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## **CHASING A CHILDHOOD FRIEND, A FIGHTER IN AFGHANISTAN**

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In Chronicle of a caged journalist, Egyptian war correspondent Yehia Ghanem tells the stories of those he's met while covering wars in Afghanistan, Bosnia and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

As I stood in that cage in an Egyptian courtroom, memories of a childhood friend kept returning to me. I shall call him by his initials, KL.

We lived next door to one another in our middle-class, tree-lined Cairo neighbourhood, where we'd play hide-and-seek behind the brick walls that had been erected in front of the apartment buildings during the 1967 war with Israel.

With his fair hair and blue eyes, KL resembled a mythological Nordic god. And in a country where such features were a rarity, people, young and old, were drawn to KL. But it wasn't just his appearance that attracted them: Polite and meek, he was well-liked, and I was proud to consider him a friend.

We attended the same schools from grammar to high school, parting only at college when he began to study commerce and I focused on journalism. We were in different faculties of the same university so would frequently bump into one another on campus.

Then, suddenly, a year before graduation, KL disappeared. For days, he didn't turn up for class. Nobody had seen him in the streets. After a while, we asked his brothers where he was, and they told us their suspicions: that he'd been picked up by one of the many intelligence bodies in Egypt.

It was shortly after the assassination of President Anwar Sadat and just attending the mosque could be enough to get you apprehended. KL's crime: simply being too punctual in his prayers.

Almost three years passed. Our lives moved on; I graduated, did a year of public service and

became a radio journalist, but I never forgot KL. I talked often about him with friends. Others who'd been arrested spoke of the brutalities they'd experienced inside. We knew the same must be happening to him.

Then KL was released. But he was a different person. He had been subjected to the most horrific torture, the details of which he never discussed with us. Although still polite and outwardly calm, KL had been reborn into an entirely different ideology.

His firm conviction that social and political change - something as basic as the freedom of expression we all craved - could be achieved through peaceful means was gone. He still wanted that change, however. But now he believed that violence was the way to attain it.

I remember one conversation as we stood on the street, talking and exchanging ideas. "Peaceful means are meaningless," he told me. That wasn't the KL I knew, but all peaceful avenues seemed blocked to him now.

It was hard to be surprised by the shift in him. For three years, he'd experienced nothing but violence and oppression himself.

He completed university and graduated. But then, a year after he was released, KL disappeared - again. It was 1984, and the Soviet war in Afghanistan had been raging for five years. Foreign fighters, the majority of whom were Arab, had been shoring up the ranks of the mujahideen, and KL had joined them.

We heard stories about his activities there from other mujahideen who returned to visit their families. But what we heard was unbelievable: He had become a leading figure, not only as a fighter but as a planner.

More than a decade later, I too was in Afghanistan, covering the war between the Taliban and Northern Alliance. I wanted to find my old friend, who was still in the country - a foreign fighter aligned with the Taliban.

Eventually, I learned that he had become so important that it would be impossible to meet him for reasons of security.

For a little over two years, I reported first on the Taliban and then on the Northern Alliance, covering the war from both sides. Sometimes I was on the frontlines, sometimes interviewing prisoners of war or senior officials. Sometimes I ended up in a Taliban cell myself. But I always felt protected and suspected that on occasions, my old friend had been the one responsible for getting me out of there.

I still feel indebted to him, even though I haven't seen him since the 1980s.

He had graduated from Egypt's notorious prison system as someone who had internalised the violence perpetrated against him. There were tens of thousands of others just like him; once innocent young men who had been painfully and brutally broken down, only to be re-moulded as what the world might call "terrorists". They were human beings to be hunted.

I would meet many, many others just like KL as I covered wars throughout the world - from Afghanistan to Bosnia to the Democratic Republic of Congo: young men embroiled in conflict and trapped in cages, both physical and mental.

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