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THE BEST ENEMY

Sergio Olguín

Translated by Miranda France

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To Carolina Salvini, Paola Lucantis and Amalia Sanz

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*Is it more foolish and childish to assume there is a conspiracy,
or that there is not?*

CHINA MIÉVILLE, *The City & The City*

*...all the way upstairs he kept thinking what a shame it
was that none of the newspapers had any guts any more. He
wished he'd been living back in the days of Dana and Greely,
when a newspaper was a newspaper and called a sonofabitch
a sonofabitch, and let the devil take the hindmost. It must
have been swell to have been a reporter on one of those old
papers.*

HORACE MCCOY, *No Pockets in a Shroud*

*What was it to love someone, what was love exactly, and why
did it end or not end? Those were the real questions, and
who could answer them?*

PATRICIA HIGHSMITH, *The Price of Salt, or Carol*

*The dead mature;
with them, my heart*

SALVATORE QUASIMODO,
Metamorphoses in the Urn of the Saint



Prologue

THE DEAD MATURE

I



In the duty-free shop of the Parisian airport of Charles de Gaulle, Peter Khoury bought M&M's in a range of packages, along with some miniature Mars bars, a bag of Kinder Bueno and two more of Toblerone. He wasn't a lover of sweets (he'd bought some tins of Planters peanuts and Blue Diamond almonds for himself), but he reckoned it wouldn't be a bad idea to stock up for the children he was going to be treating in the next few years – not that the chocolates would last long. Like any good paediatric doctor – recently graduated, with honours, from Imperial College London – he knew the promise of a treat helped sweeten the consultation. Some children would arrive crying and leave happily clutching a Mars bar. Sweets like these had extra appeal because they weren't usually available to the children he would be treating at Al-Shifa Hospital on the Gaza Strip.



At the age of twenty-six, Peter Khoury had decided to make a change in his life. The kind of change that marks you forever. In his family there had always been talk of returning to Palestine. His four grandparents and father had left Haifa when the Israeli troops entered the city in 1948. They'd had

no choice but to go, with only the clothes on their backs. They had locked up their houses and taken the keys with them, in hopes of returning one day. Peter's father was a baby when they arrived in England. His mother, like Peter, had been born in London. And yet all of them (including his siblings, aunts, uncles and cousins) had grown up with a nostalgia for the country lost after the Nakba.

While still a student, Peter had taken a course in emergency medicine at the University Hospital of North Norway. The course was led by Mads Gilbert, a renowned doctor known also for his activism; he regularly travelled to Gaza to give medical training. Gilbert was a very good teacher and Peter an outstanding student. Not surprisingly, an affection sprang up between them. At the end of one class, Gilbert asked him: "Khoury, your family are Maronite Christians from Lebanon, right? I'm guessing from your surname."

"We're orthodox Christians from Palestine. On my mother's and father's sides."

"From which cities?"

"Haifa, both sides."

Gilbert nodded. "Let's go for a beer sometime, Khoury, and I'll tell you about my own experience in Palestine. I think you'll be interested."

Peter was interested, of course, in whatever the Norwegian had to tell him, for example about the challenge of treating so many people with insufficient staff, supplies or medication. Or the fear that a person cured of pneumonia one day might die the next in a bombing. Gilbert knew Khoury was specializing in paediatrics.

"We really need paediatricians in Al-Shifa."

"When the time's right..."

Peter thought it would be years before that time came. He finished the course, returned to London, got his degree and

began specialist training at Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children.

He planned to take a break in the summer: a trip through the Netherlands, Germany, northern Italy and France. Forty days alone with his backpack. As he was preparing for the trip he received a text from Mads Gilbert, his old Norwegian teacher. It wasn't a private message but one that had obviously been sent to lots of people. It read: *On behalf of Doctor Mads Gilbert in Gaza, thanks for all your support. Two hours ago the central fruit and vegetable market in the city of Gaza was bombed. 80 wounded, 20 dead. All of them were brought here to Al-Shifa. It's hell! We're deep in death, in blood and amputations. Lots of children. Pregnant mothers. I've never experienced anything so horrible. Even now we can hear the tanks. TELL people, pass it on, shout it out. Whatever it takes. Do something! Do more!*

Peter decided that he must go to Palestine, the land his father had imagined, the one his grandparents yearned for. He thought of abandoning his trip and setting off for Gaza straight away, but his parents and grandparents persuaded him to do his European tour first. He wouldn't have much time later on, and this would be a good way to bid farewell to his youth before entering the adult world once and for all.

After Europe, Peter would go straight to Palestine without returning to London. His grandparents gave him the keys to their houses in Haifa, although he wouldn't be going to that city, which was now part of Israel.

"Many Palestinians have a key, but I have two. I'm a millionaire," he told his paternal grandfather.

"We Palestinians are millionaires every time we dream."

II

There was a lot of turbulence on the flight from Paris to Tel Aviv, so much that Peter Khoury found himself praying, something he hadn't done since he was twelve. He hated turbulence; it terrified him. The last few minutes of the flight, over Israeli territory, were reassuringly smooth, not that Peter ever felt reassured on a plane. When they finally touched down in Tel Aviv, he offered up thanks to the three versions of God he knew.

He had enjoyed his trip through continental Europe, visiting museums, bars and parks. He had met people from far-flung places and in every city he visited he had fallen in love and then tried to fall quickly out of it again. Those German, French and Italian girls had conquered his heart, but his soul was in the Middle East, in Palestine.

Now, in Ben Gurion airport, the events of a few weeks ago seemed distant, as though they had happened to a Peter who no longer existed, or who existed in another dimension, one in which he was still drinking beer, smoking weed and kissing blondes and brunettes who spoke a hesitant English.

His grandparents' keys were in the backpack that had gone in the hold. As a precaution he had put some old keys with no value next to the other two on his key ring. Just as well, because at Customs the agents had decided to open his bag. The key ring caught their eye. "They're for a cottage I have outside London," Peter explained with an easy smile, one he had practised in the mirror.

The Immigration guy looked at him and saw a British man loaded down with duty-free, doubtless hoping to have some fun with Israeli girls. Peter carefully repacked the shirts and jeans and put the keys in his jacket. From then onwards he wanted to feel them close to his body.

There were no problems at passport control. A tourist arriving from London didn't attract much attention. Peter was asked where he planned to stay and for how long. He had deliberately booked a return ticket for ten days later, one he had no intention of using. He lied about his lodgings and length of stay, as he had been advised to do.

Outside the controlled area, he found himself in a hubbub of travellers reunited with their families, taxi drivers touting for work and tourists who already seemed lost. Peter looked around him, but it was Mads Gilbert who spotted him first and came bounding over to give his friend a warm embrace. He looked a little older, but preserved that youthful spirit Peter associated with Nordic men. Gilbert offered to carry his backpack. Peter handed over some of the duty-free bags instead. They walked towards the parking lot.

They must have looked like two Europeans without a care in the world. Gilbert asked him about the Champions League games and complained bitterly because there had been power outages the last few days and he had missed the round of sixteen away games. Despite being Norwegian (or maybe because of it, since Norwegian teams never went far in the Champions League), he supported Manchester United, whereas Peter was an Arsenal fan. Man U had drawn away to Milan, and Arsenal had won, at home, against Rome. Peter told Gilbert he had watched that match in a Roman bar, surrounded by the local *tifosi* as they hurled insults at their rivals. "When van Persie scored I clutched my head so as to look distraught, but inside I was shouting 'gooooaaal!' I was weeping tears of joy."

They arrived at Gilbert's Hyundai Tucson. The car, which must have been at least five years old, was dusty and covered in scratches. They got in and drove out of Ben Gurion airport.

“The drive’s about an hour, not including Israeli police checkpoints. We shouldn’t have any problems getting through the controls with our papers. Although you never know...”

In fact the journey took them nearly three hours. At every roadblock they were asked the same questions. Peter wasn’t a British tourist visiting the country’s natural attractions any more but a doctor heading for Gaza. There were no objections to his journey, though, just a lot of questions and wasted time.

And so they entered Gaza. The panorama of a desert with buildings in the distance was gradually replaced, first by one in which rubble from destroyed houses lined both sides of the road: a city both bombed and flattened by Israeli bulldozers. Then, like a miracle, out of the ruins emerged a teeming cityscape of precarious buildings mixed in with modern pizzerias, electronics and phone shops, even a school surrounded by walls painted with Palestinian flags and drawings of children’s faces. People moved calmly along the sidewalks and drifted into the streets, to the fury of drivers leaning on their horns.

“I wanted to show you around Jabalia before I take you to your apartment,” said Gilbert.

Peter had never been anywhere like this. In some ways it reminded him of the favelas in Rio de Janeiro, which he had visited a few years ago. What he particularly noticed wasn’t the sheer number of people and precarious structures, but the bombed buildings, half destroyed yet still serving as homes.

“The refugee camp at Jabalia is one of the largest in Gaza,” Gilbert explained. “It’s overcrowded and there’s a lack of habitable rooms, gas cylinders, electricity and drinking water. Yet these people never stop trying to live with dignity. Oh, and we’ve got several hospitals.”

Peter looked around him in astonishment: the place was much poorer than what he had imagined, or seen in photos, back in London.

“I’ll take you to your apartment, it’s not far from Al-Shifa. Spend today resting, because tomorrow you’re going to start a new life.”

“I’ve already started,” ventured Peter.

III

Every day of the next five years Peter was busy saving lives, mostly of the children who came to Al-Shifa Hospital. A resident doctor in any part of the world can expect to come across every kind of sickness, disease and scenario, but in Gaza all these factors were multiplied by a hundred. It would be rare, in a hospital in Berlin or Buenos Aires, to see twenty children arrive on the same day with bullet wounds, or with the beginnings of asphyxia (because the Egyptian security forces attacked children who entered the tunnels), or collapsed lungs (because the Israeli navy shot at fishing boats). Gaza was overpopulated with children, and so everywhere they were victims. And that was without taking into account all the everyday, run-of-the-mill cases of malnutrition, chronic respiratory problems, endemic illnesses and deformities of the arms or legs.

There were operations that had to be postponed because Israel cut off the electricity supply; blood and plasma ruined for the same reason; poisoning caused by contaminated water; shortages of vaccines or of dental prostheses, knee and hip replacements. The outlook was bleak for a society essentially made up of children, adolescents and young people.

For the first few years Peter – dubbed “the English doctor” – worked alongside other professionals from around the world. A Brazilian surgeon, a Syrian epidemiologist, French orthopaedic surgeons, Israeli ophthalmologists, a South Korean dermatologist and many other clinicians from Médecins

du Monde, Médecins Sans Frontières and Medical Aid for Palestinians. Some arrived in Gaza and couldn't cope with the pressure. They would leave after a month, two months, six months. Others, either more courageous or more stubborn, lasted a year, maybe two. They were carrying out a vital mission in a country that urgently needed doctors. Afterwards they would return to their countries, write papers, give lectures. The clinicians came and went, but the English doctor stayed on in his small apartment, with a balcony from which he could watch Gaza in real time.

As time went on, the newly arrived doctors didn't even know he was English because he spoke quite good Arabic (thanks to his grandparents and the family custom of keeping the language of the elders alive). Mothers would no longer say *My son was treated by an English doctor*. They asked for Doctor Khoury and assumed he was Libyan or Palestinian. And he was pleased by that confusion, because in five years he had grown a thicker skin, he had learned not to cry when a child died in his arms of blood loss; he had comforted mothers (the fathers rarely put in an appearance); he had made home visits, taking food and medication; he had even risked his life crossing the border through the tunnels that led to Egypt, in search of supplies for the hospital (and stocking up on sweets while he had the chance).

Life in Gaza was as close to miraculous as an atheist could credit. The blockade inflicted a form of collective torture rarely seen before. The Israeli armed forces achieved levels of refinement or barbarity for which it would be hard to find comparison.

The Israeli troops rolled in, demolishing the homes of suicide bombers (as punishment for the whole family), destroying flour mills and water sources, avenging the death of one of their own soldiers by killing dozens of civilians, older

people, women and children. The death count was recorded everywhere, in newspapers and magazines, on websites and Wikipedia. For Peter those numbers were the bitter bread that fed his love for his family's people.

It was only logical that he would fall in love with a woman from Gaza. Azima was a widow with two children, a surprisingly small family for a Palestinian woman. Peter had been a doctor to both her children – Nahid, a little girl of two who had been born after her father's death, and Omar, a ten-year-old boy whom Peter called Messi because the first time he came to the hospital he was wearing a number ten Barcelona shirt. There was nothing seriously wrong with Omar at that appointment; he had bronchiolitis and was a little run-down. Peter made sure the girl got the right vaccines for her age and asked Azima to come back a week later for a check-up.

He wasn't surprised to see Omar on the beach a couple of days later, playing soccer with some other boys his age. He was even wearing the same shirt. Peter liked seeing soccer played, so he stood to one side and watched these boys who dreamed of one day playing for Barcelona, or Juventus, and for Palestine. Omar scored a goal. When the game had finished the boy recognized him and came over.

"Doctor, Doctor, did you see the goal I scored?"

"It was very good, Messi, congratulations."

The other boys also wandered over and Omar told them proudly: "He's my doctor, aren't you, Doctor?"

One of the boys, pretending to be worried, asked: "Is it serious? Will he die?"

Everyone laughed, Peter included.

At the next appointment, Azima brought lemons and garlic. They chatted about his encounter with Omar on the beach. She told him that she was a widow and lived with her mother and another sister, also a widow.

Azima returned several times more on different pretexts, usually at Peter's instigation. On one occasion she came without her children and in the company of a young woman she introduced as her cousin. Her name was Iman; she was twenty-two years old and studied nursing. Azima wanted to know if Peter could help her, and he suggested she come once a week to the hospital. They had no budget, but she would learn a lot helping in the emergency department. Iman was happy, even though Al-Shifa Hospital was a long way from her home in Rafah.

Peter, so quick when it came to solving problems in the hospital, took a long time to find the courage to ask Azima out on a date. And when he did, the young widow said no. Peter was disconcerted, even embarrassed. But then Azima invited him to eat at her house instead, in the Shati encampment, close to the hospital.

Despite all the years he had spent living in Gaza, Peter didn't have a clear idea of what to expect. He realized this wasn't going to be a romantic lunch for two; presumably at least the children would be with them, and most likely Azima's mother, and perhaps the sister, with her own children. He was right to consider these possibilities, and yet he still fell short: there were also two brothers and an uncle – because a man couldn't visit women alone at home – and Azima's cousin Iman with one of her sisters.

There were also about ten children who would run in, cram food into their mouths, and run out again. The women were cheerful and good hostesses, but the men seemed more uncomfortable, as though they had been obliged to take part in the meal against their wishes. Peter had a knack for putting people at ease, so it wasn't hard for him to win round the men of the family.

They ate a delicious *maqluba*, made with incredibly tender

lamb, pine nuts and almonds. The saffron rice was infused with cinnamon. There were also cucumbers dipped in yogurt with mint and garlic, hummus, and the inevitable stuffed vine leaves. They finished the feast with sweets made from figs and honey. Later there was coffee and a hookah. Peter didn't partake (he had never got the hang of this apparatus), but he was surprised to see both Azima's mother and sister smoking, even though Hamas had forbidden women to use a hookah. Political prohibitions seemed to be ineffective, at least in this house.

The five women came outside to see him off and kept waving until he turned a corner and was out of sight. Peter had enjoyed the occasion, but he didn't know what to make of it. He had been so careful, during his visit, not to keep staring at Azima, who seemed to him sweet and intelligent, and more and more beautiful. If only he could have had even two minutes alone with her, at least when they said goodbye. Had this been her way of showing him she wanted him only as a friend of the family? His doubts were dispelled when, minutes later, he got a text message from her: *You're a wonderful man. Inshallah we can see each other soon. Would you like to walk on the beach tomorrow evening?*

Of course he would.

Peter was on duty that night, but he swapped his shift with an American woman, also a paediatrician. Azima and he met late, walked on the beach beneath the moon and stars, talked a lot. Peter told her about his grandparents, about how they had left Haifa during the Nakba, about his life in London, how happy he was living in Gaza. She told him she had never left Gaza, and that was why she liked the sea at night, when you couldn't see the Israeli patrol boats, because she could imagine a world out there that she might visit one day.

They kissed and held each other. Peter quickly told her that he would be willing to marry her.

Azima had a beautiful laugh. "All in good time," she said.

IV

Where might Azima and Peter first have slept together? In some corner of that almost empty beach? In his apartment, which was in a building mostly occupied by foreign doctors and therefore more tolerant than the Muslim neighbourhoods and settlements? Would they have married? Would they have had children? Four or five, like a typical Gazan couple? Would he have obtained a passport for Azima so she and her children could leave Gaza and visit his family in London? Would they have lived happily ever after, like in fairy tales?

Would Iman, injured by Israeli missiles at the door to her house, have finished her nursing studies? Or would the deaths of her mother and two siblings in that same attack have meant she attended the Rafah Community Centre for Mental Health only as a patient?

Omar runs with the ball along the beach, dribbles past one opponent and another, gets kicked. There's an argument, shouting, then they resume the game. They're exhausted. They throw themselves down on the sand. They make filthy remarks about the girls in their neighbourhood. They laugh raucously. They walk towards the jetty. Some of them get in the sea, the others look for cigarette butts in the sand. Omar goes off alone because he's spotted something shining a few yards from where they are. He thinks it may be an emerald or a ruby. He could sell the precious stone, become a millionaire, buy his mother a house. But when he gets there he sees it's only a piece of broken glass from a bottle. Omar is a believer, so he asks Allah what kind of gift this is. And the

heavens seem to answer him, because right then there's an explosion. He's paralysed by terror. The thunder – because that's what it seems like – strikes the beach where his friends were playing. It takes a second, less than a second. When he can, he turns towards the place where his friends were. And there are people there screaming, moaning, imploring God, clawing at their faces. Omar can't recognize the bodies, but they are his friends. His best friend, Ismail Baker, nine years old, is dead. Ismail was with his cousins: Aed, ten years old, dead; Zacarya, ten years old, dead; Mohamed, eleven years old, dead.

Would Omar ever play for the Palestine team?

When the bombardment of the hospital began, would Peter have thought of his parents, growing old alone in their house in Islington, or of that girl he had met in Amsterdam five years ago, or of Azima holding him? Would he have thought he didn't want to die, not that day?

And the skilful pilots of the F-16 planes that bombed, with surgical precision, the houses, mosques, universities and hospitals of the inhabitants of Gaza on those days in 2014? Would they later have nightmares, fears, moments of doubt?

And that person who gave the order to attack Al-Shifa Hospital, who ordered missiles to be shot at the children on the beach, what did he do after seeing his orders carried out, what did he eat, where did he travel, whom did he love?