

The Land of Sad Oranges

By Ghassan Kanafani

Translated with an introduction by [Nejmeh Khalil-Habib](#).

Introduction

Ghassan Kanafani was born in Akka, Palestine, in 1936. He died when an explosive device planted by an Israeli operative, detonated under his car on July 8th, 1972. His wife Annie, a Danish national, described the event as such: “... *We used to go shopping together every Saturday morning, on that day he accompanied his niece Lamees. A few minutes after they left, I heard the sound of a huge explosion. I ran but only saw remanence of our exploded small car. Lamees was a few meters away from the spot, but I could not find Ghassan. I hoped to find him injured, but I only found his left leg. I was devastated, and our son Fayez, started knocking his head against the wall. Little Layla was crying: Baba...Baba...I gathered his remains, the Beiruti escorted him to his last resting place at the Shuhada Cemetery where he was buried next to Lamees who loved him and died with him.*”¹

Kanafani is a prominent literary figure in Arabic Literature. His works were translated to many different languages. During his short life he enriched the Arabic library by contributing a valuable collection of writings, varying from novel to short story to literary research and political essays. “The Land of the Sad Orange” is one of his early stories. It depicts the impact of deracination on the Palestinians after Israeli forces took over their country in 1948. In this story Kanafani mixes artistic reality with history. Though the story tells the suffering of a middle-class family, it is exemplary of the experience of thousands of displaced families, who suffered the humiliation of leaving their country and living in poverty, following the 1948 defeat of the Arab armies and the creation of the state of Israel.

The Land of Sad Orange

When we left Yaffa to Akka, I felt no agony. It was like going from a city to another for a holiday. For several days, nothing painful happened. I was happy because this move gave me a nice break from school.

Things started to look differently when Akka was attacked.

That night was hard on you and me.

The women were praying, men were bitter and silent. You and me and all the kids our age didn't understand what was going on. But that night we started to gather the threads of the story. When the Israeli soldiers left, after threatening and swearing, a big van stopped in front of our home, and few things (mainly beds and blankets) were thrown into it. I was standing with my back against the wall of the old house, when I saw your mother rise up into the van, then your aunt, followed by the little ones. Your father picked you up and threw you over the furniture, in the same way, he lifted me over his head and threw me in the iron box at the top of the van. There was your brother, Riad, sitting in silence. Before having myself settled properly, the car started moving and Akka started to fade little by little, through the ascending, zigzag road that led to Ra'ss-

Ennakoura.²

The sky was cloudy, a touch of cold air chilled my body. Riad sat calmly with his legs propped on top of the box, his back resting against the furniture, staring at the sky. I was sitting in silence, holding my knees by my arms and putting my chin between my legs... All along the way there were orange groves. A sense of fear and anxiety spread over everyone. The car moved with difficulty over the wet soil, and from a distance, we heard the sound of gun shots as if bidding us farewell.

When *Ra'ss-Ennakoura* appeared, the car stopped. The women came down from among the belongings and went to a farmer who was squatting in front of a basket of oranges. They picked up the oranges, and we heard them lamenting. At that moment I realised that oranges are something precious, and that they are dear to our hearts. The women bought the fruits and went back to the car. Your father stretched out his arm, took an orange, stared at it silently, then burst into tears, just like a miserable, little child.

In *Ra'ss-Ennakoura*, our car stopped among many other cars. The men gave up their guns to the police officers who were there for that reason. When our turn came, the table was full of hand and machine guns and I watched the long line of cars enter Lebanon, leaving long behind them the land of orange. I started wailing. Your mother was still looking in silence at the oranges. In your father's eyes were the reflection of all the orange trees he had left behind for the Israelis, all the clean orange trees he had planted one by one, glittered in his face. He failed to stop the tears that filled up in his eyes, when he came to face the head police officer.

When we reached Saida³, in the afternoon, we became refugees.

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The road absorbed us among many other things. Your father suddenly became older than before, he looked as if he hadn't sleep for a long time. He was standing among the belongings, which were thrown over the side of the road. I knew if I were to say any word he would explode in my face: "Damn your father! Damn you!" These two swears were clear on his face. Even I, who was brought up in a catholic conservative school, at that moment, doubted that God wanted to make his people happy. I doubted that God could hear and see everything. All the paintings that show God loving the children and smiling at them looked like a lie, among other lies told by people who build conservative schools for which they can charge extra fees. I was sure that the God we knew in Palestine, left Her as well, and that He was refugee somewhere in this world, and that He was incapable of solving his own problems, and that we, the refugees, who are sitting on the footpath, were waiting for a new destiny to find us a solution. We were responsible to find a solution ourselves. We were responsible for finding a roof over our heads. The pain struck the head of the naive young boy.

Night was awful, and the dark started to fall, bit by bit. I was frightened... thinking that I am going to spend the night on the pavement filled my spirit with dreadful nightmares. No one was there to calm me down. I couldn't find any person to turn to. Your father's rigid silence raised more fear in my heart, and the oranges in your mother's hand ignited fire in my chest. Everyone was silent, everyone was looking at the black road, hoping that some solution would materialize from around the corner and take us to a certain shelter. Then destiny came. It came in the form of your uncle, who had arrived in town a few days earlier. He was our destiny.

Your uncle wasn't a man of real values, and when he found himself on the road, he

became more savage. He went to a house where a Jewish family lived, opened the door, threw the content of the room away and cried to their face: "Go to Palestine". For sure they didn't go to Palestine, but, intimidated by his frustration and anger, they went to another room leaving him to enjoy a roof and a floor.

Your uncle led us to that room; we were heaped with his family and his belongings. We slept on the floor and were covered by the men's coats, In the morning, when we woke up, the men were still sitting on the chairs. The tragedy started to penetrate through our bodies...all our bodies.

We didn't stay in Saida long, just three days. Your uncle's room wasn't wide enough even for half of us. Your mother asked your father either to find himself a job or to return to the oranges. Your father exploded in her face. His voice was trembling with rage. Then our family problems began. The happy, strong-bonded family we had once been was left behind along with the orange groves, the old house, and the martyrs.

I didn't know from where your father got the money. I knew that he had sold your mother's jewelry, which he had bought her once, to make her happy and proud of him. But the jewelry wasn't enough to solve our problems, other resources were needed. Had your father borrowed any money? Had he sold any belongings that he brought with him without telling us? I couldn't tell. But I still remember that we moved to a certain suburb of Saida, and there, your father sat on the high rock and smiled for the first time. He was waiting for the 15th of May to return with the victorious armies.

The 15th of May came after a bitter period of time. Exactly, at twelve o'clock he nudged me with his foot while I was still sleeping, and said in a voice thundering with great expectation: get up, go see the Arab armies⁴ entering Palestine. I woke up in a frenzy and we ran bare footed, all along the hills, in the middle of the night, till we reached the street which was a full kilometre away from the village. All of us youngsters, and the elderly, ran breathlessly like idiots. We saw the lights of the cars beaming from a distance, travelling towards *Ra'ss-Ennakoura*.

When we reached the main street, we felt the cold, but your father's crazy shouting made us forget about everything. He started to run after the cars like a small boy. He waved at them. He shouted in a broken voice until he went out of breath, but he kept running after the cars like a small child. We ran beside him, shouting like him, as the admirable soldiers looked toward us from under their helmets with silence and stiffness. We were all breathless, though your father kept running in spite of his fifty years. He was throwing cigarettes to the soldiers. He kept running and we kept following like a small herd of goats.

The procession of cars vanished suddenly and we returned home, tired and breathless. Your father became silent and speechless. When a passing car flashed its lights at his face, tears were spread all over his cheeks.

After that day, life passed slowly. We were deceived by announcements and by the bitter truth. Grimness started to invade our faces. Your father found it difficult to talk about Palestine or the happy days in his orange groves, or his houses.

We were the walls of his tragedy and cunning enough to know the meaning behind his early morning shouting: “go to the hill and never come back before noon.” We knew that he wanted to distract us from asking for breakfast.

Things began to deteriorate. Any simple issue was enough to ignite your father’s anger. When one of us asked him something, he would jump as if electrocuted and then scan us with his eyes. A damned idea festered in his mind. He stood up suddenly, as if he’d just found a solution to his dilemma. Out of feeling that he was strong enough to put an end to his tragedy, and out of the horror one feels taking a disastrous action, he started talking nonsense. He started turning left and right, as if looking for something we couldn’t see. Then he jumped up on a box which we brought with us from Akka. He emptied its contents in a hysterical, frightening way. As if led by her maternal intuition, your mother must have grasped what was going in his mind. Suddenly, she started to push us away from the house and asked us to run to the hill.

Against her will, we stuck our faces to the window, and stuck our little ears to its wooden frame. Frightened, we heard your father saying: I will kill them and kill myself. I want to finish it. I want to...I want...

We started peeping through the cracks of the door, we saw your father splayed on the ground, breathing heavily, gnawing his teeth. Your mother was watching him from a distance. Her face was full of horror.

At First, I didn’t understand what was going on. I remember that the moment I saw a black pistol by his side, I started running as fast as I could, as if escaping a Phantom which had appeared suddenly. I ran away from the house, toward the hills. The further I ran from the house, the further I felt myself moving away from my childhood. I started to realise that our lives will never be the same: things were no longer as simple as they once were, and life was no longer something you eagerly looked forward to. The situation had reached the point of having a shot to the head as the only thing a father could offer his children. So from now and on, we had to watch our step, behave ourselves, keep quiet when father speaks about his problems. We wouldn’t ask for food no matter how hungry we got, we will show obedience by shaking our heads and smiling when he shouts: “go to hills and don’t come back till noon.”

Your father was still there shaking with fever that evening, long after the darkness had spread over the house. Your mother sat beside him. Our eyes glistened like cats’ eyes in the dark. Our lips were sealed as if they were never opened, as if they were remnants of an old injury.

We were heaped up there, withdrawn from our childhood, away from the land of oranges...oranges that died, an old farmer once told us, if watered by strange hands. Your father was still sick, thrown down on his bed, and your mother was gnawing tragic tears that never left her eyes. I snuck into the room, an outcast. I saw your father’s face quiver with broken rage, and I saw, at the same time, that black pistol on the low table. Near it was orange.

The orange was wrinkled and dry.

¹ For more on this, see my article “Ghassan Kanafani, the Rebellion Born in the Womb of Despair” in *Joussour*, February 1999, 48-54.

² A Lebanese check point situated on the border of Lebanon and Palestine

³ A main city in South Lebanon

⁴ Groups of Arab armies, from the surrounding countries, entered Palestine, that day, to defend its people against the Israeli Hagana Militias. Against all expectations, they were defeated and the Israeli state was announced.

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