THE LAST EARTH

A Palestinian Story

RAMZY BAROUD

With a Foreword by Ilan Pappe

Tamam Nassar was of similar age and refugee status to Ahmad al-Haaj. Known as Umm Marwan (Mother of Marwan), she was a friend of my mother's back in the Gaza refugee camp where I was born and raised. Like most women of that generation, she was illiterate. Yet she possessed the heart of a self-aware rebel. While the men were off working as cheap laborers for Israel, these women did everything necessary in order to persevere. Not only did they raise children and make ends meet in dire circumstances, but they also protected their families by fighting with soldiers, and labored to build communities in overcrowded and impoverished camps.

When I was a child and teenager, I had the pleasure of meeting Umm Marwan on numerous occasions. Twenty-five years later, she could not help but weep into her white scarf when she spoke of my parents, now buried in the Martyrs' Graveyard in the camp. Her tears transformed into laughter as she recalled my father's antics and my mother's love for him. Here I tell the story of the long path she endured. 'Would you want to go back to Palestine, Umm Marwan?" I asked. "Oh son," she answered. "If I can only breathe the air of my village one more time and die, I would die happy."

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Spirit of the Orchard

His writings on the prison walls denoted all that was certain to Kamal. When he carved the names of everyone he was devoted to, there was not enough untouched space on the concrete surface to keep his own scratchings separate from what had been engraved by other prisoners. So he found the most faded of all the memories and over them he imprinted his own. First he etched the name of the woman he loved most: Umm Marwan, his mother. Weeks earlier, when the soldiers with their angry dogs showed up at his home in the middle of the night to throw their weight around, and began dragging his weary, injured body out to the street, his sisters cried like any siblings would. But his mother, fearing an overwhelming loss, shrieked in indescribable pain. Her screams pierced the calm of the night like a fractured arrow that somehow managed to travel miles in all directions—even beyond the Matar Orchard. Some say they heard her howls past the dark Hirthani Orchard from where only masked fighters and soldiers ever emerged, and where others disappeared, never to be seen again. He was hardly conscious throughout most of the ordeal, and though his mother's cries were reminiscent of ones he had heard all too often since childhood, they were still vividly different this time. Each bloodcurdling scream resembled the cries of a wounded beast, seeking mercy yet finding none. He would never forget the pain inflicted on his beloved mother, whose wailing echoed in him like a broken

record. In a ring of small flowers, her name would be the first to be immortalized on his prison cell wall.

In traditional Palestinian culture, parents are given titles that carry the names of their first-born sons. Umm Marwan simply meant "the mother of Marwan." Tamam Nassar was her birth name. A few years after Marwan, Kamal arrived and her love was plentiful for her second-born too. The many sleepless nights he spent inscribing names on prison walls was a testament to this. Later on another boy, Jamal, appeared, followed by three girls. All were born in the same refugee camp in Gaza. Having boys always meant more prestige for a mother in a peasant society. It did not matter that all the peasants and landlords had turned into refugees living a squalid existence, some things never changed. But Tamam was different from her sister Palestinians in one regard. In her heart she desired daughters, for the absence of her mother Hamda who was long gone, and the sisters she had always dreamed of, left a loneliness inside her that she felt could only be quashed by the female spirit. So she asked God for girls, and her body responded to her prayers with three baby girls each separated by only one year. Iman, then Asmahan, and then Manal came into the world and Umm Marwan was satisfied.

During the dark nights, when memories of Nuseirat Refugee Camp would come alive, Kamal would envision a beautiful flower. It grew sparsely through this second most populated camp, and though it had only three delicate petals, its intense red color exploded in simple beauty. On the wall of his cell in Khan Younis, he decorated each of his loved ones' names with a ring of these flowers, and stared at his creations when pangs of pain would resurface. That same intensely red and usually odorless flower also grew in the Hirthani Orchard, but some said that the Hirthani strain had an aroma so powerful, it was almost intoxicating. Since masked fighters and soldiers were the only ones who dared enter the enigmatic orchard, no one

could attest to the claim. One fateful day, many years later, the camp residents woke up to find that the orchard had been completely destroyed. It was a puzzle how an undertaking so brazen and violent could have happened when no one heard the sound of bulldozers carrying out the evil deed. All that was seen that morning was a cloud of suffocating dust hovering above the camp, while the orange and lemon trees lay lifeless on their sides next to dead flowers that had once perfumed the now heavy air. Alas, it would not be the only orchard in Umm Marwan's life that contained within it both tragedy and mystery, hand-in-hand. Her earliest memories were attached to another orchard that existed many years ago.

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Tamam Nassar's memory of Joulis, the Palestinian village where she lived until the age of five, was hazy. By the time she was born, the British had already colonized Palestine for decades. The few memories peeking through the naïveté of her innocence were largely about racing after military convoys pleading for candy. Once, upon returning to the family mud-brick home with a whole bar of chocolate and a big smile on her face, her older brother Salim confiscated the prize and claimed it as his own. Had it not been for Ismail, the oldest of the three, Salim would have devoured the bar in one or two bites. Though he was barely twelve years of age, a strong sense of responsibility pushed Ismail to play the role of the father at times, since Yousef was gone most of the day, either working hard on the family's land or offering his labor to other landowners whenever his small property grew tired of yielding the same crop year after year. Hamda, the mother, was not afraid to put in her share of manly work, never hesitating to shoulder some of her husband's grueling

tasks while still tending to the children, loving them as best as she knew how and doing everything else in between.

Back then Tamam did not encounter Jews, or perhaps she did. But since many Palestinian Jews looked just like Palestinian Arabs, she could not tell the difference or even care to make the distinction. People were just people. Jews were just their neighbors in that southern village, and that was all that mattered. Although the Palestinian Jews lived behind walls, fences and trenches, for a while they walked freely among the fellahin, shopped in their markets and sought their help, for only the fellahin knew how to speak the language of the land and decode the signs of the seasons. Tamam's house was made of hardened mud, and had a small front yard where the little girl and her brothers were often confined when the military convoys roamed their village. Soon this would happen more and more frequently, and the candy that once sweetened the lives of the children was no longer offered. During those tense days, Yousef spoke often about the betrayal of their Jewish neighbors and a conspiracy between the Zionists and the British. Though each day she hoped for another chocolate bar, young Tamam knew deep in her heart that the days of candy were gone forever.

Then there was the war that changed everything. The battle around Joulis crept up all too quickly and showed little mercy. Some of the fellahin who ventured out beyond the borders of the village were never seen again. To ensure the safety of her children, Hamda told her kids about a terrifying ghoul that lived inside the orchard adjoining their home. Instilling fear in them, she insisted they should never walk past the dirt road outside Joulis, for crossing in the monster's path would be a risk too great to take. But the ghoul, despite her occasional nightly raids on Joulis and the devouring of a sheep here or there, kept largely to herself. With time, Hamda told them,

the villagers learned to respect the ghoul's boundaries and believed that she meant no harm.

As the legend goes, when the ghoul gave birth to her first child, she wrapped it up in warm sheep's wool, then hid it among sheep as she went to fetch water from the nearby creek to quench her thirsty body. The flock of sheep belonged to the household of Abu Ghanim Abed. While the ghoul was away, a thunderous storm suddenly erupted, compelling the shepherd to herd the sheep back to the safety of the village. Unsuspectingly, the shepherd also herded the newborn ghoul child along with them. When Abu Ghanim's wife discovered it among the sheep, she cared little whether it was a baby human or a baby ghoul. Motherly instincts compelled her to breastfeed the little creature as if it were her own, hold her tight throughout the storm and nourish the tiny ghoul, Zalibiya, with cinnamon and nuts. Gripped with worry and rage when she returned to find the baby missing, the mother ghoul pursued the scent of her little one. Soon relief came over her, when she finally arrived at Abed's home to find her baby safe and warm in the arms of a loving mother. Her anger turned to elation and gratitude. The startled Abu Ghanim stood in disbelief when she appeared and asked him to extend the palm of his right hand. She clasped it between her furry palms and whispered in his ears:

> "I give you my word before Allah, and if I ever betray you, I betray Allah. Hard times are ahead, Abu Ghanim, but you and your family shall pass this safely. You shall all survive, and with time you shall attain wealth and boundless offspring; many boys who will carry your name and bear you many grandchildren."

The ghoul's prophecies came true. When many fellahin were killed in Joulis during the war, Abu Ghanim fought a brave

fight and somehow survived. And when many houses were blown up by the invading militias, the Abed family home remained intact. The prediction of hard times was certainly true—Abu Ghanim became a refugee in Gaza, a destiny he had never foreseen. But fortune was on his side when all was considered, and this was shown by the gift of nine children from the same wife, who in turn eventually each bore between seven and ten children, mostly boys. These all married too and had flocks of their own children. The Abed family even had enough abundance of wealth to allow Abu Ghanim and his wife to embark on a pilgrimage to Mecca when they were still relatively young and strong enough to bear the harshness of the journey, and then come back to a loving house with rooms over three floors which let in Gaza's warm sunshine through more than twenty windows.

Tamam never met the ghoul, though. At the age of five, she left the village with her family because it was Joulis's turn to be destroyed. She sat on the back of a cow along with Salim, as Ismail, their mother Hamda, and their father Yousef all walked the long way to Al-Majdal. Anticipating a return once the war was over, they stopped in an orchard along the way to hide their treasured harvest so that they could retrieve it upon their coming back to Joulis. But the road from Joulis was mostly one straight line that never ended and hardly ever curved or deviated from the onset of the nightmare, and the Nassar family's exile became a permanent one. As the family crossed the dirt road outside Joulis on that fateful day in 1948, Tamam wondered if the mother ghoul would meet the same fate as all the other villagers whose dead bodies dotted the dirt road, barefoot, bloodied and half naked. Salim whispered in her ear not to worry as they both perched on the back of the cow. He had heard from trusted sources that the mother ghoul was seen entering the orchard that bordered their village just as the war began, so it would be forever safe from the British

and the Zionists. They would never capture her or her baby, nor the spirit that kept them both fervently alive.

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Salim himself would disappear into an orchard, leaving no tracks and very few clues. Some believed he was locked up in a prison deep underground somewhere. That was in 1956 when he was just a teenager. By then the Zionists had a state of their own and took over Gaza for a few months. Salim was around sixteen years of age when the Suez crisis culminated in the Suez War. The two great powers, Britain and France, allied with Israel to defeat the Egyptian army and conquer Sinai. The Egyptian army was, in fact, ordered by Jamal Abdul Nasser to withdraw, but even that decision did not guarantee the invaders an easy victory. Under international pressure, they were compelled to pull their forces out of the Egyptian desert. Britain was hoping to regain political influence in the region, years after its army left Palestine in the hands of the Zionists. Yet it was too late, and neither the Americans nor the Soviets had much patience for Europe to stage a comeback, so Israel and its allies were ordered to leave the newly taken territory. The Israelis dragged their feet for months, refusing to withdraw from Sinai, and by extension from the Gaza Strip, which they had conquered for the first time since Palestine's great Catastrophe.

Salim followed their every move. He obsessively wrote in his journal everything he saw and heard. Whether it made sense or not, he tried as best as he could to piece it all together. Everything was in ink: the names and ages of those killed and wounded by the army, the types of military vehicles they used, and his thoughts on what he perceived to be detailed information about their daily conduct. No one knew if Salim was spying for anyone, or if he just took it upon himself to

document the short-lived occupation of Gaza. Although Tamam was illiterate as were most refugee girls in Gaza at the time, she observed Salim and his edgy body language intently. She was certain that his constant writing was not school work, as no schools were open during that period. Gaza was shut down in anticipation of a looming defeat.

Following the war of '48, Gaza had fallen under Egyptian administration and military control. Initially, Gazans welcomed the role that Egypt played in the Strip. This was based on the assumption that sooner or later, Egypt, along with other Arab countries, would liberate Palestine and send the refugees back to their villages. Soon it was evident that Gaza would not be free, and the Egyptians grew harsher with time. Gaza's true defenders were the fedayeen who ventured into the newly established Israel to ambush soldiers near border areas separating Gaza from the new state. Many lost their lives and were celebrated as martyrs with symbolic coffins and the chant: "With our souls and our blood, we shall avenge our martyrs."

But Salim was not a freedom fighter. He did not wear a khaki uniform, brandish a rifle or wear a kufiyah around his neck before delving into the dangerous orchards north of Gaza. He just wrote down everything he witnessed in his journals. Perhaps it was a humble attempt at coping with the loss of his childhood in Joulis, a defensive move to take hold of whatever remained of his youth as it was ripped away in the rawness of Gaza. Life was never easy for the Nassar family. The Strip was hardly welcoming towards them when they first arrived. Squatting wherever they could and pitching a UN-supplied tent here or there did not allow vulnerable refugees to feel what it was like to have a home. Security, warmth, and protection were rare commodities, especially when the more powerful had their way even within what little shelter was found. A rich Gazan, who owned much land in the town of Deir Al-Balah,

complained to the UN agency responsible for the welfare of the refugees to remove the squatters from his land or else suffer the consequences. So in a truly dismal moment, humanity did not prevail and the refugees were forced to pitch their tents elsewhere. Their numbers grew, and Yousef and his family became permanent residents of the UN-run Deir Al-Balah Refugee Camp, located somewhere between the center of the Strip and its southern corners.

Survival was all that Yousef aspired to achieve for his children during the war of '56. The risks were too high to ask for more. Many were killed when Israel took over Gaza and the Israelis became its new masters. The whole ordeal happened so quickly when the Egyptians pulled out, but the one thing that remained consistent was the will of the fedayeen who fought alone and died equally alone. Their famous battle in Khan Younis, a town located a short distance south of Deir Al-Balah, was to be remembered for generations for the fedayeens' refusal to surrender. They knew the terrible fate that would become of them, yet they chose to be veiled in a shroud of honor and fight until the bitter end. When the resistance was crushed in Khan Younis and in the nearby town of Rafah, the Israeli army moved in and executed men in their homes in cold blood, and lined up young men and children against walls, mowing them down—they fell like dominoes. Hundreds perished and thousands more were left with the kind of pain that never lessened with the passing of time. This was how Khan Younis earned its title, the Castle of Resistance, a designation that stipulated a price of blood that was exacted from its sons and daughters from that day onward.

This all took place starting late October and ended abruptly in March of the following year. Soon before the Israeli withdrawal, sometime in February of 1957, Salim ran away to the orchards as did scores of other young men who were fleeing in the hope of finding safety by crossing to Jordan

through Israel. They naively assumed the orchards extended further than the furthest horizon they could conceive, and would at least offer them shelter all the way to Amman. But when they walked north for a few miles, the trees grew sparse, and the soil underneath their tired feet succumbed to the light of the bright Mediterranean sun, and to the vigilant eyes of the Israeli military that was hovering above and clustering below in strategic points. The soldiers waited patiently for Gaza's fedayeen to embark on their hopeless journeys.

Salim held tightly onto his journals with a sense of great importance and prestige as he walked into the orchards on a mission divinely self-constructed. Nothing could change the way he felt about the earth-shattering information he had so patiently gathered in Deir Al-Balah, so he held onto them even tighter after realizing that the orchards did not extend beyond the first horizon. As Salim and his friends emerged guardedly from the other side, an expanse of empty space met their disappointed gazes. Before them stood a land once rich with greenery which was now a sad shadow of its former self. It had been leveled within months after the fellahin were exiled, to make room for Israel's agricultural settlements. As the group quarreled about whether to continue their march to Jordan or return to Gaza back through the same orchards, bullets flew all around them and bodies began to fall.

Salim never returned, but his loved ones kept him alive in their hearts. No one could irrefutably confirm whether he was living or dead and Tamam grew old searching for him, despite the fact that he once stole her chocolate bar. Ismail and Tamam followed every clue and every rumor about the disappearance of their teenage brother, yet every time they would come back empty-handed and broken-spirited. The Red Cross told the Nassar family that Israel was not holding anyone by the name Salim Nassar, and from Deir Al-Balah all the way to Amman, no marked grave carried that name in all

the cemeteries where young victims rested in peace. One of the young men who survived the orchard massacre told the family that Salim was shot just as he surfaced outside the orchards, and that he had hauled his injured body into the safety of the orange and lemon trees where he bled to death alone. But how could he have known if Salim died alone? Tamam was never convinced, or perhaps she did not want to believe that she no longer had a brother. So she sought the help of a reliable psychic, an old nomadic woman with a hundred tattoos and a thousand wrinkles on her face that told stories older than she was. She could offer Tamam no more than a single line: "Your brother is locked up in a prison deep down underground and can never be rescued."

Tamam married five or six years after Salim disappeared, and five or six years after the Israeli army left Gaza, at least for a while. She married her cousin Mahmoud al-Assar, still with a heavy heart as her mourning for Salim never truly ended. She refused to dye her palms with henna as tradition dictated, and insisted that the celebration remain private and small. But Mahmoud wanted all of Deir Al-Balah to know that he was to marry Tamam, a modestly beautiful woman who had just turned twenty years of age. When she met him, he was a soldier with the national guard, wearing a mismatched old army uniform, and carrying a rifle and his most prized possession: he kept a single bullet in his right pocket at all times. Tamam's mother Hamda and several elder women of the family first met to arrange the wedding details. Mahmoud was to provide ninety-five Egyptian pounds as a dowry, a bottle of hair cream, a handkerchief, a bar of soap, a bottle of perfume and a quality comb. Thanks to the women's expertise, the whole wedding was organized in a matter of days.

Once Al-Fatiha was read out loud by representatives of both families to formalize the agreement, modest festivities ensued and a feeling of happiness was felt by all. Several trays

of tasty couscous, smothered with cooked vegetables and meat, were prepared to perfection and shared joyously as was always done at Gazan weddings. The celebration was made even more special when Suleiman Daud, a member of the fedayeen, fired some bullets into the air with his prized pistol. When the main festivities came to an end, as many members of both families as possible were crammed into the back of a pickup truck. Tamam and Mahmoud sat next to the driver as they pondered the new phase of their lives and listened to the jubilant crowd cheer them with wishes for prosperity and many children. After a trip of less than half an hour, they all were dropped off in Nuseirat, close to Mahmoud's family house which was made entirely of mud-brick rooms and tucked somewhere between two orchards, Matar and Hirthani.

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Tamam's stay at her in-laws lasted for only one year and a few months, long enough for her to give birth to Marwan and become pregnant with Kamal. She was then kicked out with her husband and first-born for reasons that she did not care to remember, or perhaps wished to forget. Her father, Yousef, the hardworking man of Joulis, bought the couple a new home not far away from the in-laws, a single mud-brick room with no toilet or kitchen, for the price of fifty-four Egyptian pounds. Luckily for them, the refugees were largely left to their own devices back then, expanding on their mud homes as they found fit. Mahmoud spent most of his days shattering rocks near the Gaza Valley and selling them to a local quarry by sunset. At night he joined Tamam in fashioning mud bricks and slowly expanding on their single-room home which was not big enough for their expanding family. Soon there was a bathroom, a kitchen, and a tiny front yard. It was finally feeling like a real home when another room was built,

and then a third. But then Israel returned to Gaza, this time staying for decades. When Israel defeated the Egyptian army and conquered the Strip and Sinai in 1967, most of the refugee camp was demolished. It was rebuilt by the refugees with their own hands and by the UN, mud brick by mud brick. The status of the refugees did not change. The Israeli army needed to widen some roads so that its tanks would be able to move through the streets of the camp unhindered, hunting down the remaining fedayeen and quickly subduing any rebellion among the poor refugees. The roofs of the houses of the new camp were made of grey tiles, and in winter were covered with large sheets of plastic and speckled with small sand bags to prevent the rain from seeping through.

When the war of 1967 concluded in Israel's favor, Mahmoud simply ran away, leaving Tamam, then pregnant with Jamal, to fend for herself and her two children. He never meant to disappoint the wife he loved, but Mahmoud was terrified of the Israelis beyond rationality. He sought shelter in the Gaza Valley, not only because he knew that his single bullet, which he carried in his pocket, was not enough to repel an advancing Israeli army, but because of a deep-seated trauma that had haunted him since he was a teenager. During the previous brief occupation of '56, Israeli soldiers who raided Mahmoud's house were bored and wanted entertainment, so they ordered him to dance in the street like some sort of puppet owned by a perverse master. Fearing the worst, the petrified teenager obliged and was eaten away by degradation. He danced a little, twirled a little more and ran back and forth between two patches of soldiers who were laughing from their bellies. He ran as fast as he could between the vile jokesters, while yelling obscenities in Arabic that they ordered him to repeat over and over. Fearing another episode of humiliation as a grown man, but this time carrying the title of Abu Marwan—father of Marwan—he timorously fled in such a way that earned him

even more humiliation from his unimpressed wife and amused neighbors.

Umm Marwan, on the other hand, ran away with her children to an orchard known as Izbat Al-Majanin—orchard of the crazy people—somewhere between Nuseirat and Deir Al-Balah. Along with thousands of others, she waited there with little food and water, trying her utmost to protect her children. The events of the war were transpiring before their eyes as they peered outside the orchard desperately seeking good news from beyond the tree tops. But there was little good to be reported or observed. First, Egyptian military vehicles swished by expediently, as if in a state of urgency or panic, heading back south to Sinai. Then the few soldiers who were abandoned by their units ran south as well, some even in their undergarments after having ditched their military uniforms in case the Israeli army would stop them and execute them, as was their practice. Then the fedayeen followed, some heading south, others running in the opposite direction, and still others not knowing where to go at all. Many were bleeding, screaming, crying, and befuddled by a crisis that was later named Al-Naksa, the Setback—but it was more than a setback. The Israeli air force had already won the war when it blew up Egypt's seventeen airbases before a single aircraft had even taken off.

That was not the only battlefront that went awry. Syrian and Jordanian armies desperately fought back encroaching Israeli forces, which pounded them from the air, land and sea. Israel was determined to expand its territorial control throughout the region and had copious amounts of western arms to do so. Gaza was then a killing field. Palestinian fedayeen units lost all communication with their Sinai and Egypt superiors and chaotically fought using light arms and pistols which were no match against the superior weaponry of the enemy. But the outcome of the battle was no happier than in 1948. Egyptian

soldiers, mostly fellahin inspired by Nasser's revolutionary rhetoric and promises of social justice and equality, fought and fell in droves. Many were killed or captured, and the rest fled into the open desert, often being left to the miserable fate of being gunned down by the Israeli air force that roved through Sinai uncontested. The bitter fighting on the outskirts of Gaza soon ended with a thorough defeat as well. There was nowhere to run to but the sea, the desert and to Israel itself, and they were all equally lethal.

Despite her own exhaustion, Umm Marwan carried her children, now filthy, hungry, and fatigued, back to her mud-brick home three days later. When she was finally reunited with her husband, her first task was to dig a large hole in the ground that would serve as shelter for the kids if the conquering army began blowing up homes and lining up people against walls to be gunned down. But even defeat can offer moments of hope and respite. As soon as Gaza was occupied by Israel and things calmed down enough to offer a veneer of normality, Tamam and her brother Ismail began venturing out into the once inaccessible territories looking for Salim. They walked through the orchard where he was said to have disappeared and then walked the same path that they hoped Salim might have crossed. They stopped in every graveyard and read the names of the dead on simple tombstones, and wherever they failed to find the name Salim Nassar, they were nonetheless overtaken by the hope that he was still alive. Meanwhile, Abu Marwan was consumed by the fatherly duty of feeding his children, especially since the rocks of the Gaza Valley had all been smashed and pulverized years ago by refugees like him trying to survive by selling them to quarries. So he joined many thousands of hapless refugees who returned to Palestine as cheap laborers in what had become Israel, tending to the same land that was once theirs, offering their services as manual laborers in factories, as janitors, street

cleaners, or carrying out any menial employment that Israeli Jews found crude and beneath them.

When most of the men disappeared into the gorge of grueling labor in Israel, the refugee women reigned supreme and rose to the demands of every task. They took care of household chores, raised children, repaired leaks in their roofs, mended raggedy clothes, lined up to collect meager supplies from UN feeding centers, scuffled with occupation soldiers, ensured that their children were doing their homework, upheld fellahin traditions, and celebrated, mourned, danced, and cried. This was all done without their men by their sides—men who would return on the weekends to plant their seeds and levy upon their families either love or physical abuse, consoling their own sense of emasculation and dishonor.

The unkindness of life made Umm Marwan the strong person that she became, while her husband existed largely on the periphery of their complicated existence. He provided income, and occasional guidance and discipline, but not much more. She embodied all that was needed to feed the soul by being the epicenter of love and authority, serving the role of both parents in a family that was rarely blessed with easy times. But Umm Marwan was human too, and sometimes the trials of life were too much even for her to bear, so she would delve into the Hirthani Orchard to converse with a woman who many in the camp doubted existed.

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The woman of the orchard was Fatima. She was rarely seen in the camp itself, but her presence in the Hirthani Orchard was always felt, as if it were a spirit or a wandering ghost entombed between a life she loathed and a death she feared. Her family members died one after the other soon after they were expelled from their Palestinian village to the Gaza

refugee camp. No one really knows the cause of death. Some say it was a plague that fed only on her family and spared everyone else. First, her mother died, followed by the death of her father a few months later, then two brothers and finally two sisters. There was little medicine in the local UN clinic, and the few aspirins that were readily prescribed for every sickness simply held no sway before the mysterious illness that struck the tiny, insignificant family. Fatima was left alone at the tender age of nine, defending herself in a shrinking world of refugees and military men. The last that people had known of her was when she lived in the house of distant relatives in Buraij Refugee Camp, serving their elders and putting up with the abuse of their young. Then she disappeared for years. Not a soul knew of her whereabouts and some rumored she had committed suicide, a taboo which guaranteed her eternal existence in hell. One day rumors about her resurfaced again, this time suggesting that she was the invisible guard of the Hirthani Orchard.

At first very few believed them because refugee women did not serve as guards of orchards, or of anything else for that matter. To be the guard of an orchard meant constant chasing after thieving kids, facing up to drug addicts and hunting down fornicators who sought cover in the darkness of the orchard to carry out their wicked deeds. Yet the rumors persisted and some even claimed to have actually seen Fatima. They said she wore a traditional thoub (long robe), donned a thick belt on her waist where she kept a knife on her right side, and a small machete on the other. People said she was as ugly as a ghoul, and that her hair was a wild mingling of black, white and henna-dyed colors. But whenever the accounts of those self-proclaimed witnesses to her existence were examined, the stories seemed to fall apart. For one, the traditional dress she allegedly wore seemed inconsistent with the pattern of embroideries affiliated with the village of Adas

where her family came from. Those who hail from southern villages like Joulis, Beit Daras, Al-Sawafir, Adas, and Falouja wore thoubs with different patterns and colors from those who come from villages further north such as Mighar, Qatra, Akir, and Zarnuka. Fatima's thoub, as it was described, seemed to have been embroidered with a pattern that challenged all the traditional designs and even the entire social hierarchy that separated the refugees. Moreover, if Fatima guarded the Hirthani Orchard, where exactly did she live? And why is it that she never ventured out to the camp to buy groceries? And how did she survive the many Israeli raids at the camp when the Hirthani Orchard was used as finishing staging ground? How was it possible that none of the fedayeen ever encountered her presence?

The fellahin can be merciless in their gossip, especially some of the brazen refugee women whose husbands spent their entire week collecting Israeli garbage and erecting houses for Jewish families. Sitting in front of their homes just before sunset, these women would talk and talk about all kinds of nonsense, spreading rumors about infidelity and whatever else was the juicy topic of the day. If the rumors about Fatima were true, and she was indeed as ugly as a ghoul, she would have been thrashed beyond mercy and chased by unruly children in the camp who would have pelted her with pebbles and foul words. Not even the chastising of a kindly old man or woman would have been enough to keep those little vultures away.

Before the Intifada started in 1987, Fatima's existence was confined to occasional rumors and unconfirmed encounters. When children would sneak ever so cautiously into the Hirthani Orchard to collect wild berries or pick its coveted oranges, they would feel a presence: a spirit, a being, an animal of some sort that would violently charge but never approach. Gripped by fear, they would run away without being touched in any way, but somehow they were certain that

something had been there with them. These stories were not taken seriously by most, until one notoriously unruly child returned home one day with marks on his body. It was as if someone had swung at him with a heavy belt, and branded him once or twice on the back, and a third time on his legs. The little boy was so terrified that his mother sought the help of Umm Marwan and other neighbors who all rushed to the Hirthani Orchard and dared to go inside. But yet again, there was no one and nothing except the eerie stillness of the trees, interrupted by the occasional splash of rushing water from somewhere deep in the orchard.

From that day forward, Fatima, or her ghost, or whoever the spirit was that guarded that orchard, was referred to as the ghoul. Bedtime stories were quickly spun to send numerous little children to bed, petrified but at the same time entranced with excitement. The ghoul stories represented a folkloric tradition that went back hundreds of years, and was rife in the fellahin culture until the year of exile to the refugee camps. In that year, the Palestinian ghoul was presumed dead, killed in the war perhaps, or vanished into an infinitely dark orchard where even military men did not dare enter.

But the ghoul was summoned again when the Intifada broke out. In fact, were it not for the ghoul of the orchard, Kamal would have bled to death, and Umm Marwan would never have retrieved his body. She loved Kamal very much, although he was a rebellious, skinny and strange child who always mumbled about socialism and a utopian world where the fellahin united and liberated their land from oppressive landlords and the armies that protected them.

* * *

When the Intifada broke out, Kamal also emerged from his own solitude. Baffled by his father's choices, he never

understood why his own father would offer his services to the very Jewish landlords who stole his land. He loathed the smug, confident looks on the soldiers' faces as they walked through the humble dwellings of the refugees, brandishing their guns, barking orders, harassing girls, and commanding boys to dance, sing, and slap one another for no reason other than to validate whatever voids they felt inside. All these violations filled him with rage and he hated the soldiers beyond words. He hated school as well as his teachers. To him they seemed so docile, adhering to the rules of the occupier which decreed that Palestinians not teach their own history, so that the fellahin were denied even the right to remember who they were or where they came from. As a young boy he quickly learned that self-respect demanded that one defy orders and stand out from the rest. While he was still just a child in elementary school, he colored a Palestinian flag using UN agency-supplied coloring papers and crayons and taped the small flag to a pencil, raising it in the market on his way back home. The soldiers were resting in the shade of Abu Ayman's bookstore and caught him red-handed. They slapped his face repeatedly, and then held him for days in the "tents," where the soldiers established their military camp near the road separating Nuseirat from Buraij.

It was not until high school that his fighting spirit truly materialized. With an unmatched obsession for reading and writing and a sincere persona that grabbed the hearts and minds of everyone he encountered, he was the obvious choice to lead the youth unit of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. A brand of revolutionary Marxism was all that the refugee camp needed to throw these occupiers back to whatever European hell they came from. Kids sat in total fascination when he lectured them about how the refugee camp was not their Palestine and that the real Palestine was a land so fantastic and beyond the furthest horizon they could

possibly conceive. In their young minds, he instilled the sense of mission that it would be they who would lead the masses home. His new recruits were told how most of the factions were defeated in Lebanon, not just in the battlefield itself, but, maybe more importantly, psychologically as well. The lesson was that it was now up to the fellahin to rise again, and redeem the sins of a generation that was dishonored beyond redemption. Indeed, Gaza rebelled, not because of the urgings of Kamal, but because of a thousand such youth who took on the responsibility of forming a new leadership that challenged the Israelis and also the traditional order in Palestine itself.

The uprising did not start in Nuseirat, but in the Jabaliya refugee camp in the afternoon of December 6, 1987. Nuseirat was the place, though, where thousands of youth took to the streets and vowed to avenge the innocent blood of the Jabaliya victims of the previous day. They swung large flags made of silky fabric that swayed beautifully in Gaza's salty air and as the momentum grew and they became intoxicated by their own collective chants, they marched to the "tents" where the soldiers were uneasily perched on the tops of watchtowers, hiding behind their binoculars and automatic machine guns. Within minutes, a war had started and a third generation of refugee-camp-born fellahin stood fearlessly against a well-equipped army that was visibly gripped by fear. Rocks were hurled in all directions by the children, although most never hit their intended targets. The Israelis hit many that day and several children were killed. Among deafening chants that freedom was coming, the remains of the dead were carried to the Nuseirat Martyrs' Graveyard and laid to rest. Though these ones paid the heaviest price, there were still many wounded children who needed tending to when the UN clinics declared that they had run out of the cure-all aspirins and had no available operating rooms. Fortunately, resourcefulness was not lacking in the medical staff of Gaza's Al-Shifa and

Mamadani hospitals which treated many wounded children from Nuseirat and other refugee camps in the Strip, with whatever humble equipment they had. Within days Gaza was the breeding ground for a real revolution that was self-propelled and unwavering. The chants of Palestinians in the Strip were answered in the West Bank, and echoed just as loudly in Palestinian towns, even those located in what became known as Israel proper. The contagious energy was emblematic of children and young adults wanting to reclaim the identities of their ancestors which had been horribly disfigured and divided between regions, countries, and refugee camps. Even refugees exiled outside Palestine yelled back from across borders and fences, desperate to regain a collective sense of self: "With our souls and our blood, we shall avenge you Palestine," their voices thundered across the heavily militarized borders of Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan.

Kamal was no longer tucked away in a dark room reading the works of Marx and Gramsci, waiting for things to change. He was in the streets of Nuseirat fashioning his own utopia. The fastest of the children with the strongest arms were placed on the front lines to taunt the soldiers and throw rocks when they drew near; those in the back lines were ready with raw onions to supply the "troops" with tools to survive the tear gas; the most able-bodied were placed in the middle in order to charge against the soldiers when the frontlines needed aid, or when the wounded needed to be carried to safety. Yet no revolution is complete without art as a source for emotional and political power. Poets molded words in the most articulate of ways to communicate the message of the revolution to the masses. Graffiti adorned every available space on every wall throughout the camp and those with the most roaring of voices led the marches, rallies, and funerals. The unity was palpable and the undying thirst for expression was channeled through creativity.

It was Kamal's world, one of solidarity, camaraderie, and wild youth who needed no one to speak on their behalf; no faction leaders with large mustaches and big egos, wielding machine guns to articulate the aspirations of the people. These youth, born in a place that was never truly perceived as home, reared by a submissive generation that was fed from the bosom of defeat, did not offer their uniformed obedience. Although Kamal's small build and introverted demeanor did not necessarily qualify him for tasks requiring physical robustness, his astute emotional intelligence and ability to connect with the children of the fellahin propelled him into an almost accidental leadership from the very start. With time, he walked confidently in those shoes and earned respect from his fellow Palestinians. His brother, Marwan, would proudly carry him on his shoulders, echoing the words of the thousands of marchers behind him: "Revolution until victory … Revolution until victory." No task was too large or too small when it came to pushing the rebellion forward. Kamal threw rocks, carried the many wounded to blood-stained ambulances, and brought the dead to their final resting ground, all with the same amount of conviction. He even led prayers for the souls of martyrs when childhood friends were shot in the head or throat, as being an avowed socialist did not mean a lack of faith or a world without God. Hundreds fell, dead or wounded, throughout Palestine in a matter of weeks. Yet the more they bled and died, the more determined the living became, and the faster they again mobilized, regrouped, and recharged. Their chants grew louder: "No east, no west, this is the uprising of the people."

But then they caught him. Kamal was home watching the news during one of the many military curfews imposed on the camp, when the Israelis came looking for him. The beating commenced as soon as he was in reach of the first soldier who entered the house. "Ya Ibn Asharmouta!"—they immedi-

ately branded him a son of a bitch as they began punching his emaciated face. One soldier twisted both of his arms behind his back, while another kept kicking him in his genitals. Unalloyed pain erupted through his guts, as blood violently gushed out of his brow and mouth. The naturally protective instincts of his mother instantly rose to the scene as she wedged herself between him and the soldiers to absorb as much of the beating as possible, only to realize that Marwan was being targeted out as well. "Iman," she screamed at her eldest daughter, "shelter your brother!"

Iman was a rebel at heart, or maybe her moment of rebellion arrived at that juncture in time. She was not detained, but her jaw was broken with a single punch. That beautiful, sensitive child of fourteen years shrieked in pain both from her body and her heart. 'Kamal! Marwan! My brothers!" she yelled. Hearing the screams and fearing the worst, neighborhood women transformed into warriors of justice and descended upon the house. Suddenly, defenseless, powerless, and illiterate women found their voices and their calling. It was the microcosm of a battleground of a war much bigger than them. The women attempted to lessen the pain of the two boys, by enduring as much of it as they could. They cried to God for mercy and He answered when more and more women, both familiar and unknown, arrived from everywhere. Broken limbs and bruised faces did not hinder Marwan and Kamal from escaping in the midst of the chaos which, in the end, served a greater purpose. From this darkness came forth the birth of a movement from the women's collective power for the first time since they became refugees. And it was led by Umm Marwan herself.

Kamal escaped, but a limping and physically weakened Marwan was eventually caught trying to cross the Gaza Valley at the southern border of the camp. He was sent to Khan Younis to serve six months in jail for his role in the Intifada, and when the military judge sentenced him, he was told that

he would not be released until Kamal was caught. Marwan had no qualms about serving jail time on his brother's behalf until his last day on God's rebellious earth. Committed to his credo, Marwan would not divulge a single name of any of the other activists, not even when they hung him naked, with his toes barely touching the cold prison floor; or when they repeatedly punched him in his genitals or sent electric shocks to his penis and nipples. Yelps of agony were all that escaped from him and nothing more.

Marwan was older than Kamal by only a few years, yet more mature in many ways. When Mahmoud was laboring in Israeli factories for weeks on end, Marwan's strong sense of family compelled him to play the role of the father. But this feeling of responsibility was not limited to his blood relations; he was just as devout towards his fellow Palestinians, neighbors and friends. This duty and a need to protect his younger brother was what drove him during the Intifada. When the Eid holiday massacre took place, their neighbor, a young boy named Raed Muanis, was killed and Marwan carried him to safety, trying to hold back the blood gushing from his face. As he looked into the dead boy's eyes, he pleaded to his brother Kamal to escape to the valley and spare him the pain of possibly losing his brother too. "It is a massacre brother. I kiss your hands, run away." Kamal did not listen, forcing Marwan to charge back towards the soldiers so that he could stay close to his brother and be his guardian. And whenever Marwan could not restrain Kamal from leaving the house during military curfews when snipers occupied the camp's tall buildings, including the famous water tower inside the Martyrs' Graveyard, Marwan always had to follow suit. Kamal lived in his own world where revolution was the only escape from his family's permanent misery. When recruiting youth in the camp, besides galvanizing their ideals, he ensured there was always a balance in

numbers between sons of peasants and sons of laborers. True socialism demanded both.

As soon as the curfew was lifted, Umm Marwan went searching for him when he disappeared in the orchards. Yelling his name, she crossed the valley, and fought the current to reach the furthest orchards. Heartbroken, finding no sign of him, she went back home to her family after having dried all of her tears. She told them Kamal was safe and sound in the Hirthani Orchard and that the soldiers would never find him, no matter how hard they tried.

Every day her son was the object of her prayers. Dawn prayer in particular could not be missed because Allah loved the most faithful who would kneel for his mercy when everyone else was still asleep. Now that both Marwan and Kamal were not able to play their roles in mobilizing the camp, Umm Marwan was overtaken by a duality within her that she had never known before. Two opposing forces lived within her: an unfamiliar sense of responsibility towards a revolution that she hardly understood and her cultural socialization where women were taught that their place was in the home and not the battlefield. Never weak or docile, her strength was expressed in withstanding the longing to go back to Joulis, the daily exhausting torment and humiliation placed on her by the soldiers, the anguish of Gazan life, and the confining expectations of society. These were all battles in and of themselves, and once she found her truth, there was no going back on her choices.

Being on the frontlines of revolution brought her closer to her children and gave her newfound strength. She was too weak to throw rocks, and her chants were muted by her inability to remember the slogans. But there was something that she did well and which she did fearlessly. In wedging herself between screaming children and angry soldiers, she found her calling. So she led a group of women, and roved the

streets of Nuseirat looking for soldiers even during curfew, for the presence of soldiers meant that children would soon be lined up waiting for their bones to be broken, their faces to be smashed against the sidewalk, and their teeth to be crushed by cowardly fists.

When Wael Abu Safieh was about to be taken to the "tents" where the soldiers rested, drank alcohol, spoke Hebrew and punished little kids, Umm Marwan led the women's protest by leaping inside the back of the jeep where Wael was handcuffed and blindfolded. Holding as tightly onto his feet as possible and pulling as much as she could, she refused to let them have their way. To deter her, the jeep driver drove off at full speed hoping that she would let go and fall onto the sand, but she tightened her grip even more. The soldiers pulled her hair, punched her in the back and kicked her in the stomach, soon discovering that she was more relentless than them. When she could not endure any more, she screamed at the top of her lungs, as she always did, so that women of the neighborhood would come out of their homes ready to throw themselves into harm's way and help whichever victim was she was trying to free. Wael was eventually taken to the military "tents" and Umm Marwan to the local clinic. She returned the next day and repeated the routine as if every boy was Kamal and every teenager Marwan.

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Nuseirat extended from the sea to the highway and was divided between various blocks that each carried a number. It bordered Buraij to the east, Deir Al-Balah to the south and the Gaza Valley to the west where the sea quietly breathed hope and offered respite to the refugees. But when the Intifada started, the sea became off-limits, and the giggles of happy children were never heard anywhere near the beach for almost seven years. Buraij was smaller than Nuseirat in size and population,

so when the small camp that also bordered the eastern orchards of the Strip was besieged, Nuseirat came to the rescue. The Israeli military encampment, which began with a few khaki-colored tents, and then grew to a hundred or more during the Intifada, was positioned precisely between the two camps. When an army blockade on Buraij reached a point where the refugees began to starve, or were killed while trying to break free, almost all of Nuseirat walked in one massive rally to Buraij. "We live together; we die together" was the slogan, and Umm Marwan was once more on the frontlines ready to shield the first line of youth who carried flags and chanted for Buraij's freedom and the freedom of all Palestinians.

The snipers stood motionless, in awe of the crowds whose masses extended from the army tents to the sea. It was the furthest horizon the soldiers on the watchtower could view. Even if they had wanted to fire, there were not enough bullets to take out everyone. Young and old, weak and strong, they all walked in unison. Marching in front, women led the way as icons of female power while children carried crayon-colored flags. The soldiers hid behind the towers and trenches, not firing a single bullet. The refugees of the camp who had been trapped for weeks, came out of their homes in disbelief when the masses started arriving in Buraij. Thousands hugged random thousands in a scene of solidarity never witnessed before in the history of the two camps. As the Nuseirat refugees celebrated their victory upon their return, Umm Marwan felt the tug of two arms embrace her from behind and fold gently upon her neck and chest. "Mother," said a voice that had grown hoarse from insistent chanting. It cradled her very being.

Kamal's cheekbones had sunk in to highlight a perfect skull merely covered with a layer of whitish, pale skin. But his spirit was as charged as ever, like that of a commander of an army, although beset and starved, who still believed victory was at hand only if the troops held strong for just one more day. He

had been gone for many weeks, living in thick, dark orchards that sheltered him and many others. But when he heard that Nuseirat had risen to break the siege of its neighbors, Kamal could not tolerate remaining in hiding while the most historic moment of his life was unfolding, and he returned to the camp. Against his mother's wishes, Kamal promised to stay for only one night, and then run away back to the orchards first thing after the dawn prayer. Of course she wanted nothing more than for her son to be with them, but home was too risky and Umm Marwan knew the Israelis would come looking for him sooner or later. He had missed his family, Iman's endless chatter, his mother's warm touch, and the comfort of his floor mattress with its perfectly fluffed pillow. She promised to make him all the food he desired, and proudly spoke of the many kids she had liberated from the hands of the soldiers during his absence.

Abu Marwan was home with nothing to do. He had lost his job in Israel when the fruit factory owners received a police memo that the man's two children were involved with the fedayeen. With no income and with Marwan still in an army prison in Khan Younis, the family grew even poorer. Few, if any, urgent supplies had made their way to them in the recent months. Later they were smuggled to the camp through the Gaza Valley by young men sent by Kamal himself. But the fresh vegetables and fruits collected from nearby farms and orchards were not meant for the family's own consumption. Instead they were to help the neediest of the refugees regardless of clan or faction. One of Kamal's notes to his mother, read by Iman, stated:

"Dear Mother,

I know how great our need is, but I hope you understand that my moral duty compels me to help others who are in

greater need than us. Please distribute this food equally among those who need it most, and make sure that no member of our family, or even al-Assar clan receive any of the shares. Start with the house of Umm Raed Muanis. Hug her for me and tell her that Raed's blood was not in vain, and that we are all her children.

Your loving son,
Kamal.

Kamal wanted to break all the divides that stood between the refugees, and confront even factional hierarchy. Although Umm Marwan understood his intentions, her frustration was fueled by the wants of her own family and her innate predisposition to protect them. She was only human after all. Still, she honored her son's wishes starting with Umm Raed's house in Block 5. Exhausted both mentally and physically, having knocked on many doors that day, she did not return home until after midnight. Kamal's pride was nothing less than exceptional when she told him all about it upon his return for that single night.

Yet on that very night, the soldiers reappeared. Their collaborators among the refugees informed the army that the young rebel was back. Without wasting any time, they went to Umm Marwan's home an hour before Kamal was to be awakened and readied for his escape. When Kamal understood the scenario about to unfold, he jumped to the roof of the house by climbing on top of the large blue container where the family stored water. But the soldiers had anticipated his move and he found them on the roof, ready to fire at will. Surrendering was the only option. All that Umm Marwan could hear from the living room below were Kamal's muffled screams, and the sounds of heavy pounding.

She beseeched God for help, but the neighboring women were kept locked in their homes as the army had already anticipated their rebellion. In sync like a chorus, they accompanied the mother's screams in the early hours of dawn in a last desperate attempt to help. Minutes later, the soldiers were dangling Kamal from the roof of the house, as if he were a slaughtered animal suspended on the hook of a butcher shop, bloodied and pacified. At that exact moment she howled, producing a similar sound to the one that emanated from her gut when Salim went missing in the orchards many years earlier. Kamal was unconscious and despite the fact that the battle was lost, she still charged vigorously against her attackers, fighting for her child, unmindful of the blood which was oozing from her face and mixing with his.

Along with Iman, she ran into the street trying to track the army that had stolen her son. But when they disappeared into the main road connecting the camp to the Gaza highway and eventually to the army tents, she could no longer run, or even walk. All the strength that refused to abandon her since the day her family left Joulis evaporated. Kamal was gone, and she felt it would be the last time she would ever see her precious son. Falling to her knees, she softly wept, crying "Kamal, my son" over and over.

When Kamal regained consciousness, he found himself in a small cell, with thick, unwashed walls that felt so cold and foreign. His blue jeans were torn, scuffed and terribly bloodied. Staring at his exposed pointy shoulders and the bones of his ribcage, he wondered where his shirt had gone and how he had become so skeletal. He picked up a tiny little pebble and began leaving his marks on the wall. "Umm Marwan," he wrote, around which he drew a ring of small flowers. He had never anticipated that the odorless red flower of the camp actually sometimes had an intoxicating fragrance until he reached the Hirthani Orchard. While he was there, camping under a tree,

hiding from the army, he calmly picked a flower and brought it to his nose. Instantly the world around him was no longer cold and dark. The trees grew taller, and the grass was like that of a green, endless meadow. The hunger pains disappeared, and the victory of the revolution that he had unleashed with his young friends in the camp seemed assured.

He also saw her, Fatima. She was an old woman, but hardly ugly or a ghoul. Visiting him often, she would gaze at him like a loving mother without exchanging a single word, and bring him bread, feta cheese, and fresh tomatoes. Her thoub combined the embroidery styles of all the fellahin villages into one and the wrinkles of her brow mimicked the carvings of the soil of the Hirthani Orchard.

Kamal spent most of his prison time in the torture chamber. After every long and harrowing session, he would be tossed back in his cell where he resumed his artwork on the walls. He did not reveal to his tormenters a single name, and denied any recollection of them even when they questioned him about the activities of his own brother. With the option of releasing him or renewing his stay, the army instead decided to beat him senseless. They broke all of his limbs, and every single rib in his chest. They pounded his genitals with their guns, and cracked his skull by bashing it repeatedly against the wall, on his writings and homages to his family and all of those he loved. Blood splashed color on the petals, now a vivid red, of the small etched flowers, their fragrance smelling of his blood.

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When Umm Marwan opened the door to her home, she came face to face with a woman she had never met before. "I am Fatima," said the woman, who was old but hardly ugly or a ghoul. "Come with me. Kamal is in the orchard." Without seeking any answers, or even wearing her slippers or throwing

a cover upon her hair, Umm Marwan ran behind the woman, with a sense of urgency that invited the curiosity of others in the camp. Many joined her, forming a large crowd that delved into the Hirthani Orchard. A few minutes later they all emerged and returned to Block 5, carrying the young man who was covered in a vivid redness and had a glow unlike the color of any blood the refugees had ever seen. The young man, nearly lifeless, was expected to be drained of his last drops of blood in that orchard, but a mysterious woman hovered above him, caressed his hair and washed his face before daring to leave the Hirthani Orchard in search of his mother.

Kamal died years later. He made it to Amman using a different path from the one that his uncle Salim had chosen for himself in 1956, when he was probably shot dead and buried under a lemon tree in a faraway orchard. If his grave existed, it still remained unmarked. No one knew the fate of his journals filled with all the details of the suffering of the refugees in Deir Al-Balah. In Amman, Kamal had just embarked on his graduate studies in economics when after a visit to the doctor he was told that he had brain cancer. Considering his frail body and the many ailments that he had accumulated from his times in prison, he was said to have only six months to live. In keeping with his fighter's spirit, he returned to Nuseirat with a plan to defy the doctors' grim verdict, and began teaching young people at a local university economics and the history of a homeland that was meant to be kept secret. When he finally died, thousands from the neighboring Buraij refugee camp descended upon Nuseirat. The massive crowd mourned him as a martyr and buried him in the Martyrs' Graveyard, near the large water tower, not far away from Raed Muanis.

Umm Marwan's rebellion never ceased. She took every opportunity possible to spread the message of her revolutionary son, standing in the frontline of every protest and every funeral of the camps' many martyrs; all sons of fellahin who

believed that a utopia was possible. And during her weak moments, fearing that others might notice her tears, she would go to the Hirthani Orchard and converse with Fatima, where the two women cried together, surrounded by little red flowers with an enchantingly beautiful scent.