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opening extract from

A Little Piece of Ground

written by

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published by

Macmillan Publishers

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1

Karim sat on the edge of his bed, his head framed by the mass of football posters which covered the wall. He was frowning at the piece of paper in his hand.

The ten best things that I want to do (or be) in my life, he had written, *by Karim Aboudi, 15 Jaffa Apartments, Ramallah, Palestine*. Carefully, he underlined it.

Underneath, in his best handwriting, he listed:

1. *Champion footballer of the entire world (even I can dream).*
2. *Extremely cool, popular and good-looking and at least 1.90 metres tall (or anyway taller than Jamal).*
3. *The liberator of Palestine and a national hero.*
4. *Famous TV presenter or actor (famous, anyway).*
5. *Best-ever creator of new computer games.*
6. *My own person, allowed to do what I like without parents and big brothers and teachers on my back all the time.*
7. *Inventor of an acid formula to dissolve reinforced steel as used in tanks and helicopter gunships (Israeli ones).*
8. *Stronger than Joni and my other mates (this is not asking much).*

He stopped and began to chew the end of his biro. In the

distance, the sound of an ambulance siren wailed through the afternoon air. He lifted his head and stared out of the window. His eyes, large and dark, peered out from under the straight black hair which framed his slim, tanned face.

He started writing again.

9. *Alive. Plus, if I have to get shot, only in places that heal up. Not in the head or spine,* inshallah.
10.

But number ten defeated him. He decided to keep the slot free in case a good idea should come to him later.

He read through what he'd written and sat for a while, tapping the end of the biro against the collar of his striped sweatshirt, then he took a fresh sheet of paper. More quickly this time, he wrote:

The ten things I don't want to do (or be)

1. *Not a shopkeeper like Baba.*
2. *Not a doctor, like Mama keeps saying I should. (Why? She knows I hate blood.)*
3. *Not short.*
4. *Not married to a girl like Farah.*
5. *Not shot in the back and stuck in a wheelchair for the rest of my life like that boy who used to go to my school.*
6. *Not spotty like Jamal.*
7. *Not having our house flattened by Israeli tanks and ending up in some lousy tent.*
8. *Not having to go to school. At all.*
9. *Not living under occupation. Not being stopped all the time by Israeli soldiers. Not being scared. Not being trapped indoors.*
10. *Not dead.*

He read his lists through again. They weren't quite right.

There were things, important things, that he'd left out, he was sure of it.

He heard raised voices outside the door. His brother, Jamal, was arguing with their mother. He would come into their shared bedroom in a minute and Karim's moment of peace would be over.

He reached down for the box under his bed, in which he kept his private things, ready to stow his lists inside it, but before he could squirrel them away, Jamal had burst into the room.

It was obvious at first glance that Jamal was in a bad mood. His brown eyes, under the wedge of black hair that fell across his forehead, snapped with irritation. Karim tried to hide his lists behind his back, but Jamal lunged forwards and whisked them out of his hands.

'What's all this secrecy about, then?' he said. 'What are you plotting, you little creep?'

Karim jumped up and tried to grab the sheets of paper back again, but Jamal, who was tall for his seventeen years, was holding them above his head, out of Karim's reach. Karim dived at his brother and pulled at the belt loop of his jeans, trying to wrestle him down onto his bed, but Jamal kept him off easily with one hand, and, still holding the lists out of reach, read through them both.

Karim waited, his face burning, for the scornful comments that he knew would come. They did.

'Champion footballer? You?' sneered Jamal. 'With your two left feet? I think I can see you scoring a goal in the World Cup – or not. You? Liberator of Palestine? With your brains – or lack of?'

Karim swallowed. There was no point in fighting with Jamal. The best thing was to pretend he didn't care.

'Don't worry,' he said, as casually as he could. 'Jealousy is a natural emotion. When I'm world-famous I'll be good to you. I won't hold anything you say against you, not even that

crack about my feet, which is totally unfair because I can cream a ball in between the goalposts like Zinedine Zidane any time I like.'

Jamal threw the pieces of paper back to him. He was bored with the subject already.

'So you ought to be able to,' he said, 'seeing as how you've probably spent at least a year of your life kicking that damned football against the wall downstairs, on and on and on, driving everyone in this building totally nuts.'

Cheated out of a proper fight with his little brother, he began to box the air, kicking Karim's nearly new best trainers out of the way and shuffling around in the small space between the beds as if it was a miniature boxing ring.

Karim went to the window and stared down at the ground, five storeys below. An empty plot lay next to the apartment block. It had been flattened, ready for the builders to start work, but nothing had happened there so far. Karim had made it his own, his personal football ground, the place where he played his special game.

He could feel his legs twitching as he pressed his face against the cool glass. With all his being, he longed to be down there, doing what he loved best, kicking the ball against the wall, losing himself in the rhythm of it.

Kick, bounce, catch-ball-on-end-of-foot, kick, bounce . . .

When the game went well, his mind would click into neutral. His head would empty out, and his legs and arms would take over. The rhythm would satisfy and soothe him.

Jamal had flopped down onto his bed, stretching out his long, slender legs.

'Get away from the window,' he growled at Karim. 'They'll see you. They might take a pot shot.'

Karim turned his head and looked in the other direction. The Israeli tank that had been squatting at the crossroads just below the apartment block for days now had moved a few metres closer. A soldier was sitting on top of it, his gun

cradled in his arms. Beside the tank were three other men, one crouching down, talking into a mobile phone.

There was no chance, none at all, that he'd be able to go outside and play his game while the tank was there. Since a Palestinian gunman had shot two people in an Israeli café two weeks ago, the Israelis had set up another curfew, which meant that the whole city had been locked down. Everyone in Ramallah had been trapped indoors for those two weeks, unable to go out (except for a two-hour break once or twice a week) by night or day. If anyone tried – if they so much as stuck a foot out of their front door – the soldiers would open fire and blow it away. Jamal was right. Even standing by the window was dangerous.

He turned away. He wished now that he hadn't looked down at his football place. It had made him long to be outside, to be able to run and jump, to swing his arms and kick.

'Anyway,' he said to Jamal, 'I haven't noticed you being so fantastic at scoring yourself.'

Jamal turned his head to stare at him.

'What are you on about now?'

'You're a lousy shot. You know you are,' Karim said daringly. 'I saw you and your mates throwing stones at the tanks last week. You missed, every time. And don't pretend you weren't aiming properly, because you were.'

Jamal sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed, pleased to have an excuse for a wrestling bout at last.

'You little spy. You've been following me again.'

He advanced on Karim, his arms outstretched. Karim shifted away, shuffling himself to the head of his bed, ruckling the scarlet blanket with his white-socked feet, his back against the wall, his hands held up in surrender.

'Lay off me, will you? I won't tell Mama. Not if you leave me alone.' He registered with satisfaction the look of caution that had crossed Jamal's face. 'And,' he went on, 'I won't tell

Baba either, if you give me one hour of totally unrestricted time on the computer without a single interruption. No, two.'

Disgusted, Jamal retreated. Karim could see that he was searching for something cutting to say, and failing. With one hunch of his shoulder, he turned away to the table, grabbed his headphones, hurled himself down onto his bed and clamped them to his ears.

Thrilled with his triumph, Karim jumped up and settled himself at the computer, which took up almost the whole of the table between the two beds. He would do it this time. He would get up to Level 5 in Lineman. He'd nearly managed it last week, but then there'd been a power cut and the computer had crashed just as victory was in sight.

He pushed the tottering pile of textbooks to the edge of the table. He had lists of English words to learn, as well as the dates of the Arab Conquests.

'They can stop you coming to school,' his teacher had said, before the curfew had been imposed, 'but don't let them stop you learning. Work at home. Your future is Palestine's. Your country needs you. Don't forget it.'

He'd tried to work once or twice, but it had been impossible to concentrate for long, with Jamal coming in and out of the room all the time, and Farah and Sireen, his two little sisters, noisily playing in the sitting room next door. After a few minutes, he'd usually ended up leafing through old comics and weaving delightful daydreams, imagining, for example, that Jamal was a million miles away, preferably in a space capsule endlessly orbiting round the planet Jupiter – or Saturn, he didn't mind which – and that the computer was his and his alone.

And now, for the next two hours, it was.

When my two hours are up I'll have a proper go at Biology, he told himself, as he stared at the screen, waiting for the game to boot up.

Peace settled on the room. Jamal had got up and gone back

into the sitting room, to settle himself on the old red velvet sofa and watch the news with his father. Sireen, who was four and had been crying all morning, had stopped at last, and Farah, who was eight, seemed to have gone across the landing to play with her best friend, Rasha, who lived in the apartment opposite.

The game began. At once, he was totally absorbed.

The opening moves were familiar. He'd played Lineman often enough to go through them almost automatically. Soon, though, he was doing the harder stuff. He tensed over the keyboard, his eyes boring into the screen, his fingers responding with lightning speed to his brain's commands. Slowly he was climbing through the levels. This time, he might really make it.

The door of the bedroom opened. He didn't look round, but he sensed his mother's presence. He needn't need to turn and look at her to know that a deep frown was scoring her forehead between her sharp black brows.

'You want an education, Karim, or you want to grow up like your uncle Bashir?' She paused, waiting for an answer. Karim said nothing. 'You want to mend roads for the next fifty years? Break your back in the hot sun, shovelling dirt?' Another silence. 'Suit yourself. Don't expect me to wash your dirty clothes for the rest of your life, that's all.'

He grunted, having barely heard what she had said. She sighed with exasperation and closed the door again. The game went on. One by one, the targets fell, and level succeeded level. Breathless, almost dizzy, Karim willed the screen to obey him, and when at last it exploded into stars as he reached the highest level, his head seemed to explode too.

'Ye-e-ess!' he yelled, and he slammed out of the bedroom into the sitting room and danced around the rest of his family, punching the air in triumph. 'I did it! I did it! Level Five! First time ever! Champion of the world! Victory is mine! Yield and obey, all lesser mortals!'

Jamal got up off the sofa.

'Level Five? In Lineman? Let's have a look.'

He pushed past Karim into the bedroom.

Hassan Aboudi, Karim's father, was sitting bent over on the sofa, staring at the TV screen, watching people wailing at a funeral. The announcer's solemn voice seemed to fill the room.

Five Palestinians, including two children, died during clashes between Israeli soldiers and stone-throwing youths in the West Bank town of Nablus this morning.

Hassan Aboudi turned to look angrily at Karim.

'Stop that noise at once,' he snapped. 'Get back to your homework or I'll take the damned computer away.'

Lamia, Karim's mother, was half reclining on an easy chair nearby. Her legs were crossed and a pink slipper dangled from her raised foot. Sireen had been sleeping against her chest, but she woke at the noise and struggled in her mother's arms, beginning to cry fretfully again. The mark of a button from Lamia's red blouse showed clearly on the little girl's cheek.

'Now look what you've done,' Lamia said reproachfully, lifting the damp black curls off Sireen's hot little forehead. 'You know how unwell she is. Don't you remember what earache feels like? I'd just got her settled, poor little thing. You might think what it's like for other people sometimes, Karim. Or is that really too much to ask?'

Jamal lounged back into the room, his hands in his pockets.

'It was only Level Four, you sad person. Thought you were one of the big boys, did you? Well, I've got news for you. You aren't.'

Karim felt his pleasure and triumph drain away and the miserable sense of imprisonment that the game had kept at bay for the last two happy hours closed in on him again.

'I hate you! You're lying! You know you are!' he shouted, aiming a blow at Jamal's chest.

Jamal laughed and ducked out of the way. Karim rushed back to look at the computer screen, but Jamal had turned the machine off. Now he couldn't prove a thing.

Desperate to be alone, to get away from his whole unbearable family, he went to the front door, opened it, stepped outside and closed it after him. The landing and stairs weren't much, but at least he'd be on his own for a bit.

Almost at once the door behind him opened again.

'Karim,' his father said, his voice tense with anxiety, 'what do you think you're doing? Get back in here at once.'

'I'm not going outside, Baba,' Karim said. 'I'll stay on the landing. I just – I need to be on my own for a bit.'

His father's face softened.

'All right, but only for a little while. Don't go near the window. Don't let them see you. Keep yourself out of sight. Come back in after ten minutes or your mother will start going crazy on me.'

The sound of the TV news followed Karim out through the open door of the flat.

Israeli troops shelled a refugee camp in Gaza this morning, killing nine Palestinians, including a three-year-old child. Five Israeli woman died and three children were badly injured when a Palestinian gunman opened fire in a crowded shopping street in Jerusalem this morning. A spokesman . . .

He pulled the door to behind him, shutting the voice out, then balled his fist and punched at the wall, painfully grazing his knuckles.

2

Three more eternal days passed before the curfew was lifted and then the break was only for two hours. A soldier on the tank down below shouted the news through a megaphone.

'From six o'clock in the evening for two hours,' his voice boomed, 'going out of your houses is permitted.'

Lamia let out a sob of relief.

'If they'd kept us penned up in here one more day,' she said, wringing out a cool cloth to lay on Sireen's head, 'this child's ear infection would have gone into the brain. Her temperature's been way up for three days now. And anyway, we've almost run out of food.'

Her husband was already on the telephone. He replaced the receiver and turned to her.

'Dr Selim's given me the name of the right antibiotic. I'll take her down to the pharmacy as soon as we can get out. He says to start her with a double dose tonight.'

He went off to his bedroom, shaking his head.

'Punishing children,' Karim heard him mutter. 'Let God punish them.'

It wasn't only Sireen's ear that was likely to be saved by the break in the curfew, thought Karim. Just one more day of

imprisonment and there would have been a massacre of the entire Aboudi family. He himself would have personally murdered both Farah and Jamal, his parents would have murdered each other, and the whole family would have ganged up to murder him.

He fished his mobile out from the mess of stuff on the shelf above his bed and punched in the number of Joni, his best friend.

'I've got to take my homework into school and get a whole lot more,' he told him. 'Have you?'

'No. My teacher called. He's coming by my father's shop. He says he'll pick it up there.'

'You are lucky,' Karim said enviously. 'I wish I went to your school. They're much stricter at mine. There's only two hours. We won't have time to meet.'

'Yes, we will. I'll come down to your school. I'll meet you at the gate.'

The last few minutes before six o'clock came seemed to Karim like the longest since the curfew had begun. He felt like a can of Pepsi that had been shaken up and was full of fizz, just bursting to shoot out in a wild, frothing spray.

By 5.55 the whole family was poised to rush out. Lamia waited, impatiently smoothing down the blue material of her skirt, her purse in her hand. Hassan was holding Sireen, ready to run with her down to the pharmacy. Farah was frantically searching her bedroom for the pink top she was determined to put on before she skipped out to play in the forecourt of the flats with the other children of the building. Karim, in clean jeans and a fresh sweatshirt, was reluctantly putting together his homework. It was only now that he came to look at the scrappy bits of paper and the half-finished exercises in his books that he realized how little he'd managed to do.

The hands on the fancy pendulum clock that hung on the sitting-room wall moved round to six at last, and with it came the longed-for revving of the tanks' engines. With the front

door ajar, everyone listened eagerly as the huge machines clanked away from the street corner and retreated to the bottom of the hill.

Jamal, his thick hair freshly gelled, was the first out. He jumped down the stairs six at a time, with Karim right after him.

'Karim! Meet me at the supermarket at half past seven!' his mother screeched after him. 'I can't carry all the shopping back on my own. And Jamal, if you're not back before eight, I'll . . .'

But neither boy heard what she planned to do. They were out on the street already.

The fresh air on his face, the wind in his hair and the wonderful liberty to run and jump intoxicated Karim. He had taken the bottom flight of steps in one wild leap and now he was jumping up and down and running around the parking lot in a wide joyful circle.

Jamal had taken off at the speed of a bullet, but instead of going up the hill, towards the school, he was racing down it. Karim stopped running and watched him, eyes narrowed. He guessed what Jamal had in mind. He would be meeting up with Basim and his other friends and making for the wrecked bus park which the soldiers had taken over and where they had their base. He could imagine the great armoured machines lying down there, like a row of green scaly monsters, crouched, waiting to crawl back up the hill and pin the people of Ramallah down in their houses again when the two precious hours of freedom were up.

Karim's stomach lurched with fright at the thought of what Jamal and his friends would be doing. They'd be picking up stones and hurling them at the tanks, shouting insults at the soldiers inside. The soldiers would have their fingers on the triggers of their rifles and they'd wait for a bit, and then

they'd get angry, or they'd panic, and they'd fire. Someone, sure as anything, would get hurt, or even killed.

If it's Jamal, thought Karim, he'll be a martyr, and I'll be so proud of him I'll never, ever think anything bad about him again.

He had set off by now and was running fast towards the school. With luck, it wouldn't take long to hand in his school work and grab the next assignment.

Joni was at the school gates already. He was moving bizarrely, spinning and kicking on his sturdy legs, and punching out with his plump arms. The boys who were streaming past him on their way in through the battered old gates looked at him oddly, but Karim, used to Joni's habit of practising karate kicks, was unimpressed.

He had run fast for the last ten minutes and, unused to exercise after the long days indoors, was so puffed that for a moment or two he couldn't speak. He bent over, gasping for breath.

When at last he straightened up, he found Joni's foot high up in the air, ten centimetres from his face. Karim pushed it down.

'Listen,' he said, 'I got to Level Five in Lineman.'

'You didn't.'

'I did.'

He was impressed, Karim could tell, but he was trying not to show it.

Joni followed Karim up the stairs towards the upper row of classrooms. Other boys were crowding round the open doors.

'Where's Mr Mohammed?' Karim asked one of them.

'Not here,' he said. 'He hasn't turned up. He's not coming.'

'Great!' Karim disliked his stern teacher. He grabbed Joni's arm. 'There's no point in hanging around here any longer. We can go and play football. I've got to meet my mother at

the supermarket, but she won't be ready till at least half past seven. We've got nearly an hour.'

A crowd of boys was already assembled on the football pitch behind the school and a game had just begun. There was no time to organize teams. Everyone joined in, playing around, dodging and passing and shooting at the goal.

For the first few minutes Karim felt clumsy and breathless, running as if his legs were as stiff and weak as matchsticks, missing the goals he tried to score and being easily outmanoeuvred by anyone who tried to tackle him. Then, suddenly, he felt his skill coming back. Power juddered through him. A rare magic tingled through his feet.

The light was going now, the sun sinking fast towards the horizon. The white stone walls of Ramallah were turning a pale yellow. Soon they would be golden, then pink. In more normal times, the smell of frying onions would be wafting from open windows and music would drift across the town from a dozen radios. Tonight, though, the return of darkness would bring only the soldiers and the tanks, the occasional burst of gunfire and the wail of sirens.

Karim had just scored a peach of a goal and was enjoying his triumph with crows of delight when the caretaker came running round the side of the building. His red and white checked *keffiyeh* headdress was flapping round his shoulders and he was waving his arms urgently.

'Out! You've all got to get out now!' he shouted. 'I'm shutting up the compound! I've got to get home before the tanks come back!'

Karim felt a thump of anger and savagely kicked at the ground. The precious two hours of normal life were over. There was no telling when the next time would be.

Together, he and Joni went out through the school gates and set off towards the supermarket.

'Hey,' said Joni suddenly. 'Your brother's over there.'

Karim looked up, surprised. Jamal was some way ahead,

further along the road, with a gang of friends. Sharply dressed, they were standing around the door of the Internet café, their favourite place in town.

He was relieved. There could have been no violent clash down by the tanks today.

'Isn't that your sister, too? Look, isn't that Violette?' he said, pointing towards a girl in tight pink trousers with swinging shoulder-length hair who was coming out of a shop on the far side of the street.

Joni looked up quickly and dropped his eyes again, then he sidled round to walk on Karim's far side.

'What's the matter with you?' Karim said, surprised.

'I don't want her to see me,' mumbled Joni. 'You don't know Violette.'

'I do. I've known her all my life.'

'You don't. She's just totally embarrassing. Last time I met her in the street she was with all her stupid friends and she called out, "Hey, little brother! Leila thinks you're really handsome." She does it to tease me. One day I'm going to strangle her. I mean this.'

Karim was no longer listening. He had noticed something else. His brother, the self-styled cool guy of Ramallah, was staring across at Violette with a soft, stupid look on his face. The very sight of it made Karim feel queasy.

He was about to dig Joni in the ribs and point out this odd new development when a roar came from down the hill. The soldiers were revving up the tanks' engines. They were about to roll back and take possession once more of the town.

'Mama! I've got to help Mama!' said Karim, suddenly remembering. 'I'll call you.'

His mother had already finished her shopping. She was struggling out onto the pavement, loaded with half a dozen bulging bags.

'Karim! There you are at last,' she snapped. 'Quick! They'll be here in a minute.'

She had hardly finished speaking when, from below, they heard a crackle as the soldiers' loudspeaker cleared its throat and the awful, frightening rumble as the tanks came nearer and nearer up the hill.

'*Mamnou'a al tajwwol!*' the loudspeaker blared out. 'Being outside is forbidden!'

'Hurry!' shouted Lamia. 'Run!'

Together they scrambled home, over the litter of stones and rubble covering the street, clutching the flimsy plastic handles on their supermarket bags, hoping that they would hold until they and their food supplies were safely back inside.