

New Fiction from Jillian Danback-McGhan: "Allied"



James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Nocturne in Black and Gold – The Falling Rocket, 1874

I met the Lieutenant at a diplomatic reception at our embassy. Carrying papers which issued weaponry to his nation's military, I passed them to my contact – a pock-marked General whose eyes glittered when he seized them. Having done my duty as military attaché, I grabbed a drink and contemplated my exit.

That is, until the Lieutenant lured me to him with a smile; his fiery green eyes blazed over cheekbones sharp as blades. He served in his nation's military police, which his father now led. A young man burning with the promise of his own bright future. He touched my arm as I spoke about my role at the embassy and the room grew hazy. *To our countries' partnership*, he said, raising his glass for a toast. Then the band started playing. He extended his arm to invite me to dance.

We whirled around the room for the rest of the evening, drunk on wine and each other's flattery, our uniforms askew. Embarrassed by the curious looks our cavorting attracted, I turned my head when he moved in and received his kiss on my cheek. He looked wounded.

I leaned back and laughed.

Ten years later, I saw him again. My children fought on the floor as I read the paper and, lured by an article about protests in his country, spotted him in an accompanying photo. He had no name or insignia on his riot gear, but his helmet and protective mask fell askew: I saw fiery green eyes and

cheekbones sharp as blades. A Kevlar-clad man standing among burning barriers. Clouds of teargas bloomed in the background and made the image look hazy.

Had the papers I carried issued him the weapon he held his hand? *To support our countries' partnership?* With an extended arm he directed the assault.

Across from him stood a young woman holding a cardboard sign. Other protestors slumped behind her. They looked wounded. Shards of glass scattered around the woman's feet and glittered on the pot-marked pavement. She turned her head to receive a kiss from a rifle stock on her cheek. The impact forced her backwards and jolted her mouth open.

As if she were laughing at me.

New Fiction from Moe Hashemi: "Javid"

We buried Javid on a gloomy Friday morning in late December, shortly before Ali was gassed on the battlefield. All the guys from the eleventh grade attended the funeral, most of the teachers too.

Later that day at the mosque, Javid's dad, a well-groomed, bearded, middle-aged man who sold rosaries and prayer stones to pilgrims, stood at the podium with an Abrahamic disposition and gave a speech about how proud he felt as a father to offer a martyr to God and to the Supreme Leader of the Revolution and how much Javid cared about both.

*

I had known Javid ever since the second grade. I still remember our first conversation when he approached me timidly and asked why my old eraser was so unusually white and clean.

"My baby sister grabs it whenever I'm not looking and she licks it clean."

"Wow!" he said and walked off pensively looking at his dirty eraser.

The next day he came to class with his eraser all nice and clean:

"Look what my baby sister did to my eraser!"

He didn't have a baby sister. I could picture him licking his eraser for hours.

*

No matter how hard Javid tried to blend in, he stood out like a bad stitch in a Persian rug. He was too scrawny for his age and always wore a buzz cut and clothes that were either too small for him or too large. One year, he became the butt of jokes when he showed up to school in early September in ugly blue winter rubber boots with conspicuous large white dots. The boots were a bit too big for him and made loud farting noises with every step he took. He pulled his pant legs as far down as he could to cover the boots and walked like a geisha to diminish the noise, but this just made him look even more awkward.

*

Javid was an easy target for bullies. They called him Oliver Twist, played pranks on him, locked him in the school bathroom, hounded him on his way home and pummelled him hard. But, the bruises he received from the bullies were nothing compared to the ones he brought from home; he never complained or talked about his bruises. He seemed to be able to take all

insults and injuries with a rueful smile and move on.

*

His undoing though was his unfeigned innocence. Mr. Nezami, aka "Mr. Psycho," was our disgruntled science teacher. He was a vicious, paranoid man in his early forties who thought the world was after him, so he went after his students.

"Javid! Read out the passage! Page 45, Plants."

Javid opened his book and started reading.

"Although plants can respond to certain stimuli such as light by turning towards it or by opening their petals and leaves, they do not have nerves or any equivalent system to feel or respond to stimuli such as pain."

At this point Javid fell silent and looked kind of lost.

"Why did you stop? Go on," snapped Mr. Psycho.

"Sir! Does this mean that if people kick trees and break off their branches, the trees don't cry inside?"



The whole class burst into laughter at this; Mr. Psycho strode menacingly toward Javid.

"Are you mocking me, kid?"

He twisted Javid's arm and pulled him off the bench, then slapped him hard a couple of times on the back of his shaved head, and kicked him out of the classroom.

*

Once we got into comic books, Javid found a passion. He didn't own any comics, but he managed to borrow some from the few friends that he had. At first, he became infatuated with

Captain America and drew the superhero's pictures on all his notebook covers, but Captain America lost some of his glory once Javid became acquainted with Rambo.

*

In those days, the Iran-Iraq war was at a stalemate. The two sides had lost lots of manpower and they were desperate for recruits. Iran's Revolutionary Guards would visit high schools and show action movies like *First Blood*, tell tales of valour and glory on the battlefield, and then try to sign up as many kids as they could. As long as you were fifteen or older, all you needed to join was a consent letter from your father or your legal guardian.

*

Ali, who was the oldest kid in our class, as he had failed and repeated a grade, was the first to sign up. His older brother had joined the Basij paramilitary militia before him and had been dispatched to the battlefield, so Ali's father was reluctant to let his second child join. Ali forged his dad's signature, and then taught Javid how to do it as well. Ali was hoping to go to seminary school after graduation and he was a true believer in martyrdom and going to paradise. Javid, on the other hand, signed up for the love of guns. He wanted to get a big machine gun and kick ass like John Rambo. Perhaps, he fantasized about taking all that pent up rage inside him and blasting it at enemy soldiers.

*

I visited Ali at the hospital a few months after Javid's funeral. He had been poisoned with mustard gas during the Battle of Faw Peninsula. He had hideous blisters all over his body, was blinded in both eyes and had irreversible lung damage. There was a breathing tube taped to his nose. He asked about school. I told him about our classmates and the pranks we played on teachers. I also told him how Mr. Psycho had

ended up dislocating a kid's elbow, and had been fired; he had eventually locked himself in a hotel room, swallowed all his meds and died.

"Lucky bastard! I wish I could go that easy," He wheezed.

"You'll be fine," I lied and tried to change the subject, *"Tell me about Javid."*

"We took our intensive training course together. Javid had a real talent for marksmanship. He finished at the top of our class. The night before we were sent to the front, he was so excited that he couldn't sleep." Ali burst into a fit of coughing. He continued talking after a long pause, "We were taken to the front in a military truck. Javid was among the first to get off. An Iraqi sniper was waiting in ambush and started shooting at us right away. Javid took a bullet in the chest and was gone, just like that! He took the blow and moved on to paradise. That's the way I'd imagined I'd go."

He paused again, breathless, his sightless eyes staring up at invisible entities beyond the ceiling.

"In a way, I also feel sorry for him," Ali murmured, *"after all, he didn't get to fire a single bullet at the enemy."*

*

Ali died the next June after a hard battle with cancer right around the time we were graduating from high school. He was buried in the same plot of the cemetery as Javid, among the throngs of other fallen soldiers.

I visited both their graves one last time before I was drafted. I placed a small picture of Rambo on Javid's grave and one of a blind angel on Ali's. I left the cemetery wondering what others would put on my grave.