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Ice Cold

Reem Obeid

Beads of sweat trickled down my forehead as I made my way down the bustling street with eyes downcast. The sun was hidden behind the clouds so I had to focus on the littered walkway in front of me to see the little holes formed by gunshots from years of war that came and went. Marcus walked beside me, and I knew he had fallen as deep into his thoughts as I had. It had almost become a tradition, our own tradition, in a place full of tradition, to make our way to the small icecream stall on this busy road every afternoon, where ancient buildings stood next to contemporary boutiques. We were two people from different worlds in another foreign place. Maybe if I had been back home in Melbourne and he was still living in an upper-class apartment at the centre of New York, and if our families hadn't dragged us over to live in the capital of Lebanon, we would not be walking together like we were Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson. But they had, and even though he might 'Bing' and I might 'Google', we were both foreigners in this unlikely place.

'Jen,' Marcus called my name, and I looked up to see he had stopped a few metres behind me in front of the brightly coloured icecream fridge. He wore a crooked smile on his boyish face and there were small creases around his brilliant blue eyes as he pulled me from the swirling river inside my head. We were the only two people on the packed street with blue eyes, and I smiled as the thought crossed my mind.

Marcus was still smiling when he asked the little girl with the high ponytail for two cones with two scoops of chocolate icecream. The little girl listened so attentively, as though her whole world hung on the order of these two fair-haired teenagers, then turned to her mother and translated proudly. The glow in her heavily lidded eyes was one of the reasons we walked an extra five minutes every afternoon instead of going to the Cold Stone ice-creamery, where the employees all wore uniforms and the flavours were labelled in English.

Just as Marcus paid the mother in her pale yellow burqa the faded red paper note, and the little girl dropped a silver coin into his hand, an unfamiliar sound jerked me to attention. The buzz of a helicopter's propeller became audible above the hum of the icecream fridge, and multilingual greetings shouted across the street.

I looked at Marcus, he looked at me. The fear in his eyes mirrored my own. Reality snuck up from behind to remind me that home was a long way away. The concerned look from the mother to her child before me only confirmed the feeling in my gut.

There was a split second when everyone on the street was staring up at the sky: the old women who stood together gossiping, the young women who had been wondering at the dress in a shop window, and the children who had been chasing each other on the crowded pathway followed by angry shouts.

It would have been quite a picture to look down from that helicopter at the silent, comprehending and clueless faces. Someone with a heart might stop and feel. In that split second they might have paused and there might not have been the deafening explosion of a bomb that lit the busy street of the capital on fire, shattering the glass of dozens of shop windows and ripping chunks of the tall buildings down, squashing people underneath.

Maybe the little girl with the high ponytail would not have been lit on fire, and maybe the screams that left her small lips would not have been drowned out by a hundred others if the man in that helicopter had a heart.

It all came so quickly, the fire and noise, so that by the time I could begin to comprehend where the sudden sharp pains across my middle had come from, I was lying on the floor with Marcus's limp body draped over me like a broken shield. His face was buried in my shoulder and a gasp of pain escaped my lips as I stretched my arm across to touch his bloodstained face.

I almost choked as I inhaled the metallic stench of blood. The smoke from the all-consuming fire made my eyes water. The sweet taste of chocolate still lingered on my tongue, like the inside of me was still there while the world around me became a terrible nightmare.

I wanted to call Marcus's name, I wanted him to answer me, but I knew deep inside of me, a part of me that was deeper than the wound that would cause me to slowly bleed to death, he never would. I might have screamed now, in pain and anger, as my view of the street began to blur, if I had the strength. I might have cried for my family, for my life back home, for Marcus lying dead on top of me, but the last clear thought that rang through my mind was that there are people in this world who do not have a heart.



Reem Obeid wrote this in 2011 when she was in Year 11 at Kildare College in South Australia.