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Iftar

I walk alone through the streets listening to spoons and voices. It is *iftar* time, and I am racing the light down to the beach, where I hope to find my brothers. The music of spoons on dishes is a mercy from God, for without it I'd lose my mind in the darkness.

I run the last few blocks to the beach. Abu Samra is there with the others around a small fire. I thank God, for if there were no fire, it would mean they are back on the front, and I'd have to spend the night searching for them. They're sharing food and comparing wounds. Abu Obayda lost an eye; Abu Samra lost fingers; Saifullah has burns all over his chest. I pull up my sleeve to show the hole in my forearm; I pull my hair back to show them the scar on my forehead. We pray God has mercy on all the martyrs: Abu Samra's brothers, my mother and sisters, Saifullah's father, Abu Obayda's son.

Abu Samra is writing in the sand with the butt of his weapon. I have a small sack of *za'atar* with me and I spoon some into a bowl of olive oil. We cook pita on flat stones by the fire, tear off pieces, and slurp oil and spices beneath the stars.

"Let us thank God for this fire and this food," I say.

"God is great," they reply. "God is sufficient"

Abu Layla is Lebanese and he's been fighting with us for almost five years. He has no scars, not even a scratch, and we call him the lucky one, the one God favors too much. He always gets the goodies though, like this special olive oil we're using tonight. His discomfort as we compare wounds is obvious, so we jeer at him.

"You know," Saifullah says. "Whenever we go to the front I have to search for Abu Layla."

He mimes looking around, "Where are you Abu Layla? Nobody knows." and we all burst out laughing. It's a joke, everyone knows Abu Layla is brave, but he's the only one not laughing.

"Remember Alfa?" shouts Abu Obayda. "Abu Layla, be careful brother, if you go too long unwounded you'll die like Alfa did, may God have mercy on his soul."

"A single mortar," Saifullah shouts, laughing and coughing on pita. "And poof! he was gone, just like that."

"Brother, he went years without getting shot," Abu Obayda says, laughing so hard he cries. "He left the bunker for one moment only, one moment!"

"This is what happens, by the grace of God, when you dodge too many bullets," Abu Samra adds from the shadows beyond the fire.

I remember Alfa. He was from Nablus. He always wore a dark shirt, a cap tilted to the side, and a pair of blue Adidas he kept clean with a toothbrush. I was a boy when he fought. One time I passed him on the street as he was leaning against a wall lighting a cigarette. We caught eyes over his

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hands cupped around the flame. Just before I turned my head he said in a low voice meant for me alone, *May Allah Bless You*. Another time, maybe a few months before he was martyred, I was on my way home and we caught eyes again. He was in a tea house and he disappeared behind another patron as I walked past the entrance, reappearing again with a spliff in his hand that he offered to me. I took a puff, said *halawwa habibi*, he said *mashi*, and I kept walking. I wasn't there when he died, but every soldier in Gaza knows the story.

Saifullah and Abu Obayda are still needling Abu Layla, who absorbs it in sullen silence. Abu Samra is finishing his message in the sand. I lift the kettle from the fire and replenish everyone's tea. There are others on the beach tonight, lighting defiant fires. Childrens' voices in the wind and the rush of the sea in the night, my friends laughing. I have known ceasefires, but never peace; I imagine it sounds like this.

I walk over to see what Abu Samra wrote. It's too dark to read so I ask him.

"It says, 'We are all in *dunyā* together, can't you see that?'"

We turn together and face the sea. Somewhere south there are explosions. The air shifts and the land wakes, shaking off the dreamy dusk. This time is different from the others, we know this and speak it aloud from time to time, to remind ourselves that death is nothing. If we all die it means the world has finally tipped and we embrace it, this unit of ours on the beach by the fire. I dream we're all reborn as olive trees dotting the land, rooted as the sun rises and sets into forever.

We're all surprised when Abu Layla shouts *khalas!* and loudly chambers a round. He presses the muzzle of his pistol to his thigh and blows a hole into his own leg. I have heard countless gunshots but this is the only one to freeze me. Saifullah grips Abu Layla beneath his arm and drags him up the beach toward the medical tent just across Haroan Al Rasheed. Abu Samra curses him and calls him a donkey and worse. We are all shouting that it was a joke, but all he says is, *We are brothers now, By God we are all brothers now*.

"We were always brothers, you idiot," I scream back at him.

We run all the way to the hospital. The doctor listens to our story in silence before carting him away. *It's just a hole*, the doctor says, but we already knew that. And still we are so angry with him. We are so angry we start sobbing in the lobby, the way boys sob after losing their mothers.