

The Boy Who Kissed the Soldier: Balata Camp

-- *By Starhawk*

"What source can you believe in order to create peace there?" a friend writes when I come back from Palestine. I have no answer, only this story:

June 1, 2002: I am in Balata refugee camp in occupied Palestine, where the Israeli Defense Forces have rounded up four thousand men, leaving the camp to women and children. The men have offered no resistance, no battle.

The camp is deathly quiet. All the shops are shuttered, all the windows closed. Women, children and a few old men hide in their homes.

The quiet is shattered by sporadic bursts of gunfire, bangs and explosions. All day we have been encountering soldiers who all look like my brother or cousins or the sons I never had, so young they are barely more than boys armed with big guns. We've been standing with the terrified inhabitants as the soldiers search their houses, walking patients who are afraid to be alone on the streets to the U.N. Clinic. Earlier in the evening, eight of our friends were arrested, and we know that we could be caught at any moment.

It is nearly dark, and Jessica and Melissa and I are looking for a place to spend the night. Jessica, with her pale, narrow face, dark eyes and curly hair, could be my sister or my daughter. Melissa is a bit more punk, androgynous in her dyed-blond ducktail.

We are hurrying through the streets, worried. We need to be indoors before true dark, and curfew. "Go into any house," we've been told. "Anyone will be glad to take you in." But we feel a bit shy.

From a narrow, metal staircase, Samar, a young woman with a wide, beautiful smile beckons us up.

"Welcome, welcome!" We are given refuge in the three small rooms that house her family: her mother, big bodied and sad, her small nieces and nephews, her brother's wife Hanin, round-faced and pale and six months pregnant.

We sit down on big, overstuffed couches. The women serve us tea. I look around at the pine wood paneling that adds soft curves and warmth to the concrete, at the porcelain birds and artificial flowers that decorate a ledge. The ceilings are carefully painted in simple geometric designs. They have poured love and care into their home, and it feels like a sanctuary.

Outside we can hear sporadic shooting, the deep 'boom' of houses being blown up by the soldiers. But here in these rooms, we are safe, in the tentative sense that word can be used in this place. "Inshallah", "God willing", follows every statement of good here or every commitment to a plan.

"Yahoud!" the women say when we hear explosions. It is the Arabic word for Jew, the word used for the soldiers of the invading army. It is a word of warning and alarm: don't go down that alley, out into that street.

"Yahoud!"

But no one invades our refuge this night. We talk and laugh with the women. I have a pocket-sized packet of Tarot cards, and we read for what the next day will bring.

Samar wants a reading, and then Hanin. I don't much like what I see in their cards: death, betrayal, sleepless nights of sorrow and regret. But I can't explain that in Arabic anyway, so I focus on what I see that is good.

"Baby?" Hanin asks.

"Babies, yes,"

"Boy? Son?"

The card of the Sun comes up, with a small boy-child riding on a white horse. "Yes, I think it is a boy," I say.

She shows me the picture of her first baby, who died at a year and a half. Around us young men are prowling with guns, houses are exploding, lives are being shattered. And we are in an intimate world of women. Hanin brushes my hair, ties it back in a band to control its wildness. We try to talk about our lives. We can write down our ages on paper. I am fifty, Hanin is twenty-three. Jessica and Melissa are twenty-two: all of them older than most of the soldiers. Samar is seventeen, the children are eight and ten and the baby is four. I show them pictures of my family, my garden, my step-granddaughter. I think they understand that my husband has four daughters but I have none of my own, and that I am his third wife. I'm not sure they understand that those wives are sequential, not concurrent-but maybe they do. The women of this camp are educated, sophisticated-many we have met throughout the day are professionals, teachers, nurses, students when the Occupation allows them to go to school.

"Are you Christian?" Hanin finally asks us at the end of the night. Melissa, Jessica and I look at each other. All of us are Jewish, and we're not sure what the reaction will be if we admit it. Jessica speaks for us.

"Jewish," she says. The women don't understand the word. We try several variations, but finally are forced to the blunt and dreaded "Yahoud."

"Yahoud!" Hanin says. She gives a little surprised laugh, looks at the other women. "Beautiful!"

And that is all. Her welcome to us is undiminished. She shows me the shower, dresses me in her own flowered nightgown and robe, and puts me to bed in the empty side of the double bed she shares with her husband, who has been arrested by the Yahoud. Mats are brought out for the others. Two of the children sleep with us. Ahmed, the little four year old boy, snuggles next to me. He sleeps fiercely, kicking and thrashing in his dreams, and each time an explosion comes, hurls himself into my arms. I can't sleep at all. How have I come here, at an age when I should be home making plum jam and doll clothes for grandchildren, to be cradling a little Palestinian boy whose sleep is already shattered by gunshots and shells? I am thinking about the summer I spent in Israel when I was fifteen, learning Hebrew, working on a kibbutz, touring every memorial to the Holocaust and every site of a battle in what we called the War of Independence. I am thinking of one day when we were brought to the Israel/Lebanon border. The Israeli side was green, the other side barren and brown.

"You see what we have made of this land," we were told. "And that-that's what they've done in two thousand years. Nothing."

I am old enough now to question the world of assumptions behind that statement, to recognize one of the prime justifications the colonizers have always used against the colonized. "They weren't doing anything with the land: they weren't using it." They are not, somehow, as deserving as we are, as fully human. They are animals, they hate us.

All of that is shattered by the sound of by Hanin's laugh, called into question by a small boy squirming and twisting in his sleep. I lie there in awe at the trust that has been given me, one of the people of the enemy, put to bed to sleep with the children. It

seems to me, at that moment, that there are indeed powers greater than the guns I can hear all around me: the power of Hanin's trust, the power that creates sanctuary, the great surging compassionate power that overcomes prejudice and hate.

One night later, we again go back to our family just as dark is falling, together with Linda and Neta, two other volunteers. We have narrowly escaped a party of soldiers, but no sooner do we arrive than a troop comes to the door. At least they have come to the door: we are grateful for that for all day they have been breaking through people's walls, knocking out the concrete with sledgehammers, bursting through into rooms of terrified people to search, or worse, use the house as a thoroughfare, a safe route that allows them to move through the camp without venturing into the streets. We have been in houses turned into surreal passageways, with directions spray painted on their walls, where there is no sanctuary because all night long soldiers are passing back and forth.

We come forward to meet these soldiers, to talk with them and witness what they will do. One of the men, with owlish glasses, knows Jessica and Melissa: they have had a long conversation with him standing beside his tank. He is uncomfortable with his role.

Ahmed, the little boy, is terrified of the soldiers. He cries and screams and points at them, and we try to comfort him, to carry him away into another room. But he won't go. He is terrified, but he can't bear to be out of their sight. He runs toward them crying. "Take off your helmet," Jessica tells the soldiers. "Shake hands with him, show him you're a human being. Help him to be not so afraid." The owlish soldier takes off his helmet, holds out his hand. Ahmed's sobs subside. The soldiers file out to search the upstairs. Samar and Ahmed follow them. Samar holds the little boy up to the owlish soldier's face, tells him to give the soldier a kiss. She doesn't want Ahmed to be afraid, to hate. The little boy kisses the soldier, and the soldier kisses him back, and hands him a small Palestinian flag.

This is the moment to end this story, on a high note of hope, to let it be a story of how simple human warmth, a child's kiss, can for a moment overcome oppression and hate. But it is a characteristic of the relentless quality of this occupation that the story doesn't end here.

The soldiers order us all into one room. They close the door, and begin to search the house. We can hear banging and crashing and loud thuds against the walls. I am trying to think of something to sing, to do to distract us, to keep the spirits of the children up. I cannot think of anything that makes sense. My voice won't work. But Neta teaches us a silly children's song in Arabic. To me, it sounds like:

"Babouli raizh, raizh, babouli jai, Babouli ham meloucar o shai,"

"The train comes, the train goes, the train is full of sugar and tea." The children are delighted, and begin to sing. Hanin and I drum on the tables. The soldiers are throwing things around in the other room and the children are singing and Ahmed begins to dance. We put him up on the table and he smiles and swings his hips and makes us all laugh.

When the soldiers finally leave, we emerge to examine the damage. Every single object has been pulled off the walls, out of the closets, thrown in huge piles on the floor. The couches have been overturned and their bottoms ripped off. The wood paneling is full of holes knocked into every curve and corner. Bags of grain have been

emptied into the sink. Broken glass and china covers the floor.

We begin to clean up. Melissa sweeps: Jessica tries to corral the barefoot children until we can get the glass off the floor. I help Hanin clear a path in the bedroom, folding the clothes of her absent husband, hanging up her own things, finding the secret sexy underwear the soldiers have obviously examined. By the time it is done, I know every intimate object of her life.

We are a houseful of women: we know how to clean and restore order. When the house is back together, Hanin and Samar and the sister cook. The grandmother is having a high blood pressure attack: we lay her down on the couch, I bring her a pillow. She rests. I sit down, utterly exhausted, as Hanin and the women serve us up a meal. A few china birds are back on the ledge. The artificial flowers have reappeared. Some of the loose boards of the paneling have been pushed back. Somehow once again the house feels like a sanctuary.

"You are amazing," I tell Hanin. "I am completely exhausted: you're six months pregnant, it's your house that has just been trashed, and you're able to stand there cooking for all of us."

Hanin shrugs. "For us, this is normal," she says. And this is where I would like to end this story, celebrating the resilience of these women, full of faith in their power to renew their lives again and again.

But the story doesn't end here.

The third night. Melissa and Jessica go back to stay with our family. I am staying with another family who has asked for support. The soldiers have searched their house three times, and have promised that they will continue to come back every night. We are sleeping in our clothes, boots ready. We get a call.

The soldiers have come back to Hanin's house. Again, they lock everyone in one room. Again, they search. This time, the soldier who kissed the baby is not with them. They have some secret intelligence report that tells them there is something to find, although they have not found it. They rip the paneling off the walls. They knock holes in the tiles and the concrete beneath. They smash and destroy, and when they are done, they piss on the mess they have left.

Nothing has been found, but something is lost. The sanctuary is destroyed, the house turned into a wrecking yard. No one kisses these soldiers: no one sings.

When Hanin emerges and sees what they have done, she goes into shock. She is resilient and strong, but this assault has gone beyond 'normal', and she breaks. She is hyperventilating, her pulse is racing and thready. She could lose the baby, or even die.

Jessica, who is trained as a Street Medic for actions, informs the soldiers that Hanin needs immediate medical care. The soldiers are reluctant, "We'll be done soon," they say. But one is a paramedic, and Melissa and Jessica are able to make him see the seriousness of the situation. They allow the two of them to violate curfew, to run through the dark streets to the clinic, come back with two nurses who somehow get Hanin and the family into an ambulance and taken to the hospital.

This story could be worse. Because Jessica and Melissa were there, Hanin and the baby survive. That is, after all, why we've come: to make things not quite as bad as they would be otherwise.

But there is no happy ending to this story, no cheerful resolution. When the soldiers pull out, I go back to say goodbye to Hanin, who has come back from the hospital. She is looking dull, depressed: something is broken. I don't know if it can be repaired, if she

will ever be the same. Her resilience is gone; her eyes have lost their light. She writes her name and phone number for me, writes "Hnin love you." I don't know how the story will ultimately end for her. I still see in the cards destruction, sleepless nights of anguish, death.

This is not a story of some grand atrocity. It is a story about 'normal', about what it's like to under an everyday, relentless assault on any sense of safety or sanctuary.

"What was that song about the train?" I ask Neta after the soldiers are gone.

"Didn't you hear?" she asks me. "The soldiers came and got the old woman, at one o'clock in the morning, and made her sing the song. I don't think I'll ever be able to sing it again."

"What source can you believe in order to create peace there?" a friend writes. I have no answer. Every song is tainted; every story goes on too long and turns nasty. A boy whose baby dreams are disturbed by gunfire kisses a soldier. A soldier kisses a boy, and then destroys his home. Or maybe he simply stands by as others do the destruction, in silence, that same silence too many of us have kept for too long. And if there are forces that can nurture peace they must first create an uproar, a vast breaking of silence, a refusal to stand by as the boot stomps down.

Copyright (c) 2002 by Starhawk. All rights reserved. This copyright protects Starhawk's right to future publication of her work. Nonprofit, activist, and educational groups may circulate this essay (forward it, reprint it, translate it, post it, or reproduce it) for nonprofit uses. Please do not change any part of it without permission. Readers are invited to visit the web site: www.starhawk.org.
