# WHEN THE BULBUL STOPPED SINGING

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*A Diary of Ramallah Under Siege*

Raja Shehadeh

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# INTRODUCTION

## *I Told You So, I Told You So, I Told You So*

The word *curfew* is derived from the Old French *couvre-few*, meaning "to cover fire." In Europe during the Middle Ages, a church bell would toll at a fixed hour — eight o'clock in winter, sunset in summertime — to instruct villagers to move indoors, bank their hearths, extinguish the flames, and prepare for sleep. It was, essentially, a practice designed to prevent the leap of potential fire from one house to another.

In around 1066, when William of Normandy — also known as William I, William the Conqueror, or, sometimes, William the Bastard — conquered England, he began to use the curfew as a practical way to get the Saxons off the streets. The subjugated Saxons became second-class citizens, and curfew was an essential part of the political chiaroscuro: Lights out; troublemakers inside. Darkness. Security. Control.

Since then curfew has been invoked just about everywhere, from the streets of Berlin, to the alleyways of Belfast, to the favelas of Brazil, to the boulevards of Paris, to the thoroughfares of Singapore, to the souks of Marrakech, to the docklands of Greece. It is mentioned in Shakespeare (*The Tempest*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*) as a time when the spirits were relieved from their confinement and allowed, until the first cockcrow, to roam freely. The word now suggests a lockdown, a suppression of the undercurrent, a tamp-down of a larger tide.

Raja Shehadeh's memoir, *When the Bulbul Stopped Singing*, begins under curfew in 2002. (The song of the bulbul reminds

Shehadeh of the phrasing *I told you so, I told you so, I told you so*.) It is the time of the Second Intifada. While the First Intifada (1987–1993) had brought a cohesive sense of purpose to the Palestinian community, revolving around civil protest and largely symbolized by stone throwers standing up to a military heavyweight, the Second Intifada (2000–2005) was considered, especially in its wake, to have shattered those stones into a terrible bomb-dust.

Shehadeh's book, which takes place in Ramallah over the course of a month, places us squarely in the middle of that glaucoma storm. He gazes out from his window, past the trees, beyond the hills, right into the territories of our own complicit hearts.

Shehadeh is a human rights activist, a lawyer, a hill-walker, a writer, a cultural icon, a man in pursuit of reality and justice. Born in 1951, he has resided all his life in houses that have overlooked the hills of Ramallah in the West Bank. A polite, provocative, piercing man, he now lives in a beautiful low house just off the Tireh Road, on the outskirts of the city: a small gate, a large ornate steel door, an entranceway of Damascus furniture, a window out to a courtyard, a lemon tree laden with yellow fruit. One can imagine the house once, looking out to the quiet hills, waiting for rain and an explosion of green shrubbery. At night, as a boy, Shehadeh could see Jaffa in the distance, and he pined for the house that his parents had been forced to leave in the war of '48. He can still see the lights of Jerusalem and Jaffa from the nearby hilltops. (One must remember that Israel and Palestine together are not much bigger than Wales.)

The house has become more and more suburban in recent years, crowded in not just by Israelis' settlements across the valley, but by flagrant and slipshod Palestinian construction too: nearby flyways and malls and empty hulks of apartments. Yet Shehadeh's house maintains its sense of peace and calm. It comes across not just as an oasis but as a living piece of chamber music: step inside, take a breath, listen. It is here that Shehadeh invites us to stay during the

month of April 2002, opening us to the terrible silence alongside the dream of symphony.

Shehadeh begins the book two days after a Palestinian suicide bomber blows himself up in Netanya, Israel, during Passover. Scores of Palestinians and Israelis have already been killed. He recognizes immediately the terrible moral toll the violence has taken on both sides. The city is in lockdown. The tanks are waiting in the streets. Bombs explode in the distance. Jets roar overhead. His wife, Penny, is away. His brother's house is occupied by Israeli soldiers.

The reader can sense Shehadeh in the corridors, in slippers and open-neck shirt, going from room to room, alert to every noise. Fifty years old, he paces the length of the corridor for exercise. He tunes the radio to BBC News. He slips a CD into the player. When the lights go out, he reads by candlelight. He makes sure the windows are darkened. Snipers can be anywhere. In the daytime he listens for birdsong. Even the bulbuls seem silenced. He wants so much to go outside and walk in his beloved hills. Impossibility surrounds him. Everything is fraught with meaning. Should a knife be left on the counter? What reading material might agitate a soldier? Even the fertilizer meant for the roses in the garden could be misinterpreted. At one stage he breaks curfew by mistake, like a delayed April Fools' joke.

Shehadeh doesn't want our pity. Nor does he play for any easy admiration. He lives in a world governed by the exercise of power, not law. He writes because his world depends on it. He simply must do it. This is his resistance. (One is reminded of the Algerian journalist Tahar Djaout saying, *If you speak, you die. If you keep quiet, you die. So speak and die.*) He desires the dignity of being allowed to just tell his story. The writing is immediate: It is a diary, after all, and the reader can detect the current of anger underneath. This is not the world as anyone wanted it. He is under curfew. Occupied. Shackled. He declares his affinity for *somoud*, or the Palestinian

idea of perseverance: he will go on no matter what, no matter, no matter what. Out of the silence: *I told you so, I told you so, I told you so.*

He writes quietly, but this quietness — this whispering intensity — is exactly the tone that shatters curfew. For a long time we in the West have been prone to receiving one-dimensional portraits of the Palestinian character — either subjugated victim or crazed terrorist — just as the Israelis are also often one-dimensionally drawn, hapless victim, cruel colonist, high-tech savior. But Shehadeh realizes that simplicities have the ability to reduce complex people to rubble. The truth is kaleidoscopic. It holds many other truths. The Palestinian people and the Israelis are just as diverse as anyone else. He himself is certainly no terrorist extraordinaire or pleading victim: this is a man sitting back under curfew and attempting to maintain sanity and preserve beauty in the face of all the evidence. At the same time, he wants to cut to the heart of contradiction: He, like his people, contains multitudes. He wishes to step, empathetically, into the shoes of others. "If only the Israelis would ask themselves what they would have done if they were forced to endure what we are enduring."

And then there is the reality on the ground. The snipers on the roof of the Casablanca Hotel. The women shot while out hanging their washing. The morgue filled to capacity. The residents living in the houses with decaying corpses. The doors kicked in. The soldiers humping the mannequins in the middle of a car park. The houses gutted and burned. The children buried alive in the rubble.

One of Shehadeh's triumphs in this memoir is that he reaches a point of compassion for the smashed-up lives of the soldiers, for their relatives and the society they might have to go back to. After all, he says, they "will always be a neighbor of ours." This is a remarkable act of grace for people who find themselves, together, on a sinking ship. Shehadeh makes the declaration that by "documenting and exposing the Israeli government's violation of human rights" he hopes to "help bring an end to them." One wonders

what might happen if we — as readers — were to swap the word *Israeli* for *Palestinian*, and vice versa. Would it make any difference if it were Palestinians besieging the trapped Israelis? Would it profoundly shift the conversation if it were Israelis pulling the tabs on the suicide vests?

It is the work of the storyteller to rearrange the remembered so that it becomes true and also so that the remembered — in all its facets — might last. The biggest temptation of the storyteller is to create too much or to settle for too little, but Shehadeh somehow doesn't allow this to happen. The work has a balance about it. This equanimity seeps through just about every page, even when the book exhibits anger and disappointment.

One is reminded of the work of Edward Said — the generosity, the expansive imagination, the endless ache for his people to be recognized. Shehadeh also understands John Berger's notion that never again will a story be told as if it were the only one. The truth must be told over and over again. Perhaps the sad fact of the matter is that almost two decades along, little or nothing has changed in Israel and Palestine (the encroaching settlements, the swing toward the right, the silence of the international community), but Shehadeh's story — and the stories of others — still stands in defiance. At issue here is the human soul, which has to be continually shocked or seduced out of its stupor. A reprint of this book is just one dot in the matrix of hope.

Shehadeh is not interested in hibernation. Writing, or telling, becomes its own form of hopeful resistance. One day this too will end. And it happens sometimes, this hope. When Shehadeh's wife, Penny, comes home, they march around the house to fast-tempo music: What better way to occupy your occupied house and to put a curfew on the curfew?

Colum McCann

2019

# PREFACE

This is my third book of diaries. I did not plan it this way, but I have been writing one every decade.

I wrote the first in 1980, a few years after I returned from my legal studies in England and began practicing as a lawyer under occupation. I was committed to the practice of *sumoud* (perseverance). I saw the perseverance of the ordinary Palestinian who was determined to remain on his land, despite all attempts by the occupation to make life impossible, as the best antidote for Israeli policies of ridding the land of its Palestinian inhabitants. *Sumoud* was the way I felt that I was challenging the occupier. But I was also doing more. I had become involved in human rights work and believed that by documenting and exposing the Israeli military government's violations of human rights I would help bring an end to them. This first book was called *The Third Way*.

Ten years passed before I wrote the second book. I started it just before the Gulf War. There were strong expectations that the Gulf War would bring an end to the status quo that was enabling Israel to pursue its oppressive policies against the Palestinian residents of the occupied territories. There was also a lot of fear. We believed that Saddam Hussein might use chemical weapons against Israel, which would mean against us also. But whereas every Israeli was provided with a gas mask to save his or her life in the event of a chemical attack, we had none. Instead we sealed ourselves in one room of the house, plastering all the windows, closing every possible hole, and placing wet rags soaked in chlorine underneath the doors, as we had been advised. Fortunately no chemical weapons were dropped on our region. However, many of us, myself included,

suffered chlorine poisoning from the fumes of the door rags. I called that book *The Sealed Room*, because I felt that the manner in which we, Israelis and Palestinians, had sealed ourselves in closed rooms was symbolic of the way we were leading our lives ordinarily, not only in times of war. We were sealing our hearts and minds and not reaching out to the other. But I was not feeling sentimental. On the contrary, in the book I express rage at the Israeli public, only to end with a call to both sides to leave their sealed rooms and reach out to each other, to meet halfway and make peace.

Just after that book was completed the peace talks between the Israelis and Palestinians began in Madrid and then continued in Washington. I joined the negotiations as legal adviser and put all my capacities at the disposal of the Palestinian team. I believed in peace based on compromise. I lasted for only one year. Then I left, having lost all hope that there were going to be properly conducted negotiations that could possibly lead to a real peace.

When I read the text of the Oslo Accords I felt that years of hard work on the Palestinian legal case had been in vain. The legal, administrative, and physical infrastructure of all the Israeli settlements had been left in place. I decided to leave human rights work and for the first time in my life seriously considered leaving Palestine altogether. I decided against this simply because Palestine is home. Difficult as life has always been, it is where I want to live.

For seven years the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority failed to bring results. Meanwhile, the number of settlers living illegally in the occupied territories had doubled. Negotiations and compromise were acquiring a bad name. The only dignified option left, it began to appear to an increasing number of Palestinians, was to resist the occupation in every possible way. The impoverishment of the working people; the absence of hope, exacerbated by the continuation of the building of settlements; and the failure of the Accords to deal with the basic issues led to an explosion. On 28 September 2000 a second, more violent Intifada broke out.

Unlike the first Intifada, which was a popular, mainly nonviolent uprising, this was an armed rebellion punctuated by horrific bombings among the civilian population in Israel. The worst of these took place on 27 March 2002, when a Palestinian attacker exploded himself in the dining room of a hotel in Netanya during a meal to celebrate the Jewish festival of Passover, killing 29 people and injuring 140. It was this incident that provided Israel with the excuse to begin its invasion of the West Bank. The Israeli army was militarily and, thanks to the horror of this and other bombings, as well as their exploitation by the Israeli right, psychologically prepared.

The invasion of Ramallah described in this book began on 29 March 2002. From the outset I was aware how differently I felt from other times of crisis. In the past I rose to the occasion. I saw meaning in my suffering. I was part of the struggle and expected and accepted the enemy's response. This time, when this second Intifada began, I tried to ignore it. Then I became depressed. I had seen how badly our leadership had managed earlier struggles. I had no faith that the same leadership would manage this round any differently. The indiscriminate killing of civilians in Israel exacted a high moral and political cost. I could not discern a clear strategy on the part of the Palestinians. I was especially worried by the excessive militarization that was taking place all around me. I could see how it deprived the populace of their role and gave Israel the justification to practice ever more brutal policies. I could not understand the wisdom of engaging in a military confrontation with the fourth most powerful army in the world when we didn't even have an army of our own. Our strength was in the justice and morality of our cause, and we were jeopardizing these by our outrageous actions.

Over the past nine years I have been uninvolved in public life. I concentrated on my legal practice and on writing. I never thought I would ever write another book based on my diaries. I wanted to draw on my imagination for material, not record the difficult

ordeals of my daily life. Still, I decided to edit my diaries of the invasion into a book. The experience you will read about here is not that of a hero who took risks. It is that of a Palestinian who has always wanted to be able to continue to live his life as an ordinary citizen in Palestine.

The events described here represent the epitome of a tragedy that has long been unfolding. I have not decided to publish these diaries merely to paint a bleak picture or to gain the reader's sympathy for the victimization the Palestinians experienced. Those well-wishers who called me as the shelling was going on to commiserate, I tried to silence. No one is helped by being reduced to the status of victim. Palestinians don't need to be pitied or viewed as unfortunates who deserve assistance and relief. They need people to understand their cause and work with them to bring justice and peace to their war-battered land.

# 28 MARCH

I felt the tension the moment I entered my law office. I asked about the two assistants from Jerusalem and was told they were unable to cross the checkpoint at Kalandia. They had phoned, alarmed at reports that all foreigners were being evacuated from Ramallah in anticipation of an Israeli invasion. The presence of foreigners in the town had always seemed a protection for the Palestinian community from Israeli excesses. The news that they were being evacuated made us feel that some atrocity was being planned for which the Israeli army wanted no witnesses. For a long time Palestinians had been demanding an international protection force. I would have felt immensely more secure if one had been dispatched.

It was only two weeks ago that the army had withdrawn from Ramallah after an occupation of three days. They were now stationed on the outskirts of the town, which was under siege. There were two points of view at the office. The first was that the attack was imminent; the second that Arafat has signed the document that General Anthony Zinni, the U.S. envoy, wanted him to sign, therefore there was not going to be an attack. My own sense was that something was going to happen. I felt overwhelmed by a strong sense of foreboding.

One of our secretaries asked to leave early to do some shopping. I too decided to take the precaution of shopping, stocking up on things and getting prepared for a long curfew. I didn't want to be caught off-guard. I left the office and went out to the street. Our law office is in the center of town on its main commercial artery, Main Street. I didn't drive. I walked. The town was in its usually chaotic state, with posters plastered on many walls with pictures

of the latest Palestinian bombers. But something was different today. It was as though the place had been struck by a storm. There was a rush on the market. Everyone was moving quickly, and people were emerging from shops with heavy bags. Prices had risen appreciably. A sense of an impending catastrophe loomed in the air. At the vegetable shop a frantic middle-aged woman with ruffled hair was loading vegetables into her shopping bag. I saw that she was taking a large number of golden onions. When she bent down to pick them from the lower rack, I noticed that their yellowish translucent skin was the color of her hair. She looked up at me, "Onions go a long way. They're good to have," she said, and helped herself to more. Vegetables from her overfilled bags were falling on the narrow paths between the stalls. She stooped down to collect them. She was creating panic in the crowded shop. I carried my vegetables and left, passing by the Manara, the recently renovated roundabout at the center of downtown. I looked at the plastic lions, an addition from the Oslo years, and remembered the picture I saw in the daily paper a few weeks ago of the Palestinian fighters crouching behind one of them, shooting at the Israeli soldiers. One cub had lost its tail in the fusillade.

Dominating the square was a large banner the width of the street with a picture of Arafat, his *kuffieh* piled up like a small pyramid over his head, raising his finger like a teacher, his eyes open wide. The words he was preaching were sprawled in large script:

*All it takes is to will it. You are the knight of this hour.*

Farther up the street, by the florist where a gun battle had blown away the cornerstones of the old building, I noticed fresh plastering between the restored stones. The glass of the travel agency across the street had also been replaced. The son had recently renovated his father's office and, rather than install full metal shutters like the rest of his neighbors, he wanted to distinguish his agency by using

the daintier metal grille. It cost him the entire glass front. Nearby was the blackened butcher's shop that had been firebombed and its proprietor killed in a criminal feud involving armed groups from a nearby refugee camp. Disputes of this sort used to be settled by the court. Now, with the predominance of arms, people were taking the law into their own hands.

These shops around the center of town are not far from Arafat's headquarters. During the last Israeli incursion into Ramallah the army had stayed away from this area. It became a refuge for the Palestinian fighters resisting the occupation of Ramallah. All other parts of the city were occupied, with Israeli tanks crowding the narrow streets. We could not move out of our house for three days as gun battles raged. This episode had ended with an Israeli withdrawal and the feeling that our side had won and had driven back the mighty Israeli army.

No wonder the large contingent of armed men in uniform and civilian clothes seemed to carry their arms with pride. They finally had the opportunity to use them to defend the town. A columnist in the local daily newspaper called this second Intifada the Palestinian War of Independence.

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Just after I got back to the office with my heavy shopping bags, two armed Palestinian security men came in. They said that they had been evacuated from their residences at the headquarters in anticipation of Israeli air strikes. Their commanders had made no alternative arrangements for them. They were on their own and had to find a place to spend the night.

"Had the weather been warmer," one of them said, "we wouldn't have minded sleeping out. We are soldiers. We put our blanket anywhere and sleep out in the open. We don't care. But it's stormy and rainy. We need to find a place. Do you know of any empty apartments?"

We didn't. My partner suggested that perhaps they would stand a better chance in the villages around Ramallah.

"Yes, we know there are more possibilities there," said one of them, "but we have Gaza identity cards; we cannot get out of Ramallah. It's too dangerous. If the Israelis find us outside Ramallah, we'll get deported back to Gaza."

One did all the talking. He had dark skin, a round face, amiable with kind eyes. He was jaunty and seemed to take his predicament lightly. His friend was quiet. Contemplative. He let his companion do the talking as he stood awkwardly in our office, wearing his fatigues, with his large gun propped heavily by his side, his eyes roaming around our shelves full of books and paper. What could he have been thinking? I looked at their shoes. Neither was wearing boots, as soldiers do. They had on ordinary black leather shoes. The more garrulous had worn ones; the quieter had a newer pair. Both were dusty. I wondered how they were going to cater to their personal needs. Alongside the orderly, ordinary life I led in my hometown of Ramallah is a population of transient people who wear army uniforms when we don't yet have an army and who camp out in the hills when the weather permits or in empty apartment blocks if they can find them.

The two of them were very polite and, when they realized we could not help, they apologized for barging in like this. They carried their guns and walked out wearing the emblem of their doom that, in the event of an Israeli invasion, would bring death and destruction to them and to any place of refuge they might find.

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Over the past nine years, since the Oslo Accords, I have been worried about the growing number of armed civilians I could see around just walking in the street. This was not part of a policy of armed struggle. It was more for exhibitionist purposes. Parades were conducted with masked men bearing arms, as if in a masquer-

ade. An arms culture develops as quickly as a drug culture. Once it takes root, it is difficult to eradicate. It has its own economic logic and beneficiaries. Its victims are the civilian society who have to endure its violent consequences. During the first twenty-five years of occupation, before the return of the PLO, the armed struggle had been waged outside. Now it had moved inside. Increasingly I have been seeing armed men in all sorts of gear. This morning when I left the house I saw six Palestinian soldiers outside my door waiting as two others changed the flat tire of their army van. It is not always clear which unit they belong to and how they are related to other units. For a long time a number of soldiers had been living in a makeshift camp behind the UNRWA* community college not far from my house, bivouacked on the highest hill to guard the town from attacks by Israel from the north. I felt for them as they endured the cold of the Ramallah winter. During the last Israeli incursion one of them was shot dead. Since then they seem to have abandoned that post.

Before the Oslo Accords in 1993, only Israeli soldiers carried arms. The Interim Agreement between Israel and the PLO allowed for a strong, armed Palestinian police. The Israeli government was happy for this force to police dissidents and curb civil rights but claimed that it was in excess of the numbers agreed upon.

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Just after the Accords were signed, we employed at the office a bright young man to do the cleaning. He was overqualified but had lost his job in Israel due to the closure of the West Bank. One day I came back to find that he had broken an antique ceramic vase that I had on the shelf behind my desk. I was angry and explained the archaeological significance of this piece of pottery from the Middle Bronze Age. He listened quietly. The next day I found the

*United Nations Relief and Works Agency

pot back on my shelf. I was astounded. I looked and found that he had collected the pieces, taken them home, and glued them perfectly together. I was impressed and tried to learn more about this talented man. He was reluctant to speak. In the course of our conversation, I tried to find out what he thought about the peace that the PLO had signed with Israel. I assumed that he, like most young men, belonged to one or the other factions of the organization. I was wrong. He belonged to another clandestine struggle, committed to principles that were foreign to me. This was the first intimation of what the Oslo Accords would bring: the polarization of Palestinian society. Throughout the first Intifada I had felt such oneness with everyone. We were all working together for a common cause, the end of the Israeli occupation. It mattered little that one was the employer and one the employee. There was a strong sense of solidarity among us. Before the Israeli oppressor we were all equal. Together we participated in the struggle of ridding our country from occupation. Now the false peace of Oslo had divided us, made some believe they could pursue their private life despite the continuation of the occupation while others suffered in the worsening economic conditions. The false peace had shattered us like the pieces of that old pot.

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Yesterday I paid a condolence visit to a man who used to work at my office for whom I have a strong fondness. His twenty-five-year-old son, Ahmad, died in the last Israeli incursion into Ramallah. The son had been doing well as an insurance clerk. He was married with children. When he was only fourteen I defended him in the military court, where he was being charged for protesting against the occupation. Because he was a minor, the court imposed a fine on his father. As I was walking out of the court with the father, I heard shouts from the narrow window above the door where the son was being temporarily held.

"I warn you," he called at his father, "don't pay the fine. You hear me. I don't want you to pay money to these Zionist occupiers."

The military court and prison were in an ugly square cement building that was a legacy of the British mandate. It had been built in 1936 and named after its designer, an Irishman by the name of Tegart. Arafat has his headquarters in the same compound, which has been expanded and surrounded by high walls. It is now referred to as the Muqata.

Ahmad's family had lived in a refugee camp. They had lost their home in 1948. The father did not want his children to get involved in politics, so he moved them out of the camp. But Ahmad had grown up with anger and, when the chance came to acquire a gun and fight the occupation army, he took it.

When we arrived we found that the father was at the mosque praying, even though it was not a Friday. Throughout the twenty-five years he had worked at my office he never prayed. As we waited we asked the mother what had happened. Her answer sounded as though she was reading from a prepared text, delivered dutifully but without conviction. The loss of her son was obviously the real thing, not his heroism, which she recounted to anyone who asked.

"Ahmad was first shot in the leg," she said, keeping her palm over her cheek, "but he wanted to go on fighting. Then he got the bullet that made him a martyr."

I was later told that the real story was that after her son's first injury the ambulance came to take him to hospital. But they would not allow him to take his gun. He refused to abandon it and was shot again. This time the Israeli sniper got him in the stomach and he died. I had no doubt about his integrity. I only wondered who gave him the gun, and under what conditions. What would it have meant if he had left it behind? The only thing I was sure of was that this gun must have meant so much to him that he was willing to risk his life for it.

The father, now with a full beard, seemed resigned to the loss of his son. As I sat in Abu Ahmad's guest room, which was decorated with the usual symbols of Palestinian pride — large uncomfortable sofas, Palestinian flags, and a miniature Dome of the Rock in mother-of-pearl — I tried to think what it must be like for a father who was my age suddenly to find his son, who is not a soldier, killed in the course of fighting a regular army. This is the son who was his best security for old age in a stateless society where one's only security was in one's children. The successful working son, his pride and joy, who was married and had brought him grandchildren. How could he deal with his death? He didn't want to speak about it. We spoke instead about the general situation.

In the course of the visit he turned to me and said, "Do you remember what my opinion was about Oslo? Wasn't I against it from the first moment? Did I not tell you it would not bring us peace? Didn't I? We shall never see peace in this country."

Between the silences our eyes rested on the poster of Ahmad that took up half the wall of the guest room in which we sat. The poster was a gift from the son's Fatah unit, in appreciation and memoriam.

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Having been denied arms for so long, young Palestinians seek them and carry them with manifest pride. Today, as I was walking to my office, I saw a young man in civilian clothes with a gun strapped around his shoulder. He was a lean, tall young man, quite dapper, almost a dandy. He wore tight black trousers and shoes without a speck of dust. He had a flat stomach. His belt was black with a silver square buckle. He wore a knitted polo-neck sweater. It too was black. He was adjusting the strap (also black) of his gun, which was resting on his back. He was trying to get it exactly diagonal along his chest, as though he was grooming himself for a date

with his girlfriend. He must have seen Israeli soldiers with their guns and was emulating them.

I turned to look and my eyes met those of one of the shopkeepers, who said, "The man has no idea what effect this has on foreigners coming to Ramallah. It will just confirm to them what they hear about us and make them decide to stay away." This merchant was thinking only of the commercial impact militarization has on his business.

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For weeks a reconnaissance helicopter had been literally parked in different parts of the sky above Ramallah, photographing. It was an ominous sight; its drone a nerve-wrecker. The Oslo Accords had created a three-tiered jurisdiction, giving Israel rights over the subsoil and the air and leaving the Palestinians in control only of the surface. The Israeli army must already have full aerial photographs of every section of the town.

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Just as I was turning the corner to walk up to my office after I had finished shopping, I met Dr. Mustafa Bargouti, a popular politician and founder of the largest nongovernmental organization involved in medical services. He did not believe the Israelis were going to attack tomorrow. He told me that four hundred foreigners from various European countries were flying in to be with the Palestinian people for protection and solidarity. Ninety of them were already in Jerusalem. I wondered whether they would be able to make it to Ramallah since the checkpoint at Kalandia was closed.

• • •

We decided to close the office early today. I couldn't wait to get home. On the way I felt relieved that I had filled up the oil tank for

heating and hot water. I loaded my shopping into my car and drove away from the center of town. I parked the car in the garage, closed the outside gate, carried the bags into the kitchen, and pressed the switch for the garage door. But when I heard it click closed, I felt something was wrong. I'm not ready for the worst to happen tomorrow. Not with my wife, Penny, still away.

# 29 MARCH

I woke up this morning, heard the screeching of Israeli tanks scraping the road past my house as they drove down into town, and knew that the strike that Prime Minister Sharon had warned would make us weep had begun. As the tanks moved beyond my house I felt captured behind enemy lines. With my house in the occupied zone, Penny would not be able to get back. I felt as though a calamity had befallen me. A low black cloud was descending, darkening my world. This was not the first time I had been under Israeli occupation — I was for most of my life — but this time I was caught unprepared, just three days short. When Penny was trying to decide whether to go to Cairo for her conference, we thought no Israeli attack could possibly begin as long as the U.S. envoy, Anthony Zinni, was in the area. We had miscalculated. Now she was stranded outside and I was here alone, captured. I knew she would eventually be able to come back, I was sure of it, but how could I not help worrying after knowing of so many Palestinians who suffered for years trying to obtain permission from the Israeli authorities for the reunification of their families. Whatever was coming, I would have to endure it alone.

As I was trying to manage my feelings of insecurity and fretfulness, Samer, my younger brother, called. He was whispering.

"Why are you whispering?" I asked.

"Israeli soldiers are in my home," he said.

He told me that he was forbidden to use his telephone. He described what had happened in low, halting whispers, placing his mobile phone close to his mouth. He said, "Israeli soldiers came early in the morning, broke the kitchen window, and occupied the

whole building. They forced the neighbors down to my apartment and locked us in three rooms."

I asked him whether they had an order for impounding the building.

"No," he said. "Nothing of the sort. They forced us at gunpoint to obey their orders. I'll give you more details later. I don't want them to know I'm talking to you. Can you do something to help me?"

After I put down the telephone, I felt distressed the more I thought of my brother and his family — Tala, his four-year-old daughter, and Aziz, his six-year-old son — subjected to the brutality of an occupying army. I had to do something to help them. I racked my brains. What could I do?

When I began to review the options, I realized how I had severed my ties with the establishment — Israeli, Palestinian, and American. I used to know people in authority when I was active in human rights. I knew who to call, what to do, how to raise a storm, how to apply pressure, how to use the media to make a case. Now I knew no one whom I could call on. My brother's only advantage, I thought, was that he holds a U.S. passport. Perhaps the U.S. consulate in Jerusalem could help. But then again I knew no one there. It was fortunate that a well-connected friend called from the States to inquire about me after he heard of the occupation of Ramallah. I sought his advice. He gave me the name and number of the U.S. consul general and another number for an assistant. He said he knew the consul general well and would speak to him about Samer.

I called the emergency officer first, because I could not get hold of the consul general. A woman answered. I told her of my brother's situation. I said that the army had stormed his apartment building without an order. Perhaps the consulate could use this fact to intervene.

"No," she said. "It doesn't matter that they had no order. It doesn't matter at all. The order comes later."

"I am a lawyer," I said. "I know that orders cannot be made after the fact."

This angered the woman, who accused me of confusing reality with politics. "We can do nothing," the American official finally insisted.

I should have known better. Before Israel, the United States is impotent. We were on our own.

That cursed dark cloud that had hung over me since last night was descending further and further, allowing no light through, leaving me no room to breathe. I felt that I could do nothing. Couldn't concentrate. My thoughts were constantly with my brother and his family.

Samer was so proud of his recently built house. After several difficult years, he had just finished paying his loans. This morning he woke up in his comfortable bed to the sound of commotion in his house. In the dark of night, Israeli soldiers had driven up in their tanks, smashed the outside gate, driven up the yard where his children play, walked up the kitchen stairs, broken the glass of the window, and opened the kitchen door. By any civilized standards, these members of Israel Defense Forces were burglars, for there is no law, domestic or international, that justifies such an action. They didn't have an order impounding the building, they didn't ask for permission from its owner, and there was no military or security justification for their action. They were driven by their sense of military superiority and their conviction that at no time would they ever be held accountable for their illegal action. The children, Tala and Aziz, also woke up to find their home, their private space where they sit for breakfast in the kitchen, occupied by strangers, armed men who were giving orders to their father. Then they took him away. At gunpoint. They put the gun in his back and forced him to go with them up to the neighbors. He was their human shield.

The children began to cry. They asked their mother, "Where are the soldiers taking our father?" Hanan was distracted, worried

about her husband. She wanted to protect him, to scream at the soldiers. She neglected the children because she was asking the soldiers who stayed behind where the others had taken her husband. "*Sheket* [shut up]," they snapped at her contemptuously. She had no right to ask, or address them in any way. She should remember her place and remain silent, invisible and out of their way. They had work to do. The children didn't like to see their mother shouted at and they began to cry. "Where have they taken our father?" they asked. She tried to comfort them, but it was no use. They could see how her bosom was heaving and her fingers shaking. The soldiers were annoyed at the children's cries and pointed their guns at them to silence them. The children held back their tears and waited. It was an agonizing wait. They had all been forced into one room now and told that they couldn't leave it. A soldier was placed at the door to guard them. This was no longer their home. The minutes dragged. Samer had not returned. Hanan sat in silence, sweating. Where have they taken him? Why couldn't they at least tell her? Time passed slowly, oh so slowly.

When Samer returned, seemingly hours later, he was as pale as a lemon, withdrawn, looking parched. He had had to stand in front of the soldiers as they forced open all the doors in the building. The soldiers had nudged him with their guns, abused him, and taken liberties with his person as they had done with his house. Samer could feel the fear in the soldier who had stuck the gun in his back from the way he twitched whenever a new door was opened. He knew that none of his neighbors was armed or would put up a fight. This was a building of professionals, people who work in business, who have families, who are uninvolved in politics or warfare. He worried only that any loud sound or sudden movement might frighten the soldier into pulling the trigger of the gun aimed at him.

Tala needed to go to the toilet. She was crying. "Come, I'll take you," Hanan told her. But Tala shrugged her shoulders, indicating

that she did not want to move. Unlike her brother, she is thin and fragile, but she is strong-willed.

"Don't be afraid," her mother told her. "I'll get permission from the soldiers."

As soon as Hanan said this she realized the absurdity of the situation, that she should need to ask for permission from an Israeli soldier to take her daughter to the toilet in her own home. But she was willing to do it for the sake of her daughter.

Tala still shrugged her shoulders. Her great discomfort was obvious and yet she was afraid to pass the soldier and be close to his frightening gun. She wanted to stay in the corner, as far away from him as possible. Her mother began to tell her a story, but Tala wasn't listening. She whispered to her mother, "Turkey is very nice." The summer before they had been there on vacation.

"Yes, I know," said her mother. "But why?"

"There is the sea and the pool. I like it there."

Hanan understood the message her daughter was trying to communicate: Why are we here, not there? She continued to try to distract her with the story. But it was no use. Tala's world had crumbled. She could no longer find security in it. Her hero was her older brother, whom she imitated in every way. And both children had their father as their hero, whom they admired and saw as God Almighty. Now Tala's first hero was in the corner, afraid and intimidated, and their father, the big hero, was being pushed around and humiliated.

The soldiers now began to bring down all the neighbors, packing them in the same room in Samer's apartment. They all sat in silence, breathing heavily. At this point the children must have wondered what was going on, what was going to happen next. Then a tall, fair soldier barged into the room and began to scream at their upstairs neighbors, whose apartment he had just finished searching. He used Arabic swearwords that Samer would never have allowed his children to hear.

"It was you who shot at us when we came into the building," the soldier said, opening wide his hand. "I found these bullet shells in your apartment. You bring your son and come with me. I know how to deal with your kind, you bastard."

"Wait a minute," the man said. "These are your bullets. My daughter collected them from the garden after you were here the last time."

"You're a filthy liar," the soldier snapped.

"No, I'm not, and I will prove it to you. Take me up to my apartment and I'll show you."

The two went up together, the soldier pointing his gun at the man. A little while later their neighbor returned with a piece of paper, a little note written by one of the Israeli soldiers who had occupied their apartment during the last incursion into Ramallah. A soldier had knocked down a plant and had left the soil on the ground. Another had lifted the plant with its roots and placed it in water to save it from dying. He had left a piece of paper on which he had written in English, "Sorry for the mess. I hope we meet in better times. Stay away from the windows. The IDF."

This satisfied the soldier and they left the neighbor alone. Now there was quiet. But the soldiers were not budging. The children began to wonder whether they were going to stay in their home forever. How, then, would they be able to go to sleep with the soldiers in the home, or play with their games, or watch television, or go to school? The soldiers smoked all the time. The apartment was full of smoke. But Tala did not dare tell them what she tells her father when he smokes the occasional cigarette, holding her little finger up to close one nostril: "My nose closes when you smoke."

The soldiers stationed in Samer's apartment were a mixed group. Hanan could tell the good ones from the bad by the manner in which they held their guns. The good ones pointed them down to the floor, the bad ones pointed them at the Palestinians all the time they sat with them in their living room.

I have always felt paternal toward Samer, who is seven years younger. Now he was in such danger and I could do nothing. How will this end? I was petrified with worry when I heard what happened in another house that soldiers had taken over. A young man of eighteen had asked permission to use the toilet. When another man returned from a visit to the toilet with clear signs of having been beaten, the young man changed his mind. "But you must," the soldier standing guard at the door said. When he still refused, he was dragged out and beaten on the head. The soldier allowed the mother to call an ambulance only after two hours had passed, by which time the man had bled to death.

My brother and his family were not my only immediate concern. I was also thinking of my mother. She was seventy-five and living with a helper. Otherwise she was alone. She's a long-term sufferer of high blood pressure. A few years ago she underwent a major brain operation. What if she should need medical assistance? What if her house was shelled? But I could do nothing to help anyone, and my earlier efforts with officialdom had come to nothing.

My private, orderly world had crumbled. Cruel, irrational politics was all around me, refusing to leave me alone. The events of the past few years had soured relations between us and the Israelis to the point that even their reservists did not see us as human beings.

Last December the army had made their first limited incursion into Ramallah since the signing of the Interim Agreement in 1995. They occupied my neighborhood but not my brother's. Aziz continued to phone me, asking to visit. I knew that he wanted to satisfy himself that I was not in any danger. I was not allowed to use my car, so I walked down and met him beyond the temporary checkpoint placed by the army opposite the gate of the UNRWA community college. I tried to convey to him that there was nothing to be afraid of. As we walked back toward my house, I told my nephew that the tank has a small compartment inside, like a tiny room. "Would you like to see it?" I asked him. When we passed the

tank, I was glad to see that the soldier had lifted the side door and was sitting outside on the pavement, sunning himself and reading his newspaper. This made the tank seem less forbidding.

"Come," I told Aziz, "let us look inside the little room. Shall we ask permission from the soldier to go inside? What do you think?"

My nephew looked at me with his large intelligent eyes as though I were utterly mad. "No," he said, with a knowing grin to indicate that he knew I could not be serious, and tried to get me to walk faster away from the tank.

Now I hoped that our small excursion during a less tense time might have prepared him to deal with this more vicious incursion.

After spending many hours sick with worry, I began to tell myself that my brother was a strong man who would be able to endure. It had taken him a long time to get settled, when I continued to feel protective toward him. But now he has pulled through. He has a happy, stable marriage; he is raising a family and is doing very well in work. I must have trust in him. My mother is the more serious cause for concern. Yet despite her physical frailty, she is psychologically strong. During her life with my father she was totally dependent on him. But since he was murdered, in 1985, she has learned to manage on her own. I always thought of her as a frail woman. I have since learned how wrong I was. She is capable and resilient. Strong-minded, she relishes the company of others and is able to get along with all sorts of people. She is sustained by her imaginative mind and strong sense of humor. I must trust that she too would be able to endure. What choice have I got? I cannot reach them. I am powerless. I had thought it would be possible to be left alone in my country to live my own life, without the need for contacts, for support, for relations with the powerful. I told myself this will pass. Now it looks so dangerous and full of unexpected perils, but it will pass, as the many other similar storms have passed, as the 1967 war, the Gulf War, as the dangers of life during 1982 and the seven years of the Intifada. I must heed the

lessons of the past, must not lose my cool, must not get into a rage, must not resort to negative emotions. I must try to lead as orderly a life amidst all this chaos as is possible. Above all I must not begin to lose respect for myself by wasting my time and getting myself in such a state as to be unable to think, write, and do useful work. This is life here: constant trauma, tragedy, catastrophe, violence, brutality, and stupidity. If I am to be paralyzed, then this would be the permanent state of my life, for the interim periods of quiet are brief and far apart.

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Clearly the invasion two weeks ago had been only a precursor. Then the army had entered the outskirts of Ramallah, concentrating their attacks on the surrounding refugee camps. The center of the town, including Arafat's headquarters, was left untouched. The armed men thought they could again find refuge there. Some were hiding in various buildings in and around the center. They should have known that the Israeli army, like any good army, would never repeat the same tactic twice. This time they came from several positions; they used tanks but also entered on foot. They surrounded the center and concentrated their attacks there. They met with limited resistance. At a certain level the decision must have been taken not to defend the town. Still, there were some who fired at the soldiers. Whenever shots were fired, the army retaliated with barrages of fire from tanks and heavy machine guns.

The center, where most of the action was taking place, is not far from the Manara roundabout with the plastic lions where, during the last incursion, the Palestinian fighters took shelter. Five of the main arteries of the town meet here. One of these, Irsal Street, leads after less than a mile to Arafat's headquarters. Another, which is perpendicular to it, is Main Street, the street my office is on. This is a two-lane road with shops on each side. Close to the middle of this street are two five-story buildings opposite each

other, built during the Oslo years. One of these is called the Natshe Building. It has six floors, the higher awkwardly overhanging the lower. This building is next to the Quaker Meeting House, which has a spacious front yard with seven old pine trees. In the Natshe Building a number of armed men were hiding. Some of them must have shot at the Israeli army. The retaliation was brutal. Farther down the street, just past my office, is a limestone building with round soft corners and large French windows called the Arizona. It has shops on the ground floor and offices on the upper floors. One of them is the Teachers' Development Center, established by a friend of mine who was spending the year at Stanford. This building is next to a parking lot. It also has the office of FIDA, one of the PLO factions. Farther north is another building and then, at the top of the hill, the once famous Ramallah Grand Hotel, with its large and beautiful pine-tree garden.

Halfway between the Natshe and Arizona buildings is the corner of Post Office Street. Just near the top of this street is a parking lot, at the end of which is the Midan Building. This has a shopping center and offices, including those of the Ministry of Finance, as well as some private residences. It was around this area that much of the fighting and bombardment took place. All these buildings were heavily damaged. My mother lives just behind the Midan Building.

But the initial heavy attack was directed against the Muqata (the compound where Arafat was staying). The compound was attacked from different sides. Several tanks were stationed on Irsal Street, which begins from the Manara roundabout. These bombarded the western wall bordering the pavement. The main gate was also destroyed. Farther down, closer to the Manara, another tank was shelling the southern end of the compound containing the building that had served, during the Israeli occupation, as what was called the Civil Administration. Most Palestinians over the age of twenty-eight remember the humiliation they had to endure when they went there for the different kinds of permits required

by the occupation authorities. Having destroyed these two outer walls and the corner building, the tanks now proceeded inside the compound and began their attacks on the old British-built cement structure, the Tegart. This had been used by the Israeli army as the headquarters of the military governor of Ramallah, the military court and prison. Built with fortified concrete, it was being gutted by the bombardment. Having broken the main door, the soldiers entered the building and began searching it room by room, demolishing the partition walls and vandalizing it. But Arafat was not there. Several years ago an additional annex had been built for him by the Palestinian Authority. This was a limestone building to the north of the main structure. It was attacked from the east, causing some of the cornerstones to fall. The walls on that side of the compound were brought down and the tanks were now inside the section of the compound surrounding the building where he and his associates were staying. It now appeared that they were going to enter this building and take the Palestinian leader hostage.

A number of Palestinian politicians were interviewed in the wake of the attack on Arafat. From the way they spoke I thought they were with him in the compound. Then it became apparent that they were trying to take undeserved credit for their solidarity with the leader. In fact they were not in any danger. They were outside, planning future political moves. A palace coup seemed to be taking place just as the "palace" was being shelled. Figures who never were known for their willingness to comment publicly on events were now vociferous. Developments were taking place quickly. I was aware that the Israeli government was holding large sums of money belonging to the Palestinian Authority. Should it choose, it could transfer these to any new leadership that might arise with its blessing and support.

The attack on Arafat had hardly begun and the aspirants were beginning to stir and get visibility. This made me wonder whether there was an Israeli/American plan for Arafat's succession. The

way the fighting around his compound was taking place, it would be easy for the Israelis to claim that Arafat was killed in crossfire.

Heavy bombardment was also directed at the Arizona Building. Apparently those guarding the FIDA office were trapped inside. They didn't seem to have clear instructions what to do. Should they surrender? But how? If the army should barge in and find them armed, they would surely kill them. Should they then defend themselves? But against tanks?

The tanks were stationed in the parking lot to the east of the building. They were bombarding it with a continuous barrage, as though this civilian building was a formidable fortification. A number of families live in the buildings around the lot. They were petrified with fear. The noise was horrendous. They worried that ricochet bullets would damage their houses and endanger their families. They began to vacate their houses and take refuge with neighbors living farther away. But everywhere in the center there was bombardment and danger. People could move only within their building. If they went out to the street they risked their life. They had the worst time. They had never experienced anything like this before.

As the bombardment continued, one of the three guards at the FIDA office decided to escape. He threw himself from the second floor. The army saw his body fall and they went after him. The ambulance came too, as did members of the foreign contingent, who were making themselves available to help the wounded. Among the foreigners was a member of the European Parliament, Louisa Morgantini. She tried to help the ambulance workers carry the injured man, but the army wouldn't allow it. A scuffle ensued and the man was carried away by the army medics. Fortunately the fall did not prove fatal and his life was saved. The two others inside the building were shot dead.

The journalists were doing an excellent job covering all the action as it was happening. One of these working for Nile

Television wanted to get a better view of the events taking place at the Muqata. They were moving their van closer to the demolished wall when an Israeli sniper shot the driver of the van.

"Were you hit?" the journalist in front asked the driver.

Faintly, almost apologetically, the driver answered in the affirmative.

I was watching the scene on television and noticed the hole that the bullet had made in the windscreen of the van.

"Let's get down. Quickly, quickly," the reporter screamed as he helped the man out of the van. The driver lay on the ground. The reporter leaned over him and placed his finger across the hole in his neck. He was trying to keep the blood in as he screamed, "Ambulance, ambulance! For God's sake, send for an ambulance!" His screams were getting louder and more desperate, until he was shrieking, "For God's sake, ambulance, ambulance! Ambulance! We need an ambulance here!"

The wounded man now lifted his head. He wanted to say something. The reporter stopped screaming and listened, "Take care of my wife," he whispered.

"By God, I will. I will," his friend said, with pathos in his voice, and resumed his desperate calls for an ambulance.

It was like watching a heart-wrenching, superbly acted movie. But it was not. It was real and it was all happening live before my eyes. I couldn't help crying as I watched.

But this episode was only a filler. The main focus remained all day on Arafat. Would he be captured and expelled? What would this mean to the future of the Palestinian struggle?

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The telephone never stopped ringing. Everyone inquiring about my safety. My mother was reporting a lot of shooting around her house. My brother reported that the soldiers had allowed the neighbors back to their apartments but were staying in his. All day two

soldiers stayed in his living room, guarding the front and kitchen doors. My brother and his family have now been allowed to stay in their living room. As Samer attempted to distract his six-year-old son with the Playstation on television, the soldiers watched.

The man who lives in the apartment opposite my law office called. He told me that several armed Palestinian men on the run had tried to open the street door of the office. They used a crowbar, which succeeded in bending the strong metal door, but it would not open. They left and went looking for somewhere else to hide. Above our office two new floors are in the process of being built. They must have wanted to use these for sanctuary.

I read over the e-mail that our friend Islah is desperately worried about Jad, a young man in the security forces who is a friend of her son. She had offered to keep him at her house. He stayed the night that the Israeli army entered Ramallah, then left. She got a frantic call from him around noon, telling her he was trapped in a building surrounded by the army. He wanted her to send the Red Cross to save him. She tried her best, but failed. Then all contact with him ended.

The more I saw and heard, the angrier I became. What sort of political and security authorities leave their people, civilians and officials, stranded like this? The decision not to resist the Israeli attack was sensible. Why were some allowed to violate it? And why had those armed by the Authority been left to fend for themselves, moving from one empty apartment block to another? There seemed to be a Palestinian strategy neither for war nor for peace. Many opportunities were missed. We continue to suffer one setback after another, one disaster after another. And we are expected to endure in silence, and at the end of every defeat express our understanding and suspend reality by turning the defeat into a victory. How many more such victories can we endure?

In the old city of Ramallah, we saw the army tying the hands of a group of young men in civilian clothes with a plastic rope used to

wrap boxes. They were lined on the ground, crouching with their heads down. The reporter asked one of them who he was. "We are all Birzeit University students," he answered. "They came to our house, destroyed our books and computers, and took us with them."

Then we saw the army ordering a large number of uniformed men to pull up their shirts to show that they had nothing wrapped around their waists. What humiliation for members of the security force to have to reveal their naked flesh before the cameras of the world.

# 30 MARCH

Yesterday toward the afternoon I heard a short click and the electricity went out.

Without electricity the house began to die: the water pressure, the heat (the weather was bitingly cold), the lights, the computer, the telephone, even the comforting sound of the BBC news on the hour announcing the most extraordinary events in that reasonable tone of voice. All my electrical gadgets were off. It was quiet inside the house. It was also quiet outside; there seemed to be a lull in the shooting. Earlier I had heard extensive tank movements around the house. I wondered nervously if the army had switched off the electricity from our neighborhood in preparation for a special operation. The twilight began to get faint and the outside became more hostile and uncertain. I looked for candles. If the army should pay me a visit tonight, would I hear them without the doorbell?

The outside was a cold, dark, gloomy world swarming with tanks and soldiers bent on destruction and terror. And I was alone in my house, my unprotected fortress. I wrapped myself in my cardigan and sat by the fireplace, one hand holding the manuscript of the novel I was working on and the other a candle. When I moved, the wax dripped over my papers. Then I began hearing sporadic shooting, sometimes sounding like automatic machine-gun fire, sometimes like shell fire. How am I to tell? After living all these years in a war zone, I still refuse to learn to distinguish between different kinds of gunfire. Sometimes the crackle of guns sounded like the drilling that was so prevalent during the Oslo years, as one building after another was constructed, filling the empty hills