

**6 January 2009**

**What is war?**

Arslan asks me again: "What is war?"

"Who's making it and why?"

My mother appears just in time with her fancy stationary to give to the kids.

"Come on all of you," I call.

"Majed, Arslan, Wael, Dima. I'm going to explain to you what war is."

I put the paper on the floor:

"In English we write: 'W-A-R.'"

"'W' which is like 'V' + 'V'"

"'A' as in Arslan..."

Wael interrupts: "No, not like that. He asked you, he wants to know what is *war* -- like the war in the sky, not like the war in the classroom."

I look at Wael: "But they're happy with my answer. What's your problem, little man?"

"No, they aren't."

Dima jumps in: "She's lying to you."

"She's trying to review English lessons because Majed's school is closed and he'll forget the alphabet in English."

"Ok, Majed shall I continue?" I ask, trying to ignore the other kids.

"Yes, but tell me what war *is*, not how we write it in English."

"Ok then, but it will take such a long time to explain. Let's save it for later. For now, take your stationery and go and draw."

I hope they won't ask me again.

Let someone else answer this question of theirs.

**7 January, 2009**

Like a can of sardines, we're all gathered in one room.

It's too unsafe for my brother and family to sleep upstairs.

The house-quaking experience is too scary.

Wael and I share a small narrow mattress on the floor.

We both start looking at photos on my mobile, trying to ignore the live war orchestra outside. Within minutes, Wael is asleep, holding the mobile in one hand and his thumb in his mouth.

He looks like an angel with his eyes half open – as if he doesn't want to miss a moment of pleasure -- he loves mobiles. I can't afford to let him take photos all day like he demands because I have to save the battery.

At 5 am I'm fast a sleep.

Wael starts drawing on my face with his little fingers.

He softly touches my forehead, my mouth.

Then he starts whispering in my ear.

"I'm talking softly in your ear because I don't want to wake you up," he says.

"What did you say? I didn't hear you."

"The war is over and today we must go out," he whispers.

"Ok," I say and fall back to sleep.

Wael jumps on my back: "You are my airplane. Let's go up."

"Wael, I want to sleep."

"I want to go to the club."

"When the war is over, we'll go."

"The war is over."

"No, the war is not over."

"Look out the window, listen: nothing. The war is over -- at least to buy kerosene for the heater and gasoline for the car..."

Wael leaves me no choice but to wake up.

He starts waking everyone else up too and by 5:30 the whole house is in action. At around 8:00, it's sunny and we have electricity. Wael has had his shower and comes downstairs, looking all smart in his red jacket.

"Let's go now."

"No," I said "the war is not over."

"We won't buy anything, just go in a loop around the house." he said

"Wael, believe me it's too dangerous to go out of the house. Just go and play."

When he starts crying, it's as if I can hear his heart breaking. All he wanted was to get out of the house after 12 days of not going anywhere.

He's mad at me again. He goes to the garden and chooses to play exactly in the area I asked him and all the kids not to play in: in front of our garden on the left hand side is an apartment that the Israelis have bombed before and everyone expects the worst this time.

It's just a few minutes before there's supposed to be a three-hour lull in the bombings – Israel has announced it will allow 'safe passage' for humanitarian assistance. But I can't believe it:

"Wael, I asked you not to play there."

"I asked you to take me out," he retorts.

"But it's dangerous!" I scream.

He ignores me and heads further toward where I don't want him to be.

In the middle of this frustrating discussion, Dima, my niece, arrives from her house, which is just two houses down. (We opened a garden passage between our houses, crossing through the neighbor's yard, a long time ago so we could avoid the street in these kind of situations.)

Dima, who's 9, has also taken a shower today. She sits in the sun to warm herself up.

I go inside the house for a second.

Wael runs after me.

All of a sudden, there's a huge explosion.

Black airplanes are everywhere.

They cover the sky.

More than one.

More than two.

More than three.  
At least half a dozen at once.  
A terrifying sound.  
Dima's screaming and unable to move.  
She's alone in the garden.  
Everywhere in the neighborhood, children start crying.  
Wael's clutching on to my pants, his thumb in his mouth.  
I pick him up and throw him at his mother.  
I jump the six steps.  
I reach Dima.  
She's trembling.  
Her legs won't move.  
She's screaming her heart out.  
I'm trying to hug her, but her whole body is stiff.  
Both her legs are shaking violently.  
And the airplanes are still in the sky.

"I don't want to go out today," Wael announces.

I carry Dima in to her mother.  
I can feel each beat of her heart  
She pushes her head into my neck.  
"Dima, relax.  
"They're gone.  
"They didn't hit anybody.  
"It was just an air show."

And this time I wasn't lying. But the truth didn't really matter.

### ***9 January, 2009***

Today my mother brought out the old style kerosene lamp she inherited from her mother. It had long ago become part of the decor in our guest sitting room where she keeps all her fancy and kitsch souvenirs. She filled it up with kerosene despite the fact that half of the family has allergies to kerosene.

The lamp makes a nice atmosphere during the quiet moments early this evening! The full moon coming in from the opened windows and doors adds more light to the room. It feels warmer today. Oddly, all of us, sitting there in the living room are talking softly, as if we're hiding our voices from something. Someone I don't know.

My brother Nael, my sister Zeinat and my nephew Hitham start playing cards. The game sounds too serious because everyone's trying to suppress their anxiety.

"I think one of the stitches in my eye is coming out," Zeinat says. "My doctor is in Gaza, the road to Gaza is cut, and the hospitals are only taking emergencies and this is not an emergency!"

"And your mother's old lamp is adding to my problem," she adds looking at my mother, who is not impressed with this comment.

Hitham looks at me and says, "Can't you do it?"  
"What?"  
"Can't you remove the stitch?"  
"Me?"  
"Yes, you."  
But before he finishes, the house starts shaking.  
Left and right.  
Endless horrific sound.  
Winds sweep in from the windows.  
Doors slamming.  
And everywhere across the neighborhood, children are crying.  
A huge glare lights up the entire city of Khan Younis.  
Our eyes stare at the door.  
We're trying to recall what we memorized yesterday.  
About what to do when an F16 hits your area.  
But is it an F16? Because if its tanks shelling, then the instructions are different...  
A few seconds pass.  
Obviously, we are bad students because our only reaction is silence.  
We stare wide-eyed at the door.  
And wait...  
Can we call three seconds "waiting"?  
I guess in Gaza you can.  
Three seconds in Gaza can actually change your future.

Then, like runners at the marathon starting line, at the same moment, we're suddenly  
all racing towards the garden.  
The smoke is rising more than 500 meters away from the house.  
Thank god.  
"We survived one more strike," my mother announces.  
My sister Najat picks up the phone and calls our cousins who are not far from the  
explosion to check on them.  
They've survived one more strike.  
We've survived one more three seconds.  
Today, our survival is counted in seconds and not days!

### ***10 January***

Logic is my key for today.

I want to apologize to all the musicians in the world for calling the sounds of bombing  
an orchestra.  
After a horrific night of tank shelling, bombardment by F16s, maybe an Apache too,  
the drone and, most scary of all, the smell of phosphorus gas reaching the edge of our  
neighborhood, today, I want to apologize to all musicians.  
No, war sounds are far more frightening and ugly.

Today I will not joke.  
I will think logic and talk logic.

Not enough food at home.

Children frustrated, wanting out of this prison.  
It's not going to end today.  
It might last for much longer.  
Demands are increasing at all levels and from every side.

So, best is to act.  
No safe place in Gaza Strip.  
If my own bed is not safe,  
then the market is not safe.  
But it might be safer than, or at least as safe as my bed could be....  
So, I'm up early.  
I call the children: "Come we'll all go to the vegetable market."  
"Is the war over?" screams Arslan, my 5-year-old nephew happily.  
"No, but there will be a ceasefire, a 'safe corridor' from 1 to 3 pm," I tell him.  
"Is it 1 pm?" Arslan asks.  
"What's a ceasefire?" Wael asks my sister Najat, at the same time.  
"Is a safe corridor like the one we use next to our bathroom?"  
Najat is exhausted. She hasn't slept for two nights now. She looks at Wael and breaks out in laughter: "Similar.... it's the shit in the pot!"  
I answer Arslan: "It's 8 am now. We'll go now."  
For me it seems safer to get out *before* the ceasefire because it doesn't seem that there really is one, or at least that it's observed....  
I catch Arslan's eye: "Looks like there's movement in the streets, so we'll try to go now."

I haven't seen the children so happy. They don't wait for me to get the car out from the garage. Like birds escaping the cage, they all start singing and dancing on the door step of our house.

### **The woman**

A woman in the street asks me if I can give her a lift.  
"I came here because they are distributing vegetables to poor people," she tells me.  
"I'm not at an UNRWA school, I'm with my sister's family. Nobody knows about us.  
"We're not registered, we're not refugees, so no one wants to help us. This kind man living in your neighborhood asked me for my ID. I gave it to him yesterday. Today I came and he gave me some vegetables. I have no idea what we will do with them -- we have no wood, no gas and no electricity. We haven't even had water for the last four days."  
I looked at her in the rearview mirror and say: "Sell it and buy canned food."  
"Who will buy it?"  
"Many people will," I assure her.  
"Will you take me to the vegetable market?" she asks.  
"I'm going there, I'll take you."  
She looks out the car window and says to herself: "It's better like this, I'll sell it and buy milk for the kids and some kerosene."

### **The market**

I decide that I will only look in the mirror or straight in front of me.  
I don't want to see anything around me.  
I love Khan Younis.

I can't do anything for Khan Younis today but wait patiently and survive, so tomorrow we all can do something.

Halfway to the market, we're the only car in the street.

Wael is laughing and telling Arslan to look at the old man we've just passed.

"He's hiding behind the door and looking.

"But I saw him.

"Look at that woman too! I saw her!

"She's hiding behind the door, peeking out..."

Arslan is looking out on the other side of the road. He screams: "Hey look, our kindergarten! They destroyed the building near our garden!"

Majed, my 6-year-old nephew, asks me "Who did this?"

I answer, "The airplane."

"I know, but *who* is in the airplane?"

I look at the woman and say: "You can sell your vegetables here."

Majed repeats his question

"*Who* did this destruction?"

I look at him and say: "The Israelis. But don't ask me who they are now because if you look just in front of you, you'll see where we'll buy our stuff."

There was huge truck distributing flour to people.

We sat and waited until some families got their quota and then they sat in the sun and started selling half of what they'd received.

An old woman was sitting covering her face.

I went to her and asked if I could buy from her.

"Yes, please, I have to get back quickly. If my sons know I am here, they'll be upset with me. I came because we have nothing left at home. And we have twelve children at home who need to eat three times a day."

I asked her why she is selling the flour in this case.

"Because we got two bags from UNRWA, we'll use one and with the money of the other one we'll buy vegetables."

"Ok, then how much is this?"

"NIS180."

"Why? It was 90, I say.

"Everyone in the market is selling at this price."

"Ok then, I will take it."

Some young men come and help me put it in the trunk.

When I switch the car on, Dima asks: "Why did you buy that sack of flour? It's got 'Not for Sale' written on it"

I look at her jokingly: "I *bought* it, I will not *sell* it, because it is not for sale."

What else do we need, Dima?"

She looks at the small paper where my mother has listed all her needs.

"We still need everything, you only bought one thing."

"Sugar, my grandmother said: 'don't forget sugar,'" Arslan offers.

We look everywhere but find nothing but vegetables.

So we buy what we like. And then what we don't like, just in case.

And we drive back, with my eyes staring only straight ahead.

I hear Wael, Arslan, Dima and Majed playing their new game "I see something different."  
I'm not ready to look.

Shelling starts in Khan Younis.  
Strikes somewhere not far, but far.  
I drive quickly, passing down the main market road – a road I've not been able to drive down for the past 20 years because it's always so packed full of people and stands.  
Today I can drive as fast as I want.  
It's totally empty.

### **Back home**

We reach home and everyone's happy.  
Finally, we've managed to get flour, which is most important.  
Wael enters the house and announces to my mother:  
    We brought you flour.  
    But no sugar.  
    The toy shop is closed.  
    The supermarket is closed.  
    The woman who sells the flour doesn't have any chocolate.  
    She doesn't sell cars or airplanes.  
    She is covering her face.  
    She didn't want us to know her.

The phone rings.  
Wael runs to answer.  
"Hello. Who is it?"  
He's silent for a moment, then: "No, we don't have any..."  
A few more seconds of silence.  
"But we need sugar."  
"And I want a car and an airplane with a remote control."

I run to pick up the second phone. This boy is out of control. He has to stop asking my friends to buy him things every time they call:  
"Hello?..."  
It's a recorded message from the Israeli military.  
The message repeats:  
"If you have guns at home you should get rid of them."  
"If you are hiding any of the militias, report them at the following number..."  
"If you have information you want to share, call the following number..."

I look at Wael. He looks back at me, his eyes are asking my permission to request the caller to buy chocolate for his brothers too. I give him the Ok.  
So he adds: "Bring some for Majed and Arslan and Dima too."

Precisely at 1pm, the cease fire starts.  
I was right in my calculation and logic.

The military planes are back in the sky, performing their daily shock and awe show, complete with the sound and motion. But today they've added flying balloons and they're drawing lines across the sky with the smoke of the airplanes. The chorus of kids crying their hearts out starts up across the neighborhood again. I secretly congratulate myself -- going to the market before the ceasefire was a wise choice. But now it's time to go comfort and hug the kids.

*11 January, 2008*

"What's wrong with your rooster?" my friend shouts down the phone line.

"It's 9 pm and he's crowing as if it's dawn!"

"Suffering jetlag," I explain.

"They didn't sleep all night because of the explosions.

"They're hungry because there's no feed for them in the market.

"And an Apache just lit up the whole Khan Younis skyline with their flares.

"They think it's the morning.

"But don't worry, they'll go back to sleep," I assure her.