

TLC Showcase

STEVE SABELLA

Introduction to the manuscript	2
Extract from <i>The Parachute Paradox</i>	3
About the Writer	9

Introduction to *The Parachute Paradox*

The *Parachute Paradox* delves into the impact of the Israeli occupation on the imagination, and explores my life's search for liberation.

Once, I went skydiving in Haifa. On the tarmac, the plane looked like it hadn't flown since the 1967 War. After takeoff, the engine roared as if it could fail any second, shaking wildly as it reached the sky. When the time came, I unbuckled my seatbelt and leaned out of the open door against the strong wind. Without much thought, I did it. I let go. I was flying in the air. I felt light, less burdened by what was happening below. I felt identity-less, free from all the labels and classifications, free from all the racism and discrimination, free from the Israeli occupation I was born into.

But I didn't open the parachute. I was in a tandem jump, attached to an Israeli. Over the years, I've come to see this situation in the air as a metaphor for what it means to be a Palestinian living under Israeli occupation. Life under occupation is like the reality of a Palestinian attached to an Israeli in a tandem jump. There is an Israeli on the back of every Palestinian, controlling all aspects of life—the Israeli is always in control. This impossible reality places the Palestinian under constant threat, in a never-ending hostage situation.

Blurring fact and fiction, love and loss, *The Parachute Paradox* traces my arduous search for liberation from within, through a confrontation with the colonized imagination.

I almost picked up the pen to write this book when I was twenty. I started seventeen years later! As a visual artist, I've always seen the process of creation as eliminating the unnecessary. My TLC manuscript reviewer's literary expertise helped guide me to go straight to the essence. I had infused a lot of emotion into the draft, and he pinpointed segments that needed to be toned down so readers would have the space to feel the scenes on their own. He also advised me not to underplay certain stories. I was considering moving a dramatic scene to the very beginning of the book. When I got the report, he confirmed my intuition, a great sign from an experienced reader. While I did not put every piece of advice into action, I found it insightful to hear an in-depth, neutral, and fresh perspective.

Extract from *The Parachute Paradox* by Steve Sabella

Let me take you back to 1996, when I sat alone in the back corner of Abu Shanab restaurant, a bustling hangout in the Old City. I was only twenty. The First Intifada had ended three years earlier, but I was still tormented by my severe episodes of depression, like aftershocks following an earthquake. Suddenly my eyes caught sight of a face shining ethereally under a table lamp. Her bright face, blue eyes, and delicate lips, as though painted by a master, were shadowed by her long black hair. She was perfect—a sign from the universe. My mission was to be with her.

I watched her, in silence, mesmerized by her beauty, and when the man next to her stood up to leave, I snuck out of the restaurant and reentered. I sat in the chair next to her and pulled out the black and white photographs I had just printed in the darkroom and conspicuously started to leaf through them. Her perfume was magnetic. I inhaled deeply, and its scent of dewberries became locked in me forever. Once the dewberry captured me, it never set me free. She leaned over to look at the prints. My plan worked. She asked me what I was looking for. I said to her,

A moment of truth.

To my surprise, she didn't turn away, but instead asked what I meant.

I replied,

I'm tired of playing games. Why can't people drop their masks?

We talked, and the heavy conversation turned into a light one, where nothing mattered. Francesca was different. She didn't confront me with the origin of my name, ask whether I had changed it, or try to figure out my real name at birth. Those questions irritated me. They usually transpired within seconds of a first encounter, but when I asked people to name three typical Palestinian names, most realized the inanity of their questions.

The more I watched Francesca speak, the more I fell in love with her. But how could I give her my phone number without coming on too strong? I hid my anxiety and said,

*Here's my phone number. It's my age seven years from now,
followed by the unlucky number, and then the year I was born.*

Francesca never called.

Two weeks later I was standing in front of Café Rimon, waiting for a Spanish girl who had just immigrated to Israel. It was our first date. I couldn't help but wonder what the point was. I didn't speak Spanish, she didn't speak English and hadn't yet learned Hebrew. Perhaps I preferred to date girls who couldn't ask me where I came from, about my name or religion. Such were my thoughts as I hid from the rain under an awning, when suddenly I saw Francesca hurry by under an umbrella. I called out to her,

Francesca!

Hey.

What're you doing here?

I'm just waiting for a friend.

How are you feeling now?

I guess I'm on the wrong train, heading in the wrong direction.

I'm stuck, trapped.

Give me your hand. Let's jump onto another train.

I grabbed her hand and we jumped. Over the years, I was drunk on the dewberry perfume my lips had wiped off her body. I was afflicted by a most beautiful curse. This curse still inflames my imagination. I called her Bombina with an O. She looked like Snow White in disguise. Once, a five-year-old-boy confirmed my intuition when he shouted in excitement to his mother that he had seen Snow White.

Francesca is from Switzerland. Three days before she was to come to Jerusalem to live with me, I flew to Bern to surprise her on her last day of work. I set up my tripod at her bus stop and placed a red rose on it. She walked down the street, spotted it, but sat down on the bench on the other side of the bus shelter from where I was hiding. After a few minutes, the bus arrived and just as she stepped in, I grabbed her hand from behind and whispered,

Tonight you're not going home alone.

Francesca could not stop laughing. On the bus I handed her a black-and-white photograph I had created a few years earlier. Two hands and arms extended parallel

to each other toward the sky, mirroring a plant stretching toward the light. Plant and arm merged and faded together into the background. The effect was caused by an accidental double exposure, created by improperly rolling the film. Over time, I learned that what happens by mistake bears meaning. With one arm around her, I read aloud the words I had written in calligraphy under the image:

*This is the World I am Looking for
A World of Love, Peace and Serenity
This is How I Want to Live and
This is How I Love You*

Francesca wore a silver ring that had a visual presence, compelling anyone who glanced at it to remark about how great it looked. The ring had an exceptional design, set with a circular, Bordeaux-colored stone that bulged from the finger. When I slipped it on I felt a connection. I asked Francesca where she got it. She said,

We'll wear the same ring. I'll find another one for you.

She had found hers at Grass', a Jerusalem jewelry store on Ben Yehuda Street. We walked there, and I asked the shopkeeper if she had another ring by any chance. She barely gave the ring a fleeting glance before replying "no" in harsh accented Hebrew. I was taken aback by her attitude. Two months later, we checked again. She remembered us. While Francesca showed her the ring, I said:

*Shalom.
Did the silversmith by any chance make another ring?*

With a brusque attitude she replied,

Amarti lecha sheh lo. En li.
I told you before that I don't have it. No.

It was infuriating, but we went back one more time. This time, I interrupted her before she had a chance to speak,

*Listen to me. Every time I come here, you say no. But do you know
what bothers me? You have never really searched for it. Do me a
favor and please look in the drawer. You have nothing to lose.*

She murmured a few words but started looking and opened several drawers. Shortly after, her head emerged from behind a messy counter. Shining between her fingers

was Francesca's ring. She found one. I knew it was special and that I was the one meant to wear it. What I didn't know then was that over the years many forces would try to separate us.

My first trip outside Jerusalem was planned when I was twelve. I was going to live with an American host family from Connecticut for six months or even longer, a visit meant to be an escape. My parents thought the distance would lighten the dark depression I had been suffering from since the beginning of the First Intifada in 1987. It would take me twenty years to give a proper description to what I felt then, which came to me while watching the film *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, whose protagonist suffers from locked-in syndrome. I felt as if I, too, had locked-in syndrome, entrapped, isolated in constant dialogue with the voice of my thoughts.

I am able to move my body, but it never moves forward.

I am able to move my eyes, but they only see death.

*I am able to hear, but all I want is to not hear the sound
of bullets and tear gas everyday.*

*I am able to feel the weather change, but my skin is growing pallid
in the prison I have been confined to for five years during the intifada.*

I used to call that prison home.

Even as a twelve-year-old I was aware that I belonged to a country that was not a country, but a land occupied by Israel called Palestine. I could see for the first time the enormous effort needed to break free from the physical military occupation, and more importantly, from the Israeli colonization of my imagination.

I was impatient though. I wanted the conflict to be resolved quickly. It paralyzed me. I had had plans for my future before the First Intifada, but the occupation crippled life. The state of political stagnation suffocated me. The anticipation of promised peace that never came exhausted me. I understood then, as clearly as I do today, the impossible reality on the ground and its injustices justified by toxic amounts of ideology. At times, the exertion I needed to liberate myself overwhelmed me, and once it found me on the highest ledge of our house in the Old City. While my eyes

were drowning in the sky, contemplating jumping from the roof, I heard my mother shouting hysterically from below. I did not kill myself. Was it because I loved my mother, or was it because of a belief that someone in the sky was watching over me? Perhaps a bit of both.

When the First Intifada erupted and the uprisings hit Jerusalem, Palestinian Resistance pamphlets were thrown over the Old City Wall into my school's basketball court. They contained patriotic phrases and a list of rules imposed on everyone living in occupied Palestine. They also ordered all schools in Arab Jerusalem to close at midday. To compensate for the lost hours, schools started at 6:30 a.m., which was the worst in winter, when the house was freezing and the sky was still dark.

My classmates from Ramallah, fifteen kilometers from Jerusalem, had to wake up as early as five o'clock. Victor, my best friend, often fell asleep during class. When we were little we sometimes held hands during the class breaks. One summer he opened the cover of the water tank on the roof of his apartment building. He took off his shoes and shirt and plunged through the narrow opening into the water. All I could see was his short black hair. After a few seconds Victor emerged with a smile. A few years ago I learned that he ended up in a mental institution.

One day a sixteen-year-old boy I knew from my school was killed by the Israeli army, the first person to die in Jerusalem during the intifada. His name was Nidal il Rabady, an Arabic name that means "struggle". Nidal came from a Christian family that lived between the Christian and Muslim Quarters. He caught a bullet while riding his bicycle back home. Like many of my classmates, I attended the funeral in his home. This was my first encounter with death. I was thirteen. The room was packed, with Nidal's black coffin in the center. There were two candles placed above his head. He lay in the coffin, which seemed suspended in air, among crying women wrapped in black. I couldn't see his face and moved closer. My body still remembers the sadness of his mother, and her face, swollen and red from endless tears. She kept caressing his face. But, Nidal was pale, frozen, wearing a suit that did not fit him. A morbid scene that broke my bond with life. I stared at Nidal and said my farewell.

People die in wars, and in all wars, at a certain point, the enemies sit down and make peace possible. There is something different about the way Israelis perceive peace. I understand this because I have lived like an Israeli. Most Israelis do not understand the need for peace. They prefer seeing their enemy defeated.

When a Palestinian was killed, people in Jerusalem and other Palestinian cities would mourn and strike for three whole days, closing all shops, schools, and institutions. Once my school's doors were closed for three consecutive months to satisfy the traditional three days of mourning per death.

This was when Brother Robert Wise volunteered to come to our house daily to teach my brother Peter and me. He was a teacher at my school, Collège des Frères, and a dear family friend, who closely followed my progress. Wise wore the traditional black dress of the brothers. He suffered from an eye problem and incessantly wiped his leaking ducts with special cotton. I now see him as my first mentor. I had many questions to ask, and one day he gave me a book from the school's library with the title *Ask Me Why*. He once told me,

You can change the world.

When I asked him how, he said,

Don't ask me how.

About the Writer

Steve Sabella, born 1975 in Jerusalem, Palestine, is a Berlin-based international artist who uses photography as his principal mode of expression. He is the author of the award-winning memoir *The Parachute Paradox* delving into the colonisation of the imagination. Moving beyond a narrative of exile, Sabella explores in his art and writing the poetic state of nomadism, human conditions, commonalities transcending culture and nationality, advocating for global citizenship.



His first comprehensive monograph *Steve Sabella Photography 1997-2014* was published by Hatje Cantz in collaboration with the Akademie der Künste, Berlin (2014), with texts by Hubertus von Amelnunxen and a foreword by Kamal Boullata.

Sabella holds an MA in Photographic Studies from the University of Westminster and an MA in Art Business from Sotheby's Institute of Art, London. Given Sabella's focus on themes of liberation, he has been the subject of several documentaries, including *In the Darkroom with Steve Sabella* (2014), screened internationally.

His art has been exhibited widely and is held in numerous collections including those of the British Museum in London; Mathaf in Doha, The Dalloul Art Foundation in Beirut, and The Arab World Institute in Paris.

Sabella has published numerous essays on the art world and is soon publishing *The Artist's Curse*, a series of epigrams, micro-narratives, tips and concise analyses of the art world as it looked till 2020. And coming to light soon is the artist book, *The Secrets of Life*.