

DE NIRO'S GAME

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For my parents.



“And the breadth *shall be* ten thousand.”

— THE BOOK OF THE PROPHET EZEKIEL

“How, from a fire that never sinks or sets,
would you escape?”

— HERACLITUS

“Moi, j’ai les mains sales. Jusqu’aux coudes.
Je les ai plongées dans la merde et dans le sang.”

— JEAN-PAUL SARTRE



CONTENTS



I. ROMA / II

II. BEIRUT / 85

III. PARIS / 183



ONE



Roma



1

TEN THOUSAND BOMBS HAD LANDED, AND I WAS WAITING for George.

Ten thousand bombs had landed on Beirut, that crowded city, and I was lying on a blue sofa covered with white sheets to protect it from dust and dirty feet.

It is time to leave, I was thinking to myself.

My mother's radio was on. It had been on since the start of the war, a radio with Rayovac batteries that lasted ten thousand years. My mother's radio was wrapped in a cheap, green plastic cover, with holes in it, smudged with the residue of her cooking fingers and dust that penetrated its knobs, cinched against its edges. Nothing ever stopped those melancholic Fairuz songs that came out of it.

I was not escaping the war; I was running away from Fairuz, the notorious singer.

Summer and the heat had arrived; the land was burning under a close sun that cooked our flat and its roof. Down

below our white window, Christian cats walked the narrow streets nonchalantly, never crossing themselves or kneeling for black-dressed priests. Cars were parked on both sides of the street, cars that climbed sidewalks, obstructed the passage of worn-out, suffocating pedestrians whose feet, tired feet, and faces, long faces, cursed and blamed America with every little step and every twitch of their miserable lives.

Heat descended, bombs landed, and thugs jumped the long lines for bread, stole the food of the weak, bullied the baker and caressed his daughter. Thugs never waited in lines.

GEORGE HONKED.

His motorcycle's cadaverous black fumes reached my window, and its bubbly noise entered my room. I went downstairs and cursed Fairuz on the way out: *That whining singer who makes my life a morbid hell.*

My mother came down from the roof with two buckets in her hands; she was stealing water from the neighbour's reservoir.

There is no water, she said to me. It only comes two hours a day.

She mentioned something about food, as usual, but I waved and ran down the stairs.

I climbed onto George's motorbike and sat behind him, and we drove down the main streets where bombs fell, where Saudi diplomats had once picked up French prostitutes, where ancient Greeks had danced, Romans had invaded, Persians had sharpened their swords, Mamluks had stolen the villagers' food, crusaders had eaten human flesh, and Turks had enslaved my grandmother.

War is for thugs. Motorcycles are also for thugs, and for longhaired teenagers like us, with guns under our bellies, and stolen gas in our tanks, and no particular place to go.

We stopped at the city's shoreline, on the ramp of a bridge, and George said to me, I have a *mashkal* (problem).

Talk, I said.

This man, Chafiq Al-Azrak I think his name is, parks his car down from my Aunt Nabila's place. When he leaves, he still reserves the space for himself. I moved the two poles marking his spot so my aunt can park. So she parks, and we go up to have coffee at her place. This Chafiq fellow knocks at my aunt's door and asks her to move her car. It is his space, he says. My aunt says, It is a public space... He insults her... She shouts... I pull out my gun, put it in his face, and kick him out of the house. He runs down the stairs and threatens me from below. But we will show him, won't we, quiet man?

I listened and nodded. Then we hopped back on the motorbike and drove under falling bullets, oblivious. We drove through the noise of military chants and a thousand radio stations all claiming victory. We stared at the short skirts of female warriors and drove beside schoolgirls' thighs. We were aimless, beggars and thieves, horny Arabs with curly hair and open shirts and Marlboro packs rolled in our sleeves, dropouts, ruthless nihilists with guns, bad breath, and long American jeans.

I will see you tonight, late, George said to me when he dropped me back home. Then he drove away.

MIDNIGHT CAME; the noise of George's motorbike filled the neighbourhood. I went down to the alley where the men

watched the late-Friday-night Egyptian movie, smoking on small balconies, gulping cold beer and *arraq*, cracking fresh green almonds, and with their filthy yellow nails crushing American cigarettes in folkloric ashtrays. Inside their houses, the impoverished women carefully, economically, dripped water from red plastic buckets over their brown skins in ancient Turkish bathtubs, washing away the dust, the smells, the baklava-thin crust, the vicious morning gossip over tiny coffee cups, the poverty of their husbands, the sweat under their unshaven armpits. They washed like meticulous Christian cats that lick their paws under small European car engines that leak corporate oil extracted by exploited Nigerian workers from underneath the earth where devils roam, and worms gnaw on the roots of dead trees that are suffocated by factory fumes and the greedy breath of white-skinned engineers. Those lazy cats lingered under unwashed cars, watching the passing of Italian shoes, painted nails, colourful and torn-out cuffs, pointy high heels, plastic flippers, stomping naked feet, and delicious exposed ankles that thick hands would bind, release, and slip higher to reach a flow of warm fluid that carefully, generously turned into a modest flood smelling of eel, red fish, and rosewater.

We drove fast toward George's aunt's house. When we arrived, George said, That is Chafiq Al-Azrak's car. He pulled out his gun. I gave the motorcycle gas and made it roar. George shot the wheels of the car, and the air in them was released. He aimed higher and shot the car's lights, the door, the tinted glass, the seat inside, his own reflection in the mirror. He fired silently, and calmly danced around the car, then

pointed and fired again. The broken metal was penetrated with tiny, damaging holes, quick and sharp. It was a lethal, entertaining act of vengeance, and I liked it.

When it was over, we fled the scene. I drove the motorcycle through sleepy neighbourhoods with endless wooden doors, and I felt George's gun brushing against my back. We reached the open road, and our cotton shirts welcomed the wind; it molested our skin and dwelt in our ears. I drove fast, impetuously, and the wind stroked my eyes, entered my nostrils and my lungs. I drove through streets of broken lamps, walls covered with bullet holes, spilled blood that turned into dark stains on dusty, neglected sidewalks. I drove and felt thirst in my veins, convalescence and fresh wind in my chest. George was breathing heavily behind my shoulder, like a mad dog, howling to the air in triumph and demonic laughter.

Cocktail, he shouted in my ear. Let's have a cocktail! I made a quick and sharp turn. Like a Mongol rider I swung George's machine to the road, and the back wheel rolled and crushed tiny pebbles. A grey cloud rose from the earth, and I swung around and drove straight to the juice bar that was open all night over the highway on the other side of town, in the Armenian district, far from the Turks who had enslaved my grandmother. We passed Cinema Lucy, where young men and chronic masturbators watched a large screen that showed American women with large chests getting hastily fucked by men with large cocks who were dressed in cowboy suits or as schoolteachers with Afros and 1970s hairdos, over a jazzy tune, on the border of a fancy pool, with maids in white aprons who left their tiny skirts backstage on the director's

door or the cameraman's car seat, and bounced their liberated 1970s asses on the edges of long, plastic chairs, ready to serve red cocktails with midget paper umbrellas.

AT THE JUICE BAR, George and I drank mango topped with white cheese, honey, and nuts.

We sat and sipped our cocktails, licked our fingers, and talked about the gun, and how silent it was.

2

TEN THOUSAND BOMBS HAD SPLIT THE WINDS, AND MY mother was still in the kitchen smoking her long, white cigarettes. She was dressed in black from head to toe, mourning her father and mine. She boiled water on her gas stove, she cut meat on her meat board, and she puffed tobacco against our shattered wall and through our broken glass window. Here, in her kitchen, a bomb had landed and made a wide-open hole in the wall, giving us a splendid view of the vast sky. We wouldn't fix it until winter, until the rain fell and washed away the soil above all the corpses we'd buried. Here in that kitchen my father had died; hers had died farther north.

WHEN GEORGE PAID his aunt a visit the next day, her car was parked in Chafiq Al-Azrak's space.

Chafiq Al-Azrak came this morning, apologized, and offered to share the space, George's aunt said, and played with her red-dyed hair. Aunt Nabila was in her mid-forties. She worked in a bank. Never married, flirtatious and voluptuous,

she dressed in tight skirts, high heels, colourful makeup, and low-cut blouses that showed her generous cleavage jutting forward. She called George “Gargourty,” a nickname from childhood that made him feel uncomfortable.

I often passed by Aunt Nabila’s place looking for George. And she often opened her door in her nightgown, with a cigarette balanced on her round lips. I fantasized about her inviting me in for a coffee, offering me water at the kitchen table, kneeling in worship under my belly button, undoing my Japanese-made zipper, nipping at my secreted fluid, and sweetly, in her little coquettish voice, assuring me that George was not here.

Isn’t he at work? she would say. Gargourty is at work!

George, my childhood friend, worked in a poker-machine joint. He cashed money from gamblers who lingered all day on machines that flicked green light on small screens. They pressed buttons and lost their wives’ jewels, their fathers’ houses and olive trees, their kids’ clothes. Everything they owned was sucked in, everything was extracted from their polyester pockets by aces and laughing jokers. George took their money and transferred the credit into their machines, sold them whisky and cigarettes, cleaned the bathroom, opened the door, lowered the air conditioning, swept the dust away, emptied the ashtrays, protected the place, and when the militiamen came he put the money in sealed bags, handed it to them, took his motorbike, and went home.

There must be a way to get a cut, he once said to me when I visited him. Are you in?

Abou-Nahra will cut our heads off if we are caught stealing.

Yeah, it’s risky, but there must be a way.

We will be fucking with the militia, I said.

George shrugged his shoulders, inhaled oily black hash, closed his eyes, and held the smoke in his thin chest. Then, slowly, with his eyes closed, he released his breath, extended his arm like a half crucifix, stretched his two fingers, and passed the hash on.

BOMBS WERE FALLING like monsoon rain in distant India. I was desperate and restless, in need of a better job and money. I worked at the port, where I drove the winch. We emptied weapons from ships. The weapons were stamped with Hebrew, English, and Arabic serial numbers. Some shipments had oil, and we had to hook them up to pipes in trucks. Fruit came from Turkey. Seasick sheep with dripping noses and frightened sounds came also from Turkey. We emptied it all. When the shipments contained weapons, militia jeeps surrounded the whole area. The unloading was always done at night and no light was allowed, not even a cigarette. After a night shift I would go home and sleep through the day. My mother cooked and complained. The few jobs I got at the port were not enough for cigarettes, a nagging mother, and food. Where to go, who to rob, con, beg, seduce, strip, and touch? I was sitting in my room, looking at a wall filled with foreign images, fading posters of teenage singers, blondes with shiny white teeth, Italian football players. I thought, Roma must be a good place to walk freely. The pigeons in the squares look happy and well fed.

I thought about George's proposal and the poker machines. I decided to pay him a visit at his work.

I WALKED THROUGH the little alleys on the way to the casino, passing by Um-Sami, the seamstress whose husband had

abandoned her for an Egyptian maid. She was sticking needles into the white gown of a young bride whose wedding would take place in a small chapel with an electronic recording of pitiful bells scratching like an old 1930s record, and whose father had accepted a middle-aged Canadian engineer for a son-in-law, and whose mother was busy making dough and gathering chairs and cutting parsley for the big day, and whose brother was planning to fire his gun in the air in celebration of his sister's official deflowering, and whose cousin would drive her, in his long, polished car, to the church and then to the ship on the Mediterranean Sea. The sea that is filled with pharaoh tears, pirate ship wreckage, slave bones, flowing rivers of sewage, and French tampons.

Across the street from the seamstress, Abou-Dolly the grocer was fanning and driving the flies away from his face and into his rotten vegetables. Abou-Afif was playing backgammon with his nephew Antoine. Claude was still hunting for a husband. It won't be me, I said. It won't be me! The sky was a deep blue. From it, bullets and bombs fell randomly. To look at the sky over our land was to see death diving at you—you, a pool of water on a curved street, a salty sea with red fish, a string bed for boys to jump on; you, embroidered underwear for painted toes to step into, a diamond cover for an arched dagger; you...

I was passing by Nabila's place and decided to stop in and see her. She opened the door. I smiled and stood still, without a word, just breathing.

Looking for your friend again? she asked me.

We are all friends here, I replied.

She smiled, laughed, shook her head, and invited me in.

I sat agitated, like a schoolboy who is about to jerk off.

Do you want some coffee?

Yes, I said and looked at her see-through dress. Her thighs were full and round. The lines of her underwear were showing, defining the borders between her majestic ass and the tops of her legs.

She went to the kitchen. I followed her.

I am going to see George, I said.

At work?

Yes.

So why did you come here if you know he is at work?

I thought you might want to send him something, like a sandwich or an apple.

She approached me, pinched my left cheek and said, You are not so innocent, young man, visiting your best friend's aunt while he is at work.

I held her hand; she tried to pull it away. I hung on to her little finger and pulled her over slowly. She smiled. I kissed her neck. She smelled of beauty cream, milk, and fat bankers' cigars. She let me wander my lips over her neck, then laid her open palm on my chest and gently pushed me away.

The coffee is foaming on the stove, and you have to go, young man.

GEORGE WAS WAITING for me. I walked toward him and handed him fifty liras. Pretend not to know me, I whispered.

Which machine do you want it in?

What do you mean? I asked.

Which machine? He sounded irritated. I will transfer the amount to that machine.

Oh yes. Number three.

I went to number three and there were fifty liras in credit waiting for me on the upper right-hand corner of the screen.

I played for twenty liras and lost. I went back to him and said that I needed the balance back, the thirty that was left.

He gave it to me.

I walked back to my home, thinking that, yes, there had to be a way.

TEN THOUSAND BOMBS had dropped like marbles on the kitchen floor and my mother was still cooking. My father was still buried underground; only Christ had risen from the dead, so they say. I was no longer expecting my father to show up at the door, quietly, calmly walking into the kitchen, sitting at that table, waiting for my mother to serve him salad and thin bread. The dead do not come back.

Ten thousand bombs had made my ears whistle, but I still refused to go down to the shelter.

I have lost too many loved ones, my mother said to me. Come down to the shelter.

I did not go.

TEN THOUSAND CIGARETTES had touched my lips, and a million sips of Turkish coffee had poured down my red throat. I was thinking of Nabila, of poker machines and of Roma. I was thinking of leaving this place. I lit the last candle, drank from the water bucket, opened the fridge, and closed it again. It was empty and melting from the inside. The kitchen was quiet; my mother's radio was far away, buried down in the shelter, entertaining rats and crowded families. When the bombs

fell, the shelter became a house, a candy castle and a camp for children to play in, a shrine, a kitchen and a café, a dark, cozy little place with a stove, foam mattresses, and games. But it was stuffy, and I'd rather die in the open air.

A bomb fell in the next alley. I heard screams; a river of blood must be flowing by now. I waited; the rule was to wait for the second bomb. Bombs landed in twos, like Midwestern American tourists in Paris. The second bomb fell. I walked slowly out of the apartment. I walked down the stairs and through the back alleys, guided by screams and the smell of powder and scattered stones. I found the blood beside a little girl. Tony the gambler was already there, with his car ready to go. He was half-naked and stuttering, M-a-r-y mother of God, Mary m-o-t-h-e-r of God. He kept repeating this with difficulty, breathless and frozen. I carried the little girl. Her wailing mother was hysterical; she followed me to the back seat of the car. I took off my shirt and wrapped it around the girl's bleeding ribs. Tony flew his car toward the hospital. He honked his siren. The streets were empty; the buildings looked hazy and unfamiliar. The girl's blood dripped on my finger, down my thighs. I was bathing in blood. Blood is darker than red, smoother than silk; on your hand it is warm like warm water and soap. My shirt was turning a royal purple. I shouted and called the little girl by her name, but my shirt was sucking up her blood; I could have squeezed it and filled the Red Sea and plunged my body in it, claimed it, walked its shore and sat in its sun. My hands were pressing on the little girl's open wound. She faded away; her pupils rolled over and disappeared into a white, soft, dreamy pillow. Her head was leaning toward her mother's round breast. Her

mother picked up Tony's mantra and they both repeated, Mary mother of God, Mary mother of God. The little girl was leaving to go to Roma, I thought. She is going to Roma, lucky girl. Tony honked a farewell in a sad rhythm to the empty streets.

THE NEXT MORNING I was meeting George down at the corner by Chahine the butcher's. There was a line of women waiting for the meat. Inside, goats were hung, stripped of their skin. White and red meat fell from above, pieces were cut, crushed, banged, cut again, ground, put in paper bags, and handed to the women in line, women in black, with melodramatic, oil-painted faces, in churchgoer submissive positions, in Halloween horrors, in cannibal hunger for crucifix flesh, in menstrual cramps of virgin saints, in castrated hermetic positions, on their knees and at the mercy of knives and illiterate butchers. Red-headed flies strolled everywhere, there was animal blood on the floor, butchers' knives paraded on stained yellow walls. The bombing had stopped, and women had come out from their holes to gather tender meat for their unemployed husbands to sink their nicotine-stained teeth into and seal their inflated bellies.

George was walking down the street toward me. When I spotted him, he waved to me. A man in a green militia suit stopped him. They shook hands; George gave him three kisses on the cheek.

As I waited, I watched the flies resting on the mosaic tiles, feasting on perfect round drops of blood.

Who is that? I asked George.

Khalil. He works with Abou-Nahra.

Maybe it is not a good thing that he sees us together, I said, thinking of the poker machines.

He hardly ever comes to the casino. Not to worry.

Maybe there is a way to get a cut of the money, I said. And it might be simple. I come and pay you the money, and you press the credit in the machine while I am playing. Does the machine keep records... I mean, if you have a straight flush, for instance, would it record the winning strike somewhere?

No. I don't think so, George said.

We have to be sure. I will pass by on Monday. We can try it. While I am playing, inject some credit in there. A small amount, not much, just to try.

Come by in the morning, early... usually there is no one there, George said.

And maybe we should stop meeting in the open for now, I said.

I WENT TO THE little girl's funeral, the little girl who was on her way to Roma. Her mother was wailing. Women with veils over their hair filled the little alley. My mother went to the funeral too. They come to our funerals, we go to theirs, she whispered to me in a moral tone.

The girl's father flew back from Saudi Arabia, where he worked in the burning fields of sand and oil. He walked to the front, crossing his thick hands, his sunburned face in flames, his dark eyes sobbing, his feet dragging on dust and sand. The small white coffin was carried by the girl's cousins and neighbours on the long walk to the cemetery; as the sunlight landed on the white wooden box it twinkled, the wood and the metal twinkled, everyone twinkled, even I twinkled.

Men in grey suits and black ties moved slowly, past the closed stores, and sagged their heavy heads toward the floor. Tony was behind me, stuttering and telling his tale of driving, death, and hospitals. I was surrounded by familiar faces filled with grief. Behind us, the mother was fainting, hanging on to the women's arms. She was pulled forward, slapped and sprinkled with rosewater by women who were beating their chests, chanting farewell and wedding songs, wailing, waving white handkerchiefs high in the air toward the Leaning Tower of Pisa.