

THE FLIGHT OF THE LESSER KESTREL

by Lee Romer Kaplan

Context: This excerpt from *The Flight of the Lesser Kestrel*, my novel-in-progress, is from the point of view of Elyas, a Christian Arab from the Northern Galilee town of Me'ilya (within the Green Line, which makes him an Israeli citizen). The chapter begins in 1959 when Elyas is four years old, and ends in the mid 1970s, when he is a student at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, soon to be married to Almasa Nasser.

When he was not quite four years old, Elyas fell in love with flying. Night after night, he climbed out of the bed he shared with his older brother Yousef and padded over to the bedroom window; the stone floors cool against his feet. Silence, Elyas knew, was key to approaching the sky. If he were very good and very quiet, the sky would open for him, take him into her arms, and carry him over their Galilean village.

During the day, Elyas practiced stepping softly. He studied the neighbor's ginger cat, the way she walked on the pads of her feet. Catching her prey required stealth, and Elyas mimicked the ginger cat's movements; on tiptoe, he glided across the kitchen floor, practicing. When his mother laughed and asked what he was doing, he smiled.

"Meow," he said, and batted the air with curved fingers.

"Here, kitty, kitty," his mother said, and when he came to her, she fed him a sweet or two with her smooth fingers; she tickled him under the chin.

"Ya, *habibi*," she said. "My darling boy."

At the time, his mother was pregnant with the second of his two sisters; for a little longer, he was still the baby. He leaned against the top of *Yumma's* domed belly, and pressed his head between her breasts. He listened to the sound of his mother's body, a swishing sound punctuated by heartbeats, as if the sea lived inside her belly and the baby were a fish, flicking its tail and gulping. When his sister Maryam was born, he half-expected her to come out with fins.

At night, Elyas waited for the right moment to approach the sky. He lay in bed, drowsy, fighting sleep, until Yousef's breath became deep and constant, his body slack and dreaming. He waited until the only sounds he heard were the steady ticking of the clock in the salon, the rustling of grape leaves brushing against the balcony, the muffled breath of the wind.

Yousef sometimes moved suddenly in his sleep, responding to some dream challenge by throwing a skinny arm or leg across Elyas' body, trapping him in the bed. When this happened, Elyas imagined his body changing shape, transformed into water, a boy-shaped river that flowed out from under Yousef's weight, over the side of the bed and down onto the floor as silently as the ginger cat.

Elyas saw the sky as a beautiful woman in a blue gown, her dark hair shot through with silver, hovering outside the window. He leaned against the arched frame of the window, rested his cheek against the stone, and looked down into the garden. Bathed in moonlight, the stones of the old well glowed; the leaves and branches of the lemon trees, tinged with silver.

Soon he would swoop over and beyond his mother's garden; his body buoyed by the night wind, the town would grow small beneath him. He unfocused his eyes and allowed the outlines of things to blur—the carob tree planted by his great grandfather in the courtyard, the edges of his uncle's houses, until the world below him softened, and he began to feel a tingling in his feet. The sky smiled, a luminous smile.

“Come,” she said, and Elyas opened himself to her, delighting in her gentle voice, low and full of magic. As they flew, she sang to him in a language without words, the language of stars and wanderings. Wrapped in her arms, his cheek against her breast, Elyas looked down over his known world, growing smaller as he rose into the sky—the stone house built by his great, great grandfather became a doll's house, the pomegranate trees flanking the door, a flash of scarlet in the dark—and felt himself soar.

In the mornings, awakened by his mother's touch, he was amazed to find himself home again. He never remembered the landings, only flying. The physical sensation of flight was so real, that even years later, when he told his son Daoud about his own childhood adventures, Elyas still felt the rush of wind against his skin.

Elyas' dreams of flying changed as he grew older. By the age of six or seven, he no longer stood at his bedroom window, willing himself into the sky. Instead, he became fascinated by the dynamics of flight—the forces of aerodynamics: lift, weight, thrust and drag. He pored over books about airplanes, built model planes from sticks and bits of cardboard. Even his father took an interest in Elyas' flying machines; after church on Sundays, if the wind were right, Elyas and his father would climb the hill behind their house

to test out planes. Later, during the week, they made modifications: adding and subtracting flaps from the wings, experimenting with methods of cutting down drag so that the planes would fly farther, unimpeded.

One day, when he was nine and his brother, thirteen, Elyas arrived home to find Yousef in their bedroom holding the newest plane in his hands. The plane was a real beauty, nearly perfect; if only he could figure out a way to streamline the nose, this little plane would soar. Elyas watched his brother twirl the plane around and around in his fingers; Yousef's expression was one he'd never seen before: mocking, almost vicious. Elyas held out his hands, but Yousef just stared into his eyes and, still looking straight at Elyas, sent the plane crashing towards the floor. Elyas gulped and turned his head away. He couldn't bear to look, imagining the bits of balsa wood and strips of silk torn from his father's old handkerchief, strewn about the floor.

"Come on, kid. I didn't break it," Yousef said. "Just wanted to see if I could get a rise out of you." Elyas stared down at his feet, at the dusty toes of his school shoes, shoes outgrown by Yousef, and by their cousin Nabil before him.

"You're such a baby," Yousef said. "Actually going to fly planes, huh?"

Elyas imagined himself wearing sunglasses, a pilot's cap and a shirt with epaulettes, like pilots wore in the movies, sitting snugly within the cockpit of a jet full of passengers trusting him to carry them home. Although he'd never actually been on a plane, he knew the kinds of things pilots said.

"A-Okay," he sometimes said, looking into the mirror and adjusting his imaginary captain's cap.

He felt an extraordinary happiness, an ecstatic weightlessness as though he were in fact flying. Once again, he heard the sky whisper to him, felt himself rising, his chest expanding with joy. And then, Yousef sighed.

"Little brother," Yousef said, reaching out and tousling Elyas' hair, a new, grown-up kind of gesture. And for a moment longer, though he became increasingly aware of the floor beneath his feet, Elyas held on to the feeling of flight.

"Oh, little brother," Yousef said again. "The Jews will never let one of us fly their precious planes. Arabs can't be pilots. Not here, anyway."

Elyas stared at the almost mustache, the tentative smudge of gray beneath the skin of his brother's upper lip. In Yousef's eyes, Elyas saw that his brother wanted to say more. Instead, Yousef made a soft grunting noise, a grown up kind of noise at the back of his throat, the way their father did when he was tired of talking. He handed Elyas the plane and without another word, turned and walked slowly out of the bedroom. As he watched his brother leave, Elyas pushed the tip of the airplane's wing into the center of his left palm, hard.

The pointed wing tip, pressed fiercely against his skin, broke through, and blood began to emerge, slowly at first, and later, in long rivulets that stained the cuffs of his school shirt. Elyas registered the pain, but refused to cry; he gritted his teeth and watched Yousef's back as he walked across the room and out the door. He noted the way Yousef's shoulder blades dented the thin fabric of his shirt, the way his shirt pulled across the shoulders. When Yousef stopped, slumping as he stood in the doorway, Elyas could see that the fight had gone out of him by the way his brother's arms hung loosely at his sides, his slender wrists poking out from the cuffs of his too-short shirtsleeves.

Years later, Almasa would often say that of all the marks scrawled across her husband's body by childhood, she loved best the scar left on his palm by the airplane wing. They were sitting in a Jewish café in Haifa, a few months before their wedding, when she first discovered the scar and traced it lightly with her index finger.

"Here," she said, looking up at him and smiling. "This is the sign that you will be loved by a very beautiful and intelligent girl."

She was a surprising one, this Almasa Nasser, despite her modest appearance—the downcast eyes and covered hair, her schoolgirl's dresses and general lack of coquetry. Although it was Elyas, through his parents, who first approached the Nassers about their daughter some months back, Almasa herself arranged for this clandestine meeting, devised an elaborate plan involving a shopping trip to Haifa, during which Almasa's older married sister would deposit her at the café for half an hour, while the sister shopped nearby.

On the designated day, Elyas arrived at the café in Haifa well before Almasa, and sat at the table, feeling nervous and fidgety. He ordered a cup of Nescafé, which came to the table lukewarm and not nearly strong enough for his liking. He usually drank his coffee dark

and sweet, but this tepid brew required doctoring. As he stirred an extra sugar into the cup, he felt the Jewish patrons' eyes on him. An Arab busboy emerged from the kitchen, and started when he saw Elyas, who shrugged in response; he too was surprised to find himself in such a place, where the only other Arabs worked there, and then, mostly behind the scenes, as dishwashers, prep cooks, the occasional busboy.

As Elyas waited, he tapped his foot against the metal column supporting the table; he stopped when the woman at the next table shot him a nasty look. Embarrassed and not sure what to do with himself, he got up to use the WC. As he walked past the kitchen, he looked through a small pane of glass set into the swinging doors and saw a man old enough to be his father, soiled apron wrapped around his belly, standing with his balding head bowed. Elyas winced as he heard a red-faced Jew his own age, in a voice loud enough to be heard in the next room, scream, "This, *habibi*, is the last straw."

The older man looked up and for a moment, his eyes met Elyas' through the glass. Elyas heard the Arab apologize, for what, he could not make out. Elyas felt a surge of anger, and put his hand on the swinging door, pushing it open slightly. He looked at his hand, and imagined his fingers curled into a fist, the thud and crack that fist would make against the Jew bastard's wagging jaw; the tremendous satisfaction pummeling that arrogant shit would give him. His hand shook against the wooden door and he realized that both men inside the kitchen were watching him through the pane of glass, that he was now the object of their mutual focus.

"What are you looking at?" the Jew said. Elyas swallowed hard, removed his hand from the door and stepped back with eyes lowered.

In the WC, grateful for a room with a door he could lock behind him, he splashed water on his burning face and shook his hands dry. He looked into the mirror, and saw there a coward. A prudent sort of person, perhaps, in his well-pressed, oft-mended shirt, his hair combed carefully back, but not a real man. He looked at his hands, his baby-soft student's hands, and thought of the old man in the kitchen, his large calloused hands dangling by his sides. He thought of the old man's eyes, the defeat that registered there, and felt disgusted with himself, with the old man for taking such abuse, with the Jew for meting it out, with all of them for being lesser men than they might have been.

When he returned to the table, he was relieved to find that Almasa had not yet arrived. He cupped his hand to his mouth to check his breath, unbuttoned his shirt cuffs and rolled up the sleeves, then unrolled and re-buttoned them. Perhaps he should have dressed more informally, or then again, maybe he ought to have worn a jacket. But among the casualness of the Jews in the café, he would have stood out even more, not that he could hide his Arab-ness, even if that was what he wanted.

Whatever worries he harbored disappeared the moment Almasa arrived some ten minutes later, flushed and a little disheveled, and all the more lovely because of it. He smiled as she removed the scarf covering her hair and shook her long curls loose, at the effect she had on the other patrons, who could not help smiling at such a pretty girl, Arab or not.

“Look,” she said, nodding in the direction of a young Jewish couple holding hands across their table.

“We could hold hands,” she said, and when Elyas blushed, and stammered that he wondered whether Almasa might be worried about her reputation, she reached for his hand. She turned his palm over and stared at it, then ran her forefinger over the scar.

He told her then, the story of the scar’s birth. And how the day after the wingtip of the airplane sank into his palm, in the half-light of morning, he rose before anyone else and slowly, silently, slid the box holding his airplanes out from under the bed and carried it outside. In the barren patch behind the house, he pried at the Galilean earth with his fingers, digging a hole in which to bury the wooden box he’d made from scraps of wood given to him by the carpenter, Abu Hamid. Sometimes, Abu Hamid allowed Elyas to sit and watch him work, and it was in this way that he learned to make a simple frame, and from the frame, a rough, but adequate chest to store his planes.

In exchange for wood scraps, Abu Hamid gave him small tasks to do; the one Elyas loved best: sweeping the carpenter’s floor, raking through piles of fragrant cedar dust. He liked helping Abu Hamid, and imagined that the way he felt in the carpenter’s woodshop must be the way the boy Jesus felt working by Joseph’s side.

Although he worried it might be sacrilegious to do so, Elyas composed a prayer to the joys of Abu Hamid’s workshop: Oh, glorious, the curls of wood spiraling to the floor. Oh, majesty, the smell of fresh wood, the way the light slants through the window, illuminating

the sawdust, making everything beautiful. Oh, lucky boy Jesus, a carpenter's son. The box he made to hold his airplanes was painted the most beautiful greenish-blue, the color of the sea illuminated by sun. The paint he used was given to him by his uncle, left over from painting the ironwork on a house built for a new bride. The color would protect him from the evil eye, his uncle said.

At this point in the story, Almasa clapped her hands together and laughed and, hearing her laugh, Elyas forgot about the scene in the café kitchen, about the triumph of gravity over flight. He imagined painting not only the ironwork, but every inch of the home he would share with Almasa with blue-green paint, inside and out.

"Yes," she said. "Our own blue paradise." They would eat their meals sitting on blue chairs at a blue table set with blue plates.

"Of course," she said. "We must also have blue curtains and carpets and allow only blue flowers in our blue vases, and blue sheets and blankets on our blue beds." Seeing this blue world spring from Almasa's imagination and then, take root in his own mind, for a moment, in a Jewish café holding hands under the table with the woman who would become his wife, Elyas believed that for Almasa, with Almasa, he would succeed in creating this safe and lovely blue world.