

Everything We Could Have Been

Adam picks up a pebble out of the rubble. He places it in the palm of his hand and brings his face close to contemplate it. It casts a soft glow on the boy's face. 'It's going to be our marker,' he says to his friend. 'You toss it onto a square. And then, you hop on one foot from one square to the next, avoiding the one with the stone. When you get to the end, turn around, come back the other way and right before you pass the square with the stone, pick it up without losing your balance.'

Reem springs onto the hopscotch. Her eyes glued onto each of its numbers, her voice sets the pace for her steps '*Wahid, ithnan, theletaa... 'ashara!*'¹ 'I am doing everything just right', she thinks. She looks up. There is a shadow between her and the sun. She turns around, suddenly facing the barrel of a gun. The man's equipment suggests he is not there to play hopscotch. He says something in a language the girl does not understand. He waves his gun around, without taking his eyes off her face. She holds his stare. Behind them, Adam approaches number four. His trembling hand lifts the pebble from its square and throws it at the soldier. It hits his neck, bounces off the floor and rolls to his feet like a defeated pawn fallen from its chessboard.

No time for fear or cries. The children take off, running as fast as they can without looking back. Reem shows the way, mouthing a song she inherited from her peers. "*I am brave and my head is always up.*" She draws her strength from each word. "*I'm keeping my oath to you, my homeland.*"² They navigate the streets like a playground. She has been here before. It might look like a heap of ruins and collapsed walls, but somebody once called this their home. Once, these cement blocks were perfectly interlocked, standing proud in arches and domes. Yet, buried under the rubble, families' dreams are still waiting to be fulfilled.

At the end of the road stands the Omari Mosque, steadfast witness to its neighborhood's rise and fall. The only guardian of its people's untold stories. Adam rests his hands on its wall, panting, finally catching sight of the marketplace.

The two friends sneak into the covered market. The hustle and bustle of the bazaar drowns out the pounding of their hearts - the 'peace be upon you' at the beginning of a tailor's haggling, the 'all praise to God' after one of the jeweler's successful trades. The children hide behind a stall of Arabian rugs, their forehead leaning against a pile of rolled-up carpets. Their hands

¹ "One, two, three... Ten!" in Arabic

² *Dammi Falastini*, a resistance song by Mohammed Assaf

cling tight to the fabric like a shield. They lost him. Both sink into the ground from relief. Their eyes finally meet. Still mute, they simply nod - the tacit agreement that they won't say anything to *Baba*. Otherwise, they may not be able to play hopscotch again, ever. Without a word, they split up and head home.

Reem's house smells like *Maqlooba*.³ Her favourite dish. Yet, it is fear that fills her stomach. She is staring through the window. It is getting dark. *Baba* is coming back from the Mosque, his prayer mat tucked under his arm. He steps onto the abandoned hopscotch. The soldier is gone. She prays to God that he will not find Adam. One time she overheard *Khalti*⁴, her voice tinged with worry, saying to her mother that the Defense Forces were taking the stone throwers away from their families. And putting them in jail, never to return. 'What can a hopscotch rock do against a pistol?' she thought.

Outside, grown-ups are playing a different kind of game, a bigger one, in which everyone forgot the rules, and no one can ever win. There are so many players, yet no one really thought about how or when it would end. Men had competed with the finest artillery, accusing one another of having cast the first stone. Houses had been stolen and destroyed, lives had been taken away but still, everyone resumed playing as burying shrouds was part of it. Mothers mourning the loss of their child. They wished they had found a way out, a cheating technique. But prayers and blessings over dead bodies is everything they have left— "verily, to God we belong, and indeed, to Him we shall return."⁵ In this round, the teams did not take turns. None of them really wanted to take part anymore. Yet, they had been playing for so long, no one really dared to drop out.

Adam had heard about that game, but he preferred hopscotch in which a stone was never a weapon. He knew exactly what kind of grown up he wanted to be. He had it all planned, all set up. He never intended to be a player. He had a big dream of becoming an architect. Sketching out the lines of a new fortress of a city. Putting houses together that could never be broken. With doors so strong they would never let an enemy pass through. He had high hopes for Reem as well. 'She is kind and brave,' he thought. 'The time he scratched his knee, she was not even scared of the blood.' He had tried not to wince, squeezing his eyes so they could swallow his tears. Somehow, a few drops still managed to escape, and she was the one who wiped them away. Then, she knelt down and used gauze to dress his wound, her veil floating in the breeze

³ A Middle eastern dish made of layers of rice, vegetables and meat cooked in a pot and flipped upside down before serving

⁴ Auntie

⁵ Quran, Surah Al Baqarah (*The Cow*) 2:156

like a cape. That day, Adam told his parents he had met a superhero. ‘God willing, she will be an amazing doctor someday.’

This exact thought mirrors in her mother's mind as she is looking at her child. ‘She is the soul of my soul,’ she thinks. She puts her glass of black tea onto the coffee table and pats her laps, inviting her daughter to rest her head. As she strokes her hair, she recites *salawat*⁶ in a voice sweet like a lullaby. The girl's body softens as she slowly drifts off to sleep. ‘Hearts do find rest in the remembrance of God,’ she thought.

The electricity is cut off again. The late night throws its shadows in a merry-go-round against the walls. Outside, the shootings begin. Reem tries to recall her *Mama*'s words. ‘It is just fireworks.’ The only lie her mother ever told. Her daughter believed in fireworks like others believed in Santa. ‘Can all children tell the difference between the explosions that sparkle in the sky and those that crash into the earth?’ she wonders. As missiles bleed onto the night sky, deceptive stars become accomplices of horrors and crimes. Tomorrow, more families will huddle underneath the rubble. If only someone had taught the bombs how to fly.

The moon and the sun battle for the horizon. The exact time when night can be mistaken for dawn. Adam is woken up by the air blowing onto his hair. He is alone, facing the open sky. The torn-up city suffocates in a heavy smoke. The world is in black and white. His legs are numb but he has to run. His feet twist and slide on the remains of home. He needs to find *Baba*. His tears blur his sight. All he can see is ash. Ashes swallowed everything.

The boy suddenly stops. He kneels down and starts digging. Looking for his miracle. The dust clings to his skin like a leech. He spots the outlines of the hopscotch in the rubble. ‘Maybe if I reach it,’ he thought, ‘I could go back in time. If I just find another pebble, Reem and I could play once again.’ Another airstrike splits the sky in two. Miracles only happen to others. Adam raises his hands to the sky, looking for a last embrace. “And give good news to the believers, that they have deserved from God a great blessing.”⁷ His head plays on a loop all the prayers he ever heard. The bomb roars louder, as the titanium stone breaks with a thud. Forever trapping every sound that had once lived here. The echo of children's steps from square to square. The rumbling of shattered dreams. The beating of an open heart.

Dear Adam and Reem, may the Most Merciful take your laughter up to more beautiful skies.

⁶ Blessings Muslims address their prophet Muhammad

⁷ Quran, Surah Al Ahzab (*The Confederates*) 33:47