

Eye Sea

Fares Amer

Ahmad woke up, sitting up as his mother shook him, to the bitter quietness of his home. Each day, this unwelcomed silence seemed to grow thicker, crawling upon both the house and Ahmad.

She was sitting on his bed, her hand on his shoulder. They gazed into each other's eyes for a moment; Ahmad could tell she had had very little sleep. He had noticed the recent wrinkles and gray hair before, but his insides tore as he clearly saw her chest and shoulder bones protruding. Their suffering had now lasted for hundreds of days, but this day was evasive.

"We'd better set off right now," she said in a whisper. In recent times they spoke very little to each other, and when they did, they spoke in hushed voices, as if the walls had taken part of the ongoing war and were not to be trusted. Every part of the plan was undoubtedly real, then, and he had to face it all. He slowly nodded-his chest heaving-as her hand gently circled his face. Saying no more words, she left the room. Ahmad watched her leave and sighed. They were enduring harsh weather in the month of January, and so he could see his breath in his own room.

It suddenly hit him that he ought to be strong, for his mother. He stood up and gathered the very little of his possessions he had packed earlier. They had sold what they could sell, threw away things they didn't want to be in other's hands, and packed what they needed the most, yet it was all of no value to Ahmad. He opened the bag and checked-perhaps for the tenth time-on the portrait of his brother. It was there; and his brother was still in it; and he was still beaming happily at Ahmad. The portrait was all that was left of him...

Moving through its narrow corridors and spacious rooms, Ahmad quite understood it was the last stroll he took, ever, in the house, and that as soon as they left it would no longer be their home (for it could no longer offer them safety). He threw his bag next to the front door and called for his mother. Having heard no answer, he went to her room. The door stood ajar, and through the opening he saw the figure of his mother silhouetted against the gray window, kneeling on the floor, her hands raised high in prayer, and her lips murmuring hurriedly to God. His mouth dry, he decided to go wait for her outside.

As soon as he left the house, cold wind caressed his face. The sky was faintly lit as it was dawn and the sun had not come out completely yet. He stood waiting absentmindedly on one of the steps, facing the old garden that had once been fantastic. Ahmad's family had lived a happy life on a farm.

His mind was in free fall, dreaming vividly. Or was it rather only leafing through pages of time and memory? First it was autumn, and the farm was vibrant and full of loved ones who had come to the annual harvest of olives, and all the young cousins played their time away. Then it was winter, cold and cruel outside. Yet within the walls of the house, the space was entirely cozy and joyous. Then came the long awaited spring; that same garden was green, full of colorful roses and annoying rabbits, and on it he and his brother had the best of times. Summer would follow; the sky blue, the wild alive, the fields all ready to be harvested, and the school closed. The days

were long, and often the farm work exhausted the child-Ahmad. However, a glass of cold juice would always cheer him and his brother up. Probably his favorite time of year had been summer, where he-

It was all suddenly interrupted when his mother wrapped her arm around his shoulders, giving him a scare.

“Are you ready?” she asked. Although Ahmad did not answer, they started into the rusty farm gate. The bags dangling by their sides, they walked slowly, and with each step Ahmad thought he was getting far too distant from the house than he should. He stopped and burst out.

“Let’s *stay*.” He pleaded. “I beg you, let us *stay*!”

“Ahmad, Ahmad, A-ahmad! We shall leave,” She said vehemently. “We have to.”

Both of their blue eyes met briefly before she hid hers and looked down; they were coated with glistening tears. It was painful to Ahmad, and so he tried to remember to go easy on his mother and to submit to all that was to happen; he was all she had left, and she was all he had left.

Ahmad and his mother by-and-by crossed the great gate. She took the task of closing it, and it made a crackling noise all the way. The gate was shut with a pretty loud clang amidst the silence, making unfocused Ahmad jump. Never before in his life had he felt as much agony. The gate was closed, and so was a life that he had known and dearly loved. The unknown life that laid ahead frightened him.

A pickup truck already stood waiting for them on the dirt road facing the gate. His mother talked to the driver, giving him the money he had asked for. Then they sat self-consciously with a group of tired faces in the back, facing their farm. Ahmad glanced at his room’s window, the barn building, the swing. The vehicle’s motor roared, and he could hear the sound of the wheels running against pebbles. He raised his hand in farewell, and so they rode on, on a journey not of their choice...the image of the farm gradually faded in the dawn...

The entire ride seemed surreal, and Ahmad kept fighting an urge to sleep; his eyes closed unwillingly from time to time, and when they opened he saw the scene around him had shifted. Whatever land they crossed, there seemed to be a sort of silence in which he could find no peace; it was rather tense and alarming, as if the air itself had been cautiously anticipating bombs and bullets and blood. All was silent on the truck. He was in his mother’s arms, shielded from the dust-laden wind.

The sun was hidden behind dense clouds as Ahmad and his mother crossed yet another gate, this time leaving their home country. They went through hours of procedures and then his mother talked to a couple of men. Ahmad realized she knew exactly what she was doing, and that it all had been planned out earlier.

“Where are we heading to, mama?” He inquired; all he knew was that they were fleeing for their lives. She answered him saying she had a brother whom Ahmad had never met before. He lived with his family in a place where safety and prosperity were well reserved. That was where.

Then, without saying goodbye to their silent companions, they were driven away in a van with some new strangers. By that time it was dark again, and Ahmad yielded his consciousness to

sleep, falling into pleasant dreams of the past and horrifying nightmares of the present-the two colliding in the boy's mind...

He woke up as golden sunshine coming through the window pleasantly shone on his face. His mother was in slumber, her chest slowly moving back and forth. She seemed to be in peace, and that brought comfort to her child. He was in the beginning of his teenage years, but perhaps he was ahead of time; perhaps he had grown up a little too quickly. Obscuring the sun from disturbing her sound sleep, he brought down the window curtain.

As he turned his face he saw an elderly man smiling at him. The man was almost toothless, yet his smile was beautiful. Ahmad smiled back.

"Where do you reckon you are going to?" He asked quietly.

"I'm not sure," Ahmad honestly answered.

"Well, I hope we all find peace wherever we're going," he sighed. "Never forget your home, boy, I beg you. Never forget your home."

Ahmad's mind was troubled by the old man's request, and he thought about it. Home. The father, the mother, the brother, the farm, the cat, the trees. It all was eternally in his heart.

"How could I?" And the old man's wrinkled face brightened. He fell silent for a while, and then asked: "What do you wish you to become once you're a man?" Ahmad felt that the man was feeling lonesome, and desired to talk.

"I don't know," said Ahmad truthfully.

"I had a grandson, no older than you... and did not get to grow any older," his voice quivered. "We spent an awfully long time with each other, and we did always enjoy it. He *is* dear to me, and whether or not he's around me right now playing, he's everywhere in my heart. His dream was to become a writer; a writer about our home and all its beauty, about the war and the men, women, and children that were lost amidst its dreadful storm. He even promised that he would write about me... We had every right to think I would die first,"

The old man stopped for a couple of minutes, Ahmad waiting sympathetically for him to go on. His words were touching, and hugely relating to Ahmad's personal experience with war; love gets victimized. Ahmad learnt that through hands-on experience. His mother had woken up by then, and was listening to the old man's story, her head still resting against the headrest.

"And I witnessed it," his eyes were full of tears. "My poor grandson, bombarded along with his dreams. He had his head in the clouds, I say now." And the old man sobbed in his own old tired trembling way.

Ahmad wished he had a way to relieve him from his pains. He thought of telling him that it's okay and that people die, but Ahmad scorned lying...his brother should have been living, too.

"What is the happiest memory you've got?" was what he could come up with after the old man had finished sobbing. He stared blankly at him, and then turned to look outside the window.

The old man looked back again at him, and confidently said: "The day my daughter brought my grandson into our lives."

The day had started fading when they reached their destination. Ahmad saw a sign that read: *The Aegean Sea* in different languages. It was sea then, the other part of their journey. It was a first for him to be around a sea, and so he gazed at it when it became visible through the window and it looked huge and ghostly. His mother tightly wrapped her arms around him.

They descended from the van and got their bags. The old man was accompanied by a couple of other persons-Ahmad saw-and they nodded to each other from a distance.

The sand was wet from rain, and Ahmad took pleasure in watching the footprints he printed walking. A memory of his brother crossed his mind, forcing him to stop. He took out the portrait and stared at it. They were almost safe now, and his father and brother would remain alive through their memory, within the strong family circle he and his mother were going to build. But were memories enough?

The sky was pale. The sea was dark and cold. And in between, Ahmad and his mother were no less desolate. They sat on a rock among others at twilight waiting for their next ride, listening and watching the choppy waves and the winds that rushed them.

But his mind's eye was watching more of those memories. His older brother had willingly taken a side in the war, sacrificing himself and the brotherhood he shared with Ahmad. He was fully aware that his mother still blamed herself for the death of her son. She did stand in his way vehemently many times, but failed to only once. His father, politically active himself, did not help her, and his silence only fed the stubbornness of his son; they both believed in the war.

"THEY WILL KILL YOU!" Ahmad remembered she hollered at his brother once, and repeated, sobbing: "They will kill you. And then others will forget you." She then turned to her husband, as Ahmad watched silently, and whispered to him: "Don't do this!"

In their room that night, his brother broke the silence: "Brotherhood is timeless, you know that?"

Worried Ahmad wondered hesitantly: "Are you really going to leave the farm?"

He heard no answer at all. A couple of days later he woke up to find his brother gone and his mother lying in despair in the living room. His father was also there, sitting on the edge of an armchair, burying his face in his hands and not too delighted himself. A couple of weeks after that, the screams of his mother woke him from his sleep. He ran fretfully...strangers were in the house, forcefully dragging his father along. He stupidly raced after their car, but dare he say he was too weak to protect his family. True, his mother was still living, but she had been damaged, perhaps beyond repair. *Our life ahead must be bright and healthy*, Ahmad promised himself.

"Ahmad, I have been unfair to you in recent times," she interrupted the silence. "I've not been with you as I ought to be, I'm sorry." She was looking meditatively at the water horizon, and Ahmad thought her face was still beautiful, and felt hugely thankful for she was alive. "We still have challenges together to face, but we will do fine, if God wills. And we will come back when the time comes."

She ran her bony fingers around her neck twice and pulled out what turned out to be a locket. It was small, golden, and decorated with crimson colored strass. She stared in utter admiration at it

and then brought it closer to her chest, slowly closing her eyes.

“This is, let’s say, my gift to you.” She said, smiling as she put the locket around his neck. He curiously checked the beautiful piece; in it was a small family picture of the four of them.

Ahmad took the portrait he had of his brother and showed it to his mother in return. She smiled, holding it close to her face, and let out a quivering sigh. “You know, I’m proud of him...of them.”

They did not have to wait long in the bitter cold for the boat to appear. People, exhausted yet excited, moved closer to the cold water at the boat’s arrival. It was a large white fishing boat, circled with a light-blue stripe. And in the same color was written a word that Ahmad read as *umut*, but as it was in a different language he had no idea what it meant. A few minutes later the smuggler’s boat was boarding its passengers, most of them as Ahmad noticed were gaunt women and gaunt children, along with a few gaunt men. They were all paying money, and no doubt that the business was a good one for its owner. Ahmad and his mother-arm in arm-waited in line for their turn.

Ahmad reckoned that the captain was the man standing next to the boat’s stairs; a tall man with abnormally red eyes, an uncombed greasy black-and-gray hair, and an unshaven chin, dressed in a fat stained grey coat and a cigarette in his mouth. Ahmad stared at him, and the captain smiled once he saw-and dare Ahmad think he had not the most beautiful smile. Ahmad looked away.

The air on board smelled fishy as they made their way through the passengers looking for a place to sit on the deck. By the time they all boarded it was dark; a moonless and a cloudy winter night. There were two lanterns hanged; one in the front and another in the back of the cabin, barely emitting enough light for the passengers to see one another’s faces. They found some space in the bow of the boat and sat down on their bags. Across from them were a young man and a girl of Ahmad’s age, with diffident wide eyes that sparkled in the lantern’s fiery yellow light. She stared at Ahmad who thought they were quite wondrous. She then looked away.

The engine had been awoken, and into the heart of the sea the boat started. It rocked as it went, and Ahmad turned around and saw waves crashing against the boat. The scene sparked an intriguing sensation that they were calling upon him, wanting him to join their unchained lives. He turned back and saw the young man whom the girl was with coming toward them and speaking to his mother. Now that he had a closer look, Ahmad remembered him as a guy from their town. He politely asked Ahmad to go and sit by his sister while he spoke with his mother for a bit, and his mother also nodded. Ahmad did what he was told.

He said hi, but the girl did not answer, and therefore he too remained silent. He watched his mother listening to the young man’s story, frowning as she did. Then, she started telling hers. Ahmad needn’t to hear to know what they were talking about.

“We go to the same school,” the girl out of a sudden said. “We-we used to.”

Ahmad did not know. “Really? I have not seen you around,”

“I have. Where are you *running* to?”

Her question hurt him, and he threw his head forward. He again answered: “I’m not sure.”

The girl was friendlier than he had thought. She told him she and her brother were going to a really nice city that she had pictures of, and that they had a lot of money with them. She then started talking about her home, and then about her class back in school, the friends, the teachers. She was the top of her class and spent most of her afternoons doing homework, and most of her evenings reading. Other than that, she played with her parents or baked delicious treats with her mother. She also enjoyed biking on long summer days in the park located near her house.

Perhaps an hour passed as they conversed without getting tired of it. Ahmad used the opportunity and followed her black eyes the entire time. When they eventually went short on words, they made a vow to each other: when they become old enough, they will get married. They fell silent after that, and the girl slowly fell asleep, peacefully landing on her luggage.

Not much talking was going around the boat, simply because each passenger was busy facing his own fear, and in the middle of sea and night, both fears and hopes equally grew. Ahmad, shivering himself warm, looked again at his mother. She had stopped talking to the young man, but they probably wanted them to get to know each other and to feel less lonesome, and so her brother did not come back for his place.

The cold wind was gusting speedily and the waves had been gaining speed and might. The boat was now rocking like a rocking chair, weakening Ahmad against the grip of sleep; again he fell into dreams.

His eyes flung open in horror at a strong shake of the boat and short shrieks of a couple of passengers. He sat straight up and searched with his eyes for his mother. She had already been looking at him and made a gesture with her hands as though to assure him it was nothing, but it was her face what really was assuring. He nodded and laid back down.

He was too close from falling asleep again when another shake—a much stronger one—brought the rocking boat into a screeching halt. Ahmad sat up like a shot, not at all convinced that the things happening were normal. By then all passengers were awake and alert as well, cautiously trying to listen. The sound of the waves was all they could hear now, and it grew louder when the sound of the engine died away. Ahmad breathed hard, him and his mother watching each other. A man came out from the cabin. He was not the captain himself but was somewhat similar in appearance. He announced that the boat will go on in a couple of minutes when strong rain started falling viciously from the dark above. Now the void was filled with the sound of the powerful waves, the rain cascading, and the infants' sharp cries. *I have to go to mama*, he thought. He looked at his wife-to-be, but she was—surprisingly—still sleeping. He stretched out his arm and shook her, his sight still fixated on his mother. The lantern in the back of the back suddenly went out.

Prayers were whispered loudly and fearful tears started to shed. His mother stood up in panic, her figure short as one of her knees was a little bended. She was the only passenger standing up, and she darted in Ahmad's direction under the rain. She slipped on the wet deck and fell on her shoulder, yet she rose again in a split second, and, as Ahmad realized that their lives were in peril, started again—limping—his way through the cries of the passengers. She was halfway there—

their eyes meeting-when the second lantern went out, and a huge wave ascended the boat.

“MAMA!” Ahmad yelled with all the voice he could muster. His ears and mouth were filled with seawater and he had to close his eyes... He forced them to open but it was of no use; the lanterns were out and the boat had been swallowed in the absolute dark...He felt a hand frantically touching him until it found his face. Perhaps he had heard his name, but his ears were painfully ringing with the water that filled them... He reached to the hand and clutched it, but then yet another wave stroked the boat. He lost the hand and was fighting against the freezing water....

“MAMA, MAMA, MAMA,” He went on yelling, coughing the water out of his chest.

“AHMAD.” He could faintly hear his mother screaming back; she was no longer near him, and so he started crawling on the deck searching for her, while neither did the sky nor the sea stop their attack on the boat, which Ahmad suddenly felt moving. But it was no straight motion... Ahmad searched for something to hold on to as the boat started to diagonally move: the boat was slowly being swallowed by *the Aegean Sea*...

The passengers were all enduring the same fear in that now-anarchic boat, and suddenly he found himself forced out of it along with many others to the dark water, falling hard against it. His arms were flailing as he tried to stay adrift and he gasped for air, for life. He hanged so passionately to it, and had no intention of letting it go...

“MAMA!” He called.

The boat was entirely submerged now, and Ahmad was aware that many souls had already been lost. But where were his mother and the girl and her brother? He swam bravely in the murderous water under the pouring rain and in the unwelcoming darkness, screaming MAMA over and over again, the current almost taking him out many times... All the human voices were one by one fading... He found part of the mast that belonged to the boat and supported himself on it.

“No, no, no, no,” he gasped. “MAMA... MAMA,”

He was now either thinking the words *Mama* and *no* interchangeably over and over in his mind or he was saying them out loud, and he could not tell which. The mast was carrying him in some direction and he did not have to swim anymore, although the water kept rushing into his ears and lungs and he was still struggling. Ahmad stared blindly into the dark. “Mama.” He whispered, causing his chest to burn. He desperately wanted to shout and look for her, but it was like one of his nightmares where he had no control of his own body. The run after the car that stole his father came to his damaged mind, and once again he felt the agony of being too weak to protect his family. At least they were all going to join soon...

But Ahmad would've chosen life, a thousand times over if it was his call, for both of him and his mother. He could sense cold death touch his heart, and despair abundantly washed over him, and he fainted...

A golden sun hung above all misery and all wars, lighting up the seashore where Ahmad laid

unconscious on his stomach, his face pressed against the sand... warm, soft, and wet from the night's storm. Birds were circling in the sky, their wings still most of the time.

Miraculously, his heart was still beating. He woke up gasping for air, water and saliva drooping from his mouth into the sand. He coughed and breathed and grabbed his burning stomach. A minute later he sat straight up. His mind was at loss for memories at first, but there was the mast close to him, and then there was the sea. It did seem placid that noon, yet he knew how powerful and cruel it could be...

He could not understand; he thought the waves were his enemy, yet they carried him to land. But as he came to think about it, it turned out that the waves *were* an enemy so ruthless. They took all he had left but his life, making way for him to feel the loss... the enemy had won.

He had already lost his brother's portrait along with the luggage, and so Ahmad hurriedly checked for the locket his mother had given him, and it, too, was gone. Then young Ahmad broke into tears, and, for they were blue, his eyes created a sea of their own, and in its waters were thousands of pains and thousands of laughs...

Time passed before Ahmad decided to stand up and walk. He limped along the beach; it maybe was a Greek island, he thought, and it seemed deserted. He had no idea where he walked to, but he walked and walked and went on walking, neglecting the screams of his fatigued body. He mounted a hill leading to a cliff that hung high above water, and stood at the edge of it. The breeze ruffled Ahmad's hair and he could see much more of the vast sea from up there; it was possible he was looking where his mother had drowned, or where the old man had, or the girl, or the people of his home.

Ahmad wanted to walk infinitely and so he turned back and was about to start, but the most unusual scene forced him to stop: a shining golden spear hung completely on its own in midair. Its blade was thin and wide, and it was decorated with beautiful crimson colored jewels. Never before had he seen such beauty, and it was calling him and attracting him the way magnet attracts iron. He went for it.

The spear took Ahmad on a journey through time, eventually showing him his own story. He had been weak, unable to fend those he wanted to fend. But now things changed. He had the magical spear and with it he had enough power to save the entire world from all injustices and to end all wars. First he had to find that car, the one that drove his father away from him, and revenge. He would then look for the body of his beautiful mother and build this beautiful graveyard for her. He would forcefully take back his brother's portrait and kill the waves. And then-

No. The world had been ungodly to him, why would he treat it fairly on his part? Anger and hatred shot into his veins altogether. Ahmad's future beheld no happiness, and he was not going to silently bear it. The world had to pay and its people had to suffer....

Ahmad felt his soul was complete again, although in a sense quite different from the one the farm had given him. The war-made Ahmad wanted to kill all the fish in the sea and to fill the skies with *terror*...

Flames appeared out of nowhere and they flew in every direction. The wind was howling and the earth started to shake. The waves themselves came to Ahmad, breaking as they clashed with the great rocks beneath the cliff.

The flames engulfed him, and hundreds of shots of fire flew into the horizon, like shooting stars, some diving into the heart of the sea and some continuing to the land beyond, looking for peace to burn. The sky had gone dark, and heavy raindrops began to fall from its body upon Ahmad's dusty face as he looked up...his eyes closed and his lips arched into an unhappy smile....