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# RACHEL OF OLYMPIA, RACHEL OF RAFAH

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Every spring, I mark the distance from the day Rachel Corrie stood in the sand in front of a pharmacist's home in Rafah, hoping that the Israeli bulldozer that had come to raze it would stop before it killed her. I look at the photographs—taken

by my friend Joe, who was on the scene with a disposable camera—and see her wearing that crumpled orange vest, never intending to become a martyr.

A generation before we would watch in horror as Gazans livestream their own genocide to social media, these pictures of a white woman from Olympia, Washington, killed by an Israeli bulldozer driver, would spread across the world. They'd be juxtaposed with another image of Rachel sitting on her porch, glasses perched on her head, holding back her blonde hair, solemn and assured. The pictures would briefly attain the status of proof of Israel's wrongdoing, or, to some cynics, the hubris of youth.

But what do they mean now, all these years later? As hundreds of thousands of us come together day after day in efforts to shut down business as usual, our efforts to stem the bloodshed running up against the Biden Administration's moral cowardice, does the memory of American solidarity activist Rachel Corrie offer a sense of hope, or of futility? And how does that question reverberate in the wake of Israel's murder of American activist Ayşenur Ezgi Eygi, as the U.S. again fails to hold Israel accountable?

I remember so clearly the day Joe called me in Haifa. It was late in the afternoon and I was waiting for my shift at the coexistence center to end. I was alphabetizing Hebrew children's books in a place where the Palestinian kids didn't read Hebrew and Jewish kids weren't showing up.

"He saw her and he didn't stop," is all he could say at first, and I didn't know who he was talking about.

"Rachel," he said. "My friend Rachel."

"Wait," I said, because I wasn't ready to know what he was about to tell me. I walked into the supply room, its shelves stacked with colorful construction paper, printer cartridges, plastic tubs of pencils and crayons.

I'd met Rachel two weeks earlier in the chaotic office of the International Solidarity Movement. She'd been sunburnt and exuberant, wearing a keffiyeh and carrying a life-sized cardboard cutout of George W. Bush. It was for a mock trial that she'd

organized to teach kids in Rafah about international law. She joked that it was easy to find a cardboard cutout of the American president, due to his frequent appearance in effigy.

Rachel and Joe had been classmates at Evergreen College, then colleagues in Rafah, where they joined Palestinian-led civil disobedience efforts aimed at stopping Israel's home demolition campaign. At the time, I was living in Haifa, and Joe persuaded me to visit Gaza for the weekend. (Such a thing was still possible then.) My visit had turned everything I thought I knew about Israel on its head.

I'd gone to the border with the activists to stop the demolition of a home, but we got there too late and found only a pile of cinder blocks and rebar. I'd shadowed a human rights worker in the aftermath of an invasion in Khan Younis, where the army had detonated a seven-story apartment building and made dozens of families homeless. I'd stayed overnight with a gregarious family in their bullet-riddled home on the border with Egypt. They'd warmly welcomed me, a Jewish woman, even as an Israeli sniper posted in a tower took shots at people on their street.

And now Joe had called with this unspeakable news. There should have been more to say, but I couldn't find the words. I walked out of the library into the gloomy springtime chill of a city I no longer recognized, aimlessly wandering through green hills shrouded in dusk. Haifa was supposed to be idyllic and cosmopolitan, with its winding streets and shops—a place where Palestinians and Israelis lived in harmony.

"It's safe for foreigners," Joe had said.

"The army is there to protect you," my Israeli friends had said.

Rachel and I weren't that different. We were two American college kids who'd traveled here hoping to volunteer for peace. I remember feeling that something was crumbling inside me—like something I'd been trying to hold together was coming apart. I stopped in a small bookshop, where an Israeli woman at the counter in a grey ponytail and wool sweater saw me and asked if anything was the matter. I hesitated,

then told her what had happened, hoping for some words of kindness that could quiet the anger and shame that was taking hold.

Her eyes hardened. "That girl got what she deserved."

We stood there, eyeing each other across that sentence. I walked out of the store and back to my apartment, called Joe, and packed my things.

I rode a bus to Tel Aviv, then boarded another bus to Ashkelon, just north of Erez Crossing. At a roadside stop, I watched soldiers eat sunflower seeds and spit out the shells, M-16s slung across their backs. Now and then an empty bus pulled in, then pulled out full of military green. A man with a light brown buzz cut dropped a few coins in a vending machine. I imagined that he could be the one who'd run her over—and that perhaps he wouldn't hesitate to do the same to me. My bus came hours later. After half an hour's drive through unremarkable desert roads, the driver pulled to a stop and yelled out, "Erez."

Alone, I walked off the bus and across the empty lot. An odd smell, like rotten bananas, wafted from the military base, along with the sound of target practice. I briefly wondered if it was gunpowder that I was smelling. In the air-conditioned VIP building, I watched soldiers joke in the cold light and make plans to meet up for drinks in Tel Aviv. Passing through it, stepping outside again, I walked across a field of razor wire to the Palestinian Authority checkpoint, a dim shack where Arabic text curled off the walls and three fatherly types sat around an old table. We made a bit of small talk.

"You're here for Rachel Corrie?" they asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Many foreigners coming for her," they said, and taught me a word or two of Arabic, asked if I had children, and warned me to be safe. I lingered a few minutes longer than necessary to support the fiction that their presence was more than a formality. Then I exited that small structure to walk beneath the weathered, concrete archway into Gaza.

In his testimony about that day, Joe would say that he and Rachel had been accompanying city workers to help keep them safe when their colleagues in another neighborhood saw two armored bulldozers destroying farmland and called for backup.

One of the activists' main objectives was protecting Palestinian houses and

infrastructure from demolition by Israeli bulldozers. This often meant using pacifist tactics such as putting their bodies between bulldozers and homes, or climbing onto the structures so they couldn't be destroyed without harming the international activists blocking the bulldozers. At the time, the Israeli military was in the process of razing hundreds of homes in Rafah to create a "buffer zone" along the border with Egypt. (In recent months, the Israeli military has started doing this again, but across an even larger swath of land.)

Rachel and Joe took taxis over. The activists got in formation, but soon realized they were facing a particularly aggressive crew. At one point, a bulldozer rammed into a partially demolished house that the activists were standing on. Soon after, another bulldozer knocked over a concrete pillar, which nearly fell on a Scottish activist—he moved out of the way just in time. Then, Joe testified, a bulldozer "pushed an American activist against barbed wire and piled rubble onto him and we had to dig him out of the rubble and unhook his clothing from the wire. A tank approached, and one soldier stuck his head out of the tank, but said nothing."

Joe briefly wondered if this crew had been given a directive or a green light to escalate to violent force, but dismissed it as an irrational worry—he'd been worried before in tense situations with the army, but had always walked away unscathed.

Then, in the late afternoon, bulldozer serial number 949623 began to approach the home of a pharmacist named Dr. Sameer. Rachel was close with his family. She'd spent many nights there, alerting the sniper tower across the way that international civilian observers were present. She'd help his daughters with English and art, and some mornings they'd hang out watching cartoons.

As she'd done many times before, Rachel, wearing a bright orange vest, stood fifteen meters in front of the bulldozer, waved her arms, and shouted.

"It got so close it was moving the earth beneath her," Joe later wrote. "She climbed onto the pile being pushed. She got so high that she was at eye-level with the cab, the driver and co-operator could clearly see her. Then he continued forward, which dragged her legs into the rubble and her out of view.

"We ran towards him, waved our arms and shouted over a megaphone, but the driver continued forward. By this point, it was more than clear that she was nowhere underneath the bulldozer, there was simply nowhere else she could have been, as she

she had not appeared on either side of the bulldozer, and could not have stayed in front of it that long without being crushed.

"Despite the obviousness of her position, the bulldozer began to reverse, without lifting its blade, and dragged the blade over her body again. He continued until he was on the border strip, about 100 meters away, and left her crushed body in the sand. Her body was mangled, her face was bloody. She said, 'My back is broken,' and nothing else.

"At 17:00, the ambulance arrived. She was breathing, but her closed eyes were becoming bruised. They drove her into the hospital where, at 17:20, she was pronounced dead and wheeled out with a white sheet covering her head. I was dumbfounded.

"I keep remembering small things about her, that she liked juice, or used to wear this ridiculous pink jumpsuit given to her by a Palestinian woman. Kids would show up at our office and she'd be ready with soda, candy, a game of soccer."

"You're one of us now," some Palestinians have said to me. "You were a foreigner before, but now you know what it is to be Palestinian." Perhaps, if only by a small glimpse of the unimaginable scope of Palestinian loss.

Spray-painted on a wall near our apartment, graffiti had appeared that read: *Rachel Corrie, an American citizen with Palestinian blood.*

I walked past that spray-painted wall and up a flight of tiled stairs to the International Solidarity Movement office in Rafah, where TV crews had taken over and were fighting for time with activists. I squeezed between camera equipment and lighting umbrellas and found Joe in the cluttered back room, grabbing his things to head out, looking like he hadn't slept. There was no time for grief, he said. The Iraq War was going to start, and there were panicked predictions that Israel would send in ground troops while the media was busy covering Shock and Awe.

In the corner of the room, the cardboard would-be effigy of George W. Bush leaned against the wall, the president smirking stupidly. Next to it, a field worker took notes as a man in a folding chair told him how he'd lost his home in an unrelated incident.

I set down my bag among the bulging backpacks crowded on the floor.

"I have a meeting with EMTs," said Joe. "Wanna come with me?"

After her death on March 16th, 2003, Rafah's council of imams, after one night's debate, would declare her a martyr. To do so they invoked a category of Islamic law concerning those who die in a foreign land. As we rode across Rafah, Rachel stared out from the city's walls from rows of martyr posters. She looked relaxed and happy in a white oxford, hair falling casually to her shoulders, at ease in the sweetly amateur design. Purple bubble letters declared the date of her death against a mottled teal background. Her posters were glossy and bright, next to others that were faded and torn like old concert advertisements. With time, her own paper memorials would fade and fray in the elements, and vivid new faces would cover them.

It would take a decade for Israel to finish investigating itself and rule her killing an accident; the bulldozer driver was anonymized behind a screen at the trial, and the crucial minutes were found to be absent from the army's surveillance footage.

In the car with Joe, I heard an acapella voice singing on the radio—the sound of the recitation of the Quran. Potholes jolted the taxi as we passed the remains of buildings, piles of gray rubble, and looked out at the distant sea. When we exited the cab, there were children playing in the street. They were so much younger than Rachel—too young to know death. And yet they knew it well. The first time I'd come here, children had greeted me with the word *ajnabi*, foreigner. Now, they greeted me with her name, "Rachel"—a single word for our foreignness and our common loss.♦

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*Laura Kraftowitz's writing appears or is forthcoming in The Kenyon Review, Hayden's Ferry Review, The Evergreen Review, The Forward, and elsewhere. She is an organizer with Jewish Voice for Peace and the co-founder of City of Asylum/Detroit, a nonprofit that provides safe-haven fellowships to writers and artists who are in exile under threat of persecution. She is completing work on a manuscript about her year as an activist in Gaza, The End of Abu Jameel Street.*