

The Watermelon Patch

The Salem Community Farm used to be much larger than the parking lot that surrounds it.

Before the war, when my grandmother was young, she and the other women of our family would harvest watermelons each year to distribute to the community. Two entire acres were devoted to my great-grandmother's watermelons. Grandmother told us of vines and leaves of infinite green that stretched across every inch of the rich dark soil, that was as black as night, in the summertime.

Things changed after the war. They called it progress. They called it development. To my grandmother it was erasure. To our family, and our culture, it *was* erasure. In less than a year they had taken more than an acre. My grandmother — now full with the growing life of my own mother — fought day and night against the constant development and construction around the farm. She shielded vine, leaf, and produce from bulldozers, tractors, and more. But as development continued and slowly consumed more and more of the watermelon patch, so too did the yields disappear.

Once-rich soil festered and held within it harsh chemicals and toxic metals, forced into the ground by progress. Roots shriveled, vines rotted, and the watermelons wrinkled, darkened, and died.

That was many years ago. Long before I was born. Long before my mother died in the *accident*. Long before the paint on the sign had faded, and the message in Arabic had been shot through by bullets. The message was simple:

زرعوا فأكلنا ونزرع فيأكلون

They planted, and we ate; and we plant, so they eat.

Was it the eating that made them so angry?

When I arrived at the Salem Community Farm, which is nothing more than a garden, I parked in the back of the black asphalt parking lot, behind the shoppers looking for nutritional supplements and deals on back-to-school supplies. The heat shimmered off of the asphalt like standing lakes of oppression, sucking the moisture out of the very air before it could ever grace the dry and crusty soil.

A pretty gravel path, laid at great expense, leads most of the way to the farm but ends just a few feet short. A path worn by the steps of hundreds of visitors stretches from the end of the landscaped area to the Salem Community Farm. Liberal use of weed killer and other chemical sprays left a constant chemical taint on the air around the farm. A bitter aftertaste of battery acid and engine coolant that couldn't be driven away by rain or wind. Nothing would grow on the perimeter. Nothing could grow there.

Every year the harvest grew smaller and smaller. Where Grandmother Salem handed out full melons, and my mother halves, today I would set up a table and slice our few melons into thin portions. Mawlid al-Nabi was here, and we gave what we could.

It was a muggy August afternoon several years later — several years after I found the first note nailed to the entrance sign — when the violence disguised as expansion finally showed its face.

Before I had even set foot on the gravel path I could smell the violence on the air. It was sweet and intoxicating. It reminded me of the Mawlid al-Nabi festivals Grandmother Salem would host at the farm. The happy children ripping into freshly cut watermelon and spitting the seeds all about. To my child brain the smiles of my community were sweeter than the melons we

shared. Our communal bond strengthened through the fruit of Grandmother Salem's labor, freely shared, produced together. They planted, and we ate. And we plant, so they eat.

There was more.

More to the scent than sweet memories, and happy faces. As I walked under the sign, I could see the truth for what it was. It was not happy children eating fruit grown for them and freely shared. It was broken fence posts littering the soil. Tire tracks, wide and rugged, ploughed over watermelons ripe, and still growing. Not an inch of the plot was spared. Sweeping ruts strewn with the shattered corpses of watermelons once destined for joyous faces.

Shattered melons festered in the hot August sun. The once sweet and alluring aroma turned foul and putrid. Varying states of decay veiled the nauseating smell beneath waves of sweetness carried on a pleasant summer breeze.

All is lost; nothing is left.

I leaned down in the churned soil and ran my fingers through it. Each grit and grain, each pocket still wanting for its next dose of nutrients, eager to host a new seed. Dampened soil, wet with the spilled guts of cherished melons clumped underneath my fingernails. As I clenched my fist and crushed the clustered clumps of soil between my fingers, their earthy scent mixed with the air circulating in a confusing aroma of delight and disgust.

When I lifted my hand up from the dirt there were three seeds in my palm. The first was crushed, flattened, and split at the ends. The second had been baked in the sun, its coat bleached white. The third, against all odds, had begun to sprout.