

noble, but it's not for children. You're still children. For our people, the struggle isn't only on the battlefield—it's also here, in these classrooms. I am a struggler too, and I play my national role by teaching you, and..."

I gently interrupted him:

- "Yes, sir... but I truly don't know where Basem is. All I know is that he was planning to leave home, but he didn't tell me any details. And I have no intention of leaving school now."

He patted my shoulder with his large hand:

- "May God grant you success, Hussein. I hope you'll pay more attention in the coming lessons. Give my regards to your father."

I hurried toward Abu Omar's shop. I couldn't tell my teacher anything about Basem or myself—he was my father's friend and they always played backgammon together. If he knew anything he'd tell my father and things would become difficult for us. I reached the shop:

- "Hello, Abu Omar. Tell me—did he call?!"

Abu Omar smiled and winked with his left eye:

- "Yes. And he'll call again at five sharp. Would you like to have a drink while you're waiting?"

Abu Omar always thought of exploiting everything and everyone. If he could sell air, he would! I laughed loudly:

- "Yes, one for me—and one for you. I'll pay for both."

Abu Omar's shop, with its half-green iron façade and the high stone ledge where the huge black telephone sat—the one with the silver dial, the heavy receiver, and the coin box that swallowed a lira every three minutes. A passerby asked to use

the phone, but I put my hand on the receiver and apologised:

- "Sorry. You can't make a call now—I'm waiting for an important one..."

Then to Abu Omar, who had begun trembling at the thought of losing a customer:

- "Don't worry, uncle. I'll pay you for all the missed calls."

The phone rang. That deep, raspy sound! A second ring, then I lifted the receiver:

- "Hello..."

- "Hi Hussein. How are you, you rascal?! Hahaha... I miss you."

- "Yes, Basem. Tell me—are you... did you join the...?!"

- "Not yet. Listen: I'll give you the address I'm staying at. When the taxi drops you off in Beirut, without asking anyone anything, stop another taxi and tell the driver to take you to Um-Elias pension in Bourj Hammoud. You'll find me there..."

- "Alright, my friend. I'll be there tomorrow, inshallah. Goodbye."

I put the receiver back, handed Abu Omar a five-lira note, and headed home. My father was waiting. As soon as I entered, he pulled off his leather belt and shouted in my face:

- "Thank God you're finally home. Teacher Ataya told me about your disgraceful decline!"

My mother rushed between us:

- "I beg you, by God—don't do it! By the love of the Prophet, put your belt away... Don't be harsh on the boy!"

I stepped back and said apologetically:

- "Dad... Mum... don't be upset with me! I'll live up to your

expectations. I just need some rest. Ever since my friend disappeared, I've been sad and confused. If you allow it, tomorrow—Friday—I'll go on a short outing with friends, and when I return in the evening, I'll devote myself to my studies and you'll be proud of me."

My father calmed down and left the house. My mother wept silently:

- "Hussein, my sweetheart... Your father loves you and is kind, but life is hard on him, so he seems harsh sometimes..."

I wiped her tears and kissed her forehead and hands:

- "Mum... I know all that, and I'm not upset with Dad. May God help him. And as for you—I want you to be happy and at ease. Come on, show me that gentle smile, sweetest of all women..."

We heard a knock at the door, and I began singing to my mother:

- "Mum, the moon is at the door, its lanterns glowing... Mum, shall I shut the door or call out to her?"

She wiped her face and whispered:

- "Call out to her, my sweetheart..."

I opened the door—there she was, our neighbour, Susan, also in al-Kafa'a... She visited so I could help her with Arabic, and she helped me with maths. She was a blonde, blue-eyed girl who had come with her family from a village in the coastal mountains at the start of this school year. Her father was a field officer in the army serving in Lebanon, her mother was a nurse at Al-Mouwasat Hospital, and she was their only child. I was shy with girls at first