

ABDULLAH ABU SNAINEH

THE STEP

A SHORT STORY COLLECTION

بيلومانيا
للتنشر والتوزيع



The Step: Short story collection
Author: Abdullah Abu Snaineh.

Book revision: Jamal Suleiman
Cover design: Mohammad Ali

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First Edition: December 2016

ISBN 978-977-85325

Bibliomania Publishing & distribution
Egypt, Cairo.

Mobile: 002 0106 553 45 41

Website:

www.bibliomania.tk

Facebook:

Www.facebook.com/bibliomania.eg



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Mine

"These books are going to save you. They are the best weapon you can have. Why don't you study?! People die just to have an opportunity to study! It's 8:00! You must be at school now!" My mother shouted at me because I was late for school this morning. While pointing to my backpack she lectured me about education being a way to fight the occupation. I nodded, but in my mind, I had a different idea: in a way, the occupation is one of the best things that ever happened to us. We study to fight them, so if we weren't under occupation we wouldn't care very much about education, right? Or is it just the way the elderly put it to us? The older members of my family always demonstrate education as a cure to a disease but I think education is not a cure. It's immunity. If we were learned in the first place we wouldn't be under occupation, I guess!

I know it's strange for a defender of education to be late for school, but the truth is that life is more important.

Priorities.

And my priority is to stay alive.

Personally, I've been living in misery all my life. But it is still called 'Life'. Yes, I am desperate but with desperation comes hope. The more miserable you have lived, the more likely you find happiness. Because happiness is relative and almost everything is better than *living* in this shithole. Wait!! If my city was a shithole, what does that make us?!

I stopped talking to myself at that point and took my heavy backpack and carried it. I halted a bit at the door and looked at my mother and my little sister in her arms. Our *house* is a caravan donated to us after we had lost our home in the last war. I didn't look at its walls. There were no memories to be embraced there. It was just a symbol for humiliation and surrender. I left and shut the door behind me.

I wasn't going to school. Instead, I was heading to the coast where from I would be taken to the future by a ferry. I've worked after school for almost a year to save some money to buy a ticket and have financial security when I leave. I worked in restaurants, factories, security, fishing, and so many other jobs. It occurred to me several times to stay here but I knew I

couldn't rely on working here, even if I worked for 15 hours a day.

Today was the day I leave everything behind, but I wanted to make sure no one knew I was going before I was gone. I didn't take a crowded road to the port. I couldn't take risks showing myself to anyone, especially that I've worked as a fisherman and my face would be recognized there. If someone identifies me at the port, they won't stop questioning me: Why aren't you at school?! Do you want to work in fishing again? Do you want to buy some fish? How are you? Where are you going?

I headed up north toward the border and from there I meant to turn west to the coast. My plan didn't go well. As I reached the northern border I quickly changed my direction to the west. There were no signs to follow, just the electric fence. I only had to walk by it until I see the water. I knew the trip would be long and tiring in the desert even if the sun wasn't vertical on my head yet.

My backpack was tremendously heavy so I dropped it on the rough-untraveled desert to walk lighter and faster. I walked for four or five light steps before my foot stepped on a land mine. It didn't explode at once.

It was the kind that doesn't explode unless you remove the pressure. Their explosion may not be fatal sometimes. It might only amputate your leg, and in this desert, it means death too but in a slower and more painful manner. My leg would be chopped and my genitals burnt and then I would bleed to death, especially that the temperature is very high so my blood would turn into a river.

I have to focus. Just don't let go. Keep the pressure on the mine. Mines are like us in a way: If the ruler keeps his boots very tight on our heads we will keep silent but if he becomes a little lenient we would rebel. We would explode. And I am the master of the mine. It is mine. Just keep your foot on it.

Hadn't I dropped my backpack I would've carefully put it on the mine instead of my left foot. My mother shouted at me hours ago, "These books are going to save you!" She was right.

It is 12:45 now. The school bell will ring in less than thirty minutes and all of the students will go to their houses.

I intended to contact my family when I'm far away from our coast. The ferry is far away now, taking my dreams of a better future with it.

My leg is numb. I can't feel it.

This morning started with a dream of a better future but now all I'm dreaming about is having any future. The sun is getting hotter and hotter and if I faint I will absolutely die today. And the chances of fainting are very high because I always get nausea under a scorching sun and this made me miss many of PE classes.

I love sports. The spirit and the fight you put to win a game. It is just like life except that life is not a game. There is no 'retry' option in real life and you don't get to get a bonus life. In the real world, once you die there is no coming back until resurrection day.

I didn't die from a missile coming from above but I might die now from a mine under my feet. I wonder if they will mourn me as a hero martyr! This very morning, I was running away from here, from them and from the others, but mostly from myself. I find it strange that life and death are the most paradoxical things yet they are always linked to each other! There

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is no life without death and there can't be death if there isn't a life to begin with. The sun is falling toward the west but it is still broiling.

Exiled

"But you promised"!

"I know".

"You promised to take me to the most beautiful beach"!

I kept silent.

"So we can't stay together, can we?" She asked.

"No"!

"Why"?

This phone call is still stuck in my head.

I was imprisoned for five years, six months, and two days. In prison, you learn to count each day and each moment. You even count the bad meals and the unbearable ones. When I was released I needed time to adapt to my new status as a released prisoner. The world changes but only the outside world .

Prisoners Club invited me to their meetings which aimed to help the freed prisoners adjust. I went there only once and it was enough.

She was a volunteer in Prisoners Club. I knew her brother. He died in prison. When she knew that he was in my cell, she asked if I could tell her about her brother. I accepted. After a while she asked me if she could make documentaries about the prisoners' cause. She kept asking me during interviews and short films but when it was my time to ask, I asked for her hand.

She has always been fascinated by the skies and seas. She has always coveted to be a bird or a fish so she could fly or swim freely.

She also loved looking at the stars and wished to sit on a beautiful beach so I promised to take her to the most beautiful beach on our honeymoon.

"I will take you to the Riviera," I started, trying to impress her.

"Which one?!"

"Is there more than one Riviera?!" I asked, embarrassed.

"Yes, but I'd like to go to the French Riviera!"

"Do you think we'll live long enough to see our own Riviera?" I asked after a minute of silence.

"We would have if they hadn't taken everything that is beautiful from us!"

"Not everything!" I corrected. I continued, "I wouldn't trade this moment for anything!"

"Not even for the moment of our liberation?!"

At that moment, I knew she always put the love of our country before me. I even sometimes thought that she loved me because I was a prisoner, a part of the cause. I wasn't surprised I didn't come first. I would do the same too.

It was only my second day of strike in prison when her brother asked me. "Isn't there a better way to fight?"

"Is there any other way?!"

"Not here. Not while we are here."

"But you know we might die of hunger, right?"

"We won't be the first ones."

"I'm afraid we won't be the last ones!"

"But it's a glorious way to die!"

"It's a glorious way to fight."

My strike lasted for seventy-two days but his didn't last for more than five. He was very ill and received little medical attention. His health didn't allow him to strike for more days. Nine days later he died.

What he and others had done showed me that there might be things dearer to your heart than anyone in this world.

Her honesty has always impressed me and I was graced to be a part of her life, even if I was so for only a short period of time. We were engaged for only twenty-two days and it was my decision to break our engagement.

We are accustomed to losing things we love and people we adore but that doesn't change the fact that loss hurts.

It was almost noon when an intelligence officer of the occupation came to the place where I used to work, a small plants nursery. We were inside the small greenhouse when he started, "Your fiancé won't stop, will she?"

He was talking about her videos and reports that exposed many of their crimes, especially against the prisoners.

There were two soldiers inside the greenhouse with him. The first was shorter than the average. He had pale skin, brown eyes and an aquiline nose. The other soldier was very tall and of colored skin. The two soldiers wore helmets so I couldn't see how their hair looked like. The officer on the other hand, had a bright, golden hair and deep blue eyes.

I looked directly at his eyes and replied, "She's a grown person. She can do whatever she likes,"

"Not if her beloved husband tells her to stop!"

"Fiancé, I'm her fiancé. We are not married."

"And you'll never be!" He quietly said while leaning to a flower and smelling it.

I stood speechless until he met my eyes again.

"Okay!" I said while putting my hands in front of him so he could handcuff me.

"You are not going in, you are going out." He said.

"Exile?"

"Yes. And you both may get married but in that case she will be exiled with you too!"

The officer picked the rose and left.

I went to my fiancé's house to tell her father about my exile, face to face.

"If we get married she would never be able to come here again!" I told him.

"She loves you!"

"But there are things that she loves more than she loves me!"

He kept silent and I left.

While I was packing, I called her, "Hello!"

"Hey!"

"Did he tell you?"

"He did," She said. I could hear her sobbing.

"I'm sorry!" I apologized.

"But you promised!"

"I know."

"You promised to take me to the most beautiful beach!"

I kept silent.

"So we can't stay together, can we?" She asked.

"No!"

"Why?"

I knew the answer then but I didn't say it. I agreed with her father that he wouldn't tell her about my exile before I had left the country.

I left.

I'm here now crossing the border to another country, to my exile.

There are countless travelers but few counters where employees work to have our papers done. I have to wait for my role. I have ticket number 48.

The electronic board beeps - 46 to counter 2. Another minute, it beeps again - 47 to counter 1. Few seconds - 48 to counter 3.

48. That's me. That's us!

The Past of the Future

That day wasn't like any other day for him. It wasn't filled with emptiness. Every morning he waited for the bus to take him to his work. The bus wasn't specialized for his work but he just loved listening to the old driver's tales. The young man has always preferred to sit on the closest seat to the door so he can hear the driver very well.

On that specific day, he couldn't sit where he has used to do because when he stepped onto the bus he saw an old man sleeping on the closest seat to the door. The old man looked like he was dreaming about a past that he didn't have. The young man looked at the driver and shook his head in disapproval before the bus was on the road again.

The young man looked for a seat while the bus was moving. He stumbled into many seats and armrests to keep his balance. It was a long way to find a seat as almost everyone on the bus greeted and exchanged friendly words with him. He wasn't born in that city but he was loved since he moved there after he had been released from prison.

The second two seats from the last on his right were occupied by a woman with an infant in her arms and a university student tightly holding three chemistry books. The little infant vomited on the student's hand so she involuntarily stood and stumbled into the young man who was about to take the vacant seat across where she sat. He was once a prisoner but he had never been captivated the way he was by her eyes. The sun was leaning on the horizon behind her back and the golden rays were framing her physique and her eyes centered the portrait.

He noticed the chemistry books. Chemistry was his favorite subject at school and he was brilliant at it but he didn't say anything about it. He also wanted to apologize for accidentally hitting her but also didn't. He didn't even give her tissues when she had needed them to wipe some vomit off her shoe.

The bus arrived at the young girl's university thirty minutes before the first lecture. She stood up keeping her eyes on her books. The young man looked at her only when she was walking down the steps of the bus. She stepped out and the door behind her shut causing a sharp squeaky noise.

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The young man woke up. He was sleeping at the closest seat to the door. Before the old driver opened the door of the bus, the young man had seen a passenger holding three chemistry books from the glass window of the door. Then the door was opened letting light illuminate the interior of the bus while the passenger was stepping up the steps.

Beauty Wars

"Well, I've known May since the last few weeks of twelfth grade and that was about three years ago. She became the most beautiful girl in the school after I had been so before she came. I always came second to her, at school and university. Everyone was attracted to her. And to make it worse, she sometimes looked even more beautiful. It was always this way since I knew her. Few days ago, our department at the university announced that the students who wanted to go on a field trip to the other universities in the other cities had to sign his or her name with me. May refused to go at first but I insisted that she go with us," I told the police officer who was investigating me about the murder of May.

"I thought you said you always came after May when it came to beauty, right?" A policeman asked.

"Yes,"

"So why did you insist that she come with you on the field trip!?"

"I think I wanted to look nice in front of the other students!" I shrugged.

"You said she sometimes seemed different , how?"

"I guess I said she looked more beautiful! A little taller even! And she also seemed oblivious, shy, and unsure!"

"Were there certain times at which you've noticed these changes in her character?"

"Yeah! University breaks."

There were two policemen in the room. They looked at each other and then one of them handed me three pictures of the victim and asked, "Do you recognize the victim?"

" Yes, she's May!" I positively answered.

They looked at each other again. They continued their investigation.

"Were you aware that May has an identical twin sister?"

I was surprised by his question and "No!" was my answer.

"Their parents are divorced and the mother has the custody rights but they've reached an agreement to let

Maya, that's her name, stay with the father so she could be closer to her university. Actually, she had a scholarship to study there. She was brilliant!" continued the other policeman.

"So Maya is the victim!" I unnecessarily concluded.

"Yes. But you didn't know that, did you?"

"What do you mean?!" I worriedly asked.

"You are our lead suspect."

"What!!!" I panicked.

"She was suffocated with a pink scarf around her neck. We found hairs on that scarf and they matched your DNA."

"It's her... May's scarf! I just tried it for a minute!" I replied defending myself.

"You also insisted she come with you so you could get rid of your target away from home."

I just shook my head while fear was creeping into my spine.

"She's a devil!" I thought.

The Reply

The twenty-two years old Kurt was studying for his forensic test when he heard a shy knock on the door of his dormitory. He took a glance at the digital clock on the wall. It was 12:17 AM. Kurt stretched and yawned while getting up to answer the door. He took two steps away from his desk before turning back to leave his lighter there. That lighter was priceless to him. It was a gift from his deceased girlfriend. The knocks weakly continued but Kurt didn't open the door the instant he reached it. He looked through the peep-hole and saw a friend of his, Ben. It took Kurt several seconds to recognize Ben as he looked horribly pale. Kurt opened the door and before saying anything Ben demanded, "Is he gone yet? Please tell me he's gone!" Kurt would've certainly acted differently than he did if he hadn't seen the dark blue circles around Ben's eyes, his pupils were also dilated. Kurt knew if he took Ben to a hospital having such symptoms, after midnight, they would have to answer a marathon of questions.

"You've had an overdose, haven't you?" Kurt accusingly asked. Ben didn't answer. Instead, he cried while his breaths were racing each other, "Put the fire down. Put it down, please!!"

Kurt looked right and left out of his door to make sure there was no one listening in the hallway and locked the door before turning again to Ben to recommence investigating him. Kurt asked another question, “What did you take, tell me?” Ben didn’t answer this question either but whatever he’s taken that night should’ve been out when he puked at Kurt’s sofa. After Ben had puked, he walked three shaky steps before stumbling into a chair and falling next to the dirty sofa.

Ben lied on the sofa like someone who’s surrendered himself to the sun on a beach. With little vomit, still on his lips he murmured, “I don’t wanna have fun. I don’t...”

Kurt had a test the next day, or technically, the same day as the time was after 12 AM. He tried to deal with the problem quickly because he didn’t want to fail the exam. Except for Ben’s moans, it was quiet and easy to hear any sound. Kurt heard a faint chattering in the hallway, so he went out of his dormitory to see what or who caused the noise and he found two repairmen working to get the electricity current working probably as the lights were flickering through the hallway as if it was a night club. Kurt wondered in his mind, “They’re fixing it now!” then went inside again.

It wasn't a minute before someone knocked on the door. Kurt answered without looking through the peep-hole. It was one of the two repairmen. The man said in an apologetic tone, "I think you're wondering why we're fixing it now," then continued excitedly, "we just want to electrify your life, don't you want your life to be electrified?!" "I just want my room to be electrified." Kurt replied. The man returned to his work and Kurt returned to his room, he almost forgot that Ben was lying on his sofa. But little did Kurt know that Ben was out of the dorm. Kurt searched for Ben but Ben couldn't be found.

It was time for Kurt to go back to study for his test but it wasn't that easy for him to finish studying as he heard gentle knocks on his door, "Ben must've forgotten something!" Kurt assumed. He opened the door quickly and saw two attractive girls and a short man escorting them. The man started talking tenderly to Kurt, "I'm Seamus McKean. Your brother is a friend of mine and I'm here to invite you to a party we're having six doors from here." "I'm sorry but I have a test that I should study for!" Kurt said. "Oh, c'mon, you see... we're hot as hell!" said one of the girls in a seducing voice before the other girl said with a chuckle, "He can't sense the heat by looking only.

He must touch.” Then the man asked Kurt, “Don’t you wanna have fun?” “Well, the thing is I have a test. Besides, my friend’s birthday is soon. I’ll party then.” Kurt replied. “Ooh! I know it’s been so lonely since she passed away. In addition, don’t settle for good if you can get great.” The man said while looking at the two girls. Kurt didn’t mouth a word. The man persisted, “I’ll count to five and then I want a reply.” “I have to study!” Kurt’s reply was quick and decisive. The man then confidently told Kurt while he was closing the door of dorm number 660, “I said ‘I’ll count to five’ and only then I’ll get your reply. Maybe you’ll change your mind! But before I leave, can you bring me your lighter? I want to light a cigarette.”

Kurt quickly brought his lighter to Seamus who was still standing outside and then shut the door locked without even taking back the lighter. The man’s voice said from behind the door, “Remember! I’ll have your reply when I get to five!”

The twenty-two years old Kurt was studying for his forensic test when he heard a shy knock on the door of his dormitory. He took a glance at the digital clock on the wall. It was 12:34 AM. Kurt stretched and yawned while getting up to answer the door. Before being able to see his sofa, Kurt took a deep breath and didn’t

exhale until he saw that the sofa wasn't covered with vomit.

Kurt looked through the peep-hole but couldn't see anything or anyone. He noticed that electricity was properly running in the corridor Kurt went to his fridge and grabbed a carton of milk. He poured all of it into a huge mug. He shook the carton till every drop was in the mug.

Holding the mug, Kurt returned to his desk. He drank the milk then looked at the wall-clock again. It was still 12:34. He assumed that the batteries were empty before the idea of smoking a cigarette crossed his mind. Kurt pulled out a cigarette out of his pack before looking for his lighter. He searched everywhere but couldn't find it. He kept searching for the lighter but a single loud knock on his door interrupted him. He looked at the clock, it was still 12:34 but then he remembered his assumption regarding the batteries, so he looked at his cellphone, the clock was also 12:34. Kurt was startled. The loud single knock became loud knocks.

Kurt finally opened the door to see Seamus, surrounded by no one. The man had lit a cigarette using Kurt's lighter before blowing the smoke of the

first poke at Kurt's face. Then Seamus said in a superior tone, "Five!"

Earthly Paradise

My father loved skiing, bungee jumping, mountain climbing, Formula1 racing, sky diving, scuba diving, and God knows what other insane stuff he loved doing. But why am I using the past tense? That's right, because he's dead. Even though I stopped him from doing anything that could've been dangerous to his health. I hid his passports every time he mentioned going to some place that might hurt him. I even didn't speak with him for days when he told me that he wanted to be at the top of the world... Mount Everest. Of course, I didn't let him do these crazy things but he, somehow, found a way to die!

I didn't know how he died, or exactly when. All I knew then was that he'd died a week earlier in Africa. But I was sure he didn't die like normal people do. He must've died while hunting lions or struggling with snakes. He always did things the hard way, the adventurous way. And obviously, he wanted me to do things his way.

The reason why I'm saying this now is that he left me a will. But he didn't say what he wanted to say straight forward. I had to decode what he had written in his

will to find what he wanted me to find, what he called 'the treasure'.

Valuable things are there for you and for the sake of your trip, let me give it a name 'the treasure.' A big part of the treasure is at NASA. First, you should walk, or even crawl through a small door to meet the mother who's going to help you. Then, a father will help you too. After that, go back to the gate of heavens to find life in a place of death and to find delicacy in a hard place and to unite with the ultimate beauty. After doing all of this, I hope you'll be able to see the treasure. But be aware that the beginning of your trip might be disappointing, but believe me when I tell you that when you finish your journey it'll be worth it. Beginnings might be disappointing but they are important, very important, maybe more than you think.

P.S.

to help you in this, I left some cash in a safe in my office on the second floor.

You don't have to look thoroughly to see the treasure

with love, your father

Okay, first things first. I had to bring the money. I went up to his office and saw the safe and tried to

open it but it was locked. There was a combination of three numbers to figure out. To do that, he had left another paper, another riddle.

*I don't want to hold you for long on this one,
so the riddle is easy and you probably already
know it...*

*'a tree that has twelve boughs, every bough
has about thirty twigs, and each twig has
twenty four leaves.'*

Piece of cake, it was 'a year'. So, the combination was 365. I tried it and... "YESSS, it worked!" I exclaimed as the safe opened its arms to me but I didn't have time for hugging because I had to be using that money to travel to the USA without delay.

That was the third time I travel to America, but it was my first visit to Texas. I'm not sure I could call it a visit. It was more like an exploration trip. But I thought that I won't leave a single place in the United States without visiting it when I find the money. But before finding the money I ought to be on my way to the city of Houston.

Within hours, I was at the front door of the headquarters of NASA. It was a very big door, so it wasn't the door my father mentioned in his will. The

door in the will is small and I needed to find it quickly to meet the mother who was going to help me finding the treasure. I imagined her as an old, big woman. Every time I tried to draw a picture of her in my mind, I remembered that big lady who guided Homer with her wisdom from The Simpsons Movie.

After five or six minutes, I found the door but there was a fence between us. But since when a fence or a wall could stop us! I climbed the fence and approached the small door. Then I saw a shadow of a big figure drawn on the ground in front of me, "It must be the mother's shadow." I thought. I turned my head to see whose figure that shadow was. That big figure was nothing but a huge officer. At first, I didn't know why he was holding handcuffs in his hands. Few seconds were more than enough to answer my question, he wanted to shackle me. That big-muscled man handcuffed me and informed me, "You have the right to remain silent. Any th..." I thought this right was only a right for US citizens. Maybe it was but the officer didn't recognize my true nationality. And truth be told, I hated being handcuffed or being forced to silence but it felt really good to almost have rights for once.

I really was hoping to visit a lot of places in the USA, but honestly, the police station wasn't one of these places. After a cup of coffee and two donuts, a cop stepped into the interrogation room and stood across the table and slid an envelope to me. "What's in it?" I wondered, and it seemed that that cop was capable of reading my mind as few words were able to make their way out of his pizza-filled mouth. "A letter... for you."

At first, I thought that the cop mixed me up with someone else but he was right, it was for me.

Hahaha... I can't believe you wasted your time traveling to America! But don't worry, this is the beginning I told you might be disappointing.

But you have to admit that it was a nice touch from me, making you think that you got closer to the treasure when you did nothing but crossing half the world away from it.

Don't give up.

I felt the world conspiring against me. But there was something I couldn't believe, my father loved to joke even when he was dead. But at least, I knew then that the treasure was in Palestine. The logical next thing to do was taking the first flight back home.

My father told me not to give up, and I won't. I am not a quitter.

I wished that that Boeing 747 could fly faster! I had to find what I was looking for, and I had to find it quickly.

After a long flight I was home. But only after about ten minutes, two British old men rang the bell of my door. My father was their friend and he had told them before he died that I will guide them in the streets of Bethlehem. I had totally forgotten about that but we had to go to Bethlehem, the two gentlemen, I, and Sami, the only friend whom I told about the will.

After hours of touring the old city of Bethlehem, the two gentlemen finally decided to visit the Church of Nativity. Their decision probably came after spending almost all their money on buying souvenirs.

We reached the front yard of the church, and when the first man tried to enter the church he had some difficulties due to his knee arthritis. So, it was hard for him to kneel in order to go through that small door. It is believed that the door was built so small so the visitor of the church would bow to the sanctity of the place.

The four of us were inside. The scent of the votive candles and incense filled our noses. The sparkling paintings on the glass glimmered in our eyes, especially that painting of The Virgin Mary holding her child. "Wait, wait, she is a mother... could it be?" I thought. It was the first piece of the riddle. I had to go through a small door, and then there was the mother.

I told Sami my thoughts and he agreed with me. But then it was time to solve the second piece of the riddle. "A father will help you too." It was time to know who this father was, and to find him. Sami was quick in his assumptions as he promptly said, "It's the trinity, the father, the son, and the holy spirit." but I said with confidence, "No, it couldn't be. My father didn't say 'the father' but he said 'A father' 'A' not 'the' A... A... eureka... I bet it starts with an A. in his will he said "the biggest part of the treasure is at NASA," The Church of Nativity is the letter 'N' so the father must start with an 'A' they are the true initials that together form 'NASA' that's why he said that beginnings are very import..." I didn't finish my theory because Sami rushed in assuming again shouting, "ADAM" "Yes, of course!" I replied in joy,

"Adam Muhammadi, a friend of my father's. He must have an answer."

I went to see Mr. Muhammadi. He didn't recognize me at first but when I told him who my father was he said in a tone suggested that he was expecting me, "Oh, yes, your father is... was a good man," then he asked me, "He left you a puzzle?" "Yes," was my answer and I also told him the whole story and where I've got until then in decoding the will. What he told me afterwards was short, but enough, "When you think about this puzzle, you should think in a holy way, and in this specific part of it, you should think in a hollow way too."

Holy and hollow and starts with 'A.' It became easy. The father is Abraham. He's holy. I mean he's a messenger who rests in a cave, a big hole. And he's the father of the prophets.

Our next destination was Hebron. It was the first time I visit Hebron in this millennium but Sami had been there a month earlier. I think I should pay a visit to the cities I've never been to in Palestine. The taxi dropped us at Bab Ez-Zawyeh, not far from the old city where Abraham Tomb lies. But that day was Thursday and people were like bees on a mission.

The streets were paved with people from everywhere. The alleyways of the old city were decorated with the shouts of vendors and peddlers. The 'wows' of the tourists were like a theme song of that place.

More than an hour had passed, but it felt like minutes to me. It is astonishing how a few minutes, or even a few seconds in a place can take you back thousands of years so that little generator in your skull starts creating millions of stories about that place.

My eyes were captivated by the majesty of the site. They were prisoners in a sweet prison. Please! Any judge! Anyone! Just sentence me for life in that prison. Nothing was capable of distracting or stopping me except that rusty revolving door set by a pack of soldiers. I'm not one of them. I even hate thinking about joining them. I think there's still some humanity in me. But what I hate the most is mixing me with them. They and I are on the opposite poles of ideology. I won't say 'feeling' because I'm not sure they even feel even though that they have hearts. But their hearts are rifles and shotguns, M16s and Tavors. They do have pulse, but they only pump bullets.

After being searched thoroughly, I stepped on these soldiers, unfortunately, only in my mind. I didn't care

much about them as I was inside the mosque and all of the hideous pictures of the low-life soldiers had been cleansed by the purity of the mosque.

I didn't want anything. All I wanted was a little bit of that, a little bit of heaven. Luckily, I had a bit of it when a young boy gave me a cluster of grapes. Honestly, at first, I thought the cluster was artificial as it looked like marbles, gorgeous and shiny. When I put a grape in my mouth and the juice burst out of it, I felt a twitch. Something just pressed my ignition key.

I had to "go back to the gate of heavens," then. Sami rushed again, I almost forgot that he had come with me, and concluded, "I know this one, 'go back to the gate of heavens,' means that you should go back to NASA," but I replied, "No, going to NASA was never part of the answer so I can't go back to a road that doesn't take me to my goal. That road doesn't even exist on the map that should lead me to the treasure. It's Jerusalem, my city. It's wherefrom the prophet Muhammad ascended to heavens. It is the true gate to heavens. We should go there... WAIT! Let's think in reverse, 'N' refers to 'Nativity'... 'A' to Abraham. I bet that 'S' refers to 'Sepulcher', the Church of Sepulcher. It is where Jesus is buried. It's a place of death and I must find life there. Why stop here? The last 'A' is for

'Al-Aqsa.' My father wrote "the ultimate beauty" 'ultimate' means 'Aqsa' in Arabic. Besides, he said 'to find delicacy in a hard place,' something that is hard, a rock, 'the Dome of the Rock' I mean, c'mon! It makes sense. It even comes to your mind automatically, 'between a rock and a hard place.' My father used 'hard place' to make it less difficult.

All the thoughts ran in a non-stop motion in my frontal lobe. Like there was something that pushed these thoughts to flow like that. Like a train, connected trailers, connected ideas that altogether formed the key to my father's riddle. Probably Hebron grapes helped a lot. I felt so brilliant, and so blessed.

Talking about blesses, I was in a very blessed city, Jerusalem. The third location to check was the Church of Sepulcher. I walked in the narrow alleys which I know by heart. I can walk, even run in these alleys with my eyes closed. My ears were my guide. I heard a choir singing, but their melody was not just waves of sound, it was vocal oxygen that gave me life. I went inside to become more alive. It's strange to feel more alive in a burial ground.

I went out of the church but I wasn't sad because I knew that what awaited me at Al-Aqsa wouldn't be

less divine. And what was there for me after I figure out the riddle will be splendid.

I tried to make my way into the mosque, but that day was Friday. The number of people at Salat Jumu'ah was too large to let anyone in. so I stopped, waiting, but as I was waiting, I looked around but that golden dome caught my eyes from far. Like the crown of a beautiful queen. I just couldn't take my eyes off it.

The sun rays reflected from the dome glistened on everything, and everybody, they shone upon me. I felt illuminated. And when the soothing breeze blew through the cedar and olive trees, it carried with it that smell, a smell of a new life, a better life. The taste of Hebron grapes was still fresh, and the scent of the candles and incense was tingling in my nostrils again. The melody of the choir was stuck in my head, but that's okay, I didn't want it to fade away. If Plato was right, that we are a reflection of heavenly beings, then, this land must be a reflection of heaven itself.

Serenity. Everything was clear, and only then I saw it, my father never said, "to *find* the treasure," but he said, "to *see* the treasure," It was never hidden. It was here all along and we didn't have to look for it. All we

needed to do was appreciate it. The treasure was not in Palestine, it was Palestine.

I was in unity with this land and there was nothing and no one that could part me away from it.

I was taken away by the magnificence of the scene, of the feeling. I think that Adam Muhammadi had been standing there for hours but I didn't notice him. He said to me while approaching me, "You see it now, don't you?" "Yes," I gladly replied, "Now I can see the treasure." I continued. "Your father must be proud of you!" he said. "I hope he is, from somewhere above," I replied. He smiled while saying, "Yeah, above, about nine kilometers." "Maybe a little more!" I told him with a smile on my face and a seed of a tear in my eye. But he confidently replied, "No, no. Not more! But it's not how high he is from the ground that matters but how high his spirit is after what you've done, and what he's done too. Now he can die in peace, the ever-rest of his soul."

I couldn't see my face but I think its color has changed a billion times when I heard that from Mr. Muhammadi. Then I said in shock, "Nine kilometers, ever-rest - Everest. You are not joking, are you?! He's going to kill himself!" I said with surprise and I can't

deny that that surprise was the most pleasant surprise in my life.

Mr. Muhammadi laughed so hard before preaching me, "Son, death knows his way to us and he'll take it no matter what we do or don't, but it is life that we should pave the roads that take us there!" I kept silent, looking at the horizon. Ten or fifteen minutes have passed before he asked me, "So, what are you doing tomorrow?" "Nothing," I answered him, "You know, tomorrow's Saturday."

The Life We Mourn

I like Scrubs. It's very funny and entertaining but I also find it awkward. Hospitals are usually not the place in which we laugh or talk about our happy moments. People die there every day. I realize that hospitals might witness a happy moment like a mother giving birth but shouldn't we respect the ill and the relatives to a deceased!?

I can't fathom how the workers in a hospital go on with their lives easily! Is it their belief in fate? I'm certain I will die too and I don't think of death very often. I think of clothes; I work as a fashion designer and I am also a fashion critic for a fashion magazine so whenever I see someone I check his or her style. What I like about their clothes and what they should wear.

If all people were like me, if they usually think of things related to their jobs, wouldn't that mean that the people who work in a hospital will often think of death!?

I have a fiancé and she is a nurse but I have never asked her if she ever thought about the patients at the hospital where she works. But that doesn't mean I

don't wonder about that almost all the time, at least when I'm with her.

This morning I told her I will pick her up after her shift ends at 2. I said earlier that I also write for a fashion magazine and there was an article I haven't finished yet so I found it as an opportunity to complete writing my article at the cafeteria of the hospital.

I was at the cafeteria at 12:30. It was on the ground floor and it looked like a normal cafeteria, not like how a cafeteria in a hospital should look like. I had a plenty of time to finish the article and to have a drink. There wasn't a waiter in the cafeteria so I headed to the cafeteria counter before having a seat. I demanded, "Water, please!"

"Diet?" The cafeteria attendant inquired.

"Is there diet water?!" I wondered just before noticing a woman standing next to me. The guy in the white T-shirt gave her the coke and she replied with a wide-motherly smile.

I found a vacant table. I sat and put my bottle of water on the far side of the table and the laptop at the center in a position that blocked my sight of seeing the bottle

of water. I did that on purpose because I get distracted by the smallest things.

I opened the saved file and read what I had already written. I continued writing and I decided to re-write what I'd written about the mourning dress in Philippines. The unedited version was bleak and pessimistic. It talked about that those who wear red in the time of mourning will severely suffer. But isn't that the point? Bleakness and sadness because of death! Anyway, the editor is always telling me to lighten up my articles so I continued, "Black is the perfect color to wear. It makes you thin and tall." I deleted that very fast. You don't aim to look "thin and tall" at a funeral. Then I began again with something else, "What is the color of death?" I intended to answer the question by giving my opinion that death is colorless. Colorful is always good, unlike death. I couldn't type my thoughts as a woman was distinctively laughing three tables away. She wore a black hoodie with white horizontal stripes. There weren't any words on the hoodie. Her dark brown hair was strapped behind her head by a red hair band. She was laughing with a man wearing an unironed shirt and worn out blue jeans.

Their lack of any sense of fashion or style wasn't the reason of my displeasure. It was their lack of humanity. How could they laugh there?! They were laughing down there and others are dying up there! Will they laugh had they faced death!?

It was almost 2 and I haven't added any single letter to the article. I was startled by their endless laughs and that made me think that they were laughing because something good has happened there. The woman didn't seem as a mother to me so I thought they were probably visiting friends who had a child. That ought to be the reason of their smiles and laughs. They were celebrating a new-born, I thought!

Still I didn't forgive their laughs in that particular place. It's inhuman to laugh in a place where others cry at, even mourn!

It was 1:58 when the man went and talked to the cafeteria attendant. He came back to the woman in no time. He didn't sit but she didn't stand up either. He then kissed her on the forehead very gently and stood right behind her, put his hands on her shoulders and slightly slid them to her wheelchair pushing her very slowly toward the door. I didn't notice that she was on a wheelchair until they were gone!

I was very stunned and only a text-message from my fiancé turned me to the cafeteria, "I'm in the cafeteria. Where R U?" she texted. I didn't reply with a message. I looked left and right searching for her before our eyes met and then I spontaneously smiled. The shock was that I saw my smile as evidence of my inhumanity at first but then I thought while she was gracefully walking toward me, the same way I imagine her walking to me at our wedding, "Are there things that are capable of killing death?!"

Passivity

I had no desire to go to the university that day. I was warm in my bed and the weather outside was stormy and cold. The ugly reality was that I desperately had to go because I had a lecture in 'Regimes.' The topic was meant to be 'The improbability of public acceptance of adopting a new democratic regime after decades of being under prosecution.' and I needed every mark I could get to fix my GPA.

I fought the urge of staying in bed and went to the university only to find that the professor wasn't there, his car had stuck in mud en route to the university, so the lecture was cancelled. I had two reasons to be mad: I didn't stay in bed neither did I have the lecture .

It was a difficult way home as I was walking against the wind for some distance. Steps before reaching the doorstep of my house I heard a stir in the dumpster and I immediately knew it was the dotted cat. It is used to look for its food in the dumpster so I didn't care and walked on. When I opened the door of my house I felt the huge difference between the inside and the outside so I pitied the dotted cat and walked back to the dumpster and brought it home.

The first thing I did was drying it. I remembered the expression "it's raining cats and dogs." and the cat actually seemed at first as a raindrop, it was all wet. Even worse, it was very malnourished so I put a bowl of milk in front of it but the cat stayed away! I thought that it didn't want to eat in my presence so I went to my room. When I went back to check it I saw the milk spilled on the floor.

It wasn't even six when I went to bed that day but before going to sleep I told my little brother that he could play with the cat, and feed it if the latter accepted. I woke up after about five hours. It was almost eleven and the weather was still raging outside. I asked my brother about the cat and he said that the cat had run away. I knew there wasn't a sanctuary for the cat besides the dumpster so I went outside and brought it home again.

I had to prepare for the university next day but the warmth of my bed had drawn me to it so I slept without studying. I searched for the cat in the morning but didn't find it in the house. However, I knew where it would be. While walking to the main street to catch a taxi I heard a meow in the dumpster and just out of curiosity I went to see the dotted cat. It was looking for food! I knew that I would find the cat in the

dumpster but didn't expect to find the topic of the canceled lecture there too.

9

(1)

Everyone is going to die and everyone knows that but they react normally to this fact. Nevertheless, I'm sure they would feel differently if they knew when they're going to die. Death is deadliest when you have an appointment with him. That awkward moment when you know when and where you'll take your last breath, when you're able to set a countdown to your life. I will die now, seconds away, a stab or a step away.

(2)

My name is Catherine, meaning pure. I was named after my mother.

(3)

My mother passed away just 9 hours after I was born. My father always saw me as a bad omen. He had never called me "my daughter" nor even did he address me by calling me using my name. He just shouted at me.

(4)

When I was 9 months, my father received a deployment order to Iraq. He told his sister to look after me. I didn't spend much time with him as I only saw him on his vacations. He was so mean to me but I think he was so because he thought of me as the reason of my mother's death. So, in a way, he hated me because he loved my mother and that made me love her too, and also sympathize with him, even love him. Anyway, he was killed in action when I was 9 years old. After only 9 days, my aunt committed suicide.

(5)

After that, I moved to my uncle's. He was a soldier too. He ended his service after 9 months of fighting in Afghanistan. He was out of war, but war raged in him until his death. He was married to his 9-inch Army knife. I was frightened by his knife so I used to add "sir" at the end of every sentence I spoke to him. I lived with him for 9 years. Then, I was legally able to get my independence but unfortunately, I didn't.

(6)

I was raised by military men. I never cried except for that one time. I went to a gynecologist to check me. I was pregnant but the fetus was abnormal. I didn't cry because the fetus was abnormal but I did because the way I got pregnant wasn't normal.

(7)

I was a virgin when my uncle raped me. The strange thing was that I always thought that if he was ever going to hurt me it will be done using his army knife.

(8)

It's been 9 months since he raped me. Now, I have two options to choose from. I can kill myself with this army knife, I tried it on human flesh and it worked perfectly, or I can just take a step forward to jump off this bridge.

(9)

You see!! It's better for boys to ALWAYS use condoms and for girls to use any protection method to prevent any unexpected pregnancy.

And NOW, for only 9 dollars, you can get all the protection you need in one pack. You can find this product in every major store in all fifty states.

The Virtue of Exhaustion

Minutes after 4 pm, Adam went home after work. He works as a car mechanic and that requires a lot of lifting heavy parts which tire and tear one's muscles.

He directly headed to his room and lied down on his bed. He always takes off his work clothes at the garage and leaves taking a shower until he is home. While he was resting on his bed, his little brother rushed to him, "Mom needs a doctor. She told me to tell you so you get her a doctor." his brother said. "I'll get her a doctor. Go get me some water to drink." Adam replied.

Just after the little brother left the room, Adam's cellphone rang, "Hello Adam! You wanna play today?" His friend asked over the phone.

"When?"

"Now!"

"Where?"

"As usual,"

"Ok. I'm on my way. I'll just take a shower."

Adam hung up and put his cellphone next to his pillow and sighed with his eyes closed.

They played football and one of Adam's friends hadn't brought shin guards so when another player tackled him his shinbone got broken. All of the players knew that he had a broken leg even if he didn't feel that his leg was really broken. However, he had to be taken to a hospital, so Adam and another friend took the injured guy to a near hospital .

At the hospital, Adam saw his cousin who has asked before greetings, "So, how's my aunt now?"

"She's sick. I told her I'll call the doctor for her tonight."

"But she's here! Why do you want to call a doctor?"

Adam was puzzled of what his cousin had said and his facial expression showed that so his cousin asked, "So you are not the one who brought her here?! Did you even know she was here?!"

"No!" Adam muttered.

"She's at the department of internal medicine." Said Adam's cousin and went away, leaving Adam alone.

Adam then went to the department of internal medicine to see his mother. His cousin hasn't told him in which room she was in so Adam had to search. He asked the receptionist and she answered, "104, room 104 on your right."

Adam found the room but before he got in, a doctor went out of the room and when he saw that Adam was about to go in the doctor asked Adam to stay out.

"When can I see her?" Adam asked.

"Was she related to you?"

"Was?!" Adam asked fearing the worse.

"Ah! I'm... I'm sorry for your loss!"

Adam was shocked by what the doctor has said. It all happened so fast but it was painful. That nightmare shocked him, so did his brother trying to wake him up, "Adam!! Adam!! Here's your water. I'll spill it on you if you don't wake up!" Adam's little brother had told his elder brother before the latter woke up.

So Close!

Graduating should be delighting but what comes next is usually not. It's the real world, real challenges and real ventures. It's exciting but also tiring and could be demonizing. There is not a thing such as "honorable competition" in the real world. And often you have to let your angelic personality disappear if you want to survive .

Daniel's case wasn't any different. He graduated after studying for four years to have a degree in marketing. He is very smart and was third on his class but that didn't guarantee a prosperous future for him. But he is twenty two and has to find a job to become financially independent. He has always hated asking his parents for money. Becoming financially independent is the first step into maturity. That was his point of view about work.

Most people of his age were looking for something, masters scholarships, love, the American dream, but in his case, he was looking for a job. Looking for a job is easy but finding one is not. He googled several job websites and scrolled down to see hundreds of different available jobs before finding the job that he

thought could suit him. The job description was "car accessories salesperson." He thought, "I have a degree in marketing and I love cars. This would be the perfect job for me and I would be the perfect applicant for the job!"

Then he spent the night searching and studying the frequent job interview questions. He didn't understand some answers. But he thought and reassured himself, "It's about how you answer the questions, not the actual answers that matter."

The first thing he did the following morning was going to the company to apply for the job. The building was empty and there was only one person, the hiring manager who also took care of other tasks like selling accessories to costumers. That was a good sign to Daniel because that meant that the company desperately needed employees.

There were only two other applicants there at the time of Daniel's arrival. He sat silently and listened to the interview of the first applicant. The hiring manager commenced questioning,

"How many languages do you speak?"

"I'm learning the fifth nowadays."

The hiring manager was very impressed and then continued:

"And what are they?"

"Arabic, French, Spanish, Italian, and learning German these days."

"You forgot English!"

"In addition to English, of course,"

The hiring manager seemed very pleased but didn't stop questioning the qualifications of the first applicant at that point,

"Are you good with computers?"

"I have ICDL, sir."

"Good! And have you ever worked in sales business?"

"Yes, I have."

"What was the reason of leaving your previous job?"

"It was the company's new policy of hiring employees only from the same city."

Astonishment was obvious on the hiring manager's face and on Daniel's too.

The first applicant left and the second sat on the other side of the hiring manager's desk. The manager was reading the second applicant's CV to himself when he auspiciously asked the applicant, "Your father is Mr. Manahan?!"

"Yes."

"The owner of the Mercedes-Manahan franchise?!"

"Well, I know this is embarrassing but he wants me to depend on myself."

The hiring manager was very delighted by hearing that. He stood up and shook hands with the guy and said, "Here's my phone number. Call me whenever you are ready to take on the job."

It was the nervous Daniel's turn to do the interview. But before he sat on the chair the manager had excused for five minutes. Daniel went out of the building and made a phone call before returning back in.

Before the questioning began, a handsome, tall young man entered the company. He was wearing a black shirt and blue jeans. The costumer saluted the hiring

manager and Daniel before asking, "Can I find STFU CD players here?"

The manager positively answered, "of course you can!" And meant to walk to the costumer to show him the STFU CD players but Daniel raised his eyebrows to the manager requesting his permission to sell the costumer. The manager nodded giving Daniel the permission .

"Welcome to our company!" Daniel started.

"It's my pleasure."

The CD players were on the third shelf on Daniel's right and he didn't have an idea about where they were so he showed the costumer other accessories pointing their advantages until he found the STFU CD player. It was the last piece.

"You are very lucky!" Daniel told the costumer and then their voices fainted so the manager couldn't hear them but he saw that the costumer was very satisfied by Daniel's offer. The manager smiled and put his hands behind his head in relief.

The costumer nodded in acceptance to buy the device and Daniel reacted with a smile. The manager walked

toward the two young men and asked the costumer, "So, what do you think?"

"I believe it's a bargain! I always knew that STFU players are the best but this young gentleman showed me that there is even more in these players and for only 80\$!"

The costumer took the device with him and left.

The hiring manager was very happy to see that and so was Daniel. "Accepted!" The hiring manager told Daniel who was very pleased to hear that. Daniel took two steps toward the exit before one of his friends walked in. Daniel's friend shook hands with the manager and then with Daniel before saying to Daniel, "Where were you man?! I've been calling you for days! Even Luke called! By the way, I just saw him on the street and I gotta admit that he looked very nice in his black shirt and blue jeans and he was carrying an STFU CD player. He told me he bought it for 80\$ and that you will buy it from him later. Anyway, let me ask you something, what about the three of us hang around this weekend?"

Birthday Party

Today is my eighteenth birthday. I went to school and found three of my friends waiting for me in the WC. A cheap cake with a single candle on top was waiting for me too. One of the guys pulled up his lighter from his sock and lit the candle. He also lit a cigarette and gave it to me. The first toke, wow... the second, splendid... the third, caught by the principal. All of my friends ran away and I was the only one to be punished.

The principal took me to his fancy office. The office looked very well-designed to me with the silk curtains, marble tiles and there was also a framed large picture of him shaking hands with the head of the state, both smiling. It's hung over his fancy mahogany desk. But the principal was not smiling then, he was so aggressive, his words were mean. He yelled at me, "You spoiled young man. I shouldn't even call you a man, but you are spoiled. Smoking is an irresponsible behavior. YOU are irresponsible! You'll be expelled for three days." He destroyed me with his words, crushed me, just like the way he was crushing the butt of his cigarette under his shoe.

Debris

For the last 13 hours, I've been worried by the news of the disappearance of a force fellow. He was on a patrol on the northern highway on his own. I work alone on the same highway too.

It was a day off for me but it was the worst day one could have. It began with my wife leaving me taking our only child with her, and to add fuel to the fire, we received the news of the disappearance of a fellow officer.

We lost contact with him at 16:00 when he sent a call to the units telling us that he was following a suspicious vehicle. His worried tone was ominous. I only listened to a recording of the call.

Despite it was my day off, I went searching for him. I thought it could also make me forget my domestic troubles for a while.

I drove back and forth looking for a lead to find the officer. While I was searching, I saw someone recklessly driving a red 92 Ford Bronco. I drove carefully right behind it and honked twice to make the driver stop the car but the driver apparently didn't

hear. I flashed the headlights so the driver would notice, and it worked. The driver pulled over to the side of the road. I stepped out of my car with a hand on my holster. When I reached the Ford, I ordered the driver to step down. He was a white male in his late twenties and he was deaf. He peacefully stepped out of his car and pointed to the backseat of the Ford. I looked in there and saw a woman suffering the pain of labor. We had to move the woman to the nearest hospital very quickly. The man looked too weary to drive so we moved the woman to my car and I drove to the nearest hospital.

I silently accompanied the husband and his wife to the maternity ward. Then I went back to my car immediately. I was tired and sleepy. I opened the door to find three whiskey bottles on the passenger seat! I wondered where they came from but I was too drowsy so my head tilted to the left and my eyes involuntarily closed. I don't know if I slept or not but I clearly heard the force radio station calling to all units, "Attention! Attention! To all units on the northern highway! We have found the missing officer in a fatal car accident behind the gas station in the valley. The other car is a red 92 Ford Bronco and its driver and the passenger are dead. The driver is a white male in his late

THE STEP

twenties and the passenger is his pregnant wife. All units on the northern highway head to the location ASAP!”

Q&A

Q: How old is Quentin?

A: 26 years and three months and two days.

Q: How old is Amanda?

A: 23 years and one day. Actually, yesterday was her birthday.

Q: How did they first meet?

A: They met at Amanda's 21st birthday party.

Q: Was Quentin a guest?

A: No, he was the employee who brought the birthday cake from the bakery.

Q: I think I should've asked this earlier. Is this a love story?

A: No, at least not a happy one.

Q: Did he do something bad to her?

A: No, in truth, he was very gentle to her.

Q: Did she do something bad to him?

A: No, at least not on purpose.

Q: When did they know that they can't be together?

A: Amanda knew that all along but Quentin didn't know it before yesterday.

Q: What happened?

A: He proposed.

Q: Did she say "Yes?"

A: No, she didn't say "Yes!"

Q: Was there a good reason?

A: There was a reason but it wasn't good.

Q: What was it?

A: She said that he wasn't her type .

Q: What do you mean?

A: I mean that HE wasn't her type.

Sugar Mountain

"drrrdrrdrrrr..

War, huh yeah...

What is it good for?

Abso..."

My brother's phone had rung before he answered,
"Hello!"

". . ."

"Really?!"

". . ."

"Does he look like him?"

". . ."

"Okay, goodbye. We're coming."

My brother hung up and told me to get dressed because we were going to the hospital. The caller informed him that we had a baby brother.

"Did they name him after our father?"

I asked.

After a short pause, he answered, "Yes."

It wasn't a surprise to me that my younger brother was named after my deceased father. That was the best way to remind my family of my loving father, but for me it wasn't.

I have loved my father for all of my life but when his memory passes in front of my eyes it keeps rewinding only the last seconds of his life over and over again.

We were on the street going home. I was holding in my hand a new ball that he'd bought for me. He was walking next to me when he said that I could be anything I wanted.

From about a hundred meters we saw a group of gunmen of one of the two fighting sides of the civil war in front of our house. My father told me that we would stay at a friend's house nearby until the gunmen are gone. He held my hand and walked in the other direction of the gunmen. But when we turned our backs to them we saw another group of gunmen. The second group was fighting for the other side of the fighting parties in this war.

It was a duel between two ravenous foes and we were in the middle. They wouldn't wait for us until we find a shelter. They started shooting. My father and I were the net of a ping pong table, and the game was on. The difference was that the both conflicting groups didn't hit balls at each other. Besides, it wasn't a game.

My father tried to protect me with his body but he didn't know from what side bullets might hit me.

We were both hit but only one was killed. Several bullets passed through his body. He fell dead on the asphalt. I also fell as a bullet hit my left knee. I screamed out of pain but the sound of shooting was so loud that I couldn't even hear my own voice.

I wasn't able to move. I just involuntarily stayed on the ground watching my father's blood creeping toward me.

I will remember that moment every day now after my baby brother was named after my father.

I tried to remember the good memories but I couldn't. It's like having a mountain of sugar but there are mites on that mountain. You can remove the mites and enjoy the sweetness of sugar but I've never found a way to do that.

"Are you ready?"

My brother asked.

"Let's go!"

My mother was at a nearby hospital which was about 700 meters far from home so we just walked our way. The streets were very quiet.

We were at the hospital after exactly 30 minutes from the call. I even checked how long it took us to get to the hospital. "At what time exactly did they call you?" I asked my brother.

"I don't know. Let me check." He responded.

He checked the recent calls log and said, "4:14"

"And what's the time now?" I acquired again.

"4:43" But why are you asking such a question?!" He asked.

I just shrugged even though I knew the answer. I was counting the seconds from the moment we left home. I needed a way to distract me from overthinking about the consequences of naming my young brother after my father.

The number of seconds I counted = 848

The hospital was busy, mostly with wounded people. Not fighters, just normal people like my father was. The smell of iodine made me feel a bit dizzy so I tried to rush my way to the room where my mother had given birth in but I was still slow because I was only hoping on my right leg.

After two or three minutes, we were in the room. There were my mother and my sister with her husband, and of course, the newest addition to the family.

My little brother was too young and fragile for me to carry. I just gently kissed his red cheek while my sister was holding him.

I saw some tears in my mother's eyes. I couldn't fathom if it was because she'd remembered her husband or because she was happy. But I guess she cried for the two reasons. She was sad, but her sadness couldn't stop her from being happy once again, at least for a while. I too, felt that way.

Mites started to run down the sugar mountain.

"I think we should take a group picture for all of us."

My sister suggested. Everyone accepted except Mom. She had something to say.

"It wouldn't be 'all of us' without your father."

She nostalgically had objected to my sister's suggestion before she continued, "There is a big picture of him at home."

"I will go and get it."

My brother volunteered.

I went with him.

I didn't count the seconds on our way back home.

My brother waited on the street fifteen meters away from home when I went inside to bring the picture. There were many pictures of my father that I could have chosen from but I took the biggest. That picture was taken at my sister's wedding. He was wearing a black suit with a white shirt and no tie. He didn't like wearing ties. He'd always said that ties are not necessary to look gentle. He was right, at least in his case.

I took the picture and went outside. The sun was about to fade behind the horizon.

I walked down the four steps of our porch. My brother was looking at me with his phone in his hand and I was looking at a pickup truck with a Gatling gun installed on the cargo area.

Mites quickly reached the top of the sugar mountain.

My brother didn't run.

There were many fighters shooting without even aiming at the enemy. A grenade fell close to my brother and exploded. We both fell. I couldn't stand up because my left knee was hurting me again but I was conscious and able to crawl. Few meters away, my brother was just staying still under the dying light of the sun, not moving, not even for an inch.

My mother's wish of a family reunion seemed possible to achieve at that moment, but not through bringing my father back to life but through the death of the remaining members of the family.

My brother's phone fell four or five meters away from him. It rang.

"drrrdrdrrrr..

War, huh yeah...

What is it good for?

...

My brother didn't answer .

No one did.

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First Edition: December 2016

ISBN 978-977-85325

Bibliomania Publishing & distribution
Egypt, Cairo.

Mobile: 002 0106 553 45 41

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