

# GRACE

By Suzanne Strong

"DON'T WORRY, ALLAH IS WITH YOU." The man spoke in Arabic into the bloodied ear of his son, whose eyes were frozen. He closed his son's eyes and held his hand, as they moved the gurney down the hospital aisle. A bandage covered the crimson mark on his head where the bullet had torn through his skull.

"Ahmed, He will welcome and protect you now. Forever, you will always be safe." His language made him conspicuous in the hospital corridor, almost alarming to those who were working. His quiet weeping was heard through the corridor, his black mass of hair fell over the chest of his still, small boy.

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Ismail had woken early that morning and after performing his Islamic prayers had gone into the kitchen and saw Ahmed eating his breakfast. Ahmed had already visited the mosque and had helped his mother make tea for everyone; he felt she didn't get enough help around the house.

"Morning, son." Ismail sat down next to him at the table.

"Morning, Dad. Have you noticed the Israeli tanks closer at the moment?"

"Yes son, but we don't have to worry."

"What can we do Dad? We can't just let them do whatever they want."

"We cannot take things into our own hands son. When you get older you will understand better. We have to trust our leaders to work it out. Killing never solves anything."

Ahmed was starting to associate with friends who were more militant about the Israeli occupation. This worried Ismail. The tanks and soldiers were encroaching closer to their part of Jenin. Ahmed had grown up in this refugee camp with its abject squalor, the dust and hardship of living in poverty.

Ismail had sought to keep Ahmed from as much of the hatred of the conflict as he could. He didn't want to indoctrinate his son. Ismail hoped these issues would be resolved by the time Ahmed was an adult.

Pretending to be freedom fighters was a favourite game of Ahmed and his friends. That was why he had pleaded with his father to buy him the replica machine gun for his birthday but his parents had refused.

"Don't worry yourself, Ahmed. Allah is in control."

"Yes, Dad."

"I'm going outside now, Dad, Ah'man is coming over soon."

"Sure." Ismail touched Ahmed on the shoulder as he got up.

Ismail had watched his son's thin petite body walking out the door. His twelve year old form disappeared into the sunlight. As Ahmed turned the corner only the top of his shining black hair could be seen. He called out to Ah'man, his friend who was playing with Jusef in the dirt with their new toy guns. Ahmed walked over and asked to borrow one of their guns it was a replica Uzi.

Standing up from the dirt he called to his friend Jusef who was running away and pretended to shoot, pointing the gun directly at him. Then machine gun thunder assaulted the air, the sound of grinding metal and Ahmed fell sideways, as if a wall had just hit him, into the dirt. Still breathing, he could not speak only taking deep breaths in and out, his friends ran to him. Blood began to form a halo around his head in the dirt.

Ismail was sitting in his lounge room with the newspaper when he heard the terrifying bang that clattered through the air. In that moment, terror overwhelmed him. Instantly, he was at the door and yelling his son's name into the oblivious, sun-drenched day. His first thought made him feel guilty, "Please, not my son." Then he saw Ahmed's crumpled body, like those toys that collapse when you press the button, only he wasn't going to bounce up again. A toy machine gun was lying next to Ahmed's limp hand.

"Noooooooooo..." His father's high-pitched panic was heard across and down the street that had now fallen completely silent. Ismail ran to him screaming his name into the deaf air. He picked up Ahmed's tiny body. Blood dripped onto and mingled with the sandy dirt around him. His t-shirt was covered with the dark liquid; his eyes were afraid as he looked at his father.

"I love you, Ahmed," Ismail said as he cradled him. Ahmed looked into his father's eyes—his breath was short and sharp. Israeli soldiers had come over to investigate and the other boys held up their hands and showed the toy guns to them. The young soldier who had pulled the trigger, walked closer, stopped and collapsed onto his knees a little way off, hiding his face in his hands. Ambulance sirens cascaded, like a strange mourning bird, wailing through the still air, as Ismail held his son in his arms and whispered to him, kissing his face, weeping and pleading with him not to die.

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Dr Rosenthal had arrived for his usual mid-morning shift at the hospital. Noticing Ismail and his son, he walked straight over and behind the reception desk.

"Why is this man here?" Dr Rosenthal asked Miriam, the brunette nurse.

"His son was killed by a soldier and we were the best hospital to deal with this."

"Shouldn't his son be going to the morgue?"

"It says," she pointed to her clipboard, "he's going to be an organ donor."

"Really? Here, in an Israeli hospital?"

"Yes, I know it's unusual," she whispered. "His son is killed by an Israeli soldier and yet he is here donating his son's organs to us."

Dr Rosenthal was speechless. He could not stop looking at the man.

Ahmed's trolley was wheeled past the desk and into the cubicle adjacent. His body was attached to various machines that were keeping his heart pumping blood to his vital organs.

Dr Rosenthal could hear Ismail—the man didn't look unlike himself; curly, dark hair, thick eye brows and light green eyes—talking to his son. Dr Rosenthal could understand Ismail as he was fluent in Arabic and had spoken the language more than most Israelis, due to his volunteer work with Arabs in Gaza.

"No one should go through this, Ahmed," he was saying. "Not even Israelis. You'll see everything clearly when you see Allah, you will be at peace." His words were barely audible as he sobbed.

Slowly and gently Dr Rosenthal pulled back the curtain, making sure the man wasn't startled.

"Hello, I'm Dr Rosenthal," he told Ismail in Arabic, "we will take good care of your son." Ismail looked at the Dr and nodded in a grateful manner.

Dr Rosenthal wanted to hide from Ismail's wide-eyed stare.

"His mother will be arriving soon from a relative's house. Can we stay with him a while?" Ismail asked.

"Of course," Dr Rosenthal said, "anything you need, let me know."

"Thank you."

Walking out of the cubicle, Dr Rosenthal felt disoriented and he didn't know why. He had seen this kind of thing all the time on the news in Israel. He had received casualties from Palestinian bombs and comforted many Israeli parents with similar losses. However, this man was different. Where did this man put his anger from losing his son at the hands of Israeli soldiers?

It was unnerving to the hardened doctor, having lived his whole life in Israel. He wanted peace with the Palestinians, but he understood it wasn't that simple, or was it? Dr Rosenthal wanted a lasting solution to the suffering he saw everyday caused by this endless conflict and he wanted the Palestinians to also have a place and a chance for a normal life.

Dr Rosenthal walked quickly down the corridor to the bathroom. He looked at himself in the mirror, tears appeared in his eyes.

"What's wrong with you?" he said, to the person in the mirror, "get it together, be professional." He splashed water on his face; he had to get back to work. Something had changed inside; somehow a question seemed to sit in the place where resignation had been. Ismail's words, his soft tone, whispering to his son played over and over rhythmically in his head. Dr Rosenthal didn't know whether this action would impact anyone or make people take notice, he hoped it would. But he did know that whatever happened, he would never forget the morning this Arab man came into his ward and showed him, a glimpse of unthinkable compassion.

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Two days passed of shifts treating people in the emergency ward, eating dinner in his small apartment and sleeping, but Dr Rosenthal couldn't get the Arab man out of his mind. He kept seeing the little boy's face, the bandages and the gentle tone of his father.

He was on his way to the hospital when he saw *The Guardian* newspaper and bought it, as he always did. On the second page he saw him, the Arab man and his wife pictured with the title "Ahmed's gift of Life" and began to read. Tears filled his eyes as he read about how Ahmed was shot by soldiers and then this:

*"The army apologised with unusual speed. The armed factions entrenched in the Jenin camp made no calls for revenge. But it was the reaction of Ahmed's parents that caught everyone off guard. As life slipped away from their son in an Israeli hospital at the weekend, Ismail and Abla Khatib decided that some good could come of his death. The Palestinian family donated Ahmed's organs for transplant. The boy was in an Israeli hospital and his parents understood that their son's body parts were most likely to save people routinely spoken of as "the enemy" in Jenin. Within hours, Ahmed's heart, kidneys, liver and lungs were transplanted into six Israelis, four of them Jewish.*

*The move was hailed by stunned Israeli leaders as a "remarkable gesture for peace", particularly given the circumstances of Ahmed's death, and a bridge between warring communities. Ariel Sharon's closest cabinet ally, deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, telephoned Ismail to praise his "noble gesture". The speaker of the Israeli parliament praised the Palestinian family for its "remarkable humanity."*

Further down in the article, he read that Ahmed's mother, Abla had decided with Ismail about the donation. She said about this:

*"We saw a lot of painful scenes in the hospital. I have seen children in deep need of organs, in deep pain. It doesn't matter who they are. We didn't specify that his organs would go to Arabs, Christians or Jews. I didn't want my son to suffer...I didn't want other children to suffer regardless of who they are," she said.*

*"My son was dead but at the same time maybe he could provide life to others and maybe he could reduce their pain. Of course my son was martyred and they were the criminals and they took his life away but we are the ones who could give life back to them. And maybe my son is still alive in someone else.*

*"It was a message from us to them, a message of peace for them. We are the ones who want peace and love..."*

The bus pulled up, brakes screeching at his stop. Dr Rosenthal jolted out of his deep thought. He didn't want to stop reading the article. He was shocked and moved by the events that had unfolded, but he folded it carefully up in three places and placed it under his arm. Wiping away the tear under his eye, Dr Rosenthal could not help the wide smile that formed across his face. The woman in red next to him on her way to a job in travel looked at him with curiosity. His face reflected a calmness that made him stand out as he stepped off the bus.

Dr Rosenthal felt disbelief at the actions of these parents. He felt awe but also relief the world had taken notice, and that this act of kindness had stopped those in power, those with machine guns and even the average person. That the death of this small boy, due to his parents' actions had given life to others, but not just other people, those who were his "enemies," and those who had taken his life. This was the profound and mesmerising aspect that moved Dr Rosenthal, that for once, the death of an Arab boy would not go unnoticed by the world. He walked quickly towards the street of the hospital excited to share the article with Miriam.

**This story is based on the real life story of Ahmed who lost his life in Israel/Jenin in 2005. His parents, Ismail and Abla showed an act of phenomenal love and grace.**

**<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/nov/11/israel1>**

**Suzanne Strong**