

“*Before We Say Goodbye* can do infinitely more for the peace between the two people than hundreds of political goodwill talks I have heard.”

**Ali Rashid, former head of the Palestinian delegation in Italy**

“*Before We Say Goodbye* gives us a rare look and a wonderful opportunity to get to know reality from the bird’s-eye view, with all its complexity and many faces. It does not embellish it. It does not blame or judge, nor does it get tangled in political accusations of who is better off or who is hurting more. It mourns, it despairs and it hurts, but it is brutally honest. And that is where its importance lies. That is where its magic lies.”

**Vered Cohen-Barzilay, Director of Communications and Publications, Amnesty International Israel**



# BEFORE WE SAY GOODBYE

GABRIELLA AMBROSIO

Translated by Alastair McEwen



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*Inspired by the true story of  
Ayat al-Akhras and Rachel Levy*



MAIN CHARACTERS:

*Abdelin*, 38, Dima's aunt and her fiancé's mother;  
Palestinian

*Abraham*, 59, a security guard; an Israeli Jew who was  
breast-fed by an Arab woman

*Adum* a haulage contractor; Palestinian

*Dima*, 18, top of her class at school; Palestinian

*Faris*, 20, Dima's cousin and fiancé, a tiler; Palestinian

*Ghassan*, 23, an unemployed Palestinian; an explosives  
expert

*Leila Oder* a star journalist with Arab television station  
al-Arabiya

*Lia*, 37, Abraham's wife

*Marwad* and *Safiya* and their sons, *Khaldun* and *Ibrahim*,  
live across the way from Dima; Palestinian

*Michael*, 18, Myriam's "American" friend; Israeli

*Myriam*, 18, spends some time at school and some time  
on the hill; an Israeli Jewess

*Nathan*, 19, Myriam's brother, doing his military service  
at the Erez checkpoint; an Israeli Jew

*Rizak*, 25, Ghassan's acquaintance and owner of an old  
red van; Palestinian

*Said*, 54, Dima's father, a foreman with an Israeli  
construction company; Palestinian

*Sara*, 61, a clerk with the company that employs  
Abraham; an Israeli Jewess

*Shoshi*, 45, Myriam and Nathan's mother; an Israeli Jewess

*Vered*, 50, a pacifist and Shoshi's friend; an Israeli Jewess

EXTRAS:

Israeli workers at the site where Said works

Inhabitants of Dheisheh, a Palestinian refugee camp

Soldiers from the Israeli army

Workers in the mortuary



JERUSALEM, 29 MARCH 2002



7 A.M.




## DIMA DOESN'T LISTEN TO LEILA AND GOES OUT

It was technically springtime on the day that Dima got up from her mattress after a long yet strangely brief and confused night. She switched on the television as she did on any other day, and the journalist Leila Oder appeared before her as she did on any other day. Leila was giving a news item which Dima didn't understand. So she lit the gas ring, and since it wasn't just any other day, the smell of the gas slipped straight into her veins and began to flow slowly through her blood.


Leila Oder didn't take her eyes off Dima that morning as she spoke to her from the al-Arabiya news desk. Now *she* was the spectator, watching Dima drinking her coffee, which slid down slowly, ever so slowly, and blended with the blood and the gas inside her.

Everything would be slow that morning, slow and dull to avoid getting hurt. Even Dima's smile was slow



and dull as she turned back from the door to embrace everything and everyone in one glance, as if to photograph them, and to remain photographed there herself, all in one piece – head, arms and feet. Feet that did not move from there, yet they eventually did and finally carried her out.

It had rained throughout the night and the street was a sea of mud all the way to school. Dima's shoes became heavier and heavier, sinking into the mud, and she didn't think about Leila. She trudged through the mud with her mouth wide open. And that's how she was when she came across Jihan, who would later say, "Her expression wasn't that of someone who wants to talk. So we said hello and I went on my way."



#### MYRIAM IS IN THE COMPANY OF MICHAEL

At that same moment, Myriam found herself with Michael. They were on the hill of Tiberias, breathing deeply; the air slipped under their skin as the sun traced squares on the fruit trees. They were shouting into the distance, no one could hear them, when the alarm clock rang. She would have switched it off and carried on dreaming, had it not been the day of her school photography exhibition.

All the trees of Jerusalem were waiting for her, lined up in rows behind glass panes, hanging from the walls

of the school corridors. Olive trees, fig trees, grapevines, pines, acacias, convolvuluses; full suns on the horizon, gnarled boughs and strong boughs. Perhaps this was why she had dreamed that Michael was shouting with her up on a hill. This morning her trees at the school were forming an avenue along the corridor all the way down to Michael's corner. She closed her eyes again and imagined that the last few trees bowed towards Michael's photo.

She smiled at the thought, and found the strength to get out of bed. She went into the bathroom, where she looked in the mirror and reminded herself that Michael was dead.

"Sooner or later you'll have to come to terms with it," said her mother when she saw Myriam come into the kitchen with a lost look.

"I'm gonna," said Myriam in her funny English, taking her jacket and going out.

Her mother was left alone.

#### ABRAHAM GETS UP

In another house the phone rang at seven, while Abraham and Lia were still in bed, his arm round her shoulder, one of her long legs over his back.

"Did I wake you, Abraham?" laughed old Sara on the other end of the line.

“You know it’s always a pleasure to hear from you, Sara,” replied Abraham as he stifled a yawn.

“They’re asking for two replacements today,” said Sara, “one for the Artists’ Restaurant and one for the supermarket in Kiryat Yovel.”

“If I can choose, I’ll go for the supermarket,” he said. “I don’t feel like working late tonight.”

“Of course, Abraham, that’s precisely why I called you. Only you’ll have to hurry – the supermarket opens at eight.”

“I’m already up,” he replied, sitting on the edge of the bed and feeling for his slippers with swollen feet.

Lia heaved herself up from the other side with a yawn, grabbed her dressing gown and headed for the bathroom. “I can see you’re in a rush; I’ll make you some coffee,” she promised, tidying her hair with her hands before closing the door behind her.

#### GHASSAN IS ALREADY ON THE ROAD

Ghassan had got up before everyone that morning, and it was still raining when he went out. His one brown eye and one blue eye glittered beneath the tiny droplets on his lashes. In the rain he walked unseen to Rizak’s house, where Rizak gave him a small heavy bag and the keys to the van. Ghassan stowed the bag under the seat, switched on the engine, put the van in gear. As he adjusted the



mirror he first turned it towards him and took a good look at himself. The water was running down his black curls onto his face, which broke into a smile. His heart leaped with a deep satisfaction.

He looked towards the distant city, which still seemed asleep. "Wait a few hours and you'll get your wake-up call," he murmured. He looked at the sky and thought that the fine weather was returning.


Ghassan was twenty-three, and today he felt strong. His only fear was that he might suddenly get one of his terrible migraines. He pressed on the accelerator, and with head held high he drove the van home. A faint smile danced at the corners of his handsome mouth. When he got back, he hid the van as best he could behind the house and took the bag with him. It had stopped raining, and in the distance, in the direction of Jerusalem, the sky was brightening.

Everything seemed under Ghassan's control that morning, even the sun as it broke through the clouds and urged everyone out of their homes to meet their fate.

ON THE STREET DIMA THINKS ABOUT A WINDOW  
ACROSS THE WAY

Meanwhile, Dima continued to make her way through the mud, staring fixedly ahead.

A window into a room across the street had been the



only proof, in the long days of the recent curfew, that the world was still going on. Marwad and Safiya and their children, who were growing up in that room. There was nothing else to do but grow, in those circumstances. And there was nothing else Dima could do but watch them. The street that separated their houses was only a few arm spans wide, and the old broken windows of the Dheisheh refugee camp were not windows with curtains.

On the first day of the curfew little Ibrahim had begun to crawl on all fours. On the fifteenth he took three steps at a run, throwing himself from his mother's arms into his father's. By the twentieth he was moving about with the aid of the sofa. That day he got hold of a piece of soap and with it he rubbed Khaldun, who was ten months older than he was and had the patience of an old man. Together they would fall down and get up, lean against each other and tug each other, pointing to new horizons every time. The world was theirs, the three by two metres of that room. What lay beyond, they would see sooner or later. But there was no hurry. Their voices filled Dima's long days without an outside or an event, without light, without time.

Faris could not reach her from Bethlehem because of the curfew. Their wedding plans, as the exhausted hours gradually dripped from the days, seemed further and further away: perhaps illegitimate. Faris's evening visit was another right that had been eliminated. Another punishment on the way. And there was nothing to do.

There was  
nothing  
to do.

Leila Oder hadn't come to see Dima any more either. While broadcasting the unrest live from the streets, she had been wounded by a rubber bullet and had vanished from the screen, to be replaced by other reporters. But no one was as good as she was at giving the world the news from Palestine. And no one was as capable as she was of looking Dima straight in the eye as she spoke.

Without Faris, without Leila, without school; in a paralysis of action and a deterioration of thought. The window across the street had taken Dima far away. Where there was no difference between yesterday today and tomorrow, where the past was a hole, the present didn't exist and the future was the same; where there were two children who were strong, who were learning, who were growing and who were laughing.

But one day the window had suddenly shut. And everything had begun urgently and unstoppably demanding to settle accounts.

So that morning, Dima stared fixedly ahead, and in front of her now she saw nothing more than a wall. For a moment, she hoped the earth would open up to swallow her and all the walls. Instead she went into school with eyes lowered and headed straight for her desk.

## MYRIAM SKIPS SCHOOL

To get back to Myriam. It's important to know this about her: her trees didn't stop breathing once they were in a photo. On looking carefully, you could see that they didn't even stop growing. Now some had gone beyond the frame, branches suddenly intoxicated by spring.

That was what did not disappoint her about this land: the trees. A miracle among the many – too many – stones and the thick dust and the gusty breath of the desert. A miracle, the trees planted there, growing sturdier by the day. And so Myriam had begun to photograph trees. Framed in a viewfinder, things immediately seemed clearer. A tree was a tree, claiming the right to exist, to remain planted there, peacefully reaching up towards the sky.

It had been a stroke of luck for her the day someone at school had thought of organizing a photography competition. That way, she'd had a pretext to leave school every day and go off alone up onto the hill, which was the only thing she felt like doing at that time. And she had found so much material, unexpectedly even fuller, stronger and more solid in the finished images than when she actually took the shots.

When she had handed in her photos the week before, she had peeked at the other students' entries, and none of them had struck her as up to much – except Ella's. She had photographed all kinds of water: fountains, puddles,

rain, gutters, jets. Myriam had liked those almost as much as her trees.

In any event, Myriam was sure she would do well today. But as she was about to pass through the main school gate, she realized that she was no longer interested in the exhibition at all. So, instead of going into school, she turned once more in the direction of the hill.

She caught a bus. Her mother had said I beg you, please don't ever do that; but it didn't matter, she was fine; she was part of a living, breathing nature.

#### ABRAHAM DAYDREAMS AS HE DODGES THE PUDDLES

By now Abraham was on the road too, but still not entirely awake. This morning he wished for a gentler sun that would carry him away. Plump swarthy arms that would cradle him. A lullaby, an ancient lament. Walking quickly among the puddles towards the supermarket, he sensed those odours those flavours that accent all of which fell upon him at once, and as usual when he least expected it. Like a wave, like an echo. Like a melody. This morning. Arab eyes watching him. They were all around him. He could sense their warm pulsing. A deep pulsing, a dark breathing, a zone of shadow. Inside him. Somewhere they were waiting for him. They were calling him. They were hot on his heels.

Abraham wanted to surrender to it. Slow his pace. He