

Children of Olive

VISIONS IN RED

Book One of Children of the Olive

A Psychological Horror Novel

Sajjad Rasool

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DEDICATION

For the 71,000.

For the children who still draw red.

For the mothers who remember everything.

For the land that holds the names.

We do not forget.

We do not look away.

We do not blink.

ALSO BY SAJJAD RASOOL

The Whispering Ledger

Beneath the Willowbridge

Yellow Room Number Three

Carmilla's Orchard

The Vault of Amontillado Lane

China Ate Red Apple

The Shell (Spiral Arms Book 1)

The Memory (Spiral Arms Book 2)

The Choice (Spiral Arms Book 3)

The Bridge (Spiral Arms Book 4)

The Seed (Spiral Arms Book 5)

The Spiral (Spiral Arms Book 6)

ABOUT THE SERIES: Children of the Olive

Children of the Olive is a psychological horror saga set in a fictionalized Palestine, where the trauma of occupation has given birth to monsters.

They are called the "Hollow Ones." They do not blink. They appear at sites of massacres, checkpoints, and destroyed homes. They are made of silence.

This series follows Amal, a schoolteacher, Yasmin, a psychologist, and Huda, an elder who remembers 1948—as they uncover the pattern of these hauntings and learn to fight back.

The Books:

- Book 1: Visions in Red — The Drawing and the Discovery
- Book 2: Unblinking — The Stained Sites
- Book 3: The Bitter Well — The Horror of Water
- Book 4: Hollow Ground — The Erasure of History
- Book 5: Naming the Night — The Climax and Resistance

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book was written in the shadow of genocide.

As I write this (December 2024), the people of Gaza and the West Bank continue to endure a catastrophe that the world watches in real-time. The Nakba is not history; it is happening now.

The horrors in this book are fiction. But they are inspired by testimonies, reports, and the drawings of children who live under occupation. The "Hollow Ones" are not real. But the silence they represent is.

I am not Palestinian. I am a writer from Pakistan who believes that stories are a form of witness. This book is not a replacement for Palestinian voices—it is an amplification of the scream.

If you want to help, look up organizations providing aid to Gaza. If you want to understand, read the words of Palestinian authors, journalists, and poets.

We do not forget.

Sajjad Rasool

Karachi, Pakistan

December 2025

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sajjad Rasool is a fiction author from Karachi, Pakistan. His work explores trauma, memory, and resistance through the lens of horror and science fiction.

Chapter One: The Red Crayon

Part I: The First Drawing

The dust never truly settled in Falestinam. It hung in the air like a question no one wanted to answer, coating windowsills and door frames, gathering in the corners of rooms where mothers swept it away each morning only to find it returned by evening. Amal had learned to live with it, the way she had learned to live with so many things—the distant rumble of engines at night, the way her husband's eyes went empty when the news came on, the small rituals of survival that had become as ordinary as breathing.

She was cleaning Noor's room when she found the drawing.

It was a Tuesday, one of those rare quiet mornings when the checkpoints opened early and the streets outside hummed with something almost like normal life. Amal's husband, Fadi, had left for work at the clinic before dawn. Noor was in the kitchen, eating bread with za'atar and humming a song she'd learned at school—something about birds and olive trees, the kind of simple melody that children in Falestinam sang without understanding the weight of the words.

Amal had been reaching under the bed to retrieve a stray sock when her fingers brushed against paper. She pulled it out, expecting a worksheet or a picture of flowers, the kind of thing Noor usually drew—bright suns with smiling faces, houses with red roofs that looked nothing like the concrete blocks they actually lived in, families holding hands beneath skies that were always blue.

This was not like those drawings.

Amal sat back on her heels, the paper trembling slightly in her hands. The image was rendered in crayon, the strokes heavy and deliberate in a way that seemed wrong for a six-year-old's hand. At the center of the page stood a figure. A soldier. But not like the soldiers Noor might have glimpsed from the car window or seen standing at the checkpoint near the market—those were just shapes, uniforms and helmets that blurred together into background noise.

This soldier was different.

The helmet was drawn with careful precision, its rounded shape darker than the rest of the figure, as if Noor had pressed the crayon hard against the paper again and again. The body was bulky, covered in what looked like a tactical vest rendered in thick brown lines. The boots were black, reaching up to the knees. The weapon—some kind of rifle—was longer than the soldier's body, extending past the edge of the figure like an extra limb.

But it was the face that made Amal's breath catch in her throat.

The soldier had no mouth, no nose, no features at all except for the eyes. Two massive circles, colored in with red crayon so thick it had torn through the paper in places. The red was not the cheerful scarlet of apples or hearts. It was the dark, rust-colored red of something old and dried. Something that should not be there.

The soldier stood over a small car.

Amal's hands began to shake.

The car was gray, boxy, rendered with the simple shapes a child might use—four wheels, two windows, a roof. But the back seat was empty. Not just unoccupied—empty in a way that felt intentional, like Noor had deliberately left that space hollow. And hanging from one of the windows was something that might have been a blanket. Or might have been an arm.

The red of the soldier's eyes seemed to pulse in Amal's vision. She blinked, looked away, looked back. The drawing remained the same. Static. Just paper and wax. But she could not shake the feeling that something in it was watching her.

"Mama?"

Amal startled, shoving the drawing beneath the bed like it was something shameful. Noor stood in the doorway, a piece of bread still in her hand, crumbs dusting her chin. Her dark hair was pulled back in two uneven braids—Amal had done them herself that morning, distracted and hurried—and her school uniform was slightly too big, the sleeves hanging past her wrists.

"Yes, habibi?" Amal forced her voice steady.

"I can't find my blue crayon. The good one. Have you seen it?"

"No, I haven't. Maybe it's in your schoolbag."

Noor nodded, seemingly satisfied, and disappeared back toward the kitchen. Amal listened to her small footsteps recede, then slowly retrieved the drawing from under the bed.

She would ask Noor about it. She would ask, calmly and casually, the way the parenting books said to do. *Don't make them feel interrogated. Don't project your own fears onto their answers.* She had read those books when Noor was a baby, back when she still believed that reading the right words could protect her daughter from the world outside their walls.

But not now. Not yet.

Amal folded the drawing carefully, pressing the creases flat with her thumbnail, and slid it into her pocket. She would look at it again later, when she was alone. When she could think.

When she could figure out why a car with an empty back seat and something hanging from the window looked so familiar.

She sat on the edge of Noor's bed for a long moment, the small mattress creaking beneath her weight. The room was quiet except for the distant sounds of the city waking up—the clatter of a cart on the street below, the murmur of a radio from a neighbor's window, the bark of a dog somewhere in the alley behind their building. These were the sounds of ordinary life, the sounds that Amal had spent years learning to find comfort in. But today they felt thin, like a curtain stretched too tight over something that was pressing through from the other side.

She looked around Noor's room, really looked, in a way she hadn't done in months. The walls were painted pale blue—Amal had chosen the color herself when they first moved to this apartment, pregnant with Noor, full of plans and hopes that seemed naive now but had felt so solid at the time. The paint was peeling near the window frame where water had seeped through during the last winter rains. Above the bed, Noor had taped a row of her drawings: the usual collection of suns and houses and stick-figure families. Happy images. Normal images.

But now Amal found herself studying each one with new eyes. Was that sun smiling, or was its yellow face stretched into something else? Was that house with the red roof just a house, or was there something in the window—a shape too faint to make out, but definitely there?

She shook her head. This was ridiculous. She was seeing shadows where there were none, frightening herself with a child's crayon drawing. Noor was six years old. Six-year-olds drew strange things all the time. It was part of processing the world, the developmental psychologists said. The mind of a child was a strange and wonderful thing, full of monsters and magic and meanings that adults had long forgotten.

But the developmental psychologists didn't live in Falestinam.

They didn't wake every morning knowing that the checkpoint might be closed, that the water might not run, that the rumble in the distance might be thunder or might be something else entirely. They didn't send their children to schools with blue tarps on the roofs and UN flags at the gates. They didn't learn, from the time they were children themselves, to carry a mental map of safe routes and danger zones, of which streets to avoid after dark and which soldiers to never meet eyes with.

The developmental psychologists would say that Noor's drawing was a healthy expression of childhood anxiety. That the soldier with the red eyes was just a symbol, an archetype, the mind's way of processing fear into something tangible.

But they would not explain why the car in the drawing looked exactly like the car Amal had seen on the news three weeks ago—a car she had never described to Noor, never even mentioned, a car that had haunted her own dreams until she learned to push it away.

She stood abruptly, smoothing down the bedspread where she had wrinkled it, straightening the pillow, adjusting the stuffed rabbit that Noor slept with every night. Normal actions. Routine actions. The kind of things a mother did every morning without thinking.

But her hand shook slightly as she reached for the doorknob, and she could not quite shake the feeling that something in the room was watching her leave.

The walk to school was fifteen minutes on a good day, longer when the checkpoints were slow or closed entirely. Today was a good day. The morning air carried the smell of exhaust and cooking oil and, beneath that, the faint sweetness of jasmine from the plants that old Um Khalil kept on her balcony, watering them with reused kitchen water because the taps only ran three days a week.

Noor held Amal's hand as they walked, her small fingers warm and slightly sticky from breakfast. She chattered about her friend Reem and a game they were going to play at recess and whether the teacher would let them use the colored pencils today or only the crayons. Amal listened with half her attention, nodding at the right moments, making the right sounds.

The other half of her mind was still with the drawing.

She had seen images like it before—not in person, but on television, on her phone screen late at night when Fadi was asleep and she scrolled through news she knew she shouldn't be looking at. Burned vehicles on roads she recognized. White sheets laid over shapes that were too small to be adults. The careful, clinical language of reports that described "incidents" and "operations" without ever saying what had actually happened to the people caught in between.

There had been one, last month. A family in a car, trying to reach the southern crossing. The details had been confused—they always were, in those first hours—but what stuck in Amal's memory was the photograph someone had posted before the accounts were taken down. A gray car, boxy, ordinary. Something pale hanging from the rear window.

She had told herself not to think about it. Told herself that Noor was safe, that their neighborhood was calm, that the closest the violence had come was the distant thud of something falling somewhere in the hills. She had told herself these things the way she told herself that the dust would settle, that the water would come back on, that one day things would be different.

"Mama, you're squeezing too hard."

Amal loosened her grip on Noor's hand. "Sorry, habibi."

"It's okay." Noor looked up at her with eyes that were too knowing for a six-year-old. "Are you thinking about something sad?"

"No. Just thinking about work. Boring grown-up things."

Noor accepted this, the way children accept so many of the lies their parents tell them. They turned the corner onto the main road, and the checkpoint came into view—a concrete barrier with a narrow gap in the middle, manned by two soldiers who looked barely older than Amal's students.

This was the easy checkpoint, the one near the school, the one where they usually just waved people through without looking too closely. Amal had learned to read checkpoints the way farmers read weather—which ones to avoid, which ones to pass quickly, which days were safer than others. This morning, the soldiers were talking to each other, their rifles slung casually across their chests, their postures relaxed.

Amal slowed her pace anyway. Drew Noor slightly closer.

They passed through without incident. The soldiers didn't even look at them. Just two more figures in the stream of people moving toward their ordinary days.

But as they emerged on the other side, Amal glanced back. One of the soldiers had turned, just slightly, and was watching them go. His face was hidden by the shadow of his helmet, his body bulky with equipment, his posture utterly still.

He did not blink.

Amal quickened her pace, pulling Noor along, telling herself it was nothing. Just a trick of the light. Just her imagination, poisoned by that drawing, seeing things that weren't there.

But she felt his eyes on her back until they turned the next corner, and even then, she could not shake the feeling that something was still watching.

The school was a two-story building with walls painted pale yellow, though the color had faded to something closer to cream, streaked with water stains and the occasional scrawl of graffiti that the janitor never quite managed to scrub away. Blue plastic tarps covered sections of the roof where tiles had fallen or been knocked loose by things no one wanted to name. The playground was a patch of packed dirt with a rusted swing set and a single tree, its branches bare despite the season.

UNRWA had built the school decades ago, before Amal was born, and it had been repaired and patched and held together so many times that it seemed less like a building and more like a living thing, adapting and enduring through sheer stubbornness.

Amal taught the first-grade class—twenty-three students this year, though the number fluctuated as families moved or couldn't make the journey or simply stopped coming for reasons that went unspoken. Her classroom was on the second floor, with windows that looked out over the checkpoint they had just passed. On clear days, you could see all the way to the hills on the eastern horizon, their slopes dotted with the white cubes of settlements that grew a little larger every year.

She kissed Noor goodbye at the entrance, watched her run to join a cluster of girls her age, then made her way upstairs.

The morning passed in the comfortable routine of work. Reading practice. Arithmetic. A song about the alphabet that the children loved to sing as loudly as possible. Amal found herself relaxing into the familiar rhythms, the drawing in her pocket temporarily forgotten as she corrected mistakes and praised successes and mediated a dispute over who got to use the green marker.

It was during art time that everything changed.

She had given the children a simple assignment: draw something that makes you happy. It was her fallback activity, the kind of open-ended task that let the anxious children work out their feelings and the bored children stay occupied while she circulated among the desks.

For the first ten minutes, everything was normal. Sami drew a football. Reem drew her cat. Little Ahmad, who struggled with fine motor skills, made a page full of colorful scribbles that he proudly declared was his grandmother's garden.

Then Amal reached Layla's desk.

Layla was a quiet girl, new to the class this year, her family having moved from a neighborhood on the eastern edge of the city that had been designated a "closed military zone" six months ago. She rarely spoke unless spoken to, and when she did, her voice was so soft Amal had to lean close to hear her.

Layla's drawing was not something that made her happy.

At the center of the page stood a soldier. The helmet was round and dark. The body was bulky with a tactical vest. The boots reached to the knees. The weapon was longer than the body.

And the eyes were two enormous circles, colored in with red crayon so thick it had torn through the paper.

Amal's hand shot out and gripped the edge of Layla's desk, steadying herself. The world seemed to tilt, the fluorescent lights above suddenly too bright, the room too loud with the chatter of children and the scratch of crayons on paper.

"Layla," she said, and her voice came out strangled. She cleared her throat, tried again. "Layla, habibi. What is this?"

Layla looked up at her with dark eyes that held no fear, no excitement, no particular emotion at all.

"It's one of them," she said simply.

"One of who?"

"The ones who watch."

Amal forced herself to breathe. *Don't project. Don't interrogate. Stay calm.* "Where did you see... this?"

Layla pointed out the window. "There. At the checkpoint. And at the place where the car was burned. And sometimes at night, when I can't sleep."

Amal straightened. Looked around the room. And felt her heart stop.

At least five other children were drawing the same figure.

Malik, near the back, had rendered his soldier larger than the school building itself, looming over a row of tiny houses. Yasmin had drawn a line of children holding hands, and behind them—casting no shadow—stood the red-eyed figure with its too-long weapon. Even Ahmad, who never drew anything recognizable, had abandoned his happy scribbles for a page dominated by two red circles that took up half the paper.

Amal moved through the room in a daze, collecting drawings, her hands trembling so badly she nearly dropped them. The children watched her with varying degrees of confusion, though none of them seemed frightened. None of them seemed to think there was anything wrong.

"Where did you see him?" she asked each child in turn.

"At the checkpoint."

"Near my uncle's house."

"On the roof across from our building."

"In the street where they found the car."

Every answer was the same. Every drawing was the same. The round helmet. The bulky vest. The too-long weapon. The hands that looked like they had been dipped in something dark.

And always, always, the red eyes.

By the time the bell rang for lunch, Amal had seventeen drawings. Seventeen variations on the same impossible figure, rendered by children who had never spoken to each other about what they had seen, who came from different neighborhoods and different backgrounds and different levels of exposure to "the situation."

Seventeen children, all drawing the same monster.

She locked herself in the bathroom during lunch break and cried.

Abu Youssef was the science teacher, an older man with a gray beard and kind eyes who had been at the school for twenty years. He found Amal in the teachers' lounge, staring at the stack of drawings she had spread across the table, her tea growing cold beside her.

"What's all this?" he asked, settling into the chair across from her.

"The children drew these," Amal said. Her voice was flat, emptied of everything except exhaustion. "During art time. I asked them to draw something that makes them happy."

Abu Youssef adjusted his glasses and picked up the nearest drawing—Layla's, the one that had started it all. He studied it for a long moment, his expression unreadable.

"Ah," he said finally. "The soldier."

"You've seen drawings like this before?"

"Many times." He set the paper down carefully. "The children process what they see. This is normal, in a situation like ours. The psychologists call it 'trauma expression.' The children lack the words to describe their experiences, so they draw them instead."

"But they're all the same." Amal spread the drawings out, overlapping their edges like a mosaic of nightmares. "Look. The same helmet. The same vest. The same... eyes. Red eyes, Abu Youssef. What soldier has red eyes?"

He was quiet for a moment. When he spoke again, his voice was gentler than before, the voice of a teacher explaining something to a struggling student.

"They all see the same thing because they've all experienced the same thing. Soldiers at checkpoints. Raids at night. Vehicles on fire. The details blur together in their minds, and what comes out is... this. An archetype. A symbol of everything they fear."

"But these children don't know each other. Layla just moved here. Malik lives on the other side of the city. How could they all—"

"Because fear doesn't need geography." Abu Youssef picked up his own tea and took a slow sip. "My grandfather used to tell me stories about the Nakba. About how the villages that fell in '48 all had the same nightmares afterward—the same faceless soldiers, the same burning houses, the same empty roads. He said the land remembers, and what the land remembers, the people dream."

Amal opened her mouth to argue, then closed it. What was there to say? That she didn't believe in collective nightmares? That she didn't believe the land could remember anything?

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