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IS THERE LOVE IN GAZA?

EDITOR'S NOTE:

This essay was written and edited on the author's phone using WhatsApp, after his laptop was obliterated in the September 10, 2024, bombing of the Gaza displacement camp—a day when the helicopter missiles took his tools, but not his voice.

FOR MORE THAN TWO YEARS, the genocide has stolen the future from Gaza's youth, intertwining days and nights with no direction and no promise of progress. I should be in my university classrooms now, attending lectures. I should be building my life, looking for a job, dreaming of marriage, dancing at my own wedding with the people I love.

But here I am today, two years later, and all I have done is carry buckets of water from supply trucks, struggle to light fires for food, and risk my life to secure aid for my family, living in a simple camp in a fabric tent that offers no protection from the sun, nor from the cold winter or the rains that are just now beginning to fall in Gaza.

And today, with the announcement of the ceasefire, it still remains unclear whether we will ever be able to return to our “normal” life, to anything more than just breathing. For now, we are still in our tents, hungry and deprived of the simplest necessities of life. Inside, the fear of another night of bombing still haunts our sleep, as if the genocide has paused only on paper.

Still, both before and after the ceasefire, and despite all the hardships that weigh heavily on us, some young people in Gaza have gotten engaged and even married in the midst of an active genocide, as if to say: we will not wait for a peace that may never come. It is also why others continue their studies above the rubble, believing that the pursuit of their dreams is itself a form of resistance.

They try to seize their right to joy amid the chaos, refusing to let the unknown delay their future. And yet, one question still revolves inside us all: Is there love in Gaza? After the ceasefire, can we love and be loved once more?

EVER SINCE I was a child, my family would gather at my grandmother's house every week, and I would hear the girls around me and my aunts talk about weddings. "I just want to live long enough to see my daughter as a bride," one of my aunts said, and the others nodded in agreement. I can't forget the way she put it, and all she didn't say. But I also remember the way the room felt after she said it: their stubborn hope for joy and celebration even amid war and uncertainty.

Listening to these conversations, I perceived that for many women in Gaza marriage has always been much more than a ritual. Attending weddings with their mothers since childhood, the young women around me would talk about how they imagined their own—the dress, the music, the joy of having their loved ones surround them. For us young men it was no different: We also longed for our weddings to be joyful gatherings with our loved ones and looked forward to the pre-wedding celebrations most of all—a night of music, food, and shared excitement before entering a new chapter of our lives. But beyond the decorations and the ceremony, what we wanted most of all was the rare chance to be at the center of warmth and celebration in a life defined by survival.

But now, all those dreams have been forced to shrink. No more grand halls, no beautiful dresses, no nights safe enough for dancing and laughter. Couples have given up all these joyful rituals. And even if the war were to end tomorrow, it would take a long time for Gaza to reclaim the ability to hold weddings as it once did.

Our faces have changed, carrying the marks of exhaustion and grief. Celebrations are no longer held in large halls; families host ceremonies in homes or temporary tents, often limited to family and their closest friends. There are no beauty salons or tailor shops to prepare the bride and groom, and they often have to show up on their big day as if it were any ordinary day. Some families choose not to hold any celebration at all, mourning lost loved ones or out of respect for the countless Palestinian lives that are extinguished daily in the ongoing violence. Others insist on keeping a small spark of joy—believing that, in a place weighed down by sorrow, young couples deserve at least one moment untouched by grief.

ONE OF THESE PEOPLE was my cousin Hussein. He has been one of the people closest to my heart since we were children. We used to see each other every week at my grandmother's house, but the war kept us apart for more than a year and a half. We'd go out for shawarma (and I'd

always pick up the tab). The conversations we shared were an essential part of our week, but since October 7, I only saw him once.

During the war, Hussein had been working as a psychosocial support facilitator in one of the displacement centers. One day, he saw something he could not forget: it was the way one of the volunteer teachers smiled while she was helping children learn the Arabic and English alphabet. Heba—who was not his wife yet—had a wholehearted smile that didn't belong to a time of war.

The scene repeated itself day after day. Hussein began waiting for that very moment, because her smile could make his day, despite the collapse of everything around him. After days of quiet observation, he went home and told his mother he had found “someone different” . . . a girl who could make children laugh in a time made for crying. He asked her to go and see Heba, and to propose on his behalf. And that was how their love story began. Many months later, when I was finally reunited with him after a long time of not seeing each other, he told me, “That was the day I had been waiting for, for so long . . . the day my story with Heba would begin.”

Hussein and Heba had planned to get married at the start of 2024, but the genocide made that impossible. They postponed even thinking about the engagement several times, waiting for the war to end. But one day, they finally had enough. All of a sudden, he announced they had decided to get engaged despite the war, and I felt immense happiness for them but also a deep sense of shame and frustration that I couldn't be there. I had been displaced to the South in Al-Mawasi, Khan Yunis, and they lived in Al-Nuseirat, in central Gaza. I talked to Hussein on the phone and apologized to him for not being able to attend, and of course he understood.

A month after the engagement, news began circulating about the possibility of a temporary ceasefire, and Hussein and Heba set a wedding date. But each time, it turned out to be just political talk, and hope faded. But they never gave up. They told the family they would hold the wedding no matter what—life must go on—even amid the famine that swept through Gaza at the start of July.

They set the wedding date for July 27. A week before the event, we were living through some of the hardest days since the genocide began: famine gnawed at our bones, the shelling continued, but I kept thinking about how much I wished I could be there for Hussein. The wedding was limited to family only, and I desperately wanted to go, but

the situation was dangerous. Suddenly a miracle occurred: A one-day ceasefire was announced in Gaza—and it happened to fall on the very day of Hussein’s wedding! It felt like life itself had paused for him and Heba, just for that day.

Early in the morning, my family and I set off for Al-Nuseirat. There was no sound of reconnaissance drones and no bombing. After several hours, despite how difficult transportation was, we arrived at my aunt Lina’s house, which I hadn’t been to in over a year. I saw bustling markets, houses, and streets. My heart began to beat anew, and I felt as if I were living there again.

When I got to his house, I started calling out: “Groom . . . Groom!” But Hussein had already gone to the hall where the ceremony would be held. Then I saw Abu Hussein, his father. He was looking at me, and for a moment he didn’t recognize me; the war had changed our bodies and faces. When he realized who I was, I greeted him, congratulated him on his son’s wedding, and then went to see my aunt, his brother Hassan, and the rest of our relatives. I felt a pounding in my chest as I reunited with them after such a long absence. Afterward we boarded the bus toward the hall.

Everyone was gathered, and I waited outside for Hussein’s arrival together with all the other young people. After a few minutes, Hussein arrived and stepped out of a car. My eyes met his, and he immediately came to hug me.

When I spoke with him after the wedding, he confessed to me he had been afraid of being forced to leave his home at any moment. The threats in Al-Nuseirat were real and constant. But with the ceasefire in place, even temporarily, Hussein was one of the happiest among my relatives—relieved that, at least for now, he would not have to be displaced from his own home. The small pause in violence had given him a moment of security, a rare gift in Gaza, and a reminder that even amid war, life and love find a way to persist.

ANOTHER ONE OF my cousins, Hamoud, had been working as a contracted nurse in one of Gaza’s few remaining hospitals when a case arrived that he didn’t expect: his future wife. She had injured her hand, and he was assigned to treat her. What stayed with him was her patience. Even with pain written across her face, she tried to stay composed, thanking him quietly each time he checked on her. There was a calmness about her that stood out in a hospital full of chaos.

After she recovered and left the hospital, Hamoud found himself thinking about her more than he expected. The empty space she seemed to have left behind her made him realize he wanted her to be in his life. The ten-year age gap made her family hesitate, but he returned to them again and again—with respect and clarity of intention—until finally they agreed.

When Hamoud had just turned thirty, he had been postponing any ideas he might have had about getting married for nearly a year because of the genocide and the harsh circumstances we were living in. But the war showed no sign of ending, so he too went ahead and got married. And in the middle of a genocide that is constantly taking things from us, Hamoud managed to protect one thing: the beginning of a future with his wife.

We stole moments of joy wherever we could, trying to celebrate with him the night every young man and woman dreams of—the night before the wedding. We organized a small pre-wedding gathering, which we call the “Youth Henna,” on the very same ground that had been hit by four airstrikes in the past, all of which we had miraculously survived.

We invited family, relatives, and camp friends to celebrate the end of his bachelorhood and the beginning of a new chapter in his life. The wedding itself was the next day. The celebration took place in a modest seaside chalet—because that was all we could find. Transportation was so scarce that the only way to get the bride to the venue was by donkey cart, which cost twenty dollars.

Hamoud now lives in the same camp as I do, surrounded by people from Rafah who share the same loss. He had waited, hoping the ceasefire would allow him to return to his apartment. But after the ceasefire was announced, he discovered it had been destroyed. He came to me and asked, “Will I live in a tent all my life? Will my future child grow up in a tent too?” The memory of the happiness he felt on his wedding day jarred against the reality that followed; it was yet another cruel reminder, which none of us needed, of just how fleeting these moments of normalcy are in Gaza.

HOW MANY GROOMS missed their wedding by just a few days—or even hours? How many brides found themselves widowed mere days after their wedding? Here, joy is always incomplete, surrounded by death on every side. At the start of the genocide, and even before it, Gaza was already full of unfinished stories—engagements cut short, small dreams swallowed under the rubble of homes.

I have witnessed countless young people begin their lives with hope, only to be cut short under the bombs. Friends—students, doctors, journalists—have been killed before they could graduate, marry, or even celebrate another birthday. Their loss made me wonder if loving someone had become a curse here.

My friend Mohammed Al-Habibi was a medical student in his sixth year at Al-Azhar University. On August 25, 2025, when was about to don his graduation robe and celebrate this pivotal moment with his family, he was targeted during an Israeli airstrike on Nasser Medical Complex in Khan Younis. Mohammed was a model of ethics and humanity, and everybody expected him to make a significant contribution to the Palestinian medical community. His father described the news of his son's death hitting him like a thunderbolt.

This was the same airstrike that killed the photojournalist Mohammed Salama before the eyes of his fiancée, Hala Asfour. Hala is a journalist, too; a writer. She and Mohammed worked side by side to cover the horrors of Israel's genocide as it unfolded. Together, Mohammed and Hala nurtured a love greater than all the destruction around them, sharing joy and grief as one. In one devastating moment, Israeli airstrikes took Mohammed's life from Hala, but they could not take his love. As Hala once said to a friend, the journalist Wa'ad AboZaher: "If nothing can save us from death, then let love at least save us from life."¹

Mariam Abu Daqqa was also there that day. She was killed in the same airstrike as Mohammed and three other Palestinian journalists. Mariam saw journalism as a mission rather than a career, and she took her camera with her everywhere, to document the pain that words could not express. Her love for her family too went far beyond words. She kept her father alive by donating one of her kidneys to him, and she sacrificed so much of her life to be a voice for the people of Gaza, hoping her son Ghaith would one day see peace.

In her last call to a colleague, she said: "Keep reporting, be the voice of the community," ending with what seemed like a farewell: "One day, the camera will fall from my hands."² Hours later, she was martyred in the airstrike on Nasser Medical Complex, and her camera fell from her hands. Today, Mariam's son Ghaith is an orphan, yet in his hands is Mariam's double legacy: her photographs, and the immense love she left behind amid the rubble.

Perhaps one day, love in Gaza will not have to be brave to exist. Until then, every act of love—every wedding, every promise, every

photograph saved from the rubble—is a quiet form of resistance.

EVERYONE IN GAZA carries a story of loss, but some carry a loss so great that even the memory of love causes a pain too heavy to bear.

When I was in the final year of middle school (grade nine in Palestine), I eagerly awaited lessons from one of the most renowned Arabic language teachers in Rafah: the esteemed writer and academic Omar Harb. Everyone respected him, and for me, he was more than just a teacher—he saw something special in me. He trained me in public speaking and promised that if I earned the highest marks in my class, I would host the school's ceremony for outstanding students. It was only thanks to his encouragement that I was able to achieve first place and stood to give my speech in front of everyone.

But his life too was as defined by love as it was by loss. In 2021, his daughter Abir lost her fiancé, Ismail Duwaik, who was killed in an Israeli airstrike. The war stole her dream to start a life with the one she loved, leaving her burdened with grief. During the genocide that unfolded after October 7, my teacher's entire family was denied even a moment to breathe. Omar Harb lost his daughter Abir, who joined her fiancé, as well as his wife, most of his children, and seven grandchildren who were killed in airstrikes that destroyed five family houses over two years of war. Each table had an empty seat, and every room carried a heavy silence. The only one to survive from this large family is a child who is now struggling with a neurological disease.

Omar Harb himself lived in a temporary displacement tent alone with his mom. Amid the agony of loss and the relentless famine devouring our bodies, he was diagnosed with cancer in one of his legs. With severe malnutrition and no access to medication, he lost more than seventy kilograms, dropping from one hundred twenty kilograms to just forty, becoming a shadow of his former self. In his final days, he kept saying, "Death is closer than any chance of survival."

He passed away on September 4, 2025. His death became for me a reflection of all the tragedies Palestinians suffered in Gaza, the consequence of a genocide that spared no one—not children, not women, and not the teachers who shaped the community's minds and souls. The most devastating remembrance his passing brought into relief was how the pain of loss can slowly consume our lives; surviving his wife, children, and grandchildren shattered even the memory of all the love Omar Harb ever had in his life.

SOMETIMES IT FEELS LIKE love in Gaza is by definition a truncated act—love for a home that turns into a tent of illness and hunger, a father’s love for a daughter taken by bombs, a student’s love for the white coat that will never be worn, and the love of life snuffed out under years of siege and sudden airstrikes. Occupation does not only kill bodies; it steals the simplest dreams and forbids all forms of love from reaching their fulfillment.

Yet, despite all the loss we endured and the dangers we continue to face, love always finds its way amid the rubble; it appears in simple weddings and in laughter laced with sorrow—which is still a declaration of life. Marriage in wartime is not merely the union of two people—it is a collective declaration that despite death, hunger, and massacres, we hold on to life. It is another kind of defiance, a ritual that means that we are still here, and we will continue to love and celebrate, no matter how much they try to steal our lives.

The brief moments of joy we try to reclaim today remind us of the days we once had, and we ask ourselves if those days can ever return, and if love, in all its forms, will ever be safe in Gaza.

NOTES

1 Hearst, Katherine. “I cannot imagine our coverage without him’: Tributes paid to MEE Gaza correspondent Mohamed Salama.” *Middle East Eye*, August 27, 2025.

2 Abu Eisha, Ezz Al Din. “One day, the camera will fall from my hands’: How Maryam Abu Daqqa fearlessly documented the war in Gaza.” *The Independent*, September 1, 2025.