

The
Distance
Between Us

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UNBRIDLED
BOOKS

ANYONE WHO HAS WATCHED people crowding around the scene of an accident on the highway realizes that the lust of the eye is real. Anyone who has watched the faces of people at a fire knows it is real. Seeing sometimes absorbs us utterly; it is as though the human being becomes one great eye. The eye is lustful because it requires the novel, the unusual, the spectacular. It cannot satiate itself on the familiar, the routine, the everyday.

—J. GLENN GRAY, THE WARRIORS

One



THE WHOLE OF HEAVEN IS OFF-BALANCE as they rumble out of the city: clouds one moment, darting sunlight the next. A dust shroud swirling around the Land Rover prevents Caddie from seeing where they are going or where they've been. Far behind them, a mosque wails its hellfire summons to those who believe. It's noon, then, and men of conviction are submitting their foreheads to the ground in a graceful wave, while she barrels forward into the formless, blind middle of a day.

The Land Rover rattles like a crate of scrap metal. Her shoulders ache, she's inhaling cupfuls of powdered dirt and they have at least another ninety minutes to go. But those are only irritants. Her real worry is the driver, a complete unknown. Rob and the hotel concierge rounded him up when the regular chauffeur, the one Rob assured her was "the best in Beirut," didn't show. A driver is their lifeline in dusty, uncharted territory. This guy, well—she catches her breath as he

swerves sharply and clips a roadside bush, aiming directly for half a dozen desert larks. The birds scatter and arc overhead, their fury sharp enough to be heard above the thrash of the engine.

"Christ," Caddie mumbles. In the rearview mirror, the driver gives her a squinty glare. Cobwebs form at the outer corners of his eyes, and dried grime thick enough to scrape off with a fingernail is caked behind his right ear. "Who the hell *is* he?" Caddie mutters to Marcus, next to her in the backseat. "Should we really be—?"

"Cautious Caddie," Marcus says. "He's okay. Rob wouldn't use him otherwise." He leans over Caddie to address Rob, who's on her left. "Right-o, Rob?"

"He's fine. Told you. Checked him out." Rob is focused on adjusting his tape recorder's input level. With his scruffy hair and taut energy, he looks like a street tough instead of a network radio reporter. Here, that aura serves him well.

"See?" Marcus says to Caddie. "Anyway, what's our choice? Sit on our bums all day?"

She smiles at him saying "bums" in his refined British accent. Something in him—his inflection maybe, or his humor, or his experience in the field—unknots her, and relieves her of the responsibility of having to control everything. Anyway, he's right. This story is too hot to pass: a Q-and-A with Musaf Yaladi, fiery-eyed, Princeton-educated thug-darling of the West, in his south Lebanon lair. The elusive Yaladi is a Lebanese crime king, dabbler in terrorism and chief distributor for weapons, bogus American one-hundred-dollar bills and

the raw materials for heroin produced in the Bekaa Valley. With a couple punchy quotes from him, the piece will write itself. She'll be the only print reporter to have it. Page one for sure.

They'll be fine, just fine. Caddie would prefer fewer variables, but she's done her usual checking, narrowed the risks to a pinpoint. She's confirmed that they aren't traveling through disputed territory, that Yaladi knows they are coming, that he wants to do the interview. The only drawback is that she doesn't know this particular minefield very well. With Israel, the West Bank or Gaza, it would be different. She's worked that territory for more than four years now, she and Marcus, and those back roads are carved in her mind.

Marcus fingers the leather band on his left wrist, a gift from an Arab mother he once photographed and managed to connect with, he would say. Caddie would say charm. He stretches his arms, the muscled forearms tapering to delicate wrists, then widening to broad hands, and smiles sideways at her in a way that excludes Rob, the driver, all of Lebanon. She imagines licking lemonade from his lips, its bitter taste undercut with tangy sweetness. She rotates her shoulders to loosen them.

In the front passenger seat, Sven pats the video camera on his lap and chats to the driver in sunny, Swedish-accented Arabic. Long-limbed, he seems as comfortable as he would in his own living room. He's the most easygoing and polite of journalists, with an uncommon ability to nap anywhere on short notice. Caddie often runs into Rob and Sven on the same story. Privately she's nicknamed them Yin and Yang.

They pull up short before a barrier of razor wire and man-sized chunks of concrete spray-painted black with Arabic graffiti. A Yaladi roadblock. She didn't expect it this soon. The driver cuts the engine and the air grows defiantly still. The dust finally gives up and sinks.

A slouching man with a knife tucked into his belt separates himself from a concrete slab, sticks out a hand to collect their press cards, and then, self-important on squat legs, strides into a hut. A second roadside militiaman, baby face and pear belly, plants himself next to their Land Rover, machine gun cradled in his arms.

Caddie brushes the dust from her hair. She wishes again that she were more familiar with this route from Beirut to the south. They are probably twenty miles from the border with Israel, twenty miles from the Mediterranean Sea. The land is scraped and stingy, abandoned even by animals and insects, left to these imprudent men with their weapons.

"One-two-'twas brillig and the slithy toves . . ." Rob intones into his microphone.

"You're going to drain the battery before we get there," Sven says.

"Something's wrong with the goddamned pinch roller," Rob says. "If I don't get the interview on tape, I might as well have slept in, saved myself this cowboy ride."

Incessant worrying over the equipment, Caddie knows, is part of his routine. She has habits of her own. During interviews, she often makes up a ridiculous question or two that she

would never actually ask, then imagines her subject's response. It's oddly soothing.

"You worry too much," Marcus says. "If the pitch is off, it's so slight no one will notice."

"Hey, bud, I don't worry enough," Rob says. "Otherwise I wouldn't be in the middle of fucking East Jesus letting some monkey point his gun at me."

Their guard has begun shifting gently from foot to foot, swinging his weapon as if in time to music. Watching him, Caddie almost hears her ballet teacher's shrill military voice: "One, two, on your toes, lift your head." She'd been, what? Eight, maybe nine years old, and remarkably clumsy, all clashing elbows and difficult knees. "Again, from the top. Let's plié . . ." She pictures this bulky militiaman, with his unexpected Santa Claus face, wearing a pink tutu. As he sways next to the hunks of ruined concrete, she is struck by a single, distinct wave she can identify only as elation.

How could she ever explain to someone back home what it is to cover a conflict? At least one like this that crisscrosses through the region, its front line changing daily, so that she can find herself unexpectedly *in it* at a moment's notice. Everyone with a television set observes the violence and horror. But, sitting on their couches, can they imagine the delight of unexpected absurdities? The rush of ecstasy, even, when the exotic intersects with the familiar? Or the way that seeing all this, up close, elevates a common life?

"I have an idea for dinner tonight," Marcus says near her ear.

"I'm filing tonight," Caddie says. "And you'd better be sending a couple pictures."

"That'll take half an hour. As for you, what? A couple quotes from the drug lord, a little local color from his hideout. You could almost write it now." Marcus shifts in his seat and pulls a crumpled receipt from his back pocket. "Here."

"I've got paper, thanks."

"How about your phone number, then?" he jokes, pseudo-husky, leaning in again to smell her cheek. She laughs, shoving him off. He winks, and the color of his eyes makes her think of olives resting in martinis.

Okay, so she's partial to his blond good looks, his humor, and his consummate skill with a camera. She likes that he's drawn to her face without makeup and her constantly disheveled short hair. But they aren't a *couple*; spare her that conventionality. They are colleagues. Plus lovers, when the mood strikes. Both of them journalists who find the story irresistible and plan to live in it a long time. Discussions about relationships soon bore her. Too much dependency invariably backfires, in her experience.

Usually she thinks Marcus agrees. There are, of course, those other times. Like in the hotel bar last night. She'd been talking about how she didn't want to sign another year-long lease on her apartment, and he'd said she'd become afraid to commit to anything, too hooked on the ephemeral news story to ever be satisfied with the solidity of real life. His tone was surprisingly wistful. She refused, though, to give him a serious response. They were in a bar, after all, with colleagues. *Screw*

you, she'd countered, laughing. *News stories are real life.* And they were—a form of it, anyway, the way bottled perfume was a form of odor. *Besides, I'm just talking about a lease.* She could tell he wanted to say more, but he took another slug of beer, letting it drop.

The mustachioed militiaman who collected their cards strides out of the hut, shaking his head as though he's uncovered a plot. He motions. Their driver—what's his name? Hussein? Mohammed?—glances back without meeting anyone's eyes. Grains of sweat darken his temples and bead above his lips. He slides from the jeep, taking the keys with him, as if these journalists were inmates, plotting to drive off and leave him behind in the vacuous Lebanese landscape. *Christ.*

The gunman speaks to the driver in a dull slur that Caddie can't make out. Their guard is still swaying, his AK-47 balanced delicately in his arms and pointed in their direction. The crickets grow loud, unusual for midday.

The driver shuffles back and passes out press cards. Three. "Excuse me," Marcus says. "Where's mine?"

The driver shrugs.

"Brilliant." Marcus swings out of the jeep, the two Nikons around his neck bouncing.

Their pear-belly guard stiffens, aiming his gun at Marcus's chest. Caddie reaches from the Land Rover to try to grab Marcus's arm, but he's too far away.

"Okay, okay." Marcus raises his hands. "I need my card back. Card. Back. *Comprenez?*"

The guard holds his gun steady.

"Tell him, Catherine." He's still grinning, still outwardly confident that this adventure is manageable, no more threatening than a Ferris wheel ride. But Caddie knows he drops her nickname only at serious moments,

"My colleague, please, must have his press identification," Caddie says in Arabic, addressing both militiamen, trying for a there-must-be-a-*small*-mistake smile. "Then we will depart, thank you."

The mustachioed militiaman speaks shotgun-fast to the driver—to Caddie it sounds like "these beans should be fried again in Syria"—and the driver listens without expression. Caddie's Arabic isn't bad, but now she wishes, deeply, for a better grasp of local colloquialisms.

Another man emerges from the hut. Shirtless, skinny and muscular, he appears younger than the others. His face is creased in irritation. His hair sticks up in tufts as though he's been unwillingly roused from bed. Carrying no weapon, he walks with shoulders high, hands alert, fingers slightly extended. Caddie's tongue suddenly tastes metallic.

"You still here?" The shirtless man speaks in English.

"I need my identification card." Marcus enunciates as if to a child. "What a *fashla*," he says to Caddie in an aside, using the Arabic for "mess-up."

The young tough squints. "What you want?" he asks in English, in a tone that convinces Caddie the best answer would be "nothing."

Marcus chuckles. "This guy speaks pretty good caveman."

Caddie speaks sharply, quietly. "Shit, Marcus. Shut. Up."

Yes, this sleepy-eyed militiaman is a fool, made silly by the handful of power he holds over a hut and two armed men. But Marcus, it's clear, has a case of Superman Disorder, the disease that worms its way into journalists, fooling them into believing they're so seasoned, their instincts so developed, that every risk is manageable. That even the clouds and the dirt will back off in their presence. That a little cockiness will simply give them Godspeed. She's avoided that pit of overconfidence. So has Marcus, until now. She shoots him a pointed look. He seems to need reminding that this is not a disciplined army. These are thugs led by a man who smuggles and kidnaps and kills. They let mood swings, and a very personal interpretation of Allah's will, dictate when and where they fire their guns.

"C'mon, Marcus. Let's get out of here," she says.

"I don't go without my card." Marcus takes a step forward and speaks in one long breath. "We're more than happy to scoot, you bloody bloke, but first, it would be brilliant if you could go peek under your pillow and see if you can find a little card, one with my face on it." He finishes with an ersatz smile.

The shirtless boy fighter surely can't understand much of Marcus's racetrack sentences or clipped accent. But he leans forward attentively as if examining vermin, then pushes closer to their Land Rover, bringing with him the scent of barbecued onions. He glances in Caddie's direction, then grips Sven's arm. "Go," he says in English, shoving Sven and motioning at their driver. "Go!" The word comes out guttural.

"Bit testy, aren't you?" Marcus remains jaunty, but he's finally edging back toward the jeep.

"Still, I think it's a good suggestion," Sven says, sounding strained.

The baby-faced guard, gratingly calm, lets off a shot into the dirt that produces a pregnant swell of dust. He levels his gun and jerks it to motion their driver forward. The driver shifts into gear. Caddie grabs Marcus's arm and tugs him back into the vehicle as the driver punches the gas pedal.

"My card," cries Marcus mock-meekly, raising his arms in an empty-handed gesture. Having lost, he's clearly decided to treat this as good fun. "Why *my* card?"

"Why *my* wife?" Rob speaks over the engine noise. "Life is arbitrary."

"Why do we always end up talking about your divorce?" Sven asks over his shoulder.

"Right," Rob says. "Who cares? Let's just get the interview. We've got to be almost there. When we get back, Marcus, you can tell the press office your card went through the wash."

"What wash?" says Marcus. "Who's holding out on me? Is anybody using anything besides the sink?"

He's too jovial, considering this nonsense could have caused them to be detained for hours—or worse. Caddie jabs him. "You won't even need the damn card in a couple days."

"Right you are. A whole month in New York." Marcus, oblivious to the edge in her tone, is annoyingly cheerful. "I'm overdue. So cheers-*ciao-salaam*," he says, running the words together.

She twists slightly away from him, reminded now however irritating she finds his reckless behavior, it doesn't bother her