

Power of a Good Story

The Power of a Good Story Well Told

by Charles Strohmer

A feisty woman who had been editorializing about rising violence in The Middle East gazed in my direction and asked, "What do you think can be done about the situation?" It was the autumn of 2000, and the peace summit at Camp David had recently broken down. The room quieted. I was on a speaking trip, and the guest speaker is always supposed to know. The occasion this evening, however, was a pleasant break in the action, dining with a married couple whose family and large suburban brick home in the American Midwest was the epitome of the hard-working upwardly mobile.

After the meal, a pasta dish, if I remember correctly, we shifted to the den and into comfortable sofas around the coffees and desserts that awaited us on glass-topped tables. Soon we were lost in that venerable tradition of solving the world's problems. The second intifada in the Holy Land had been headlining the news stories. But who knew "what could be done?" Anyone who could answer that with any real confidence would first need to know all the history that produced it, and I mean the history as seen by both sides and told by both sides. It takes a certain unbolted reserve to accept an invitation to the Palestinian story

That's what began to get me into trouble that evening. Specifically, the binary Us vs Them lens through which many people in American have been taught to think about "the situation." American Christians, and that evening I was dining with some very gracious ones, had information about it from a chiefly Jewish perspective; what they now needed was a revelation the tragedy from Palestinians. I decided on that route. Trying not to abuse their hospitality, I hoped to make the claims of the Palestinians known. It takes a certain unbolted reserve to accept an invitation to the Palestinian story. I get that. It's risky. But what's the alternative?

Some years earlier I had reached a point where I saw the foolishness of thinking about wisely just solutions if I carried around a lopsided narrative about the Middle East. I don't know how those Christians thought about the situation after I left them that evening, but I remembered what unbolted me.

The Palestinian story first played for me when I met Charlie in the late-1980s. A talented young English actress, Charlie was being lured by the very handsome and mysterious Joseph to meet Kurtz, a rigorous, manipulating Israeli intelligence officer who must convince Charlie to leave the London stage and act for Israel in the theater of the real. It wasn't the fact that she had my name or that England is my home away from home that pulled me into the pages of John Le Carré's *The Little Drummer Girl*. It was the invitation.

Please, Charlie, we'd like you to penetrate an elusive, breakaway Palestinian terrorist group that is bombing Jewish leaders up and down Europe. They like beautiful European women, like you. You've played parts on stage, Charlie, and we like it that you're loosely radical, pro-Palestinian. But we also know that you're looking for a purpose, a direction in life, a cause, a family even. You believe passionately in extreme measures. Join us and you will save innocent life. You will be doing good. You will continue to act, but in the theater of the real. So won't you join us, Charlie?

Great works of imagination get you into their stories, and I was in this one, sometimes caught in the monstrous logic that was manipulating Charlie, and appalled by it; sometimes moved by the Palestinian argument from the lips of the Palestinian characters, and accepting it? no matter how jargon-ridden the vocabulary or questionable the statistics or tortured the rhetoric. If it is to have any power at all, a story cannot be a complete fiction.

How would the growing tension end between Charlie's love for Joseph, the Israeli agent runner who is now her controller, and her (so far) staged loyalty to the maverick terrorist group she agrees to infiltrate? Part of her has gone over, part of her has stayed. Will Charlie break down and go over? Or will she faithfully act her part till the end and show Israeli intelligence a way to the elusive, unidentified Khalil, the terror group's leader and bomb-maker? The team, and even Kurtz the seasoned veteran, isn't sure. For Charlie now gets the other side.

"If you've been driven from [refugee] camp to [refugee] camp, if you've had the living daylights persecuted out of you by your own people ? by the Israeli's but above all by your brother Arabs ? I can understand that you would turn to violence." That's John Le Carré being interviewed about the time he spent in the Middle East researching *Drummer Girl*. He visited Palestinian camps talking with refugees. He met with Israeli generals and had help from Israeli special forces to speak with their Palestinian prisoners. He spoke to Palestinian commanders and their "fighting kids." He met Arafat, who asked, "Why have you come, what do you want?" "Well, Mr. Chairman, I'm trying to put my hand on the Palestinian heart." Taking Le Carré's hand and holding it to his own heart, Arafat replied, "Sir, it is here, it is here."

"Many people," Le Carré again, "who have [a] clichéd vision of the Palestinians would themselves, if they had been subjected to the same harassment and persecution and humiliation, if they had no passports, no friends, no permanent home, if they'd been bombed out of one place after another all through their lives, from the age of practically nothing ? many of those people would have taken the violent path.... If you are a displaced people, and you've got to make the world listen, that is the Palestinian argument."

Now listening, I followed my namesake ? first playing a notable St. Joan in theaters up and down England with her rickety acting troupe ? then reciting back to me long passages of dialogue or streams of information, first heard, verbatim ? now in her role as a somewhat crazy radical attending lectures to please her flaky anarchist boyfriend, Al, but afterward writing checks for radical left-wing causes. Charlie, now on improvised holiday with the troupe, she's tanning her pale English skin in the sun on the Greek island of Mykonos, meeting the handsome Joseph with scars on his already suntanned body.

Let's tour Greece together, alone, he suggests. And let's start in Athens. On the last evening of their tour, she and the mysterious Joseph sit idly side-by-side atop a hillside gazing down into the melancholy, moonlit Theater of Dionysus.

"I read somewhere that no true drama can ever be a private statement," he finally remarks. "Novels, poems, yes. But not drama. Drama must have an application to reality. Drama must be useful. Do you believe that?"

She laughed. "In Burton-on-Trent Women's Institute? Playing Helen of Troy at pensioners' Saturday matinees?"

"I'm serious. Tell me what you think?"

"About theater?"

"About its uses."

She's disconcerted by his sudden earnestness. Suddenly too much is hanging on her answer.

"Well, I agree," she said awkwardly. "Theater should be useful. It should make people share and feel. It should ? well, waken people's awareness."

"Be real, therefore? Are you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure."

"Well, then," he said, as if in that case she shouldn't blame him.

"Well, then," she echoed gaily.

We are mad, she decided. Certifiable loonies. Barking, certifiable loonies, the pair of us.

Mad Charlie, minutes later made quite sane. She and Joseph leave the god of wine to his moonlight celebrations and amble back down the hill to the car park. She'd been had. It was the dark red Mercedes that awoke the sickening feeling. No, he must be playing

a joke on me. They hadn't come in the Mercedes but apparently they were going to be leaving in it. She watches Joseph slip a key into the keyhole and the buttons of all four locks pop up at once. He leads her round to the passenger door while she asks him what the hell is going on.

"Don't you care for it?" he asked, with an airy lightness that she immediately suspected. "Shall I order a different one? I thought you had a weakness for fine cars."

"You mean you hired it?"

"Not strictly. It has been lent to us for our journey."

I watch as Joseph holds the door open and she doesn't get in.

"Lent by who?"

"A kind friend."

"What's his name?"

"Charlie, don't be utterly ridiculous. Herbert. Karl. What difference does a name make? Would you prefer the egalitarian comforts of a Greek fiat?"

"Where's my luggage?"

"In the boot. Dimitri put it in there on my instructions. Do you want to take a look and reassure yourself?"

"I'm not going in this thing. It's crazy."

She got in nevertheless, and in no time he was sitting next to her, starting the engine. He drove fast and skillfully. She didn't like that either ? that wasn't how you drove friends' cars.

"Do this often, do we?" she asked loudly. "One of our little things, is it? Taking ladies to unknown destinations at twice the speed of sound?"

No answer. He was gazing intently ahead of him. Who is he? Oh my dear soul?as her bloody mother would say?who is he? The car filled with light. She swung round and saw through the rear window a pair of headlamps about a hundred yards behind, neither gaining or losing. The road was straight but very narrow, the needle had reached 140 kilometers, and she could feel the panic forming inside her and battling with her artificial calm.

"Mind telling us some good news, would you? Something to put a person at her ease?"

"The good news is that I have lied to you as little as possible and that a short time from now you will understand the many good reasons for your being with us."

"Who's us?" she said sharply.

Till then he had been a loner. She didn't like the change at all.

"It's not guns is it?" she enquired, suddenly thinking of his scars. "Not running a small war on the side somewhere, are we? Only I can't stand bangs, you see. I've got these delicate eardrums."

Her voice, with its forced jauntiness, was becoming unfamiliar to her.

"No, Charlie, it's not gunrunning."

"?No, Charlie, it's not gunrunning.' White-slave traffic?"

"No, it's not white-slave traffic either."

She echoed that line, too.

"That leaves drugs then, doesn't it? Because you are trading in something, aren't you? Only drugs aren't my scene either, to be frank. Long Al makes me carry his hash for him when we go through Customs and I'm a mess for days afterwards just from the nerves." No answer. "It's higher, isn't it? Nobler? A different plane entirely?" She reached out and switched off the radio. "How about just stopping the car, actually? You needn't take me anywhere. You can go back to Mykonos tomorrow if you like and collect my understudy."

"And leave you in the middle of nowhere? Don't be utterly absurd."

"Do it now!" she screamed. "Stop the bloody car!"

Charlie, an hour later holed up in a villa with "us," bitterly under the full bore of Kurtz's exacting, time-foreshortened verbal torrents justifying the abduction, his impelling phrases answering her every objection, turning her into their agent. Charlie, awakening at dawn, but not from sleep, finding a homeland at last. Yes, I'm listening. Yes, I follow. The team wonder if her durable base of morality, essential to their plan, will endure through the infiltration to its climax.

An hour later ?the clock is ticking, Charlie, we must go ? I ride with Joseph and Charlie from the villa to a hillside taverna near the Acropolis, where Charlie now sits passively at a small round table opposite Joseph. It's early and it's quiet. We're alone except for a black-and-white television fluttering nearby and "old hillsmen too proud to take an interest in tourists, even pretty red-headed English girls in blue kaftans and gold bracelets."

Joseph now besieges Charlie's sponge-like mind with the rhetoric of the passionate young terrorist Michel, the younger brother of the quarry, Khalil. In the theater of the real, Kahlil must believe, really believe, that Charlie and Michel are lovers. It is a role that must be fully assumed by Charlie before Khalil's group comes for her. She must memorize the rhetoric. And the clock is ticking, Charlie. So listen.

In the fiction that Joseph is now spinning for Charlie inside the taverna, the new lovers Michel and Charlie are seated alone in a roadhouse grillroom outside Nottingham, which Michel had bribed to stay open. When you hear Michel, Joseph continues, he "speaks the name Palestine. With passion. You hear it at once in his voice ? Palestine, like a challenge. Like a war-cry ? Palestine."

"He loves you, he loves your talent," so he tells you, "the British are all my enemies, all but you. The British gave away my country to the Zionists, they shipped the Jews of Europe to us with orders to turn the East into the West. Go and tame the Orient for us, they said. The Palestinians are trash, but they will make good coolies for you! The old British colonizers were tired and defeated, so they handed us over to the new colonizers who had the zeal and the ruthlessness to cut the knot. Don't worry about the Arabs, the British said to them. We promise to look the other way while you deal with them. Listen. Are you listening?"

"Jose, when was I not?"

"Michel is a prophet to you tonight. Nobody has ever before concentrated the full force of his fanaticism on you alone. His conviction, his commitment, his devotion ? they all shine out of him as he speaks. In theory, of course, he is already preaching to the

converted, but in reality he is planting the human heart into the ragbag of your vague left-wing principles.... You want him to lecture you: he does. You want him to play upon your British guilt: he does that too....

"He throws statistics at you as if you had caused them yourself. Over two million Christian and Muslim Arabs driven from their homeland and disenfranchised since 1948. Their houses and villages bulldozed ? he tells you how many ? their land stolen under laws they had no part in making ? he recites the number of dunams ? one dunam is a thousand square meters. You ask him and he tells you. And when they reach exile, their brother Arabs slaughter them and treat them like scum and the Israelis bomb their camps and shell them because they continue to resist. Because to resist being dispossessed is to be a terrorist, whereas to colonize, and to bomb refugees, and to decimate a population ? these are unfortunate political necessities. Listen."

He leaned forward and grabbed her wrist. "Who has the simple courage to tell out loud the cruelest joke in history: that thirty years of Israel have turned the Palestinians into the new Jews of the earth? You know how the Zionists described my country before they seized it? A land without a people for a people without a land. We did not exist! In their minds, the Zionists had already committed genocide; all that remained for them was the fact. And you, the British, were the architects of this great vision. You know how Israel was born? A European power made a present of an Arab territory to a Jewish lobby. And did not consult a single inhabitant of the territory concerned. And that power was Britain."

He's speaking in the first person, now. "I describe our peasant life to you, and the many intricate systems by which the communality of our village was maintained. The wine harvest, how the whole village went out together to the grapefields on the orders of the mukhtar, my father. How my elder brothers began their education in a school which the British founded in the Mandate. You will laugh, but my father believed in the British also. How the coffee in our village guest house was kept hot all hours of the day so nobody could ever say of us, 'This village is too poor, these people are inhospitable to strangers.' You want to know what happened to my grandfather's horse? He sold it for a gun so that he could shoot the Zionists when they attacked our village. The Zionists shot my grandfather instead. They made my father stand beside him while they did. My father, who believed in them."

"Is that true too?"

"Of course."

She could not tell whether Joseph or Michel was replying, and she knew that he did not mean her to. "I refer to the war of '48 as 'the Catastrophe.' Never the war ? the Catastrophe. In the Catastrophe of '48, the fatal weaknesses of a peaceable society were revealed. We had no organization, we could not defend ourselves against the armed aggressor. Our culture was tended in small communities, each one complete in itself, our economy also. But like the Jews of Europe before their Holocaust we lacked political unity, and this was our downfall, and too often our communities fought each other, which is the curse of the Arabs everywhere and perhaps of Jews. Do you know what they did to my village, those Zionists? Because we would not flee like our neighbors?"

She knew, she did not know. It did not matter because he paid her no heed. "They made barrel bombs filled with petrol and explosives, and rolled them down the hill, setting fire to our women and children. I could talk to you for a week, just of the tortures of my people. Hands cut off. Women raped and burned. Children blinded."

"?I fight, therefore I exist," he announced quietly. "You know who said these words, Charlie? A Zionist. A peace-loving, patriotic, idealistic Zionist, who has killed many British and many Palestinians by terrorists methods, but because he is a Zionist he is not a terrorist but a hero and a patriot. You know who he was when he spoke these words, this peace-loving, civilized Zionist? He was the Prime Minister of a country they call Israel. You know where he comes from? From Poland. Can you tell me please ? you an educated Englishwoman, me a simple stateless peasant ? can you tell me how it happened, please, that a Pole came to be ruler of my country Palestine, a Pole who exists only because he fights? Can you explain to me, please, by what principle of English justice, or English impartiality and fair play, this man rules over my country? And calls us terrorists?"

The question slipped from her before she had time to censor it. She had not meant it as a challenge. It emerged by itself, from the chaos he was sowing in her: "Well, can you?"

He did not answer, yet he did not avoid her question. He received it. She had a momentary impression he was expecting it. Then he laughed, not very nicely, reached for his glass, and raised it to her. "Make a toast to me," he ordered. "Come. Lift your glass. History belongs to the winners. Have you forgotten that simple fact? Drink with me!" Doubtfully she raised her own glass to him.

"To tiny gallant Israel," he said. "To her amazing survival, thanks to an American subsidy of seven million dollars a day, the entire might of the Pentagon dancing to her tune." Without drinking, he put his glass down again. She did the same. With the gesture, to her relief, the melodrama seemed temporarily over.

"And you, Charlie, you listen. Overawed. Amazed. By his romanticism, his beauty, his fanaticism. He has no reticence. No Western inhibitions. Does it play ? or does the tissue of your imagination reject the disturbing transplant?"

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