

# Guard of the Dead

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This novel is a work of fiction.

Should its events, characters, and places bear any resemblance to real people, events, or places, it is pure and unintentional coincidence.

# 1

CHANCE ALONE IS TO BLAME for what I suffer now.

I was hunting in the open country. It was sundown. Walking past the village garbage dump, I heard sporadic groaning. First, I thought I was imagining it, but with the repetition I was sure it was a person's voice.

Possibilities jostled. Had a shepherd's child scavenging for broken toys fallen and got hurt? Had a nomadic Bedouin from one of the tribes found a large tin can and been injured? Had a hunter shot his quarry, but still able to move, the animal had caused an accident? Had someone seen me coming and, to play a trick on me, hid and started groaning? I expected the guy to show himself at any moment, arms aloft and shouting, to give me a fright.

I backed the last possibility. Stunts were often pulled to scare people. Then, once the trick had been jazzed up to make it worth retelling, it was recounted to friends. Specialists in omission or addition made the version doing the rounds somewhat different than the facts.

I advanced toward the voice with the muzzle of the double-barrel shotgun pointing upward so it didn't bump into anything solid. The gun was still new, and I had gotten the money together for it lira by lira. Every time I took a step, the groaning faded away. I stood completely still and it started again, but not as loud as moments before. Approaching the source of the sound, I did not exclude any of the four possibilities.

I was primed for a surprise when I neared a pile of garbage, or an oil drum, or a mound that someone might hide behind. Smoke rising near the rust-eaten springs of a bed caught my eye. Some clothing and three pairs of shoes were smoldering. Right then the groaning grew louder. I strained to make out the spot it was coming from. Useless. The breeze made it impossible.

I wasn't frightened, just cautious and on the lookout for someone to stand up howling and laughing at the same time. Being prepared for the surprise would reduce its impact. I picked up a few stones and tossed them around the spot the groaning was coming from, thinking that might cause the concealed person to move. Then I would see him, and the game would be up, but after I threw the stones the groaning stopped.

I froze where I was for a minute. Two minutes. I looked around, listening closely, and heard the sound of rats scurrying over sheets of metal. The groaning, however, was gone. I turned back in the hope that the trickster would think I was about to leave and reveal himself or start groaning again.

The instant I turned around, I heard movement. A man, his face covered in blood, flew at me with an iron bar. I ran. He chased me, raging: "It's you, you son of a bitch!"

The shotgun was over my shoulder, so it was impossible to wave it at him in self-defense or to threaten him. It looked like he had been watching me. I had only slung the shotgun over my shoulder when I pretended to turn back. It never occurred to me that a blood-covered man would jump out of the garbage and chase after me as if I intended to harm him. If I had foreseen that, I would have kept the gun ready for use and fired a shot in the air or between his legs to stop him in his tracks and make him realize that going any further might cost him his life. I would have done that as a threat, but I can't guarantee what I might have done if I felt in real danger. I had never experienced anything like it. I might have killed him with a single cartridge. I was quite capable of aiming between

his eyes and hitting the target. Those who know me, know that I go out hunting with ten cartridges and come back with nine birds. The tenth I would have clipped, and the injured bird kept flying before dropping far off.

The man looked frightening. Blood covered most of his face, and I couldn't make out his features. No way could he catch me. After all, I was a champion sprinter, and a prize-winning shot-putter to boot. When I run, after a certain distance I feel I'm running on air. He was still behind me when he started swearing and threatening me. When the sound of his voice reassured me that there was sufficient distance between us for me to catch my breath, I looked behind me. I saw him totter and then collapse by the side of the road.

Had he died? Had he passed out as a result of blood loss? Had he faked his collapse to induce me to come to his aid and then grab me?

Who was this man, who apparently knew me personally? What else could his saying, "It's you . . ." have meant? His words accused me outright of having done something bad, but I didn't know what.

Perhaps the blood running down his face was the result of a shot to the head. There were lots of hunters at this time of year when the plovers passed through, and one of them might have hit him by mistake. An accident like that might happen. I remember one hunter from Beirut missed a low-flying quail and hit his companion in the neck and killed him. Another hunter shot at a quail and missed, but in a nearby vineyard a Syrian worker dropped dead. It turned out he'd been shot in the head.

The man groaning in the garbage dump might also have been a hunter, shot unintentionally. He thought that I had fired the shot and come back to check on him. Doesn't a criminal always return to the scene of the crime? But the garbage dump wasn't a good spot for hunting. Apart from the swarms of fleas and flies, its stench made being in the vicinity an ordeal. I had never seen a hunter bagging birds there.

Possibly, one of those who waylaid hunters from outside had thought the man rich pickings. He had disarmed him, then used the rifle butt, or something else to bang him on the head, and made off with the gun. He wouldn't have been happy with just the rifle but would have stolen his car too and scarpered. Nobody came here on foot unless they were from the village.

The blood-covered man was, most likely, a stranger, even if I hadn't seen a car parked around the dump. What puzzled me was him saying, "It's you . . ." He knew me.

Did he know me from my cousin's car repair shop where I worked in the summer holiday? Had he seen me in the pinball and pool place where I sometimes went to have fun? Did he see me reading the newspaper in the café, which became a gambling den in the evening?

I hadn't seen his face. Blood obscured most of it. Anyway, the shock and fright stopped me looking too close. The rays of the setting sun were dazzling too. When I turned around with him running behind me, I saw a man in his fifties or thereabouts, square built, with a small paunch, and a mustache and goatee. His legs worked fine since he was able to run quite a long distance. The same applied to his arms and the rest of his body. That made me think it likely he had a head injury. Even his voice I didn't hear properly. It came out of a mouth full of blood.

If the man was from the village, I would have recognized him even with his face cloaked. I knew everyone—from the way they walked, from their voices, or from their clothes—without having to see their faces. When you see a man several times a day over the course of years, seeing anything remotely connected with him is enough to know who it is. If you showed me a hand, for instance, and concealed the rest of the body, I would be able to tell you that it was so-and-so's hand.

Perhaps the man had relatives in the village that he visited every now and again, and he had seen me at one of the

events held by our sports club in summer. Perhaps he'd seen some resemblance between me and someone else. Faces look alike. What made me lean toward that possibility was that he hadn't used my name when he spluttered his rude words. If he really knew me, he would have said my name to prove to me that he knew who I was and that he wasn't going to let me get away with it.

Probably he forgot my name during those excruciating moments. Excruciating for him because he thought that the person who had caused his injury had come back to see the result or to make certain that what he had done didn't need finishing off or some such reason. Excruciating for me because I was expecting a prank, not the appearance of a face covered in blood and an attack and threats from the person whose face it was.

When he failed to catch me and fell to the ground, I thought about going to help him before his condition worsened and he bled to death. If that happened, I would be overwhelmed with feelings of guilt that would stay with me until I met my Maker. I wasn't up to that. I would go up to him, offer assistance, and exonerate myself. I would tell him that I was just passing by, heard a groaning, and stopped, thinking that a friend was playing a trick on me.

He might be convinced and find me innocent. However, after some hesitation, I rejected the idea. I was afraid he would think I had come back to finish him off or that I was lying.

I was also afraid to tell someone who passed by. If I did tell someone passing that there was a bleeding man who might die, they would say, "Come and help me do something." Then it would be awkward. If I went it would be a problem, and it would be a problem if I didn't.

I was unwilling to dig my own grave or to live a nightmare awake, so I was afraid to make a report at the nearby police station. Such a report would require specific legal steps be taken. In my case, the matter might not turn out well. Assuming I did

make a report, then a patrol would go and bring in the man for questioning. He would definitely accuse me of being the perpetrator, and I had no proof to rebut the accusation. I would be thrown in a cell as a result and subjected to interrogations punctuated with torture to make me confess. What would I confess? Until the truth came out, if it came out, who would get me back my good name and compensate me for time in prison as well as for all the abuse I suffered since being arrested?

I didn't leave. I walked along the road that overlooked the area where the man had fallen. The darkness that had slowly descended made it impossible to see. Passing cars did briefly illuminate the area, and for a few moments I could survey the place. I tried to focus, hoping to see whether the man had stood up, or at least crawled if he was unable to stand and walk. If he reached the road alongside the open area, it might save him from certain death.

I carried on watching. I would never relax unless I knew his fate. If, God forbid, he died, I would feel responsible for his death. That feeling disquieted me as it dug into my mind and soul. But there was nothing to be done. Nobody else knew what had happened to him. Apart, that is, from the perpetrator, who too might have been watching the scene from a distance. Perhaps he was driving around in his car to find out what had happened to his victim. If he went to the dump and did not find a body, his suspicions would push him to investigate.

The cars that had driven past, and continued to pass by, aroused no suspicions. I observed them all and did not see a driver, or someone sitting next to him, looking frantically around, as would have been the case if someone was on the lookout.

If it had been possible to make a phone call, I would have dialed a random number and informed the person who answered that there was an injured person in need of assistance. I would have given the location and hung up. I would

have repeated the attempt with several people. Perhaps one of them would take the call seriously, feel a surge of humanity, put on his clothes, and go to help. The world is full of do-gooders. But the telephone at home was out of order. When it did work, you had to wait half an hour for a line. I ruled out the idea.

The village phone booths were a fifteen-minute walk away. Not being on the lookout for so long left a window, during which time the man might come round and reach the road. He would stop the first car and head for the nearest hospital. Then I would lose his scent and no longer know whether he remained where he had fallen after chasing me or had been able to stand up and escape. It was sensible not to leave as long as I was careful to keep pulling the strings.

It was now ten o'clock at night. At such an hour, carrying a shotgun would draw attention, even if the gun was pointed down and hanging over my shoulder. The sight would raise question marks for anyone who saw me, especially any outsider to the village who happened to be passing through. Yet the pouch hanging down on my thigh which contained around a dozen plovers indicated that I was a hunter, and not an armed militia man.

I don't know why I imagined that the man was still alive and had found a way out of his predicament. He had vanished without my noticing. I imagined what I hoped had happened, so as to relax and let my conscience relax and end the nightmare I had been enduring for six hours.

My presence on the road at midnight raised questions. I approached the space where the man should have been and had a last look around. I listened carefully, for at night even a quiet sound is audible. The place was calm; only the sound of cicadas, falling leaves, and passing cars disturbed the silence.

I went home. Mum and Dad were asleep. I had a late supper, brushed my teeth, put my pajamas on, and lay down in bed. I couldn't sleep. When I closed my eyes, I kept seeing

the man's blood-covered face and hearing his voice. I tried to think about something else to allow me to sleep after an atypical day. But the expression, "It's you . . ." kept ringing in my head until first light.

That night I learned the value of a sense of security and peace of mind, which are the two best catalysts for refreshing sleep and sweet dreams.

## 2

YESTERDAY MORNING, WHILE I HAD been lying in wait for the rarely passing flocks of plover, three members of the Sovereignty Party were meeting at one of their houses in the village. On the agenda was kidnapping a certain teacher and teaching him a lesson to serve as an example for others like him.

He had been insulting the party out loud to his pupils in class and his colleagues in the staffroom, accusing it of backwardness, extremism, and narrow-mindedness. He even described its leader as an agent of foreign powers. The teacher belonged to a rival party. He had been transferred to the village school because it was not far from his village, following the intervention of a senior political figure.

The three at the meeting set zero hour for the end of the school day—4:00 p.m. The location was to be the square next to the school that had to be crossed going in or out. At that time of day, the square would be packed with people waiting to take their children home and with buses that took pupils to nearby towns.

The choice of that time and that place was deliberate. The three guys, and the mastermind directing them, wanted the furor about the kidnapping to reverberate around the village and its environs. If that hadn't been their objective, they would have chosen another time and place. It seemed they wanted the operation to send a two-pronged message.

The first prong was internal and connected to the party's response to the village big shots. They refused to let the party run things and tried to keep the village out of conflicts. It was, after all, surrounded by villages most of whose inhabitants were of another denomination and belonged to parties that looked at the Sovereignty Party with defiance and aversion. They wanted to say to the big shots—the head of the municipality in particular—that in the village, what we say goes. It's us who decides its fate, not you, and not those propping you up.

The second prong was external and directed at the vicinity, as if to say: There are red lines, and anyone who crosses them will meet the same fate as the teacher. This prong had an addendum: Although there might not be many of us, we aren't afraid and we aren't afraid of your veiled threats. We're ready to defend ourselves, and will never abandon our homes unless it's for the grave.

The three guys were Sailor, Grinder, and Rooster.

Sailor was a childhood friend of mine. My mother said that she nursed him as a baby and loved him just like she loved me. His mother said the same about me. The difference between us was his passion for lethal weapons and my dislike of that kind of weapon. He loved to be photographed about to pull the pin out of a hand grenade or posing with a machine gun or pointing a pistol at his head. His role in the operation was getaway driver.

Grinder, who was thirty, had been discharged from the army for his conduct. He was said to have killed his sister—she was rumored to have drowned—and thrown her body in the river after he found out that she was not, as she claimed, working as a nurse at a hospital in Beirut, but in a brothel. He had a black belt in kung fu and was proud of his athletic physique and bulging muscles. Even in the freezing cold he often wore a short-sleeved shirt to show off his pumped forearms. His role in the operation was to pounce on the teacher, drag

him into the car, and put a black bag over his head to prevent him knowing where he was going and who was taking him.

Rooster earned his nickname because of his resemblance to Antoine Karbaj, who had the same moniker in the Lebanese television program *From Day to Day*. He was twenty-five years old and constantly at odds with his father, who owned half the village land and was close to the head of the municipality. He had joined the party out of spite to get one over on his dad. His role was to shield Grinder during the operation and ward off anyone who tried to defend the teacher or do anything else.

The identity of the mastermind was unknown, but suspicions revolved around two men. One was Bou Layla, who was normally held responsible for anything that breached the peace of the village, even if he was in fact innocent. The other was the Colonel, who was the first person to confront the head of the municipality and the members of its council when they decided to restore their authority, which had waned as the party's sway extended.

While I was catching up with a plover whose wing I had hit and which had dropped into the brambles, the three of them were in a car stolen two hours before from a hunter from Beirut. It was parked near the square in an isolated spot. When their lookouts, who were students, told them that the teacher was on his way to the square, they pulled masks over their heads and set off. They pulled up in the middle of the square. Rooster got out to ensure cover, flashed his machine gun, and needlessly fired a few shots. Grinder attacked the teacher. He punched him, then picked him up and forced him into the car. They made off to the astonishment of the people and the panic of the pupils. The scene of the kidnapping was straight out of the movies. So concurred the witnesses.

Inside the car, the kidnapped man asked, "Who are you? What do you want from me? Where are you taking me?" After each question, Grinder gave him a punch to shut him up. He

had already tied his hands behind his back with thick cord to stop him moving.

The whole route from the square via the Zaarour neighborhood to Bayada, the three of them kept their masks on and did not take them off until they reached the open countryside. They were afraid someone might follow them, since they expected that word of the kidnapping would reach the army barracks or the police station. Speed was of the essence.

Sailor rebuked Grinder because there had been no need to fire shots over people's heads. That might have led a police patrol to pursue them. They might have to engage them if needed. Grinder had made a mistake, but things were still under control. Sailor said that his heart had been beating fast, not in fear but for an unknown reason. He said that he had felt things he had never experienced before, feelings only experienced by those who undertook such ventures.

They chose the garbage dump to settle scores with the teacher and send a message to those concerned that anyone who made a mistake with someone from the village would end up in the garbage dump. At the time I was resting under a willow tree reading a new chapter of Agatha Christie's *Dumb Witness*, the three of them were beating up the teacher, insulting him and his party and the party leader.

They did not intend to kill him. They wanted to discipline him to stay in line, to content himself with teaching and put a stop to giving political advice and insulting the party they belonged to. The blow that fractured his skull came from the butt of Rooster's pistol. As soon as he saw the blood spurting from the teacher's head, he suggested they throw him in the middle of the dump and leave. They untied his hands to give him a chance to escape. If they had left him tied up, it would have been impossible for him to stand up and he would have bled to death.

They changed out of the clothes and shoes used in the operation, which they set alight after having poured a can of

gasoline over them. Those were the clothes and shoes I noticed smoke rising from. They had thought of everything and executed their plan. They even had a Plan B should Plan A fail.

The level of organization was noted by some people and made my father and others think it more likely that it wasn't Bou Layla behind the operation but the Colonel, who had studied math for four years at the University of Lebanon and taught it to the middle school classes at the village intermediate school. (His flunking topology four times prevented him graduating. He wrote an appeal to the faculty administration to allow him to re-sit the exam for a fifth and final time, but the appeal was rejected by the dean of the Faculty of Science.)

On their way back, they got rid of the masks. They stopped the stolen car on the edge of the village and split up, having agreed to meet that night in the party offices.

All of that was revealed to me by Sailor the following day after swearing me to secrecy. I tried to link each chapter of the kidnap operation with what I had been doing at approximately the same time out in the countryside.

When I saw the teacher, or more accurately when he saw me and tried to attack me, Sailor was drinking coffee at his aunt's house where everyone was talking about the kidnapping. Along with the aunt and her husband were a few neighbors and some young eyewitnesses, who, at the time of the kidnap, had been scoping passing schoolgirls with hungry eyes. Sailor did not participate much in the conversation. He preferred to listen. He felt proud inside when someone relayed something about the operation and added a touch of heroism to the account. He noted that those present had concluded that the perpetrators were from the village and not outsiders. Some of them tried to guess the names of the participants in the kidnapping, based on their physique and movements and the size of their heads. Sailor was happy that the list of names did not include his name or those of

his accomplices. That was proof of the effectiveness of their disguise and of the success of the operation.

While Sailor was at his aunt's house, Grinder was sitting in the kiosk that looked onto the square, a bottle of beer in his hand and a pack of pistachios between his thighs.

Rooster had gone home. He undressed, put on his pajamas, and slept. Luckily, the house was empty. His mother was at a neighbor's. His father was at the café, and his sister was doing yoga in the garden. He wanted to rest so he would be able to stay up till the morning. It was his turn to be up all night organizing the guard.

At the time of night when I had been watching the waste patch where the teacher had fallen, the three met up at the party HQ. While they were listening to each other's comments about the operation, the head of the municipality's house was full of people denouncing the operation and expressing their fears over its consequences, particularly after fingers had been pointed at certain extremist party elements. The name of Sailor was mentioned, but not the two others. However, there was no proof of his involvement in the operation. They penned a statement and distributed it the following morning. In it they held the village blameless for the attack on "the educator who teaches our children love, goodness, and beauty, and who deserves nothing less than gratitude and esteem," and slammed "the foolish action undertaken by the enemies of knowledge and peace." The statement concluded with an apology to the teacher and the school administration and with the hope that "the regrettable incident would not assume dimensions impacting on the harmony between the village and its neighbors and serve the aims of those who sow strife."

Meanwhile, the party issued a statement condemning the incident and blaming "hands from outside that aim to sow discord between the people of the village themselves and between the village and neighboring villages." It urged everyone to

“reflect and act wisely in the delicate circumstances that the country is passing through.”

Naturally, the party would issue a statement of that sort, particularly once it found itself in the dock. Equally, sensible heads in the party did not expect the matter to end well. The teacher who had been kidnapped was a well-known activist and from a big family. If his party did not respond to restore its prestige, then his family would not turn the other cheek but take revenge.

The morning was somber. People’s faces looked anxious as if prepared for a day of uncertainty in the village. I was the most anxious of all. None of them, apart from Sailor, knew what had happened to me.

### 3

I WAS AT A LOSS.

At midday I headed to the road overlooking the waste ground hoping for a sign that the teacher had survived and gone back to his family safe and sound. The place was quiet. A tractor was parked at the side of the road parallel to the waste ground. The driver looked over his shoulder every now and again as if waiting for someone. Two hunters were heading out into the open countryside. Around them ran a dog that seemed not to have been out for a walk for a few days.

I imagined the dog smelling something strange and making for the waste ground. He stops, then walks around a particular spot and ignores the command of 'come' from the hunter, or gives a howl to signal that he has found something and that his master should come and look. The hunter and his companion obey the dog's summons and discover a body. The body of the teacher. I imagined them shocked then racing off to notify the police after having shouted out to passersby and the nearby houses.

Thoughts roared in my head. I did not calm down until the dog had crossed the waste ground, content to sniff the earth and run behind the two hunters. I inferred that there was no dead body there. If there had been, the smell of the corpse would have attracted the dog. After about twelve hours, it would have started to decompose. Plus, it had been under the rays of the autumn sun for around seven hours, which

would accelerate decomposition and cause the body to putrefy and give off an intolerable smell.

This inference cheered me up. The news circulating that evening confirmed its accuracy and shook the village. Unknown assailants had kidnapped the head of the municipality's son from his home and Grinder's brother from the farm where he worked as a guard in retaliation. That the teacher was alive cheered me up as much as that news saddened me.

When had he left the waste ground? I had stayed up the previous evening until midnight, monitoring every movement in and around the area, but observed nothing. Perhaps he had crawled a long way until he reached a side road leading to the same main road I was wandering along now. The road curved away toward the open countryside though and prevented a view down it.

Assuming he had reached the road, no driver would have been brave enough to stop for an injured man in blood-soaked clothing. Possibly, the teacher had stood in the middle of the road and forced a passing car to stop, but that would have been very risky. The road was not lit and the darkness was intense. Headlights might not have picked him out from a distance and a car could have run him over.

Possibly, he had walked to his house in the neighboring village, just seven kilometers away. Or he had gone to the hospital about five kilometers away. His condition required medical attention and treatment. Most likely, he had not headed for home but for the hospital. If he had gone home, he would have had to be taken to hospital anyway, and he knew that.

So he made for the hospital on foot or by car. He went to emergency and received first aid. He asked to call his wife or one of his brothers. If that wasn't possible, he would beg the nurses to let his wife or brother know and give them the address.

Fear ran through me. The man, so it seemed, knew me personally. Even supposing he didn't know me, he had seen me. He had seen my face and the clothes I was wearing. He had seen

the shotgun and the birds hanging on my thigh—evidence that might help track me down. I was positive that they were looking for me. He must have given them my name, if he really knew me, or my description, if he didn't know my name.

I walked along, turning my head in no particular direction. I felt like someone expecting to be jumped and beaten up, then thrown into the trunk of a car and driven off to an unknown destination. Just what happened to the teacher.

Goddamn hunting. If I hadn't gone out into the countryside, I wouldn't now be panicked and desperate. The kidnap of two men with no direct connection to what had happened suggested escalatory intent. I didn't know what end awaited them.

I wasn't going to sleep at home that night, or at my grandfather's or at one of my relatives'. Our house might be watched and, because it was located on the edge of the village, it wasn't safe. It would be easy to drag me off from there.

I had to let Dad know. When I came back last night, he was asleep and I didn't want to disturb him. When I woke up today, he had already gone out. I avoided telling Mum to stop her scolding me: "How many times have I told you, 'God protect us from hunting trips these days!'"

I made for the square. Young guys were stationed on the roofs and in the windows with unseen weapons. Whenever a car passed, I felt as if my heart would leap out of my chest. Its pounding sounded like it had detached and settled by my ears.

Evening and the café was half empty; that was unusual. I expected to find my dad there. The owner of the café, who was leaning against the door smoking a cigarette, told me as soon as he saw me that my father was looking for me. He had just left and probably gone home. I was reluctant to go to the house. I told one of the boys crowded in the pinball place to go and let my father know I was waiting for him at the café.

Dad came back in a hurry. I told him everything. He too thought that I shouldn't sleep at home. He said that the kidnapped teacher was a colleague of his, who had only

been transferred to the village school about a month ago. Dad said that he had been introduced to him, and, as usual with his friends, he had shown him a photograph of me. One day he was standing chatting with him on one of the school balconies overlooking the schoolyard. By chance, I was passing by, and he pointed me out to him. I knew what he would say after pointing at me: “That’s my son. See how much he looks like me.” It’s what he always said about me in my absence, and in my hearing when he wanted to introduce me to someone.

Now I was certain that the teacher knew me. He had, of course, given my name and description to those concerned. In his eyes, I was an accomplice in his kidnap and beating. If that wasn’t the case—unlikely given his reaction at the dump—I might be the lead his faction needed to find the rest of the gang and reveal the mastermind. Even if I was innocent, I still might have seen the criminals or their car.

That’s what they would think. They wouldn’t believe me if I told them I hadn’t seen either the kidnapers or their car. They would consider me complicit and a liar who didn’t want to snitch on his fellow villagers. Then they might kidnap me and beat me up. They wouldn’t let me go until I confessed everything.

If only Sailor hadn’t told me. If he hadn’t, I would have been at peace with myself. The information I had made me an accomplice. I might reveal it, at a moment of weakness, under torture.

They might be watching me, but they wouldn’t dare kidnap me in a public place, as long as they could do it somewhere else, like on the way to my house, which was normally dark. There was no better spot to carry out such an operation. Who knows, perhaps they were already lying in wait for me there.

Dad suggested I spend the night at the school. The classrooms were left unlocked. It would be easy for me to slip through the small window of the garbage room into the playground and

into one of the classrooms. I had often done just the same as a pupil, but in the reverse direction, skipping school to go hunting, or swimming in the muddy pond at one end of the village.

Dad said that the garbage room was emptied around sunset, meaning I could enter easily without getting my clothes dirty. He said he would find a safe way to give me some food and a blanket. With words cut through with suppressed anguish he whispered—even though no one could hear us—that staying in the village was dangerous for me. I had to leave until the danger subsided.

I sneaked into the school in the evening and spent the night awake in the classroom overlooking the courtyard and part of the road leading to the Zaarour neighborhood. Dad was unable to bring food and the blanket. Perhaps he noticed that he was being watched and, afraid to lead them to me, preferred not to risk it. I put four desks together until they resembled a bed, then lined them up against the wall. I could not fall asleep. Fear alone banished sleep, how then if it was in alliance with cold and hunger?

My exhausted eyes were on the point of closing when the engines of the buses started rumbling in preparation for their morning school run to the neighboring villages. As soon as they left, I found myself hanging from the classroom window, which was on the first floor, and jumping down onto the road. My knees let me down and I landed on my elbows. I did that because going out the way I had come in at night wasn't safe. To reach the garbage room I would have to cross part of the playground. One of the staff might spot me, or the principal, who arrived early to exercise by walking around the playground.

The village was yawning that cold morning. It too seemed not to have slept. The kidnap of two villagers was no ordinary event. The efforts made by the head of the municipality to secure the release of his son and Grinder's brother appeared to have been fruitless. Only tractors disturbed the calm.

I didn't believe I made it home. I barely reached the doorstep when Mum opened the door. It was as if she was expecting me, or as if her heart had intimated my return. She smothered me and cried. Dad was sitting by the stove. He told me that he had been unable to bring me food and a blanket because he sensed he was being watched. He was afraid to lead them to the place I was spending the night. My hunch had been right. They would never do anything suspect inside the village, because they knew that the guards were up all night.

While I ate a hearty breakfast after a night of nil by mouth apart from the water I drank from the school taps, and Dad toasted the bread and soaked it in the bowl of milk, and Mum looked at me with worry in her eyes, there was a knock at the door. I opened it. It was our only neighbor bearing news that darkened our morning. He said that they had killed the son of the head of the municipality and thrown his body on the country road. The fate of the other kidnapped man remained unknown.

Dad put his clothes on. "You have to leave. Today," he said.

Mum packed me a few clothes and things in a shopping bag. We didn't have a suitcase, since none of us had left the village before.

Dad accompanied me to the neighboring town and begged a friend of his from his days at teaching college to put me up for a few days after telling him why. The friend welcomed me and seemed sympathetic.

Dad drank his cup of coffee quickly. Then he hugged me, said goodbye, and left. I remained standing on the balcony watching him walk dejectedly away. Before he disappeared around the corner, he turned around, raised his hand, and closed his fingers into a fist that he shook before going out of sight.

## SELECTED HOOPOE TITLES

*The Watermelon Boys*

by Ruqaya Izzidien

*Sarab*

by Raja Alem, translated by Leri Price

*Fractured Destinies*

by Rabai al-Madhoun, translated by Paul Starkey



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