Adelene

A story by Mazin Iqbal

Adelene.

That was her name.

“Why Adelene though?” asked Jingo. We were in the army truck, bumpily making our way from Marseilles to Cassis. I frowned.

“I don’t really know,” I said, holding the black and white photograph at arm’s length. I closed an eye and looked at the picture more closely. A young lady in a laced dress sat on a divan, smiling back at me. She held her chin tilted slightly upward; at the instructions of the photographer, probably. “She looks like an Adelene to me.”

Jingo sucked in air through his teeth. “You know what she really looks like?”

I was still staring at the photo. The lady was nowhere near what anyone would call the pinnacle of beauty, yet there was something about that face, I felt sure I knew her. Like seeing a classmate from nursery school years later and feeling that flicker of familiarity. “No. What?”

“She looks like a photograph you picked up off the old barracks.”

I turned to look at him. He grinned, popping a peanut into his mouth.

Jingo’s real name wasn’t Jingo. Two days after he first joined our troop, the lieutenant happened to remark that the new recruit’s wide-toothed grin resembled that of his dog, Jingo; and the name had stuck. He had a silly face, and a smart mouth, but a kind heart and good sense in the battlefield kept his name up as a soldier.

I looked at him now. “How’d you know I got it from the old barracks?”

Still grinning, his mouth full of half-chewed nuts, Jingo answered. “My dear friend, I literally saw you pick it up off the floor. You were so absorbed in your examination of this Adelene that you didn’t even see me standing there, smiling, just away from where you stood.”

The truck went over a particularly bumpy stretch just then, making all of us jump. I pursed my lips and held onto the seat for dear life. How could I explain to him that she reminded me of everything and nothing in particular? Of home, of an embrace, of a warmth I had not known since my mother had hugged me when I left? “She… she looks familiar, see? I feel like I’ve seen her somewhere.”

The venerable Jingo shrugged. “If you say so, pal.”
We were passing by a grape orchard (or what remained of it, any rate) when he piped up again. “Vineyards. Haven’t seen that in a while.” He scrounged for more peanuts in a small paper bag on his lap, but was unlucky; it had been cleaned out.

I looked outside at the trees, saw the scorched grass and puddles of dirty water pass us by. The water was dirty, but it still looked inviting. We hadn't showered in a while. God knows I could have done with one. An old childhood rhyme came to mind just then, unbidden.

Machli jal ki rani hai. The fish is the queen of the sea.
Jeevan uska paani hai. Her life is tied to the stream.

Humming it under my breath, I stopped when I saw Jingo giving me a queer look. "You know," he said. "I never understood why you have a French name. You're the first Indian I've met with a name like that."

"I told you," I muttered. "When his business was failing, my father had a French benefactor. It revived the company, you know, got us out of near poverty. Father was so grateful he vowed to name his firstborn child after the Frenchman. And, well… "

"That was you," said Jingo.

"That was me," I agreed.

That all of this was before the war we left unsaid. That the business had eventually gone to ruin anyhow, and that the firstborn son had joined the British army out of necessity. I sniffled. The picture of Adelene fluttered in the wind. I held it tight in a fist, not ungently.

Haath lagao dar jaayegi. Touch her once, she'll dart in fear.
Bahar nikalo mar jaayegi. Take her out, she'll die right here.

Presently the truck squealed to a stop. Four of us tightened our helmets and got out of the vehicle, me and Jingo and two others. The lieutenant put his head out the window from where he sat beside the driver and screamed instructions.

This is a strategic outpost. Do you understand that? Sir, yes sir!

Man the stations and radio the main barracks if you see an enemy flight, you hear me?
Loud and clear, Lieutenant!

Looks like these ladies got the lay of the land, driver. Get going!

We stood there for a while, the four of us, staring at the truck until it shrunk to nothing in the far distance. Presently one of the two men made a sound like a turkey with laryngitis. He had a ginger moustache and spoke with a slight lisp.
"We-ell. Looksh like we're here now."

After dropping which nugget of wisdom, the man tightened his helmet strap and went into the barracks. The second soldier, a pale youth with a sprout of hair on his chin, shouldered a bag and went in after him. We followed, not feeling anything in particular but a sense of mounting dread.

The *Cabane Près de la Mer* is an old army outpost that was built to observe the approach of enemy aircrafts. Made to house two or three people, a tower stands in the exact center of it, tall and proud, built from the ground up with hard black stone from the coast off of Cassis. Roughly translating to *Shack By the Sea,* the outpost is poetic only by name; it is surrounded on all sides by acres and acres of ochre land, devoid of flora and fauna.

There was plenty more information in the booklet I found on a table inside the general's quarters; but needless to say it didn't contain any riveting stories about musketeers and thin-lipped villains. I put down the pamphlet after a while and stared out the window, rocking back and forth in a very comfortable chair I'd found. What with the breeze drifting in through the open windows and the picture fluttering in my hand, I must've dozed off, because the next thing I remember was waking up to Jingo yelling in my face.

"Jean! *JEAN! A plane! There's a plane headed towards the barracks!"*

I stuffed the photograph into a jacket pocket, grabbed my helmet and bolted out of the chair. No soldier sleeps in the face of death, and I had no desire to be different.

We ran towards the barracks, me and Jingo, joined by the flustered youth on our way. The sky was ivory that day. Not very high up, a damaged aircraft trailed black smoke, brilliantly visible against the slate-grey expanse of sky.

It was making straight for the main barracks.

There is something strangely beautiful about watching a plane crash. You just stand there, staring in awe at the machine broken by bullets spat out of another machine. You think about man for a second, and the machines we come up with; you are sure there is a profound philosophical discovery here, but wait- your eyes travel all over the aircraft's crimson body, taking in the hole-ridden wing, the coughing engine, the crippled propeller, and the plane gets closer, and closer, and closer, and you would've seen more, and more, and more, if your friend had not yanked you to the ground and asked you what

"-THE HELL ARE YOU *DOING,* MAN?"

The earth shook as the front walls of our barracks came tumbling down. The picture of Adelene had fallen out of my jacket when Jingo pulled me down. I closed my hands over it and put it back inside, breathing heavily, the smell of ash and soil in my nose. "I- I'm sorry-the plane was coming, and-"

Jingo spat on my face. I had never seen him so livid. "You're damn right the plane was coming. It crashed straight into the barracks, you fool. A second more of standing there and a rock would've smashed you to a *pulp.* Now get up! GET UP!"

A slap and another yell later we were standing and staring at the crash from a safe distance. The pasty youth stood with us, biting his nails. Thankfully, the barracks that had fallen had no flammable material, and only gun parts and maps were ruined in the fire that was spilling out of the plane; but as we looked, a man came tumbling out of the fire…

Jingo called out to me.

“Yeah?”

“You uh, you see a man over there?”

I buttoned my jacket and ran towards the fire. “Catch up.”

The man, the pilot, supposedly, was wearing a red jacket and helmet, stained black by soot. As we approached, he screamed something unintelligible in German at us, making his way over a burning plank and falling in a heap at the foot of a well just in front.

Jingo ran to his side and helped take the helmet off of his head. With as much energy as he could muster, the German pilot yelled, gesticulating wildly towards his throat. Jingo turned to me, yelling. “The Jerry wants a drink, he wants water! Get him some from the pump!”

I ran to the pump opposite the well, and that was when I heard the gunshot.

There are moments in life when you feel like everything runs out of colour- and all you see is black, white, and red… a whole lot of red.

I turned around to see the German writhing on the ground with a sawed-off shotgun in hand, Jingo a-ways off, hands raised as if to say *calm down*, and the pale youth on the ground, a mess of blood and gore in place of where his face had been a minute ago.

The German screamed. He was bleeding, I saw. There was a dark stain on his side.
Death makes us fearless, but it also takes away our hearts.

Jingo was speaking very, very, slowly. He was muttering nonsense, in a soothing voice, now going up, now coming down, always calm. “Hey, now. Calm down. We’re here. Medical aid is here. You can live. You can breathe. Hey. Listen to me.”

The pilot’s hands were shaking. He aimed the gun at me, and then at Jingo, and then back to me, barking short sentences with every wave, walking backwards. Jingo got a step closer, and the man pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

The German dropped the gun. I followed in Jingo’s wake. We walked slowly towards the man, whispering sweet nothings.
“Hey. Hey now. Hey. Calm down.”

The pilot raised his head; tears made black rivers down an ashen face. He sniffled, unable to stop crying. Up close, I saw that he was young, very young. The lad could not have been more than one-and-twenty.

“It’s alright. You’re hurt. We can help.”

I reached into my jacket for the photograph, and held it tight with one hand, taking out my pistol with the other.

Jingo walked until he stood in front of him now, never taking his eyes off the man’s face. “Listen. *Listen.* You’re alright. It’s alright. It’s war. This is war.”

The man sobbed now, looking straight at Jingo, returning his unflinching stare. "*War*," he said, his voice cracking, the sound of a man broken inside.

"Yes," said Jingo, "war," and shot the German in the chest.

The silence of the dead cut through the uproar of the entire camp, and in that loveless place I held onto my little photograph, crumpling it, eyes shut tight, praying to God.

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Many years later, as I sit here and write this, I hold in my hand that same photograph, even though I am married now, and the voices in my head have stopped, I look at this young lady, and I think of what she stood for, and I pray that whoever she was, and wherever she may be, I pray that she leads or has led a good life, devoid of love and war; for the most beautiful thing about love and war is that everything is fair in it, and the ugliest thing about love and war is that everything is fair in it, and that is what causes us to make monsters out of ourselves. Afterward, after we left Cassis, I served for two more years before returning home, and yet it is that field of scattered ruins I still dream of, that German who was young, so young, looking for some reprieve from the despair that surrounded the burning plane, only to see us walking towards him with death in our wake, a deep, loveless pulse resounding with every step we took towards him. He was human too, looking for a semblance of love in the worst of places, and maybe that was his mistake. In wartime you are always surrounded, whether by friend or foe, and a man can do worse than make a best friend out of thin air… and sometimes the best friend a man can have is himself.

18/06/1934
-Jean Deepinder

CONCEPT NOTE

I wanted to write about love through the lens of soldiers in the middle of a war. It becomes a dreamy sort of half-truth, something you hang onto to keep your sanity as the world crumbles around you, forcing you to do things to strangers you would probably be neighbours with otherwise. I wanted to imagine how an old man would look back on his experience as a soldier, see how he'd dwell on the littlest of details as they punctuated his memory of how things had once been. I wanted to explore love in both a romantic sense and in terms of brotherhood, and I believe I've done so, to the best of my ability.