

# Papal Fiction

By Ismail Khalidi

SETTING:

Occupied Palestine and The Vatican, circa 2015.

CHARACTERS:

The Pope

Palestinian Woman (between the age of 40 and 60)

Chorus (any age or gender)

## SCENE 1

*(Bethlehem. Pope Francis, still, kneels at the feet of a woman. She is Palestinian. The chorus member, nearby, addresses the audience)*

### CHORUS

In the town of the Nazarene's birth, some 2,000 years after his death, we find ourselves in the shadow of the wall of death and separation, under the tall stones of domination, where a man of God has come. He is the pope, the papa, the baba, the papst. As you know, he is a people's pope for a poor church....though if you look at the bank statements of the Holy See you'd be like 'holy shit', cause poor they are not...

*(The pope signals for him to move on.)*

But you know what he means when he says a poor church. In other words, focus on the fact that he's not like the fancy footed gold robe wearing old fascist fart before him; not like the others, the indulgence-selling, crusade starting, inquisition waging, woman-hating homophobic -

*(The pope clears his throat. The chorus member stops. After a moment, Gregorian chants or choir music can be heard. The chorus member, standing to one side, lip syncs. As the music starts, the Pope begins to clean the Palestinian woman's feet. She lights a cigarette and then pulls out a magazine and flips through a couple pages. The pope is a bit confused but keeps washing.)*

### PALESTINIAN WOMAN

Do you do pedicures too?

### POPE

No. No my child, we do not.

### PALESTINIAN WOMAN

God knows I need one.

### POPE

God knows all, my child.

PALESTINIAN WOMAN

Yes.

POPE

Yes. Indeed.

PALESTINIAN WOMAN

No.

POPE

Pardon?

PALESTINIAN WOMAN

No. No. Back.

POPE

(alarmed but concerned)

What?! Are you ok my child?

PALESTINIAN WOMAN

The heel. Where your hand is. Yes. Right there! A bit deeper. Right there. It shoots up my legs and my spine some days. Sunday's the worst.

POPE

To walk the path of Jesus Christ is difficult but rewarding. I was wondering, my child, if perhaps you are unaware -

PALESTINIAN WOMAN

I don't.

POPE

What?

PALESTINIAN WOMAN

Well, 'can't' is more like it.

POPE

Can't what?

PALESTINIAN WOMAN

Walk in Jesus's path. The Via Dolorosa. It's in Jerusalem.

POPE

Yes. And?

PALESTINIAN WOMAN

(still relaxed from the foot rub)

I Can't get there. Can't go. Not permitted. Not the right color document for them. My mother's from Jerusalem too, if you can believe it. But I haven't been allowed since I was a kid.

POPE

Is that so?

PALESTINIAN WOMAN

The 'pass system'. Ever heard of it?

POPE

I'm afraid you'll have to give me a hint.

PALESTINIAN WOMAN

South Africa. The pass laws.

POPE

Ah. Yes. Yes. A passport system, no?

PALESTINIAN WOMAN

To keep the blacks separate, apart, below. Yes. To keep them out of the cities. Away from the lives of the white rulers, except to work, to clean and scrub and lift and load. Meant to impose "influx control" on black men and allowing for the removal of people deemed to be living idle lives.

*(Chorus turns and steps to audience)*

CHORUS

Who deems? The deemers. The deemers deem. Draw lines on maps and in the air, they deem and declare, change borders and names. The deemers proclaim proclamations that fuck and fuck and give birth to nations and notions and pain. And yet it is they who deign to deem you subjects, deem you sluts, deem you native, barbarian, peasant and putz, deem you property, deem you chattel, deem you two thirds, three quarters or half a man, a fraction of soul, the deemers always have deemed and the deemers often stole.

POPE

She's new. Hired her from a travelling greek chorus. We have yet to settle the, uh, parameters of the job, you know, but it's still early.

PALESTINIAN WOMAN

I understand. I like her. Keep her....Could we switch feet?

*(The pope moves to her other foot)*

POPE

Go on.

PALESTINIAN WOMAN

The Pass Laws Act made it compulsory for all blacks over the age of 16 to carry a "pass book" at all times. For example, no black South African could stay in an urban area more than 72 hours without special permission

POPE

That system is gone, thank God.

CHORUS

*(chiming in)*

Ah, but such systems have a way of surviving, hiding, adapting, moving.

PALESTINIAN WOMAN

Here, for example, our ID, our name, religion, all determine where we can go, when and for how long. The color of your licence plate too. If you are Palestinian you are color-coded. We are numbers, two-legged dogs, roaches, coded, controlled and corralled.

POPE

Excuse me for a moment.

*(The pope walks over to the chorus member)*

POPE

About the passes? It's true?

CHORUS

As you've seen, there is a very rigid system of control here.

POPE

Yes.

(beat)

Are we in the right place by the way?

CHORUS

It appears we have taken a wrong turn at the checkpoint. The army closed the road we were supposed to take and we ended up here. But our hosts will be here to lead us to the church any moment.

POPE

And all these people?

*(He points to the audience. They both look out, while the woman waves and smiles at her friends in the audience)*

CHORUS

You can't pull up to a refugee camp in a papal motorcade and expect the people not to come and watch.

POPE

(quietly)

And her?

CHORUS

(matching volume)

It appears this lady is under the impression that you are a kind of podiatrist or masseuse, your holiness.

PALESTINIAN WOMAN

Excuse me, can we get the music again? I find it very nice. Relaxing.

*(Chorus starts lip syncing again, she signals the pope back to her feet. The pope returns and begins drying her feet and putting her shoes back on, gently, meticulously..)*

POPE

Your feet. They are in pain?

## PALESTINIAN WOMAN

Yes. I stand too much. At the checkpoint out and the checkpoint in. Like cattle we stand. And then at work, from dawn til dusk. And then I return home and cook on my feet. I almost feel that I sleep on my feet, ready to run at any moment. And then to the prison on Saturdays to bring a bit of food to my boy. My son. He threw stones at the soldiers when he was young. As he should. As you would. But they caught him. Before his voice even cracked, on a winter day, broke through the door, shattered the glass, took him away. Now, I only see him through glass. Thick glass. Glass I cannot break to get to him. He has a beard and scars now. And a voice like an earthquake.

*(He silently finishes with her feet. He smiles at her and she smiles back. A car horn)*

## POPE

I must leave my child.

## PALESTINIAN WOMAN

Me too. I am off to the church. They say the pope will be there.

*(She pays him and begins to leave)*

## POPE

I hear he is thinking of recognizing your state. The state of Palestine.

## PALESTINIAN WOMAN

(matter of fact)

That is very sweet of him.

*(She exits.)*



SCENE 2

*(A year later, in the Vatican)*

CHORUS

In the Vatican, a year later, the papa paces with cardinals chirping in his ears.

POPE

It was the right thing to do. It made official our policy of many years.

CHORUS

I agree sir. A logical step. And an important one.

POPE

There are over 130 countries that have recognized Palestine. It's only a matter of time. We are simply acting accordingly.

*(An envelope is thrown onstage and lands near the chorus member's feet)*

CHORUS

Precisely. This note has arrived from the prime minister by the way.

POPE

Read it.

*(The pope sits down, closes his eyes and prepares to listen, pensively, seriously.)*

CHORUS

To his Holiness, Pope Francis.

Fuck you.

Love, Bibi.

POPE

A nice man.

CHORUS

Well-loved, your holiness.

*(Another letter lands near her feet)*

POPE

What's next?

CHORUS

Another letter, sir. It's from Bethlehem. Shall I read it?

*(He nods. As it is read the woman appears, massaging her own feet after a long days' work. She speaks some of the lines while the chorus reads the others.)*

CHORUS

Dear Mr. Francis,  
It was a pleasure to meet you.

PALESTINIAN WOMAN

Your hands are good hands to work muscle and bone. Perhaps you should consider going into physical therapy or surgery.

CHORUS

I have heard the news here about the recognition of Palestine. I hear that over there it is a big story. That is good. Perhaps this symbolic statement will make people think about us here.

PALESTINIAN WOMAN

Or perhaps it will allow them to believe all is solved and to forget us all together. I do not know.

CHORUS

I am sure Bibi will be a dick about it, though.

PALESTINIAN WOMAN

The Americans too will whine about not respecting the peace process.

CHORUS

But their process is dead and gone and the word peace a charade. Even Bibi cannot say it with a straight face. So part of me part of me is glad for the recognition, while another part of me says:

## PALESTINIAN WOMAN

I don't need your recognition to be validated, to have worth. Not yours nor the Americans'. I don't need the British or the Zionists to tell me I exist either. We are a people, with rights, with history, with humanity, dignity and culture; with the ability and the desire to make our own decisions. We have always had the right to be free and flawed like any other people.

## CHORUS

And no one can bestow this upon us, no one can parcel it out or make it contingent upon our actions being deemed suitably compliant to merit a morsel of humanity or autonomy here or there. No, we are not a state. Because we are not free.

## PALESTINIAN WOMAN

You recognize Palestine, but even I, who lived my life here, I do not recognize this place. It has been replaced. Just as we have been replaced in many parts. The horizon has been cut by the invader's spade, the valleys deformed with fortresses that are built in the wrong shape and the wrong color with the wrong materials. The walls and wires and pools that the settlers use suck dry the aquifers and keep the animals and people from travelling the routes they have travelled as long as any of us remember.

## CHORUS

As I told you, I have not seen Jerusalem, where my mother's family was living even before your predecessors declared crusade after crusade and burned and raped and pillaged us out of Jerusalem. My son rots in prison for throwing a stone to defend his home, his right to play on the street past dark. He has never seen the sea. Even though it is just there. 60 kilometers away. Imagine. It is barely further than the sea is from your home in Rome.

## PALESTINIAN WOMAN

And yet it might as well be the moon.

## CHORUS

My father and my grandfather were fishermen, and yet we cannot get to the sea. I have forgotten what it smells like.

## PALESTINIAN WOMAN

Yesterday, as an experiment, I went to the wall, to the checkpoint at the wall, with its

tower that looks both medieval and science fiction, and I asked to pass into Jerusalem, which is the capital of our state, and the soldier said

#### CHORUS

You have no state.

#### PALESTINIAN WOMAN

And I said. The pope said we do. And all of these countries too, and I unrolled the list.

*(She unscrolls a long piece of paper. The chorus member as soldier starts laughing, hysterically. Then he tears it up and spits on it.)*

#### PALESTINIAN WOMAN

So you see sir. It means very little, all of this. Just as it does when you apologize for past crimes committed in God's name. Your apologies and declarations don't bring back the women burned by the inquisition, the indigenous limbs hacked off for not collecting enough gold or silver or rubber for the king and the church for which he went about civilizing the darker nations.

#### CHORUS

Apologies and kind words do not make people whole again, do not erase the deafening silence during the abuse and violence of deacons and dictators.

#### PALESTINIAN WOMAN

I do not know what I expect from you, or from any man of importance anymore. I only thought I should thank you for easing the pain in my feet for a couple hours-

#### CHORUS

-and urge you to be more of a pain in the ass to all those who deny freedom to others. That is all any of us can do I suppose. Refuse to serve the powerful and be pains in the asses.

#### PALESTINIAN WOMAN

Love, A nameless Palestinian woman with sore feet.

*(The pope takes the letter and reads it over and then shares a long moment of eye contact with the chorus member...A third envelope lands between them.)*

CHORUS

Another letter sir.

*(The pope again sits down to listen earnestly as the chorus member opens it).*

CHORUS

P.S. Your recognition doesn't mean shit, punk. I got this shit on lock and nobody can tell Bibi what to do, especially not your sweet tango dancing ass. Fuck you again, Bibi

CHORUS

It was from the Prime minister.

POPE

Yes, I gathered, I gathered.

CHORUS

We are late for your next meeting, your holiness.

POPE

Very well.

*(They exit. Onstage, alone is the Palestinian woman who looks off into the distance as she massages her own feet.)*

END OF PLAY.