**If I Forget Thee, O Jerusalem**

Kate Raphael

I spend my last day in Jerusalem in a police station. It’s not in the picturesque part, where the Dome of the Rock rises golden above the verdant hills of Mount Scopus. It’s in an ugly subdivision that could be anywhere in the world. While the unsmiling bureaucrats argue with their computers, I sit in the dingy, gray-walled hall and look out the unbarred window at the street below, watching solid women scurrying from their boxy French cars to the banks and shops, whose Hebrew signs I can read though I’d be unable to carry on a conversation with the customers.

I know my days in this country are numbered. Or I should say, two countries, one on top of the other like the twin cities in *The City and the City*. A Jew from across the globe, in this place where Jewish security is sacrament, I violated the eleventh commandment: Thou shalt not witness Israeli soldiers chopping down Palestinian olive trees. From this police station I will be taken to a prison and then eventually, when my appeals have run out, or maybe before if they decide I’m too dangerous to allow into a courtroom, to the airport where I will be shoved onto a plane and spit out on the other side of the world, hopefully in San Francisco, where I will greet my friends with a mixture of joy and unbearable loss.

I think of all the places I will never go again: Dallas Chinese Restaurant in East Jerusalem where I and whichever friends I’m with are always the only customers and the Palestinian owner who has come to look a little bit Chinese over the years calls me to come into the kitchen to get our Szechuan fried eggplant and Kung Pao tofu when they’re ready and rummage in the cupboard for chopsticks. Amigo Emile, the elegant but cozy dining room in the Old City, where Abu Emile, who made his money in the Gulf and returned during the optimistic Oslo years, gives away more than he sells because he cannot bear for foreign guests to leave without tasting every delicacy created by his chef who is also his mother. The Austrian Hospice, with its balcony biergarten overlooking the market, where the good-natured nuns ran out with a sweater to cover me when I thoughtlessly went out into the courtyard in scanty clothing to take a phone call because the basement room where I sleep for free has little cell service.

I think of all the people who cannot return to this country, people whose parents and grandparents were born here, who left olive and lemon trees they nursed from infancy, who had the misfortune to be living their quiet lives in 1948 or 1967 on land the Israeli settlers wanted for themselves, and who were told they must forget Jerusalem because my people have sworn never to forget Jerusalem. Growing up I never cared about Jerusalem, never believed those hymns were anything but pretty songs, but now I have been here, and I have breathed the air, always alive with spices and the longings of so many peoples and so many centuries of history coexisting the way the people cannot.

And now I cry as I realize that I too must leave and not return, must accept a tiny shard of exile, the chief export of this City of Peace.

And no, Jerusalem, I will not forget you.