Forbidden Zone

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Abstract
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Maximum sea. Tiny boxes. Wall to wall windows. Wall to wall balconies. Angled for privacy precariously
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Aydın Mehmet Ali

FORBIDDEN ZONE…

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Drinks, sun, sea and the local tanned olive-skinned boys with erotic eyes and shy smiles. Always moving around in groups. More in love with their own bodies and each other than the tourists, peripheral to their lives but still a temptation. Doing somersaults on the beach, games, excuses for touching, embracing each other, holding tightly. Older women aware of their own attractiveness glancing, careful lest their lingering looks attract exaggerated attention needing justification to husbands. Older men wistful. ‘Accidentally’ the ball is kicked towards the blonde, red-skinned tourists sizzling in the July heat. Blue-eyed, loud-laughtered, bikinied girls. A few smiles, furtive looks. Seductive games while drinking bottles of coke or beer unable to quench the thirst. Laughter, movement, running. A cacophony of noise, a perfect camouflage for the hastily spoken words while picking up the ball from the blonde tourist talking to her friend. The dark long fingers gently brush off the wet sand grains from the ball, enough time to arrange to meet at the disco, at the back of the hotel. What time…? 8.00 tonight…? OK.

The cacophony has died. An eerie silence patrols the hotels, the balconies, streets, gardens, the disco. The blood-red hibiscus continue to blossom on the veranda, between two hotels half submerged in the sand. And date-palms, natives and lovers of the sand dunes. The pigeons have taken over the hotels. The new tourists with permanent residences and no visas. No one can order them about.

Forbidden Zone

Red boards. Black letters with black soldiers gun in hand tangled in barbed wire guard the empty hotels. Against whom?
Zone Interdite

The pigeons in defiance of orders fly in and out, settle anywhere they wish, shit indiscriminately, even worse dance in courtship and fuck all over the balconies, in full view of the guards impotent in preventing or punishing such audacious violations of morality, decency and military dictates. The quick succession of generations ensuring erasure from memory passed on by those witnesses to carnage.

Verbotene Zone

Empty holes. The dark hollow body of the hotel cannot prevent the echoes escaping from all its orifices. Cooing sounds echo around the hotel corridors, bedrooms, dining room, barely audible but the woman with the dark hair and olive skin can hear them as her bare feet touch the sand, and toes sink in gently gathering sand grains and tiny ground white pink and yellow shells on her skin. She turns her face to the hotel and silently calls for the sounds to come to her… A child’s voice. Laughter. Excitement. A little girl. With Daddy. A game is being played. In and out of the water. Daddy-Daddy-look-look! Catch me! Catch me! She is three. Dark hair. Bouncing in two bunches on top of her head. Rubber duck ring around her bottom. But Daddy look, look at me! Look! I’m nearly swimming. Little bare feet run in and out of the water leaving tiny footprints kissed then erased by the sea foam. Daddy is looking at the lone figure in the distance on the other end of the beach. She walks without haste. Daddy holds the little girl in his arms. His eyes watch the lone woman in a white flimsy dress with fluttering tiny cornflower-blue flowers. Daddy-daddy-look… Yes I’m looking. The woman is watching the little girl. Daddy is bald. He can’t believe the lone woman is looking at him so boldly. Daddy smiles at the lone woman in expectation…

* * * * *

Planes flew over in July. Fighter jets screeched and tore the sky apart. A confused moment. Happy birthday to you happy birthday dear Aris happy birthday to youuuu… From the basement of Aspendia Hotel. Wish wish blow the candles and wish… Don’t tell anyone or it won’t come true. Close your eyes close your eyes. Now, wish… silence everyone… A roar whistles past. The walls shake. The crystal chandelier. A deafening blast as though the earth exploded. Clouds of dust descend. Invisibility fear seep through. A child’s whimper. Adults shout orders, get down get down… hands reach out for each other crawling on the floor until they reach other hands, other body parts. Hold on. Hold on. Quickly quickly let’s get out of here. Dust covered bodies try out slow ghostly movements. My beautiful dress Mummy… my pink fairy dress… it’s dirty. A whimper. I won’t be able to be an angel again Mummy… loud wails. I want to be an angel Mummy. You said you won’t get me another if I get it dirty. It isn’t my fault Mummy! Mummy? An
imperceptible silence. A hushed trembling voice. *Shusssh Alexia... don’t cry baby. It isn’t your fault. We’ll get you another one baby... shuuush...* A loud explosion shakes the walls further. Windowpanes explode a rush of hot wind blows in, furniture flies off, debris falls, the stunned silence no longer contained, screams screams fill the air, hysterical, uncontrollable screams. In between offerings and prayers to God and Jesus and to the Holy Mother Panayia, Mary. The fear of death of the adults soaked up by the young unable to comprehend the complexities of life and death but well aware of fear. With tear-filled eyes and faces the young watch the adults, wait for them to make everything all right, to stop the loud roaring, to stop the dust and debris, to get back to the party. The adults paralysed by fear become children ... holding babies tightly against themselves, nearly suffocating them, searching for safety. *Get into the cars quickly get into the cars...* a man’s voice penetrates through the dust and fallen debris from what was the direction of the door. But he is invisible. *Mummy my cake... I haven’t made a wish yet. And the candles have all blown out, by themselves. Wait Mummy wait...* The swings are buried under the sand whipped up by the winds from the sea sometimes bringing red sand clouds from the Sahara. They don’t move. The top bar rusty with peeling blue paint stands half a metre above the sand dune; the immovable rusty brown chains hold the seats trapped under the sand. No children’s laughter, high-pitched excitement, giggles. *Push Daddy push... higher higher... up to the sky...* the high pitch of excitement skirting the edges of fear. *Hold on now... don’t let go! Both hands! Both hands! Don’t wave to me...* White sand lilies blossom at the end of Summer, their scent descends on decay, destruction, decomposed bodies, broken windows, doors, abandoned buildings, flowers, trees, prisoners of barbed wire protected by red signboards black gun-touting shadow soldiers. Visible. Impenetrable. A shrill whistle tears the silence of the day. The fight of the shrill whistle against the thousands of cameras clicked by the day-tourists from the South on their quick tour of the North to the abandoned well-guarded empty hotels silent witnesses to war and atrocities. Unmovable, unhiden, magnificent monuments to shame stand stoically while around their skirts insignificant nobodies flutter desperate to impose unimplementable rules with the help of the gun-totting-black-shadow-soldiers strapped on barbed wire. The whistle losing the battle of *no photographs* to the music of the click clicking of cameras and languages of the world whispered along the narrow beach in homage to the dead and disappeared.

His whole upper torso is tattooed. He struts his legs, a peacock on an almost deserted beach. A few late season English tourists afraid of the sizzling July heat arrive in November with their umbrella and cool-box always at the same spot with the stones they have appropriated. A few *tut-tuts* followed by the assertive claiming of the umbrella bearing stones which may have been scattered or used for other purposes by the university students for a cheap night-out on the beach the previous night. The stones oblivious as to their constantly changing ownership by
day and by night. Sunflower seed husk patterns and empty beer bottles evidence of the nightly crimes. *They must be animals these people how could they do this? Why don’t they put their rubbish into the bins?* The anger and frustration from the slightly disabled young street cleaner pouring curses on the privileged spoilt brats at university while he clears up rubbish. He is luminous in his orange jacket moving around picking up *their* rubbish. A Cypriot by accident brought over from Turkey when three years old by parents offered land and houses abandoned by the Cypriotgreeks after the invasion in 1974, cursing the students from Turkey who come to escape military service and in the process live envious student lives due to generous parental contributions.

The tattooed peacock struts over to the English couple settled under the umbrella ensuring high visibility from the barely five people making up his beach audience. The woman with the dark hair walks by steadily looking at his tattoos, sagging body, greasy dyed streaks of hair which travel from one side of his head over to the other side in a futile attempt to cover the bald patch on the move. Streaks, forever at the mercy of gusts of wind. But he doesn’t see. In the mirror he only sees the body beautiful and dazzling white smile of his youth now maintained by porcelain dentures…

* * * * *

Yorgos runs into the room. He tries to disperse the thick dust clouds burning his eyes with futile hand movements. Gasping for air as he swallows the earth tastes stuck on his tongue and roof of the mouth. His heart pounding, ricocheting echoes in his ears. He barely recognises his voice shouting into the void, ‘This way … this way!’ drowned by the screams and cacophony of sounds. He desperately wills himself to believe his wife and child are alive. Trying to identify scraps of nuances amongst the screams, shouts, crying children and women, shaking chandeliers and falling debris. Tears stream down leaving luminous snail trails on his dust-covered face.

‘Ariiii… Mariaaa…’ bellows out of his lungs as he hurtles himself from one shadow to the next losing his balance, crushing into objects and bodies, falling over scrambling up and dashing forward into the dust fog.

‘Daddy… tomorrow is my birthday! You know… did you buy me a present? Mummy says it’s a surprise.’ The previous night his son had crawled onto his lap as he was reading him a story and conspiratorially whispered, ‘You can tell me… I won’t tell Mummy’. After a brief silence he added wisely, ‘It will be our secret’. Yorgos had chuckled at his son soon to be six playing games he had picked up from him. He marvelled and worried at the capacity of the young to pick up so much which was not consciously taught them.

‘Ariiii… where are you?’ his voice bellows into the hall of chaos as fear begins to wrap him up. He wipes his eyes smearing his face with salty mud aware that no one can hear him.
He jumps out of his skin as a hand grabs his arm and grips it painfully tightly. He catches Maria’s scent as he wraps her in his arms breathlessly asking, ‘Aris? Aris?’ before he becomes aware of two little hands pulling onto his trouser legs. Yorgos picks up his son as they rush towards the sea through the back entrance hoping it will save them from the wrath of the fighter jets screeching by and burning up what was spared by the heat of July. They crawl on the sizzling sand amongst people scattering in all directions and circle the hotel. They rush past the crimson-red flowering hibiscus bushes on the corner, turn left, past the date palms growing in the sand, emerging in front of the hotel. Their car is covered in debris and broken glass. All the hotel windows next door had exploded from the bombing. People run in all directions, confused as to which direction leads to safety. Where did the attacks come from? They jump in the car. Total strangers bundle in after them, with ghostly fear in their eyes. Silent. Stunned. Yorgos struggles to turn on the ignition. His fingers shaking uncontrollably like the poplar leaves in a summer breeze. Maria watches carefully without panic as he tries to spit the grit sticking to the inside of his cheeks, no saliva comes. ‘I can drive,’ she says gently touching his trembling fingers.

The roads are filled with streams of people walking, running, crying, calling out, looking for loved ones, someone they might recognise, searching, constantly searching with dazed eyes, in disbelief, trying to guess the way out, the safe passage. Cowering with every loud bang, searching the skies for the next fighter jet attack.

‘What’s he doing hanging down from the hole? It’s dangerous…’ Aris’ trembling voice breaks the silence of held breaths, looking up at the tenth floor of the first hotel on the Beach. Neither Maria nor Yorgos explain. No one speaks. Sweat pours down the roots of their hair, behind their ears, trickling between their breasts and down their spines, creeping between their buttocks creating pools on the leather seats of the car, drenching their clothes. A young man hangs precariously over the wall framed by the massive hole torn open by the bombing, a direct hit by the fighter jets. He was so still. Dead. Aris knew. The side of the hotel has collapsed, all the way from the top beyond the tenth floor, creating craters on the ground and mounds of crashed concrete, metal and red bricks.

The car crawls towards the new yellow painted modern church while they avoid talking lest it betrays fear. They are reduced to eye signals and quick secret hand and finger movements they hope Aris can’t see or interpret. Avoiding people on foot, bicycles and motorbikes running in and out of cars is becoming even harder. They head towards the West. The safest bet, Maria and Yorgos signal to each other. The jets had come from the north so would the soldiers. The invasion had begun. For days they didn’t want to believe it, for days they wished it away, they wanted to believe that diplomacy would prevail, that the big guarantor powers and the West would not allow it. Surely common sense would prevail. War was not in the interests of Cypriots. There were deliberate provocations but
surely the majority of people could see through them and would restrain from reacting. It couldn’t happen… They wanted to continue the normality of their lives just like yesterday. But it had happened. And it was changing everything beyond their imagination.

They approach the traffic lights by the famous Venus nightclub on the corner on the left, where the sailors of the world docked at Famagusta harbour for a short respite seeking the comfort of the arms, tongues and groins of prostitutes and delights of young olive-skinned boys willing to fuck them senseless to prove their masculinity. They were the fuckers and not the fucked. You are not a puşt, a Turkish word finding itself transformed into the Greek Language as pushtis, a poofler, if you did the fucking, they said. They saw the dark clouds billowing out of the upper windows and doors of the District court House. Tongues of fire devouring the timber structured roof with an avarice and speed uncurtailed by the absence of firefighters. Yorgos gazes at the building only for a brief moment imagining the transformation of bundles of white sheets of paper into the black flakes flying around in the skies. Records of his cases, victories, defeats for justice, fairness and equality before the law for all people; some he had defended without pay out of a principle, now mere specks fluttering in the bluest of skies. He barely hears the gasps of Maria and Ari as he wonders the whereabouts of Mustafa, his friend since the English School in Nicosia and fellow barrister since their time together at Lincoln’s Inn in London. He closes his eyes willing with all his powers that he be unharmed. He can hear the screams of the panic stricken animals and their crashes against their cages, imprisoned in the small zoo opposite as he puts his foot down.

* * * * *

‘Pull up… to the side of the road…’ came the order from nowhere. In Cypriotgreek spoken by the softness of a CypriotTurkish man. All Yorgos could see was a rifle pointing at him, straight into his eyes, level with the car window. It caught flashes of light from the headlights of the car behind. The gun shook with impatience, held by a relaxed hand, pointing towards the left. There was nowhere to go. The road was blocked by hundreds of cars, small pick-up trucks, lorries all going the same direction: West. Gridlocked. Others just walked alongside cars or stood waiting.

‘Get out,’ came the order immediately after. Yorgos opened his door slowly and scrambled out of the car, loaded with some of their belongings, avoiding any sudden movement and squeezing his wife’s hand gently with trembling hands.

They had managed to get back to their house in the new developing suburb of Varosha with modern houses, beautiful large gardens full of bougainvillaeas, frangipani, jasmine, roses and pavements lined with trees transported from other parts of the Empire. Australian bottle-brush, South African jacaranda, flame trees from Malaysia, ficus variations from Africa, broad-leafed almond from
the Caribbean and a purple sometimes white flowering legume trees, their scent descending over the streets especially during warm spring nights. They had decided to pack some things and travel by night as they thought that to be safer.

What do you take with you at such moments? Will you be away for long? Is this temporary? When will you return? Not returning, not an option to contemplate. Just a situation you need to get yourself through. And you have no answers to the same questions asked by others seeking reassurance. Maria did not ask. They packed some summer clothes, books, toys for Aris, important documents, money, passports, jewellery, ID cards and a first aid box. Yorgos wanted to take some law books and case files he was working on. He dropped them when Maria said, ‘But the Court House was burning’. Some water and food on the way was better use of space she suggested. When Maria took her wedding dress he just looked at her but said nothing. Some photos, she insisted on taking some albums and photos off the walls. She looked around the house in desperation for what else to take. She, much more astute and quick as to what she could leave behind; he, feeling useless and detached. It didn’t matter anyway; they would be back in a few weeks…

He was so young, the hand holding the shotgun. On the inside of his forearm a tattoo of the crescent and star in lurid red. They came eye to eye. He was barely fifteen–sixteen. One fully aware of his powerlessness, the other unused to wielding such seemingly limitless power. One used to operating in circles of power curtailed and limited by the laws of the land, the other operating without boundaries on that insignificant remote road leading to the village of Derhinia usually deserted, running through potato fields witness only to occasional tractor jams caused by three or four travelling together during harvest or sowing time.

He guided Yorgos unhurriedly to the side of the road before he came back and leaned down to look into the car. He noted Maria’s frightened eyes darting back and forth to her husband while she held her son’s hands, squeezing, letting go, caressing and squeezing again. She heard women screaming from other cars in front and behind her. She noticed another body, the crotch level with her window on her side of the car. She didn’t look up. She kept her eyes on her husband. ‘Can you drive?’ the young man asked. She was surprised by his steady, unhurried voice. She nodded after a while trying to prevent the possible scenarios crowding her head, threatening to overwhelm her. She kept repeating to herself to be focused. ‘My husband…’ she managed to say, swallowing hard to overcome the fear in her mouth but he had already moved away, towards Yorgos. She waited in the car for what seemed to be an eternity trying not to take her eyes off her husband, her ears picking up the screams, crying, curses, half-hearted scuffles betraying defeat, the guilt of self preservation, abandonment of the self and others to fate… The futility of resistance, struggle, the surrender to what is perceived as more powerful, reluctance to become martyrs in a land eulogising ‘martyrs’ adorning most streets in all towns and villages with their names, where special parades and anniversaries are organised with much pomp and ceremony,
where the families of the martyred are honoured and rewarded for giving birth to and instilling the sacred duty of martyrdom for the Cause. Maria noticed other Cypriot Greek men by the side of the road. Her heart beat faster but she was alert. Why were they separating the men from the women? She was startled by a scream close by. She looked towards the back of the car. A woman wearing a black headscarf and clothes, a sign of mourning, was being dragged along the road. She held on tightly to a young man wearing a white T-shirt being dragged away in turn by two men each carrying a shot gun in the other hand. Her scarf came off in the scuffle, her legs covered in blood as they grazed along the side of the asphalt. They hit her arms repeatedly with the butts of their rifles but couldn’t make her let go. ‘He’s my only son’ she was wailing. ‘The other two you killed in our village!’ she spit out the words in anger rather than fear. ‘You killed my husband! God’s curses be upon you! Satans! Murderers! May you burn in Hell! I curse your wives, your children! May they be killed and raped… like you are doing to us!’ The slim young son imprisoned in the powerful hands of the two men, gripped from under the arms was being pulled away, his feet scraping the ground, his face crumpled, tears flowing. Maria kept her eyes on her husband holding onto her son sitting on her lap…

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‘That night the army officers from Turkey in charge of the operation made so much money. Imagine … these people were trapped! On the road, they could go nowhere. They handed everything over in exchange for their lives. The officers claimed it was for the Cause, to buy guns and ammunition so we could defend ourselves against the Greeks.’ He leans sideways from where he is sitting, stretches his arms, his face breaking into a smile, the folds of his face curtains on either side. Dazzling perfection achieved with porcelain dentures.

‘Come… come to Grandpa bullim, come… come,’ he makes a childish gurgling sound as the thick rough fingers make waves in the air cajoling the toothless wonder on all fours crawling away speedily scattering little excited cries and giggles to his audience of one. He pretends to get up to follow the baby who becomes more excited by the chasing game scuttling off even more speedily giving out little victory cries of delight. He sits back in his seat, his eyes moist as he continues to watch the baby for a while.

‘Those who tried to crawl into the darkness, it was a moonless night… to disappear into the potato fields, were shot or beaten mercilessly and dragged back onto the road. A deterrent. That night was Godless… He abandoned us all. They raped women,’ after a brief silence, ‘…and girls, some as young as thirteen–fourteen’. He seems reluctant to go there. He resists, but it’s like a flood. Once the barrier breaks, he is swept in the torrent. That memory has been buried for so long… thirty-four years. Why dredge it out? What good would it do? The dead are dead. What’s done is done.
‘I will never forget this man… he just stood there, calmly, once he realised he was going to be killed. He was a barrister, I think, famous one. I knew him. He had defended many Cypriot Turkish people, even when he knew some couldn’t pay him. But I couldn’t say anything. I kept quiet,’ he lowers his voice and throws a glance towards the house. A quick confirmation that no one was close enough to be listening… to what? Shame? Guilt? Remorse for his silence on the night but even worse his silence for over thirty-four years? He colluded. He was complicit in the creation of this history, he knew. But even more so the creation of the schizophrenic society of cowards his children and grandchildren now inhabited. This was his legacy and that of those still walking around free. Wherever they dug the ruins of the past … skeletons emerged with the recent excavations of mass graves. Bones, hidden at the bottom of waterless wells, under bridges, caves, ravines, remote and not so remote fields, emerged to tell half the story, the other half still a secret, safe with the perpetrators.

‘I didn’t want trouble with the officers from Turkey or the TMT* killers they brought to Famagusta, to do the killing. They would bring in outsiders because they knew the locals would find it difficult to kill someone they knew or grew up with. It wasn’t worth putting my life and that of my children in danger and be accused of being a traitor. Do you know what that means? Especially during a time of war? I’ll tell you … death! They used to kill “traitors”, and you could be a traitor sitting in the café with a Cypriot Greek you’d known all your life. You immediately became a spy! It didn’t take much to be one.

‘I killed some myself…’ he shuffles in his chair and glances over at the baby. ‘When you get the orders and the gun delivered in the middle of the night, from “high above”, you don’t ask questions. You go out and do what you are told. It was all for the Cause. We killed many good people, some totally innocent … for the Cause. I left and went to London. Now, I know most of it was for the personal Cause … of the Leader!’

* * * *

The body next to the passenger side of the car leans over calmly and opens the door. Maria holds tightly onto Aris. She is feeling exposed, more vulnerable; the shield created by the car door has been removed. She tries to keep focused, her heart beating like a trapped bird. She looks at her husband watching her, agitated. He tries to take a step forward, a muzzle slowly cuts across his chest, dark against his white linen shirt. The hand leans down and grabs Maria’s arm. She is still holding onto Aris, straddling her lap. He pulls her out, forces her onto her feet. Maria can hear Yorgos’ desperate shout, ‘Mariaaa…’ as she is dragged from the car. A few steps along, the young fourteen–fifteen year old appears by their side. He is calm, ‘En entaxi,’ he says in Cypriot Greek, ‘It’s OK. Don’t be frightened.’ She looks at the face with the innocence of youth. His Cypriots a momentary comfort evaporating as soon as he leans over to take Aris from her
arms. Her elegance, gentle manner, reasonableness vanishes. She snatches him away her eyes scattering fire, ‘No! No!’ she hisses. From the corner of her eye she sees the muzzle against Yorgos’ heaving chest. She is on her own. She takes a few steps back and stares at the young boy. He has not changed his expression. Such calmness, control, so unnatural for one so young. The man’s face a mocking leer. He grabs her hands and prises them apart at breaking point. She struggles twisting and kicking, tears rolling down her face drenched in sweat. She tries to escape by dropping her body on the ground suddenly, but the two hands hold on, bruising her forearms and burning the skin. Aris is sitting on her lap, his arms tightly around her neck, almost suffocating her. The young boy prises Aris’ hands from around her neck and pulls him up into the air, like in a game of swirling around… Suspended in mid-air by his arms, he looks over his shoulder at his mother being dragged away by the stocky man with bullets strapped across his chest, wearing camouflage hunting trousers and boots.

* * * * *

‘He dragged her into the night. A light elegant little thing she was. Like a bird. Young, barely in her mid-twenties. I heard him shout like a wounded animal, “Mariaaa… Mariaaa…” as they dragged her from the car. She was wearing a light blue sleeveless dress. You know, it was a hot summer… ’74. And she was beautifully tanned, with dark hair down to her shoulders…” He pinches his lower lip and bites the tip of his thumbnail. He looks up, ‘You should’ve seen what he did to her… Sex is one thing … but this was something else! Her face was cut up, eye swollen, lips cut up, bleeding, dress torn into shreds,’ he demonstrates by moving his hands from the top of his chest to his knees, repeating the action a few times, his face crumples up, ‘… soaked in blood. You could see her legs and arms sliced open…” he shudders. ‘She was covered in the red soil of the potato fields … she held her forearm, it dangled unnaturally … it was broken. She walked barefoot into the headlights of the cars on the road. For everyone to see … as though she wanted everyone to see! She didn’t cry or shout. Nothing! She limped, dragging her foot, looking ahead, searching for their car.

‘She was the symbol of our shame … of the shame of our Cause. And of those who carried out such atrocities in its name. I wasn’t proud to be a Turkish man that night! The blood running in my veins was not noble that night … it was a stinking sewage!’ After a deep sigh, ‘And he was Cypriotturkish, he wasn’t from Turkey…”

He realises he is going bright red in the face and throat and sits back in the chair reminding himself not to forget to take his high blood pressure pills, as he sometimes does. The toothless wonder is preoccupied with a bright orange marigold flower he has decapitated with one flying swoop from the flower-pot next to his chair busily deflowering it, scattering clumps of petals all around him.

* * * * *
‘What’s you name then?’ the fourteen–fifteen year old asks Aris. He does not look up. He keeps furtively looking in the direction the last time he saw his mother. ‘Mine is Hasan.’ Aris wipes off his tears with his palms. His mother has been gone a long time.

‘Where do you live? Are you from Famagusta?’ Aris looks at the ground, covering his eyes with his hands, his elbows on his bare knees. ‘I’m from Sandallar, Sandalaris… do you know it?’ Aris gets up and looks in the direction he has last seen his mother. He is agitated. ‘Don’t worry she’ll be back.’

‘When?’ Aris asks as quick as a flash. ‘Soon. Soon she will be back. Just sit down…’ Aris does, looking at the gun the young boy is carrying.

‘This is my father’s gun. Do you have one?’ Aris is shocked; he is not even allowed to have a toy gun. He checks that he can still see his father. He lifts his chin up, the Cypriot gesture of ‘No’. ‘I’m thirteen. I learnt to shoot when I was nine. My father taught me.’ A brief silence as the thirteen-year-old caresses the shotgun.

‘Have you seen anyone dead?’ asks Hasan. Aris jumps up, ‘Yes, at the hotel,’ he blurts out. ‘A man. He was hanging from the hole in the wall. After the jet fighters…’ Hasan nods slowly. ‘Have you?’ asks Aris with fear, for the first time looking at Hasan. ‘Yes,’ he says with a deep sigh. Aris watches Hasan’s face with fear, for the first time. They are sitting on the ground by the car on the road, leaning against it facing the darkness into the fields, beyond the initial light amber headlights casting long shadows. All the doors are open, looted, their belongings now belongings of others. ‘My Dad,’ came from Hasan. Panic in Aris’ eyes, he looks for his father who is still standing by the side of the road, further down, with many other men of all ages. Aris looks up to see Hasan wipe his nose, ‘My mum. My two sisters. My little brother… he was your age,’ Hasan nods towards Aris. ‘My eighteen-month-old baby brother … and my nene and dede. They were old.’ He looks at Aris, ‘Why did they kill them? They are all dead… I have no one left…’ as though murmuring to himself. Aris stands up like a shot. He starts to tremble, his eyes full of tears he does not hide, looking directly into Hasan’s face which is now oblivious to his presence, crumpled, eyes shut, covered in tears and snot sobbing uncontrollably. Aris sways from leg to leg, agitated… He must pee...

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‘She swept her son into her arms with that single arm, she held him. He wrapped his arms around her neck, his legs around her waist tightly and pissed all over her breasts and down her front. She took one look at her husband, put her son into the car, got in, put it in gear, put her foot down and took off with one foot and one arm into the fields overtaking the cars blocking the road, like a woman possessed. No one dared to shoot or drive after her. We watched her as the lights of the car disappeared on that lonely road going West, far into the distance into the night…’
He murmurs almost to himself, ‘No one said a word… but you couldn’t help but admire a woman like that. I looked at her husband. A strange tiny smile on the corner of his lips … that’s all.’

‘After a while we were told to tell the women, children and the old to go. We pushed them into the cars, lorries, pick-up trucks, threatened them with guns. Some just left, others wanted their husbands and sons. They tried to walk over to the men; we turned our guns on them. They stopped. It was heart breaking really, we didn’t allow them to say goodbye.

‘We were under orders. We didn’t know what the officers from Turkey wanted to do with the men. Later they said they were going to be used in prisoner exchanges. It made sense…

‘Then out of the blue, a young one, barely fourteen–fifteen … he went berserk! He started shouting and screaming about his father, his mother and sisters. He was crying about his brother who was six… We knew him. He was the only survivor, his family was massacred alongside thirty others, we were told, in one of the Messoria villages. He waved his gun at the men, at the women and children who were scrambling into the cars and lorries, frightened out of their wits. He kept shouting, “I’m going to kill you … why did you murder my family? What did we ever do to you…?” tears and snot running down his face. It was heart breaking. He had found them brutally murdered in the house and around the yard when he came back from tending his herd.

‘Then a hothead from another village shouted he wanted revenge, an eye for an eye. He was one of the sharp shooters but young, barely eighteen–nineteen. He was one of those who had heard there was a blockade and that Greeks had been taken prisoners. So he turned up for a bit of excitement with a couple of others. He wanted to kill everyone. He kept pointing his gun at the women and children getting into the cars, then at the men lined up at the side of the road. He was raging, running up and down. No-one in his family was killed… Then a couple of others also got worked up in a frenzy and started to do the same…

‘The army officers didn’t intervene. They let it play out. Some of us instinctively walked towards the women and children and stood facing the hotheads. We took a risk. The hotheads turned to the men. They started pushing and hitting them with the butts of their guns, kicking, swearing… They were pushed against the wall of the open reservoir used to water the orange orchards. A low wall of about two feet. Some instinctively climbed on the wall. We stood back. Suddenly a machine gun rattles out. From where we don’t know! Shotguns join in. It was Hell! The men didn’t have a chance. They were mowed down. They fell back into the water. Again and again… they killed them all… hundreds… it only took a few minutes.’ He shakes his head as the image resurrects itself. ‘We had to let them do it … to take revenge … an eye for an eye,’ he says slowly. A brief silence, ‘Some of us just dropped on the ground.’
When we went to look, the reservoir was full of dead bodies, all piled up. Riddled with bullets. Some still with their eyes open. The water had turned to blood. I will never ever forget it…” he rubs his fingers and hands repeatedly.

‘As the day began to break, they opened the sluice gates and the blood water gushed out like a river. It rushed to the orange trees a little further down,’ he looks down at his knitted fingers going white at the knuckles, then away into the distance. A vacant look.

‘We buried them in two mass graves. Huge. We dug all night… All of us… just digging and digging. We managed to bury them as the sun was rising,’ he sighs and rubs his palms on his legs a few times, absentmindedly, looking down.

‘Some took whatever was left on the bodies … the worst was the gold wedding-rings. They cut off the fingers… The officers said it was to prevent identification but it was robbing the dead … and we all knew it.’

He straightens his back, takes a deep breath, exhales loudly and looks straight ahead, ‘They are “missing” according to records. No one found them, so they are ‘missing’. They are DEAD! Many of us are witnesses … but no one will say. The area is under the control of the Turkish military. The “Forbidden Zone”. No one can enter except military personnel. Their graves and our secret are safe. What a secret…! I’ve lived with this all these years…” an imperceptible tremble in the voice immediately buried.

‘And you know … it’s not very far from here. Only just down the road… Some nights it’s so hard to sleep. Well you know that; I come here to talk to you. But even that doesn’t help,’ he hangs his head staring at his lap for a while.

‘Two summers ago I got really worried!’ he looks up, ‘It was the time when they started to dig up the graves. People rang the UN Missing Persons Unit anonymously giving details of murders and burial places. Then one night, I heard what I thought were tanks in the “Forbidden Zone”. When I listened carefully I realised they were bulldozers … they were at it … all night! Then the next night! It went on for three–four nights! I was worried… I was so scared! What if they were found?’ After a brief silence as though to himself, ‘and maybe part of me wants them to be found.’ He looks around him with vacant eyes, ‘The following day I asked one of the TMT members, a hardcore, I told him I’d heard bulldozers… At first he didn’t want to say, but we carry a common guilt … we were all there.

‘Anyway, you know what they were doing?’ he waits for a respectable pause, ‘They were digging up the mass graves after thirty-two years!’ He calms down, ‘They scooped up the bones, shoes, rotting clothing, everything with those huge mechanical diggers and dumped them into the back of military lorries. I suppose they were afraid someone amongst us might talk… We wouldn’t would we?’ he asks without seeking reassurance, then continues in the same breath, ‘They sent them to a stone quarry halfway up the Pentadactyllos Mountains and crushed everything into small pebble-size pieces. They loaded them up again, brought them back and laid them down as hardcore then tarmac on top … on the road
they are re-surfacing in the “Forbidden Zone” leading to the hotels the Army has commandeered for a luxury holiday resort for its officers. All under the control of the Turkish Military. Ingenious … with orders from the highest command outside the jurisdiction of the UN. All that remains is a beautiful, smooth asphalt road.

‘No one will ever find them…’

He sighs again and looks at the face sitting in front of him listening to his confessions. It’s not the first time. He has come here before, to this safe place where he can dig, excavate in his memory where he has chosen to bury, to forget so much. He sits in the same chair and talks, sometime losing all sense of time … he looks out for signs of disapproval, accusation, hatred even sympathy and understanding, signs of forgiveness, of guilt, of shame … in the face.

He picks up his grandson who has come up and put both hands on his knees, now standing, pleased with his creation of torn up newspapers, thrown and scattered cushions, plastic cups, boxes empty of their contents, shoes and sandals, socks, decapitated marigolds, busy-lizzies, daisies, stock flowers…

‘Come here … you maskara, little clown! Look… look! Say goodbye! We have to go or they will be after us. It’s food time.’ He lifts him up and holds him close to his face, breathing in his sweet curdled smells, cheek crushing into cheek, showing him their images in the mirror.

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The woman with the dark hair walking barefoot on the beach notices the tattoo of the lurid red crescent and star on the inside forearm of the man playing with his daughter running in and out of the water’s edge amongst the descending shadows of the deserted ghost hotels in the Forbidden Zone guarded by the black shadow soldiers on red boards tangled amongst barbed wire as the sun goes down in the West.

* TMT: Türk Mukavement Teşkilatý (Turkish Resistance Organisation)