

What Happened at Ofer

I remember the first time. He was twelve. He walked out squinting. He could hardly open his eyes. I ran to him, asked him what was wrong. He said simply, *The cell. It was dark.* Before I could reply, his mother grabbed him and pulled him to her. He received her embrace with little reaction. He tried to smile but the effort seemed so forced, his mother turned her face away and just pulled him to her tighter. His father gently laid his hand on his head. His hair, usually black, was gray with dust. I stood quietly.

I didn't know what to say or do, though I had fought to be there. Only three of us could come through Erez. The night before, his sisters and brothers had argued that it should be one of them, and though I was just a cousin, Nidal was my best friend. More importantly, I made an argument that no one seemed willing to refute. It had been my fault. My voice shook, and my eyes stung. The room went silent. Mohammed, Nidal's oldest brother, looked at his mother and father, and said simply, *Just let her go. We'll wait for you here.* His father deferred to his mother who nodded. My eyes met Mohammed's gratefully. And that had been the end of it. And now that I was here, I wasn't sure what to do. The sight of Ofer, which I had never seen before, exceeded even my wildest fears. It was a large concrete monster. The thought of Nidal inside of it made it hard to breathe.

I made your favorite, Om Mohammed was saying, grasping at the familiar. *Yallah. Let's go home.* She walked next to Nidal, holding him tightly, as if frightened someone might change their mind and drag him back. We pushed our way onto the bus with the other prisoners' families, and prepared for the long ride home. Nidal sat next to his father, and I sat next to his mother. I had questions, but the questions

would have to wait. I could not see Nidal as he was in the seat behind me. I wondered what he was thinking-- if he blamed me. I leaned my head against the window, closed my eyes and tried to sleep.

Om Mohammed nudged me. *We're here.* We got off the bus and walked to "Passport Control," presented our ID's, answered the same endless questions, *Where are you coming from? Why were you there? How long did you stay?* We then walked through the narrow corridor, through two turnstiles, and then stood before the solid metal door, waiting. Just waiting. After about 20 minutes, it suddenly slid open, and we started the long hot walk through the caged passageway that led to the control office on the other side.

Abu Mohammed had arranged for a taxi van. We climbed in along with another prisoner and his family. I was still next to Om Mohammed. The mother of the other prisoner was nervous and twittered like a bird. It grated on me.

How long was your son there? she asked my aunt, as if asking her about some pleasant trip Nidal might have returned from. Om Mohammed replied quietly, *Six months and two weeks.* The woman's eyes widened, perhaps having expected some shorter period for someone so young. *God bless him! My son was only there for a month, but his older brother has been there for 6 years.* Om Mohammed nodded her head, *I'm sorry,* but made no effort to politely extend the conversation as she usually would. The woman turned her attention to someone else in the taxi.

We got out at another cab stand and took the final ride. Nidal had not said a word to me the entire trip. When we finally reached home, there were people standing and waiting in front of the house. The whole family was there. Nidal's brothers, Mohammed and Ghassan, approached the taxi first. As Nidal

got out, he was knocked over by the press of bodies and hands. They reached for him as if their touch could somehow heal the wounds of the past six months. Nidal received this attention with little reaction. His face was unusually quiet. The laughter that lived in the outer creases of his eyes was gone.

We slowly made our way into the house. Nidal was pushed into an arm chair in the living room. His sister brought him a glass of water. His mother and sisters started filling the living room table with hummus, olives, fresh baked bread, zaahter, tomatoes. Someone made a plate for Nidal and handed it to him. He put the plate and the water on the end table beside his chair and stood up. He smiled gently at everyone, looked at his mother and said, *I would like to take a shower now.*

Of course, Habeebi, go, his mother said. *He needs to eat!* someone cried. *Look how thin he is!* Nidal stood up and left the living room. *He's tired. Let him rest. We'll see him tomorrow.* Haja Aziza stood up and motioned for the others to do the same. Most of the family followed her out. The only people left in the room were Mohammed, Ghassan, Abu Mohammed, Ahmo Sammy, and me. Om Mohammed and Nidal's sisters had started moving the untouched plates of food back to the kitchen.

Abu Mohammed spoke to Ahmo Sammy, *He told me on the bus that he was in solitary the whole time.* He looked to Ahmo Sammy for some reaction, but Ahmo Sammy only nodded his head silently. *He said they only let him out for interrogations.* Ahmo Sammy acknowledged this with a loud sigh and gazed out the window, but still said nothing. *He won't--* Abu Mohammed stopped, composed himself, and started again. *He won't say anything more.*

Ahmo Sammy spoke quietly, *Don't push him. When he's ready to talk, he will.*

So no one asked Nidal anything. And Nidal said nothing. A full week went by before Nidal spoke to

me at all. It seemed that every time I approached him he made some excuse to be somewhere else-- run an errand for his mother, walk our young cousin Amal home. Finally, I snuck up behind him in the market as he was buying some apples.

You're avoiding me.

He turned to face me. *What?*

You are. You're avoiding me.

I'm not--

You are.

Fadila--

I spoke rapidly, trying to say it all, before he could find some excuse to cut me off-- *I'm sorry. It was my fault we were there. It was my idea to throw stones. You didn't want to go--*

And you think I'm mad about that? His angry emphasis on the final word was like a door that slammed closed between us-- as if an argument about who made who throw stones was part of some old life he no longer belonged to. I had no idea. That was what his words meant. I had no idea what he had been through. My eyes started to tear for the second time in a week. This was not the Fadila he knew.

He sighed and shifted the apples to his other hand. *I'm not mad at you.* I was finding it hard to speak as the tears finally came full force. *You don't... have... to lie to me--*

I'm not. That wasn't the first time I threw stones. It won't be the last.

But you said--

It doesn't matter what I said. If it didn't happen that day, it would have happened some other day--

But why did they keep you so long? What happened to you?

Nidal looked down at the bag of apples as if the answer could be found there. He shook his head and smiled, and for just a moment, we were there together, just like before. It could have been any summer's day, standing there in the market, arguing about some meaningless thing, enjoying the breeze on our faces. When he finally spoke, it was with the calm and certainty of someone who has finally found the right words, *I learned something important.*

He wouldn't say anymore about it. We talked, yes-- but not about what happened at Ofer. We talked about everything but Ofer-- how the algebra teacher had almost gotten to al Quds, only to be turned back at Qalendia. The reason she was turned back was not half as interesting as the reason she had gone in the first place, which was a matter of much debate among our classmates. Some say she went to meet the family of a potential suitor while others (with a more scandalous bent) said she had gone for a now no-longer secret rendezvous with the suitor himself. Whether it was the former or the latter, there was to be no marriage or scandal. The occupiers had seen to that. So we talked about her misadventures, soccer, and parkour, and life went on in the slow way that it does when there is nothing on the horizon to draw the eye. There were moments when I thought that Nidal almost seemed back to himself, but then I would look at the edges of his eyes for the laughter that once lived there and find something else.

Yes, that's the way it ends-- Nidal's story. It's not the one everyone remembers, but it is important in ways I have only now begun to understand. Some stories get woven deep into the fabric of who we become. In the end, we don't choose those stories. They choose us.

Like the one about Nidal's eighth time, but the young soldier didn't know and offered him a cigarette.

Nidal said *sure*, then asked for a light. The soldier gave him one and then started to ask Nidal a question, but before he could finish, Nidal lit the cigarette, put it out in his own hand and said, *Now go get me someone who knows what they're doing.*

They put him in solitary again for six months and when they brought him out, they asked him if he was ready to talk. He looked at them and said, *Yes, I am ready.* And the interrogator looked pleased. That's when Nidal leaned back in his chair, put his hands behind his head, and stretched. Then he looked the interrogator in the eye and said, *When I got here I felt so tired and weak, but now I've had a good rest and feel much stronger.*