

It is morning and I hear the jangling of two sets of handcuffs as the prison guard approaches us. He throws them to the ground, clanging against the concrete floor, and a sense of calm settles over the room. There's one bundle to tie the hands, and another, with longer chains, to tie the legs. Eight pairs of handcuffs of each kind, for seven prisoners.

I stand with the others in the middle of a small yard, ringed by holding cells, and try to lean against the wall. I am tired of being moved between prisons since we started the open hunger strike. I gather my energy and try to take in as much air as possible in preparation for a journey that will last hours, inside an iron box that in this heat quickly turns into an unbearable furnace.

Once he is finished handcuffing us, the guard heads off for the prisoner transport truck. And then I hear a voice emanating out of the cell behind me...

“Uncle, give me a cigarette.”

I peer into the cell's darkness but cannot see anyone, and for a moment I think I am delirious. Then the voice issues out of the cell again, this time louder and more desperate. "Uncle, my uncle, give me a cigarette!" I stare into the cell again and call to the voice.

"Where are you?"

"I'm here, down here!"

Hunching down, I peer through the slot in the bottom of the door through which prisoners receive their food and have their hands tied before being let out of the cell, and I see a child, not older than twelve years old. A child asking for a cigarette.

I didn't know how to respond to him. Should I give him a cigarette, I wondered, or should I educate him about the dangers of smoking in the way that adults do with children outside prison? Adults, adults...and then I am struck by the fact I am including myself in this category. By the fact that he called me "uncle." Am I so old already?

I was suddenly terrified by being addressed in this manner. It was the first time during my 26 years of imprisonment that I have met someone speaking to me across such a distance of age. In prisons we are used to not addressing each other in this way, with social honorifics marking our age. Regardless of what our age differences may be, we all address each other as “my brother” or “comrade” and, more recently, “fighter.”

I considered the child, empathizing with his craving for the cigarette. The craving is not for the rush of nicotine but for what the cigarette connotes. Frightened, a mere child in the harsh world of the prison, he wanted to become a man quickly. Meanwhile, it is now my desire to turn back time so that I can again become a child, at least a young man, the way I was when I entered prison more than a quarter of a century ago.

Both of us were fearful. I was fearful for the time that had passed and he was fearful of what had not yet passed. I was afraid of the past and he was afraid of the future. I was afraid of having lived a life that had burnt out in prison, and he was afraid of what the cigarette that was now lodged between his lips could not burn away. The cigarette became something else after he had exhaled and so did he, standing tall now on his toes, appearing now older than his age. The ember glow became a lantern in his hand, chasing away the darkness of the cell, dispelling his fear and loneliness.

He was not smoking but trying to dispel the image of a child that so incontrovertibly clung to him. In the world of the prison, in the face of the cruelty of its guards, childhood is a burden. Knowing that he was to face years of imprisonment, he was seeking to rid himself of his vulnerability and innocence, for which he clearly had no further use—it having made no difference to the judge that had sentenced him to four years.

The guard came back for us, picked the eighth pair of handcuffs up from the concrete floor, and barked at the child to push his hands through the slot in the door. So the child pushed them through still holding the cigarette between his fingers. The guard shouted at him to drop the cigarette and then muttered to himself in Hebrew, bemoaning the sight of a child smoking. Nevertheless he proceeded with the handcuffing, remaining unmoved by the sight of those small hands in handcuffs. Because the child's wrists were too small, however, he struggled several times to secure the handcuffs, and finally decided to use them to chain the boy's legs.

When he was moved out of the cell, in preparation for the transportation, I looked at him and imagined that he was my own son, such as fate had not yet wanted to bring into the world. I wanted with every strain of my being to hug him, and as these paternal feelings surged through me I felt an overwhelming desire to cry. But I hid my feelings. I did not want to shatter the image of the man that he wanted now to become. I walked over to him, so as to shake his hand as a comrade and a rival, asking,

“How are you, fighter?”

story by Walid Daqqa

translated by poet and playwright Dalia Taha

THE MARTYR, WRITER, AND REVOLUTIONARY **WALID DAQQA (1961-2024)**



Hailing from the Palestinian town of Baqa Al-Gharbiyye, Walid Daqqa was among the most prominent intellectual figures in the Palestinian prisoners' movement, penning books and essays from behind prison walls that went on to influence generations of Palestinian political thought. Daqqa was incarcerated a total of 38 years, until his martyrdom in April 2024

During his imprisonment, Daqqa conceived a child with his wife by smuggling sperm out of jail. He was denied the right to raise his daughter, or to see his dying parents. In 2022, Daqqa was diagnosed with myelofibrosis — a rare form of bone marrow cancer that disrupts the body's normal production of blood cells. Israel repeatedly delayed his treatment and rejected his request for an urgently needed bone marrow transplant, murdering Walid through medical negligence.