

A SPECIAL PERSON

Shafts of early morning sunlight streamed through a hole in the roof of the dilapidated, single storey hospital. The illuminated section pinpointed two facing rows of wounded soldiers, lying on stained cots, like bleeding teeth in a gaping mouth. A man with a bandaged head sat next to an open window, smoking a cheroot, ignoring the restless ramblings of his compatriots.

Through heavy eyelids, Armeni glimpsed a doctor, wearing a white suit and hurrying down the channel between the beds, his long jacket open and flapping like the wings of a gull. Waves of pain crashed through Armeni's wrecked limb, sometimes rising to unbearable heights, sometimes abating on an ebbing morphine tide. Gentle hands were slowly unwinding saturated bandages from torn flesh, that only a short while ago had been a muscled, sun-tanned leg. Running in some nightmare.

A concerned and attentive face hovered over the bed and Armeni strained to keep it in focus, feeling comforted by its presence, and fearing it might disappear, asked,

'Am I dead and in Heaven?'

'Hold on, try not to drift off again, I'm here to help you,' a lilting voice was saying as the morphine coursed through veins already saturated with shock.

'I'm hot, so terribly hot. I cannot see you any more,' Armeni cried, distraught at losing sight of the face. The lovely image was melting in a fierce heat, dissolving and turning into a glittering expanse of sea, upon which Armeni's Mama and Papa floated effortlessly. Around them, their dark haired children drifted like sleeping dolphins, salt encrusting their closed eyes. The scene was hazy, viewed as though from a distant shore.

'Hold on,' Mama was calling as she tried to draw closer. Sweat trickled into

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Armeni's eyes, mingling with surf that swirled and foamed with every leaden blink, with every splashing footfall that Mama made. Armeni watched helplessly as the water slowly turned from blue to red.

'Can you hear me? Your name, can you tell me your name?' a soft voice intruded, and to its dulcet tones Armeni slid into saline waters.

Nurse Lesley Johnson addressed the doctor who had arrived at the bedside in a flurry. There was no time for pleasantries,

'Mortar wound to right leg doctor, morphine administered. Lost a lot of blood, keeps passing out. No ID for medical records though, just a photograph of a family group'

The doctor unwound the last layer of sodden bandage, examining the wounds briefly before confirming with a shake of his head what the nurse already knew. He steered Lesley by the elbow, away from the bed, and spoke quietly,

'Looks complex, the bone is severely shattered in several places, I can't be sure yet, but I'm afraid it could be amputation. The surgeon's on his way. Try to keep the patient conscious until we're ready. It's all nothing but bloody waste out here,' he reflected sadly. Lesley watched him flutter away along the ward, like an exhausted migratory bird that knows it will fail to reach dry land.

Armeni longed to drift on the water, but a persistent and reassuringly pleasant sensation was hindering this. Cool hands caressed hair and brow, compassion and warmth oozed from the person watching over the bed, someone determined to coax heavy eyes to stay open.

'Can you hear me?' the voice was saying. Soldier Armeni turned wearily toward the nurse.

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‘I can hear. I am Armeni. I am very brave.’

A strained smile revealed perfect white teeth, dark, tousled hair, clung to a youthful brow, Lesley was surprised to notice such things at a time like this.

Only ten minutes earlier, Lesley was feeling immense relief that the night had passed without incident, a few distant explosions, but no admittances. There was a brief opportunity to get a coffee and take some air. It was at night the desert really came alive. A trillion stars studded the beautiful, dark velvet sky, and the jasmine and frangipani took on a heady, almost seductive fragrance. Lesley found the desert intoxicating, it had the power to make one seem insignificant, yet at the same time *alive*.

But out here, things could change quickly. As dawn rose in all its splendour, peace was broken by the distant wailing of the ambulance siren and twenty minutes later the casualty trolley burst through the doors. Such horror amidst so much beauty.

‘Yes, you are very brave. You’ve a nice name too,’ Lesley said, hopeful of getting some personal details from the soldier.

‘Are you an English angel?’ Armeni asked. ‘My English is very good? Yes?’ the questions came in tortured gasps.

Lesley laughed, ‘English, yes. Angel, no.’

‘But why, why are you here, in this place?’

‘Well, I’m here to help crazy people who are trying to get themselves killed.’

‘I am *not* crazy, I’m here because, because of so many things.....’ Armeni rallied, but wanted the honey voice to keep talking, wanted the beautiful person to stay, and anger quickly drained away. Lesley tried to make amends for seeming judgemental.

‘I’m Lesley, the night shift nurse. We need to get you to the operating theatre,

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shouldn't be too long now,' then holding up the photograph, 'is this your family Armeni?'

Armeni tried to focus on the wavering image. Three solemn young men in army uniform posed with an equally grave elderly couple. Armeni was not in the picture.

'Mama, Papa, brothers. I was a student, away from home in those days.....' Another tumultuous current of pain surged and threatened to drown them both. Afraid to show weakness, Armeni stifled a scream.

'My brothers, all killed,' Armeni said, surfing back on a softer swell, needing to explain, to keep talking, 'I wrote to Mama and Papa, said I would become a soldier, but no reply. I went home, found our house bombed. A neighbour approached me,

'Everyone in that family is dead. Did you know them?'" he asked.

'But **I** am still alive. Don't you remember me? Little Armeni?' But I could not forget his words, "*Everyone* in that family is dead." As though I'd never existed.

'If I die Less Lee, if I die...?'

'You can't die Armeni. You must live. You are very brave, remember? You told me so.'

'Perhaps you like me, just a little. Is this why I must live? Tell me it is so.'

'My, you don't waste time do you? Of course I like you. And I'd travel through fire and water to see you again.'

'You would do this?' Armeni's voice faltered.

Leslie grinned, 'Yes, and I'll come to see you tomorrow - if it's not too hot!'

Tears welled in Armeni's eyes, Lesley instantly regretted the joke, this was no time for such foolishness.

'You make fun at me.'

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‘No of course not. See, I’m beside you, because you are a special person.’ An understanding lingered between them before Armeni drifted across the sea, to a café somewhere, in another life. Sitting with friends, there was laughter, love, and a feeling of such freedom. They drank wine together and spoke of many things. The white tablecloth flapped in the breeze and the contents of the glass spilled across the table, drenching the damask cloth, staining it red.

‘You won’t leave me will you? Please stay,’ Armeni pleaded, and Lesley knew it was not the time for hesitation.

‘I won’t leave you Armeni,’ Lesley’s stomach flipped and churned, with a juvenile thrill that had no right to be. Thoughts of unprofessional behaviour soared away, recklessly unheeded. Armeni listened, lying quietly, like a child, safe in the care of this stranger who would take away the pain.

Suddenly a flock of raucous gulls were swirling above the bed, bustling, flapping, disturbing them with their noisy cries. The bed was moving, wheeled away by the white throng. They flew, taking Armeni with them, over the sea. The tableau slid through the ward toward the operating theatre, Lesley’s hand was holding Armeni’s, as though it would hold on for a lifetime.

‘You are special Armeni. A very special person,’ and hearing these words, Armeni plunged contentedly into deeper, safer waters.

Lesley Johnson sat slumped outside the operating theatre, head in hands, shaken by the force of such unexpected emotions.

A colleague perched himself on the bench next to Lesley, measuring the right time to speak.

‘You O.K?’ he asked after a while, ‘you caused quite a commotion back there.’ He

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placed a kindly hand of support on Lesley's shoulder, acknowledging this place could get to the best of men. 'Look, everyone is exhausted, the strain is getting to us all. Your shift's over, get yourself home.' He hesitated, 'I have to ask you though, what was that all about? Do you know that soldier?'

Lesley gave a barely perceptible shake of his head. He hardly knew how to answer the question, or understand the feelings that had welled up inside him.

But one thing he knew for certain, that he would keep his promise to Armeni, he would be there for her when she woke.