THE BIRTHDAY

By Keven Wickham

Bassem opened his eyes and rubbed them. The excitement of the day instantly coursed through his small body. Today is the big day.

He had wanted it from the first time he saw it. Sleek, beautiful, amazing, he dreamt about all the places he would discover, all the jumps he would conquer.

Bassem opens the drawer in the bedside table and pulls out a glossy brochure. There it is, in all its glory: a picture of the Huffy Moto X Kid's Bike. He remembered the first time he saw it a year earlier. Every day since, he pestered his father. Every day since, he put an X on the calendar marking off the days until his birthday. His seventh birthday.

Standing at the calendar Bassem puts the final X on the date. Downstairs his mother busies herself cooking the birthday feast. His father—he is at the front door greeting the arriving relatives. Bassem hears the noise and laughter: he smiles and says to himself: *Today it is mine.*

Bassem's brother Tariq and his sister Najwa tease each other, running around the sitting room. The guests—two aunts and uncles, their children, and grandparents from both sides—have arrived. Everyone takes what seat they can find in the sparse apartment and they wait.

Bassem's mother yells to her son: 'Bassem, Bassem come now. Bassem, everyone is here, we are waiting.'

Bassem emerges to applause. He is mobbed with hugs and kisses. His dad's brother touches the top of his head: 'You look pretty big for a seven-year-old,' he says. 'You are an image of your dad!'

Sitting in a chair in the middle of the room, Bassem receives his gifts. First a jumper, then shoes, then a shirt, socks, pants. Bassem rolls his eyes. He opens the last gift. It is from his mother's parents.

'Wow,' he says, 'This is heavy. I wonder what it could be.' His eyes widen as he peels off the last of the wrapping: *A Picture History of Palestine*. 'Oh, thank you, thank you.' He opens the book: Chapter One - *Palestine Before al Nakba*. 'This is so lovely. How did you know I wanted this?' Bassem asks.

His grandfather laughs. 'It is important to know your history. Enjoy!'

The radio makes an appearance; music fills the room. Tariq and his sister Najwa tease Bassem. ‘Show us your pants, show us your pants,’ they yell and laugh. Tariq holds them up high as if he won a trophy.

Bassem protests. ‘Stop it, stop it! Mom! Tell them to stop!’ Bassem goes to the window and looks out. *Is this it?*

His father comes up behind. ‘You know Bassem, this life, it is difficult here. Sometimes we have to make sacrifices we don’t like. We can only get what is allowed. Every day we make the best of it we can.’

‘Look Dad,’ Bassem interrupts, pointing. ‘It’s another one.’ Outside the window a drone flies. It watches Bassem and his father and then flies off. The father looks at Bassem.

‘Okay, turn around Bassem,’ his father says, smiling. ‘You must wear this blindfold. Don’t worry, you can trust me. We will play a little game.’

Blindfolded, Bassem is led by his father down stairs to the street below. The guests quietly go out on the balcony overlooking the street.

‘What’s happening?’ asks Bassem.

‘Okay, Bassem. Are you ready?’

He nods. Bassem’s father spins Bassem around and then unties the blindfold. Bassem takes a second to find his balance. Laughter rains down from the balcony.

‘Dad, dad, DAD!’ Bassem can’t believe it: it’s the Huffy Moto X Kid’s Bike. Everyone on the balcony cheers. Bassem gets on the bike in seconds and rides on the road in circles. Everyone claps and laughs and then—

Darkness . . .

A pale hand pokes out from the rubble. One of the rescuers sees it.

‘Here, here, here!’ he yells. Men scramble over the jagged cement and rebar to the shouting man. ‘Look, look!’ the man says. The men remove the rubble surrounding the hand. They unearth an arm, then a torso, then head and finally legs. ‘Praise Allah, it’s a child. The child is alive!’ the man yells. They carry Bassem and place him on the smooth surface of the road. The rescuers swab the white cement film off Bassem’s face. He opens an eye, then two, and then cries.

‘Praise Allah, he lives, the boy is alive!’ The rescuers hover over Bassem comforting him. They sit Bassem up and give him sips of water. He chokes at first.

‘Where am I?’ Bassem asks. ‘Is this a dream?’

‘You are a lucky boy,’ says a man, ‘You are alive. A miracle, a miracle.’ Bassem sits up and tries his arms: they work. Now for the legs. With help he stands. Wobbly at first, he falls to a knee. Then, using all his available strength, he stands, and lets out a wail.

A few minutes later he asks: ‘Where is my family, what has happened, where are they?’

The men look away, then one offers to speak: ‘We don’t know. What is your name,’ he asks.

‘I am Bassem.’

‘Where is your house?

‘I lived there.’ Bassem points to the rubble.

‘We have been looking through that rubble for two days, we were ready to move on today and Hasim saw your hand. You were the only one found Bassem. Your family, God willing, has fled south.’

Every house in the neighbourhood is destroyed—many more burn. A narrow road, recently cleared by many hands winds its way from the north and to the south snaking through the neighbourhood. Around a bend an Old Man appears out of nowhere. He sits on a wooden cart that is pulled by a donkey. He stops and speaks to the rescuers. The rescuers animate their story while the Old Man stares at Bassem. The Old Man gets back on his cart, taps the donkey, and the cart moves along stopping at Bassem.

‘It is too dangerous here,’ he says. ‘What is your name?’

‘I am Bassem.’

‘Well, Bassem,’ the Old Man says. ‘It’s your lucky day. I will take you south to find your family.’ The rescuers help Bassem onto the cart. With that the Old Man taps the donkey, and they make their way out of the demolished neighbourhood.

Bassem looks back. *I wonder where my bike is*. He shakes uncontrollably.

Now, the old man had seen a lot. Some would say he is a grumpy man, but none would say he isn’t a good man. His face tells a thousand tales and his eyes have seen everything beautiful and everything horrible.

‘So Bassem, how old are you,’ said the Old Man.

‘I just had my birthday. I guess it was two days ago. I am seven . . . How old are you?’

The Old Man smiles. ‘You know Bassem, when I turned seven, I had to leave my house too.’

Along the side of the road a woman carries a shrouded baby. Blue patterned, she wears her prayer clothes. The headpiece is covered with blood, the skirt bottom in tatters. The Old Man passes her, and they trade glances. He decides to stop. The woman draws near.

'Where are you going?' the Old Man asks.

'I am heading to Khan Younis to the cemetery to bury the child,' she says.

The Old Man points north: 'There is a cemetery just up the road a few kilometres.'

'I know,' she says, 'the soldiers are digging up all the graves.'

The Old Man takes the shrouded baby and places the child in a box attached to the cart deck. He helps the woman up. 'Why do you wear your prayer clothes?' he asks.

'I wear them to bed every night in case my building is bombed. If I die my body would be fully covered. If I live, well, I could escape the rubble modestly and covered—I lived, praise Allah.'

Still shaking, Bassem sits on the cart, nods at the woman. The Old Man taps the donkey, and the cart moves on down the narrow road. The woman shuffles over beside Bassem and puts her arm around him. 'It's OK now,' she says. Shaking, Bassem nods in disbelief. The rhythmic oscillation of the cart rocks Bassem and he falls asleep.

The Old Man drives the cart through many destroyed neighbourhoods, one after the other after the other. The scenery is grey, rubble is everywhere—anything that grew has been wiped out. The road, crowded. Cars tailback behind: in front—more cars, small trucks and people riding bikes. Many more walk along the road and over rubble carrying what they can. Some sift through piles of garbage scrounging for anything that resembles food. Others dig through the rubble looking for lost souls. They have fear in their eyes, their faces—expressionless.

The traffic stops. The Old Man and the woman look to a man screaming as he rummages through rubble.

Bassem wakes, shakes uncontrollably.

'What is this, what is going on?' he asks.

The screaming man moves rubble and with his hands and he pushes away the cement-coloured sand. He puts his ear to a slab. Lifting his head, he yells: 'I can't hear you my dears. Salma, Salma my dear?' He walks to a larger slab. The rebar spirals out of it into the air. Underneath, a void.

'Salma? Salma my dear. Saeed? Saeed!' he yells. He crawls under the void pulling out rubble. 'Saeed, Saeed! Salma, my dear? Saeed, didn't I ask you to take care of your sister, Saeed.' He crumbles and sobs.

A rescuer comforts the man. 'May their souls rest in peace,' he says.

The traffic slackens in front of the cart. Horns sound from behind. The Old Man taps the donkey. The woman slides beside Bassem to comfort him. The cart moves forward. Further down the road, in the rubble of a building, the old man sees a small pipe. A pipe with water coming out.

'Bassem, are you okay to get some water?' The old man asks.

'I will help you,' the woman offers. Taking the containers, the Old Man had tied to the cart, Bassem and the woman collect the precious water. Containers filled, Bassem puts his face under the pipe and drinks. Wiping his mouth, he notices someone is waiting for a drink. She sits on a partly destroyed slab. She wears a dirt-stained, blood-spattered long white coat. Under the coat—green trousers and shirt. There is a stethoscope around her neck. In the last week, she has seen one thousand deaths that haunt her nightly in her dreams. Bassem notices the right coat arm is ripped across a shoulder, unveiling a flesh wound.

'Are you okay? Can we help you,' Bassem offers.

The doctor smiles: 'You are a kind boy.' she says.

'We will help you. Where are you going?' asks Bassem.

'I am heading to the Dar Al Salam Hospital in Khan Younis.'

The Old Man has walked over for a drink. He interrupts: 'God willing, join us. The hospital is on the Salah Al Deen Road on our way to Rafah.' The Old Man walks away and looks around for a place to stop and rest for the night. He sees a small clearing off the main street but away from any standing building. He knows the night brings the horror of the bombs and buildings are not safe.

'Bassem, go find wood or anything that burns,' says the Old Man. Bassem jumps off the cart and disappears. The group huddles around a fire. The Old Man brings a pot from the bottom of the cart and a small bag of rice. 'It is a good thing we found some water,' he says. 'It is not much, but God willing, it will nourish our weak bodies.'

'That was good,' says Bassem. 'That rice is better than anything I have ever eaten.' The Old Man smiles.

Bassem turns to the Doctor: 'What happened to your arm?'

The doctor looks to the Old Man. He nods his approval.

'I work at the Indonesian hospital. It was surrounded by the soldiers. I was coming out of the operating theatre with a colleague, and we walked past a window. That's when the shots rang out. One bullet grazed my shoulder. My colleague, my friend, was shot dead. May God keep him in his heart . . . Where are you going, Bassem? Is this your grandfather?'

‘No. He is my friend. He knows all about this place and he is taking me to Rafah. We were bombed. My family got away and couldn’t find me, so I am on the way to Rafah to be with them.’

The doctor looks to the Old Man for confirmation. He looks away.

The woman breaks in to the conversation: ‘Where do you come from?’ she asks the Old Man.

‘I am from Nazla,’ he says.

‘No, no. I mean, where are you really from?’

The Old Man sighs. ‘I am from everywhere and nowhere.’

The woman presses.

‘Okay, okay. I am from Deir Yassin. I was seven. Y0ur age Bassem. We thought we were safe when the war broke out. We were neutral you know. There were many paramilitary groups all over the place in those days, but for us there were two: the Irgun and the Lehi. They came on the village one afternoon. They killed anyone they found. They burned our houses. I escaped, but my mother and father were killed. I had no brothers and sisters. It was a massacre.’

The Old Man is emotional for a minute, then says: ‘A kind old man brought me to Gaza on a cart like this . . . Bassem, do you know of the al Nakba?’

‘Yes, I saw it in a book given to me by one of my grandparents for my birthday.’

‘Well, Bassem, it means “great catastrophe”. Our people, our land—the land owned by our ancestors was violently stolen from us. Hundreds of thousands of people were forced from their homes. Some of us went east to Jordon, others to the West Bank. Others, north to Lebanon. Me, I came to be in Gaza.

‘Okay,’ said the old man, changing the subject ‘We need to rest as best we can.’

The sound of gunfire and continual bombing in the near distance made resting difficult for everyone. They eventually fell sleep.

Morning has come and so have the soldiers. The Old Man is frantic. He shakes the woman, the doctor, and Bassem: ‘Wake up, wake up!We must be going, we need to leave now. The soldiers are coming. They are just up the road.’

The sounds of gun fire fill the air. The loud mechanical sound of the Merkava tanks bring fear. People run everywhere. Car horns honk, people scream. There is a sense of urgency. The Old Man looks to the passengers: ‘Be quick! I know that sound.’

The pot and containers are quickly collected; the passengers mount the cart. The Old Man taps the donkey and the cart lurches forward. The traffic is heavy, and the constant stops make for little progress. High in the sky a small plane buzzes.

'Look!' says Bassem. 'It is one of those small drone planes.'

The old man taps the donkey multiple times to increase its gait. 'Hold on everyone,' he says. The cart lurches forward, snaking its way between cars and people. The Old Man fears these planes. Everyone looks up wondering when the bombs will fall.

Then, out of the sky they fall.

'Is it snowing?' asks Bassem. Thousands and thousands of small white pieces of paper float in the air. Some spin as they fall: others glide back and forth; others are taken away by the light breeze. The Old Man looks up. He has seen this many times before. Bassem jumps off the cart and picks one up off the ground. Others on the road scramble to grab their piece of floating paper. Bassem climbs back onto the cart and reads the message written on the paper.

> *This area will be bombed. It is not safe. You must go to Khan Younis where you will be safe. You have two hours.*

'Two hours?' the doctor exclaims. 'Look!'

Thirty soldiers appear. They walk with three Merkava tanks.

Shots ring out. The tanks fire rounds. They explode to the right and the left. People are killed. Everyone runs everywhere. It is utter mayhem as people run for cover. Soldiers snipe at anything that moves. Bassem shrieks. The donkey rears up, frightened. The Old Man jumps to the ground to calm the donkey. More shots ring out--another round from a tank. It hits the wall of a building, sending debris in the air that lands on the cart and the passengers. Bullets ricochet all around them. The passengers jump off the cart and take refuge underneath it.

To the Doctor, 'I will calm the donkey, you take the lead,' says the Old Man to the doctor. 'Hurry, hurry!' he yells. Reluctantly, the doctor climbs on the cart. The soldiers continue shooting. The Old Man is hit. He falls to the ground.

Bassem has no idea how it happened on that day. Something inside him exploded and with the courage of Yasser Arafat at the Battle of Karameh, he ran the gauntlet of bullets to help the Old Man.

The Old Man sees him: 'Bassem, hold the donkey, hold the donkey!'

The soldiers enter a building. It's a lucky break. The Old Man gets up.

'Praise Allah,' he says. 'God willing we will get to safety in Khan Younis.'

The doctor jumps off the cart to tend to the Old Man. 'You are badly grazed,' she says. 'We will have to take care of that at the Dar Al Salam Hospital.'

'It's okay, it is just a scratch.' He says, smiling. 'They have given me worse.'

The passengers reassemble on the cart. The Old Man taps the donkey and the cart lurches forward.

On the horizon: Khan Younis.

Smoke rises from buildings on fire.

'I thought it was a safe place,' said Bassem. 'They said it was a safe place to go to.' Bassem holds the piece of paper that fell from the sky earlier. 'See, this says it is safe.'

'Nowhere is safe,' says the Old Man. 'My family lived in Khan Younis,' he went on. 'It was 1956. There was a rising, we wanted freedom. They said the people would be held collectively responsible. The soldiers killed over three hundred people going door-to-door, shooting anything that moved. My family fled north.'

The cart and its passengers wind onto the Salah Al Deem Road: it improves with each meter. It has been spared from the bombing and from the excavators sent to destroy the roads. The tanks and the soldiers are left behind. Five miles behind.

The tall green building is a beacon of hope and normality. The doctor smiles at the sight of the Dar Al Salam Hospital. 'You must let me dress that wound, Old Man,' says the doctor.

It was true. He had lost a fair amount of blood by this time, and he was weak. The doctor leads the passengers into the hospital lobby. It was not what the doctor remembered. The lobby is full of injured people. Bloody rags lay here and there. The floor is slippery and red from patients bleeding. Bodies lie everywhere. Wounded children with crushed body parts howl. A woman holds her dead child. A man consoles his son. The doctor is anxious. She surveys the room and sees a familiar face.

'Kashif, is that you?' she yells.

Kashif looks over. 'Yasmin!' He walks over and gives her a hug.

'Kashif, can you look at this wound: the soldiers shot him.'

'Old Man, let's have a look at that . . . This is serious.'

Bassem and the woman walk over to see what is happening.

'Is he going to be alright?' Bassem asks.

‘Don’t worry, little man,’ Kashif says. ‘He needs stitches and the wound cleaned.’ Turning to the Old Man: ‘We are out of pain relief.’ Despite his bravado the Old Man winces for the ages. ‘There, it’s done,’ said Kashif.

‘Okay, doctor,’ the Old Man says. ‘We have to get going. Okay, next stop, Kahn Younis Cemetery.’

The cemetery is busy when they arrive.

The woman opens the box on the cart and picks up the shrouded baby. A large group has gathered further on. Bassem jumps off the cart and pushes through the crowd. Breaking through he sees it. It’s a long, excavated mass grave. Two hundred white-shoaled bodies lie here: the silent martyrs. The woman arrives and looks on.

‘God be with them,’ she says. She joins a steady stream of people who carry shoaled loved ones. One person after the other, one woman after the other, one child after the other, one baby after another: the innocents. The woman gently lays the baby down. She tears up.

May peace be with you, may Allah protect and love you, she says to herself. She pauses and looks down the long trench. *So many, so many, so many*.

Rafah is busy. The traffic is heavy: carts, bikes, all kinds of cars and trucks, people walking, people resting. The pavements are unusable given the tents—hundreds of tents. It seemed like the whole world is visiting, the whole of the Gaza world. The Old Man pulls over and talks to someone from the Red Crescent. He returns to the cart.

‘Bassem, there is a tent area over that hill. We will go there and find the UNRWA tent. They may be able to help us.’

The Old Man takes the cart off the road, driving it through one of the last empty grass areas. He reaches the summit of the small hill. Bassem and the Old Man jump of the cart and walk to the top and look out. They stand together, neither speaks. In the small valley below: thousands of tents.

‘We will never find them,’ Bassem says.

The Old Man spots the UNWRA tent. ‘There, the UNWRA tent,’ he says.

The Old Man walks with the donkey. The hill is too steep. Reaching the bottom, on the cart, they reach the UNWRA tent.

‘We have come from Gaza City. This boy was left behind. He is looking for his parents,’ the Old Man says.

An UNRAW worker sits them down. ‘There are thousands of people here. People from all over Gaza. As to the whereabouts of your parents . . . well . . .’

‘What should we do?’ asks Bassem.

‘There is a group of tents to the left. Many children are there who are parentless. It might be good to go there. The parents may come by.’

‘These people will look after you, Bassem. Come, let’s go find those tents.’

The Old Man lifts Bassem off the cart at the tent door.

Bassem tears up. ‘Can’t you stay?’ he asks.

‘I am needed Bassem.’ With that, the Old Man taps the donkey and starts away.

Bassem turns, he looks in the tent. He can’t believe his eyes.

‘Da, da, da!’ His dad sees him and runs to his boy.

‘Oh Bassem, Bassem!’ He picks his son up, kissing him everywhere.

In the distance the Old Man turns and looks. Smiles.

Bassem points: ‘The Old Man brought me here.’

‘What was his name?’ his father asks.

‘He called himself Palestine.’

They both look. The Old Man vanishes before them.