

Love Comes from the North

Sayed Ismail. Palestine

*Don't fall in love with a Palestinian.
He may die at any moment.
He faces many bullets and
jail is a familiar place –
he's often known to stop there.
Don't fall in love with a Palestinian.
If he's neither shot nor jailed,
memories imprison him.
We never forget.
Don't ever fall in love with him.
You may find he's forever exiled.*

Yamen Nubana

“You know nothing about my world,” Fares messaged her one day.

“I know a lot,” she shot back. “It’s a world full of war, violence, fear and death. You abuse women. They’re not equal to men. Your community still sends terrorists all over the world. You don’t care if you kill innocent Western or Israeli civilians because you claim they’re all your enemies and don’t deserve to live.”

Her reply shocked him. This was never his world. “You said you’re coming to Egypt soon. How about coming to Gaza to see everything up close?” he suggested.

There was no reply. He secretly blamed his friend George, the Romanian journalist, who’d been to Gaza twice. Fares was a freelance journalist and had worked with George as a translator and news editor. They’d worked together for several months before George asked him if he could put the two of them in contact. “Her name is Anastasia,” George said. “She’s a recent journalism graduate from Romania and she wants to get in touch with a Palestinian journalist.”

“No problem, send her my e-mail. She can get me on Messenger,” Fares replied, unaware of where it would lead.

Anastasia said she lived in Budapest but had roots in Timișoara, where the revolt against Nicolae Ceaușescu’s regime started. Her mother and father were divorced and her mother was a manager for a multinational company in Roman. She had a twin sister.

Something he couldn’t put his finger on moved him to keep up the correspondence despite their repeated differences. Often their serious online conversations continued long into the night. Once again he suggested she come to Gaza to see for herself, but she ignored him on that topic and attempted to switch to another one. He repeated the invitation time after time but she never agreed to the trip.

With time he began to notice changes, though, despite her prejudices. She seemed keen to learn the truth from him. He began talking about the bitter reality of his life in Gaza and mentioned that 80% of the residents were dependent on outside humanitarian aid. Malnutrition is widespread among women and children and 95% of the water is unsafe to drink, he told her, amidst many other shocking statistics.

Early in their correspondence, she’d insisted that Palestinians were the guilty party, that they bore all the responsibility for what was happening. Now that she realized what was going on, she was trying to understand, despite her insistence that Palestinians admit the part they played in it all.

He asked her once for a picture and she sent him an astonishing photo of her and her

twin. They seemed close. Anastasia's eyes were as blue as a clear sky, her smile revealed white teeth, and golden hair fell to her shoulders.

He couldn't sleep that night. His heart beat as if it would break out of his chest, but he decided to keep his feelings to himself and leave their relationship on the level of friendship.

She asked to talk with their webcams on and her first reaction was, "Ah! So this is you? I imagined you with dark skin, dark eyes, dark hair. But I see brown eyes and white skin. Your hair is almost blond. And you're truly handsome." He smiled, replying, "Thank you, Anastasia. You are also beautiful." After that, they kept the webcams on when they talked, and their discussions were less tense. He sometimes thought he saw a look of admiration in her eyes. He wondered if what he saw was real.

"Tell me why you don't want to come to Gaza," he asked one night.

She was silent again, but this time she seemed thoughtful. She finally answered.

"Fares, I'll be frank with you. I'm still thinking about it. It's not an easy decision. It's Gaza we're talking about. You've been under siege since last year and it's not an easy trip to make. Let me think about it."

That was in August. Two months later she gave him the news he'd been longing for. "I'm going to Egypt at the end of December. I'll try to enter Gaza from there and spend New Year's Eve and two more weeks with you. Does that make you happy?"

"Very happy. I'm very pleased and looking forward to it."

"My twin sister will come too."

"No problem – you're both welcome. I just hope you can get in. The Rafah crossing was closed long ago and I don't expect they'll open it just for the sake of your beauty!"

She smiled and replied, "We shall see!"

The day he'd long been waiting for finally came, and he wondered how the twins would manage to enter the Gaza Strip. Impossible right now, he told himself. The Rafah crossing used to be opened on both sides for three days once every forty days at most for humanitarian reasons – so patients or students could move in or out. But it wasn't likely that a foreign journalist would manage to enter. Though the Al Jazeera journalist Ghasan bin Jiddo once managed to get in secretly through the tunnels, and Miko Peled, the Israeli famous for sympathizing with Palestinians, managed to cross too.

Surprisingly, both sisters entered Gaza officially on the 23rd of December 2008 – and at Rafah. He witnessed the miracle himself.

The twins' appearance, in tight blouses and skin-tight black pants, caught him by surprise. He wondered if they felt the late December cold, but their style of dress wasn't the only surprise. As soon as she saw him, Anastasia gave him a warm greeting and her sister Renata even hugged him. It made him feel extremely shy and he said, "Damn it, Renata, do you think we're in New York? This is Gaza, and you're in front of Hamas security men!" He later explained why the greeting was disastrous, and that he'd be blacklisted as one of those who'd "incurred anger" as a result of her hug and their clothes. She protested innocence: "I just found it warm here, so I assumed it's OK to wear this. It's snowing in my country."

Their car finally reached Gaza's Tel al-Hawa neighborhood, where his family had agreed they could stay. Fares, a 28-year-old single man, lived in a two-story house, where the first floor provided a place to receive guests, especially on feast days and special occasions. This was where the twins would sleep and where the whole family turned out to welcome them. There were his mother, his sister

Leen and his brother Ahmed, and his father, the only one who could speak English fluently with them. His mother greeted them formally in Arabic: “Welcome. Please make yourselves at home. You are both my daughters, just like Leen.” She asked her son for their names.

“Anastasia and Renata,” Fares introduced them.

For their stay in the family’s house, she gave them Arabic names and Anastasia became Anisa and Renata became Rema. She loved them, they loved her, and all was going well. After they’d unpacked, Fares asked them how they’d managed to pass into Gaza. They smiled and Anastasia said, “Money, my friend. The company where my mother works has a branch in Egypt, and she has many contacts among powerful people. She arranged for us to enter officially with a small bribe of five thousand dollars.”

The schedule Fares had arranged for them was a busy one. They visited refugee camps, hospitals, aid organizations and human rights groups. Conditions were truly catastrophic and what the sisters saw astonished them. “I never imagined things would be so bad,” Renata said.

“They’re worse than anyone would imagine,” he replied.

After a few days, it seemed clear to him that Anastasia had feelings for him. The way she often kept his hand between her soft ones. The way she lowered her eyes to hide her feelings. And Renata seemed jealous – he also noticed that. But everything went well until the 27th of December, an unforgettable Saturday when they were making their way back from Gaza’s port, where the sisters had been talking to fishermen about their difficulties. As they were walking by Al-Shifa Hospital, the earth shook: the sisters cried out and moved closer to him for protection.

“Let’s go into the hospital,” he shouted. Ambulance sirens were screaming and smoke from fires all over Gaza filled the sky, telling of death and destruction.

Soon the bodies began to arrive, and the morgue filled with the dead arranged side by side. Most of those killed were policemen, but some were schoolchildren who’d happened to be passing security checkpoints. It was a gallery of death and Anastasia was crying inconsolably. “Let’s go home,” she urged. “I can’t take any more of this.” Renata was in shock, crying silently.

Fares drove them home while the air strikes continued. They found most of the windows broken, but his family unhurt. Leen was crying and as soon as Fares entered she told him her friends Mariam and Hanaa had been killed.

“They were passing by the Ministry of the Interior, Fares, not far from our house. I might have been with them if I’d left only five minutes earlier. I can’t imagine that.” He tried to calm her down before he went downstairs to the guest rooms, where he found Renata and Anastasia arguing loudly. They both stopped as he walked in and he asked them what was wrong. Anastasia broke the silence.

“I have three things to tell you, Fares. The first is that I love you.”

His smile was meant to ask what else there was to tell.

She pointed to her sister and said, “Renata does too.” Though he’d smiled with Anastasia’s first revelation, the smile began to fade.

“And something else, Fares.”

But Renata, realizing what her sister was about to say, shouted, “Anastasia, shut up.”

“Let him know. He has to know,” Anastasia replied and she turned back to him and said, “Fares, my love, we are Israelis. We came here to write about our experience

entering and staying in Gaza.” She paused and continued, “Fares. Why are you looking at me this way? Please say something. Anything.”

The shock had been great and he moved to the nearest chair and sat with his head in his hands. He didn’t know how much time passed before he raised his head again to see Anastasia standing still, eyes filled with tears, while her sister sat looking at him, pulling hard on her cigarette. “Tell me the whole truth now. Don’t keep anything back,” he said in a low voice.

And so she did. She said they were Jewish Israelis from the Ramat Aviv neighborhood in Tel Aviv. They held Romanian passports and were fluent in the language, as their mother spent long periods of time back in Romania. They’d both loved journalism since childhood and decided to become journalists, both taking the Baghrouh high school degree. Anastasia had wanted to make contact with a Palestinian journalist and so she approached George, who she knew through her work in Tel Aviv, and asked him to introduce her to an open-minded, intelligent journalist. That was how they were introduced.

“And why did you come to Gaza? I need to know,” he asked.

“Remember it was you who first suggested it, and who brought it up again and again. I agreed because I wanted to know the truth and write about it for Israel, just like Yoram Binur did.

“Binur?”

“An Israeli journalist. He was fluent in Arabic and in the late 80s he pretended to be a Palestinian and later wrote about the racism Israelis subjected him to. I had to see all this for myself and document it. Only one thing bothered me. It was my love for you, Fares. I’m a Jewish Israeli and you’re a Muslim Palestinian. And now what’s made things even

worse is that my sister loves you too! And the worst of all is that there is much more hatred between our people than you can imagine, Fares. We cannot stay with each other. It’s impossible.”

“You have to leave Gaza as soon as you can,” he agreed. “If you stay here it means you’re both at risk. What if anyone discovered the truth by chance? It would be a serious problem.

“But there’s something else,” he continued. “I love you too. But after what you’ve said, you have to leave, Anastasia. I fear that one day I’ll see the two of you holding guns against us. I can’t hope to be with a woman if she’s one of them. I’ll wonder if I might see her at a military checkpoint at a border or somewhere along my way to seek treatment for me or someone in my family.”

He let out a long, slow breath and said in a voice full of sorrow, “I witnessed the first intifada, saw terrible things. Do you have any idea what I would have faced if they’d caught me holding the flag of Palestine? I could be imprisoned for six months, and why? Just for holding the flag of my country. I watched them break the bones of children’s hands, and I knew they imprisoned and tortured them. I also saw how violence increased on both sides during the second intifada. We’re now heading for more blood and violence, and oh my dear, there’s no hope our love would last through it.”

Despite his words, both sisters insisted on staying to observe what happened. Israeli troops were able to occupy significant areas of Gaza and divide the strip into three sectors, while Israeli tanks followed them in. His neighborhood was evacuated. He saw his family off to his uncle’s house in the Rimal neighborhood and both sisters went with them. A neighbor in his eighties refused to leave home, despite his sons’ entreaties. “They

got me to leave Ashkelon sixty-one years ago. They invaded the land here twice, and they're still controlling our lives even now. I've had enough of escaping. I'm not going anywhere – better to let them kill me. I'll go nowhere that's not my own grave. Not even an inch outside the house.”

The attack finally ended twenty-three days later, and the sisters had to leave then. His mother and sister embraced them, and his father and brother were moved. He wondered how his family would behave if they knew the sisters were Israelis. Would they still feel as friendly?

They left Gaza through the Rafah crossing with their Romanian passports. They stayed in touch with Fares, but the love story held out no hope. The Israelis attacked Gaza again in 2012, when more than twice as many missiles rained down as in 2008. After one attack, Fares met a neighbor who reported happily that Hamas and Islamic Jihad missiles had reached Tel Aviv.

He grasped his neighbor by the shoulders and asked excitedly about casualties.

“None so far. The missiles don't have much destructive power, but why do you care?” the neighbor asked, surprised by his reaction.

“Did the missiles reach Ramat Aviv?” Fares insisted.

“Ramat what?”

He left his neighbor and wandered the streets, remembering when Anastasia and Renata went through the iron gate at the Rafah crossing. “My love, Fares, do not forget us. Remember there are two hearts there in Tel Aviv that love you.” So whispered Anastasia to him in her special English accent. Then a wave, and she and her sister were gone. That was at the end of January 2009, when the attacks ceased.

Now, a heavy rain was falling, the first rain of an unusually warm winter, but he took no notice of it. If it rains shells and missiles one day, maybe it will rain love and hope another.