

The Death Pact*

By Tawfiq Yusuf Awwad†

Translated by David Teeple‡

The discussion was about the political climate in the world, and about the possibility of a second world war breaking out. The subject led us to memories of the last war. Each of us began to offer up his two cents, confirming whatever such and such a historian or author had written about that great tragedy, when people were busy butchering each other from 1914 to 1918. Among us was a friend who had roamed the earth a great deal, and who was sent to carry a rifle alongside those who had carried rifles for four straight years. He told us this story.

It was during the middle of 1918, and orders had been given for us to march to the front as reinforcements for the troops in action. Among my friends there was one who I felt a particularly strong bond with. We were so fond of each other that we were like brothers. You can't imagine the bittersweet anguish that poured from his blue eyes, the goodness of his heart, his purity. Something in his warm voice called to you and you would be helplessly drawn in. You would feel as though he were pulling you wherever he wished by a string tied to your heart.

François – that was his name – hated the war. But you shouldn't see that hatred as a sign of cowardice. Certainly not! In fact, he was extremely brave. But I can still remember him saying, "My friend, I can't fill my head up, like a rifle, with gunpowder and lead. It's a horrible waste."

I can't remember all of the horrors of that war, but I will never forget the image of François as long as I live.

The cars preceded us with our belongings, to the place where a camp had been set up for the troops and trenches had been dug. Our unit marched by foot for days to reach it. We arrived at night, and immediately sat down to dinner. Suddenly, François turned to me,

*The Arabic title is *Mīṭāq al-mawt*.

†Lebanese, 1911-1988.

‡American, 1978-present.

spat the wad of food from his mouth, and said, “Whose guarantee do we have that this food will reach our mouths before the bombs do?”

No sooner had he finished saying this when the ground was blown wide open three tents away, and there was an explosion of smoke, dust and rock. Three bombs had fallen on us, as though from out of nowhere. Hunger was screaming in our bowels, but we left the meal and crawled on our bellies feeling around for hiding places. Then the lights went out, and the command was given for the troops to run over to the baggage – for all of our bags of belongings had been stacked together almost two hundred meters away – and for each of us to grab whichever bag his hand happened to fall on. When we returned to our tents, our bags would be distributed to their owners.

François approached me and placed his arm around my shoulders. He said to me, “I’m going to let my hand fall where it may, and if I happen upon my own bag, then that’s a sign that I will return from the war safe and sound. If not, then I will die, far from my wife, my children, my mother, my home, and my country.”

I thought he was joking, and said to him, “Are you crazy? There must be twelve hundred bags. How can you expect to find your bag in that huge pile?”

But he didn’t answer me. We followed the road we had taken, walking at times, running at others, and sometimes crawling on our bellies. The night was black as coal. We each grabbed a bag, and while we were on our way back François said to me, “What would you say if I had happened upon my own bag?”

“I would say that it was a coincidence. It might even be a miracle. But you can’t convince me that it’s a sign pointing to anything, even though I love you and want you to be safe from all harm.”

I heard movement, and I saw, in that extreme darkness, my friend’s hand reaching behind his back to feel the bag he was carrying. Then he said to me, “Coincidence! Call it what you will. As for me, I will not sway in my belief.” His voice was shaking. “I feel confident that this is my bag. The world is full of secrets, and between those secrets and our spirits lives humanity. Between us and every living and inanimate thing in existence, there is a hidden mutual attraction, a mutual understanding, an interaction: in our language we sometimes call it a coincidence, or we call it a miracle from heaven, and fail to understand it altogether. But we live with its consequences, and we stand before it perplexed. I tell you, if this is indeed my bag, then I will be unharmed.” There was a tone of genuine joy and hope in his voice as he said this.

We were still marching back. My hand too began to reach behind my back, though I was scarcely aware of it. I remembered that in the right side of my own bag there was a safety pin that I had stuck there to mend a tear. A desire tugged at me to find out whether that safety pin was there. Could this be my bag? But my hand froze, would not obey my impulse. A strange anxiety gripped me, even though only a minute before I had been making fun of François for his belief in such superstitions. I managed to regain my composure, and I said to myself, “Am I crazy? Is it possible that my bag could have appeared to me amid

twelve hundred others? But who knows? Maybe luck placed it right in front of me to pick up. What a surprise it would be if I stretched my hand back to the right side of the bag and found the safety pin! But what's the point? We'll be back at camp in a minute, and I'll see in the light whether or not this is my bag. I will have no choice but to identify it then, so why bother trying to identify it now?"

Finally I reached back anyway, trembling with apprehension. But having scarcely touched the edge of the bag, my hand recoiled from it. I focused my gaze in the darkness, and saw that François was running back to the camp ahead of me, anxious to find out whether he had his own bag. I almost laughed at my own stupidity. I reached back to the right side of the bag, and damned if my hand didn't land right on the safety pin. My head was spinning. I examined the pin carefully by touch. This was definitely the one! It was my bag! You can't imagine the sort of exultation that flooded my heart at that rarest moment of all the moments in life. But it was an exultation mixed with surprise. A restlessness flowed in my blood, from the top of my head to the arches of my feet. My heart was wrenched so severely that I heard the pounding in my ribs as though it were the ringing of a bell.

During the course of that march, I went from mocking my friend's superstition to having faith in it as though it were a holy prophecy, despite my lack of belief in all prophecies and prophets. I began to reconsider, and wished I could take back what I had said to François.

When I arrived back at camp, my first course of action was to get this bag into the light, to make sure it was mine. As I did so, a great conceitedness overtook me. I felt an indescribable pride, and a disdain for the din of those who were shouting numbers and throwing bags around, yelling and cursing.

Then I looked into the matter of François, who was sitting in a corner with his bag between his feet, silently staring at it, with his head in his hands. I knew what had happened to him. I wanted to cheer him up, and take back what I had said to him earlier, before we had gone to get the bags. But my strength failed me, and my tongue stuck in my mouth. The faith which filled his heart had filled mine as well. I was ashamed of stammering like this in front of him, so I covered it over with sarcasm and lies. I threw my bag on the ground and said to my friend, "I didn't find my bag, either. Ferdinand had it. Do you know him? The business of all soldiers is my business and yours, you know. Anyway, why are you over here all alone, brainless? What, do you think that the unit is going to be fed a meal of hot lead and fire? Aren't you ashamed, you coward?" – but I was the real coward – "Wouldn't you be ashamed to watch death take twelve hundred soldiers, while you're exempt just because you had the dream to end all dreams, or because you found your own bag by accident?"

François lifted his eyes to me, and I noticed in them a terrifying struggle between his courage and his belief. He shook his head, and his moustache flapped like the wings of a bat. He mumbled, "I'm going to die."

From that time on, the idea of death became all-consuming for François, persevering with every breath he took. When he ate, he saw death on the plate. When he slept, death was in his bed. It was as though, when he had picked up the wrong bag among twelve hundred,

a pact had been sealed between him and death.

I've told you that François was a brave soldier. Well, after this accident of fate, his bravery turned to near-madness. He would throw himself at the bullets as though he were throwing a stone aimlessly. When an offensive was being waged, he would be the first to lead the attack. When we had to retreat, he was the last to leave the battlefield. When the generals needed some reconnaissance, and they asked the troops, "Who's up for it this time?," he wouldn't let anyone else accept this important mission fraught with dangers. It was freely granted to him, of course, and I said to him, "You jackass! If you're so afraid of death, why are you offering yourself up to it as a tasty meal at every opportunity?"

He smiled humorlessly, and answered, "I'm not afraid of death, and I never have been. But I am going to die. Death lies in wait for me whether I'm fighting in the first column or the last. He's waiting for me in the air and on the land. And I want to let him know that I'm not running from him. What's the use of running from him, when he's hiding in my clothes like vipers, slithering up my back to my shoulders and down onto my chest, coiling around my neck?"

Months passed.

The good news got around that the war had ended. Jubilation and cries of victory filled the air. The troops heartily embraced each other. Laughing and overcome by a great joy, I shook my friend's hand and said to him, "See! It's like I told you: don't believe in superstitions. The war has come to an end, and here you are healthy as an ox. Not a scratch on you. The bombs and bullets rolled off of you like water off a duck's back. The sun has risen again, and everything's bright and clear. Take your glass and drink a victory toast. After all, haven't we won? And haven't you had a part in the victory? Drink up! Drink a toast to our triumph!"

"It's only a toast to death."

Upon hearing this reply, I could not doubt that my friend had gone mad. I was truly worried about him, and I began to keep a very watchful and concerned eye on him from that day forth. I swore to myself that I would accompany him back to his homeland, return him safely to his family, and entrust him to them so that they might put his mind and his nerves to rest after the shocks and horrors which he had met in battle.

We had to march a great distance on foot on our return from the theater of battle, in order to arrive at a road suitable for driving cars, where we would be picked up. Fortunately, François and I were in the same column on that march. But before we had even been marching for two hours, I saw him remove the rifle from his shoulder and throw it in the bushes beside the narrow road, which the unit had been following through the middle of wide and desolate fields. Then he looked over at me and said, "Throw away your rifle!" He raised his voice and glance around at the troops, shouting, "Throw away your rifles, all of you! Throw away your rifles, my friends!"

I tried to explain to him the consequences of what he was doing, and to bring him back to reason. He just stared at me, menacingly, wrinkling his brows as though to threaten me. Then his face relaxed and he began to chuckle, saying, “The war is over! The war is over! Long live peace! Long live peace! Cry out with me: Long live peace on earth! Tomorrow we will sleep on our own comfortable beds instead of in the trenches; with the sweet smell of our beloved wives instead of the strangling stench of gunpowder. The war is over! The war is over!”

A soldier near us went into the bushes and carried the gun back to its owner, and when François saw it once more, a sad calmness returned to him. He took hold of the rifle, turning it over between his hands, and looking down its barrel, examining every part of it as though he were seeing a gun for the first time in his life. Then he swung it over his shoulder, and we continued down the road.

We marched for two whole weeks. Sixteen hours a day of continuous marching, with eight hours at night for dinner, sleep and breakfast. The rain was pouring down on us. The rain, mixed with four months’ worth of dried, caked on sweat, caused our clothes to stick to us. But that and much more would have been tolerable if it we hadn’t had to carry the guns the whole time. By the end of the third day, each one of us felt as though his bayonet would notch its way through his shoulder straight to the armpit. One couldn’t tell whether his shoulder could take that kind of abuse or whether it would simply fall off one day. Starting on the third day, each of us began to lighten his load bit by bit. First went the woolen blankets: we’d throw away one and still have one left. Then we’d throw away a large amount of ammunition, then some of us threw away our rifles, and the rest followed on the fourth, fifth, or sixth day. By the fourteenth day, none of the soldiers were still carrying rifles, except for François and a handful of others. I invited him to throw his away, and he said to me, “When I threw it away the first time you all laughed at me. I’m holding on to it now no matter what you say.”

I watched him struggling and weakening under its weight, and pitied him, to the point that I tried to remove it from his shoulder by force. But he punched me in the face. I was patient with him as only an understanding friend can be.

At last we arrived at the main road. We set up camp and began to relax and wait for the cars. We slept deeply that night.

I awoke at about nine in the morning to François shaking me by the shoulder. Rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, I asked him why he was up so early. He didn’t answer. I looked closely at him: he was disheveled, and his eyes were bloodshot and ready to pop out of his face. I sat up, fully awake now, and he said to me:

“I’m going to die. Didn’t I tell you I was going to die? Last night I dreamt that I was still at the front, and that the enemy was lobbing shells at us. Everyone started digging trenches to protect themselves, but when I looked for my pick-axe it wasn’t there. I cried out to those around me to see if maybe one of them could give me a pick-axe or a shovel, but not one voice answered. I set to work digging at the earth with my fingernails, until blood

flowed from them. I felt that my strength was failing me, but I didn't care. I kept digging.

"The blood became a stream, and my attention turned from digging the hole to emptying it of my blood. I began ladling it up with my hands and tossing it out. Then I was thirsty, and took out my water-skin, but there wasn't a drop of water in it. I leaned over the hole, which was now a red puddle, and began to gulp from it until my thirst was quenched. The taste of my blood was indescribably sweet in my mouth. But however much I drank, it only increased my thirst, and I was compelled to drink more. I kept it up until the puddle was dry.

"Then I looked in and saw that there was something shiny at the bottom. I opened my eyes wide, and saw one of the richest treasures in the world: pearls, diamonds, gold, emeralds, and various other unnamed jewels, shining like the sun. Then I was afraid that the light from the treasure would be visible to my companions, and I descended into the hole, placing myself over the treasure like a hen places herself over her chicks. But the rays of light continued to escape through my hands and between my legs. I decided I would have to bury both the treasure and myself with dirt. I put the dirt back where it had been, burying myself with the treasure.

"Are you listening, my friend? I put the dirt back and buried myself. That dream can only mean that I'm going to die. I am going to die. Didn't I tell you I wouldn't return to my home and family in one piece?"

Truly, François' dream was terrifying. But I didn't find it strange that such a dream would visit someone in his state of anxiety. I tried to ease his mind about what he had told me, as he stood silent, blankly staring at the ground.

The cars were now days late coming to get us. Rumors began to spread among the troops, and their grumbling reached a fever pitch. The officers saw no way to avoid doing their now meaningless work, and orders went out to us to perform drills twice a day, once before noon and once after. Each one of us had to go out into the fields and find a stick to carry, in place of the rifles we had tossed away on the march. While we were doing the first exercise, François left his column and went straight up to the officer. The officer was surprised at this, and he froze in place, staring. The officer and the rest of us all stood aghast as François lifted his gun over his head, then threw it down attempting to smash it, yelling, "War! War! Always war! You told us the war was over! You told us before we ever enlisted that this was the war to end all wars! What are these exercises for, then? Do you want to start a new war?"

The officer flared up with rage, and muttered a punishment for François that none of us could hear, then ordered him to pick up the rifle. Instead, François kicked it, smiling contemptuously. Then, with his eyes gleaming, he grabbed his rifle, turned around to grab a rock, then leaned over, and began violently pounding his gun with the rock, baring his teeth

like a cornered animal. The officer had no patience left, threw himself upon François and dragged him aside. François, with his huge boots, tried to kick the officer, but missed. From the columns of troops came cries of contempt for the officers, and as though encouraged by this, François turned to the troops and yelled, “My friends, let every one of you return to his home!” – but what home was he talking about, out there on that desolate plain? – “They have lied to us. They want to thrust us right back into war, as though death hasn’t had its fill yet. But death *has* had its fill. It has!”

I had been following François’ movements and listening to his words, appalled. Although the troops had now started to take the officer’s side, they were waiting to find out how he would get out of this dilemma. The officer then turned and straightened back up like a pillar, ordering one column of troops to step forward and arrest François for insubordination. I was in that column. When we had brought him to the tent to which the officer had directed us, my friend said to me, “I told you that death had eaten his fill, but he hasn’t had his dessert yet. He will sweeten his tooth with me – you’ll see.”

The officer arrived shortly after us, and was determined to be the one who placed the shackles on François’ hands. We helped him do so. I grabbed his left arm and another soldier grabbed the right. While I was pulling on François’ arm, he shot a quick glance at me that I couldn’t interpret: was it a look of blame, or of disgust? But I couldn’t keep my eyes on his, and turned away, wiping tears from my face on a sleeve.

I tried to explain to the officer that François was sick, and that he should be forgiven because he hadn’t known what he was doing. But he wouldn’t listen to me, and ordered me to bunk in the tent next to that of the prisoner, threatening to place the cuffs on my hands if I uttered a single syllable. But I began to ingratiate myself to him, hoping that he would hear me out, for he was a good-hearted man. He lit a cigarette as I began to explain to him what I knew of François’ story: the bag, the gun, the dream. He was convinced by my words and called in the two doctors (for there were two doctors in our regiment), who then conferred with each other. It seemed they differed in their opinions of the matter: one of them said François was insane; the other said he was only disturbed, and deserved to have his punishment increased. The officer intervened, giving preference to the first doctor’s opinion, which would at least save him from further burden in the matter.

In his prison for two days, François remained surprisingly calm all day long, but when the night came a terrible change afflicted him. I watched from a slit in the side of his tent, as he began to tear at his hair, demanding that someone bring him his rifle: “Give me my rifle! Give it back to me!” Then his voice would soften, becoming imploring and tearful: “Don’t you want to give me back my rifle? I’ll make it up to you all. I’d like to see it, to ask its forgiveness for the sins that I committed against it. I tried to break you, my beautiful gun. I despised you – you, the rifle that I worship. But you’ll forgive me. You’ll forgive me, won’t you? Certainly, certainly you will, hahaha! I will kiss you, I will wash you with my tears.” Then his voice again became violent: “My enemies, death comes for you from this barrel right here,” upon which he pointed at the place where his mad ravings had caused

him to imagine a gun barrel. “That’s how we build nations. From the barrel of a gun, we construct civilizations. Right from this dark little hole come thousands of widows, bereaved mothers, and those who have lost a brother, an uncle, or a lover. From right here, right here, hahahahaha! Turn back, my enemies, turn back! But what am I saying? No, no, come here! Come closer, all you soldiers who would fight me! Why do you fight me, and why should I fight you? Don’t point your gun at me! What have I done to you? Have I killed your father? Have I insulted your mother, or robbed your home? What have I done to you to make you want to kill me? Who am I to you? Have you ever seen me before now, or even heard my name? How can you kill someone you don’t know? I told you not to point your gun at me. Put it aside. Throw it away, smash it! Smash your gun, smash that cursed tool! Smash it! Smash it! Smash it! Take a rock and pound it to dust, and pound it some more. Smash, smash, smash! Hahahahahaha! Long live death!”

The next morning, there were shouts of joy among the troops. The cars had come to take each of us to his homeland, to the peace of his own home, to the comfort of his own bed, into the arms of his family and friends. On that beautiful morning I awoke to the sound of men singing anthems, to the roar of car engines, to the noise of shuffling shoes and men loading their belongings onto the cars.

I went to the officer seeking his counsel on the matter of the prisoner. He put his hand on my shoulder, and asked me if I would take charge of François, to watch over him on the road. So I set his mind at rest, saying that I would return my friend safely to his home, even if that delayed me a day or two from seeing my family.

The day was bright and clear as the cars sped us homeward. François let his gaze wander aimlessly over the fields to his right and left. Placing my hand on his shoulder, I asked him things from time to time: “Aren’t we there yet? How happy your wife and son will be! So you didn’t send them the good news about your coming home today? But maybe you were right not to: it will be a sweet surprise for them. Imagine your son pouncing on you and hanging from your neck! How old is he now? He must have become a young man while you’ve been gone, I suppose.”

“Hey, driver! Take it easy! Do you want to throw us into the valley below?” François yelled, shaking the driver by the arm.

I called out, feeling my heart pound with happiness, “Long live life! Long live life!”

François turned his face toward me and smiled worriedly. Then he put his hand out the car window and pointed, yelling, “That’s it, that’s it!”

“What?”

“The house, the house! Our house! Hurry, driver, hurry! Hey, not too fast! Do you want the car to turn over?” After saying this, he looked over at me with composure, saying, “Death is also found under the wheels of a car, is it not?”

“You’re kidding me! Here you are, returning home, and all you can think about is death!”

François spread out his arms, grabbing my knee on one side and the door of the car with the other, until we had arrived in front of the steps to his house. I got out of the car before him and invited him to follow. But he stayed put. I walked back to the car and got him to prop himself up on my shoulder as we walked. When we arrived at the door he raised his fist to knock, but his hand stopped short. I asked what was wrong, and he slowly turned toward me – so slowly that it was like waiting for a stone to budge. His eyes opened, frozen with terror. I wanted to turn away from those staring eyes, but I couldn’t. I waited for him to turn them away, but he didn’t. I tried to say something to him, but my tongue failed me. My heart began to throb, and I felt as though I were strangling. Then I thought I would reach my hand out to comfort him, but it stuck at my side. A long minute passed, as though it were a lifetime. His eyes flashed at mine like glass in the midday sun, and just then I heard the creaking of the door as a hand from inside opened it. I shuddered, and my eyes twitched. My tongue then came untied, and I was about to... But just then François fell onto the threshold of his home, a lifeless corpse.