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7 **Screenland** Great Scott *By Jonathan Mahler* / 11 **Talk** Patric Gagne *By David Marchese* / 14 **The Ethicist** Uninformed Consent *By Kwame Anthony Appiah* / 16 **Letter of Recommendation** Steakhouses *By Rita Bullwinkel* / 18 **Eat** Ricotta Toast With Roasted Grapes *By Ligaya Mishan*



Photograph by Renia Matar for The New York Times

20 **Meet the Ambivalents**

By Marcela Valdes / In a polarized nation, the main “swing voters” left to reach are the ones who swing between voting and not voting. What do we know about them?

24 **Why Pants Are Blowing Up**

By Jonah Weiner / And what the latest swing from skinny to wide tells us about ourselves.

30 **A Shooting in Vermont**

By Rozina Ali / After a gunman shattered their lives in America, three Palestinian college students wrestle with what it meant — for the country, and for their own future.

36 **Uncut Gems**

By Joshua Hunt / How the Criterion Collection became the film world’s arbiter of taste.

Hisham Awartani and his mother, Elizabeth Price, at Brown University in February. Hisham was shot and paralyzed in Vermont in November. Page 30.

4 **Contributors** / 5 **The Thread** / 14 **Judge John Hodgman** / 17 **Read Like the Wind** / 46, 48, 50 **Puzzles** / 46 **Puzzle Answers**

On the Cover *Photograph by Bobby Doherty for The New York Times. Stylist: Karolyn Pho. Groomer: David Searle. Makeup: Sara Tagaloa.*

A SHOOTING IN VERMONT

After a gunman shattered their lives in America, three Palestinian college students wrestle with what it meant — for the country, and for their own future. *By Rozina Ali / Photographs by Rania Matar*



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innan Abdalhamid lived in the United States until he was 2, when his mother, Tamara Tamimi, made her big move to the West Bank. That was where her parents were born, and for her, the idea of a Palestinian home had become a lodestar. In 1988, when she was 15 and protesters had taken to the streets to challenge Israeli occupation in what would become known as the first intifada, she told a local news reporter in Northern California, where she lived at the time, that if she were there, she, too, would be throwing stones at the tanks. “I would feel obligated,” she said. The news segment portrayed Tamara as being “caught between two worlds” — an American one, in which she rehearsed “Bye Bye Birdie” at school, and a Palestinian one, in which she spoke Arabic and struggled to reach relatives back home. She finally moved to the West Bank in 2005, as the region teetered on a precarious peace. She and her husband wanted to raise their child in a world where he could have a community that wasn’t possible in America.

In Ramallah, Kinnan met Hisham, a slight boy with light hair who was also born in the United States. Hisham’s mother, Elizabeth Price, first visited the West Bank from Boston in 1994 to research her undergraduate thesis in anthropology; she fell in love, first with Palestine and then with a Palestinian man named Ali Awartani. Soon, the two families were scheduling play dates and spending holidays together. The boys became inseparable.

When it came time to start school, they enrolled in Ramallah Friends School, a private Quaker institution in the north of a city that had become the de facto capital of the West Bank. The literacy rate in the Palestinian territories is among the highest in the world — more than 97 percent — but even in this milieu, Ramallah Friends shined. Founded in 1869 for girls in nearby villages, it had withstood multiple cycles of conflict, periodically serving as a hospital and a refugee center, to become the only international baccalaureate program in the West Bank. Beyond practicing the Quaker tradition of silent reflection, the school was largely non-denominational. It was not uncommon for graduates to attend college abroad and then perhaps work

to improve the deteriorating political situation at home: The open landscape outside Ramallah was shrinking as an Israeli settlement visible from campus expanded.

It was at school, one day in the third grade, that Hisham and Kinnan met a shy kid on the playground, Tahseen Aliahmad. Tahseen’s mother was from Gaza, and his father was from the West Bank, where he was born as well. He had never traveled to the United States, as Hisham and Kinnan did. But none of this mattered to the boys. “We just kind of picked each other,” Tahseen recalled.

The three friends approached the world’s perplexities with an intellectual eye. They dedicated themselves to watching YouTube videos on challenging scientific and psychological concepts. As grade school turned to middle school, they would pile into Hisham’s room and talk about ideas and history and soccer. They joined Model United Nations and, dressed in suits and ties, debated intractable international conflicts. Long evening hours were spent in one of Ramallah’s many cafes playing chess or cards.

Living in Ramallah, all three friends had West Bank IDs, which in most cases made it near impossible to travel in Israel. But Kinnan and Hisham were also sons of American citizens. This conferred a particular freedom that Tahseen didn’t have: Once or twice a year, their mothers could drive them into the rolling hills west of Ramallah, through the cookie-cutter streets of Tel Aviv and then finally to the azure Mediterranean Sea. As the two friends grew older, though, this freedom started to feel uncomfortable. They didn’t like that Tahseen couldn’t take such trips, and visiting Tel Aviv was alienating; no one there seemed to care what was happening just miles away. This privilege came to an end anyway when Hisham and Kinnan turned 16, the cutoff age by Israeli law.

The friends largely avoided run-ins with Israeli forces or the settlers surrounding Ramallah. Still, they were growing up in the shadow of the second intifada. Security was tight. Long gun barrels followed them at military checkpoints, pricking them with fear. As a child, Hisham heard about

a friend of his cousin’s who was killed by Israeli soldiers. A friend’s father was arrested and disappeared into the prison system for a year and a half. No one knew precisely why. Once, when Hisham was hiking, a group of soldiers demanded to see his identity card. They let him go, but he was rattled.

The occupation affected Tahseen intimately: He couldn’t visit his relatives in Gaza, including his grandmother, because Israel restricted movement between the two strips of Palestinian territory. One of his earliest memories was of being rushed away by his dad from a tear-gas canister that landed near him. When he was 11, soldiers barged into the living room of his house without warning, pointed their guns at the family and shouted out a name — Tahseen’s neighbor. They had the wrong house. Years later, it happened again.

But Tahseen saw all this as a temporary part of his life. His plan was to leave Ramallah, study abroad and make money. Palestine is going to stay occupied, he thought. But *he* would be fine.

Kinnan and Hisham appeared to be more troubled. Early one afternoon in May 2021, when Hisham was 18, he ventured to El Bireh, an adjoining city where people were protesting. Demonstrations had erupted across the West Bank in response to Israeli airstrikes on Gaza and efforts to expel Palestinian families from their homes in East Jerusalem. The teachers at Ramallah Friends regularly discussed the occupation — a subject that could hardly be avoided even in a class on poetry. Still, they discouraged students from attending demonstrations, where they could be killed. A classmate who attended one had been shot in the leg. But Hisham was tired of feeling humiliated and oppressed. I don’t accept this, he thought. I’m not going to take this lying down.

When he reached the protest site, in a patchy grass field near a military checkpoint, soldiers were launching tear-gas canisters toward the 50-odd demonstrators. A dumpster near Hisham was turned on its side. A burning tire cast a pall of smoke across the sky. Some of the Palestinians threw stones at the tanks, and Israeli soldiers fired back. Then Hisham felt a sharp pinch in his left leg. A rubber-coated bullet had cut through the flesh above his knee.

At school, Kinnan noticed Hisham limping and immediately asked, “Was it the knee?” They had all heard the stories about soldiers’ aiming for the kneecaps to permanently disable protesters. Hisham’s knee was unharmed, but he saw his wound as a mark of pride, something to brag about. Kinnan, for his part, didn’t partake in demonstrations, but he was still shaken by news of the killing of Palestinians. He wanted to become an E.M.T., to help treat children in refugee camps who were shot by Israeli soldiers.

A few weeks after the demonstration, the three boys graduated from Ramallah Friends School together. Hisham had been accepted to Brown University. Kinnan, too, would be going to the United States, to Haverford College near

Philadelphia. Tahseen was accepted at Concordia University in Canada, but as he made preparations, word came that the Canadian government had rejected his visa: His family didn't have enough money in their bank account.

From afar, Tahseen watched his friends thrive in their new lives as he struggled with his own. He completed some coding and visual-art projects at home and tried to smile through his friends' visit during the winter break. The unexpected change in life plans humbled him. He sent another round of applications and was accepted at Trinity College, in Hartford, Conn.; this time, the United States granted him a visa.

At Trinity, Tahseen listened as his classmates shared their experiences interacting with the police and debated whether Black Americans could ever be treated as full citizens. Around Hartford, he saw people living on the streets and heard the *pop pop* of gunfire. It was his first time in America, but it felt familiar. He was noticing "systematic discrimination in a new context," he said, and how half the country could be completely blind to it.

Then, last October, as he started his second year, Hamas gunmen breached a fence and attacked towns across southern Israel, killing civilians and capturing hostages. And then Israel began pounding Gaza.

For the first time, Tahseen felt a responsibility toward Palestine.

Tahseen immediately joined a small group in Hartford to protest Israeli bombardment. At Brown, Hisham spoke at a vigil hosted by the university's Students for Justice in Palestine chapter to remember the Gazans killed. As weeks went on and bombardment continued, Kinnan joined calls to demand a cease-fire. He wasn't "caught between two worlds" as Tamara had been, but trying to survive a single one, in which one home, the United States, was helping to bomb another home, the Palestinian territories. Like many others, the three friends donned kaffiyehs, checkered scarves that long ago became a symbol of Palestinian solidarity.

As Israel's assault on Gaza continued, so did protests; as the outpouring of Palestinian support grew, so did accusations that such support was contributing to rising antisemitism; as kaffiyehs became ubiquitous, so did claims that the scarves were threatening. A woman in Brooklyn threw hot coffee at a father wearing a kaffiyeh at a playground. At Harvard, a professor's wife followed a graduate student down a suburban street and accused her of "making families feel unsafe with your terrorist scarf."

Threats and attacks against Arabs and Muslims were climbing nationwide. A week into the conflict, an Illinois landlord was charged with stabbing a 6-year-old Palestinian boy to death. (He has pleaded not guilty.) In Denver, someone shot at the home of a Palestinian family, and in Manhattan, a former State Department official



Hisham Awartani (left) and Kinnan Abdalhamid at their sixth-grade graduation at Ramallah Friends School in 2015. Opening pages: Hisham at Brown University in February.

harassed a halal cart vendor. "If we killed 4,000 Palestinian kids, you know what?" he said. "It wasn't enough."

Still, deadly violence in the United States seemed rare compared with that in the West Bank, where Israeli forces were detaining Palestinians en masse. Even before the Oct. 7 attacks, 2023 was a particularly deadly year; now deaths shot up. By the end of the year, Israeli forces and settlers would kill 507 civilians there, including 124 children — the highest death toll since the United Nations began recording such statistics in 2005. The friends were planning to meet in Burlington, Vt., and stay with Hisham's grandmother for Thanksgiving. Some of the parents encouraged them to stay in the United States for the winter holidays, too. They thought their children would be safer there.

In Burlington, the three friends were together for the first time since the conflict began. They flitted away the break with video games and conversations late into the night — a respite from the world.

On the Saturday after Thanksgiving, they left Hisham's grandmother's house on North Prospect Street for an evening stroll. It was just before 6:30. As they sauntered down the road, Hisham noticed a man's silhouette against the darkened sky. He was standing on the porch of an apartment building, and his neck was craned away from them, as if searching. They had passed the building earlier, going the other direction. Perhaps he was waiting for them? Or maybe he had noticed the trio during one of their many walks around the neighborhood that weekend?

As the three young men approached, they recall, the man on the porch moved toward them, pulling a gun from his waistband, and started firing. Tahseen crumpled to the pavement first, then



Tahseen Allahmad at Trinity College in February.

Hisham. The man fired two more shots as Kinnan bolted across the street and jumped a fence.

Terrified that his friends were dead, Kinnan limped toward a lit house. He had lost his phone in the scramble. “Please, come out!” he begged the family inside. “I need y’all to come out!” Faces stared back at him: this strange, frantic young man, shouting at them. They finally emerged, called 911 and sat Kinnan on a bench. A sharp pain in his backside announced that he, too, had been shot.

Some yards away, Hisham, who was lying on his stomach, fished out his phone and with desperate, bloody fingers pushed the emergency-call button. Tahseen’s lungs filled with blood, and his breath grew shallow. He had never been religious, but now, as he waited for help or death, he mumbled the shahada into the night air.

An ocean away, Elizabeth Price, Hisham’s mother, was woken up by a call from her brother in Burlington. He was at a hospital, he told her. Hisham and his friends had been shot. Elizabeth struggled to process what he was saying. Shock came first, then guilt: The children had been visiting *her* mother’s house. She immediately rang Tamara. “Shot where, shot how?” Tamara screamed into the phone. Her mind raced. “Is Kinnan OK? Is he dead? Is he dead?”

The families hurried to reach Vermont. Elizabeth, her husband and Tamara headed out first; Tahseen’s mother, who had to sort out visa logistics, would join them a week later. Although Ben Gurion Airport, near Tel Aviv, is an hour’s drive from Ramallah, Hisham’s father was not allowed to access it with his Palestinian ID. The parents followed the route that most Palestinians take: They drove through roads where settlers had been throwing stones at passing cars, crossed a bridge at the Jordanian border that Israel

controlled and finally passed through multiple security checkpoints at the international airport near Amman. They could cross the border only in the narrow window Israel allowed, which happened to be long before their scheduled flight, so they waited 12 hours in Amman, in fear and disbelief.

At the I.C.U., the three friends compared their wounds. Kinnan was struck in the gluteal muscles, but the hospital staff allowed him to stay in the unit with his friends, who suffered more severe injuries. A bullet ripped into Tahseen’s chest above his right lung, and his fall cracked his ribs. Hisham could no longer feel his legs. “Hey, guys, did we just get shot?” Tahseen asked.

Groggy with shock and painkillers, they laughed and started to joke: “Brilliant, that this happened in Vermont.” “It was probably the only crime Burlington has seen all year.” They didn’t say much about the shooter. They could guess why they were targeted. For the past two months, they had seen Palestinians being killed in droves, with the support of the United States — and no one seemed to care. Someone doesn’t randomly decide to shoot someone, the friends agreed.

Within hours, the police came to talk to them. Hate crimes, which are predicated on the state of mind of the aggressor, are challenging to prove in court. This case was even more tricky: The shooter said nothing out loud before, during or after the shooting, and the man the police had charged in the attack, Jason Eaton, was a somewhat complicated character. He had returned to Vermont the previous summer, after some years in upstate New York. Things had taken a bad turn — a series of troubled relationships and jobs that didn’t work out. He spent Thanksgiving with his mother, who later told a reporter that he had had mental-health struggles but was “totally normal” that day. Eaton appeared to have engaged in political discussion online. According to a local Vermont paper, he had left comments on X about an op-ed piece about Gaza — “What if someone occupied your country? Wouldn’t you fight them?” — and described himself as a “radical citizen pa-trolling democracy and crapitalism for oathcreepers.” Per a police affidavit, Eaton had a pistol, a rifle and two shotguns in his apartment, along with ammunition consistent with casings found at the crime scene. (Eaton has pleaded not guilty to three charges of attempted second-degree murder.)

As the police began to run down evidence of potential bias, the friends shared what they thought Eaton might have seen at the time: On the walk, they were speaking a mix of Arabic and English, and Hisham was wearing his kaffiyeh, as was Tahseen. They were the ones the assailant shot first.

The parents began arriving in Burlington that Wednesday. When Elizabeth first saw Hisham on a video call just hours after the shooting, he was shivering. A bullet was lodged in his

spine, his body couldn't maintain a consistent temperature and doctors were preparing for major organ failure. He was more stable now. Elizabeth stroked his hair while his father held his hand. Tamara touched Kinnan's face, almost in disbelief. Tahseen's mother, who hadn't seen her son for more than a year, arrived a few days later and held him tightly. The boys were not in an Israeli prison, or dead in the West Bank, or under the rubble in Gaza. They were here, alive.

Immediately, support poured in from around the country. Photos of Kinnan, Hisham and Tahseen flashed on major networks. Officials condemned the attack, and Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont spoke with Kinnan privately over Zoom as the other two friends recovered. Kinnan returned to Haverford soon after the shooting and juggled classes with media requests and meetings with the college's administration. He was doing a "monkey dance," as he called it, trying to draw people's attention to the fact that not just he but also Gazan children deserved to live.

Doctors were unable to remove the bullet from Hisham's spine, and he is now paralyzed from the chest down. On Dec. 6, he was moved to a rehab facility in Boston. Hisham didn't talk much about his paralysis. To family and friends, he seemed to accept the challenge as a part of life. Elizabeth was grateful that her son had always been even-tempered. He wanted to walk again, and she knew struggle would come.

Tahseen was discharged in early December, too. Doctors removed much of the bullet from his chest, but some shrapnel remains. His terrified mother called relatives back home, who reassured her that every other neighbor, cousin and son carried bullet fragments in their flesh.

Tahseen visited Hisham in Boston soon after leaving Burlington. He couldn't imagine seeing his friend, his brother really, now in a wheelchair, and he braced himself for tears. Yet when he entered the room, there was the same Hisham, sitting as he always sat. Growing up, Hisham bore the brunt of the friends' jokes, and now he offered himself to Tahseen on a platter. He was Joe Swanson, Hisham announced, referring to the musclebound character in a wheelchair from "Family Guy."

As they recovered, the war raged on. A few days after the shooting, Hisham gave a rare public statement through the S.J.P. chapter at Brown: "Had I been shot in the West Bank, where I grew up, the medical services that saved my life here would likely have been withheld by the Israeli Army. The soldier who shot me would go home and never be convicted." In January, a Palestinian American teenage boy from Louisiana was shot in the head and killed by Israelis in the West Bank, according to the Israeli police. No one has yet been charged.

Individually, the friends struggled with all kinds of guilt: Hisham invited his friends to Burlington for Thanksgiving. Tahseen suggested taking a walk that evening. Kinnan avoided



Kinnan Abdalhamid at Haverford College in February.

getting injured as seriously as his friends. And then there was the guilt of being alive. Compared with Gazans, they are privileged: They are able to eat, drink water, hold their loved ones.

The friends tried to understand why they had received so much support. In America, their shooting had been perceived as an act of hate, but if it had happened in the West Bank or Gaza, they would be considered collateral damage or even legitimate targets — potential terrorists. Kinnan wondered: Who counted, who didn't? Was it simply that he was educated? That he was American? But Palestinians overseas are also human, he said, "and they're just as smart, and they have dreams, and the same hopes."

Kinnan, Hisham and Tahseen reunited in Boston in the new year, the first time since Vermont.

Soon, they would head back to their respective schools, Kinnan to stay on track for medical school and Tahseen to study mathematics. Hisham's love for it had moved Tahseen to major in the same. Hisham had another passion, too. In Ramallah, he had spent hours walking through ancient ruins and wanted to do archaeological digs one day. That was still his hope; he just needed to rethink his approach.

The friends missed home. Not just Ramallah, which was rapidly changing under Israel's latest incursion, but a particular time, the one they couldn't return to. They missed the life before they came to the United States to study, before the Hamas attack on Oct. 7 and the relentless Israeli bombardment of Gaza, before a shooting in Burlington wrested from them their youth. For some brief hours, they could tease one another and laugh and go back to those days, Tahseen said, "when we didn't care about anything else." They could just be themselves. ♦