

PRAISE FOR *THE PALACE OF ANGELS*

Vital, brutal and tender, *The Palace of Angels* is written with the urgency of breaking news and the delicacy of poetry. This is Morsi at his passionate best.

—Geraldine Brooks, Pulitzer Prizewinner

‘Twenty Two Years to Life’ [the second story in this volume] is a moving and heartbreaking tale based on a true story. It brings new meaning both to steadfastness and the human suffering within the mega prison of the Gaza Strip. The level of the occupier’s cruelty is matched by the fragile humanity of the occupied—in a way that can only be appreciated with the personal narrative so beautifully spun. The human complexity turns and twists and is then exposed in this powerful tale of the clash between love and hate, revenge and compassion, within an impossible and abnormal reality of occupation, colonisation and ethnic cleansing. *The Palace of Angels* is a trilogy of gripping tales that challenge our preconceived ideas and identities.

—Ilan Pappé, Israeli historian and author,
Professor of History, University of Exeter

With all the sympathy one might feel, it is impossible for an outsider to imagine what it is like to be a Palestinian living in the West Bank or Gaza today. Morsi affords one a revealing glimpse.

—Daniel Gavron, author, former editor,
Israel Radio and the Jerusalem Post

It does not matter which part of the world we belong to if we consider ourselves a supporter of peace and equality, but it matters that we do not close our eyes to the fatal truth of the regime of Israel, Syria, Iran, Myanmar, Iraq, North Korea, Afghanistan or some of the African countries. It matters to listen to the independent voices heard from these countries. And this novel is one of those voices. This novel is one of those voices that provokes our conscience.

—Shokoofeh Azar, shortlisted author for 2018 Stella and
Queensland Literary Awards

The Palace of Angels was hurting, shaking, made me dizzy and uncomfortable, gave me hope and filled me with despair, all at once.

—Kobi Tuch, Israeli educator

Morsi, writing with tremendous empathy, has distilled a political conflict into a very human, visceral story. The dichotomy between love and oppression echoes through this powerful narrative, taking the reader on a shifting journey between the delicate and the devastating.

—*WritingWA*

‘What is Past is Dead’ is about desperate actions we sometimes take to counter desperate events. The best thing about this novella: it is an intimate portrait of one man’s life. Had Morsi painted this work on a bigger canvas, it would not have worked nearly so well as what he has done instead, which is to present us with a very fine cameo.

—T.D. Whittle, Author

A captivating tale of the human power of loving and yearning for freedom. Morsi’s depiction of Palestinian life is heart wrenching because it’s the truth and nothing but the truth. A story that resonates with all humanity.

—Rana Shubair, author, Gaza strip, Palestine

These novellas bring to mind Picasso’s nightmarish ‘Guernica’, but Morsi’s palette bears more vivid colours and his canvas is stretched across the measure of years. Only a great artist could plumb the relentless horror of the Middle East conflict with the immediacy Morsi achieves here, and that he simultaneously captures and celebrates the eternal beauty of love is testament to his mastery.

—Ken Spillman, award-winning author

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mohammed Massoud Morsi was born in Copenhagen in 1975 and promptly started a roving lifestyle, moving to Egypt with his Egyptian parents, then back to Denmark to further his schooling. He was drawn to writing from an early age and found his calling in places far beyond the news fronts, and into human wastelands—light years from the trodden tourist runs.

Morsi spent almost two decades as a freelance journalist and photographer immersed in communities with forgotten people and conflicts around the world. He primarily worked for NGOs and published feature articles in Danish newspapers. Along the way, he also held a wide variety of jobs (airline programmer, forklift driver, fisherman, etc.) and expressed an entrepreneurial flair establishing a photographic academy in Copenhagen, building a school in a Phnom Penh slum, growing herbs guerilla style and farming rabbits in Egypt.

Morsi's intimate images, whether from the edge of an AIDS hospital bed, from a rubbish dump with rubbish pickers in Cambodia, from the turmoil of the Gaza Strip or in South Lebanon, all reflect his deep sense of justice.

Morsi's life experiences have given him a rich matrix which looks to important questions, finding what is quintessentially human within much broader struggles. He is a natural storyteller with compelling authenticity and an exquisite feeling for romance, at once sensitive and earthy.

Morsi's fiction and non-fiction have appeared in Australian and international publications. He has authored three novels and five non-fiction books. He lived in Europe, Africa and Asia before taking up residence in Australia in 2011. Now a citizen, he continues his writing and lives in Perth with his son, Zaki.

THE
PALACE
OF
ANGELS

MOHAMMED
MASSOUD MORSI

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I am grateful for my mother whose painted landscapes decorate my home with an aura of peace and innocence. Thank you for teaching me that art bound in love is the most liberating form of creation.

I thank my sister for teaching me how to eat slowly and discover the wonder of languages, the grace of classical music and the power of hugs.

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I am forever grateful to Omar Majdalawi, whose humour, courage, and quest for justice—whose tears brought my ship to his world. His people, the Palestinians, also became my people. Their struggle also became mine and as all other struggles, it roots within us all—in our oneness—equally deserving of a life lived in freedom and in dignity.

I am forever grateful to Kobi Tuch for sharing with me the dreams of his people, for teaching me about Tikkun Olam and all the beautiful—and often forgotten traditions—which can bring about a reality rejecting hatred, basing it on kindness and a true understanding of what it means to be human.

Finally, I am forever grateful for the giant mystery of being alive, to have my senses and their rewards, experiences—to be engaged in the world from beginning to end. I am grateful for the minuscule part of the universe that looks out through my eyes—seeing a beautiful humanity only clouded by an illusion that we are separate from each other.

*Dedicated to you, whose tears fell into the well of my soul,
whose voices planted stories in the depth of my heart.*

Disclaimer

Although based on true stories, all three novellas in this work are works of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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WHAT IS PAST IS DEAD

(A PREQUEL)

إحْيِي نَهَارِي و مَوْتِي بَكْرِي

Let me live today and kill me tomorrow.

1

It was so silent I could hear the air flowing through my nostrils. I took out a lighter from my trousers and turned the spark wheel. It sounded as if I had opened a shaken can of Coke. The flame was straight and sparks rose from the specks of dust coming off the stone. I lit my cigarette, then flicked the lighter again and watched the flame. It was dead straight.

Mido was scanning our surroundings, squinting as if he was trying to make out something on the ridges above us. In the light of the full moon, I looked up but couldn't see anything.

'Mido!' I whispered, urgently.

'Ye...es,' he replied, slowly, exhaling a plume of smoke.

'Where is Ahmed?'

I hadn't seen him leave. We had only just stopped the van. If he had gone anywhere, I wanted to know. This was his plan after all and the whole way I had sensed that he hadn't told me all the details. I had had the same sensation the last time we did this, and I didn't like it.

I put the lighter back in my trousers and felt a piece of thick paper on the back of my hand. I pulled out a tattered airline boarding pass and the two familiar lines read Vienna-Cairo. I had arrived two nights earlier and was still wearing the same pair of pants. I curiously searched the rest of my pockets and found another crumbling piece of paper, reading Copenhagen-Vienna. I held them like a pair of aces, then stuck them down the rear pockets. I didn't want anyone else to find them.

Mido flicked his cigarette and resumed his gaze.

'So, where is he?' I said somewhat edgy, almost dropping my cigarette.

'I don't know. He went that way,' said Mido, still looking up, waving his arm in the direction of where the road made a turn as it slithered through the narrow valley we were in.



I couldn't see past the bend, so I left Mido and walked a short distance along the road until I reached it. There I stopped. I had been here several times before but this time, in the night, the moon cast creepy shadows on the rock faces around us. It felt as if I had entered a gallery run by Satan himself. A tapestry of cruel theatrical masks glowered at me as far as I could see. I froze, even though every bone in my body was screaming at me to leave that place. To run all the way back to the airport, past the corrupt immigration officers and the dubious security, until I could move no more, firmly strapped in a seat on a plane out of here. Instead I stood there and all I moved were my lips.

I said his name in a careful tone, not loud, not whispering.

'Ahmed? Ahmed?' I called softly, and heard my voice echo back from the rock masks around me.

Then Ahmed's voice sounded from the blackest of shadows: 'Come here...'

I saw the glow and smelled the hashish he was smoking before I could see him. He had crouched down with his back to the cliff. The white of his emerald black eyes looked up at me like a beast of prey ready to spring, laden with thin red veins, looking even more ominous in the sheen of the moonlight. I felt a stab of anxiety, as if I was walking on the ledge above us, not knowing if my next step would send me plunging to my death.

I stood in front of Ahmed in the dark and though I wanted to ask him what was wrong, I didn't. I looked back at the van with Mido standing there, as if posed for a tourist brochure in the moonlight, dramatic backdrop and all. Except that the entire floor of this van was packed with the same stuff that Ahmed now passed on to me.

The best hashish you could find in Egypt.

‘I don’t know who will meet us today,’ said Ahmed in a low voice while staring at the dusty ground.

I sensed in his voice the squirming fear that had made him leave us to squat down in the shadow of the rocky cliff, to calm himself. Smoking hashish nudges the doors of perception or pulls out a drawer in which one’s fears may be shut away.

I wrapped the tip of my lips around the butt of the joint, took a calm deep breath, and held it in.

‘Why don’t you know?’ I asked him with a muffled voice, exhaling the smoke into the moonlight.

‘I mean, why am I here? Why did you want me here?’

‘Are you joking?’ Ahmed snapped. ‘You know why. Because you speak like a foreigner and you even look like one.’

I felt a pique to my pride. After all, I was Egyptian. My nurture in being Egyptian was acquired through speaking, eating, talking and smoking with my Egyptian peers. I almost took the bait—to jump head first into bickering about something quite irrelevant. We were out in the desert, the border of Israel just hundreds of metres away.

Instead, I replied: ‘The last time you did it yourselves. What’s the difference now?’

‘I don’t know who is coming today. That’s the difference.’ Ahmed’s face loosened in a sad way and he continued.

‘Ever since we began trading, we have met the same soldiers. The last time everything went smooth. We met, did our exchange, got money on top as we had expected, and they even asked us when we could trade again. You would have liked it. You might have even liked the soldiers as well. The first time we met them we were all nervous, remember? It was different last time. Mido and I almost began to like them. What do you think of that? Then somehow, all of a sudden, both my contacts disappeared. They were the only ones I could trust to make arrangements with the Israeli soldiers. I spent weeks trying all channels to find them, but they were gone, Allah knows where...’

Ahmed smiled for a second, staring into space, picking up a pebble and taking a deep breath.

‘Ayman, the hero in Rafah, remember him? He was found dead in a tunnel with his guts cut out. The Jews, the Palestinians—even we would not claim him.’

I didn’t say anything. I heard what Ahmed had said. I had heard that Ayman, who we’d called ‘the hero’, had been brutally murdered. The Ayman we had dined and laughed with, with whom we had lain on our backs, stargazing on a Gaza rooftop, imagining a free Palestine. That Ayman was no more. I heard what Ahmed had said and also what he hadn’t. Ahmed knew why he had been killed and I knew what that meant. Ayman had been one of the best movers of goods through the tunnels under the desert floor between Gaza and Egypt. But someone had been watching him ... watching us.

Ahmed struggled, pushing himself up against the cliff as he got up. His breathing was weary.

‘*Yalla*¹, we need to go and unbolt the floor. I need your help. They’ll be here soon,’ he said and began walking back to the van. Ahmed had deliberately not told me about Ayman before we left Suez. I strangled an urge to scream in anger.

‘What about Mido? Does he know what is going on?’

‘No, and he doesn’t care either. Mido is a happy guy. Happy to get the hashish, happy to go on an adventure, happy to get his share, happy to spend it. Mido doesn’t know what worry is.’



I was tense.

I knew Ahmed as well as I knew Mido. On the outside Mido appeared as if he didn’t have a worry in the world. Mido was the joker. Everybody loved Mido. He got into just as much trouble as the rest of us but nobody ever got mad with Mido. All he had to do was just smile his big, radiant smile, and you couldn’t help but smile back.

1 Let’s go. Or: Hurry up.

He had such a good nature. He was always telling jokes, making faces, impersonating people. But always with a good heart; he never cut anyone down, and the only person he ever made a fool of was himself. He could be tough too; as tough as Ahmed and I. But Mido would rather make friends than pull a knife.

He had this hair, this beautiful brown hair. Everybody else's hair where we came from was black or at most dark brown, but Mido had this beautiful head of thick, wavy, almost reddish brown hair. He wore it a bit long, combed it straight back, and always kept it very neat with a red comb that he carried in his back pocket. Even that gesture—fully extending his arm, then drawing his hand slowly back over his head with his comb—was a joke on himself. He did it all the time, with this serious look on his face, his lips slightly pursed. And then he'd burst out laughing. And if any girls were around, well, they'd all be getting weak at the knees.

Yet Mido was also one of the most perceptive guys I knew, and he saw the worried look on my face as we approached the van. He was just about to say something, when Ahmed spoke.

'Come on, let's get ready before they get here. We want to finish this thing quickly.'

Ahmed handed out three big Phillips-head screwdrivers and we began to undo the screws that held the false floor in the back of the van. Some of them were angled wrong and needed care not to wreck the thread. On some, the head was almost gone, and a couple we couldn't get out.

All the time we were working, Mido kept looking up behind his back as if someone was watching us.

I looked, as well, but I couldn't keep my eyes off the rock faces, with their sinister mien in the blueish hue of the moonlight. I tried to let my forebodings go. I felt stoned. I shouldn't have smoked.

The light in the van was weak and kept flickering above our heads. I was sweating so much the drops ran from my forehead into my eyes and burnt like acid. I looked at Ahmed whose eyes were still crimson red. The drops on his face escaped, chasing each other along

his jaw, disappearing down his neck. He must have seen me from the corner of his eye.

‘Are you ready?’ he asked, and I said, ‘no’. He wanted to know if we were ready to lift the floor out. Mido gave up on the last screw and huffed: ‘Ready!’

‘We’ll pull out the remaining screws as quietly as we can,’ said Ahmed. The floor was a thin metal sheet, so it would move a bit but couldn’t be bent. We’d have to put it back on again as soon as the deal was done, just with the few screws that would go in. No soldiers or policemen were going to look too closely at the bottom of the back of a van. Most of them looked as if they had been bought from a scrapyard and resurrected to live another life. There were no seats, Ahmed and Mido had removed them. Passenger vans made regular cargo runs so no one would even suspect anything in an otherwise empty van with windows all way around. If all of that didn’t work, Ahmed knew pretty much every guy at every checkpoint in Sinai, and quite a few dollar bills had already passed between shaken hands on our way to the border.

The last screw came out with a bang. We all froze and stared at each other, still holding the metal sheet. The silence seemed to be waiting for another abrupt sound but nothing came. I helped Ahmed with the front part. It came off easily and we slid it out the slide door quietly.

One of the screws had pricked the palm of my left hand and I watched as a pool of blood formed. I thought to tell Ahmed but he had already begun unloading the van with Mido.

From the front of the van, I took a rag T-shirt and wrapped it around my hand, holding it high.

As the blood coloured the fabric, I saw him.

2

About thirty metres above us a very tall man appeared. He stood still at the cliff's edge and looked down at me. He had long hair and for a second, I thought perhaps it was a woman; but he was massive like a bull on two legs and he towered up, revealing a body of strength. I was going to speak, make a sound or something, but Mido and Ahmed were still busy counting the stash. I looked up again and heard a slight sound of a bell, a little tinkle bell. It was faint, very faint. The man held a rope that slacked as a goat came up behind and stood next to him. They both stared down at me.

I froze to the spot as I felt the warmth of my blood flowing in a sticky trickle through the cloth and down my arm. After we had looked at each other for what seemed an eternity, the man, with the goat on its lead, began walking along the ridge and away from me. Not thinking, I left the others and followed.

Walking slowly at first, then faster and faster until I was almost running to keep up with the man above; I was drawn to him, to his steps and to the tinkle of the goat on the lead. The ridge suddenly disappeared into the distance and within a few steps, the tall man and the goat were also lost in the gully of darkness that lay between the opposite ridges.

I waited a few seconds, thinking they might reappear again on the other side.

Nothing happened, so I slowly crossed the road and walked into the dark.



Ahmed and Mido's voices faded into the background as the crunch of my steps on the sand beneath me echoed from the cliff faces.

I saw the ridges above narrowing as I walked further on. Ahead, a spot on the desert floor was lit by the moonlight, like a theatre stage under spotlights awaiting entry of the villain. I went to the light and stopped.

I heard the sound of the bell and the tall man's footsteps approaching. A mysterious darkness cloaked the ray of light like a black curtain. I shivered as my skin was pulled, as if the moon was pulling out every strand of hair on my head, on my entire body.

The man and the goat stepped into the light, facing me. I almost stopped breathing as we stood feet apart. He towered high above me and I looked up at a face that was crossed with deep cuts, even across his eyes, like an unpolished rock of blood marble. He had a wide, defined chin. His skin stretched over his face and looked like leather. His breathing was heavy like a maddened bull's and every time he exhaled, I felt it on my face. He looked like a man who had been on fire and survived.

'Are you ready?' said the tall man. The goat looked at me as if it, too, was waiting for an answer.

'I just wanted to see where you were going,' I said with a shaky voice, adding tremulously in my most polite Arabic: 'I think I have to go back to the others now. Please allow me...'

'I expect that you are ready, then, but also scared!' he said. 'If you can tell me what your purpose of being here is, I will accept your excuse...'

What a predicament I was in and what a peculiar way of talking to me. Who was this person to make any demands? His eyes were bulging, his coat was dusty and dirty and his hair long and tattered like an old horsetail.

'I am here, travelling my country with my friends, just like what they call camping,' I replied.

The man's eyes bulged as if they were about to pop out, the scars on his face thickened as if each and every one of them was about to burst from the blood rushing into them.

'*Kefaya!*'² he roared. The goat jumped in fright and so did I. 'Neither of us has time to stand here and play games. Let's get on with it. Come here!' he commanded.

I hesitantly took the half step towards them. The man seemed even taller, bigger, and I am by no means small. He was huge. I stared at his chest and it was moving like a giant swell on the ocean.

'I am not sure what you would like me to do?' I asked as I stood deferentially in front of him. I was confused. I was thinking that at any moment, Ahmed would slap me across my face and I'd come out of what seemed like a bizarre flight of my mind.

The man moved his jacket to the side and pulled out a large knife from its sheath. He had tucked it in behind the wide belt that went around his waist. He took the knife out, flipped it and handed it to me, holding its blade with his bare hand.

I took the knife. I don't know why but I took it.

The double-edged blade shone in the moonlight, one side sharp, the other side, serrated. The handle was round, highest in the middle of my palm and felt like rubber. It felt good in my hand.

A real Rambo knife, I thought.

The tall man spoke: 'From death we return to life; and the purpose of life is death. One sacrifice must be made to please God. It is now your turn to take this life.' His tone was ceremonial. He handed me the lead to the goat, which skipped towards me, looking at me with pleading eyes.

I stood there with the knife in one hand and in the other, the lead to the goat that I assumed I was meant to sacrifice. I thought of just turning around and walking away, but somehow that didn't seem to be a choice. I thought of escaping into the dark, but then what? Ahmed and Mido must have noticed my disappearance by now. Ahmed might be thinking that I'm sabotaging the whole operation. Perhaps Mido had already seen this man? If so, I could calmly explain what had happened and they would surely believe me.

2 Enough!

‘Would you like me to kill the goat!?’ I asked.

‘Or you can choose another life, perhaps your own. The choice is yours,’ he answered calmly.

There was no way I was going to kill the goat. The idea of taking its life just to propitiate some god seemed antiquated, from a time when the Earth was flat and belief in the Universe got you burned at the stake.

‘Hold on!’ I said, agitated. ‘You just said I am ready. Ready for what, then?’

‘Ready to choose. So, choose!’ the tall man growled.

I stared into his eyes. He was in the form of a man but there was something about him that seemed from another time. His carved face looked as if it moved around his eyes. The scars pulsed with his breath and his whole body moved, as if at some point his coat would be blown to shreds and a fiery dragon would emerge.

I looked at the goat again. No, I could not kill it. I looked at the man and thought of what a dragon could do to me. I waged a war within myself; whether I was weak or strong, regardless, I couldn’t kill the goat. The goat moved closer to me and rubbed its cheeks against my thigh.

I looked up to give my answer to the tall man, only to find him gone. Vanished. Without trace. I shivered right through my bones and suddenly the only sound I could hear, was the goat chewing its cud and Ahmed and Mido in the distance cautiously calling my name.

Ahmed and Mido!

I had lost track of myself.

I hurried back, with the goat’s lead in one hand and the big Rambo knife in the other.

I kept looking back, expecting a tall figure to loom out of the dark, morphed into a dire dragon, swooping down on me and the goat, engulfing us in a furnace of death.

3

Ahmed and Mido had indeed been looking for me. I will never forget their faces. Their mouths froze open and for a second they looked as if they had seen a ghost. A picture of them in that very instant remains frozen in my memory.

‘What is this?’ he asked in a baffled voice, looking at the goat.

‘Where did you get the knife from?’ said Mido as he reached out and I opened my hand to let him take it.

‘I am not sure how to explain this but there was this very tall man and he—’ I began to say before Ahmed, looking at me with a big question mark in his eyes, interrupted.

‘Actually, we don’t have time to hear about this now. Tell us later; they’ll be here any minute.’

Mido kept examining the knife.

‘It’s carbon steel. Very strong,’ he said, studying its details as we walked back to the van. I still had the goat by the lead.

‘I can’t believe this! What’s your plan with that goat?’ Ahmed asked, clearly stressed. ‘Let it go, let it go!’

I let go of the lead as we all stopped. Ahmed grabbed a rock and threw it at the goat. It ran a few steps away then stood there, waiting. We turned around and started walking again. Almost back at the van, I felt a lick on my wounded hand. I pushed it away but the goat kept coming back, licking the blood, rubbing itself against me.

Ahmed saw it, looked at me, then at Mido and back again.

‘Tie it up then, quickly. Tie it to the back fender,’ Ahmed sighed.

A look of resignation came over him and he shook his head. Facing me he said, ‘We’ll take it to old Hassan’s place. He’ll be eternally grateful.’



Ahmed and I were cousins and also best friends in our early years. Then life took my family and me to Copenhagen so we were separated for many years until one day we reconnected, at the main microbus stop in Suez. I was in my early teens but I clearly remember watching my cousin from a distance. He was wearing a brown leather jacket and black trousers. It was a winter day—sunny, almost glary. He wore aviator sunglasses which made him look cool. He was sitting in his van, talking to some other drivers and waiting for his ride to fill up. The van was white with wide tyres and low-profile rims and the interior had cosy lights for the night shift. It was clean and the large dash mat was embroidered with Arabic letters making up two words: *Allahu Akhbar*³.

I got in and sat up front in the passenger's seat, lightly jumping in and out to let another passenger grab the middle seat next to Ahmed. Ahmed turned from his window talk, counted heads in the rear-view mirror and looked over the man between us. I didn't let him see my face. A last passenger jumped in the back before Ahmed drove off.

My cousin was tough but very just-minded at the same time. He treated everyone in the same way. I never heard anyone, in all the years Ahmed and I were friends, say a single bad word about him.

A large family hailed the bus, and Ahmed slowed down. The cabin in the rear was almost full. He loudly announced more space was needed and asked some young guys in the back to make room. The mother of the large family quickly shuffled all the children around the available seats before sitting down in the row of seats facing the cabin. The father and what looked to be his eldest son were the only ones left outside.

I put a one-pound note in the hand of the man beside me and said: 'Let's take the next one'. He understood straight away and put the note in Ahmed's hand. We both jumped out and let the father and his son take the front seats. The father thanked us gratefully.

3 God (Allah) is most great. Used by Muslims in prayers and as a general declaration of faith or thanksgiving.

Ahmed slowly put the van in motion while looking at me intently, leaning his body forward to see past the son and the father next to him. As I finally looked at him with a big smile, he stopped the van with a jolt, shaking everything and everyone.

Flinging the driver's door open, Ahmed ran around the van and we embraced and kissed on the cheeks several times. The people in the van didn't mind—they smiled and laughed and were happy for us. Comments and jokes were made, and Ahmed turned his head around several times to explain who I was.

'This is my brother! This is my brother! He lives in Denmark!'

Ahmed was so happy. I was happy. I had lost my own brother in my early childhood so Ahmed was the closest thing to a brother I had.

4

The stash that didn't fit into the crates under the back floor, we packed into three of the same half-sized Russian 82 mm mortar crates. We had tied these crates between the front seats and the rear compartment of the van. There were seven crates in all, each holding four bars across and four down, or sixteen bars altogether, each weighing in at thirty-six ounces. A bar is a block of compacted cannabis resin, or hashish. The first time we went and picked up that same amount of hashish from Mido's family in the Delta, it was packed into regular nine-ounce bars. They looked like a mountain of plastic gold bars and were extremely hard to pack.

The first run turned out better than we'd expected. Our enemies—also our buyers—paid us almost street price although it was clear to them that we didn't really know what we were doing. But they didn't know what they were doing either. Their trade was two crates of M16 assault rifles, twelve rifles in each crate. Each rifle was worth about 10,000 US dollars on the black market at that time. Two boxes of twenty-five modified M26 hand grenades and an Israeli postal sack with five freshly dated sandwiches of explosives, labelled SEMTEX. A large number of complimentary bullet rounds for the assault rifles were also added.

On this occasion, what was to be our last run, the calculation was easy: 2,500 US dollars per thirty-six-ounce bar of hash times sixteen bars (minus one we kept for ourselves), times seven crates, equalled 280,000 dollars. Out of that amount, roughly 220,000 dollars would be delivered as arms and 60,000 as cash. How they got the weapons and the money, they didn't say, and we didn't ask. And how we got the hashish and how we paid for it, they didn't ask, and we didn't say.

Once the deal was done we would head to Rafah, where we

would give the weapons to our Palestinian brothers to use, ideally in their fight for liberation from the Israelis. Not once did any of us consider reselling the weapons to make money. We kept the cash in a box with Mido's rooftop pigeons—enough to buy the next load of hashish—and shared equally what was left.

Without Ayman, the hero, we would have to rely on one of the most powerful men in Rafah, Ahmed Al Haffar, to ensure the weapons went straight through one of the countless tunnels into Gaza. On the other side, Khaled Abu Mohammed would make sure they went to men he trusted: who would not use them against each other. It was said he did this, but we couldn't know for sure. Khaled was a man with a loud voice, a large firm belly and a long beard, who made a very good living from making sure the right things went to the right places.

The only time I met Khaled was at a wedding on the Palestinian side of Rafah. I remember thinking there was no way I could ever lie to this man. The way he shook my hand and looked into my eyes felt as if he was reading my inner secrets. He didn't do small talk, but asked me straight up about my origins, family name, relations. He was known to interrogate you straight away and I was no exception. His networks in both high and low places decided who I was and whether or not he would want to deal with me.

I presume that he learned everything he needed to know.

We stacked the crates neatly next to the van. Then we waited.

5

Where the road makes a long S-bend, the moonlight shadow from the ridge above draped us in darkness. We were out of sight from anyone travelling the Taba-Rafah road. We could have met them on one of the dirt tracks that led all the way to the border with Israel but we dared not venture there. Where we were was already risky enough. A van travelling at night next to the border would surely be watched closely.

The border between Israel and Egypt was surprisingly quiet and thanks to the Camp David agreement in 1979, the Egyptian military presence on the Peninsula and in certain areas was very limited. There were only occasional light troop movements. Israeli military, however, moved in and out of the Sinai as they pleased, especially in the area where we were to meet.

We were sure they knew we were there. The first time we traded, we had turned on the headlights of Ahmed's van for the soldiers to see us, but then realised they could see us in the dark anyway. Could someone have our position pinpointed already and could alarm buttons be going off in all sorts of control rooms across the border? After all, our enemy was armed with some of the most advanced surveillance equipment in the world. We realised, though, that power and money play the same roles for most of us. And no one would be trading with us unless they thought they could get away with it. Ismail, a good friend of mine who served his military duties on the fringe of the tiny village of Nekhel in the Sinai, advised us of all the Egyptian movements on the Peninsula, and sometimes even that of the UN peacekeepers, in exchange for some fine hashish. Killing time in the Sinai was difficult, especially stuck at a base in the middle of a scorching desert with only the occasional weekend leave to look forward to.

It served us well. His information never failed us.

6

They came in an off-road truck, sand-coloured and steel-plated. The windscreen was partly covered by thick steel mesh on the passenger side and the only openings on the front doors were small hatches. The back of the truck was a large steel box with a small airconditioning unit on the roof, steel bi-fold doors at the rear and small narrow windows high up along both sides. It was ugly.

We called it 'the box'. It reminded us of the type of vehicle the Egyptian intelligence service, the Mukhabarat, and also the police, would use to pick up dissidents, criminals, demonstrators or anyone they felt like tormenting. The Egyptian 'box' was usually a modified Toyota Hilux with a black canvas canopy covering the back.

As young men, the police could stop us at any time and take us with them to the local police station. Most of us returned after a tough talk with some high-ranking officer, who told us not to flirt with girls. Some of us got beaten up because we said or did something wrong. Others ended up spending a few nights in a cell; and then there were those who we never heard from again.

Ahmed had once told me the truck had a name. The Israelis called it the Abir. In Hebrew it meant the knight or the brave man or something like that. It was used in all sorts of ways; young Palestinians would be taken in the back of these trucks to share the same or a much worse fate than their Egyptian compatriots.

Coming from the south, the truck made a large slow U-turn, then drove straight up to us and stopped with its front facing the opposite way to our van and its back aligned with our open side door. Its brake lights lit us up in red.

Two men stayed in the front with the engine running. We could hear them talking. A short time after, when the door latches were

released, the voices grew louder as the passenger door opened slightly.

The diesel engine was turned off and the truck shook to a final thump.

I could make out Hebrew mixed with English but I couldn't understand what they were talking about. One of them sounded convincing and very confident. I was so anxious I was sure my voice would tremble and shake the moment I opened my mouth.

However, they almost seemed relaxed. Like they had just parked at their local store and were finishing a discussion about whether to stuff or grill the chicken for supper. Perhaps with some dip on the side.

After a while, the two men stopped talking and stepped out.

They were carrying short-barrel M16 rifles with their fingers on the triggers and both looked very fit. One man was dressed semi-civilian, with army pants and boots and a T-shirt with a large Star of David encircling a guy doing some sort of karate trick with the motif 'IDF Martial Arts'. The other man was in a combat kind of outfit. It looked expensive; not the usual cheap issue recruits were given. He wore sunglasses.

'*Shalom*,' the one with the sunglasses murmured in a deep voice as he stepped up to me.

The other guy didn't talk.

'*Aleikum Al Salaam*,' I replied. I should have stopped there, just moved on with things.

Not thinking, I said: 'Yet, how can we greet when we can't see each other?'

Without a flicker of change in his voice the man offered: 'What? Do you want to die, too?' He meant it. This was not just someone with a machine gun. Before me I saw a myrmidon, who could kill me, just like that, and sleep well afterwards.

My heart was pounding.

Too? What did he mean? Had he just come from a day's hard work, shooting Palestinian children in the head from a comfortable distance?

I heard my own breathing, I heard Ahmed's breathing, I heard Mido hardly breathing and I heard the air flowing through the large nostrils of the man in front of me and felt the air brushing the sweat on my face as he released every breath.

The goat murmured a quiet 'maaaah, maaah'.

I watched his finger shift on the trigger. His reflexes moved. He looked at the goat tied to the back of the van, glanced at the other guy and cast an idiotic smile straight in my face.

'Let's trade instead,' I said with a straight voice, breaking the standoff.

Lifting up the lid of a crate, I took a bar in my hand and handed it to the man in front of me. He shook his head.

'Give it to him,' he said and nodded in the direction of the other man.

Both had removed their name tags. I wondered what had happened to Baizer and Aberman, the soldiers we had traded with earlier.

The other man pushed his weapon to the side, took a small spring knife from his belt and cut open a bit of the plastic. He smelled the hashish, looked up and nodded.

These men weren't smokers; the best way to tell the quality of hashish is by smoking it. Smelling only tells you that it's hashish. There are other indicators, too, but the only sure one is to light up and try.

As soon as I saw his nod, a nod saying 'it smells good I guess', followed by a look for acceptance, I knew. Something bad had happened to the other soldiers. These guys weren't here to make money. They wanted to know who we were.



We were being watched.

The one with the sunglasses said something in Hebrew and opened the back doors of the truck.

The first thing we saw was her red-brown hair. I looked at Ahmed

and Mido and they were already looking at me with their eyes wide open like question marks.

She had honey-coloured eyes and a pretty face. A leather strap across her chest emphasised her breasts, tight pants displayed curvaceous legs and a slim top drew the line of her athletic body. She pulled the rifle on her back to her chest and exited the low roof of the truck.

She never smiled. I looked at the man with the glasses, obviously the one in charge. Then he glanced at the other man who swung his eyes to the girl, who turned to the man with the glasses. Then they all looked at us.

And there we were, Ahmed, Mido, me and a goat, a Rambo knife and a stack of hashish in a desolate part of the Sinai, less than a mile from the Israeli border.

‘All good?’ I asked to break the silence. I wasn’t going to ask about the young woman.

‘Do you have it all there?’ the man in the glasses asked.

I pointed to the crates, gave him a quick run-down of the contents and asked if he brought what was agreed as well. I had no idea, of course. Ahmed was the broker. I didn’t know who he had talked to, or what had been agreed upon precisely, but deals like this weren’t subject to chance.

‘Give him the money,’ the man with the glasses said. The other man stepped over, opened a cargo pocket in his pants and took out two hard rolls of US dollars in a zip-lock bag. He handed them to me. I gave them to Ahmed who immediately climbed into the passenger side of the van and began counting.

‘*Yalla*, move fast.’ The man with the glasses commanded, motioning with his rifle for us to shift the weapons to our van. I looked at Mido before stepping over to the back of their truck.

The young woman opened the driver’s door and flicked a switch, illuminating the back in a blue light.

Hand and finger marks in dried blood were daubed all over the walls. Towards the back doors, blood had run from a large splattered

blotch on the wall, down to the floor. A small pool had formed and dried up. Straight in front of me, on the back wall, someone had written something in Arabic. It had clearly been written in blood and was all smeared except for a small part.

I made out: 'Tomorrow the sun will shine and I...' and then the line of the last letter was dragged all the way to the side, ending in a blotch of blood splashed in every direction, like the remnant of a blast. The floor was full of dried-up blood pools, drops and smears, scratched and marked with bare feet and boots.

Whoever had been in there had either been bludgeoned or taken their last breaths. The comparison with the Mukhabarat my mind had previously conjured, suddenly vanished. I watched Mido swallow deeply and he looked over at me with the most terrified eyes I had ever seen.

I wanted to say something, but at the edge of my vision were three soldiers with smug grins on their lips.

I grabbed the rope handle on one end of the large crate in front of us and gave Mido a reassuring look, as if to say, 'come on, let's get this over with'. He grabbed the other end.

We loaded the first dozen rifles into our van.



Ahmed had counted the money and jumped out of the van as we finished loading the weapons. We spread the crates evenly from the front to the back and tied rope to the chair mounts in the floor to hold them down. Before we pulled the ropes across, I jumped up and opened each crate to check for any surprises, any hidden trackers or explosive devices. I threw a reassuring glance at Ahmed and then looked up at the three, armed soldiers watching our every move. We tied the crates down.

I looked back at the man with the glasses. The crates of hashish were still on the ground.

'One of you has got to let go of your gun...' I said, in a deliberately calm tone.

A wave of confused looks passed between the three of them before the girl released her rifle and rested it against the back wheel of the truck, just within reach.

They clearly had the upper hand. We were unarmed. They could have just flicked the safety and shot us on the spot. When the previous soldiers came to trade, they had left with a smile. These soldiers, however, were grim. They were on a mission and they were not going to fail.

The young female soldier blew a strand of hair from her left eye as she lifted the last of the crates into their truck. They were heavy. She was sweating and cursing in Hebrew. The two men grinned stupidly at each other. Hebrew tongue is close to Arabic and the three of us looked at the three of them who knew we could make out what was going on. Their grins turned into grinds again. She picked up her rifle and we were all done. I untied the goat, loudly protesting, and heaved it into the van where I tethered it short, then slammed the side door shut. I wanted to leave. It felt as if I had held my breath ever since we got there.

I turned around and stood beside Mido. Ahmed started to move. He looked at the three of them, but they remained silent. He walked around, got in and started the van. The old diesel engine puffed out a plume of suffocating smoke before it settled into its monotonous chuckle. I was waiting for the soldiers to turn around and get into their truck, but they didn't. They just closed the back of it and stood there, clearly wanting us to leave first. And we certainly wanted to leave.

I grabbed the handle by the windshield and pulled myself into the middle seat in one go. Ahmed let his foot off the clutch as Mido followed, grabbing the same handle, ready to jump in as the van slowly moved away. We did this all the time. Once in, we'd close the door and we'd be off.

I leaned towards the door, extended my hand just in case and watched Mido lift himself up, one foot on the step and in the usual way, we looked at each other, I made sure he had his legs firmly placed, he made sure I was making sure.