

# A STORY ABOUT A PALESTINIAN *KINA* TREE

## Abla Ruhayel

*My father is from Tarbeikha, a village in the upper Galilee. I was born in Tyre, Lebanon.*

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In many ways, my embroidery piece embodies my connection to Palestine, the homeland I have been denied.

When I joined the Palestinian *tatreez* project, I was thrilled and eager to start. While I have worn my embroidered pieces with pride in the past, I have never managed to learn cross-stitching myself. Immediately, I felt that with every stitch in this embroidery, I was making a statement about my existence and my identity as a Palestinian. I was contributing to preserving our deeply rooted Palestinian heritage.

I was not born nor raised in Palestine, and I was deprived, like many other Palestinians, the right to live in our homeland. I have no memories of living in Palestine, but I feel deeply connected and attached to this land. My father was born in Tarbeikha, a village at the northern border of Palestine and Lebanon. In 1948, my father along with his family and all his countrymen were forced to leave the village. All were displaced across the border to live in the diaspora after that.

When I started to look for the design for the embroidery, I searched various sources and was constantly attracted to the pattern with the *Sarou* (Cypress tree). I wanted to stitch this pattern, and I chose the tree to be the centerpiece. At times, I was puzzled at my choice given the richness and beauty of Palestinian embroidery designs. Why the tree? My memory of Palestine goes back to my childhood memories, of stories told by my father. I still remember how he always enjoyed telling us stories about living in the village of Tarbeikha. He worked as a farmer on the family land, leading a hard life, yet a happy one. One of his most precious memories of Palestine was that of a tree. A story he told frequently was of that memory. Every evening when he returned from his work at the land and at the outskirts of the village, his eldest sister Fatima waited for him under this big old tree. He called it "the *Kina* tree", the eucalypt. I still remember how passionately he described the tree and what it meant to him and to his connection to Palestine, his sister and his family.

The story of this tree was engraved in my mind. With the fertile imagination of a child, I formed an image. The tree was green, strong and tall, with unkempt branches that danced with the strong winds blowing in the open space outside the village. My aunt Fatima, whom I loved so much, would be sitting and waiting for my dad so she could walk with him back home.

Years later in the year 2000, I went to the border with my father. He looked across the high security fence towards Tarbeikha, and he pointed towards a tree with tears in his eyes and said, "This is the *Kina* tree."

And here it was. Still standing alone in the open air. It looked as tall as a giant, as watchful as the eye of a soldier, as strong as a fighter, and as caring as a mother, awaiting the return of her children, and is still waiting.

I stitch this tree for the memory of my father, my aunt, and for Palestine.



Abla Ruhayel | 2019 | *A Story About a Palestinian Kina Tree* | cotton aida cloth, DMC cotton threads | 24 x 28.5 cm

# MY FATHER'S RETURN

## Samya Jabbour

*My father is from Haifa. I was born in Perth, Australia.*

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My father was born in Haifa, Palestine in 1928, a little under 20 years before the *Nakba*\* that took his home and his homeland from him. He was a teenager when he and his family became stateless refugees in Lebanon; a young man when he met my Kurdish-Iraqi-English mother in Kuwait; a middle-aged man when they immigrated to Australia with four young children; and he was an old man of 90 years when he died, on the last day of 2018, in Perth. Exiled from his homeland for the last 71 years of his life, my father had one last wish: to have his bodily remains cremated and returned to Haifa.

During 2019, I learned *tatreez* for the first time, and I travelled to Haifa to bury the ashes of my father. So, my piece is about my father and his journey Home. Being involved in this project has brought me closer to my Palestinian heritage in ways I could not have imagined. Having grown up in Australia away from extended family, I never expected I would get the opportunity to learn Palestinian embroidery in my life. This is my first piece of *tatreez*, but I hope not my last. Initially, I tried to find embroidery designs from the Galilee region and the northern villages where my family was from, but I didn't find a lot of documented work from the north, so I made a composite piece with traditional Palestinian designs that meant something to me.

I started with the row of roses that my Dad had growing along the driveway to his house in Perth; whenever I visited, we would laugh as he introduced each of them to me by name: Mr Lincoln, Eiffel Tower, White Lightnin', Carmagnole, Blue Moon. The memory of their perfume lingers in me now even as I write their names. The rest of the piece is filled with symbolism: The Star of Bethlehem central to my Dad's Christian faith; the mountains under which he was born and is now buried; the cypress trees that surround his grave; rich colours of the flowers he loved. At the top of the piece I stitched the gates of heaven, and at the bottom are prayers to help him on his way in designs distinct to the Galilee region. I included some amulet designs that are more commonly associated with Muslim prayers than Christian, because my Dad always had great respect for other's faiths and some of the people who loved him most are Muslim. And watching over it all is a special guardian bird. The design for this bird is taken from a traditional one, but I inverted the tail to make it into a *djidi djidi* – a willy wagtail.

My Dad had *djidi djidis* nesting in his back garden in Perth. They are known for their bravery and their wit in outsmarting opponents much bigger than them, and for fiercely defending their territory. My Dad would buy worms from the pet shop to feed the birds and, being so well fed, they would often raise three families each year. When my Dad was in hospital in the final days of his life, he would ask me for updates on his beloved birds. Three babies hatched from their eggs the day he was taken to hospital, and they first took flight the day that he died. I like thinking that my dear Dad and his birds learnt to fly on the same day.

\**Al-Nakba*, or 'the catastrophe', of 1948 is when 80% of the Palestinian population were forced from their homes and land to make way for Jewish refugees from Europe; millions of displaced Palestinians have remained stateless since the *Nakba*.



Samya Jabbour | 2019 | *My Father's Return* | cotton aida cloth, DMC cotton threads, gold thread | 22 x 22.5 cm

# I REMEMBER

## Sabrina Odeh Hanna

*My father is from Nazareth, my mother from Ramle. I was born in Nazareth.*

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I have been sitting in front of my computer for hours staring at these two words: "I remember". Where do I start? How can I translate my feelings? Which of my three languages will I use? Do I write about my arguments with my sisters before getting into the car, begging them to allow me to sit near the window because I wanted to stare at the beautiful Palestinian houses I saw on my way from Nazareth to Haifa. I still remember their sealed windows that I saw from behind the car's window and wondering why they were always closed. Who did this? Who violated such beauty? Back then as a child, I did not have the words to ask questions, and I did not understand that someone has been trying very hard to erase history, and that those sealed empty windows were a testimony to a people who lived in them. I just made up stories about the people who lived there, thinking maybe they have a little girl I can play and go to adventures with. With every house that was being demolished, my stories started to fade away until my beautiful houses ceased to exist and so did my stories.

I remember my beautiful strong grandmother who was always in trouble with the police for hiding "illegal workers" from the West Bank in her home in Nazareth. I still remember her holding a Palestinian flag in one of the many demonstrations she went to and thinking how come a "500-year-old" lady can hold such a heavy flag. She did it proudly. I remember her sitting on her brown couch watching the news. She was our news reporter. Each morning, she would wake up early and make coffee for her sons and neighbours, and she would be the first to read the newspaper and update her visitors on what was happening in Palestine.

I was born in Nazareth, a Palestinian city in the north of Israel, but I grew up in Ramle, a mixed city of Palestinians and Israelis near Tel Aviv. From a young age, I learned that when I spoke Arabic on the street, people would look at me as if I had done something wrong — and since I grew up in a mixed city, I adopted Israeli accents, so nobody could tell I was and am Palestinian. My identity as Palestinian was always under judgement; the colonialist approach worked energetically to define my labels and people felt entitled to tell me what and who they think I am, denying me my right to define my own identity. I, a Palestinian woman, have fallen between the categories, not Israeli enough on the one hand as I am Palestinian, and not Palestinian enough on the other as I am a citizen of Israel.

My mother did not teach me *tatreez*, and I never saw any of my family members wearing or owning a *thobe* (traditional Palestinian dress). My love for *tatreez* began when I was looking for ways to self-care. Some do yoga; others find their peace in colours, threads and creations. Through *tatreez*, I found my connections to my heritage, and I found my belonging to my Palestinian people. The mere fact that I live within Israel's "borders" does not make me less Palestinian. I found out that creating *tatreez* pieces was an act of resistance. I was fighting back. I do not own any of the pieces that I create; instead, I give them as gifts to people. It is a chance to speak about Palestine, its history and its rich culture. Most importantly, it is a chance to speak about my Palestine, my history, my culture.



Sabrina Odeh Hanna | 2019 | *I Remember* | cotton aida cloth, DMC cotton threads | 22 x 24 cm