

## Sabra Zoo/Hiller

### One

I sat in the front passenger seat of the yellow 1956 Mercedes, clinging to the leather strap. Samir was driving too fast through the potholed streets of Sabra refugee camp, like the Mercedes was a jeep rather than the taxi it was. To be fair, a jeep was probably what he was more used to driving three days before, when the final withdrawal of the PLO from west Beirut took place. Since then, however, Samir's choice of vehicle had necessarily changed. We went round a corner and I clung to the strap with both hands as I slithered across the worn leather seat, my stomach punishing me for the amount I'd drunk the night before. I looked out of the window to fight the nausea, trying to concentrate on the passing scenery. I was never sure when the transition from city to camp happened, whether there was some recognised boundary. I suppose the buildings became smaller, less well built. The walls became unplastered breezeblock, the road lost its tarmac and there was a lot more corrugated iron. This wasn't a refugee camp in the sense of tents and blankets issued to displaced people, it was more a

sprawling shanty town built up over the years to occupy the outskirts of a city. Many of the people in the camp were born there, attended a UN-run school there, worked and got married there. Off the main road the buildings became single-storey and the streets got narrower until they were just a network of alleys with small one and two-room houses. Children jumped from the path of the Mercedes as it came to a sliding stop in front of the Red Crescent hospital, easily the tallest building around. I waited for the dust, and my stomach, to settle as Samir checked himself in the rear-view mirror, smoothing his moustache with his fingers then running them through his thick hair. He was clean-shaven and well-turned out. He gave me an appraising look.

'Ivan, my friend, you'll never lose your virginity looking like a gypsy,' he said. I shrugged inside my denim jacket and pulled at a frayed rip on my jeans.

'I knew it was a mistake to confide in you,' I said.

He smiled. 'Alcohol loosens the tongues of men and, thank God, the morals of women.' He lit a Marlboro as I stepped out of the car. 'I'll see you later, yes?' he asked, revving the engine unnecessarily.

'I'll stop by the cafe,' I said.

No sooner had I closed the door than Samir let out the clutch and fishtailed down the dirt road. I smiled to see him

being cursed by the head-scarfed women left in his dusty wake. They glared at me, complicit through association, and I quickly entered the multi-storeyed hospital building, the largest concrete structure in the vicinity. Crossing the lobby, I passed a refugee family that looked like they were camped there, complete with foam mattresses and a small paraffin stove. Refugees within a refugee camp. I ran up the stairs to the orthopaedic ward but I had to pause for breath on the second floor, my lungs sore, thinking I ought to be in better shape at 18, that I should cut out the cigarettes. It was eight-thirty in the morning and I was just in time to see the child-sized figure of Dr Asha Patel enter the ward. I followed her in, panting from my climb.

'Ah, Ivan,' she smiled, 'just in time for rounds.' Eli, the Norwegian physiotherapist who was accompanying Asha, winked at me: she'd been there the previous night, although she herself had been restrained in her drinking. I winked back; perhaps I hadn't made such a fool of myself after all. She looked fresh and professional in her white scrubs and braided hair. I was conscious of my own war-torn jeans and grubby trainers. At least I'd managed to find a clean t-shirt that morning. She was not pretty, not in the way that Samir would think, but there was something about her, the way she held herself, the frankness of her gaze. And a few times I'd

caught sight of her across a room, laughing or smiling, and I knew she was beautiful. In the few days I'd known her, I'd never seen her wear makeup, although she was partial to wearing ribbons in her hair.

'Are you two ready?' Asha asked, raising her black eyebrows at me in mock seriousness. She smiled again and my eyes were drawn to her ideally formed white teeth; it happened every time she smiled and she did it a lot.

We stopped by the bed of an unconscious man who had a bloody bandage covering the stump where his right leg used to be. His family were standing around him and they all towered over Asha expectantly. Asha prodded at his bandage.

'Tell them I had to remove his leg...' She paused. I waited, hoping to be able to interpret something more than the obvious. 'Tell them his leg was too damaged by the shrapnel to be saved, but that with the right prosthetic and treatment from Eli he'll be walking in several weeks.' She waited as I struggled for the Arabic for 'prosthetic'. I settled for 'false leg' instead, although God knows I'd had to say it enough times that summer for it to be in my top ten most used words. Asha continued, 'Because the amputation was beneath the knee he will have complete flexibility in the leg, so he was lucky in that respect.' She smiled at the family as I translated. I asked if they had questions. The man's wife

started to cry and a male relative thanked Asha, calling her 'Doctora', the Arabic feminine for doctor. She was renowned in the camp, her tireless efforts to patch people up rewarded with enormous respect by men who wouldn't have let their own sisters become doctors but would no doubt have begged to be operated on by this small Indian woman if they'd been unfortunate enough to need it.

'This boy is a sad case,' Asha said in her perfect, easy-on-the-ear English, stopping at the bed of a dark-haired kid, twelve or thirteen, about the same age my brother Karam would be if he were still alive. He had the same dark look about him, the same eyes, eyebrows that almost met in the middle and thick hair. He was having his dressing changed by a nurse and his black eyes flashed in either anger or pain. 'His foot was badly damaged although Dr Angstrom and I managed to save it,' said Asha. A woman, maybe the boy's mother, sat by his bed, stroking his dark hair. I felt queasy as the nurse irrigated the wound with saline, running gauze through a hole in one side of his foot and out of the other. The boy moaned. Asha held his bony hand and asked the nurse how much pethedine he was on. 'More than he should be,' the nurse replied, another foreign volunteer, Scandinavian of some sort, I didn't know and it wasn't the time to enquire, although Samir would have had her hotel name by now, would have made an arrangement to

see her later and take her on a tour of recent bomb sites.

Asha was talking to me.

'Tell his aunt that he will need three weeks of hospital stay and then physiotherapy, to make sure he walks properly again.' I translated, the Arabic for 'physiotherapy' eluding me as the sight of the wound and last night's vodka conspired to make me inarticulate. Luckily, the boy's aunt kicked in as I floundered, effusively thanking Doctora Asha.

'She said thank you,' was the best I could do; my stomach had become detached inside me and my hands felt clammy.

'Maybe Ivan needs to lie down,' Eli said with a smirk.

I ignored the jibe and was relieved to see the nurse start to dress the terrible wound, and tried to focus on the fact that the boy was now addressing me.

'Have you ever seen such a wound as this,' he said, pointing at his foot. He tried to shift himself up the bed using arms that didn't look strong enough to support even his light weight.

'You're very brave,' I said. 'How did it happen?'

'We went to play football and I kicked a tin off the pitch. At least I thought it was a tin. My uncle, God rest his soul, said it was a cluster bomb.'

The boy's aunt started to make her feelings about the use of cluster bombs clear, including some strong language unusual

for Palestinian women of her age. It occurred to me, not for the first time that summer, that war was liberating in many unexpected ways.

'Did you watch the World Cup?' I asked the boy, even though it was two months ago.

'Yeah, Paulo Rossi was the best, don't you think?'

'He sure was,' I said, vaguely recalling that Italy had won. 'My name is Ivan, and I'll see you again soon.'

'What sort of name is Ifan?,' he asked; excusable since there is no letter v in the Arabic alphabet.

'It's Russian,' I told him. He looked at me with more interest.

'Are you Russian?' he asked.

'No.' I didn't elaborate on my Danish and Palestinian roots.

'I'm Youssef,' the boy said. He extended his hand to me in a formal gesture that was touching. His skin was paper dry and he had no grip left, like shaking the hand of a dusty skeleton you find in a school laboratory.

We moved on, through the maimed and the critically ill, only occasionally stopping at someone newly operated on; most people on the ward were leftovers from the violence of the summer siege of Beirut, too ill to be discharged. Most had

already been told (some by me) that they wouldn't be playing football or the piano again.

We stopped by the bed of an elderly man who had been in various hospitals since June. He was nick-named Donkey Man by the staff because he'd broken his leg falling off a donkey, although he swore blind that he was wounded fighting in the south of Lebanon, despite the evidence of his family and his age. Due to his age and wartime diet his leg was taking months to heal and the hospital was keen to discharge him, except that he had nowhere to go. His family had stopped visiting after the first week; no one knew why. Perhaps they'd suffered enough of his fanciful stories, although it was more likely they'd gone back south and hadn't been able to return. I suspected that donkey man enjoyed the bed baths given by the nurses too much, and leaving would deprive him of this one pleasure.

'How are we feeling today?' Asha asked, knocking on his yellowing cast for clues.

'When will I be washed by the blonde nurse?' Donkey Man replied, not waiting for the translation.

'He's feeling fine, never felt better,' I said. I was keen to get some breakfast since my nausea had passed.

'Tell him the cast is coming off in a couple of days,' said Asha.

Asha and I went to the makeshift kitchen in the basement, leaving Eli to coax a young girl into using a newly fitted artificial leg. People were queuing up for hard-boiled eggs, sweet tea and hot flat bread. We found a seat on a box of medical supplies donated by Christian Aid and I cracked my egg on my bony knee.

'You don't look well,' Asha said. 'Are you eating properly?' This was rich coming from her. Dark rings under her eyes offset the paleness of her brown skin. Her black hair had lost the lustre it had when she'd first arrived in the city. I knew that she hadn't left the hospital in three days; the summer for her had been a constant run of traumatic amputations, relief coming only in the form of the odd dislocation or broken bone.

'I'm fine, mother,' I said, examining the purple yolk of my extra-hard egg. I was reluctant to tell her that the previous night I had spent an alcohol-fuelled evening with some of the other foreign volunteers and friends in my parents' apartment, my parents having left in the PLO exodus three days before. I suspected she would disapprove of such goings-on under the circumstances. Or perhaps she understood that it was how some of her colleagues coped and was

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sympathetic, although she herself never drank and avoided the expatriate crowd. She called them tourists.

I had first met Asha in a makeshift hospital converted from a three-floor office block situated in the Hamra district, a relatively well-heeled part of West Beirut, less prone to attracting incoming ordnance, which was why the hospital was housed there. It was July, the siege was settling nicely into a routine that people understood: the water got cut off, the electricity died, the city got pounded with big bombs, peppered with small, a ceasefire was announced and then it started all over again. Medical volunteers had started to arrive from all over the world, although the Scandinavians were heavily represented. I'd been persuaded by Asha, whom I'd met through friends of my parents, to interpret for the volunteer medics crazy enough to come to this hellhole. I'd gone to meet her at the hospital but before I even had time to get my bearings a group of armed men had stormed the emergency room. They were carrying a badly burned comrade, who was unconscious, bits of smoking clothes and skin falling from him. Waving their AK47s around and shouting, they'd demanded immediate treatment. Everyone had frozen but Asha had stepped forward, her small frame blocking the men's way.

'Tell them,' she'd said as I cowered behind her, although she kept looking at the men, 'that no one comes into my

emergency room with weapons.' Without thinking, I had addressed the insane-looking bunch, my voice wavering; they looked as if they hadn't had much sleep in the last week. There was a moment's silence as they'd looked at us, deciding whether to shoot the small foreign doctor and the sweaty kid trying to hide behind her but then they'd left, standing outside while Asha and the others treated the injured man. Later I was given the unwanted task of telling them that their comrade was in a bad way and was unlikely to survive. The fighters, slumped in their jeep and chain-smoking, told me to apologise to the good Doctora on their behalf, to explain that they were under a lot of pressure. I'd gone back in to the makeshift emergency room to reassure everybody that they weren't about to be shot but was sent straight back out by Asha to ask them to donate blood; I soon learnt that this was a standard request for anyone entering the hospital on their own feet. I'd gone back the next day. I'd felt useful.

Now, as we finished breakfast in the canteen beneath the Sabra camp hospital, my stomach wasn't coping with my over-boiled egg.

'Are you coming to my place tonight?' I asked Asha.

'Of course,' she said. I stood up to go but had to leave without saying goodbye; hospital staff and patients' relatives quickly surrounded her, blocking her from my view.

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What Asha didn't know, and I would never tell her, was that I had to get back to Hamra to courier some forged papers. After all, it was why I'd been asked to stay in the city rather than leave on a ship with my parents. I felt for the reason in my back pocket; my Danish passport, which allowed me relatively easy movement around the city. The war was over and I was parent-free for the first time, with my own apartment. I couldn't ask for more.