

Eye of the Needle

One-Act

by

Jacob Kader

CHARACTERS:

SAM, Palestinian-American, Early 20's

DAVEED, Israeli, Old City Security Guard, 30's

DAOUD, Palestinian, Old City Security Guard, 30's

PROPHET, Might have Jerusalem Syndrome, Any Age

DAVID, Israeli, Ben Gurion Airport Security, 30's

*(The four roles above may be played by the same performer.)

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EYE OF A NEEDLE

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STAGE RIGHT, A PERIMETER CORNER OF THE ANCIENT STONE WALLS OF THE OLD CITY OF JERUSALEM. STAGE LEFT A TABLE, WHICH WILL SWING AS A SECURITY STATION, LATER AS A PHOTOGRAPHY DARKROOM TABLE. ABOVE, CENTER OR UPSTAGE, A SCREEN TO PROJECT UPON.

PRE-DAWN.

Lights Shift on DAVEED,
Israeli Old City Security
Guard. Casual, cool, wrap-
around sunglasses (before
sunrise?), dressed in a black,
button-up short sleeve shirt,
cargo pants, boots, ear piece.

Enter SAM, early 20's,
Palestinian-American, wearing
hip traveler clothing, with a
tripod, camera
backpack/rollie, holding a
QUAKER OATS CANISTER, and a to-
go coffee. Sam understands how
strange he himself may look at
this hour, so he makes a big
wave.

SAM

Good morning!

DAVEED

American?

SAM

American.

DAVEED

Passport.

SAM

Sure.

Sam hands over his passport.
Daveed looks it over, talks
into his radio lapel mic.

DAVEED

You have to wait. Put bag on table. Where you live?

SAM

Brooklyn, New York.

DAVEED

Brooklyn! Fugheddaboutit.

SAM

Fugheddaboutit.

DAVEED

Fugheddaboutit.

SAM

Get tha fuck outta hea!

Daveed doesn't like that.

SAM (CONT'D)

Hey, fugheddabout it.

DAVEED

You know Difazio's Pizza in Bensonhurst?

SAM

I heard of it.

DAVEED

You haven't been? What you are waiting for, my friend? As soon as you go home, go there. You will go!!!-

SAM

-Okay okay. I don't eat much pizza, all the cheese, you know?

DAVEED

No like cheese?

SAM

Lactose intolerant.

Arab?

DAVEED

Yeah.

SAM

A shame.

DAVEED

Which?

SAM

Fugheddaboutit. So, my friend, what you are doing here?

DAVEED

I'm visiting Haram Al-Sharif to take a photo at sunrise.

SAM

Temple Mount.

DAVEED

Tomato, Tomäto.

SAM

Open backpack.

DAVEED

Sam rummages through his
backpack to show his digital
camera.

Here's my digital.

SAM

(holding up canister)

This is a pinhole camera.

Pinhole camera?

DAVEED

I put photographic paper at the back, put a hole here, and
when it's time, I take off this tape, exposing the paper to
light, and it makes a photo.

SAM

Daveed nods.

DAVEED

So, you're not planning on anything else up here?

SAM

Like what?

DAVEED

I don't know, something stupid?

SAM

No, just a photo. I fly home tonight, so I planned to get this photo before my flight.

DAVEED

Tense times, my friend.

SAM

Yeah. Always tense, no?

DAVEED

Everybody tense. Tense!

SAM

Whoa, yeah, very tense.

DAVEED

No Arab men between the ages of 18-40 allowed. You lucky you American. You tell your cousins not make war.

SAM

Sure, I'll tell 'em.

DAVEED

Why they so angry?

SAM

Who, the Israelis?

DAVEED

No, why Arabs so angry?

SAM

Because there is no peace. Why are Israelis so angry?

DAVEED

WE NOT ANGRY!

(breathes)

We not angry. Arabs always pass up a good deal.

SAM

All these years since Oslo and Israel's built a wall and all these Settlements everywhere. Wasn't such a good deal. For us.

DAVEED

Where you want people to live? All that land, so they make Settlement.

SAM

They're illegal.

DAVEED

Pssh, illegal.

SAM

Yeah, illegal.

DAVEED

Pfff, maybe to you.

SAM

You live on one of them, don't you?

DAVEED

Psssh. Fugheddaboutit.

(he holds his finger up to
the radio in his ear, nods)

My friend, go. Take your photo. Yalla, go before you make me angry.

SAM

Oh, wouldn't want that.

Daveed hands him back his
passport.

DAVEED

Go to Difazio's.

SAM

-I don't eat pizza-

DAVEED

-best pizza in New York.

Daveed walks off.

Sam repacks some of his camera gear.

DAOUD THE MUSLIM QUARTER
SECURITY GUARD enters stage
right and approaches Sam,
motions for Sam to come
closer.

SAM

Sabah el kheir. (Good morning)

DAOUD

Sabah el kheir. Passport please.

Sam hands it to him.

DAOUD

Last name Abu-Khdeir?

SAM

Yep.

DAOUD

You come to visit?

SAM

And to take a photograph.

Sam mimes taking a photo.

DAOUD

Of what?

SAM

Of Haram Al-Sharif? Dome of the rock. At sunrise.

DAOUD

Where camera?

SAM

(Sam shows him the Leica in
the backpack)

But this is one is, *yanni*, do-it-yourself camera. There is a
little pinhole here and it lets light in and exposes photo
paper at the back of the canister.

DAOUD

Small hole.

SAM

Pinhole.

DAOUD

Pinhole. Photographiyeh?

SAM

Yea, I'm an artist, well, trying to be.

DAOUD

Arteest?

SAM

Trying to be.

DAOUD

S'good. But no make money.

SAM

Yeah, no make money.

DAOUD

(chuckling)

Meen Wayn? Where from?

SAM

I live in New York City.

DAOUD

(whistling and shaking his
hand)

New York. Fugheddaboutit.

SAM

Fugheddaboutit.

DAOUD

Fugheddaboutit.

SAM

Get tha fuck outta hea!

Daoud is straight faced.

SAM

Fugheaddaboutit?

Daoud laughs, punches at Sam's
arm.

DAOUD

Where family from here?

SAM

Shu'fat. Just North.

DAOUD

Yes. I know it.

(hands back Sam's passport)

Ahlan-wa-Sahlan. (Welcome)

SAM

Shukran, shukran. (Thank you, thank you.)

DAOUD

Afwan. (You're welcome). You be careful. Very tense.

SAM

Yes, tense times.

Daoud takes out a smoke,
offers to Sam, who refuses.

DAOUD

So, New York, eh? Much money is New York.

(rubs fingers together)

SAM

Yeah, high rent.

DAOUD

You have kid?

SAM

Oh no. I mean, not yet. No kids.

DAOUD

Insha'allah someday.

SAM

Inhsa'allah. Bukra. Ma'alesh. (god willing, tomorrow, maybe/we'll see)

DAOUD

I have 3 kids. 2 daughter. 1 son.

SAM

Mabrouk, my friend. (Congratulations)

DAOUD

Shukran. This job number 3, I work all the time. Wife home with son.

SAM

Eeee, what can we do?

DAOUD

Eeee, what we can do? We come to America?

SAM

Insha'allah.

DAOUD

You help?

SAM

I don't know.

DAOUD

You know somebody who help?

SAM

I don't think so. I'm an artist.

DAOUD

Arteest.

Daoud smokes some more. Sam reaches into his bag and holds out a glad bag filled with oatmeal.

SAM

My friend, take. This is oatmeal.

DAOUD

Shu is oatmeal?

SAM

Oats. Uh, *shuufaan* I think is how you say it.

(points to the Quaker Oat can)

One cup of these with one cup of boiling water and cook, *yanni*, ten minutes. For your family, for your kids, my friend, for you.

DAOUD

(in Arabic)

Ana anzur miskeen? (I look poor/needy?)

(in English)

You think we can't afford food?

SAM

La, la/no, no. I can't take it through customs at the airport. My friend, please, I hate to waste food. You would be doing me the most kind of favors. Please, for me. Please.

DAOUD

(a little steamed but calming)

I help you?!

SAM

You help me.

DAOUD

Shuufaan.

SAM

Quaker Oats.

DAOUD

Tayeb, khalas. (Okay, enough.)

SAM

Khalas.

They shake hands warmly. A crackle through a walkie-talkie or his earpiece gives approval.

DAOUD

My friend. You are always most welcome here. *Ahlan wa Sahlan.*

SAM

Shukran.

DAOUD

Afwan, Mr. Arteest.

Daoud motions for Sam to enter the Haram al-Sharif, then exits.

Sam enters and takes a breath. Crosses Stage Right and makes a place for himself near the Old City walls.

He opens the tripod and mounts upon it the QUAKER OATS canister, using tape or string to secure it atop the tripod.

All systems go, he takes a sip of his coffee and looks out and around. He made it - he touches the stone walls.

He checks his watch, there is still time until sunrise.

PROPHET enters, a wanderer in a toga/gown/robe/galabeya - could be from any of the big religions or peoples, ancient or modern, hard to say.

PROPHET

Boker tov. (Good morning in Hebrew)

SAM

Morning.

PROPHET

Morning. *Sabah el kheir?*

SAM

Sabah el kheir.

PROPHET

Sabah al ful! The flower, the jasmine. But not now, it's too early, it's February, not yet time for spring flowers.

(holds hand out)

Baksheesh? (tip/change?)

SAM

La, baksheesh. (No tip/change.)

PROPHET

(scruffs his beard)

What brings you out this early?

SAM

A photograph.

PROPHET

With a pinhole camera?

SAM

You know it?

PROPHET

Of course, of course.

SAM

Couldn't miss the chance.

PROPHET

Of course you can't! The Old City in this interesting light.

Prophet squints his eyes and makes a camera with his two fingers in the same direction as Sam's pinhole camera.

PROPHET

Your grandparents would be proud.

SAM

Would they.

PROPHET

As you grew up, didn't they tell you to come back and visit the Old City from which they came?

Sam nods, looks around.

SAM

They left during Ottoman rule. Before the Brits and French and Americans carved it all to hell.

PROPHET

Ah, yes, a different time. Colonies come, colonies go, Jerusalem is a crossy-road.

SAM

You come from around here?

PROPHET

We all walk in the footsteps of the prophets.

Sam stiffens.

PROPHET

Have you been through all the Gates of the Old City? Damascus Gate-Bab al-Amud; Herod's Gate-Bab al-Zahra; Lion's Gate-Bab al-Asbat; Dung Gate-Bab al-Maghariba; Zion's Gate-Bab Haret al-Yahud; Jaffa Gate-Bab al-Khalil; New Gate-Bab al-Jadid; Golden Gate-Bab al-Dhahabi or bab al-Rahma.

Sam nods, he tried to follow.

PROPHET

Want me to say 'em in Hebrew?

SAM

I'm good, thanks.

PROPHET

That was 7 gates, yeah?

SAM

I think you said 8.

PROPHET

7 gates open. The last one is sealed. The Gate some believe Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Perhaps there are others? Perhaps you've heard of the secret, hidden gate?

SAM

Haven't.

PROPHET

(turning as he goes)

It's North. No South. No, it's East. West? Might be sealed, might be open, might be...might be...Are you religious? Be honest.

SAM

I am not.

PROPHET

Are you spiritual?

SAM

A little.

PROPHET

We try, we try. Do you believe the Prophets walked here?

SAM

Depends on how you define a prophet.

PROPHET

(laughs)

Hard to say, hard to say. The stories and gospels came many years after the events. The stories became stories and then scriptures and...but they've lasted, haven't they?

Sam checks his watch, waiting
for the sunrise.

PROPHET

Yes, yes, where was I? Where is it? What is the Eye of a Needle gate? Imagine a rich man came, his camel following, carrying all his wealth and riches, but they couldn't get through the Gates. The only way they could was to take off the splendiddness, the fortune, all the camel carried, so it could pass through the gate. You see?

Sam shrugs.

PROPHET

In Islam, only those who believe in the words and light of Allah, and the prophet Muhummad, peace be upon him, could enter the kingdom. Nonbelievers, they could not enter. Only a man who could shed his riches and help others could pass. And gates - GATES! So important in the Torah - gates of pain, suffering, power, of tears, gates to heaven. When their messiah comes it is foreseen that he will enter through Golden Gate.

SAM

The one that is sealed?

PROPHET

Sealed by Suleiman the Magnificent. The same Suleiman that executed his own son and 3 grandsons by strangulation.

SAM

For what?

PROPHET

For sedition! For treachery!

SAM

Jesus.

PROPHET

Jesus! Yes, he walked here!

(pointing at the oats
canister)

You could not have picked a better place for a photograph.

SAM

I thought so too-

PROPHET

A good angle...of rocks and stones and walls and gates and rulers and ruled and prayers and ages and epochs and stories and time...The Jebusites, the Israelites, King David, then Solomon, then Nebuchadnezzar, then Cyrus, Nehemiah, Alexander the Great, Seleucids, the Maccabeans, Hasmoneans, Pompey and the Romans - Herod, then Pontius Pilate, Titus, Hadrian. Then Simon Bar Kochba. Constantine and the Byzantines, Caliph Omar, Caliph Hakim, Seljuks, Fatimids, then the Crusaders -
(brandishes an air sword!)

Saladin! Then Suleyman the Magnificent. Montefiore. Allenby. Ben Gurion. And a little bit of King Hussein. These were the ones that pass through these walls. I didn't even get to all the prophets! Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Muhammad, peace be upon him, Jesus, Matthew, Mark, Luke and Joh-

SAM

-Okay, okay, okay that's fine, I'm good.

PROPHET

(scratching his scruff and
holding out his hand)

Baksheesh?

SAM

(sighs)

Okay, I need to get rid of these shekels, so...
(fishing around for whatever
and handing it over)

Here you go.

PROPHET

See, shedding your riches, you might well pass through the Eye of A Needle.

(counting)

This all you have?

SAM

That's all I got.

The Prophet does a bow, prayer hands, the cross, a Muslim bow, all of the above, as he shuffles off singing a little song, exits.

Lights shift. A stunning sunrise in the East. Sam removes the tape from the front of his pinhole camera, exposing the image as the light overtakes the stage, he counts the minutes on his watch.

The lights shift again like in a timelapse as Sam breaks down his gear, then moves stage left with his rollie backpack.

Sounds of the airport.

The table Stage Left becomes the Ben Gurion Airport Security Checkpoint. DAVID has on a uniform of white button down shirt, blue latex gloves, bossy.

DAVID

Bag on the counter.

Sam lifts his rollie backpack up and unzips everything.

David rummages through his bag, clumsily holding his camera.

SAM

You have to be careful with that-

DAVID

(holding camera)

What this?

He bobbles the camera and Sam has to almost catch it.

DAVID

Tense times, have to check everything.

David holds up a sealed
envelope clearly labeled
"UNEXPOSED PHOTOGRAPHIC
PAPER".

DAVID

What this?

SAM

Like it says - unexposed photographic paper. I'm a
photographer and this is film that cannot, CANNOT, be exposed
to light. It cannot go through the X-ray machines either.
Just very special paper, my friend.

DAVID

How do I know that?

SAM

Because I'm telling you. I promise you, it's just photo paper
inside. You can feel it.

DAVID

I have to open it up.

SAM

Please don't open it up unless you're in a dark room. It's
literally just...look, dude, I'm not, like, a spy.

DAVID

(serious)

Why you say that?

SAM

What do you mean?

DAVID

These are magic words that make me open up your file and make
sure you're not a spy.

SAM

I'm just an artist.

DAVID

That's the other magic word to make sure you are not spy. Or
a revolutionary or activist or terrorist or something.

SAM

A spy wouldn't say "I'm not a spy".

DAVID

Of course they would, they do as trick. Reverse psychology.

David is looking at a computer
monitor.

DAVID

We keep files.

SAM

On who?

DAVID

On you?

SAM

Me?

DAVID

Everybody.

SAM

Even Americans?

DAVID

Everybody who come.

SAM

Even Palestinian-Americans?-

DAVID

-Who you visit here?

David looking from computer to
Sam, ready to type.

SAM

You want names?

DAVID

Yes names!

SAM

Uncle Imad. Salah. Yazeed. Yah-yah. Farouk. *Majnoon*,
Tilihasteesi-

*(These last two are not names, they're "you're crazy" and
"kiss my ass". It's spelled phonetically and I don't give a
shit.)*

DAVID

Yep, those are your cousins. Who else?

SAM

I don't know, so many.

DAVID

Those names check out.

SAM

You know all my family?

DAVID

Yeah, I probably know more about your family than you do.

Sam is in slight shock. David
starts shuffling stuff around.

DAVID

You can put away.

Sam repacks. David holds onto
the Photographic Paper
envelope, groping it, holding
it up to the light.

DAVID

I have to open this.

SAM

Please don't. It's just paper.

DAVID

We have to open it.

SAM

Please-

David undoes a portion of the tape, opening up the top, looking in, trying to pull the paper out when Sam stops him.

SAM

Please! Stop! Don't expose it to light! Don't take it out, you'll ruin it!

David jerks away from Sam's hands, but stops.

DAVID

(threatening)

You want to miss your flight?

David peers inside one last time, does a poor job of re-sealing it, then slides it across the table, where it falls off in front of Sam's feet.

DAVID

Go.

Sam grumbles, looks at his watch, trying to repack quickly to catch his flight.

Sam beelines off stage. David resets the tables and exits.

Lights Shift to Red-Hued darkroom lighting.

Sam returns carrying three chemical trays as the table becomes a dark room for photo processing (*not really using chemicals, just the trays and tongs for moving the paper in/out, and a hanging wire to dry).

(The projected screen above
will slowly reveal what he
sees.)

SAM

Early photography was surly. A concoction of chemicals. Part art, part science. Vaporized nostrils, watery and blinded eyes, liquids melting gloves, searing and scarring hands. Now, it just stinks up the place, won't kill ya.

Sam takes the the Pinhole
Paper out of the sleeve and
places it in the first tray.

The first bath, the Developer Wash, is short. The chemicals make contact with the silver halide on the photo paper. Doesn't need long, no more than two minutes.

Those early chemists, artists really, figured out that an emulsion of silver halide or whatever, then exposed to light, would generate a negative reproduction of whatever a lens was pointing at. In the case of a pinhole camera, not a negative, but a positive image, exposed directly to emulsion. A positive image - the way it is. Unlike a negative - turned inside out. Negatives, positives; positives, negatives.

Sam moves the paper to the
next tray. The projection
slowly showing a black and
white exposure.

Next is the Fixer wash, sets the image, holds in the chemicals, sixty seconds.

Pioneeringly, we now had portraits of grandma looking back at us. Horses galloping. Images from the "Orient". Civil War death fields. Intake photos at Ellis Island. Dustbowl children with hunger pangs. Children. Children surviving or not surviving wars. A century filled with war with a witness beyond words. A way to capture the horror. And beauty. And the mundane. And memories...

Sam moves the paper again.

And finally, The Wash, to clean away the chemicals, two minutes or so, before hanging it to dry to see what you got.

A photograph tells a fuller story. One moment that branches off. How somebody came to land in the frame, what the "there" even is, where somebody's going. Moments can be landscapes, places, objects, still-life's, comedies, tragedies. And underneath what's in the frame, what's outside the frame - the choices a photographer makes. The frame. The composition. The lens choice. The light. The dark. Dark and light; light and dark. Negatives and positives; positive and negatives.

Sam removes the exposure from
the last wash of chemicals,
clips it to a hanging wire to
let it dry.

The image above on the screen
is almost clear, but begins to
fade halfway through the image
where it was exposed to light.

Sometimes you look at a photo whether you're in it or took it and it arouses other memories. Or the memories of our families, the shared histories, the stories, the identities that are formed. Or were formed. Or are being forgotten. We try to hold on. We try to pass them down to the next generation. It's the holding on and passing onto that's the hardest. So we take photos to help to remember...

Sam looks at the photo,
despondent. What happened to
it, he wonders. He knows what
happened to it. Anger,
resentment, frustration, pain,
loss.

SAM

...to remember a place that each time I leave I'm not sure if I'll ever go again. A place where, as time passes, I forget what it looks like a little bit each day.

The image of the Dome of the
Rock and Old City Walls is
washed out and hard to make
out.

Sam looks at it long and hard.

He exits.

THE PHOTOGRAPH AND LIGHTS GO
INTENSELY BRIGHT.

BLACK.

THE END.

