

OMAR

Another Katyusha fell and Omar Hamdan was happy. With each rocket that landed inside Israel, God had sent him a blessing.

Would a thousand naked virgins be waiting in heaven for him? Did he dream of death? No, he was not that type of Palestinian. He was Abu Khaled, doting father to Hanan and Khaled, and faithful husband to Fatha. To everyone else in Gaza, he was short and squat, but commanded the respect of a much taller man. It also did not hurt that he owned a tunnel. With the land, air, and sea blockade imposed on Gaza by Israel and Egypt, Omar's tunnel was secretly buried deep in between the two countries. Each rocket squeezed Gaza's borders tighter and filled Omar's tunnel. Motorbikes, Coca Cola, cement, TVs, even a goat were smuggled daily from Egypt to Gaza through Omar's tunnel. If you didn't have money for the merchandise floating through his tunnel, then you were like all the other paupers who begged and groveled from the UN. Frustration over inflated prices hadn't caused protests and revolutions across the Middle East, but the seeds were being planted. Among the concrete high rises and the verdant olive trees, Gaza was an angry yet hopeful city mixed with chaos and dirt.

If it wasn't for Omar's good fortune, he could easily be mistaken for the typical Palestinian who lived ten to a room. True, he had a Nissan truck, an apartment, food on the table, and a wife who stayed home with the kids, but he also appeared like the every day man with stubble on his cheeks, rumpled pants, and a tired look that was permanently embedded in his dark eyes. He chain-smoked Camel cigarettes and lived in a three-story walk up that was as unassuming as he was. What he lacked in looks and style, he made up for in respect.

This morning, Omar did not feel too much like the big man he had become as he sat at the edge of the bathtub nursing a whisky for his infected tooth. Fatha bent over and ran the water for Omar's bath. He welcomed her density as she had an abundance to love. She picked at the small specs of white floating on the water's surface. Omar looked at the peeling plaster on the ceiling and then at Fatha. He appreciated her patience as she knew that he was too busy making repairs in the tunnel to tend to their own home. Omar dunked his toes and then his bottom into the tub. He leaned over and let Fatha scrub his back. She made small rhythmic circles with her thumbs. At moments like this, he felt very close to her. After his bath, he dressed and knelt on his prayer mat where he felt whole again.

In the kitchen, Fatha turned on the gas burner, but it hesitated before it caught. Omar suspected that the gas cylinder was about to run out. Over a week ago he had telephoned the gas company to deliver a new one. He wondered if there was going to be another shortage like last year. The monthly ration of gas was barely enough to boil water.

Omar watched Fatha as she made the coffee. As the water bubbled, she added two heaping spoons of Yemeni mokha coffee grinds and a pinch of cardamom. She stirred the pot five times and

lowered the heat. Even if the apartment caught fire, she would never change her routine or recipe. It was considered unlucky to revise her ways.

While the coffee simmered, Fatha placed a plate of steaming foul mudammas in front of Omar. She smothered the mashed fava beans and chickpeas with olive oil, lemon, and salt. Then, she ripped the flat bread into small pieces. Omar held a jagged piece between his thumb and forefinger, shoveling the beans into his mouth. After a decade and a half of marriage, he was still not one to use a fork or knife. He had always been better with his hands. This not only applied to eating, but working as well. When he first met Fatha, he was a fruit picker. Despite his thick, leathery paw-like hands, he was quick and skillful. Before dawn, he'd leave Gaza and cross into Israel to pick the best cherries, oranges, or whatever was in season. Nine hours later, the mid-afternoon heat was enough to ferment a heavy sack of grapes on his back into wine. Even for a man who was strong and close to the ground, this was back-breaking work. Several years ago, the economic embargo hit and Gaza was sealed tight. As a refugee, Omar was no longer able to work inside Israel. He was trapped inside Gaza, a strip of land squeezed between a concrete wall built by Israel on one side and their navy patrolling the Mediterranean on the other side. Bombs flew through the sky leaving nothing but fire and the wounded. Omar looked for work on the local farms in Rafah, but gone were the gentle days of horse-drawn carts, farmhouses set in groves of grapefruit trees, and irrigated fields of sweet peas. With no way to cross the border, Omar believed, the fruit sat and rotted like the people.

Yet Omar was not the lazy type to sit all day and smoke shisha at the café. He had an idea - dirt. He scooped up the earth and knew this was his brown gold. Between Rafah and Egypt, the circulation of Gaza pumped through the underground tunnels. From flour to fuel, those that could afford to buy didn't miss a beat.

Omar looked up to the kitchen ceiling, trying to distinguish if the whistling sound was a bomb or the kettle on the stove.

Kaboom! The table vibrated with the same force as when Fatha stepped down hard on the pedal of her electric sewing machine.

Omar gripped the table until the earth breathed quietly again. Each bomb reminded him of his brother, Rawhai, who had fought for Hamas. His loyalty was natural for Hamas ruled Gaza while Fatah ruled the West Bank. In the beginning, Rawhai did it for the money. He lived in the cheapest section of Gaza with no work. He was seventeen and it was easy to make up his mind because he had nothing else to do. He loved the camaraderie among his fellow fighters and was known to have a zest for women and drinking when he wasn't on patrol. His salary was attractive and whatever happened he wasn't going to let his parents and his young brother, Omar, starve. Years later it became more than just money. Hamas policed Gaza during the day, but the Israelis came in at night for routine arrests. During one evening a riot broke out and the Israelis responded with live fire against the Palestinian's stones. Three small children died in the gunfire. Rawhai agonized that his parents had left the war in '48 to live in more war.

He didn't have children of his own, but he wanted his nephew, Khaled, and his niece, Hanan, to go to high school and become professionals. He wanted them to move around without fear. For them, he continued to fight.

Omar was proud of his brother, but told him he wanted to be proud of him in life and not death. Eventually, the Israelis bombed Rawhai's car, making it into his tomb. He was buried under glass and steel, his head twisted towards the windshield as if crying for help. Rawhai's body was replete with ammunition belts and other paramilitary trappings. By the time Omar found Rawhai his flesh was pulled over his jutted joints and his teeth protruded from desiccated gums. His brother loved life so much it was impossible to connect him with death. Omar swore he would have nothing to do with the Palestinian military wing for recruiting his brother, but years later, he accepted their offer of financing to dig a tunnel. Omar was not an idiot. He knew that without connections to Hamas, nothing gets done in Gaza.

Fatha pushed another bowl of fava beans in front of him. Every pound of her body jiggled while attending to his every need. "Eat, before it goes cold," she said.

"Hallas, Mama, I can feed myself." Omar took another shot of whiskey.

"Why don't you see the dentist?"

Omar gave his wife a look more painful than his tooth. "Dr Khoury left. He emigrated to Germany last month."

"How about his assistant? Isn't he still around?"

"That crook. He never went to dental school. He worked on cars before he worked for Dr Khoury. My mouth may be big, but not wide enough for his pliers."

Fatha sighed. Everyone who could left Gaza. She poured the coffee into small porcelain cups. The aroma was potent enough to arouse even the most devout from their prayers.

Khaled walked into the kitchen. He was delicate with a build much too slight for his fourteen years. Next to the hulking boys his age, his features were diminutive and frail. His hands were slender and his upper lip was smooth like a woman's when most boys his age had fuzz. He didn't socialize with the other boys in the neighborhood. It pained Omar that most boys came together in a kind of balance when his son preferred to sit alone on the stone steps every evening reading mystery novels.

"Is your sister sleeping?" asked Omar as he lit a cigarette.

Khaled slid into a chair and nodded.

Fatha handed Omar a cup. "She's so tired lately."

"Any more bruises?" Omar drank the bitter coffee. It was muddy, the way he liked it.

"A few more on her legs," said Fatha.

"And her nose?" asked Omar.

Fatha stirred her coffee. "It stopped bleeding, but I gave her some ice just in case."

Omar had seen Hanan sleeping with an ice pack on top of her face. He wondered how could a ten year old's nose run with so much blood. He pointed to his waist. "I'm going to take a belt to the bully who touched her." He turned to Khaled. "You need to protect your sister."

Fatha brushed the curls away from Khaled's forehead and spread butter on his toast. "Leave him alone. He works hard. He does well in school. He listens to us." She rubbed her earlobe where she had a generous mole that resembled an earring. Other than her mole, she had a plain face with straight black hair, drawn back into a bun.

Khaled nibbled on his toast and then flopped down on the parlor couch that converted into a bed. He pulled a comforter up to his chin and stared at the TV as it yakked away.

Omar watched Fatha in surprise as she took a sip of his whiskey. Normally, she drank nothing stronger than coffee. He put his hands on her fingers. "You look worried."

She took another sip of his whiskey, possibly wanting to numb her tongue before she spoke. "It's the evil eye. People are jealous of our tunnel. They look at us and wish bad thoughts. Now, our poor Hanan suffers. It's not good to have so much money when our neighbors are so poor."

Omar smashed his cigarette against the ashtray and leaned into the table. "What do you want me to do? Let everyone use the tunnel for free? I have to pay Hamas a new tax every other day! When did you start to get so worried that we are rich? If you'd like I can get rid of the washing machine and all the other robots I bought you?"

Fatha's face appeared to be full of guilt as she glanced at the rock Omar had given her the other day. It wasn't a brown dirty one, but one that sparkled in every direction.

Omar walked into the hallway toward a bobbing ladder that led to the roof. He did not want to show Fatha his face. He did not want her to know he was bluffing. He enjoyed buying her new things as much as she liked receiving them. It made him feel even taller that he was able to spoil his wife. This morning his men would start work on widening his tunnel. Eventually, an entire car would be able to fit through instead of just its parts. He swore he would bring a Mercedes through for Fatha. It would be fully loaded, everything, the works, including a navigation system. He had heard of these electronic maps. He was ready to travel the world even if he could not leave Gaza. He straddled the steps, two at a time, traveling up to the roof.

Omar stood at the edge of the straight line that separated the roof from the sky. His toes curled in his boots. He didn't look down to the street, but straight ahead to his family's land in the distance. In Israel, his ancestral home no longer sat on fields of milk and honey, but on sourness and hate.

Amna, the family maid, hung the laundry behind him. Omar's white underwear flapped in the breeze. He imagined Fatha's voice whipping the maid in the back. We are naked ghosts with our undies hanging for all to see.

Like everything that came into Gaza, Amna was also smuggled through the tunnels. Born in Southern Egypt on the Sudanese border, she was dark-skinned. Her calloused hands were no match for Fatha's doughy palms. A small cross glistened around her perspiring neck.

Fatha came up the ladder and onto the roof. Omar studied the way she walked. The upper half of her body was still, while everything from the hips down made large, smooth movements.

She put her fingers on Omar's cheek. Her nails were seashell pink.

Omar prided himself that Fatha's hands were a perfect shape and that she was spared the hard work of domestic life. In addition, he loved her rolls of puppy fat that she could never fully hide underneath her girdle.

Omar spoke with a melancholy in his voice as he looked toward his family's land in Israel. "Do you remember the figs that hung in the shade? It was a playground for all types of birds."

Fatha nodded. "My mother remembered everything about her house. She could even tell you where the toothpicks were."

Omar had heard this story a hundred times, but he let Fatha tell it again. Nostalgia made him look backwards while giving him hope. Still, Omar and his family had come a long way. There was a time when they didn't even have water or salt.

Fatha squinted as if she was reading Omar's mind. "I used to dream of flour and sugar."

"And the children only had one set of clothes." Omar shook his head, remembering when Fatha used to make Hanan and Khaled hide naked under the blankets until the wash was dry. He cupped his hands around Fatha's waist and squeezed. "Look at you now. I would love to get you under the blanket."

Fatha's smile turned cautious. "An apartment, two cars, private school, all the food we can eat. The tunnel has been a bountiful harvest. God willing it lasts."

Omar looked up to the sky. The clouds had turned unusually dark, appearing heavy and bruised like Hanan's nose and legs. Omar pressed his tongue against his sore tooth and then pulled Fatha's hand to his cheek. He was determined to shelter her from the sky and whatever it might bring. He gave her a loose smile, "Hanan will be fine. I promise."

Omar left Fatha on the roof and his children in their lazy beds. His tunnel was waiting.

Crammed into one tight spot, Gaza was about to burst. It would be impossible to count everyone. Concrete barriers and sand bags were as common as a row of palms in the middle of Gaza's main boulevard. Donkeys and European imports jostled for the right of way. Along with the ancient and the modern, heavy fumes mixed with the nearby sea's salt. Just off Omar al-Mukhtar Street, in a narrow, sandy alleyway, sat a building with pockmarked walls and bullet holes. Twisted and blackened machinery along with sagging ceilings were all that remained after the Israelis employed F-16s, tank fire and

bulldozers against the former potato chip factory. Underneath the building was Omar's tunnel. He bribed a Hamas official from tearing the structure down or leasing the land to someone else. The only people allowed inside were a few refugees. In what was once a freight elevator, a man washed his clothes while another family cooked on top of an open flame.

Omar puffed on his cigarette while looking down into the tunnel's opening: a two story-high well lined on its four sides by planks of wood. Three metal beams were positioned in a pyramid shape to support an electric winch, whose cable ran down the shaft to the sandy floor below. There, two workers crouched low and operated two more winches that ran horizontally three hundred meters to the south along the tunnel, stretching out of Gaza and into Egypt. One of the winches drew in the goods from the Egyptian side, a train of boxes and sacks sliding over the sand on plastic containers. The second winch sent back the empty containers for reloading.

It had taken about four months to build the tunnel. Omar and a team of men worked long days underground using a pneumatic drill to dig out the soil, which they then carried out in large, plastic containers and dumped nearby. By the time Omar and his men were finished, they could stand tall and spread their arms without scraping the bare walls. Today, when Omar walked through the tunnel, he not only smelled the soil, but the pine wood beams that supported the once naked walls. He was proud of this tunnel, and loved it too.

"Kissuccda!" Omar barked at his workers below to stop talking and work. "This is not a tea party. If you want a break, go smoke shisha at the café."

The work needed to be constant. Every thirty seconds one of the men needed to shout, "raise" and either Omar or one of his workers sitting over the mouth of the well would switch on the winch and pull up another sack. So far this morning, they had moved yellow chicken feed, spare parts for cars, a box of coat hooks, kerosene cookers, packets of rather dowdy women's underwear; and several large generators.

Omar sat down on top of the earth, letting his feet dangle into the large well. He tossed a coin toward the bottom, wishing for a fleet of cars. He wasn't sure how to convert the well into a ramp to move cars out of the tunnel, but he was a man of faith. He was sure that down the road, God had a business plan for him.

Abu Ramsey, a doctor and the most educated person Omar knew, leaned over his head. It annoyed Omar when people looked down on him. At forty, Omar's black hair had fallen out on top, leaving an immaculate ring with specs of white on the sides. He stood up quickly and puffed out his chest.

Omar exchanged the traditional three kisses on alternating cheeks. "What can I do for you, Doctor? Do you have medicines to pick up today?"

"No, no, just looking. I got my pills last week." Abu Ramsey's polo shirt was crisp and his hair line was freshly razored to the right. He pumped a squeeze ball in his hand instead of the usual cigarette

as he was trying to quit smoking. He pointed to the workers at the bottom of the well with their shovels. “Are you still digging?”

Among Palestinians it was bad luck for Omar to talk about his ambitions, but he wanted to impress Abu Ramsey who intimidated him with his education and success as a doctor. “I’m widening it to fit a car,” said Omar in a humble voice. He glanced at his workers. “I have the best diggers in Gaza. It’s impossible without them.”

“And what about the opening? Are you going to drop the cars down like boxes?”

“I’m going to slope and widen the entrance and exit.” Omar dug his hands deep into his pockets, fishing for loose coins. He knew this would be not only the hardest, but the most expensive part.

Abu Ramsey blinked his eyes, wiping away sudden raindrops that came through the gaping holes in the abandoned building. It was May, the end of the rainy season.

Omar felt the same drops and looked toward to the darkening sky. He nodded, approvingly.

“You like the rain?” asked Abu Ramsey.

“Rain is good. It means money.”

“Really?” Abu Ramsey played with the ends of his white mustache. He pointed through the building in the direction of the border fence. A patch of massive earthworks surrounded the border as if a herd of giant moles had gone to work. Inside these holes were hundreds of tunnels that led into Egypt. “How about all the other holes? Is the rain good for them?”

Omar shook his head. “Most of those tunnels are smaller and less stable. Mine is supported by wood and metal beams. I have good engineering. The rains will eventually make those other tunnels collapse. With less competition, I can raise prices.”

“What about the bombs? You like them as much as the rain?”

“Even better. Thanks to God for Hamas and their Katyushas. Every time they fire one into the Jewish territories, the Israelis squeeze the border and my wallet expands.”

“But sometimes the Israelis hit back. They will drain the sea to kill the fish.” Abu Ramsey gave Omar a sympathetic look. Everyone, including him, knew of Rawhai’s misfortune.

“I have faith. God won’t let it happen twice in the same family. Besides, I’m lucky. They already hit this factory once. My tunnel is well hidden underneath a building that is nothing. I have a friend whose tunnel is underneath a large hothouse for tomatoes. Last month, Israeli bombs made tomato soup out of it.” Omar put his thick fingers on Abu Ramsey’s shoulder. “Listen, you know I’m not an educated man, but I understand the law of supply and demand. I don’t have to be a banker to become rich.” Omar picked up a handful of dirt and rubbed it between his palms. “This may be the color of shit, but to me it shines like gold.”

The rain became more intense. A worker looked up and stuck out his tongue to catch a drop. His keffiyeh hung from his head like a soaked oil rag in the damp heat.

“Doda!” Omar called him the worm since he could squirm through any opening. He threw down a bottle of water. “Drink fast or I cut a day’s pay from your salary.”

By the late afternoon, the last box from Egypt was drawn through and the workers filed out. Omar phoned his Egyptian business partner, Ahmad, at the other end of the tunnel.

“Ahmad, we are done. How’s everything there?”

“Everything is good. Is it raining on your end?” asked Ahmad.

“Yes, but the tunnel is dry. We’ll put the goods that haven’t been picked up back inside the tunnel.” Omar reached for his money belt. “We’ll settle up tomorrow.”

“Fine. Kisses to Fatha and the kids.”

“Same to your family, cousin.”

Omar put his cell back in his pocket. He would sleep well tonight. He could trust Ahmad. He was family—his aunt’s second cousin’s son.

“Three hundred, four hundred and fifty,” said Omar to himself as he counted his money at the entrance. He sorted Egyptian pounds from Israeli shekels while converting everything in his head to dollars, the currency of his loan. At the end of each month, he exchanged his pounds and shekels into dollars to repay Hamas for building the tunnel. The truth was he accepted any type of currency as long as it was money. He paid his workers in shekels, Hamas’ monthly tax in dollars, and Ahmad and any expenses incurred across the border in Egyptian pounds. There was always a good supply of various currencies as Egyptian merchants shipped and paid in local pounds while their customers in Gaza paid in shekels. His customers occasional paid in 100 U.S. dollar bills or even Jordanian dinars.

Omar’s cigarette teetered on the edge of his lips. He grinned between puffs as it was he who set the rules: Not a box was picked up from the tunnel until the buyer paid. On Ahmad’s side, the Egyptian seller also had to pay before sending the cargo. Yet everything was negotiable as the rules weren’t set in a tablet of stone. The usual tariff was two percent on the value of goods for the buyer and three percent of the value to be paid by the seller. But what happened when heavy wooden doors were moved? That was certainly more difficult than a box of expensive iPhones. If it was for Hamas, then there was no charge or for Khaled and Hanan’s classroom, he would never make a profit on school children. Regardless, Omar always made sure there was enough to pay Ahmad for his services, and to satisfy the various hands that needed to be oiled with bribes and taxes.

“Five hundred and ninety—”

A pair of heavy boots landed on the tips of Omar’s toes. These were not work boots as they had very little mud on them. New and stiff, they were Hamas. Omar knew that if he was to be a good Muslim, he would have to like everyone. But it was hard to begin with Hamas, particular Fayez Dweik who demanded money from him all the time.

Omar put his bills back in the purse that hung from his belt and looked up. Fayez had a weighty black beard.

“Peace be upon you, Omar,” said Fayez.

Omar flicked his ashes toward Fayez. He did not like being called by his first name by business associates. Fayez should have given him more respect. He was not only the brother of a martyr, but “Abu Khaled,” father to Khaled and deserved a proper greeting.

Fayez extended his arm in a handshake. His forearm was hairy, extending down to the knuckles.

Omar touched the tips of Fayez’s fingers, but did not grasp them. The tunnel had cost him 150,000 U.S. dollars to build. He was almost done paying back Hamas. What more could they want? Every ten days he paid their counterparts, Egyptian security officials, a healthy bribe of 10,000 pounds. Wasn’t this enough?

“There’s a new tax today. You owe 1,100 shekels,” said Fayez.

Omar arched his eyebrows into his scalp. “That’s 120 dollars!”

“We only charge those who are doing well. You should be happy you turn a profit. Some tunnels lose money.”

“Why don’t you take my tunnel and pay me 1,100?” Omar smiled back at Fayez, but only a scowl was returned.

“A few of our martyrs were killed yesterday. We need to pay for their funerals and reward their families.” Fayez stared down into the tunnel’s well. “Besides, if you want to widen your tunnel, you have to pay the tax. Once your tunnel is wide enough to bring a car through, you can charge five thousand per vehicle.”

“And you’ll double my monthly tax from three thousand dollars to six thousand.”

Fayez grinned. “What’s wrong with a little capitalism as long as it’s ours?”

Omar dug into his money purse and scrunched his dirtiest shekels into the hand in front of him. He felt Fayez’s strength. While everyone suffered, Fayez seemed to grow stronger.

Fayez disappeared until he was only a harmless dot down the street. Omar glanced at his almost empty purse. He had a tiny bit more money than this morning and a sea’s worth more than the man on the street.

He drew a heavy crate over the opening of the tunnel and locked it with a padlock. Beyond the abandoned building, the cacophony of street sellers did not rest. From their wheelbarrows, fathers and sons hawked cigarettes, cooking oil, and bars of soap that were delivered just yesterday through Omar’s tunnel. Omar stepped over strewn bricks and twisted wire next to what had been a shoe factory bombed by the Israelis last month. He gulped down dust, smelling the remnants of smoke and blood. The violence ate at his guts. Even though these bombs made him rich by Gazan standards, they also made him sick. Gaza was Dante’s inferno. Just plain hell. Yet the Israelis couldn’t be blamed for everything. Hamas was no better. With both governments fighting, one-and-a-half million Palestinians were trapped in a cage, bombed at any time. He had seen children in the street with only their abdomens left, their arms and legs blown away. Praise God, Hanan and Khaled had all their parts.

Omar stared at his home. Only a few buildings away, it was a non-discrete square. He had inherited it from Fatha's parents and could probably afford better, but where was he to go? Trapped in Gaza, this wasteland would always be his prison. The only form of release was to watch his kids surf on wood boards at the beach. While others played along the seaweed-garbage shores, Omar knew his life was relatively modern—a jazzy cellphone and a brown leather jacket to keep him warm in the winter. All around him were the majority who made less than two dollars a day, scrounging with plastic bags draped over their backs for rubble to turn into construction material. Even to be a fisherman in Gaza was difficult. Barred by the Israeli Navy from going too far out in their own waters to catch much, the fishermen bought fish from their Egyptian neighbors and hauled it back home for resale. Omar knew he was one of the few whose situation was above zero. Most Gazans woke up and wanted to go back to sleep. Not Omar, he had too much to do. As he tried to hustle across the street, it was impossible to move fast. Everyone wanted a piece of him. When you own a tunnel, your popularity runs as deep as your hole.

“Abu Khaled!”

Omar turned to Hani, the sweet seller. In the middle of the street, a chicken ran through their legs. Omar punched Hani playfully in the stomach. “How much candy are you hiding in there?”

Hani kissed Omar's cheeks.

Omar wanted to dry his face, but he had too much respect for Hani, and his wife who loved those lips. Um Walid bore Hani six sons and her bulbous ass showed it. As for Hani, his breasts drooped more than Fatha's.

“When are you going to let me bring those chocolates through from Egypt?” Hani asked. “They are melting on the other side.”

“When you pay up,” said Omar.

“I give your children free sweets every day.”

“You give them cavities.”

“I'm only trying to make them happy.” Hani picked at the mole on his chin. A scab had formed over it, making it resemble a chocolate covered raisin.

“The only one you made happy was the dentist.”

A boy ran between them, pushing an old tire with a stick. A beggar followed, rubbing up against them. Omar dropped a coin in his bowl.

“I stopped giving a long time ago,” said Hani as he watched the beggar make his way to the other side of the street.

“God says we should give to everyone in need.”

Hani opened his empty palms. “Obviously, God has never walked down our street.”

“You should come to the mosque more often. I never see you there,” said Omar.

Hani shrugged. “I don't like the young Imam.”

“The old one is still there.”

“That old goat,” said Hani, “He loves to touch women.”

Omar looked disdainfully at Hani. He didn’t believe the rumors for one minute about the old Imam. “You shouldn’t say such things about a holy figure.”

Kamal, the café owner, waved from across the street for Omar to come into his shop. Omar smiled, hoping to escape Hani yet he was not fast enough. Hani pressed his lips into Omar’s cheek. He sucked as hard as if he was saying goodbye to his favorite sweet.

Inside the café, Shadi the butcher was eating a plate of onions and rice, forever trying to lose weight. A cat curled up on the cushion next to him. He sipped his mint tea while fanning himself with the cat’s tail.

The wind picked up outside, blowing in the raindrops. The smell of a freshly packed waterpipe rose into Omar’s nose.

Kamal swept the floors with the same attention a painter gives his canvas. He stopped his broom on top of his stone masterpiece. “Did you hear? Mubarak died.”

“That was last week’s rumor.” Omar sat down next to Shadi and took a toke from the waterpipe, sucking the dark Iranian tobacco deep into his lungs.

“I’ll bet you your tunnel it’s true.” Kamal stuck his broom out the door and shook the dust off in the rain. “At the gates of paradise, the guardian angel asks a man to state his talents and abilities. The man answers, ‘none.’ The angel says, ‘Ah, you must be Mubarak.’”

Omar grinned. “Next you’re going to tell me that Arafat still lives.”

“I think he was gay,” said Shadi in a voice that purred.

“Think what you want, what does that have to do with him dying?” Omar blew smoke rings in the shape of hearts and ovals.

Shadi licked the tea off his fingers. “If he wasn’t killed, then we wouldn’t be ruled by Hamas.”

“Careful what you say.” Omar wagged his finger.

Shadi held up his hands in the air. “Yes, I must be careful. I forgot that you work for Hamas. They have made you rich. In the meantime, Israel thinks they’re terrorists and that makes us terrorists.” Shadi picked up his spoon and sliced it in the air. “As for me, I couldn’t even hurt a lamb.”

Omar gave him a suspicious look. “You’ve been hurting a lamb every day. Where does all that meat come from that I’ve been buying at your shop?” Omar took a toke from the waterpipe and pounded his chest, but the smoke would not go down any smoother. In a half-breath he said, “That reminds me, I’m still waiting for my shovels.”

“I gave them to you,” said Shadi as he dug into his rice and onions.

“They were rakes. I have dirt, not leaves in my tunnel.”

“They were shovels.”

“Rakes!” Omar puffed on the waterpipe, exhaling a storm.

“Hallas!” Kamal held up his palm. The sky boomed outside. The rain fell harder. “Stop fighting. You clash louder than the thunder.”

“We are not fighting. We are debating,” said Omar.

“Then take it to the U.N,” said Kamal as he relit the waterpipe.

“They haven’t solved peace in the Middle East in fifty years. What makes you think they can resolve our dispute between a shovel and a rake?” Shadi quibbled.

The sky cracked open. The rain appeared to be coming down in heavy white sheets. Kamal peered outside the door. “The gods must be angry.”

“It’s that or another Katyusha,” said Shadi.

“God willing.” Omar smiled and then rose. “Gentlemen, I must get home before my wife worries that I have drowned in my tunnel.”

Shadi raised the waterpipe in a toast. “May you find good fortune inside her belly.”

Omar nodded. “Yes, another son would be nice. If not, we’ll use Fatha’s belly to float down the street.” He opened the café door and peered out. “I’ve never seen so much rain. Too bad I don’t know how to swim.”

Omar lingered in the doorway of the café a bit longer, smelling the strong Iranian tobacco that had warmed his chest. He thought of staying, but instead fished his cell phone out of his pocket and called one of his best workers.

“Put sandbags at the exit and the entrance. Make sure nothing, not the rain or the mud comes in,” he said as he hung up.

He stepped out into the rain. It reminded him of swimming in the sea when he was a boy. Yet now the ocean had been turned upside down and was pouring from the sky. The water had scared away the people, leaving the street empty except for two boys who splashed in the milky brown puddles. Their ragged feet were thick and grey.

Omar stepped next to the boys. They were so thin, their navels could press against their spines. He shouted over the rain, “I’ll give you two coins, if you jump over the puddle.”

The boy with the longer legs looked up. His wet hair and eyes moistened his dour features and made him appear soft. “Give me a shekel and I’ll do it.”

Omar nodded.

The boy and his friend tried to leap over the puddle, but their feet landed in the water that never really ended.

Omar rippled with laughter, his stomach waving up and down. He handed them two shekels each for their ambition before scurrying across the street. In the rain and mud, he felt his bulk weigh him down. He was more walrus than human with his waddle and thickness. A Mercedes barreled down the street. Its heavy tires made geysers out of the puddles. A wave splashed Omar’s entire right side.

“Acho sharmuta!” Omar cursed the Mercedes, calling the driver a brother of a whore. The Mercedes stopped two doors down in front of a woman’s dress shop. A chauffeur scurried out with an umbrella and opened the back door. Omar stared. The umbrella was rare, and the woman that stepped out was even more so. She had a haughty silkiness to her hair that draped loose from her headscarf. A plastic sheen covered her face as the result of expensive creams. An oversized ring bejeweled her forefinger, which she raised to wave a drenched street hawker away. She was beautiful or perhaps this was the only way to describe her wealth. People didn’t look this expensive in Gaza unless they were corrupt. Despite the blackened skies, she slipped a pair of sunglasses over her eyes. With all her money, Omar thought, she wanted to be looked at, but not looked into.

A man followed from the Mercedes and joined her underneath the umbrella. He was almost a foot shorter and wore grey polyester pants with a drab white shirt. Such a plain man could never have such a glamorous wife. Next to his mistress, Omar recognized the man. He was the Commander, the same Hamas officer who recruited Rawhai as a resistance fighter. Omar’s temples pounded as he tried to light a cigarette. If it wasn’t for this man, his brother may still be alive. He didn’t care that this man was one of the most powerful men in the al-Qassam Brigade. If Omar had a stick of dynamite, he would have thrown it between his eyes.

The Commander disappeared into the dress shop with his mistress before he saw Omar. It should be a crime to steal such a beautiful woman, thought Omar. It was amazing what some men could get away with when they had that much power and money. Omar sucked hard on his soggy filter and walked two doors down to his apartment building. Mrs Al-Kurdi spied through the curtain from the second floor. She was the neighborhood busybody, but Omar referred to her as the observer since she never gossiped about his family. Perhaps it was because Omar was the pride of his apartment building. The other families were tradesmen and a few retirees living on family remittance from abroad. Omar’s stature as a tunnel owner permitted them to feel a little bit more important. The apartment building next door had a banker and the one across the street above Habash’s grocery had an accountant. With business in the tunnel doing so well, Omar’s apartment building was just as important as the others.

Omar opened the front door of his building and walked up a staircase that smelled of old timber and dust. His apartment was on the third floor. Inside, the parlor was pleasantly disheveled. The kitchen overlooked a small garden drenched in grape vines. Omar hummed a folk song, childishly make-believing it could provide him with some type of protection from the gloomy weather. Fatha’s shriek overpowered his melody.

“Ah! Look at you! All wet. Are you trying to catch your death?” She turned to Khaled. “Get Baba his bathrobe.”

Fatha brushed the rain off Omar’s shoulders. “You should have called me. I would have picked you up.”

“You’d get nervous driving in so much rain.” Omar tried to step from the kitchen into the parlor.

Fatha pushed Omar back with her broom.

“It’s only rain, not the plague,” said Omar.

“It’ll ruin the rug.” Fatha tried to catch the dripping water from Omar’s clothes with a dish towel.

“I’ll get you another rug,” said Omar.

“What are you going to do? Build a tunnel all the way to Iran?” Fatha ran her hand along the rug.

“These are the finest silks from Tabriz. You can’t get the blues and the reds like this anymore.”

Omar studied his wife’s round shoulders. He wanted to hug her when she got hysterical. Instead, he stepped back. She was upset and in her Russian clodhoppers, she could stomp on more than Omar’s big toe.

Khaled handed Omar a warm bathrobe as he stripped off his shirt and pants. Amna wrung the sopping clothes in the sink.

“Thank God I have a dryer,” said Fatha. “If only I could put the rug in the machine. You brought the whole storm in here.”

Omar bent down and touched where the rug’s pink roses had turned darker. “The roses look better in maroon.”

Despite fifteen years of marriage and two children, Fatha and Omar still had their differences. Fatha called Omar ten times a day. Omar rarely called, stuck deep in the tunnel working. The fat underneath Fatha’s arms flapped like pancakes, making her too weak to open most jars. As for Omar, he could swing a ram over his back and carry it all the way underground from Egypt to Gaza. Fatha was not sure how to wear her hair, and so halfway down the stairs, she’d run back into the apartment, fussing in front of the mirror. Omar had hardly any hair to play with at all. Fatha tried to remove stains. Omar just made them bigger. Omar loved money. Fatha hated his collection of foreign coins on his nightstand. Fatha was not afraid of being alone. Omar hated it. Fatha picked at Omar’s bad habits. He considered them charming. Fatha could tell the minute someone was pregnant. Omar wouldn’t congratulate a woman until she gave birth. Fatha struggled to be natural with her hands. Omar could make a cake from dirt. Fatha liked the comfort of staying put. Omar loved digging to the other side. Fatha counted the seconds backwards until the children fell asleep. Omar counted the seconds forward until they woke up. Omar left the radio playing even when he wasn’t in the room. Fatha considered the unwanted noise like buzzing insects.

Fatha tugged at the belt on Omar’s robe. Her voice tightened as she pulled. “Where have you been all day? I thought you’d come home for lunch.”

“Working, sweetheart.” Omar loosened the belt. He felt the pressure to provide for his family. “A man needs time to make money.”

“I have been calling you.” Fatha took a pair of matching slippers from Amna’s hands and placed them at Omar’s feet. She massaged each toe.

“I was in the tunnel.” Omar shook his head to the side, trying to get rid of the rain that clogged his ear. “I couldn’t hear the phone.”

“Hanan’s not feeling well. She insisted on going to school, but then I had to pick her up early.”

“Is her nose bleeding again?” asked Omar.

“No, not now, but her gums are bloody. She seems so tired. She’s lying in our bed.”

Omar walked into his bedroom. Hanan lay on Fatha’s side with Dolly. Omar remembered when he gave her the rag doll. She was only a week old. The doll was as big as her. Hanan slept most of the time, ignoring Dolly, but within a year they were inseparable. Today, Dolly was no longer white but gray. She was flat, having lost her firmness with age. Yet Hanan still loved her comfort. On the other side of Dolly and Hanan, Khaled sat reading a comic book out loud.

Omar leaned over and kissed Hanan on the forehead. She was tall for ten, but still his little girl. “Hanooni, how are you feeling?”

Hanan did not say anything, but her face did. Her gums bled the color of red licorice.

“Who punched you?” asked Omar as he studied her mouth.

“No one, Baba.”

Omar peered at her nose. It looked good. No blood, no bruises. Not swollen, and still small like Fatha’s. Omar reached for Hanan’s arms. There were bruises all over them.

He turned to Khaled. “Who’s bothering your sister at school?”

“No one, Baba!” said Hanan.

Omar looked at Hanan. “I want your brother to answer. Khaled, who is hitting Hanan at school? Who is the bully? The bruises don’t come out of nowhere.”

Khaled didn’t answer, but glanced at his comic book. Omar knew he was a shy and awkward boy. He stayed away from his peers. He wasn’t rough like the Abusal brothers who stoned the cats in the alleyways or the other boys who wrestled each other to the ground. His son’s favorite sport was reading alone outside until dusk. The gentle breeze dried the sweat on his skin and blew it out to sea.

Omar pulled the comic book away and pointed to Khaled’s willowy biceps. “You need to exercise your muscles, not your eyes. How will you defend your sister against the bullies when your head is always in a book?”

Hanan touched her bloody lip. “I have lots of friends. No one hits me.”

Omar reached for a book underneath Hanan’s sheets. He studied a boy and a girl on the cover. They were locked in a stare. “Is it a good book?”

Hanan blushed.

“Do they kiss?”

Khaled smacked his lips and hugged his shoulders.

“No, Baba.” Hanan took the book away and put it underneath her pillow.

Omar looked at Khaled, “I expect you to look after your sister. You are fourteen. She is only ten.”

“I can look after myself, Baba!”

“She’s right, Baba. You should see the way she climbs trees.”

Omar sighed. “My children should be at their desks, not in trees. Trees are for monkeys.”

Khaled stared back at his comic book, appearing only concerned about his world and those of his superheroes.

Omar lit a cigarette and held the smoke in his chest until it made his ribcage tight. He wondered what was in those comic books. Did the characters tell his children not to listen to their parents?

Fatha appeared at the doorway. “Don’t be upset with Khaled or Hanan.” She dug her hand into the pocket of her dress, hiding her sparkling new ring. “It’s the evil eye again.”

“Hit *me* in the eye, not my daughter.” Omar rubbed his damp head. “What do you want? Get rid of the house, our food, our clothes, fill the tunnel up with dirt? Then, everything will be okay? People will be nice to us? It doesn’t work that way, Fatha.” Omar stared at Hanan’s soft eyes and then his wife’s loving face. “What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to go to school and talk to the Principal. I want you to find out who is doing this to Hanan.”

“No, Mama! Baba can’t go to school.” Khaled threw his comic book aside.

Hanan sat straight up in bed. “I’ll stop climbing trees.”

“This is no time to compromise. Whether you fell out of a tree or not, Baba and I are here to protect both of you.”

As Omar left to put on dry clothes and a raincoat, Khaled and Hanan shut the bedroom door. Omar knew they were planted on his bed, gossiping about how mean their parents were. If they only knew at this moment how much they loved them. How much it pained himself and Fatha to see Hanan bloodied and bruised. He turned to Fatha. “She’s only ten, but she thinks she’s a teenager like her brother.”

“It’s lovely that they have each other even though they hate us right now. I was never this close to my brother.” Fatha reached for her cooking pot behind the spices. She dug her hand in and smoothed each note as she counted. Every time she bargained well with the shopkeepers, she took a little bit of the savings for herself.

“Why do you feel that you have to have your own money? Are you going to run away?” asked Omar.

Fatha smiled. “It’s my mad money. It’s nice to be independent. Someday I’m going to have enough for a microwave.”

“I like slow cooking. If I wanted fast cooking, I’d eat shish kebab on the street.”

Khaled came out of the bedroom and stood in front of Fatha. “Mama, it won’t be your own thing if you buy it with Baba’s money. Everything here is Baba’s.”

“Hallas, Khaled. Don’t talk to your mother that way. Stay here and be good. Watch out for your sister.”

Omar pecked Fatha on the lips and headed out the door. The school was not far, but the rain made it seem an ocean away. The water rose to Omar’s ankles. He was mesmerized by the constant cracks of thunder and lightning. No one was outside, unless you had a boat and that was something Omar had not yet smuggled through his tunnel.

He turned into the alleyway where his truck was parked. It was a used Nissan and looked more rusted than usual in the rain. Inside the dry car, he turned the key in the ignition. The engine sputtered and choked.

“Shit! Piss! Fuck! Cunt!” He slammed his fist on the horn, making an explosive sound in the narrow alleyway. His heart kicked against his rib cage. He pressed again on the horn as if his anger would scare it into starting. This time there was nothing but silence.

He pressed the key down firmly again in the ignition, trying to give it some juice. Then, just like the horn, the engine went dead. Flooded, it drowned in the rain.

Omar slammed his head on the horn. “Cocksucker!”

His phone rang. “What?”

“Omar, could you pick up some bread on the way home?” asked Fatha.

He crushed his cigarette pack in his palm. “Okay, I’ll get more Camels,” he replied without thinking. “But it could be a while, the truck just died.”

“And bread, too. Take my car. Drive safely. Kisses,” said Fatha as she hung up the phone.

Omar opened the door and walked toward Fatha’s Peugeot that was parked behind his truck. His big boots splashed through the water that licked at the car’s hubcaps. He plopped into the driver’s seat where the rose scented air freshener smelled like Fatha. Omar jammed the key into the ignition. The heater blew hot, then cold as if he was inside a faulty drier.

There was no traffic as the storm had cleared the road of cars and people. Omar glanced in the rear-view mirror. Water churned behind him. The school was not far, but Omar parked a block away as the street next to the entrance was flooded.

Omar took a wad of unpaid parking tickets from the glove compartment and spread them out over his head, trying to shelter himself from the rain. The mud sucked at his boots. Mahmoud Telbani stood before the schoolyard, idling next to his cookie and ice cream factory. His head was covered with a large piece of cardboard while he waved frantically to Omar.

“Salaam Alaikum,” he said in a sullen greeting.

“Cheer up, the rain won’t last forever.” Omar inched closer, trying to get a piece of his cardboard.

“It’s not the rain that bothers me. It’s my cocoa powder. I can’t get that or my malt. I can’t get shortening or syrup or even wrapping material.”

Omar raised his voice over the storm. “If you’d pay my fee, I could bring as much as you’d like through my tunnel.”

Mahmoud’s small eyes became tinier inside his head. They looked like pellets he could shoot at Omar.

Omar surrendered his hands in the air. “I have my expenses too. Hamas charges me three thousand dollars a month on my tunnel, whether I ship goods or not, plus a random tax whenever they feel like it. Next week is Abu Mazen’s birthday. I’m sure they will stick me for our leader’s present.”

Mahmoud shook his head. “After I pay your tunnel fee, then I have to pay Hamas a tax on every cone I sell. It’s only ice cream! I’m not selling guns or ammunition.”

“Maybe you’re selling the wrong thing.” Omar winked. “A smart man sells what Hamas needs.”

“I don’t like Hamas. I don’t like Fatah. I don’t like Israel. I just want to make dessert.” Mahmoud wiped the rain from his face and then pointed with his cardboard to the side of his factory. A makeshift tent rested against the wall. “That’s a family of eight who lost their home to one of the bombs. They were supposed to get a donated trailer from a Turkish charity, but it went to a Hamas supporter instead. I let them stay. The mother said, ‘I fear I will die here, but no one will have to move us far as the cemetery is all around.’”

Omar looked down at the dark puddles. “She is different from us, but still the same. Her family is not dying, but not living either.”

Mahmoud sighed. “Tell me what I have to do to survive?”

Omar put his hand on Mahmoud’s back. For a small man, his shoulders rose up and down in big waves. “I do what is best for my family. Pro-Hamas, Pro-Fatah, Pro-Israeli. I’ll be any of these to survive.”

Omar left Mahmoud standing in front of his factory. If Mahmoud had tears, they were mixed in with the storm.

The school building was like most buildings in Gaza, a crumbling one-story cement structure. Its playground had turned into a brown lake. The slide was buried underneath the water while the swings only had chains. Their seats had been swallowed up by the dark depths of the muddy waters. Omar shook his head. Everything would turn to rust when it dried. A few years ago, he smuggled all the equipment through his tunnel and paid for everything so Hanan, Khaled, and their classmates could have somewhere to play. Now, it had turned to junk in just one storm.

Omar squinted beyond the playground. On a clear day, he could see his family’s land inside Israel. It was still his, waiting for him to return. Sixty plus years ago, al-Nakba occurred. His parents described the catastrophe through their tender eyes. In 1948, his parents were only children and first cousins to one another. Large barrels fell from the bellies of Israeli planes. Armed clashes started between

the Arab inhabitants and the Israeli soldiers. There was a blind man in his parent's neighborhood. He was put on the front line since he had excellent hearing. He later became a guard for the village priest. Omar's parents slept in their shoes and socks in case something happened. His maternal grandmother hid bullets for the Arab Liberation Army in her cooking pots. One day a man ran into her kitchen with a revolver. Omar's grandmother took it and put it in a pot. The English army did a search of the family's apartment, but never found the gun boiling on the stove. At sunset that night, there was gunfire. A bullet grazed Omar's father's face. The metal was still hot. His father removed his hand from his mouth and two teeth came out with the bullet. His family forced a car to stop and take Omar's father to the hospital. The doctors drugged him. With the bright lights, his father asked where the theater was. After that, Omar's father and all his relatives, including his mother, left for Gaza. It was predicted that the fighting would increase and his family feared his father would lose more than his teeth.

Despite the frightening time, there was still optimism and wishful thinking that their departure was only temporary. The Arab Liberation Army would conquer the Israelis and British in no time. They packed light and took almost nothing except the shirts on their backs: No jewelry, no papers, nothing important because they expected to return in a week. That had been sixty-three years ago.

To Omar's parents and their other cousins, the walk toward Gaza seemed like any other weekend stroll. Omar's father remembered a yellow butterfly floating in the hot wind. Yet nestled deep in the honey-dipped fields, sat a village where the townsfolk warned of a massacre. Over half the village was burned or stolen. A woman came running from the mosque. She was crying and covered in blood. "They killed my children!" she ranted. Omar's family couldn't believe what was happening except that it was true. There were open mass graves. They saw the people inside. Cats clawed at their corpses. There was a lone head with a checkered keffiyeh. It was possible to find people, but nothing was left of them.

In one long line, Omar's family along with the surviving villagers resembled an army of marching ants toward Gaza. They travelled through the woods where it was spooky and silent, surviving on blackberries and questionable mushrooms. Mothers and fathers covered their children with black blankets so the planes would not see them. Eventually, they landed in Gaza where Omar's family rented one large room for all the aunts and uncles and their children. In all it was seventeen to a room.

In Gaza, it was the season of okra and tomatoes. As Omar's family worked in the dusty fields, they glanced back toward their family home. A year after they left, it dissolved into nothing. A bomb hit their metal roof and it flew to pieces. But the land was still there. Their land, dirt and all.

As the seasons grew into years, Omar was born in Gaza along with Fatha from parents who were also Palestinian refugees. When Fatha bloomed into a young woman, Omar found her very captivating. When she walked into a room, everyone knew she was there. She held nothing back. Omar was drawn to her directness unlike other women who were shy. Despite being a hard worker, Fatha's parents didn't take to Omar at first. They wanted her to marry someone who wore a necktie and worked in an office. Soon, Omar and Fatha were swept into each other's lives, sneaking off behind their parents' backs. Their

first kiss was so passionate that Omar gasped for air. Eventually, they were married in an olive field in Gaza. A year later, Khaled was born and Omar felt the burden of not only supporting a wife and child, but also of living under occupation. He didn't consider himself the savage that Israelis believed he was. For in the territories the Palestinians had their own political administration, but lived under martial law, justified as necessary to protect Israel. Omar knew he couldn't enter Israel since it would be considered demographic suicide. It was a premise that Israel had to remain a Jewish state for its self determination and safety. If Israel allowed Omar and all other Palestinians to move into its current borders, the Jewish population would quickly be outnumbered, rendering Israel effectively an Arab state. In the meantime, Hamas and Fatah, the two political parties that represented the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, kept promising that things would get better. In the past, they were known to lie to their people. This was called history.

Omar turned away from his family's land and into the school. He was fortunate enough to send his children to one of the private schools instead of the overcrowded government-run schools. It was cold but dry inside the building. A lone light bulb hung from the hallway ceiling. Elias Aboushi, the school's principal, sat at his desk. The same small cross that hung from Amna's neck hung from his. Omar was not bothered that he was a Christian like Amna. Others did. They were like wild animals. When someone shone a light in the middle of the road, Muslims, Christians, and Jews froze like deer and scattered to their respective packs. Afterwards, they'd tear each other apart.

Elias Aboushi was a tiny thing. The top of his silvery hair came to the bottom of Omar's chin. Yet to his students, he had the power of a giant. Behind his desk hung an oversized wooden paddle that threatened the rowdiest of students. As for Hanan and Khaled, they were as quiet as a poem.

"Salaam Alaikum," said Omar as he tapped on the door.

Elias Aboushi raised his head. "God be with you, Abu Khaled. What brings you out in this weather?"

"It's Hanan."

Elias Aboushi looked down at his grade book. "She's doing well. Straight A's as usual."

Omar beamed, and then frowned. "Yes, but she has bruises on her arms and legs. I suspect a bully, but she denies it. Who is she afraid of? Who is bothering her?"

"I run a very strict classroom. No one gets out of line."

Omar glanced at the worn paddle. "Hanan's nose and mouth are bloody. No one should threaten my daughter." Omar glanced at the chalkboard behind Elias Aboushi. Not a scratch appeared on its smooth black slate. A red and yellow beaded abacus lay on top of a new overhead projector. All presents from himself and Fatha. Omar remembered when he went to school and there were no donations. He was made to write perfect Arabic calligraphy on shiny tin plates. The writing instruments came from slates of reed and the ink came from cooking pots. Omar picked up a new textbook.

"Abu Khaled we very much appreciate your generosity—"

“What are you teaching them here? To hit and bully? I have a son. I’ve seen the way other boys play. They hit, tackle, push and shove until someone gets hurt.”

“It is innocent.” Elias Aboushi pushed aside a leftover plate of crumbled feta with tomatoes. “On the playground, they are like a pack of puppies. It’s natural to show who can be the strongest.”

“So they are learning to use their hands and not their brains.”

Elias Aboushi rose from his desk. He was not that much taller than when he was sitting. “Please don’t compare my classroom with barbarians.”

Omar inhaled and then exhaled deeply, wanting to blow Elias Aboushi away. “I need you to find the bully or else there will be no more donations from myself or my wife.”

Elias Aboushi rubbed the dark hairs that swept across the tip of his nose. “If there is a problem in my classroom, you have my word, it will be resolved.”

Omar’s phone rang in his raincoat pocket. The shrill sound made his shoulders jump. It was Fatha. Who else would keep calling every five minutes? Somehow he had missed the last four calls.

Her voice screeched through the line. Hanan had a high fever. It was jumping up the thermometer. He must come home.

Before Omar could turn to Elias Aboushi, he recited one of his Christian prayers. “Lord Jesus, Who went about doing good and healing all, we ask You to bless Hanan who is sick. Give her the strength in body, courage in spirit, and patience in pain. Let her recover her health, so that, restored, she may joyfully praise Your Name, for You live and reign forever and ever. Amen.”

Outside the school, the water was up to Omar’s calves. Never in Gaza had Omar seen so much rain. It was the end of the wet season and a flood like this seemed almost impossible. It was as if a dam had broken.

Omar revved the engine and kept the car in first gear, trying to keep the engine dry. What should have been a ten minute trip home took over an hour. He promised himself that next time he would swim.

When he reached his apartment, Fatha rose from her prayer position while Abu Ramsey unpacked his medical bag. She was not as observant as Omar, but she was known to drop everything and speak to God when she needed help. She took off her head covering and let it fall onto Hanan’s bed. Her face appeared more tired than when Omar left for school.

Abu Ramsey leaned over Hanan. “How long has she been like this?”

Fatha answered in a low voice. “Her nose has been bleeding off and on for the last few days. The gums just started today.”

“How about the bruises?”

“We noticed them yesterday,” said Fatha as she turned to Omar. “Did you find the bully?”

Abu Ramsey lifted Hanan’s eyelids and shone a pen light into her eyes. “You need to get her to the hospital.”

“In this rain?” Omar wiped his forehead dry.

Abu Ramsey nodded. "Hanan has bruising, excessive bleeding, and a high fever. I'll order some blood tests and an x-ray."

Hanan touched her bloody nose. Her voice was no more than whisper. "Am I going to Shifa?"

Abu Ramsey nodded gently. "It's the only one with pediatrics."

"But they are overwhelmed. Hanan will be a sardine squeezed into a can," said Fatha as she touched Hanan's forehead with her fingertips. She rubbed them together as if she had taken something burning out of the oven.

Omar protested, "What if the Israelis bomb it again?"

"Right now the storm is more dangerous than the bombs." Abu Ramsey started to pack his bag. "Besides no one knows for sure if Hamas makes their headquarters at Shifa."

Amna pointed out the window. "The streets are flooded. It's too dangerous to drive."

"If Omar has to, he'll carry Hanan on his back." Fatha reached for Hanan's finger, linking it with hers.

"But Mama, the hospital's all the way at the other end of the city," said Hanan.

Abu Ramsey turned to Omar, "With all your connections, you should be able to find a fisherman with a boat to take Hanan."

Omar picked up his cell and began to dial.

"Who are you calling?" asked Fatha.

"Mahmoud Talbani."

"Why would you want ice cream and cookies in this rain?" Fatha rubbed Hanan's fingers.

"He wants something from me and now I need something from him." Omar looked at Khaled and Hanan. The fear of the hospital had taken the joy from their eyes and the usual flow of words from their mouths.

"Hello, Abu Suheil, it's Abu Khaled."

Omar imagined Mahmoud Talbani's warm smile on the other end of the phone.

"Abu Khaled, are you dry now?" said Mahmoud Talbani.

"Yes, I'm dry now. Listen, I have a deal for you. How about I bring all your supplies through the tunnel for the next month, free of charge?"

"Tell me what I have to do, friend."

"I need a large vehicle for the rain. Lend me your delivery truck."

"Deal."

"Good, but hurry. I need it immediately."

Hanan sat up in bed as Omar hung up his cell. "We are going in an ice cream truck!"

"Chocolate!" Khaled raised his hands into fists.

Omar winked at Hanan and Khaled. "When Hanan gets better, I will get both of you a cone in every flavor."

Fatha and Amna wrapped Hanan in blankets. Just before they were about to leave a wave of sickness came over Hanan and her blankets were soiled. Khaled peered from the bedroom door. The delicious thought of ice cream seemed to have disappeared. His face turned flush as if he had been struck by the weather outside.

Beyond their front door, Omar carried Hanan in his arms. Her body was hot beneath the blankets despite the cold stormy winds. Fatha, Khaled, Abu Ramsey, and Amna followed through the alleyways wide enough for only a fat horse. Inside the truck's cab, Omar and Fatha sandwiched Hanan between them while the others road in the back with the boxes. Omar plowed through the waters toward Shifa. The rain beat against the windshield. The smell of baked cookies and waffle cones did little to warm Omar's heart.

At the entrance of Shifa Hospital, a Rottweiler sat at a Hamas soldier's feet, its caramel chin rested on its paws. Hanan drooped in Omar's arms. One leg swung faster than the other. The soldier waved them through as Fatha, Khaled, Abu Ramsey, and Amna followed.

Inside, the air was muggy and hot from sickness. Omar missed the coolness of the storm. Here, late spring came like the plague. The odor was unforgiving.

A man banged his head in grief against a wall. His son lay on the floor. His relatives wailed, begging the doctor for a bed. Fatha peeled off Hanan's first wet blanket, leaving a dry one underneath. Hanan shivered and her nose started bleeding again.

Omar rolled his daughter's head into his chest, shielding her from the sick and injured patients. Torn open, were they human? Did they have souls? Images moved slowly. People cried, argued, complained, and hugged. It was like watching many limbs of a single organism. They were all part of one painful movement.

An emaciated man in the shape of an animal carcass wilted on a thin mattress on the floor. He was dark, brown skin with sunken cheeks and a curving, blade of a nose. His eyes were grey and wide open, he looked terrified. Yellow jaundice leaked into the whiteness of his eyes. The old man shuddered with pain and began to shake violently. A nurse appeared and rolled the sheet down to his waist. Below his chest where he should have had a stomach was a soggy bandage. The nurse snipped at its corners, making the puss and bloody gauze come off in two pieces, revealing the man's agony. Something that looked like a pink balloon had invaded his stomach. The nurse took a wet cloth and dabbed the area. Omar wondered if the pressure or the water hurt him even more. Omar rubbed his prayer beads and then turned away, wanting to give the man dignity to suffer in private.

A nurse told them to go to registration down the hallway. They stepped over bawling children and squeezed through their hysterical parents. Inside a small, dank room sat a clerk in front of a manual typewriter.

"Name of patient?" asked the clerk behind the desk. Beads of sweat appeared to bubble on his forehead underneath the dim light.

“Hanan Hamdan,” said Abu Ramsey.

The clerk banged down hard on the manual typewriter. The clickety-clack of each key took forever to print Hanan’s name. He moved in close to study the typed index card and then continued pounding on the keys.

Omar breathed deeply. The process seemed endless.

The clerk pulled the index card from the carriage and dropped it carelessly into a file. “Go find a place in the hallway. Someone will come get you when a doctor is ready.”

“My patient needs a bed,” said Abu Ramsey.

“We have no more beds.”

“How long is the wait until we see the doctor in charge?”

The clerk exhaled a heavy sigh. “It’s impossible to say. Most patients have been waiting all day. The flood has overwhelmed us.”

Abu Ramsey stood up and moved into the hallway. Omar followed with Hanan in his arms. The rest of his family trooped behind.

Abu Ramsey headed straight toward the Chief of Pediatrics like a guided missile. He knew Dr Hassan Khalaf from medical school. He was always respectful and polite to his colleague, but today he yelled above the hysteria. “I have a ten year old girl. High fever, excessive bruising and bleeding. Possible platelet transfusion. She needs blood tests!”

In the dim hallway, Dr Khalaf wiped his brow with the sleeve of his white coat. The air was muggy and full of germs as the generator was on the brink. “We have no more beds. I had 600, but the flood brought in 800 sick.”

“We can do it in the hallway. I only need a blood test.”

Dr Khalaf shrugged. “Let me see if we can find a needle.”

“A clean one, please!” said Abu Ramsey.

Omar leaned into Abu Ramsey. “How much blood will they take?”

Abu Ramsey pinched his forefinger to his thumb. “Just a little. She’ll have plenty left.”

A nurse scuttled down the hallway with a clipboard. Abu Ramsey stepped in front of her. “Doctor Khalaf has ordered a blood test immediately for my patient. Where are the needles?”

“We are low on needles. We are low on everything,” the nurse snapped. “The only thing we have is lots of sick people.”

“My patient’s father is the owner of a very important tunnel. If you need something for yourself, we can arrange it.”

“I could use some electricity. I’ve been living in complete darkness since last week.”

“Light we cannot bring through the tunnel, but how about fresh vegetables from Egypt?” Abu Ramsey suggested.

The nurse nodded. “Let me see if I can get a needle.”

Abu Ramsey pointed down the hallway. “We’ll be in the corner.”

Omar and his family settled into a corner where Hanan fell asleep on Fatha’s lap. Khaled, who was known as a constant fidgeter, grabbed all his limbs and tucked them into his body.

The nurse waddled toward them and placed a tightened rubber band around Hanan’s arm, tapping for a vein. Everyone watched the nurse while Khaled looked away.

“Such tiny veins. You are like a sparrow” said the nurse.

She inserted the syringe while Hanan shrieked. It wasn’t the pinch, but the rubber band that appeared so scary. Omar imagined the rubber band squeezing Hanan’s veins until they burst and then her arm would explode.

“Hold still, sweetheart,” said the nurse. “It just takes a second.”

Omar closed his eyes. He had seen shellings. He had seen Hamas beat a shopkeeper for not paying his taxes. He had seen it all. But there was no greater pain than the suffering of his daughter. If there was a bully, he prayed for it to appear. At least then, he could have someone to blame.

The nurse collected four vials. She turned to Abu Ramsey. “It is going to take a while. The lab is overwhelmed. You should take her home and we’ll call you with results.”

Abu Ramsey checked the vials to make sure Hanan’s names were on them. He turned to Omar and whispered. “If we leave, they could lose her blood.”

Omar looked at the nurse. “I’m the father and the tunnel owner. I’ll get you the vegetables and in the meantime my family will stay here for the blood results.”

Abu Ramsey and Fatha kept vigil over Hanan while Omar, Khaled, and Amna left. Omar knew he would have to come up with not only fresh vegetables, but something even greater to get Hanan a bed. Outside the hospital, the streets were a dark river underneath the night sky. In the beginning, a flood was only rain. It was neither as sudden as an earthquake or a fire. The rain should have been harmless. Instead, it made Omar feel much smaller. The black universe would swallow him up.

Omar drove Mahmoud Telbani’s truck toward his tunnel where crates of vegetables sat inside. A grocery owner would never know if he took a vine of tomatoes or a few bunches of carrots. At the well’s entrance, Omar stared at the sandbags and plywood the workers had laid on top. If Omar and Khaled removed them, the entire tunnel would flood. They would have to wait several days until the water receded. Omar prayed that the cool earth would keep the vegetables fresh or else he would have three hundred meters of rotting food and spoiled goods.

They turned around and made their way toward the apartment. Inside, sound blared from the TV and the radio that they had abandoned in their haste. Despite the storm that had blown out every candle and light bulb in Gaza, the generator hummed along.

Khaled got Omar a fresh pack of cigarettes and more books for Hanan.

Amna rushed to pack dry clothes. She returned with thick denim work pants, wool sweaters, cottony nightgowns and a bathrobe for Hanan. She didn't complain about Omar and Khaled's boots soaking the floor. She gave a worried look instead.

"We need vegetables," said Omar.

Amna went to the refrigerator. She packed what they had left: carrots, lettuce, tomatoes, scallions, and then threw in some oranges.

Omar shook his head in front of the TV and then yanked the plug from the wall. The nurse would get her vegetables, but he knew the doctor would need something more.

"Baba, don't forget the stereo. Hanan likes music," said Khaled.

Omar put the TV inside a cardboard box. "This should be enough."

On the street, the water rose to the brim of the giant tires. Omar rolled up his pants, letting a brown river run past his knees. Amna lifted her robe and Khaled followed as they helped pile the TV, clothing and vegetables in the back of the truck.

The streets steamed with fog: It made Gaza appear dreamy as Omar drove the truck back to the hospital.

Khaled rubbed the window clean. "Baba, are you sure there's not too much water on the road to drive?"

Omar lit a cigarette and then cracked the window a pinch for air. "This is an old truck. It works best in wet conditions. They don't have the fancy electronics. With the newer vehicles it's like throwing a cellphone into the bath. As long as I keep the engine above water and dry, we'll be okay." Omar looked at Amna who had been quiet for the last several hours. "Do you ever get rain like this back home?"

"No sir, only dust storms. We don't have fancy cars either. Just trucks like this. They last forever." Amna pressed her fingers against the small cross that hung on her neck.

The water ebbed lower past the Ministry of Health, showing the road's surface. The rain let up into a light patter. The sludge brown road sucked at the truck's tires. Omar sighed while Khaled rubbed the steamed window clear of their nervous breath.

Omar made a right and then drove alongside a row of soaked stalls that sold black market drugs. He turned to Khaled. "Not a good day to ride your bike."

Khaled smirked. His after-school job of delivering flowers around the city would most likely be washed away in the rain.

Omar shifted his eyes from Khaled toward the road. They were a few blocks away from the hospital, but the water had risen without notice into the height of a river. The steel truck turned as light as an aluminum can. Omar pressed on the brakes, but they did little good as the tires were no longer on the ground. He shut off the ignition.

Amna held her stomach while she stared at the murky brown water. "The sewer has thrown up."

Omar gripped the wheel. His smooth brown knuckles turned into white rocks. He knew the truck was floating too fast to jump out. At the same time, he tried not to panic that the truck could flip.

The water splashed over a concrete barricade ahead. Omar kept his faith that the river would take him toward the structure.

“Baba, you’re going to hit the barricade!”

“It’s the only way I can stop the truck.”

Khaled reached for the useless steering wheel and turned it toward the barricade. With a thud, the truck crashed.

“Out, everyone out!” Omar opened the door and jumped into the river. He lifted Amna over him and then Khaled.

He held Amna by the forearms. “Do you know how to swim?”

“A little,” she replied.

“Don’t panic. Make your arms like a butterfly or hang onto Khaled.”

Omar opened the back of the truck. He was careful or else the truck could tilt over. He slid the TV out and carried it over his head. His stomach pressed against the brown water, making ripples.

“Baba, what about the clothes and the vegetables?” asked Khaled.

“We have the TV. That’s enough,” said Omar as he yelled through the light rain.

“But the nurse wanted vegetables.”

Omar sighed and reached back into the truck. He swung a vine of fresh tomatoes and scallions toward Khaled. “The TV is most important.”

Khaled carried the vine between his teeth and waved the scallions in the air. “Now the nurse can eat and Hanan can watch her shows.”

Amna hung onto Khaled as he used his hands in a paddle style to row as fast as he could. Omar waded behind. In his arms, the TV was raised just above the water.

By the time they reached the steps of the hospital, the water had subsided to their ankles. The doctors and nurses didn’t seem to care that they were soaked: the troubles of the sick and injured were much worse. In the hallway, Khaled looked away from a woman sitting cross-legged. She sat haplessly breastfeeding her newborn. Her breast crushed her baby’s sweating skull. A mother lay on a gurney while a soldier cut an umbilical cord with the knife on his rifle.

Omar found the nurse who had taken Hanan’s blood and gave her the tomatoes and scallions. They were still fresh and chilled from the rain. She promised that the results from the blood test would be back by tomorrow morning.

“And warm blankets, please,” said Fatha as she tried to brush the rain off Khaled’s clothes.

Omar rubbed Hanan’s cheek and kissed her. Her skin was as damp as his. He turned to climb over the patients in the hallway and dropped the heavy square cardboard box at the doctor’s feet. Yes, of course a room could be arranged, the doctor promised.

Khaled looked up in surprise, but said nothing about the TV.

Hanan's room had been a storage area. Brooms and buckets lay about. A cot with an army grey blanket was pushed up against the wall. Light flowed weakly from a naked bulb. It reminded Omar of an empty cell, smelling of cement.

Amna wrung Khaled's shirt out in a bucket while Abu Ramsey pressed Omar's hand. He promised he would return in the morning. Khaled curled up on the floor and tried to fall asleep. When he yawned, Omar saw his gums and incisors. Fatha squeezed into bed with Hanan. Pain and fever pushed out her tears. It was incredible that Hanan's head could have held so much fluid. It had been hours since she had drank anything.

Omar stood in the doorway. He worried about Hanan and Mahmoud Telbani's abandoned truck. His thoughts were interrupted by the agony that ebbed and flowed from the hallway. First staccato shrieks, then a legato moan. Hours later, the rain had stopped and Omar went outside for a smoke. He looked up to the clearing sky for his brother of long ago. He saw a thousand eyes and wondered which one was Rawhai's. He wanted him to be there. He would have brightened up even the darkest night. Instead, Omar let out a cry. Grief wasn't specific in its timeline and neither was Rawhai's unexpected death. Omar did not want to cry for his brother now, but life did not always operate for his convenience. A piece of Omar was missing and always would be. Rawhai's death was an amputation of his family. Omar would always have a limp until they were reunited in heaven.

One cigarette after another, the dawn finally appeared. In the earth's copperish light, wrinkled laundry hung in the muddy sky. People waded through the flood waters. One father carried his daughter on his shoulders like a trophy despite their losses. The flood reminded Omar of a rare snow in Gaza. It was harmless in the beginning, but then it went as grey as ashes once it hit the ground.

Omar's phone rang. It was Fatha. There was no crying in the background, but she told him that the doctor wanted to speak to him. He had the results from the blood tests. Omar stomped out his last cigarette. He felt the nicotine charge through his veins.

Khaled sat next to the door, his head cocked toward someone's radio blaring from the hallway. Amna was busy cleaning the sink in their tiny room.

Hanan lay in bed. Her breath was peaceful and her eyes were closed.

Fatha leaned into Omar's ear. "I promised the doctor some videos in exchange for sleeping medicine."

The doctor turned away from the IV drip and shook Omar's hand. He was the same doctor who took the TV set. He spoke slowly and stiffly. "Your daughter has leukemia."

"Please, speak in Arabic. I don't understand the English," said Omar.

"Hanan has cancer."

Cancer. The word was like the storm outside.