

The Price of an Orange

For Rachel Corrie and Tom Hurndall

by Starhawk

I am writing this as we approach the anniversary of two murders. And I find myself thinking about an orange, a ghost orange, growing on a branch on a ghost tree that no longer stands in the courtyard of a home crushed to bloodstained rubble. In Rafah, the border town that lies on the dusty frontier where Gaza meets Egypt. A place of cement tenements pockmarked with bullet holes, streets choking in dust and smashed concrete, barbed wire and fences and sniper towers, where Rachel and Tom died, like so many of the Palestinians they had come to stand with in solidarity.

In March of 2003 Rachel Corrie was killed as she was trying to stop an Israeli soldier from demolishing a home. The bulldozer driver saw her, and deliberately ran over her. She was twenty-three years old.

Just a few weeks later, an Israeli soldier firing from a sniper tower shot Tom as he was trying to save some children who were under fire. After nine long months in what the doctors call a "vegetative state," his body breathing but his mind and brain destroyed, Tom died in mid-January, just a day after his mother whispered in his ear that his murderer had finally been arrested. He was just twenty-two.

Tom and Rachel were not unique in dying in Rafah. Palestinians are killed every day. A year ago, the toll was more than 250 dead in Rafah alone since the beginning of the Intifada, more than 50 of them children. Now the count must be much higher. The same day Rachel died, Akhmed, a fifty-year-old street sweeper who lived with his mother, went out to sit on his stoop and smoke a cigarette. The soldiers gunned him down, for no particular reason, and his death made no international headlines, caused no controversy, evoked no words of condemnation from a shocked world.

The children Tom was trying to save were playing on a mound of dirt on the border, a zone of rubble and razor wire, half-demolished homes and dirt piles and walls riddled with shell holes. A barren zone of scraped earth where tanks prowl at night and death comes whizzing out of the air from an unseen source. And yet, because of the danger and the emptiness and the destruction, the area right along the border has a sense of wilderness, of spaciousness, of being at the edge of something, like the sea. The children of Rafah cannot play by the sea, which lies just a few miles away. In fact, there is nothing much to play with in Rafah, no playgrounds, no swimming pools, no swings or slides or climbing bars.

So the children in Rafah are bored and infected with the restless unease of children whose lives and homes and families are constantly being shot away all around them. They run in packs. They follow strangers and mob you if you stand still. They all seem

to know only one English phrase, "What's your name?" and they call it after you, over and over again. If you ignore them they will gain your attention by lobbing a few stones at you. If you make the mistake of stopping, you are soon surrounded, groped and patted and poked by small hands as voices cry, "What's your name? What's your name?" until you think you will go mad.

In the few days Tom spent in Rafah he must have been plagued many times by these children. Nonetheless, when he saw a group of them crying in terror as bullets ricocheted around them, he acted instinctively to save them, running in under the fire from the sniper tower to rescue a small boy, going back after two little girls trapped on the wrong side of the mound. The sniper lowered his sights, and put a bullet in Tom's brain. Under interrogation, the soldier first lied, claiming Tom was armed and firing at him. Later he admitted that he knew Tom was an unarmed civilian. He says he did it deliberately, as a "deterrent."

I went down to Rafah after Rachel was shot to support the team who was with her, most of whom were so young that they had never experienced a death of someone close to them. I went back again after Tom was shot, to support the team that was with him, many of whom had also been with Rachel. We agonized about just which picture to put on Rachel's martyr poster, held a press conference after Tom's death, tried to regroup and figure out how to go on. At night we continued to sleep in homes that were at risk of being bulldozed, hoping our presence would be some slight deterrence to the soldiers, or that we could intercede with them if they came, or if nothing else, bear witness.

I stayed mostly at Abu Akhmed's home. He was a farmer, who grew olives. His groves were destroyed by the soldiers, and he had only a few trees left. Each night he sat in the small, cement-enclosed courtyard in front of his home, making a small fire in a tin can, brewing tea for us and the visitors who would stop by to smoke and gossip, as men have talked around the fire since the days of Abraham, father of both the Arabs and the Jews. Around that fire, the concrete and the bullets, the tanks and the shellfire, the warren of refugee tenements and the rubble-filled streets seemed just a thin overlay on an older pattern of life. Look through the shell holes at just the right angle, and you might catch a glimpse of an ancient Rafah, a paradise of sun and orange groves, small farms and donkey carts laden with fruit and oil and flowers, where life went on much as it had since the beginning of time, and guests were always welcome at the evening fire.

The house was strangely bare because all of the family's important possessions had long been removed to safer places. Abu Akhmed's sons stayed elsewhere--the border is too dangerous a place for young men who may be perceived to be fighters and so are at risk of being shot. But they would sneak back some evenings to join us around the fire. Abu Akhmed was old, but no older than my husband, I had to remind myself. He would tease me, saying, ""Star, she Jewish--she kill you and me!" and then laugh and say, "No, Star, she good!" and discuss the possibility of finding me a husband locally, so that I might stay on in Rafah. The U.S. was bombing Iraq, troops were moving in toward Baghdad, and in the middle of the night he would often get up, turn on the TV full blast, and yell back at the news. It was harder to sleep through than the gunshots and the periodic firing at the house, which I was used to. The room I slept in had had a big shell hole where the window was, that was now repaired. I suppose that was

evidence that it was not safe, that another shell might come through in any of the nightly tank assaults. But I was grateful for the space, and the privacy, and the mat on the cement floor, and slept well whenever there was quiet to sleep in.

Some nights, I stayed at Abu Akhmed's sister's house. Abu Akhmed's sister's name is Sorari, and she is the grandmother. The house was a big, rambling farmhouse, with many rooms and a large kitchen and a long balcony across the front. Behind it was land that had been an olive grove before the soldiers bulldozed the trees. There were still a few trees left: a swath of olives and oranges and a pen for the chickens.

Not all of the rooms were usable: one had bullet holes through the front window and bullets lodged in the molding of the doors and Nahed was afraid to let the children sleep there. One had a huge shell hole through the wall and much of the floor: the children liked to play there because they could jump through the hole in the floor to the outside and they thought that was funny.

I remember clearly the first night I stayed there. They gave me the best bed, in a bedroom all to myself where normally Abu Ahkmed's sister's son Foad and his wife Nahed would sleep with the youngest children. Now Foad came to the house only for dinner, leaving before the night grew too dangerous. The mattress was covered in plastic, which crackled whenever I turned over in my sleep.

Nahed was beautiful as a Madonna, holding her children on her lap as they did their homework or cuddled up to watch TV as tanks shot at the house. The kids were so used to gunshots that they didn't even notice. Joe, one of the team that had been with Rachel, was playing his guitar and singing, the kids were looking at my video camera and wanting me to take their pictures and play it back, all to a soundtrack of rifle fire that no one paid any attention to. Until the shots got loud and close, hitting the walls of the house.

"This is bad," Joe said. "It's dangerous. Maybe we should do something."

"What did you have in mind that we could do?" I asked.

"We could go out with a light and a bullhorn and tell them that there are Internationals here," Joe suggested. "Are you comfortable with that?"

"Comfortable" isn't the word I would have chosen. It was just over a week since Rachel Corrie was killed. We were hoping they wouldn't kill us, too. I should have been afraid but I was actually not feeling much of anything at all, just a kind of deadly calm, in that dangerous, numb state when you can no longer discern whether a given act is brave or stupid. Joe picked up the light, a long fluorescent lamp that runs on rechargeable batteries, and the bullhorn. We put on our high-visibility vests. Nahed, nervous, holds the door for us. We stepped out into the courtyard, still protected by the concrete wall. I held the video camera. Cautiously, Joe pushed open the narrow, metal door, and steps out with the light on. I followed.

"We are internationals!" he called out. "There are internationals in this house. And children. You are shooting at a house full of children."

We waited for a moment. No one shot us. The tank rolled away, and we went back inside.

Nahed had a few orange and olive trees left in the back yard and the front courtyard, and chickens. Most of her land had been confiscated, the trees bulldozed. In the mornings, she served us eggs, telling us with pride that they were from her own birds. I would have loved to help her with her garden, or to learn from Sorari how to bake bread on the domed, clay oven in the yard, its design the same as models found in Neolithic burials. The kids played in the yard, when the tanks weren't around, jumping in and out of the shell hole in the back room, making a game of it.

I stayed with them one more time, after Tom's death. I had to leave early in the morning, to go back to Beit Sahour near Bethlehem for the meeting in which we would try to make sense of these murders and decide how to go on as an organization. I didn't want to wake anyone, or take time for breakfast, but Sorari wouldn't let me leave her house unfed. She got up, made me coffee, gave me some pita bread to eat. As we walked out, she paused in the courtyard to pick ripe oranges from her tree, and filled my pockets.

It was the simplest gesture, one every gardener knows, the slightly smug generosity that draws on nature's bounty, the sense of wealth and pride at having so much that you can give without feeling any lack. Just so, if she had come to visit me, I might have handed her an apple or a plum, or sent her away with a small jar of my own apricot jam. A very ordinary gesture. Yet everything we were fighting for was in that gesture, in the simple dignity of a woman who stands on her own ground, who has something to offer, gifts to bestow, fruit from her own tree.

I left, and never returned. When I tried to go back, the borders were closed. One by one, the internationals who were there in Rafah were forced out or eventually had to leave. Laura stayed on, for ten months, but now even she is gone.

And the tanks and the bulldozers marched on. The house Rachel died trying to save is gone. Abu Akhmed's house, Sorari's house, the courtyards and the olive trees and the orange tree, all bulldozed into oblivion.

I carried those oranges for a long time, finally ate them on a long night's bus ride back from the hospital in Haifa where I'd gone to visit Brian, the ISM volunteer who was shot in the face by soldiers in Jenin. They tasted sweet, so sweet they surprised me, as if all the sweetness of ordinary life were concentrated in that juice. All the stories Rachel will never write, all the pictures Tom will never take, all the moments of tenderness neither will ever know, all the undone homework of the children and the unbaked bread of the women reduced now to beggary and homelessness, all the unsung songs and unlived dreams of all the thousands of bloody martyrs in whose company Tom and Rachel now rest, who paid their lives as the price of an orange. A ghost orange, that has yet to be plucked from branches daily ripped from a tree that has maybe already been uprooted, or maybe has not yet been planted, cannot be planted until a flood of the world's outrage cleanses this bloodstained, bitter ground.

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