



2023

## To the Shopkeeper on the Corner in East Jerusalem

Sira Quintili

*Brigham Young University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Quintili, Sira (2023) "To the Shopkeeper on the Corner in East Jerusalem," *Inscape*: Vol. 43: No. 2, Article 8. Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape/vol43/iss2/8>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Inscape* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

# To the Shopkeeper on the Corner in East Jerusalem

by Sira Quintili

From the first day I moved into the neighborhood until the day I left in a hurry, I went to your shop. Your brother was always the only one there, serving the neighborhood kids who would come with their mother's money clutched tightly in one hand, reciting the list of things they'd memorized. The first time I walked in, I was clutching a laundry list of my own—cleaning supplies painstakingly written out in Arabic by my friend, armed with Google Translate in one hand and an already-memorized apology for my lack of the right language. Then, he spoke perfect English, and in my relief, I immediately forgot every word of my apology.

That dusty August, I took to stopping in on my walk home—the shop a point of reference in a place still unfamiliar, the feel of the wall of air conditioning when I'd first walk in a greeting immediately followed by the muted, jovial colors of the inside of the shop. I'd wait in line behind the kids, trying to pick out the words in their echoed lists, watching as your brother inevitably slid a piece of candy into bags full of bread and sauces. I think that's why your shop was always full of kids, peeking over the counter, waiting.

In the third week, your brother and I bonded over my reliable Ben & Jerry's flavor purchase (I always go back to Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough), and that was the day he discovered I'm Italian, and I discovered his name. *I'm going to leave*, Salem announced to me that day with a sweeping arm gesture that could encompass the shop, the neighborhood, all of Palestine, *and see Rome. My brother loves it here, he would never leave. But I will.*

I didn't want to tell him that even though my heart bleeds the color of the Colosseum in the falling sunlight, it's not always what it's cracked up to be. But I couldn't disappoint him, so I told him only the very best true stories—the ones that touched both of us: the way our cities mingled the old with the new in a chaotic symphony, the way people tended to love each other fiercely, loudly, the colors of the ancient centers at dawn, at dusk, the family-owned businesses. *Like this one!* he said, triumphant, and I answered, *Yes!* And though I told him that there are less and less of them in Italy, that we are losing our artisanship, I made it sound funny, because don't we do that? This thick coating of humor over loss. I told him about the stickiness of Rome in the warm months and the freedom of walking through the summer pop-up cafés down by the Tiber River, a whisper of wind nudging at the cotton of clothing tucked over cooling skin. We told stories behind the wall of air conditioning that would blow your hair straight back.

Salem taught me one word of Arabic every time I went in. I want to tell you I remember every one, but even though I held them in my mind in those moments, illuminated, transfixed, the day I ran into your shop, expecting your brother but finding you, I couldn't remember a single one of those words.

That day, I needed directions to a street in the Old City, and Ben & Jerry's, and fully assumed he'd be there. Instead, it was you, disinterested and more than a little full of sneer that I couldn't make myself

understood. And you were right, you know, though I wish I could have told you how Arabic is a language I wish seeped into my skin, that I plan to wash myself with it until it sticks one day, but what mattered right then were words I did not have.

The next time I walked up the hill and stopped, Salem was back, and I never thought about you again. We went right back to talking about the heat, how the winter would be rainy, and the streets would flood, heavy with muddy water. We talked about leaving, and Gaza, and Rome, and San Francisco, and I bought candy that wasn't good for me, and cleaning supplies for an apartment I'd grown to love in very little time. I learned one new word a day. Every time I traveled, when I left the shop, he'd wave at me from behind the counter, wish me safe travels. The days were hot, and then they were rainy, and I thought there'd be time.

So, I know it's even worse that when I knew I wasn't going to come back at all, I did not say goodbye to Salem. I see how you're

looking at me—the same way you did the day I ran into a shop that was suddenly yours and not ours—and you're right again, but it was sudden, and I planned to come back. I didn't factor in that sometimes we don't know when it's the last time we'll do something, be somewhere, see someone, so even though that whole week I told myself I planned to stop by and tell him, I didn't. And then I was seeing your home disappear from a plane window.

A friend of mine was in your neighborhood recently and sent me a happy message. *I'm right by where you lived last year!* I asked him to go and see if you or Salem were there (because isn't goodbye via proxy just easier, after all?), outlined exactly where the minute building was, scrunched between the pizza place and the fruit market, turn left at the end of my road and it's halfway down the hill. But it wasn't, so you weren't.

*Places don't always last long here, you know,* my friend said into the phone, at my silence.

*But it had always been there,* I said. I had asked Salem, hadn't I? How long his family had been there? I hadn't. I just assumed it had been there always, halfway down the hill.

*Sometimes they get damaged in the revolts, or families no longer feel safe,* my friend continued when I didn't answer.

*Can you send me a picture?* I finally said. *Just to be sure you're in the right spot?*

He was.

So anyway, Salem's brother, I hope you both got what you wanted. You wanted to stay home. I wish very much that you are still there, that you've opened a new, bigger shop, just somewhere else. I hope there are kids, and that you give two pieces to the shyest ones.

But Salem. Salem, I hope is in Rome, San Francisco, Venice, Amman, Cairo. I hope he's in Tunis and Valparaíso and Moltrasio and all the places he's talked about and some he hadn't yet thought of when we met, in a dusty shop halfway down the hill, in a neighborhood of East Jerusalem. Safe travels.