

The martyr's mother

By Rama Abu Naaseh

One day while walking around the al-Jalil camp, I came across a Hajjeh in her early eighties sitting on the edge of the road, doing nothing but greeting passers-by and showering them with an abundance of kind and warm wishes. I was curious to find out who this Hajjeh was, and why everybody knew her and greeted her like they would their own mother. So I decided to approach her and extend my greetings to her. When I said hello, she greeted me warmly and treated me with the affection of a grandmother. We got to know each other—Naama Deeb was called "Um Walid"—and we were having a normal conversation, until I learned that she was the mother of a martyr. I could not believe that God had honored me by introducing me to a martyr's mother. From there on, our conversation no longer felt ordinary to me: it turned into an answer to the innumerable questions that were running through my mind about the mothers of martyrs and their lives, as she started telling me the story of her son's martyrdom and some of her experiences as a martyr's mother.

"One day, I was sitting on the roadside in the camp, like where we're sitting now, and a group of children gathered around me, and asked me to tell them about Palestine and my martyr son.

- Is Palestine beautiful, Hajjeh?
- Is it, Hajjeh?
- Palestine is the most beautiful paradise unlike any other.
- So, your son was martyred there?
- No, my son was martyred in Lebanon.

And I started telling them the story of my son Hisham's martyrdom, and nothing could stop me, except the pang as I spoke the words "Hisham was martyred". Then the children chanted: "We are all your children, Hajjeh, oh martyr's mother you are so lucky, if only it were my mother instead of you."

Later, one of them asked me, "Sitti, I hear people say they have the key to Palestine, what is the key to Palestine?"

I told him Kalashnikovs and fedayeen.

In 1983, on the eve of Eid-ul-Adha, while all the mothers were baking ka'ak-al-Eid and preparing their children's clothes, I was sitting on the prayer mat asking God to ease my heart with news about Hisham. My eldest son Walid was preparing the wreath of roses which is traditionally offered every Eid, along with a letter, to the families of martyrs.

Soon after, I hear Walid calling me to help him write the message. I started searching for eloquent words that might help ease the pain of the martyrs' mothers, but I could not find any. I tried imagining myself in their place, but I could not imagine any of my children disappearing forever. So I started writing down every word that came to my mind that might comfort them. When I reached the end of the letter, "From the young men of the camp to the martyr's parents", Walid asked me to stop writing because we didn't know yet which family this letter would be destined to. Never did we expect for these words of consolation to be addressed to me, nor that this unimaginable scene would turn into reality the next morning...

A month prior, Hisham was resisting the Zionists in Beirut, and we weren't receiving any of his news because the roads were cut off, and communications then were not as easy as they are today. After many attempts, Walid found out that Hisham was injured and that he'd been in the hospital for a while. When I heard the news, a fire ignited in my heart, and I sent Walid to Beirut to check on Hisham and bring him back if he could. A few days later, my two sons returned and I held them close to my chest, but the stubborn fighter received the biggest embrace, I held him so tightly and wanted to lock him up in my heart, and I wish I could have.

Hisham started joking and teasing, trying to lighten the atmosphere, after seeing everyone worried about him, then he told us about his adventures, and he stayed with us for a couple of days.

During this time, I tried my best to prevent him from returning to battle, I told him I'd marry him off and he could settle down and live like the rest of these young men and make me happy with grandchildren who would fill our home, but he didn't listen, he was stubborn and determined to continue the resistance with his comrades, and the more I insisted he leave this path, the more determined he was to stay on it.

Until that fateful day when Hisham decided to leave us for Beirut once again, to resist the Zionists and prevent them from occupying Beirut, just as they had occupied our region during the Nakba, and displaced us from it. That day, after I tried to stop him in every way possible, I gave up, held him tight, smelled him and I wanted to never let him go. He said a few words that still ring in my ear every now and then, up to this day, I still feel him in my arms saying them to me, his smell persists: "Promise me, if I become a

martyr, don't cry, don't torment yourself, you must ululate". These few words pierced my heart like a sword. He kissed my forehead and my hands and he left, and from then on I knew nothing about him until the day of Eid-ul-Adha.

On the morning of Eid, the camp was unusually quiet, and as I went on my annual visits to my neighbors and relatives, I suddenly saw my son's friend Hashem walking on the road, looking like a homeless man, crying. I asked him "Why are you crying like a little child?" He told me: "Hisham has become a martyr, yamma"...

Before I could comprehend what I had heard, my stubborn beloved's words flooded back into my mind: "Don't cry, don't torment yourself, you must ululate, don't cry, don't torment yourself, you must ululate." I kept reminding myself not to cry one tear, not to collapse, not upset the hero. So I went and informed the rest of the family, I prepared the roses and the rice in a tray, I carried them in one hand and I carried the kalashnikov in the other, and I went with his aunts to prepare for his procession until his body arrived. The young men carried him, and his aunts and I walked behind them with the kalashnikovs and we started celebrating and ululating, his funeral was large and very quick, we buried him and I placed the soil with my own hands, on the grave of Hisham, my eyes, my heart, my soul, I buried him with my own hands and I left... Since then, people console me saying: "The pain eases with time and you get used to it" and I believed them. But after almost 30 years, I realized that I had fooled myself and the people around me, the pain neither fades nor leaves, and it was me who was buried that day, not Hisham.

After about 30 years, on the anniversary of the Nakba, the Qur'an memorization mosque put on a play about a martyr, and they asked me to play the role of the martyr's mother. They said: "We would like you to celebrate the martyr the way you celebrated Hisham, and to ululate for him on stage", to which I agreed. I went on stage, and there was a little boy acting out the martyr's part, wrapped in the Palestinian flag, and in front of him were two boys whose features I couldn't make out, but I noticed them wearing uniforms like the Zionists. At that moment, I couldn't control myself, I attacked one of them, hitting him, not hearing anything else around me, not the crowd's noise, or the play's music, or the officials trying to remove me, since this scene was not part of the agreement. All I heard was Hisham's voice, instructing me "If I become a martyr, don't cry, don't torment yourself, you must ululate." I only regained my senses when they separated me from the actor who was playing the Zionist soldier. I stood up, I gathered myself, and I was ready to celebrate the martyr the way I had celebrated my son. As soon as I heard the ambulance, I became tongue-tied, I couldn't hear a thing anymore, the elders and the audience stood up, encouraging me to speak and do as I did when I celebrated my son, the real martyr, but I couldn't. All I could think of was Hisham's

voice, his smell and his laughter. They took me off the stage, and the Sheikh introduced me to the audience and told them my story to explain what had happened. That day, I understood that the tear I repressed on the day Hisham became a martyr had not disappeared or diminished, but it had accumulated in my heart over time like a waterfall of tears, frustration, helplessness and hatred towards our occupiers."

Hajjeh Um Walid went on talking about the camp, and Palestine, and displacement, but I could no longer focus on her words, my mind was lost in the conundrum of martyrs' mothers. Hajjeh Um Walid was not the only one who had suffered years of psychological warfare after hearing the news of her son's martyrdom, most mothers of martyrs are like her, but one of them surpassed the stage of natural grief and suffering, reaching a state of disbelief and denial... Hajjeh Um Aziz, a Palestinian refugee in Lebanon, a mother of four martyrs, or a mother of four missing sons, according to her.

The children of Hajjeh Um Aziz were martyred in the Sabra and Shatila massacre, but her subconscious mind realized that her heart would not bear the news of three martyred sons, so it decided to keep it a secret from her, and told her that they were missing and that there was still hope for their return. Um Aziz told a story that happened to her 15 years after losing her children. She was praying the 'Asr prayer at home when she felt the presence of one of her sons beside her, wandering around the house. She said to herself, "They're back, I will finish my prayer and see them", but before she could complete her prayer, she saw him in front of her, washing his face and then leaving the room, so she ran looking for him around the house but she didn't find her son or any trace of him. She ran down angrily to her sons' wives, shouting at the top of her voice, "May Allah punish you, just tell me you want to get married and I'll marry you, he came but he couldn't find you, I don't know where he went looking for you." She kept beating herself and repeating this phrase until she completely lost consciousness and fell to the ground. When she woke up, she realized that her son had not returned, and that she had hallucinated his presence around her, but she was unaware that the delusions wouldn't stop at that specific hallucination. Since the moment her children were martyred, she has been living inside a bubble of illusion that keeps her in a constant state of waiting. She places their pictures in front of her bed and converses with them all night, thinking, "What if they took one and beat him in front of the other, what if one of them has a cold, what if one of them has fever, poor them, on the day of Eid, they're wondering is my mother still alive or dead, my father, is he still alive or dead", going on and on until sleep overtakes her and steals her away from her illusions.

Before finishing my meeting with Hajjeh Um Walid, I was curious about how the condolence letter she wrote herself impacted her. She said, "It was useless, there is not

a single word in the universe that can alleviate or erase the pain of Hisham's martyrdom."

I then realized what Elia Abu Madi meant with his saying: "All the philosophies in the world cannot console someone who has lost."