



Bend like a Willow Tree

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March, 2022



‘Watch out, we’ll catch every one of you!’

Hamza’s shrill voice echoed in the stairwell, and through the opening, he saw a swarm of children scattering to hide behind the surrounding blocks covered with graffiti. Running as fast as he could, he went down the two floors separating the old shopping arcades from the esplanade, a barren square of concrete located at the center of the Willows residential compound. As he accelerated, Hamza heard:

‘Wait for me!’



Ali was struggling to follow. He and Ali always made arrangements to be in the same team when they were playing cops and robbers after school. Of course, they almost always won, as Ali knew all the hiding places in the neighbourhood, and because most of the other kids were younger than them. 8-year-olds stand no chance against 10-year-olds in a race.

The rain had just stopped, and the neighbourhood was regaining its colours in the pale sun. Hamza noticed movement behind the garbage containers, and he headed across the square, but suddenly, he twisted his ankle in a pothole and fell heavily into a muddy puddle. As he slowly opened his eyes, he could see all the buildings in circle around him: four towers, each seven stories high, all with the same small windows and weird balconies that made them look like crooked creatures. Hamza's heart sank as he realized that what he was looking at would soon be gone.

At the Willows, the imminent demolition of building 3 was the subject of many discussions, including among Hamza's group of friends. After their game, as the kids were walking back to the street, they passed by the worksite where machines and piles of construction material were stored. Even though the inhabitants of the district had risen against this new project, it seemed very real now. Yunis, one of the youngest and most daring of them all, couldn't help but pee against the fence in an ultimate gesture of protest. He yelled:

'They shouldn't have come to bother us in the first place, we were doing fine without their shit...'

After years of poor maintenance due to alleged lack of money, the city had decided to replace the Willows social housing and its somewhat crappy flats with more modern buildings, in order to make this part of the city centre attractive again for families and businesses. At least, that is what Hamza had understood during one of the neighbourhood gatherings. What he did not understand was the logic behind forcing dozens of families to move out just to allow new ones to come. Because of the 'revitalization' of their 'problem area', as the information



leaflet that had been distributed put it, Hamza's parents as well as Yunis's had to find a new place to call home, leaving more than a decade of life at the Willows behind.

When his mom had first told him about the construction project, Hamza had been worried about losing his friends and having to live far away from everything he knew, but she had promised they would stay. The city council had promised, too, they would have priority on the new apartments once finished. However, after seeing the difference in rent prices, his parents had started to look elsewhere; with his dad receiving a mechanic salary and his mom staying at home to take care of his little sisters, Hamza's family just could not afford to live at the Willows any longer. Hamza had felt a strong feeling of injustice, and one night he had taken his anger out on his parents:

'Because of you, I will never see them again, not Ali, not Dimi or Yunis or Issa! Everybody will just forget me!'

'Don't be so dramatic! Public transports exist, you can always come back with a bus or whatever to meet Ali.'

'This is bullshit and you know it! Since Hadji Ahmed retired and moved away, nobody has heard of him. I tell you, it's as if he didn't exist anymore! It's so unfair, why do we have to go? Why is it always the same people that have to pay?'

He had vigorously slammed the door, and after a while, had heard his dad mumble, resigned:

'Kid's going nuts talking to us like this, but he is not wrong though'.

Trying to put these thoughts aside, Hamza suddenly realized his little group had reached the neighbourhood shops. The streets around had been noticeably transformed during the past months, as a different type of population had joined the Willows' small world. Some artists and young people with weird ideas had seen the cheap rents and decaying stores as an opportunity to start new



businesses, and a few boutiques were already flourishing. For instance, Hadji Ahmed had run an all-in-one store for ages, where you could buy everything from shoes to computers and even furniture. But when he retired, the old man had no family members to take it over, and the cramped and dusty shop had become an old-style barber shop. Just a bit further, a chatty woman had opened a small gallery displaying artsy candles with dried flowers incrusting in them, which Hamza secretly thought were very beautiful. One day, while he was walking by with his little sister, they had pressed their nose against the window in awe, and the smiling lady had offered him a tiny blue candle for free. He had then proudly given it as a gift to his mother.

This new vibrant atmosphere attracted more and more people from the city and even tourists could now be seen in the local bars. Ali liked to make jokes about how they had become the cool kids of the city, thanks to the Willows arcades becoming 'the new place to be'. But it was annoying that the very people that had despised their neighborhood, considering it too insecure and grungy to deserve their attention, were all of a sudden falling in love with the place as if they had discovered an untouched Eldorado. To the boys, it had always been *their* Eldorado.

The children were thirsty, but the kebab place where they usually hung out was closed at this time of the day, so Hamza suggested they try and ask the adjacent fancy coffee shop for some Coca-Cola. As they entered, it seemed people were looking at them, yet Hamza could not recognize anybody. He saw the waitress imperceptibly tensing up when she inquired about their orders. Ali was about to pay for the others, but when he saw the prices on the receipt, he almost choked and asked to remove half of the drinks because he had not enough money. With a polite tone, the waitress then advised them to take their drinks outside, and as they felt awkward in the almost silent room, they obeyed.

This experience left Hamza thoughtful on his way back to the buildings. Once home, he let his mind drift again. Not only had the shopping street changed, he thought, but the Willows public school had also welcomed many new students.



Hamza did not know them well, as they did not mix with kids from the Willows towers, but he felt their families were not like his. For example, none of the new kids would eat breakfast at school. Ever since Maïa had fainted during her history presentation because her dad had forgotten to buy groceries, the teacher brought milk and bread and left it on a table in the entrance hall. Nearly all Hamza's friends would gather around the food every morning, especially Dimi and Yunis, whose mothers' cleaning shifts lasted until late morning. Apparently, the newcomers did not need free food.

The only new friend he had made this year was Leon, but that did not count because Leon was not like the others. Both liked to play chess together, a game Hamza had learnt with Hadji Ahmed, and when Hamza's mother cooked fresh Künefe, he'd often invite Leon home. Leon had once confessed that he enjoyed hanging out at Hamza's place, especially when all the neighbours came, because there were always good stories being shared. It made him feel less alone.

Hamza also went along to Leon's home, where his mother, Karina, was so loving and never punished them when they were messing around. He admired her rope-like hair, it looked just like Issa's hair, only in blonde color. Karina was always overly enthusiastic about things, but Hamza was not sure she really understood what was happening, as it sometimes seemed as if she lived on another planet. Hamza would always remember the first time Karina had met his own mother, as after having extensively complimented their carpets in the living room, she had whispered:

'Also, Elif, don't hesitate to talk Arabic with Leon, I know he will really feel home here with you and he will be happy to learn a few words with you, right buddy?'

Mom had nervously pulled a thread from her gown and, pressing her lips together, she had replied:

'I wish I could, but honestly it is going to be really complicated...'

'Why so? I can guarantee you he is very quick at picking up languages!'



‘Sure, but my main concern is that we speak Turkish here at home.’

Leon and Hamza had not been able to refrain from laughing, and although Karina had apologized, Mom had been furious for hours.

That funny moment seemed very distant now, and everything felt more complicated. Hamza was totally lost, but the difficult part was that he did not know who to blame for this situation. It seemed all the changes he had already faced were nothing compared to the tsunami a move into another neighborhood would represent. Just the thought of it made him want to cry, but he then remembered how Hadji Ahmed used to talk about their community, always in a wise and metaphorical way:

‘Hamza, do you know what a willow tree does? It bends when it must, but surely never breaks. That’s us, right? We are stronger than you think, they won’t cut our roots and branches so soon’.

As much as he felt those strong ties between people in the neighborhood were still alive, the boy wished he had the words to tell the world. To shout and to show everybody what was happening in the Willows housing compound...

Explanatory appendix

This short story is inspired by Loretta Lees’2008 article on ‘Gentrification and Social Mixing: Towards an Inclusive Urban Renaissance?’ (*Urban Studies*, volume 45, issue 12, pp. 2449–70). Academic research on gentrification and social mixing is mainly policy oriented: although it often provides a valuable basis for understanding the political, economic and social dynamics of gentrification, such as the decrease in affordable housing, social polarization and increasing precarity, articles such as Lees’ sometimes fail to adequately picture the drama displacement and social change represents at the individual or family scale. Literature on the social and psychological effects of gentrification is still



surprisingly sparse; my short story is an attempt to explore these aspects. Moreover, many studies emphasize the importance of specifying a neighbourhood's socio-historical context, as there are many different types of gentrifiers and of gentrified areas. Therefore, the fictional aspect of the short story becomes particularly relevant for the topic of gentrification. In her article, Lees discusses whether there is evidence of 'positive gentrification', in other words if the policies promoting social-mixing development projects in underserved neighbourhoods really contribute to alleviate precarity and build more sustainable communities. Her findings rather suggest that gentrification actually exacerbate existing inequalities, social polarization and segregation, eventually leading to displacement of low-income groups.

Different elements of Lees' research are reflected in my fictionalisation: the story revolves around a central event, an archetypical project of 'urban revitalization' meant to attract middle classes back in a low-income neighbourhood, which induces spiralling rents prices and results in displacement for Hamza's family; the disruption in the microcosm of the community, caused by broader gentrification of the neighbourhood, is highlighted in the conversations, as well as in the description of the spatial transformation of the area; also, the growing segregation and lack of interaction between newcomers and long term residents is pictured through the boys' experience of rejection in the expensive coffee shop and through the kids' behaviour at school; finally, the character of Karina as well as the new 'creative' class exemplify the desire of the middle class for cultural diversity and illustrate, through their somewhat voyeuristic and appropriative attitude, how socio-cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings and create tensions.

The story is framed from the perspective of a boy, Hamza: devoid of judgement, the contemplative and relatively innocent look he has on the world around him becomes the lens through which we can better understand the traumatic consequences of gentrification and displacement at the individual level. This subjectivity allows us to reduce complex social science concepts to simple everyday life situations that everyone can relate to. The intimate setting helps us



identifying ourselves, shifting the focus on the *perception* of gentrification, on Hamza's feelings and on the psychological impacts of social mixing policies. Considering the process of gentrification through the eyes of a child that does not even know what the word means further underlines the powerlessness and vulnerability of the affected communities in the face of such events.

Furthermore, the deliberate choice to avoid anchoring the narrative into a defined place and time adds a universal dimension to it. Hamza's story is personal, but it could be anyone's; although he feels alone, many isolated individuals suffer from the effects of gentrification around the world. However, the Willows neighbourhood comes as a reminder to keep faith – willow trees do not break, they bend. They symbolize hope, safety and a sense of belonging, and as the future of Hamza remains open, the power of his community to heal, reinvent itself and to grow strong again should not be underestimated.

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This post is part of our second Academic Fiction thread – see [Dennis Rodger's introductory post](#).