

## The Blossom Filled Streets

Always the same dreams these days. God reaches down a bright hand to ease the pain and hatred. Then we're all free. I sleep with a smile on my face, or so I'm told.

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I'm woken at dawn by someone tapping at the door. I stumble across from the sofa to answer it, not bothering to put on any more clothes. If it's the army, it's the army. But it isn't, it's only Masood, hunched inside his coat, breath leaking out into the cold air. I step out and close the door softly behind me, arms hugged about my chest and shivering.

“Shit, man, wear more clothes. If the army come for you, you've only got five minutes.”

I shrug.

“Cigarette?”

“Yeah.” I take it from the pack and he lights it for me. My first in over a week. Sucking in the demon, fingers reached into my blood.

“How's Rezia and the kid?”

“Cold.” I look round at the jumble of apartments, black against the cold yellow dawn.  
“They cut off the gas last night. How we're meant to sterilise things, I don't know.”

Masood sucks at the cigarette harshly. “The bastards.”

“You sound like Farukh.”

“Your brother's got a right to be angry. He thought he was in paradise when he married Rezia. And now look at everything.”

“He listens to too much shit. He gets too annoyed.”

“He's got a right to be. He never asked for this, did he? Nor did Rezia or the kid. And what's he's supposed to do now?”

“I'm frightened he'll go and do what desperate men do.”

“God knows, we're all that now.” And Masood looks briefly at the sky. “You heard from Samira?”

Samira. My heart clutches like a fist. I make a mask of my face and shake my head."She was in Jenin. The army were jamming the mobile signals, and then the battery on my phone died anyway." I force a smile. "You know Samira. She'll get back."

"Yeah."

There's a silence that we smoke into. I can't meet Masood's eyes, and he dances about, jittery as ever. He finishes his cigarette first and throws it on the step. "I got word this morning that they're dropping the curfew. Only for today. I know some places that should be selling stuff, but we'll have to hurry. I was thinking of, you know, Rezia and the kid."

I head inside to wake Farukh.

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I rattle at the curtain that divides the room and hiss at Farukh. I hear curses as he pulls himself up and pokes his head out. Behind him, Rezia's hair streams out like a flag over the sheets. The baby's still.

"What?"

"The curfew's lifted. Masood reckons he can get us milk."

"More likely he'll get us shot."

"Come on, man. What if he's right? What else can we do?"

Farukh frowns, scratching the back of his head. He nods reluctantly. "Okay." He goes over to kiss Rezia without waking her.

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Some people just radiate out all the hate that's pushed into them. That's Farukh. He takes it all personally, like it's only happened just to get at him. As if it's Farukh that is directly and deliberately the target. Him, his wife and his child. Sometimes he comes back from the mosque fizzing with this rage.

He forgets there are larger hands moving us across this board.

It's 6 o'clock now and we are heading into the centre of town. Rubble litters the streets like blossom. Half a building has been ripped away, by tanks or by helicopter fire I can't tell. The fingers of iron supports reach desperately out from shattered walls, a row of bathrooms hanging off into nothing, posters lining a bedroom rippling in the morning breeze. There is an awful intimacy about these rooms, exposed to too much light. I stare at the concrete flowers, the altered horizons.

Further along, a line of shops has been gutted, entrails spilled out into the street. Fire-blackened blind windows. Adverts for electrical goods still hanging overhead: Panasonic, Hitachi, Sony. Halal meat. Islamic dawah. A cafe, an old hangout where we used to go to talk politics and kill time. I wonder briefly about the owner, but not for too long. It doesn't pay to guess.

Like with Samira.

Next to the shops is a tank. Monstrous green bug staring down its barrel at us. Around it, a gaggle of Israeli troops twitchily stand watch, like kids who have broken something they shouldn't.

They look at us and we look at them. Masood tuts.

Farukh is boiling over. I put a hand on his shoulder. "I thought you said they'd lifted the curfew," I say to Masood.

"They have."

"Then what the fuck's this?"

"I didn't say they had gone away."

I nod. "What are they going to do? Shoot?"

"I don't think so. Unless we run away. Just walk on."

We don't have much choice. I follow Masood, tightening my grip on Farukh. He hasn't gotten over the cafe. He keeps staring at it, then at the soldiers, muttering under his breath, his face red and blotchy. "Just chill out," I tell him.

"If they do this to us. If my baby dies -"

"Don't."

But he is crying. Last time, her lips tinged blue, we had managed to rush her to hospital. Next time, we may not be so lucky. And even if we got her there, the chances are she would be lost among the maimed and bleeding, the corpses.

"Why are they doing this? I mean, what have we ever done? Have kids, a family, what? I don't understand what they want from us."

"Just shut up, yeah? You're making them nervous."

“Them? Who's got the tanks? Who's got the fucking helicopters? Who rolls into town every night and knocks the fucking houses down?”

They're all too interested now, stepping back and holding their rifles slightly more aggressively. Wondering if this is a trick, if they will be next, another statistic on American news. One of them shouts something at us, it might be Hebrew, it might be Arabic, I don't know.

It's too much for Farukh. He screams something wordless and tries to run towards them. I keep a tight hold on him, dragging him back as the rifles raise to shoulder level. Masood grabs his other arm and stands in front of him, forehead to forehead, shouting him down. I watched the guns, waiting for the crack, the sweet slide of blood, pain like from a dream.

It doesn't happen. They stand there like clay.

Farukh hangs limply between us, tears slithering down his skin, terrified of returning home with empty arms, terrified of the death we all know will happen. Not knowing how to go on, day after day.

The foremost soldier has his gun pointing right at my forehead. That tiny, cold, black hole. I let go of Farukh and carefully walk towards him.

He's younger than me, too-big blue eyes and wisps of orange bumfluff he should have shaved. A kid dressing up, pointing his toy at me.

He's scared. I watch the gun muzzle shake.

“My brother's just upset,” I tell the soldier in Hebrew. “It's his daughter. She's going to die. We need to buy her milk.”

Finger flickering over the trigger. I can't believe he's ever fired a shot. Stuck out here waiting to be sent home. Someone's son, somebody waiting on a word. He looks nervously at his comrades. One of them nods. He looks back at me, gestures me away.

As we walk off, he shouts something after us. I raise my hand in response and he looks disappointed.

“What was that?” Masood asks. “What did he say?”

I shrug. My Hebrew's not good, and I hadn't understood.

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Rescue workers and a camera crew swarm round a collapsed building. The rear wall still stands up, hanging to the sky like a line of rotten teeth. There's soldiers here too, more

relaxed; they're on TV, nothing's going to happen. The shutters of the shop have already opened and there's a queue.

The hope crumples within Farukh. "We won't get anything. Let alone milk."

"You don't know that."

"Just look at the fucking queue. I need milk." He said it plaintively, lost. "I can't just stand here. It's no good. I can't wait like this."

"You don't think they all have needs too?" I nod at the crowd, the babble of women's voices, the men a little frantic, pulling at their clothes, sucking at cigarettes as if they could pull all of the bad stuff into its fire.

"It's easy for you. What have you got?"

There's something, of course, but I don't say it. "You're right, nothing. But."

"But what?" He stares into my eyes and he's desperate.

"But what can we do? What if you'd killed that kid, that soldier? Then what?"

"Then at least I would have done something."

I shake my head. "You'd never hurt the people you would need to hurt. Never. What would they care if that kid had died? Maybe his family would, but nothing more. You can't beat them. All you can do is live."

"And how do we do that?" he asks, staring across at the ruins of the building, the rescue workers clambering over the stumps of walls, the jumble of broken furniture and broken glass, an upturned toilet cistern, the forlorn pipe like a half-drowned tree.

I look across at Masood, and then up into the empty blue cup of sky. "We have faith."

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