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Marching to Beit Jala

Maia Ramnath

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The grand old duke of York, he had ten thousand men, he marched them up to the top of the hill and he marched them down again. And when you are up you are up, and when you are down you are down, and when you are only halfway up you are neither up nor down. 150 or so internationals are marching up the hill to Beit Jala, singing and chanting. We've had word that the tanks are massing there, poised just outside Bethlehem. The invasion is expected at any time; hairtrigger tension has been building for three days. We'll go to meet them, show ourselves, making our move in a symbolic chess game.

The Italians, with their permanent presence at Daheishe camp, are loudest: *Bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao, ciao, ciao! Palestina libera, Palestina rosa!* Next in number are the French, Americans and British, with a smattering of Belgian, German, Irish, Japanese, Swiss, Swedish, Canadian. It's April Fool's Day, and although the seige of Arafat's compound is underway in Ramallah, it has not yet become clear that the largest incursion in years is about to be unleashed across the West Bank. We're still thinking within the activist-at-a-demonstration box, albeit a demonstration with higher stakes than we've ever known. It's OK, I've been teargassed

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and arrested before, I blithely tell a journalist who asks if I'm afraid.

Live ammo, now, that's something I haven't experienced before. We march to the top of the hill. We meet the tanks. Bullets slam into the pavement at our feet with heavy metallic beats, throwing off sparks and shrapnel. We link arms in two lines stretched across the road, as the three tanks drive us backward step by step. Two BBC journalists in the intervening space are driven for cover behind a jeep, pursued by a blaze of aggressive gunfire; I have to admit it's a relief to have the big gun's attention leave us for a few moments. Then it swivels inexorably back and we continue our laborious retreat. They seem to be getting their orders over a headphone or cell phone. The tank controls our speed effortlessly, accelerating toward us if we show signs of balking.

Looking neither to the right nor to the left, my eyes are fixed on the face of the soldier in the cab, behind the gun. I'm a mouse hypnotized by a snake. It's not until they leave us at the bottom of the hill that I notice how dramatically the crowd has thinned. Where the hell is everybody? Some prudent ones sought safety long ago. Others...others have been shot. Seven of my comrades are in Beit Jala hospital being treated for shrapnel wounds. One is in surgery, in critical condition with a direct hit to the abdomen. This is when I realize that the rules have been changed and are subject to further arbitrary change at any time, from here on out. This is not a demonstration. This is a war zone.

[There's an outcry in the West. Funny, we say to one another, how injuries to a few internationals seem to cause more concern than the systematic destruction of so many Palestinian lives. Well, maybe if people start asking what we're doing here...]

* * *

Morning. Outside a tank rumbles by, shooting indiscriminate shells in front of it as it goes. They seem to me to be dumb brute beasts, sniffing, stalking, always circling the camp, patrolling the

roads. The long snout of the cannon probes outward, spitting explosive curses.

“Tebabbe, tebabbe!” Tank, tank! The swarm of children empties like water from the road, into doorways and alleys, pressed back against gritty stone walls ribboned with flowing graffiti. Black for Fatah, green for Hamas, red for the PFLP. When the tanks have passed, the kids come out again, picking up their soccer and hopscotch right where they left off, laughing. They’re livewires, their energy confined inside the camp by 24-hour curfew. The little girls follow me, hanging on my arms like remoras, “Moya, Moya! Come here in home.” The boys form a ragtag parade behind us whenever we venture out on one of our missions, but they usually stop at the perimeter of the camp.

“Don’t let them follow you,” worried parents warn. “If they get near the soldiers the boys might throw stones, and there’ll be hell to pay.”

We moved into Al-Azza refugee camp a few nights before the occupation clamped down on Bethlehem, at the first warnings of its imminence. Within a few days it’s home, and we’re with family. I hope I don’t smell too bad. I’ve taken only one shower in the 10 days I’ve spent there, because I’m convinced that the moment I’m naked, wet and vulnerable, away from my boots and backpack, that’s when the soldiers will come in. The fear is much greater when we’re sitting around under seige, helpless, waiting, listening to sprays of gunfire or shelling. I’m far less afraid when I’m out, in motion, in action. At least that way if something happens to me I’ll be accomplishing something in the process.

The TV is always on for the latest news, except when the electricity’s out. Deep dark shots of astonishingly potent coffee alternate with glasses of sweet amber tea, seemingly all night and all day. The ashtrays are overflowing. Each man chainsmokes two to four packs a day. What else can you do, they say, to endure the monotonous tension of a seige? There are intense political debates at night, which I enjoy. My Arabic vocabulary increases

daily, though my efforts cause much amusement to my entourage of little girls. I learn nouns by pointing to things, but my verbs are scanty. Bread Water. Coffee. Tea. Sleep. Army. Soldier. Martyr. Sun. Rain. Thank you. Good morning. Peace.

I never go anywhere outside the camp without two amulets: my passport and my white flag, ripped from part of a T-shirt I got at the FTAA protests last year in Quebec. Its sentimental value by now is immeasurable. It's seen me through some tense situations, maybe even helped save lives. I'll never know. In an alternative universe where we weren't there, would any given encounter have turned out differently? Or am I just a meddling idiot? What if, what if... But the Palestinians we're with seem to place a high value on the precious maybe of our presence, and that'll have to be enough for me. They've had enough tragic experiences with IDF behavior both with and without us that the odds of the gamble seem to them worthwhile.

* * *

Riding in the front seat of the Red Crescent ambulance, I get a comprehensive tour of the local destruction. The empty streets are scored with white treadmarks and blurred with drifts of rubble. Many buildings are pocked with bullet holes and rocket scars. Lightposts are bent over like stalks of overcooked asparagus, and the remains of cars line the road, crushed like tinfoil. Two ambulances have also been crushed by tanks in recent days; not with people inside, but just to put them out of commission.

Back at the dispatch station, the intrepid EMTs introduce us posthumously to the driver and doctor who were killed a few weeks ago in the line of duty, via their pictures in posters on the wall. Supposedly, when the word's out that there are internationals riding along, there's a better chance the ambulances won't be hindered or shot at. Even so, we're held up frequently throughout the day by troop movements, jeeps, Armored Personal Carriers, tanks, bulldozers with their single heavy fang. Once we wait at an intersection while eleven APCs roar by one after the other. Twice

It's a hospital "for the nervous." They must have thought their missing patient was a goner. Going north on the Hebron-Nablus road, he must have been trying to get home to Ramallah. I'm sure he was so insistent that we come in because he thought they wouldn't believe him. "Oh, so you were held at gunpoint, and then you say some Americans appeared from nowhere? Good, now take your medication."

* * *

Returning to Jerusalem the following week, thwarted in our attempts to enter Jenin laden with the diapers and baby formula requested by the doctor we were in contact with inside, we relay some of the stories we've heard from the fresh refugees up north. The surrounding villages are flooded with haunted angry men bearing awful tidings past Jenin's event horizon. How they'd been beaten and tortured, stripped and trucked out to checkpoints in batches. Given signed and dated polaroids to keep with them, so they could prove they'd been "processed" already if they got picked up again. One showed us the deep bruises on his ribcage from the butts of rifles, and the burns where cigarettes had been snuffed on his neck. He couldn't stand unaided.

A man from Nazareth asks what we've heard or seen of deaths up north. It's April 13th. The blackout curtain has not yet been lifted. I don't know, I tell him, we couldn't get in to see for certain, but people are telling of homes bulldozed and many killed. And we talked to many who had been tortured.

"Torture?" he shrugs wearily. "That's routine. That's not news."

It's no wonder the civil engineer had a breakdown. What passes for normalcy can be horrifying.

The first morning that I wake up safe in my own bed, in New York City, I am so disoriented that for a few moments I literally don't know where I am or what I'm doing. The streets are full of glossy people buying shiny things and drinking Diet Coke in pleasurable oblivion. All of a sudden, normalcy seems so strange.

I get out of the cab and wait while a tank stands by with leveled cannon, and/or a soldier goes through everyone's papers. "Have a nice day," one of them says to me, handing back my passport.

Things are different once night comes. Night is always scarier. In part it's the primal human fear of the dark; but it's also true that that's when the army likes to make its moves. "They've got infra-red and radar; we don't," explains a young man in the camp. "Hear that?" The drone is high in the sky, invisible. "It can see you walking down this alley." (At night, the wide road down the middle of the camp is often a lane of sniper fire. To get from one side to the other, if we must, we run across one by one.)

A bonfire blazes in the ruined street in front of Daheishe as we drive past, with shadowy figures moving about the edges. A bit beyond it, I spy a soldier poking around at the side of the road, so it doesn't surprise me when we're stopped a second later by a whole jeepful.

"Quick, your passport," hisses one of the two EMTs, and hold it up to the window. But the soldiers don't see it yet, and they kick the door shut on us when we try to get out. Three Palestinians are riding in the back: a young woman, a young man, and a doctor, male, slightly older. These aren't the war-wounded, just regular people who need medicine and routine treatment but can't leave their homes safely to get it.

First the soldiers order the woman out, make her squat on the ground and empty her bag on the gravel. One of them stands behind her and fires his gun over her head, again, again, impatient. At each shot, she jerks sharply and gasps, until she's crying with fear. Judging from the stories I've heard from our host families, I have no doubt she has reason to associate such close-range gunshots with the average assortment of dire and bloody memories.

"You don't have to cry," reproaches a soldier. When they're through with her they call out the first man and rough him against the wall, spreadeagled. When they call for the doctor, the EMTs and I exchange glances and seize the opportunity to scramble out

of the cab. In a moment the Palestinians are all lined up against the wall and the soldiers are stalking about, questioning them, dumping the contents of the ambulance on the ground, rifling through bags and medical supplies.

“Where are you from? Where are you going? For what reason?” In English, which strikes me as odd, though it occurs to me later that perhaps it’s the language they have in common. I stand slightly apart, alert and watchful, now strangely calm. I’m directing a mental flow of Obi Wan Kenobi subtext at them: you don’t want to hurt these people, they’ve done nothing to you, just let them go. But I’m unsure of what to do, how best to intervene without antagonizing the soldiers. Then the questioner calls out, “You are all from Bethlehem?”

Here’s my chance. I brandish my passport and declare, “No. I’m from the United States of America.” Marveling in embarrassment at the involuntary note of arrogant defiance in my voice. America indeed.

They stalk around some more, confer, bluster. Then they load everything back in the ambulance and let us go.

“We’re very sorry,” one of them says politely. To me? “We have to search everything for security reasons. You understand.”

(I understand. Tom Ridge and John Ashcroft would be pleased.)

* * *

A few days later. The sun will set soon. Curfew will be officially reinstated in a few minutes. Three of us are about to head back to Azza when we notice an APC and a tank with agitated gun turret, buzzing threateningly about up at the corner above the hospital. We hasten to see what’s going on. The soldiers have disembarked; they’ve cornered a lone Palestinian man. Surrounding him, they force him to the ground, guns leveled at his head. We approach tentatively, hands raised. I feel like a hapless fool. What are we expecting them to do? And abruptly they let him go. I’m really not sure why. Did they hear over the intercom, perhaps, that it isn’t

worth the bother, with these international gnats around? He’s not on the wanted list, after all.

We go to meet him as he walks away from the soldiers. Luckily one of my friends speaks Arabic. “Are you OK? What happened? Can we walk you home?”

“I’m all right. I didn’t have my identification papers. I know the number by heart and I told it to them,” and he recites it to us, “but they didn’t believe me. They were going to shoot me.” He’s quivering with anger, a long and hard-pressed anger with no possible outlet. He strikes me as slightly unhinged. Again, I can’t blame him. I feel feeble in my inability to make things OK.

He agrees to an escort home. As we walk, since the APCs haven’t given up on us yet, the three of us try to arrange ourselves around him to shield him from lines of fire. Each time one approaches menacingly my heartbeat peaks, and drops away again when we’re passed by.

It’s a long way to where he’s taking us, longer than we expected, and I’m getting edgy. When we come to a place where a wall’s been partially crushed, the man stops still, raging silently. Come on, I think, glancing about, nervous and restless. But he’s picking up stones and chunks of concrete from the ground, piling them back on the wall with intense focus, repairing a tiny piece of the ruin of his homeland. So we help until it’s done.

We continue on. He’s from Ramallah, he says. He used to be a civil engineer. Now he’s here. Finally we come to a high wall with intermittent gates. The first is locked; so is the second. The third screeches when he leans into it, shouldering it open. Inside, the incongruous glimpse of another world: a great green garden surrounding a building that looks like a rambling castle. He invites us in. We demur. He insists. Five minutes. Tea. Reluctantly we acquiesce. Just five minutes, no more.

As we approach the castle, a couple of doctors in white coats come out to greet us. “Thank you for bringing him back! How did you know he was ours?” An aide hustles the man off to his room.