

PASSAGES OF THE HEART

by
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This is inspired by a true story I read in one of those “Save the Children” ads. The first part of the story relies heavily upon literary license in order to show the back story. However, Tomar’s goal, his sister Nusha, the note he writes, and the ending of this story, is true.

Tomar couldn’t help but spread a wide smile across his sun-bronzed face as he hastened through the dusty streets lined with mud-brick houses and stone-rubble huts. The joy he felt, especially today, radiated from his face, pushing his boyish cheeks upward and crinkling the edges of his dark brown eyes. He sucked in a deep breath as he passed an outdoor clay oven, sniffing in the pleasant aroma of bread baking. At the same time, he kept an eye on Nusha, his three-year old sister, who skipped ahead of her twelve-year old brother. The caress of the morning sun and the warm breeze that wafted in from the south promised that nothing would mar this special day. Tomar had no reason to believe otherwise.

He headed toward the outskirts of his small village, Halabja, situated near the Iranian border, and wound through the same by-ways he and Nusha always followed.

Passing his grandmother’s home, he spied her carrying an armful of wood across the yard. Shading his eyes from the sun with his hand, Tomar called to her.

“Good morning, grandmother!” At the same time, he flashed her a wide grin to relay his excitement about the festivities the family planned for the evening. She looked up, smiled, and returned the greeting.

That night they were to celebrate his father's birthday. There would be *dilok*, the spirited dancing, and he intended to wear his best shirt and pants, and the colored sash that his mother made. He could hardly wait. And the food...his eyes widened with anticipation.

Grandmother would bring Baslog, filled with nuts, sprinkled with shredded coconut. His aunts and cousins would bring sweet cakes and other delicacies, and his mother, Fesenjam chicken with pomegranate molasses and walnuts. There would also be fresh bread and thick honey. The house would fill with relatives and neighbors laughing and talking, and everyone would nibble on Nakho-Chi cookies, topped with sugar and pistachios. They would also sip Chai Kurdi tea through sugar cubes held in their teeth, Tomar's favorite. He loved the soothing taste of the cinnamon. It reminded him of the feeling he got when his mother tucked the covers around him at night.

Then, after dinner, his father would work music on his flute-like *zornah*, accompanied by his grandfather drumming his fingers on the *dahol*, and everyone would sing the stories of their Kurdish heroes, especially the Peshmerga—the village fighters who face death for Kurdistan's freedom. The music often varied, but the words were always the same so that they could be memorized and handed down to posterity. Often, his father told him, "Tomar, some day you will make a fine warrior."

This morning, he and Nusha's task was to climb the high hill and pick berries and almonds for the celebration. Tomar carried two baskets for this, a third for the wildflowers, which Nusha would fill. She ran down the street ahead of him in anticipation, her short black hair bouncing up and down about her head.

They cut across the square, a small open space and the focal point of the village. In the center stood an old gnarled walnut tree with branches that shaded most of the plaza. The area

was already noisy with chattering women and loud voices of competing vendors bargaining over apples, sugar-beets and tobacco. He and Nusha finally reached the outskirts of the village, skirted a wheat field and headed for the foothills.

They climbed the hill under a brilliant blue sky with puffs of white clouds. Within an hour they reached Tomar's favorite place, the plateau, where the sun slid golden fluid down the slopes that overlooked their peaceful village. A mild breeze wafted the tall grass into soft, rolling waves. Only the gentle lapping of a nearby stream broke the profound quiet of the hillside with its perfumed fragrance of honeysuckle and wildflowers. Something special always stirred deep inside Tomar in the palpable silence on the hill, much the same comforting feeling the cinnamon's aroma gave him.

He spent the next hour picking berries, loading his basket and shaking enough almonds down from tree branches to fill the other. After that, he plopped down on the ground to rest. Nusha continued to dart about barefoot, picking purple and yellow flowers.

Shading his eyes with his hand, Tomar took in the panorama lying in the valley below him. Sun-drenched fields and pastures rolled endlessly in all directions. Beyond them, more villages.

With a pleased smile, he lowered his head and started to reach into his pocket for his pencil and small drawing tablet that he had brought along. But, a sudden noise startled him. He looked up.

That's when he saw them—low-flying airplanes swooping down over his village. He let out a half-choking gasp, and leapt to his feet.

In an instant, thunderous bombs dropped from the planes, ripping the ground apart. Explosions shattered the air...homes blew into fragments...people screamed. Thick blackish-

yellow clouds of deadly gas mushroomed over his village. Then, a deep rumble resonated against the hillside, accompanied by a surging gust of wind that rushed up the slope to where Tomar stood. It smelled like rotten garlic.

Transfixed with terror, his eyes riveted on the roaring planes that whipped about in fury. They circled and dived, dropping their loads of destruction. Then they banked. Half of them sped off toward the horizon, but the other half headed straight in his direction. He widened his eyes in panic.

Nauseating spurts of adrenaline coursed through his body as he rushed forward, grabbed Nusha, and bolted up the slope. Stumbling and falling with her screams in his ears, he headed for the cover of nearby trees just as the planes roared overhead and disappeared over the rim of the hill.

When he could no longer hear them, he emerged slowly from his hiding place. Nusha clung to him, still crying, her arms wrapped tightly about his neck.

“Shhh, now,” he said, patting her on the back. “They are gone...they are gone.” Her cries gradually subsided, but her body still trembled.

Continuing to calm her, his eyes swept down the mountainside, scanning the distressing scene. He looked for small spaces beneath the smoke and the streets, hoping to spot some sign of life. He zeroed in on the village square, then widened his gaze to take in the vicinity of his house.

From his vantage point, a scattering of still objects dotted the streets. The gradual realization that they were bodies caused a dissonant reaction as feelings of denial clashed with the reality.

Then came more horrific booms of explosions that once again startled him. Lifting his head, he looked toward the horizon—toward other villages. The same ugly-colored clouds rose high into the air.

In a few seconds, another flurry of wind swept up the slope and Tomar wrinkled his nose. His insides lurched with urgency—the ominous smell was growing stronger.

Without hesitation, he tightened his arms around Nusha, and broke into a run. His legs hammered into the ground as he ran up the hill, zigzagging around boulders, plowing through tall weeds, and leaping over clumps of brush. Nusha began screaming again.

“Shhh...shhh, little sister,” he managed breathlessly into her ear as he ran. “It will...be okay.”

Reaching the summit, he shot down the other side, tripping, sliding, twice losing his balance and falling, but with his arms still wrapped firmly around Nusha.

Reaching the bottom of the hill, he collapsed by some trees. He huddled down, still clutching Nusha’s small body tight to his chest. His shirt and pants had torn from falling, exposing bloody scrapes and bruises. He quickly examined Nusha. She was all right—his arms had protected her.

He stroked her hair to calm her, while anxieties turbulently spun about in his head. His parents would need him *I must return!* But, there was something menacing about the smell that made him reluctant. Maybe it would dissipate if he waited an hour or two.

Peeking out from under the thicket, he crawled out. The smell wasn’t as strong. He took Nusha’s hand.

“Come, little sister, we are going home.” She took a few quavering steps, and then followed him across the clearing.

It took twenty minutes to climb back up the summit. During that time, Tomar continually scanned the sky for planes. As soon as they reached the top, he anxiously looked down at Halabja. Most of the smoke had cleared. But, he saw far more bodies than before. Still, in his heart, he knew his parents were alive. He needed to hurry--they were probably searching for him.

Fifteen minutes into their descent back to the plateau, the pungent vapors grew stronger. Tomar’s eyes smarted and he began coughing. Then Nusha started crying, doing the same thing. He stopped, instinctively sensing they should go no further.

Suddenly, off to his right, came the sound of branches and dry leaves crunching under stumbling feet. Grabbing Nusha’s hand, he turned to run.

But, before he could move, a man broke through the trees. A quick scrutiny of his clothes and color of his striped turban that hung askew on one side of his head, told Tomar that he was from his village. His spirits lifted. Now, they were not alone. The man would tell him what to do.

But, the expression on Tomar’s face gradually changed as he stared at the man tripping and falling, coming closer to him across the clearing. His face and arms were covered with ugly, mustard-colored blisters. One eye was stuck shut, and blood matted his hair and trickled from his nose and ears. A shiver shot down Tomar’s spine as he studied the man’s facial expression. It reflected an agony that he had never seen before.

But, despite the blood and oozing sores on his body, Tomar recognized him. He owned the market, only a block away from his parents house.

“Child...you...must flee,” he spoke in strangled tones as he lurched toward him, his body shaking. He could barely whisper. “Poison gas...”

Tomar stared into the man's one opened eye that excreted a yellow liquid and the twitching muscles that distorted his face.

"Our neighborhood," Tomar gulped, "...near the square?"

"Hardest...hit," came the man's halting response, struggling for breath. "All dead. I was...in another part of town...ran toward home. But... none survived.

His words sent Tomar's emotions reeling. *Everyone? His father...mother... grandparents?*

"There could be," the man interrupted, his lips quivering and now coughing up blood, "...a few survivors from other...sections of the village. Still...you must not go there. If you go ...*this*," he said, pointing to his own body, "is what will happen . . . to you."

"But..." Tomar stammered, "where shall I..."

"Anywhere...but the village."

"You will...come with us?"

The man shook his head. "You must leave me. I...cannot keep up." He then crumpled to the ground.

Tomar recoiled, as the man's body violently convulsed. Blood bubbled from his mouth and a horrible gurgling sound rose up in his throat. His vacuous face froze in muted agony, and his one good eye stopped blinking. It stared at nothing. He no longer moved.

An avalanche of fear crashed over Tomar. He didn't want to die like *that*. But, if he returned, that's what would happen—to Nusha, too. His arms tightened around her as he stepped away from the man's body.

Despite the trepidation enshrouding him, he had to leave. He took one last glance at Halabja and slowly turned his back on the only home he'd ever known—where his family boasted they had lived for twenty grandfathers.

He began walking--to where, he didn't know.

They trudged for hours. Now and then he carried Nusha, continually reassuring her that everything was all right. Occasionally, Tomar turned and glanced behind him. A sickly cloud on the distant horizon could be seen. He walked faster, remembering how the man died.

It was late afternoon and he plodded on, still carrying Nusha. His back hurt, his legs ached, and the hard ground beneath his sore feet felt like solid rock.

Sweat dripped from his forehead as he moved onto the scorching plains that stretched out before him. Temperatures soared and his lungs burned from breathing in the dry, gritty dust that swirled about his feet. Now and then he would find himself hoping that they would come across friendly villagers who would take them in. But, then, he recalled what his father told him.

“Remember, Tomar, Kurds have no friends.”

Realizing how easily he and Nusha could be spotted from the air, he decided to hide during the day and travel by night.

The next day, while the intense heat undulated from the plains, they hunkered down under an overhanging ledge that jutted out from a group of huge boulders.

The vision of Halabja and the bodies he saw from the hillside played over and over in his mind, until he nearly went crazy picturing his family, his father's birthday celebration that would

never take place, the man with the oozing blisters and his ominous words that broke Tomar's heart. "*None survived. . .*"

He studied Nusha. She didn't cry as often anymore. She just stared, and refused to move more than two feet away from him. How was he, a boy of twelve, to take care of her? He tried to clear his mind, by drawing in a few deep breaths and forcing a slow exhalation. Then, over the remaining hours he carefully processed his thoughts.

By evening, he knew what he had to do. By following the remains of old irrigation canals that laced the sand, he would locate the Tigris. By keeping the river well in sight, it would lead him to his destination—Diyarbakir.

Journeying through the black silence of night for the next three weeks, he and Nusha passed through bomb-shattered villages and deserted dwellings that fortunately had no bad smell. Trudging up and down valleys, gorges and over bony, moon-swept hills, they eventually crossed over the Turkish border and found an abandoned village.

Shudders of fear swept through Tomar as he crept into the eerie quiet of the darkened streets. Clutching his sister's hand, he pulled, half-dragged, her along, her tiny legs barely able to keep up.

When he finally stopped, Nusha collapsed onto the ground. She let out a whimper, and rubbed her sore feet. He looked down at her.

Poor little Nusha. She had been so good to walk for many days with no shoes—crossing the border into Turkey, trudging bleak paths and roads, staying in dark Zivinge caves—whereas, he was accustomed to traveling great distances. He often hiked with his father to the cool pastures of the remote mountain plateaus to herd sheep and goats. It was a long trek; but there,

the animals could feed on the profusion of pink and lavender wild flowers that blanketed the slopes.

He smiled dreamily, remembering the joy when they returned home—everyone gathering around the fire in the evening, his mother laughing and playing with little Nusha, his father working music on his *zornah*.

Tomar's eyes misted. He glanced again at his little sister who now rested her head against his legs, and stared into her tired, frightened eyes. He reached down and stroked her hair.

She looked up, letting out a shivery sob.

“Nusha...hungry.”

Letting out a deep sigh, he glanced around the darkened streets of the village—it was too dark to scrounge for food. He thought of his mother's Fesenjam chicken, and flat bread brushed with spicy oil.

He plopped down onto a segment of broken concrete, his head pounding. His chin fell dejectedly onto his chest as he massaged his temples.

Would he find food tomorrow? So far, they'd been fortunate to find some in a few deserted villages. A couple of times he came across *Khans*, places built for caravans and travelers. Inside the courtyards by the wells he found a couple of gourds to fill with water. At one, a lone nomad who spoke a different dialect offered them cheese, bread and a few Nabugs, a plum-like fruit.

Nusha began crying softly. “Hush now, my sister.” He gently pulled her up onto his lap and wrapped his arms around her. He rocked back and forth—the way his mother used to. He kissed her short black hair and whispered, “Shhh, soon you will not cry anymore. I will sing our mother's song.”

Swaying slightly from side to side, he sang the familiar tune.

Hush the night is coming on,

Rest upon my breast.

Hush, my little baby child,

Close your eyes and rest.

Lullabies are nice, he thought wistfully, remembering the comforting warmth of his mother's voice that flowed like soft silk in the evenings. He hoped the song worked for Nusha this time. Lately, it didn't—especially the last few days when her crying had become more persistent and she kept calling for her mother. He didn't have the heart to tell her that she would never again see her.

Continuing to hum the familiar tune, he watched his sister's face. Soon, her crying softened to faint sobs and an occasional hiccup. Her eyelids closed. Tomar heaved a sigh of relief.

He wiped her tear-stained cheeks with the ragged edge of his cuff, and straightened her dress that he had managed to wash clean in a bucket of rainwater the day before. "You must look as nice as possible," he whispered.

Knowing what he had to do, he felt pressed with the urgency, but clenched his eyes shut. How could he go through with it? Nusha was all that he had left.

It would mean that she would never again celebrate the feast of *Newroz*, follow the *Qirdik* clown with her friends, or go door to door to receive gifts from the townspeople. She would not participate in any village customs or hear the legends of their Kurdish ancestors. She would grow up and not know any of this. Was he doing the right thing? His whole body became a cauldron of swirling emotions.

Shivering suddenly from a gust of wind that blew through the streets, he raised his head and then wrinkled his nose. The air still wasn't right. The last few days, when it wafted in on the breeze, it stunk like fertilizer. He knew that this far away, it couldn't be from Halabja, but other towns that had been attacked. But the odor, faint or not, only reinforced what he had to do. His mouth tightened into a firm line.

"I have reached *Sin Al-Bulugh*," he said, "the age of maturity." Had not his father confirmed this, by proudly responding to those who asked his age, "*Gihaye tifinge*, he can use a rifle—he is a man now." Therefore, he must return and join the Peshmerga—those who face death.

He was too exhausted to travel any more that night, so holding her tightly to his chest so as not to awaken her, he carefully stood.

Skulking through the deserted streets, he searched for a place to sleep. Spectral shadows seemed to reach out for him with ghostly fingers and his heart rate climbed.

He finally found an old weathered lean-to, no bigger than a chicken coop, at the edge of the debris-strewn village. It smelled of damp, rotting wood, and part of the roof was caved in. He gathered old rags that were scattered about and made Nusha a soft bed.

He lay down next to her on the wood-planked floor and gazed up through the hole in the broken roof. Tiny stars studded the cobalt sky. It was the clearest he had seen for many nights.

At home, when his mother tucked them in at bedtime, she had told them about the silver river of stars—the big bear, *Terme Merxe*, the small bear, *Terme Adem*—and how they guided travelers. She also said that whenever they saw a large star encircled by smaller ones, to remember her—it was a sign of a mother's love for her children and the togetherness they would always have. He diligently searched for a large star encircled by smaller ones, but saw none.

His sobs burst upward in great heart-breaking rushes. Then, he fell asleep and dreamed he was eating his mother's bread, drenched in home-churned butter and olive oil.

The next evening, as the sun slipped down over the horizon and the warm, pink glow on the rocky landscape faded, Tomar awakened Nusha and they resumed their moonlight trek. She sleepily stumbled along beside him, clutching on to his pant leg. Only when clouds obscured the moon and it turned pitch-black, did he stop. But, the rest of the time he kept the moon-spangled water of the Tigris well in sight, and kept searching the horizon for the distant lights of Diyarbakir.

When he was young, his father had taken him there. At that time, there was less to fear from the Turks about their Kurdish nationality. But, now it was different. Both the Kurdish flag and his language were prohibited—Halabja was an example of the hatred the regime felt. It was dangerous, but that's where he needed to go.

Yet, despite the danger, he remembered his fascination with the city's tall, gilt-domed buildings and mosques, covered with shiny tiles etched with palms and pomegranates, and skilled weavers who made prayer beads and bracelets with thin threads of silver. But, best of all he enjoyed the marketplace, because before heading for home his father loaded up his truck with watermelons. Then, during their return trip across the desert, they would periodically stop and eat a few slices. He remembered the sweet taste...the fun of seeing which one could spit seeds the farthest...and how the sticky juice dribbled down their chins, hands and arms. It was a special time he would always remember.

But for now, another attraction in the city held more significance for him than grand buildings or the nostalgic memories. The few lone travelers they had met along the way said it was still there. He panicked at the thought that it might not be.

The sun dipped low at the end of the day, and the sky turned a smoky, purplish-orange. They started out again as a cool breeze came in on the tail of the blanketing dusk. Nusha was draped over his shoulder, asleep. She barely cried at all anymore except on brief occasions, which was a relief.

By late evening, he spied the dim lights of Diyarbakir in the distance. Within two hours, he reached the black, basalt megaliths that formed its city wall and began looking for *Mardin*, one of the five gates. It was the one he and his father used, as had caravan travelers of old.

Nusha stirred and began crying.

“Shhh...we are almost there,” he said. He shifted her onto his other shoulder, straddling her legs on his hip. Nusha, sobbing softly, laid her head back down upon his shoulder and closed her eyes.

Tomar soon found the gate, and fearfully crept through the shadowy entranceway. Thoughts of the regime’s powerful hatred against Kurds made him extra cautious that no one see him. His heart nearly hammered its way out of his chest.

He hesitated for a few seconds. Swallowing dryly, he ran his tongue over his cracked lips. Nevertheless, his face remained resolute. *There can be no change of plans.*

Allah excused transgressions of children; but now it was different—he was a man. He must follow through on his first duty, or a sin would be charged against him.

Moving through the moonlit streets, he passed the domed mausoleums, tile-covered mosques, and familiar market place with its awning-covered fruit stands. He was certain he was headed in the right direction and that he would recognize the place. His father pointed it out to him once, when showing him around the city. He had stopped in front of it long enough to explain its purpose, emphasizing that their family was fortunate.

He paused at a familiar corner and hesitantly peered around the corner of a building. He started down the dim alleyway and soon stopped in front of a wooden building.

A quiver ran down his back and his knees went spongy as he stared at the arched doorway that marked his journey's end.

A yellow glow shone from the crack beneath the door, spilled down the three wooden steps and spread out across the narrow alleyway. His throat constricted as he looked up at the small, weather-beaten sign that hung over the entranceway...*Children's Home*. His arms tightened around Nusha and his heart beat like the wings of frightened birds.

"Wake up...little...sister," his voice quavered. "We are...here." Nusha drowsily opened her eyes.

He nervously glanced up and down the darkened street, and then placed her on the ground. Nusha looked up at him with sleep-filled eyes.

"You must look nice," he said, managing to speak in a matter-of-fact tone. He knelt down in front of her and smoothed out the wrinkles in her dress, pausing to examine a rip.

Nusha looked down at it and her chin quivered. Tomar smiled and quickly took her hand.

"Do not worry about the rip now. They will love you anyway, for you are a good little sister."

He licked his fingers and smoothed her short, black hair. Nusha smiled at him, raised her arm and with her small hand patted her hair. Tears came to Tomar's eyes, but he brushed them away.

Pulling his pencil and tablet from his pocket, he tore off a sheet. He moved up the creaky steps and slowly began writing in the dim light coming from beneath the crack.

Please take care of my sister. Our parents are dead many weeks. I am twelve, and can no longer find food for this small sister. To my ears came news of your house, so I bring Nusha to you.

He reread the note twice, came back down the steps and knelt down, pressing it into her tiny hand. Nusha glanced at the paper, puzzled.

"You must stand here...in front of the door," he said, firmly resting his hands on her shoulders. Then, standing, he started to move back up the steps toward the door. Nusha instinctively bolted forward. Tomar pried loose the tiny arms that clung about his legs, and squatted down in front of her. He kissed her cheek.

"Little Nusha... In there," he pointed at the door, "they will give you food so you won't be hungry, and put shoes on your sore feet. You will have a bed with warm covers, and will no longer cry at night when you go to sleep.

"These honorable people will send you to live with a family, where you can play with their happy children. And do you know why they are happy? Because their mothers can mend tears in dresses, fix warm bowls of rice and sing the lullaby."

He sadly shook his head. "I cannot do these things." He felt a cold fist close over his heart.

Nusha, her eyes fixed on him, listened intently.

“Oh, little sister, you do not know what I am saying and...his face locked with pain...
“you will not remember me.” Tomar quickly blinked his tears away.

“May you...gaze up to much happiness, Nusha...” He felt his heart breaking into so many pieces that they were rising up and plugging his throat so he could no longer speak.

Moving up the wooden steps, he grabbed the slender rope that hung to the side of the door and gave it a tug. The tinkling of a bell sounded inside the building. Turning, he returned to where Nusha stood watching him.

“Stay right here,” he said, pointing his finger to the spot where she stood. Then, turning away, he slowly moved down the street a few steps at a time, the knot in his stomach twisting harder. He glanced back at her over his shoulder.

Nusha, her eyes wide, let out a cry and started after him. Tomar whirled around and rushed forward.

“No, no, little sister!” He spoke sharply, pushing her back. “You cannot come. I will just be a few minutes. Wait for me here...and...I will return.”

The last word caught in his throat—he had disgraced his parents with this lie. He only hoped that Allah would some day forgive him. He pointed up the steps.

“Look, someone will open the door soon. Give them the paper!”

Nusha, her chin trembling, turned back and stared at the door.

Those few seconds were all Tomar needed. He ran a few yards and ducked within the shadows of a small moon gate.

Peering from his hiding place, he watched breathlessly. The door opened, letting the yellow light from inside fall upon Nusha. Tomar swallowed hard as he watched her look up into the faces of two women.

One of them stepped out, knelt in front of Nusha and tenderly put her arms around her. She spoke softly, and Tomar thought he saw Nusha smile in return. He smiled too...a little.

Nusha held out the note. Tomar stopped breathing. When the lady finished reading it, she gently gathered Nusha into her arms and reentered the building.

The door swung shut...the street was quiet.

Tomar slowly sank to the ground. He leaned back against a large barrel and sat motionless for a few minutes. Turning his head, he stared down the alley where he last saw Nusha. Would he ever see her again?

Glancing down at his shirt, he pressed it together where a button was gone. Then, he tightened his sash and brushed an imaginary speck from his trousers.

He looked up at the sky. The silver river of heaven was fading. Hints of dawn now touched the sky and soft rays of light were slowly poking their slender beams between the wooden buildings.

Rising to his feet he took a few uncertain steps, paused, and took one last glance over his shoulder.

Then, he moved down the street with slow, hesitant steps, pushing a small rock with his foot.

He was glad the lady put her arms around Nusha. He hoped she could sing the lullaby.

THE END

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