

An Endless Battle

A Short Story By Karine Mabroukeh

I was only ten when I saw my first body—his face covered in sweat, his clothes red with blood. He was small, younger than the other warriors who stood among the crowd in disguise. So scrawny he **took up** half the stretcher laid in the middle of the square. My hands shook. My mind urged me to turn away, but my body refused to listen.

I **remember** the boy. He used to play in the olive field next to ours; his father would teach him how to use a gun by aiming at empty glass bottles he **found** on his trips back from the city. He was so young, yet he still fought **beside** his father, **helping hold** the line **and** protect our land—land that will be taken from us soon enough anyway.

Those gathered in the square **did** their best to conceal their grief and sorrow, including the boy's family. **They would not claim him as their own as long as the soldiers watched us.** The last time we were in this situation, Mama forbade me from looking. It angered me that I could not see those who had fallen, that I could not bid them farewell. She **held** me tight and buried my face in her clothes. **It** was hours later when I found out that it had been my friend on the stretcher, **and** that it had been his family screaming as their house erupted and their belongings **got trashed.**

On my way home that day, I picked up a discarded newspaper. The headlines read: *Hifa Falls to the English*. Tears burned my eyes, and I felt my heart sink a little, but Mama continued to walk over to our house, or whatever was left of it anyway. Half the roof had collapsed during the missiles that were fired **at** the neighbouring houses **the week before.**

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It seems like everyone around me is dying too quickly these days. It started with my uncle, who was **picked at random** amongst four others, **and** all five were shot dead. **I watched, but didn't** cry. Then, my friend's older brother was shot and killed in battle, **I** hugged her **while** she sobbed.

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Commented [JJ2]: I'd keep this in if this is your authorial voice for this narrative, but a better description would be: "and their belongings were torn apart." Just a suggestion! "Trashed" seems a little vague and informal.

Commented [CJ3R2]: "were destroyed"

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The day after that, my neighbour was caught hiding a wounded soldier in their home, and the English blew up the house and everyone in it. I grew up with the kids in that house, but I still could not cry; others were grieving louder than I was. Then today, the English tossed my cousin's body in the middle of the square and waited for one of us to recognize and claim him. We didn't.

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Commented [JJ4]: You mention the speaker not crying twice; but, for clarification and consistency, I want to ask whether you'd rather have "did not cry" or "didn't cry." Regardless of your choice, ensure that the voice of the narrator remains consistent with these small details.

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Commented [JJ5]: This is a powerful monologue. I think it has potential to be developed further substantially. I would recommend being more descriptive with the narrator's thought process here. Right now, the emotional impact of this paragraph—especially since this is placed right after the narrator describes the deaths she has seen recently—isn't as punchy / powerful as it should be.

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I used to think that death was this thing that everyone feared, but it's not scary at all. Sad, yes, but when someone lives their life knowing that they could die at any moment, death becomes normal. Death becomes your friend. Yet, when you see it, something in you breaks all over again.

Even now, as I sit in our field beneath the olive trees with my journal in my lap, thinking of something to write, I fight back my tears. *Mama is struggling*, I think to myself. *She needs me*. I cannot grieve; I cannot fall apart, no matter how badly I want to, no matter how thin a thread I am hanging by.

Dear Diary,

When Baba and my brother said they were going out to work in our olive fields, I volunteered to come with them. I thought the open air might be cooler than my small house, which has been suffocating me latehly. Besides, I have been waiting for a chance to write in my journal, and what better time or place than here, beneath the olive tree that is older than my grandparents?

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Baba and Ahmed are whispering again. According to them, some of the olive trees in a neighboring field have been set on fire. I'm not sure who did it, but I believe it's those English speakers who poke around our village. I don't know who these English speakers are or what they are doing here, but I hope they leave soon.

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On a more cheerful note, I got a 90% on my math test this week. Mama said if I keep this up, she'll let me go to high school in the city and stay with some old family friends. I hope she does,

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I hope I keep, getting good grades. And I hope we get to keep this olive farm.

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Wa al salam¹,

Noor Al-Zahrani

—

I startle awake to the sound of Mama yelling at my siblings and me. Her hand meets my shoulder and shakes me awake. I blink against the brightness of the sunlight before turning to face her.

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“Yalla², get up! We have to go,” she says before turning back to empty the drawers. “Get up, Noor, we don’t have time!”

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I stand up and dust my clothes before grabbing a bag and shoving items inside. “What’s wrong? What’s happening?”

“The neighbouring villages have fallen,” my brother explains, tossing things toward me to pack. “The English are moving fast and will come here next. We have to go.”

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¹ Arabic for with greetings

² Arabic for come on or lets go

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“Go?” I exclaim. “Go where, Ahmed?”

“South, Closer to the border.”

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“Listen, Noor,” Baba says, placing his hands on my shoulder. “Ahmed and I have to go, but you have to take care of your mother. Whatever—”

“Go? Go where? You’re leaving? I thought you were coming with us!”

“We can’t come, Albi³.” He sighs. “We have to stay and fight. We have to buy you and the next village time.”

“But then you’ll follow us, right?” His eyes meet mine, ~~y~~ years of pain and sorrow etched in them. “Afterwards, you will come and find us, right, Baba?”

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“We will try,” he says and pulls me in for a hug, pressing his lips against my forehead. “Inshallah⁴, we will see you both again.”

I feel the sting in my eyes and the tears that try to force themselves out. I cannot cry. I cannot fall apart. Mama needs me now more than ever. For her, I would do anything, ~~F~~ For her, I would tear myself apart.

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My father breaks his hold on me to embrace my mother. Ahmed hands me two bags full of clothes before wrapping me tightly in his arms. In my eyes, he is still the little boy who used to read me bedtime stories when we were kids and would hold me tight when bombs dropped around us. To think of him never coming back, to think of losing him—~~I~~ I blink back my tears and swallow my sobs.

³ Arabic for my heart

⁴ Arabic for God-willing

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“Take care of yourself,” he whispers in my ear. “It’s okay for you to fall apart sometimes. You don’t have to always walk on eggshells around Mama.” He pulls away and wipes away a single tear. “I’ll see you again. Baba and I ~~we~~ we will find you and Mama. I promise.”

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“Noor, we should go now,” Mama says.

She pulls my brother in for one final hug and kisses his forehead before walking out the door. I follow her, turning to look back at the mess of a place I call home one last time before

approaching the village square.

Pain shoots up my legs with every step I take. ~~The~~ pack on my back feels much heavier than it originally was, and sweat coats my face as the sun hangs directly above us. Mama ~~taking~~ short ~~heavy~~ breaths ~~stops~~ every few minutes to stretch her arms and legs. ~~Still, we~~ continue to follow the crowd, completely clueless ~~about~~ where we are going ~~trusting~~ ~~only~~ those around us.

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At last, we hike up a small hill and take our first break of the day. From this high up, we can spot a small village nearly a twenty-minute walk away. Groups gather and shout over each other, debating ~~where~~ we will get food ~~whether~~ we should stay here and rest until tomorrow morning, or ~~whether~~ we should continue ~~moving~~. At last, ~~someone~~ gets up on a small boulder and calls for our attention.

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Commented [JJ6]: Be careful of repetition in one paragraph: you write “At last,” twice in this movement. To ensure seamlessness and proper read flow, ensure that there are different ways for you to move the narrative, or else it may read redundantly.

“We cannot stay here,” ~~she~~ says, “We must keep moving, but let us gather our strength and search for food. Are there any volunteers ~~willing~~ to come to the village with me and ask for help?”

Commented [JJ7]: It’s also best to clarify here that this “someone” is a woman, as the dialogue after this describes her as a woman, but we—as the readers—weren’t informed beforehand; so, it might cause a little bit of confusion.

Hands go up, my own included.

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“Good! We will return shortly with food for everyone, Inshallah.”

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She steps down from the boulder and makes her way down the hill, ~~and~~ the volunteers follow her. I pick up my pace and walk to the front of the group, looking around the village as we enter its empty streets. ~~We separate into smaller groups, as the two girls and I knock on the closest door and ask for directions to the doctor’s office, where we plan on gathering medical supplies. A sweet old man opens the door for us and asks where we are going after giving us directions.~~

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Commented [JJ8]: Streamline this sentence for better readability. There are too many things happening in one sentence; it shifts too quickly from the larger group to one smaller group, which makes the action feel slightly awkward and crowded.

The girls and I begin walking down the path and towards the doctor's office. When we arrive, I open the door ~~and~~ the others follow me inside. A stack of newspapers sits on a small wooden table between two sofas. I walk up to it and pick one up: ~~25,000 killed in the last week.~~

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Commented [JJ9]: Capitalise each word as this is a newspaper headline.

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the headline reads.

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And this is only counting the claimed and buried bodies—not the abandoned or missing.

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How can other countries stand around and allow this to happen? I think to myself.

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Commented [JJ10]: I don't think it's necessary to italicise the thoughts here. This is already from the narrator's perspective, so the reader doesn't need clarification on internal dialogue. If you'd like to keep this in—I see that there were two other examples of you using this—let me know.

I place the newspaper down as the two girls call for me to come and help them carry the kits back to camp.

The sun rises as we all gather our bags and prepare to leave our camp—another fifteen hours of walking ahead of us. It has been two weeks, and we have yet to hear anything about survivors from our village; but then I remember Ahmed's promise to find Mama and me, and it gives me a sliver of hope. Perhaps they are at another camp. Perhaps they are dead. Perhaps they got away.

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I swing a bag over my shoulder and look out toward the smoke rising from faraway villages. My mother stands beside me and places a comforting hand on my shoulder before leading me down the small hill and back toward the crowd.

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Maborukeh 7

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“We should reach the border in another week,” one of the women at the front of the crowd shouts.

Over the last few days, others from destroyed villages have joined us, all sharing a common goal: get to safety.

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“What will we do once we get to the border, Mama?” I ask.

“I don't know. I heard there are camps there for us to stay in,” she explains. “We'll have

to cross and enter a new country.”

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“But how will—”

A sharp crack followed by a scream interrupts me.

I search the crowd for where the sound had come from, but all I see is red, and all I hear are screams. Screams and more gunshots, one after the other, as bullets rain down from the hills around us. The crowd begins to run, desperate for any form of shelter, but when I look to my side, she is gone.

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“Mama!” I shout as I search people’s faces. “Mama!” I repeat as I look down at the ground, searching through the dead. “Mama!” I scream when I see her hazel hair slipping loose from her headscarf and falling over her face.

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I freeze. The noise freezes. The world itself freezes.

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My hands begin to shake, and even as I force myself to breathe, to remain standing, my legs give out. I don’t feel the pain as my knees connect with the ground; I don’t feel the warmth of the blood on my hands; I don’t smell the smoke rising as trees are set on fire. Nothing, I feel nothing but the vibration of the sound tearing through me that sends birds erupting from nearby trees.

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Commented [JJ11]: I would expand this further. What sounds? Would “the force of the sound” sound better? Does it sound sharp and deep?

Dear Diary,

Maborukeh 8

It has been two weeks since I left home. I have finally made it to the camp past the border, leaving behind my land and my family. We don’t get much in these camps. Trucks with food and aid come by once a day. The tents are cold, the floor is muddy, and everyone is always crying—or trying not to. I am always crying.

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There is nothing left. Not our homes, not our lands, not even our hope.

But I am here, past the borders, as my mother wished me to be.

Wa al salam,

Noor Al-Zahrani

Commented [JJ12]: An incredibly emotional and impactful piece. There is not a lot of substantive edits here (as you can see; there are more line edits); however, the major substantive areas that we will speak about in our meeting is ensuring that Noor's character remains realistic and raw. There are a lot of transitions between memory, reflection, diary, and present action that need tightening. Having an attack occur and then the final diary entry is very powerful; though, I wonder if this can be reflected in the beginning of the story to shape how the entire narrative flows (a first diary entry before the actual narrative). But generally, the story's time shifts and structural transitions could be made smoother so the reader remains emotionally grounded throughout.