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SCENES FROM BEHIND THE SIEGE

Translated from Arabic by Elisabeth Jaquette

THE BOOKSELLER'S TABLE AT THE DISPLACED-PERSONS' MARKET

IN AL-MAWASI, Khan Yunis, the road runs along the sea. Tens of thousands of displaced persons fill the tents lining either side of the road, and I trudged there through a huge crowd of people walking and riding in trucks. This is Rashid Street, or the Sea Road, as it's called by those in the Gaza Strip.

The long, congested road has felt much like a city center ever since Israeli military vehicles destroyed the city of Khan Yunis nearly all the way to al-Mawasi, which lies on the western edge of the city, near the coast. Residents of Khan Yunis, as well as residents of other areas north of Wadi Gaza who had been displaced to Khan Yunis, have all gathered here in al-Mawasi. Just observing people on the road—their pale faces, emaciated bodies, and eyes yellow from hepatitis—is enough to make a person feel distraught.

Tired people on a narrow road: the street is filled with trucks and horse- and donkey-pulled carts, and on either side are vendors with smaller carts, not leaving much space for people to walk. I passed through this grim and suffocating scene, aimlessly scanning carts where people had set up to sell things. Some were selling canned goods distributed by international relief agencies: cans of beans, peas, sardines, and tuna, along with boxes of all different sizes, shapes, and contents, neatly stacked in nauseating towers. Other carts sold stolen items: cylinders of gas for cooking, rechargeable batteries, solar panels, kitchen utensils, pots and pans, all taken from people's homes after they left. There were carts selling falafel fried over a wood fire, carts selling drinking water, and carts selling stolen clothing, and I walked through it all with the slow, meaningless pace of the dead, my gaze wandering over vendors until it landed on a table with books. The sight transformed my grief-stricken eyes, jolting me awake as if I'd been hit with a current of electricity. The image

of books neatly arranged, side by side, atop a clean tablecloth, on a table more elegant than the slapdash ones made from wooden pallets next to it, stirred in me a wave of contradictory emotions. I felt a sense of nostalgia and longing for my bookshelves back home, which had resisted attempts to be used as kindling. When the war began and our cooking gas was cut off, people resorted to cooking over fires of paper and cardboard they found in the street. I nearly succumbed to burning books to satisfy the children's hunger, and I would have were it not for the shopkeeper below our apartment, who gave me a bundle of cardboard to use as fuel in the clay oven, allowing my books to remain on their shelves, all of them, untouched. Untouched until the military invaded Khan Yunis, and I had to leave my home and was displaced to Rafah. Seeing these books on a table stirred in me a longing for my own bookshelves as well as a degree of sadness; they had likely been taken from public libraries or people's homes. I couldn't imagine my own books being taken, especially after I'd struggled—physically and psychologically—not to burn them. I was also surprised: Who cared about books now, amid such carnage destroying everything in its path? Who would spend money on books when people were starving, poor, and in need? I felt confused by the sight of a table selling books in a place otherwise subsumed by such tragedy and pain.

NEWS FROM THE CITY, COURTESY OF A BOOK CART

AFTER REFLECTING on the scene and my accompanying emotions, I stood and examined the books arranged on the table, titles sleeping side by side amid a war of annihilation. Meanwhile, people were walking by with vacant eyes, hearts consumed with sadness, and despondent faces draped in misery. Most of the titles were familiar to me, books I'd read in a library or even had on my own bookshelf, from days far past when I would travel long distances to get my hands on a book.

Mother by Maxim Gorky, *Blindness* by José Saramago, *Homage to Catalonia* by George Orwell, *The Days* by Taha Hussein, a set of religious books, including those about Sufism, *The Treatise of al-Qushayri*, and a collection of poetry by Ibn al-Farid. I continued browsing at a typical, leisurely pace—the books could have been sitting in a public library or bookstore, and they might even have been taken from one—until my eyes fell on *Noon: Poems in the Cobbler's Cart* by my friend Nidal Alfqaawy.

At first, I was pleased to find Nidal's collection of poetry among the books on the table. I loved his poems; they had been part of my life for a long time, and I had returned to them often over the years. But then I realized the book could have been taken from my bookshelf—and that would mean that my apartment had been looted. Israeli tanks had already entered the entire city of Khan Yunis, and we were following news of the Israeli advance into neighborhoods across the city. One could tell how far the tanks had come, not just by the sound of explosions and columns of smoke that we could see as we were displaced into al-Mawasi but also by the volume of stolen goods that appeared for sale on the Sea Road. If this book really had been taken from my bookshelves, I said to myself, it would mean that tanks had reached my neighborhood, the army had entered my apartment, and thieves had come after them. The only way to tell whether this copy of the book had been taken from my bookshelves was to open to the first page and see whether there was a dedication. My copy held a dedication to me, written by Nidal in his own handwriting.

I crouched down and moved closer. Out of the corner of his eye, the owner of the table watched me open the book and read the following: To my friend Hossam Shehata. I sighed in relief and smiled, reassured that the book hadn't been taken from my bookshelf. My house hadn't been raided; the army might not even have entered it. At the same time, I thought to myself: someone should tell Hossam his house has been looted.

DOES ANYONE READ IN TIMES OF WAR?

I LOOKED UP and turned my gaze in relative relief to the young man who owned the table. He was still looking at me, his gaze tinged with suspicion and evident inquiry. I told myself that the best defense is a good offense: I'll take him by surprise and question him before he starts questioning me. I had noticed the questions in his eyes and on his lips, a torrent about to be unleashed.

"Where did you get these books?" I asked. I expected him to be surprised or even confused by the question, but he replied quite calmly.

"Some of them are my own, and others I bought from thieves who found them in wooden cabinets they'd stolen from people's homes. They were going to burn the books as fuel for clay ovens, but I bought them for next to nothing."

"Does anyone care about buying books these days?" I asked.

"Every day plenty of people stop by, believe me," he said. "Some people buy a book—I sell them for the list price, and people buy them for as much—while others are content to browse and move on to the next cart."

"But some of these books are stolen; what if the owner of a book comes to buy it?"

"And what if they do? Plenty of people come across things in the market that were stolen from their own homes, and they buy them back."

We both smiled. I left him and continued on my way.

The man's brief, clear, and honest answers were a window into how people try to protect themselves from the beast of war: a beast which, with unparalleled brutality, ravages the souls of people enduring the incredible horror and pain of war.

War is a giant machine with many gears, like machines in massive factories that melt down piles of whatever scrap metal they are fed. This is what war does in people's souls; in horrifying fashion, it consumes every detail of their suffering: the fear, the loss, the endless waiting in lines. And to this escalating backdrop of dehumanization, which displaced people endure each day, you can understand what they hope to do by buying and reading books. Books offer an opportunity to do something human, something that defies the dehumanizing war machine. Reading, as such, is an act of resistance against a brutality amplified by multiplying images, brutality evident in the hostile tenor of life. This is the experience of displaced persons in this narrow section of land bordered by the coastline from Rafah in the south to Nuseirat in the middle of the Gaza Strip, where people are crammed together and subjected to all manner of pain and torment. In order to protect yourself from the unfathomable difficulty of life in this furnace, you must take refuge in something that maintains your identity as a human being, as someone who is aware, who has agency, and who is capable of engaging with the pain around them without turning to stone.

This is what books can do: reading is an act that confronts brutality and preserves one's humanity, keeping it from being ground down by the millstones of war which pulverize everything in sight. The very worst thing war does is destroy one's ability to feel empathy and pain—sentiments that a human being faced with annihilation deserves to experience and feel.