumpled against the stonewall. Suddenly I recognize her. It’s Nina from the airport cafe. I can’t believe it, but it’s really Nina. She’s dressed in her white cotton uniform, her shabby socks still held up with rubber bands. A soldier reaches her before me.

“Don’t hurt her, it’s Nina. Can’t you see? She’s a survivor of Babi Yar.”

Suddenly I’m on the ground. I cannot breath. Someone rifles through my purse and pulls out my American passport. He yanks me up by my arms and tells me in English to go home.

*“No one gets hurt if they do what they’re told.”*

“No, it’s a lie. Run!” I scream so loud that I frighten the voice out of my head.

Nina gets up and tries to jump the stone fence, but the soldier bashes her in the legs with a club. She falls down and he carries her to the paddy wagon and shoves her inside.

I am back to the dubious place where memory distorts fragments of an indivisible experience and we meet a different self. It wasn’t Nina the soldier carried into the government vehicle. She died talking to God that terrible night in the airport cafe. She collapsed on the floor of the kitchen, not long after the fight with Gretchen, asking God why she had to die, why now that she’d regained her courage. “Very well,” was all she whispered.

Standing in the middle of the street in east Jerusalem, I watch the determined faces of the Palestinian women and weep for Nina. I still believe she is with the Palestinian protesters, just as I believe she was at Babi Yar.

An Arab member of the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, finally arrives in a government car and calls for calm. He holds both hands out to the soldiers, a sign that he carries no weapons.

The pigeon returns and lands next to me, as if surveying the waste. The Knesset member sees us, stops, then walks on with his palms facing toward the Sun. I will believe the rest of my life that this is what he prayed for.

“Save her. She is the Jewish women shot to death by the Germans at Babi Yar.

“Save her. She is the Palestinian women shot to death by the Jews at Deir Yassin.

“Save her. She is the Vietnamese women shot to death by the Americans at Mi Lai.

“Save her. She is the Mayan women shot to death by the Mexicans in Chiapas.

“Save her. She is the Black women shot to death by the Ku Klux Klan in Alabama.

“Save her. She is The People, our grandmothers, our mothers, our sisters, our ancestors, ourselves.

“Save us.”