

**Excerpt from THE OPEN DOOR by Latifa al-Zayyat**

From behind the tombs, heads rose, and hands settled in wary readiness onto rifles and machine guns. But the signal had not yet come. The airplanes released more parachutists behind the wall of the airport, and the parachutes ballooned, one after another, white, like abscesses full of pus.

In their defense positions at al-Gabbana, the forces fidgeted, hands shaking with impatient rage on the guns. But still the signal did not come. Hundreds of anxious eyes moved between the commander and the opening parachutes spread across the air. The commander sensed the heavy anxiety around him; he could almost hear the mute question that choked the air—the question asked over and over by the individuals of the popular resistance, and even by the trained army personnel who were accustomed to obeying orders without question.

What are we waiting for?

The commander went on waiting. Not a muscle in his face moved. Layla wiped the sweat off her brow and whispered to Isam, “What are we waiting for?” Isam put out a shaking hand and patted hers, smiling at her in his shy, half-smiling way. They felt close, as if the waiting that trembled in each one’s depths had erased the chasm between them, when Layla had insisted on following Isam to his post and, in front of his commander, had embarrassed him into acquiescing. She fidgeted anxiously now, fear creeping through her. It was not death that frightened her, no longer. What was she? A drop in an ocean, and the ocean would surge whether or not she was there. If she were to die, she would be one of thousands who had died; if she lived, she would still be one of millions whose right to live had been plundered. No, it was not death that frightened her, nor the enemy who was hidden there behind the airport wall. Her major enemy crouched here, deep inside, waiting to attack. She closed her eyes against that weakness and pressed her lips together tightly so that no tremble could penetrate. Once again she was experiencing that overpowering desire to look out for those around her and to feel that she was one with them, part of a larger whole. She straightened a bit behind the grave that shielded her and raised her head cautiously. Before her eyes stretched rows of heads, some covered by helmets, others bare, some were black mingled with white, others very young. Her body grew slack again as she watched this huge mass of heads. When she turned to look behind, again she saw face after face, some tense, others calm, row after row of massed faces. When her eyes came to one face she sucked in her breath and held it, seeing in her mind’s eye Adil digging the grave of his beloved, throwing his head back, in his eyes that look she would never forget. For it was the same expression—the same blend of love, fierce loathing, challenge, determination, and assured readiness—she now saw in the eyes of this man. Adil? She took a deep breath and swept her eyes across the faces. Every face was different but now she saw something that had escaped her notice before,

the same look she had seen in Adil’s eyes. She turned to gaze forward again, exhilarated. She felt strong. She was no longer alone. She was with them now. With them, and the love that pounded in their hearts was in hers, too, and so was the loathing, and something of the calm, assured preparedness. Before Layla appeared her own image, bending to snatch the oar as it sank into the Nile. Yes, at the right moment that stronger person

hidden inside would push open the door, would go out calmly and coolly, would act wisely, exactly as she must. Yes, when the moment came the miracle would happen. Her eyes swam with a vision too lovely to bear.

Noticing her tears, Isam attributed them to fear. “Go back, Layla. The door, the gate—it’s just over there. Crawl over to the gate.” His voice became softer. “You’re a woman, no one will blame you, this isn’t your place, after all.”

Layla felt dizzy, as if she were looking down from a high tower. Deep inside she felt that trembling helplessness again. Could she? Could she do it? Could she stay, could she keep going? When she was a woman? A woman, and that was all. Where would the strength come from? Where?

The enemy airplanes were releasing a new wave of parachutists into the airport grounds, within range of the fire of the armed defense forces in al-Gabbana. At the same time, the wind began to howl. Strong, angry gusts hurled into the air a yellow curtain of sand, as the airplanes dropped load after load inside the airport. The wind carried some of them far, in the direction of the neighboring area, toward civilian homes.

The commander gave the signal.

“Hit him! Give it to him!” It was the quavering voice of an old woman, hunched on the ground, staring straight ahead; the child she held in her arms wailed. A heavy rock in the hand of a young woman sailed at the head of a parachutist as he tried to get his balance. He fell to the ground, his skull shattered. The young woman stood straight, putting up her left hand to wipe away the sweat. But before her hand could touch her forehead she dashed forward, screaming. She had noticed more parachutists falling, a swarm of bats. Her shout reached other women, inside their huts preparing food for their children, for husbands and sons who would return—or would not. The scream told them that the danger their sons and husbands had gone to meet was knocking at their doors. The wooden slats were flung wide open and women came out armed with the weapons they had ready. Necks of broken bottles, kitchen knives, heavier blades, pestles. The high-pitched screaming reached the children standing in awe and curiosity before a hut that sat alone far to the right. They scattered, terrified. Inside the hut a woman tried to get up, fear on her face. She bent double as the pain that had gnawed at her since the morning came again. The hands of the midwife, gripping the rim of a pan of boiling water that she had been trying to lift from the burner, stopped. She straightened, ran to the door, paused to glance around. The woman inside moaned, sweat pouring from her forehead onto her eyes.

“What is it?” her voice was choked. The midwife went back inside, her face grim, snatched two rags from the floor, and raised the boiling water. She strode to the door as the young woman screamed in despair and pain. She crawled after the midwife, the sweat almost blinding her, her body convulsing in rapid contractions. At the threshold she clutched the midwife’s ankle, muttering, “Don’t leave me, don’t leave me alone.” But she could not go on, for the pain attacked her again, sharper this time, unbearable. She felt something round and hard almost pulling from her body and muttered, “I can’t, I’m done for.” Still at the threshold, the midwife turned to look at the young woman flat on the dirt floor behind her. Their eyes met. In the midwife’s eyes the young woman saw reflected what was happening outside, she saw the death that threatened her, that endangered the life pulsing in her belly. Her grip on the midwife’s leg relaxed; she curled up and broke out in sobs. The midwife left

the hut, steam rising from the boiling water. The woman raised her head, tears standing in her eyes, and began to slither across the floor to her mattress. Carefully she lay down, pulled up a white sheet, and covered her body.

It was her first baby. She had never done this before, but she would do it. She would give birth, by herself, no matter what was happening around her. The child was there inside of her and wanted to come out. All she had to do was to help. She must relax, but that seemed impossible. A scream of fear from outside jolted her body; the wail of a child, a whispered “there is no god but God,” a wait. Steps thrusting forward, calls, a clattering on tin rooftops as if horses galloped there, the voice of the bent old woman trembling in the air. “Hit him! Give it to him!” A moan, the howl of a dog, black smoke curling into the hut. Drops of water hissing on the fire, screams of pain, a silence harsher than the noise. A group pushing, colliding with the wooden walls, shots, the voice of the old woman ringing out, a huge explosion that shook the hut until she thought it would collapse over her. And then a wait, harsher than the explosion.

The face of the young woman, lying on the bed, her body convulsing. She bit on the hem of the white sheet, balled up in her mouth. She must . . . she must . . . relax . . . or the child would die in her belly. She ripped the sheet from her mouth and wiped the sweat off her face. She tried, with the endurance only a birthing mother knows, to concentrate all her attention on the child threatened with death inside her body.

Little by little the wailing, the fire, all of the moaning and smoke and frightened steps and long groans and suppressed sounds of victory disappeared. The outside world disappeared. There was no longer anything in her consciousness but this child, this child who wanted to come out, into life. As the children slipped from their hiding places, as the older ones gathered the butcher’s knives, the kitchen knives, and the ropes used to hunt down the parachuting soldiers, as the women dried their sweat, their heads still dizzy, as if they had awakened suddenly after a frightening dream, before counting their losses and gains, before realizing exactly what they had just done, the air carried a thin, broken wail that soon became an unbroken cry, stronger, clear, a ululation of joy, the scream of life.

Layla screamed, a ululation of joy. The human masses pushed her forward toward the airport. The second wave of parachutists had been mowed down on the airport grounds and the remnants of the first wave were in retreat before the Egyptian forces. British airplanes hovered over the spot where the two forces engaged but could get no nearer and withdrew, powerless. A battery of explosions in quick succession erupted in scattered parts of the city, and fires broke out in the petrol depots, in homes, along the city streets. The English forces tried to slip the encirclement, tried to return to their hiding places behind the walls of the airport. The Egyptian forces pressed on to block their escape. The ground was exploding—storms of sand, fire flaming from the guns, a flood of shots leaving big circles in the sand, white smoke, green spots gleaming, reflected in people’s eyes. Bodies falling, the dead, the wounded crawling behind the lines, people pushing forward to take their places.

Among the dead lay Isam; among the wounded, Layla. The circle tightened around the English soldiers and the circle of fire tightened on the city. The sun was setting, and darkness settled on the scene. A flame, a flickering light, kept the darkness at bay, and revealed from afar the enemy in bedraggled retreat.