

Sard \ On a Day Previously Known as Valentine's Day

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Close to Yarmouk Street, in that place where we used to stand almost every morning, on the corner of Al-Madaris Street to be precise, where we'd watch the faces of passersby out of curiosity, we stood there afflicted by the same questions that ran through all of our heads:

How much misery must these human beings carry in their guts?

How much sadness and anguish must fill their hearts to frown like that?

Black soot from the burning of anything that could be set alight covered most people's hands and faces. It was one more sign that the season of siege was upon us, turning brown skin black and carving black lines into the crevices of people's features. It was one more sign of the scale of death that had infiltrated the camp through checkpoints, the same checkpoints that otherwise blocked a single grain of wheat from entering the camp.

Between three and five, that was the daily harvest of the victims of hunger, most of whom were the elderly who had survived the seasons of the Nakba and the Naksa and the countless other wars that culminated in the siege of Yarmouk. This was their last battle, one they couldn't escape. This time they fell to a different enemy, an intimate enemy, one born of the same mother. For seven months, the scene repeated itself daily, revealing only that tomorrow would be worse than yesterday. Hunger was the omen of death lurking in the faces of men, faces that grew gloomier with every passing day.

And on that particular day, which corresponded to a day previously known as Valentine's Day, on that same corner where we used to stand every day to watch the people's faces as they went by, from the same angle where in bygone days flower sellers used to sell red roses . . .

On that precise day the scene was different.

There was a man in his twenties with a woman in a wheelchair. The look of compassion in her eyes indicated—with unmistakable, heartfelt clarity—that she was his mother. Their clothes were so threadbare one suspects they came from a time before time. The young man was emaciated, and his hands were so blackened with soot you couldn't distinguish their stubborn grip from the grip of the wheelchair's handles. Their eyes stared out at us in a way that left no room for doubt that they were pleading for something. Their helpless gaze, blended with the feeling of helplessness emanating from us, settled on our faces. A cloud of sorrow hung over the scene.

The young man walked forward, leaving his mother behind him on the corner directly facing us. Moving slowly, staggering unintentionally, the exhausted man walked the few meters toward his intended target. His footsteps felt like weights on our hearts while our eyes followed his course toward a dumpster, his obvious destination.

Once he reached it, he placed his right hand on the edge of the dumpster and bent his body until his head disappeared inside it. Then he stood upright, looking over the piles of garbage scattered around the dumpster, stopping and starting repeatedly as he searched in vain for something we all doubted existed. Because, during the times of siege, people learned to hold on to anything that might become of value, including garbage.

The young man continued to burrow through everything discarded beneath his feet. His eyes settled on a broken plastic jar. We all knew what was inside it; that same jar had lured many passerby to visit that same dumpster. The others who came before the young man had also stumbled across the jar. But as soon as they approached it, they would make out the smell of rot and mold and kick it away, splattering its contents. Only the young man picked it up with both hands and held it in front of him, contemplating the remains of olives and the turquoise mold inside. His face broke out into a smile that came close to tears. The mother was still in the same place in her wheelchair. Her eyes were closed from hunger, and her hands were trembling uncontrollably. The young man returned to his mother.

The journey of a few meters toward her felt so long for us we could have died; a long line of images of the camp and its history and the things that happened in it passed before my eyes, and my mind went numb. How could the camp bear all this death? And why?

His right hand cradled his mother's cheek, and his left hand encircled the jar, his treasure. We couldn't bear it any longer. A passing car blocked our view of them for less than two seconds; a scene change.

The young man holds a small tin of mortadella. He opens it and feeds his mother from it. We wonder whether he's taken it out of the inside pocket of his frayed coat. His mother begs him to eat, but he insists he isn't hungry. The young man continues to feed his mother, a broken smile drawn on her face. He finishes feeding her, then clears himself a small space on the ground near his mother and throws away the empty tin can of mortadella. We hear the sound of metal clattering against asphalt and

finally settling in the middle of the street. He goes back to his empty jar. He looks at it intently. Then with his blackened fingers he begins to pick out pieces of olive with childlike joy. Tears fill our eyes without us noticing. The military vehicle returns, once again blocking our view. The son is resting his head on his mother's lap, and they fall asleep with a calmness that doesn't belong in the hustle and bustle of the camp.

On that corner, there was a lot of grief and sorrow from hunger, and poverty, and humiliation.

But there was also love.

Lots and lots of love.

Translated by Stefan Tarnowski