

Excerpt from *Arabic from Beginners*,
by Ariela Freedman

She said her name was Jenna. A few weeks later she told me that wasn't really her name. Jannah, Jannah was her name. Jannah, meaning "paradise." Jenna was easier, she said, more familiar to English speakers, simpler to say. Jenna required no explanation. In America she was Jen or Jenna or Jenny, in Shuafat she was Jannah or sometimes Yanna. I could call her either one, Jenna, Jannah, it didn't make a difference. I tried shifting the first vowel back in my throat, but I felt awkward, so she was always Jenna to me.

She stood in the middle of the crowded room, unmoved by the crying children, the floor littered with toys, the random unfiltered chaos of the first day at daycare. She held a baby on her hip, and a little girl who had inherited the same uncanny pale green eyes clung to her knees. The baby kept slipping a hand into the scooped neck of her dress, and she kept impersonally fishing it out. She wore taupe heels and a cream dress patterned with roses, as if she'd dressed for a garden party. I had pushed a stroller all the way up the hill of Hebron Street and was shining with sweat, conscious of my bare arms, my flat sandals, the hippie swing of my red skirt. Jenna looked cool and serene. As she raised her hand to straighten her hair, diamonds glittered on her fingers and in her earlobes. She was pretty, of course, but pretty isn't word enough for what she was. When I think of her now, I see her standing there, stillness at the centre of the room, everything around her in motion.

I had signed Sam up for "The Peace Preschool" in Jerusalem from the depths of a snowy winter in Montreal, corresponding with a director who signed all her emails, "Salaam, Peace and Shalom." *At the Peace Preschool*, the website said, *we all laugh in the same language!*

On the first day, I was late. The room was full, and nobody said hello. Some of the parents sat at the small children's tables, and all of the spaces were taken. There was nowhere else to sit. They had segregated themselves by language. I heard Hebrew to the left, and the breathier, sibilant sound of Arabic in the right-hand corner of the room.

A teacher navigated the maze of children with a clipboard, registering names. The children wandered the room looking shell-shocked. One or two were crying in anticipation of their abandonment. The parents were gladly oblivious, catching up with one another at the tiny picnic tables, their adult knees slantwise because they wouldn't fit underneath. They looked relieved to have the long summer over. The teachers seemed distracted, tracking new arrivals, gathering registration information, stamping out the small disputes over favoured toys and tumbled block towers, finding the criers in the general cacophony.

Bins of plastic toys were arranged around the room, organized by type and by size. "Animals!" "Blocks!" "Balls!" The toys were spread out on low white shelves so the children could reach them by themselves. On the wall were colourful alphabet charts in Arabic and Hebrew. Tall Ottoman windows had been left ajar, and gauzy white curtains filtered the light and breathed in and out with the wind. It was a pleasant room, only there were too many of us.

My son picked up a plastic tyrannosaurus from a bin of dinosaurs, and stood still, looking lost. The teacher was suddenly in front of me, thrusting the clipboard at my chest in a gesture that felt aggressive though it was really just Israeli, with that entirely different topography of personal space, and I was empty-handed and unprepared.

And then the woman in the lovely dress saved me. "I'm Jenna," she said. "You can borrow my pen."

"Thank you," I said.

I smiled at her. I felt suddenly, excessively grateful. Jenna's voice was husky, a smoker's voice, and her accent was a strange mix of Brooklyn and something else, some elusive other flavour. That was one of the first things I noticed about her.

"Where are you from?" I said.

As soon as I had asked her, I wanted to take it back. My cheeks flushed, and I looked towards the children. But Jenna didn't seem to mind.

"I'm from here. From here, but I grew up in Louisiana."

"Louisiana? I would have guessed New York."

"Well, my mother's from Brooklyn. I sound like her, I guess."

I wrote my name down on the clipboard. I didn't have a cellphone, didn't know my passport number. The teacher tssked loudly with her tongue, and said in Hebrew, strict as a border guard, "Where's the rest of your information?" I half expected her to turn me away.

"I'll have it for you next time," I said.

She looked at me with heavy eyelids, her expression exasperated and resigned. I would get used to that gaze of weariness from Israelis, the one that said, "We are disappointed in you, collectively and as individuals, though we expected no better." I could see clumps of mascara clotting her lashes and holding them together. Her eyes were lined in the kind of glittery pale blue pencil I used when I was fifteen and just starting to experiment with makeup, the kind that had once caused my father to remark, when I came downstairs from my long sojourn in front of the bathroom mirror, that I looked as if I had asphyxiated myself.

"Don't forget," she warned. She moved heavily over to the next parent. I turned back to Jenna.

"I'm Hannah," I said. "This is Sam. He's three."

"That's Zac, he's nearly four," Jenna said, and Zac scowled at her. Zac had a long brown face, huge solemn eyes, and no front teeth.

"Come on, Zac," she said, looking down at the somber little boy and pointing a delicate shoe at the plastic bin of dinosaurs. "Play! You love dinosaurs."

Zac looked up at us soulfully, then reached over and grabbed the tyrannosaurus from Sam's hands. Sam's face began to crumple. Quickly Jenna leaned down, snatched the tyrannosaurus, and handed it back to Sam. Her boy started wailing, and Jenna reached into her purse, pulled out a pacifier, and inserted it into his mouth. He quieted down but kept looking at my son.

"My son," Jenna said, "he can't wait for anything. And this is my daughter, Aisha." She gestured down at the girl, her tiny double, in a frilly plaid dress, who had finally let go of Jenna's knees to dump a box of Lego onto the ground.

“And this is Noor. She looks like a boy, but she’s a girl. It’s because she’s got no hair. I got her ears pierced, but people still think she’s a boy.”

Noor grinned at me toothlessly, snuck her hand back down her mother’s dress. Her fat brown earlobes were dotted with gold studs. She had round eyes and dimpled plump cheeks. Her hair was short and curled tight to her skull, held back with an unnecessary pink hairband.

Sam put the tyrannosaurus down on the ground, just for an instant, and Zac swooped it up, sucking hard on his pacifier, looking at Sam all the while. Sam started to scream, and suddenly we both were on our knees, negotiating, holding back arms and legs, talking to our children and over each other. “It’s all right, he put it down,” “Had it first,” “Sam, you can share the dinosaur. Share the dinosaur! You had a turn already and at home we have ...” “He had it first. He had it first. Give it back. Give. It. Back.”

Jenna took Zac’s wrist, yanked him to standing. I picked Sam up onto my hip. They stared at each other in mutual distrust. I smiled at Jenna.

She had dark hair that curled down to her shoulders. She looked like a girl playing dress-up—even her heels seemed a little big for her, as if she’d borrowed them. Jenna had three children already. I tried to count backwards from Zac, who was a little older than Sam. Was she twenty-three? Twenty-four?

Noor started crying, and the sound of her crying triggered the other children so that the room filled with the dissonance of wails and screams. Jenna took charge, introducing me to the teachers, Sarah and Jameelah, and to some of the children. Sarah’s hair was intensely maroon, and Jameelah’s head was covered tightly with a black headscarf. They smiled sweetly at Sam. Sarah asked me how many children I had.

“Two,” I said, and she said, “Only two? That’s not even a family!”

I heard more English than I had expected. I collected introductions, promptly forgot names. There was an American boy with a blonde crew cut. Near him, a dark, scrawny monkey of a child with big eyes and a flat head. Only one girl, with long straight black hair down her back,

who immediately became the centre of attention. And the mothers, who now clustered together in the hall near the doorway. They all seemed to know one another; their children had been sharing a classroom since they were two years old.

Jenna introduced me to the other mothers, announced that she was dying for a cigarette, opened the emergency door off the hallway, and leaned out to smoke, Noor still on her hip. Noor followed the cigarette with her eyes, on its way in and out of Jenna's mouth. Zac came out into the hallway, and Jameelah fetched him back into the room; he did this again and again, and Jenna, exasperated, drew a baby bottle of what looked like apple juice out of her purse and handed it to him. Sucking it down, he retreated back into the classroom. The crying and bright hubbub had subsided. I peeked inside and saw Sam quietly playing in a corner. His mouth moved as he talked to himself, playing the parts of both the figurines clutched in his fists. He lifted his arm and crashed one figure into the other; as he separated them he rebuked himself sternly. I leaned back out before he spotted me. He was fine, just fine.

On this first day, the children only stayed long enough to meet their teachers. The preschool occupied a small section of the grand, neo-Byzantine building; a larger portion housed a hotel, and I took Sam for a celebratory ice cream on the terrace. There was a round stone fountain, green with moss. Birds kept landing on the tables, and the staff kept shooing them away. It was almost too hot to be outside, and most of the guests—pink-faced tourists and diplomats—stayed inside behind the glass doors. Sam got upset when his ice cream melted into pink and white puddles in the bowl before he could finish it. He fell asleep in the stroller as I pushed him home, his mouth smeared with ice cream, his head lolling against his shoulder, rolling with every bump in the sidewalk.

I thought about Jenna all the way home. I shouldn't have asked her where she came from. The way she said "from *here*," as if staking a claim, made it clear that she was Palestinian, and it struck me, with a sense of shock, that in all the time I'd spent in Israel I'd never really had a conversation with a Palestinian woman before. As soon as I had that

thought I put it away, as if my mind had opened a drawer and slammed it shut.

When I got to our apartment, I realized I had never returned her pen. On the walk home it had exploded in the heat, and the ink now formed a dark stain on the seam of my bag.

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