

The Palestinian Kuffiya

Below is a short story written by Vesna Al Masharifa, a Yugoslavian friend of the Palestinian revolution, based on her experience during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon.

Second week of Ramadan...The war in Lebanon was magnifying. The heavy burden of dark presentiments inhabited the vacancy left in the houses of families whose members were fighters in Lebanon. Ramadan's prayers and fasting permeated the hot sandy days and gloomy nights to break the unendurable uncertainty that had become the people's daily life rhythm.

In that time, Amna was in Damascus. She and part of her family had left their house in Ain al Hilweh camp near Saida, South Lebanon, after the Israeli invasion, and arrived in Damascus. Then Amna participated in social work in the Palestinian camp, Yarmouk. She was assigned to collect clothes from people in the camp for wounded comrades, and to pay visits to the Palestinian hospital, Jaffa, where she distributed cigarettes, newspapers and other personal things needed by the wounded comrades.

Every morning she would appear in her military uniform with a broad smile and the first drops of sweat on her forehead as an intimation of a new broiling day. Her curls were plastered over her eyebrows and she was always pushing them back before addressing someone. Although she was a silent person, a bit closed, her gesticulation was vehement and her lean figure moved with haste. Her eyes were set in deep hollows and always shining with tenderness and exhilaration. Everybody loved her and liked to tell her their life story. So, much of that she carried in her heart.

That morning Amna set off to the headquarters in Yarmouk to prepare things for the hospital. It was 8 a.m., but the sun was already very strong. Therefore, she kept trying to conceal herself under the shadows of the stone houses. «This street is so similar to the street where I lived in Saida», she concluded, glancing at the glittery yellow, dusty street, «but now everything there is ruined and there is only the debris of the houses sagging deeper and deeper into the ground...Who knows? Maybe our house is still undestroyed.» She rushed through the golden strip the sun had made through a crack in the wall and stumbled on a big stone which was in its shade. «Oh», she cried out, catching her toe in awkward pain, and instinctively sank down on the stone, checking to see if it was seriously hurt. There was no blood. She decided to rest for a while.

Then her attention was drawn by the excited voices coming from the other side of the street, which belonged to a group of barefooted and soiled boys around ten years old.

«What makes them so excited?» Amna was curious, trying to catch their discussion.

«Ohohoo, I am not going to be deceived this time», shouted a bowlegged boy bluntly. «Every time you need somebody to be an Israeli soldier, come along Hassan! This time I am very sure that I don't want to be...Why isn't it Ahmad this

time?» He turned towards a skinny boy in worn-out trousers and shirt with sparkling eyes. Now Amna knew who Ahmad was, especially when he started to shout:

«I have been two times! Yes, yes, you remember? The first time you broke my head and the second time, my face was awfully scratched...»

«What do you think? To be an Israeli soldier and not be beaten?» a new voice interrupted him angrily.

«Then you be the enemy, Omar,» Ahmad was bold enough to respond without restraining his temper.

The boy named Omar snubbed him, «You know my father was killed by Israelis...»

Ahmad felt uncomfortable, trying uncertainly to keep his sombre face in the same expression.

«Oh, let us stop our quarrel,» appealed a short undernourished boy. «Let us begin our game. I suggest that whoever is chosen to be our army leader today, will propose the enemy.»

«Yes, yes, we agree,» the boys accepted.

«If you agree, I can be the leader today,» the same voice continued.

«Oh, look at him!» Hassan protested, «You were last time and now you want to be again.»

«Okay, who do you suggest?» The boy was a bit ashamed of his immodesty.

«Omar, Omar!» somebody shouted.

Omar was very pleased to hear his name and tried to hide a smile that was timidly stealing from his lips.

«Do you agree on Omar?» the same boy asked.

«Yes, yes, Omar.» The boys were sure that it was a good choice.

«Okay then, Omar, I promote you to leader of the Palestinian army,» the boy continued with visible importance.

«Okay, okay, I agree, thank you comrades,» Omar was very proud and still holding his smile. Then he cleared his throat. Somebody passed a Palestinian-kuffiya to him and he started to wrap it around his head.

«Comrades,» he resumed in a voice still hoarse, trying again to clear his throat, «Today we will begin to apply a new plan for tearing Sharon to pieces. And I am sure it will work...»

«But who will be Sharon?» somebody broke in.

«Hm...» Omar had a problem making the decision abruptly. «Well, I think it's better for somebody to volunteer himself.» He found a solution and then, silence...

«We are an army, comrades, and the enemy will not wait for us. We have to act accordingly and quickly.» Omar commenced to convince the soldiers.

At that moment a strange, squeaky laughter cut through his words. The boys and Amna as well automatically turned in the direction of the sound. The owner was a chubby boy in