AMIR ARIAN HASANLOU

Iran

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Dear Chubby I,

Today, after a whole month away, we finally came back home. When I went to my room, I saw that the windows were all dusty, like someone had put a blurry filter on them, and I couldn't really see the yard outside. When Mom cleaned the glass, I looked out and saw the big plane tree in our garden. Some of its branches were broken, but it looked happy to see me and its new little hands were waving at me.

Parsa,

Do you remember when schools were still in-person? When we were eating egg salad sandwiches together? I told you I wanted to join a letter-writing contest. I even had an imaginary idea in mind, but because of the incident that happened, I forgot all about it.

Back then, nothing bad had happened to that school in the south of the country yet. The club was open, the music class was open, the parks were open. everything was open. But even though my mom said "no," I was playing Call of Duty anyway. Every day I went to the higher level. I kept thinking I was getting stronger than everyone.

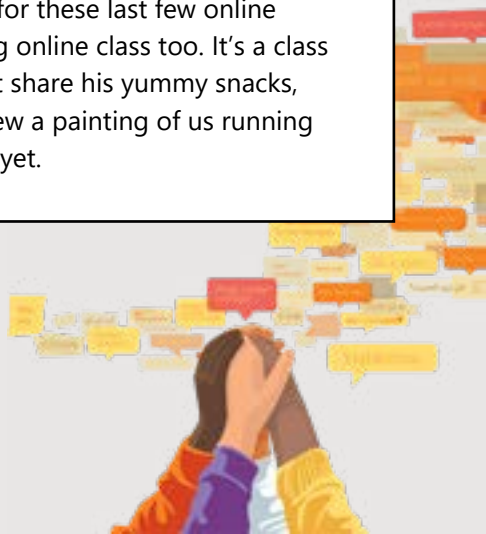
I remember telling you how my shots were getting so accurate. I even acted it out, and you finally agreed to install the game on your dad's phone. I was so excited because we could battle online together.

But that Saturday, right before the third class, they suddenly closed the school, and everything changed. At first, we were just surprised and happy about getting out of class, but then we heard the explosion. I saw some of the kids getting so scared they felt sick. The schoolyard turned into a giant anthill, and I didn't even see when or where you disappeared.

My knees were shaking so hard I could barely stand. That was the moment I realized all that power I thought I had in Call of Duty meant nothing in the real world. That's when I started to hate the idea of killing people, even in a game. That same night, when we were driving out of the city, I uninstalled Call of Duty from Dad's phone.

Parsa,

Now that the war has forced schools online, I really miss our teacher, the big schoolyard with its painted walls. I miss Arsam, and Shayan, and you too, because you've been absent for these last few online classes. Ever since you stopped replying to my messages, I've started hating online class too. It's a class where Arsam can't distract us with his silly faces anymore, and Shayan can't share his yummy snacks, and you're not here beside me to watch me paint anymore. Last week, I drew a painting of us running around in the schoolyard and sent it to you, but you haven't even "seen" it yet.



I'm not just writing this letter for the contest anymore. I'm writing it from the bottom of my heart because I'm worried about you. I never thought that when I finally write this, it would be for something so real. I don't know if you're mad at me, or if something bad happened to you. I just hope you know how much it means to me to hear back from you.

Now that there's a ceasefire and we're back home, I've been spending a lot of time alone in my room. Mom and I cleaned it up and packed away all the extra, old stuff. You won't believe it, but I'm seeing some of my toys like they're brand new! We dusted the shelves and rearranged everything. Mom made me in charge of throwing out the extra old toys so she could vacuum.

Let me tell you a secret: do you remember that animated movie, Toy Story 3? I saved some of my toys just like "Andy" did and hide them behind the stairs. I can't believe I've never told you about my sticky, gooey monkey, when throw it, and it sticks to the wall and the ceiling and hangs there all funny. I've even forgotten what I had named it. I asked Mom, and she couldn't remember either, but that's okay. You're professional at this stuff and can pick a cool name for it, just like how you always give us new nicknames. When you come over, I'll give it to you right away, and I'm sure you'll love it.

For the past month, Mom and Dad have been trying hard to keep me calm and not let me understand what's happening, but I've heard bombs exploding a few times myself. I'm scared, Parsa. I'm scared my room will get destroyed like that school and other places in the city. I'm scared I won't be able to play with you and my toys anymore. I can't even hear the other kids playing in the street.

I never understood what Mom meant when she said, "live your life for real." I used to spend hours playing Call of Duty every day and didn't even realize how quickly it got dark outside. I think I understand better now what it means to live and play for real. Please promise me you'll come here before it's too late so we can play. I want to remove this dusty filter on life together and see the world for what it really is.

Remember when I sent you photos of the night-blooming jasmine in our garden, and you said you didn't know what it smelled like? I want you to come so we can smell the flowers together.

Oh, and I'm sending my new painting with this letter. Can't wait to hear from you.

Your real friend,

Chubby I,

Amir Arian