

No Checkpoints in Heaven

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I still vividly remember my father's face - wrinkled, apprehensive, warm - as he last wished me farewell fourteen years ago. He stood outside the rusty door of my family's home in a Gaza refugee camp wearing old yellow pyjamas and a seemingly ancient robe. As I hauled my one small suitcase into a taxi that would take me to an Israeli airport an hour away, my father stood still. I wished he would go back inside; it was cold and the soldiers could pop up at any moment. As my car moved on, my father eventually faded into the distance, along with the graveyard, the water tower and the camp. It never occurred to me that I would never see him again.

I think of my father now as he was that day. His tears and his frantic last words: "Do you have your money? Your passport? A jacket? Call me the moment you get there. Are you sure you have your passport? Just check, one last time..."

My father was a man who always defied the notion that one can only be the outcome of his circumstance. Expelled from his village at the age of 10, running barefoot behind his parents, he was instantly transferred from the son of a landowning farmer to a penniless refugee in a blue tent provided by the United Nations in Gaza. Thus, his life of hunger, pain, homelessness, freedom-fighting, love, marriage and loss commenced.

The fact that he was the one chosen to quit school to help his father provide for his now tent-dwelling family was a huge source of stress for him. In a strange, unfamiliar land, his new role was going into neighbouring villages and refugee camps to sell gum, aspirin and other small items. His legs were a testament to the many dog bites he obtained during these daily journeys. Later scars were from the shrapnel he acquired through war.

As a young man and soldier in the Palestinian unit of the Egyptian army, he spent years of his life marching through the Sinai desert. When the Israeli army took over Gaza following the Arab defeat in 1967, the Israeli commander met with those who served as police officers under Egyptian rule and offered them the chance to continue their services under Israeli rule. Proudly and willingly, my young father chose abject poverty over working under the occupier's flag. And for that, predictably, he paid a heavy price. His two-year-old son died soon after.

My oldest brother is buried in the same graveyard that bordered my father's house in the camp. My father, who couldn't cope with the thought that his only son died because he couldn't afford to buy medicine or food, would be found asleep near the tiny grave all night, or placing coins and candy in and around it.

My father's reputation as an intellectual, his obsession with Russian literature, and his endless support of fellow refugees brought him untold trouble with the Israeli authorities,

who retaliated by denying him the right to leave Gaza.

His severe asthma, which he developed as a teenager was compounded by lack of adequate medical facilities. Yet, despite daily coughing streaks and constantly gasping for breath, he relentlessly negotiated his way through life for the sake of his family. On one hand, he refused to work as a cheap labourer in Israel. "Life itself is not worth a shred of one's dignity," he insisted. On the other, with all borders sealed except that with Israel, he still needed a way to bring in an income. He would buy cheap clothes, shoes, used TVs, and other miscellaneous goods, and find a way to transport and sell them in the camp. He invested everything he made to ensure that his sons and daughter could receive a good education, an arduous mission in a place like Gaza.

But when the Palestinian uprising of 1987 exploded, and our camp became a battleground between stone-throwers and the Israeli army, mere survival became Dad's new obsession. Our house was the closest to the Red Square, arbitrarily named for the blood spilled there, and also bordered the 'Martyrs' Graveyard'. How can a father adequately protect his family in such surroundings? Israeli soldiers stormed our house hundreds of times; it was always him who somehow held them back, begging for his children's safety, as we huddled in a dark room awaiting our fate. "You will understand when you have your own children," he told my older brothers as they protested his allowing the soldiers to slap his face. Our 'freedom-fighting' dad struggled to explain how love for his children could surpass his own pride. He grew in my eyes that day.

It's been fourteen years since I last saw my father. As none of his children had access to isolated Gaza, he was left alone to fend for himself. We tried to help as much as we could, but what use is money without access to medicine? In our last talk he said he feared he would die before seeing my children, but I promised that I would find a way. I failed.

Since the siege on Gaza, my father's life became impossible. His ailments were not 'serious' enough for hospitals crowded with limbless youth. During the most recent Israeli onslaught, most hospital spaces were converted to surgery wards, and there was no place for an old man like my dad. All attempts to transfer him to the better equipped West Bank hospitals failed as Israeli authorities repeatedly denied him the required permit.

"I am sick, son, I am sick," my father cried when I spoke to him two days before his death. He died alone on March 18, waiting to be reunited with my brothers in the West Bank. He died a refugee, but a proud man nonetheless.

My father's struggle began 60 years ago, and it ended a few days ago. Thousands of people descended to his funeral from throughout Gaza, oppressed people that shared his plight, hopes and struggles, accompanying him to the graveyard where he was laid to rest. Even a resilient fighter deserves a moment of peace.

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