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# **Layla the Body Washer and Incident at Jerusalem**

By

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# **Layla the Body Washer and Incident at Jerusalem**

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## INTRODUCTION

How do we remember the dead? The dying? How do we work for peace in a world that never ceases warring? How do we make sense of being either activists or nothing-ists? I recall the bumper sticker of the 1960s, “If you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem.”

Never more so than now.

“Do wars ever truly end?” Aliya asks in *Layla the Body Washer*.

Do we end wars, or do wars end us because we leave it to the business of war-makers?

What do we say to ourselves, what do we ask, how do we live alongside wars?

I once lived in Sarajevo for a summer in 1982, before the Olympics, before the last war that changed the name of that country from Yugoslavia to Bosnia Herzegovina. That visit, which seemed at the time entirely by chance, changed me forever.

Perhaps we are only concerned about lives in remote countries when we know the names and the faces, the streets and the homes. My visit to the former Yugoslavia graced me with friends, whose lives I keep close and nurture even now.

Wars have been ever present throughout the history of humanity, but that war particularly changed my way of seeing. Sarajevo, the city held hostage then, is still held hostage now, though it is coerced to a false calm under a tenuous peace accord. When I go back to that city, I witness the war kept alive in the hearts of individuals, just as we keep war alive in our country—we have yet to recover from our civil war. Rage still simmers, the war goes on, the seeds of war freshly planted with every generation. I turn 70 years old this month. I have never known a not-war era.

What can we do? How do we make change? What is our responsibility as witnesses? How do we work for peace?

Nicholas Patricca asks these questions in a language that is neither contemporary nor ancient, but something that I can only call sacred. His words are prayers, chants, fables for our times. He gives us stories both historic and contemporary.

I keep asking myself what I can do with my voice in this time of constant war. Nicholas Patricca gives me hope that all is not lost. We are each, as Rumi wisely reminds us, capable of working for peace: “We may be only a drop, but we contain the ocean inside us.”

I want to bring to your attention here today especially this—we cannot choose sides in any war without adding fuel to the fire. How do we go forward, then, as peace makers?

Activist poet Thich Nhat Hanh made me understand the power of being peace by making peace with everyone we meet today and always, every thought and word and action. This is much harder than holding up a sign. The way to peace is to be peace.

“Let the dead teach us,” Nic Patricca instructs. He confessed in a letter: “It is so hard to keep up one’s courage to dare to write ... how presumptuous to think that what I have to say or what I see matters to another soul ... that it is worthy of another’s contemplation. I always shudder at the hubris of the writer.”

His homily for me, for you, for us:

“We have become story tellers.

We think it is important to name the dead.

And to remember.”

—Sandra Cisneros

Dec. 1, 2024

San Miguel de Allende

“Nicholas Patricca is a poet trapped inside a playwright or a playwright trapped in a poet. These two plays—as do all his works—remind one of ancient ritual dramas as much as ruminations written from a time deep in our shared history and a place deep, deep in the human heart. These plays challenge us to look squarely at the world and know its suffering. They ask us to do the hardest thing—to feel.”

—Ian Brennan  
Co-creator *Monster* and *Glee*

## AUTHOR’S NOTE

*Layla the Body Washer* and *Incident at Jerusalem* were written because of my friends and colleague theatre artists Cecilie Keenan and Rick Paul, who have always generously supported me throughout my theatre career. Cecilie inspired me to write *Layla*, which she so expertly brought to life in Rhino Fest 2024. I wrote *Incident* to honor the work and achievements of Rick, the founder of the Lionheart Gay Theatre Company, which pioneered plays and performance pieces, especially in the early days of AIDS, when gay theatre was not mainstream. Rick produced several of my works over many decades. *Incident* serves both as a companion piece to *Layla* and as a tribute to the name Lionheart, which announces the courage so necessary to create and present works of art in performance for the contemplation of a live audience. It is my hope that these two plays might open hearts to compassionate action in our world of ceaseless conflict.

I dedicate these plays to all theatre artists who work for peace. Thank you.

—Nicholas A. Patricca

# **Incident at Jerusalem**

*A Tale of the Legendary Encounter of  
Richard Lionheart and Saladin*



# Incident at Jerusalem

## CHARACTERS

**SALADIN (EMISSARY):** Commander of the armies of Islam, the first sultan of Egypt and Syria, founder of the Ayyubid dynasty.

**RICHARD LIONHEART:** Commander of the Crusaders. Son of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Henry II of England. King of England, Duke and Lord of many domains in France and elsewhere.

Both Saladin and Richard are at the prime of their lives and the top of their games.

## PRODUCTION NOTES

**SETTING:** It is 1191, the time of the Third Crusade. Richard Lionheart, having won important victories at Acre and at Arsuf, has laid siege to Jerusalem, which Saladin had taken from the Catholic King Guy of Lusignan in October of 1187. Jerusalem, a city of no military significance but of the greatest political/religious importance, has become the fatal bone in the throat to both Richard and Saladin, who badly need to conclude their hostilities and attend to their political and dynastic futures.

Saladin and Richard have been exchanging letters and emissaries for quite some time.

**HISTORICAL NOTE:** As far as we know historically, Richard and Saladin never met though they planned such meetings repeatedly recognizing in each other kindred spirits loving learning and loathing religious fanaticism. Nonetheless, legends abound of their meeting because the drama of history requires it.

## Incident at Jerusalem

*(The tent of RICHARD LIONHEART before the walls of Jerusalem. At rise, the EMISSARY from SALADIN enters the tent.)*

RICHARD. What is it you want now? I already gave you my message for your master.

EMISSARY. Yes, your excellency, *(Pulls out a small parchment from his sleeve.)* I have your most generous albeit slight statement of “thank you” for my master An-Nasir Salah ad-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub, sultan of Egypt and Syria, commander of all the armies of the faithful, protector of Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem ...

RICHARD. Enough!

*(Silence.)*

RICHARD *(cont'd)*. I do not write long flowery excessive verbose flattering insincere missives as is the custom of you Arabs.

EMISSARY. Your stinginess with words is legendary.

RICHARD. Be careful, sir, lest you trespass your role.

EMISSARY. Forgive my poor knowledge of the subtleties of your language. *(Pause.)* May I clarify, my lord, I and my master Lord Saladin are Kurds, not Arabs. You must learn to distinguish the many peoples under our glorious banners.

RICHARD. Yet, you call us all FRANKS.

EMISSARY. We call Greeks, Greeks. We call Venetians, Venetians. We call barbarians, FRANKS.

RICHARD. Whether Arab or Kurd or Turcoman or Persian, your blood stains the desert sands just the same.

EMISSARY. Perhaps I should have used the word “terse” or the phrase “efficient economy in the expression of gratitude.”

RICHARD. Get on with it. I have no time to waste on annoying banter. I need to plan my next triumph over your master’s overrated armies.

*(The EMISSARY unwraps a small vessel, carefully protected and insulated, and hands it to RICHARD.)*

EMISSARY. The physicians my gracious master sent to care for you during your recent illness informed him that you suffer greatly from the heat of our lands.

RICHARD *(opens the vessel)*. Snow and ice.

EMISSARY. Flavored with pomegranate juice and kernels.

*(EMISSARY hands a small spoon to RICHARD, who tastes the snow.)*

RICHARD. Delicious. *(Pause.)* How is this possible!?

EMISSARY. From the mountains, by relays of fast horses and competent messengers. *(He surveys the tent.)* It is a wonder how you Franks live in such squalor. You seldom bathe. You eat putrid meat. Which fouls the breath that comes from your unclean mouths ...

RICHARD *(interrupting)*. And yet as uncivilized as we are, we have outwitted you, outfought you, and beaten you at Acre and at Ascalon and Asruf and ...

EMISSARY. Mere battles. You win battles, my lord, but you cannot win the war.

RICHARD *(puts the pomegranate snow aside)*. I see. You’ve come here to sue for peace. What are the terms Lord Saladin, the conqueror, seeks? To hide the disgrace of his defeats?

EMISSARY. The Lord Saladin grants you leave of safe conduct to Acre from which you may depart for your Frankish lands unmolested by his invincible armies. My master, ever magnificent, promises you ample provisions of fresh foods and pure waters ...

RICHARD. And baskets and baskets of flavored snow I presume ...

*(With a quick deft move, RICHARD seizes the EMISSARY. They wrestle. They are of equal strength. They roll. First RICHARD is on top. Then the EMISSARY. Then RICHARD.)*

EMISSARY. My spies warned me that you enjoyed wrestling.

RICHARD. Just showing my gratitude for the two fine Arabian steeds you've given me.

EMISSARY. A king must have a horse worthy of him.

*(The EMISSARY throws RICHARD over, straddles him.)*

EMISSARY *(cont'd)*. Do your guards always let you win?

RICHARD. I didn't realize how old you are.

EMISSARY. Your preference for older men is well known.

*(RICHARD throws the EMISSARY over, straddles him and removes his headdress, revealing him as SALADIN)*

RICHARD. You risk everything to be here this night, Lord Saladin.

SALADIN. You, Richard, are worthy of the risk.

*(RICHARD releases SALADIN.)*

RICHARD. You are not as I have imagined from our correspondence.

SALADIN. What did you imagine? A pampered pasha, made soft by over-indulgence?

RICHARD. Something like that. Yes. Besotted by your many wives, and boy lovers, perfumes and exotic foods.

SALADIN. I have often suspected that is why you Franks keep coming to our lands, to escape the dreariness of your weather, cuisine and customs.

RICHARD. I have come here to take Jerusalem back from you.

SALADIN. I have come here to ask for your friendship.

RICHARD. Duty and destiny make us enemies.

SALADIN. Is it truly your duty to restore the vain, the stupid, the cruel and corrupt Guy of Lusignan as King of Jerusalem? A man unworthy to lick your feet?

RICHARD. I am his liege lord. Though I do loathe the man.

SALADIN. Then rid yourself of him.

RICHARD. With poisoned pomegranate ice?

*(RICHARD picks up the flavored snow, moves close to SALADIN and hands the snow to him. SALADIN eats some.)*

SALADIN. It is good. Thank you.

RICHARD. In a different life, Lord Saladin, we might be friends.

SALADIN. The Sufis tell me that our fates are intertwined like tangled umbilical cords of twins at birth. The poets tell us that twins feel each other's pains and joys. The flesh of twins is stitched together, woven as one flesh by invisible threads.

RICHARD. Brothers bound together or not, Saladin, I shall take Jerusalem back from you. Poetry will not stop me.

SALADIN. I don't give a Damascus fig for Jerusalem. It is of no military or commercial value. It is a cesspool of corruption and petty intrigues, a nest of fanatics, lunatics and idiots. I would gladly give it to you.

RICHARD. Your enemies, however, would slit your throat if they heard you speak thus.

SALADIN. I have read Moses ben Maimon, al-Farabi, even the Latin scholars whom you so wisely sponsor in your lands. These are true men of God. But what do these ignorant men know, these fanatics who study no science, no music, no poetry, who always preach war and death? These men who claim to know the will of Allah, the merciful, the compassionate. These small men only know their own small hearts and petty ambitions.

RICHARD. I made a vow.

SALADIN. I know all about your vow.

RICHARD. Do not mock me.

SALADIN. You are the man who murdered 2,700 innocent women, children and old men at Acre for no reason other than your pride. Where was your religion, your God, when you murdered the hostages to satisfy your anger against me. Was that part of your vow?

*(RICHARD places a dagger at the throat of SALADIN.)*

RICHARD. I can kill you now.

SALADIN *(with a dagger piercing RICHARD's blouse near his liver)*. And I you.

*(RICHARD withdraws the dagger as does SALADIN.)*

RICHARD. You are as guilty as I. You were testing me. And you lost. You sacrificed those innocent people to test my will. And my wits. For ten cartloads of gold and a few Christian nobles. You sacrificed your fellow Muslims.

SALADIN. Richard, you have always lacked patience. It will be the death of you. *(Pause.)* I propose that we, you and I,