

## POSTMORTEM PRESENT

*by*

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“Daddy come on, one more! It’s only ten—”

“Ten on a school night, little monster.”

“Tell me one more or I’ll eat you with my big monster teeth!”

“And where will you put me, in that tiny belly? You can’t even finish a bowl of Cheerios, think you’ll fit me in there?”

“You’ll be gone for so long... I want my fairy tales in advance!”

“Well, if you put it like that, you don’t give me much choice. Just one more, then lights off.

Once upon a time, there was a very unfortunate man who had no wife and no children and lived all alone in the middle of the desert. He had to walk five miles each day, through the hot desert, to reach the closest city and find water and food and then another five miles home.”

“Couldn’t he buy another house if that one was so far away?”

“He couldn’t afford it, Melissa.”

“Well, maybe he could rent one, like Aunt Tina and Uncle Benny rent their house in Brooklyn.”

“Let’s just say he hadn’t thought of that and get on with the fairy tale, Honey, shall we?”

“Mm, fine.”

“Well then, one day when he was in the city’s greatest fair, he laid eyes on the king’s only daughter. He thought she was the most beautiful woman on earth, and from that moment on, he could think of nothing else but her.”

“Yes, naturally.”

“Want a fairy tale, Mel, or should I turn off the light already?”

“Ok, sorry.”

“No more interruptions then!

Days came and days went, and the unfortunate man could no longer eat or sleep because of his desperate love for the princess, until one day, as he was walking in the desert, he came across a rusty old lamp. He lifted it and wiped it clean, and then he felt a violent jolt, as if

lightning had hit him. All of a sudden, he was lying on the sand looking at a majestic jinni, who told him that he could fulfill three of his heart's deepest desires. The man couldn't believe his luck! He wished to become king of a fertile land, to live in a glass palace and have his beloved as his wife. The jinni granted all his wishes and the man thought he'd live happily ever after."

"But then what happened?"

"Well, then the princess's father, the king, got so mad that he lost his daughter, that he decided to go to war to defeat the man who dared steal her and to take her back."

"Like you'll go to war, Daddy?"

"Melissa... We talked about this, baby. I won't be fighting anyone. I'm going there to record what's happening and to try to make the world see what a bad thing war is."

"Do you think that if you show them, they'll stop it?"

"I don't know Mellie. I hope so. Your bedtime is long past, Honey Bee, give me a kiss goodnight."

"I love you, Daddy."

"I love you too, baby. Goodnight."

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It'd been a month since we arrived in Homs, and I already felt like I'd spent a lifetime in a war zone. Three days to go until we could pack up and go back to the normality of a house built of concrete, of drinkable water and not wearing bulletproof vests to go for a smoke. I don't know if we crossed a line, but I'd already seen a lot more flesh and bone than my stomach could digest, and I seriously doubted if I could ever look at the footage again.

That last week, I couldn't sleep, and every time I did, I had nightmares of my wife and daughter asking me to come home. One night, I dreamed that Melissa had come to find me in Syria and was looking for me all around camp. I could see her, I could hear her, I kept trying to run towards her, trying to shout, but I was dead frozen. I woke up sweaty and in tears, and Jessie, my first camera assistant, joked that next time we should film swimming pigs in the Bahamas, because I clearly couldn't digest this. I told him to fuck off, and we went about our day as usual, filming destroyed areas outside town, interviewing former hostages and bombing survivors, and reciting words from *Conversational Arabic for Beginners*, because people always get more comfortable when you entertain them in broken Arabic. Our "secret studio" was a basement underneath Ali's tobacco shop on the corner of Quwatli Square, and it smelled of rust and moldy tobacco. I thought it couldn't get worse than that.

I remember the evening when it happened. We'd just finished packing the camera equipment. Kendra, my top-notch interviewer, had been stressed all day because her baby back at home had a fever and, as always when she's stressed, she kept humming mainstream pop every time she found herself not speaking. With Taylor Swift's *Blank Space* stuck in my head, I headed for the square to take a break and light the last cigar in my case. It tasted stiffer than

my regular tobacco, but also richer, truer, the kind of stuff I imagined a king smoking in the company of exotic dancers. I settled myself in the low, half-crumbling mantel in the middle of the square, and I soon felt the marble sweating under my crotch. The sun was already low, making the shadows of the shacks colossal, haunted even. I felt my favorite poison burning through my nostrils as I watched dark figures moving about gingerly. It was one of my early observations in Syria that everyone walked in a disoriented way, always keeping distances from one another, like chessmen in a pre-decided battle. I guess I should have known something would happen right then, cause something always happens when you let go even for a second, but terror had always felt cold to me, and this night was so unbearably hot.

I was halfway through my smoke when a young man entered my sight, no older than eighteen, heavily dressed, huge vest around his lap, and panting. Maybe I'm making this up now just to fill the gaps, but I remember his face, his eyes, his blind look of purpose. Then again, I might be mistaken, doesn't extremism always look the same? There wasn't much time to take it in, let alone to react. The thought was half-formed in my mind, then a horrifying shriek, a deafening blast, warm blood oozing from my ear, people screaming, *Run*. And I did. I hate to admit I wasn't brave. I didn't look back at our shack. I didn't look for my crew, and I didn't look at the bodies I was stepping on, or whatever was left of them. But you have to understand, there was no time, no one can think rationally at such a time, I was in pain, you have to understand. I just ran as fast and as far as my legs could take me. I didn't even stop to think how lucky I was to still be running.

I was almost out of the square when I started regaining consciousness of being, of still being. I numbly took in my surroundings. Everything had violently paused. Ruins, dust, so much dust, and silence. Through thick dust and smoke, I could see people running, people raising their hands to the sky as if imploring an invisible god, but all I could hear was an artificial silence. It was a silence I'd never experienced before, a kind of very full, very loud silence, which can perhaps only be described as a deep dive in the ocean, when your ears hurt so much and you hear everything and nothing at all.

I heard a muffled call in Arabic that I thought I recognized.

"Please."

I don't know if it was the plea or the urgency to catch a breath that stopped me, but I hesitantly stopped and inspected the ground. At first, I saw nothing but dirt and rubble. Nothing looked alive. I was ready to keep moving when I saw a small hand emerge from under a cement fragment. I approached with caution and bent over it.

"Anybody there?" I said, my voice half-breaking.

"Please," the tiny voice whispered again. It sounded like a child, and suddenly, my nightmares were coming true. I pulled the heavy stone with all the strength I still possessed and uncovered a tiny, frail girl, no more than six years old. The sudden burst of sunlight made her blink. Her half-shut eyes were bright green. She wasn't crying, she looked so calm, angelic, so unaffected by the chaos she was found in; to my eyes, she looked like part of a different painting, as displaced as Icarus in Bruegel's legendary *Fall*. And then I saw the lake of blood she was curled upon, like a tiny baby fresh from the womb, only instead of life, she was so much closer to death. An incontrollable sob possessed me. *Fuck why?*

“It’s all right. You’ll be all right. Hush there,” I said, more for my consolation than for hers. I can’t remember a time I’ve felt more helpless. I took her tiny body in my arms, placed her head on my chest, and tried to soothe her. She looked at me with gratitude and expectation, and I was so scared because there was nothing I could do for her. I knew the only operating hospital was out of town and, in any case, she had lost so much blood that she would probably give in right into my arms. I clenched my fists and smiled through tears, weighing my options.

“Please,” she whispered again. Her arms were barely extended now, and she was holding a small wooden box. I took it and examined it briefly. It felt oddly heavy, and it had delicate carvings that had faded away with time, making it look ancient.

“Please, take it. Take care of it,” she said with a faint smile and replaced her tiny hands around my neck. Her eyes had grown tired now, no expectation in them anymore, but no defeat either. I placed the box aside carefully. I could ask questions, but what would be the point? I simply looked at her and, for the very first time since I saw her, she looked hauntingly her age. A fragile six-year-old, a fucking child, like my child, like any child, in the middle of a war zone.

Melissa’s words echoed in my ears as I held this little girl, no older than my daughter, in my arms. *Do you think that if you show them, they’ll stop it?* Nothing seemed fitting to say.

“What’s your name?” I finally said.

Her breath was now softer, her eyes were almost shut. It looked as if she wanted to say something, but nothing came out. Her embrace was getting weaker and weaker, almost lifeless. My tears fell on her wounds, my blood met her blood, and caressed her. Tears and blood are the same everywhere.

There were no words to say.

I remembered a lullaby my mother used to sing to me when I was little. I clutched her in my arms and through my tears, I sang to her.

*Sleep, my child, and peace attend thee  
All through the night.  
Guardian angels watch will lend thee  
All through the night.<sup>1</sup>*

\* \* \*

It has been a week since I returned home, and it’s not just my ear that hasn’t healed yet. I’ll try to put everything onto paper, it might be the only way to get it out of me. The worst thing so far is interaction, cause everyone’s so happy that I’m back, and I don’t know how to respond to that. I went to Kendra’s funeral yesterday. Her son had overcome his fever and seemed a jolly little thing, unaware that this was the beginning of an absence that would mark his entire life. At least Kendra has people remembering her. Remembering who she was and how she talked and how she laughed and what her name was. People will remember her birthday and look at photos of her and cry over her absence. That’s more than what many get.

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<sup>1</sup> “All Through the Night,” a traditional lullaby.

My guilt is immense. The nightmares are worse now than in Syria, so yeah, I know now that things can get worse. I can't bring myself to open that box.

"Honey," I hear my wife from the half-open door.

"Jesus, you scared me, Violet."

"I know, I'm sorry to interrupt your writing. I really need you to unpack your suitcase, baby. We can't have it wrapped in plastic forever. Throw what you don't need, and give me the rest to disinfect."

"I told you nothing needs disinfection," I sigh.

"And you know my rules about communal houses."

"You're giving me a very hard time for a man who just came back from war," I joke. She laughs and pushes the tightly wrapped package towards me, leaving the room.

"Melissa, why don't you help Dad unpack? He's in his office, go keep him company." I hear Violet in the hallway. This is not a good idea.

"Can I help, Daddy?"

"Don't you want to play in the garden Mellie? It's a beautiful day."

"No, I'd rather sit with you."

"Okay then."

I start cutting through plastic. A couple of books, a set of pens, dirty clothes, really dirty clothes, some blood-stained clothes, and a bunch of unaddressed memories, all waiting to be sorted.

"Dad, who's this little girl?"

I feel panic warming my veins. She's holding a picture that says nothing to me. Then I see the heavy wooden box sitting on her thighs.

"Give me that, Melissa, and go play. Go to the garden."

I take the box, empty now. So all it had in it was the picture. My hands are trembling, and I feel a panic attack approaching. I examine the picture. A little girl, my little Syrian girl, and a woman holding hands. Her sister? Her mother, maybe? The girl looks straight ahead, and the woman watches her affectionately. They look happy. I turn the photo to see an inscription in beautiful Arabic handwriting. *Pandora and Nour, 2015*. Below it, a line written with pencil, in large, unruly letters. *I miss you, Mom*.

Rest Pandora.

Thank you. Thank you.

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*Pandora's myth is one I've held close to my heart since I was a little girl. Pandora herself is an intriguing character, full of contradictions. She was a human crafted by the gods to bring damnation upon her fellow men, yet she was made of flesh and bone, and she suffered from the consequences of her irreversible fate all the same. There lies the essence of her tragedy: she is a piece in a chess game that has already been lost. In this revision of the myth, I attempt to redefine Pandora by stripping her of her time, place, and context in order to illustrate how she has always existed in my mind: as a victim. Much like the ancient Pandora, my Pandora is an innocent girl, forced to suffer a tragedy that goes beyond her choices, actions, and understanding. Evil is present in the world long before her, and she is just mirroring it through her suffering. The only hope that is left for mankind, the only thing left in the box, is the memory of her devastating humanity.*

### **Works Cited**

“All Through the Night.” *Musica International*. Richard Kopp, nd. Web. 30 Mar. 2017.

[www.musicanet.org/robokopp/welsh/sleepmyc.htm](http://www.musicanet.org/robokopp/welsh/sleepmyc.htm).