

GRANTA

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SEVEN DAYS  
IN SYRIA

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## 1. Hossam

When my son was born, I was unable to cut his nails. It was a visceral rather than rational reaction. I would pick up the tiny baby scissors, look at his translucent fingers, clean and pink as seashells, and feel as though I would retch.

One night, in the hours between darkness and light, the time when the subconscious allows the source of such neurosis to become clear, I understood my inability to perform such a straightforward task. I had a vision of the Iraqi man I once knew who had no fingernails.

In the dying days of the Saddam regime, I had an office inside the Ministry of Information. It was a sinister, paranoid place. Journalists begged, bribed and pleaded to stay inside the country to report. We were followed, videotaped; our phones were tapped. We all knew that our hotel rooms were equipped with hidden cameras. I dressed and undressed in the darkened bathroom.

Every Monday morning, the man with no fingernails arrived in my office and stretched out his hands, utterly unselfconscious that in place of nails were raw beds of flesh. He had come for his weekly baksheesh. His job was to get the money to seal my satellite phone so I could not use it unless the ministry listened in. Most of us had to pay our way to get anything done, and aside from the fee the ministry charged, we gave a baksheesh to get it done faster.

Every time the man arrived and I looked at his hands spread out, I immediately felt a wave of panic which turned to nausea, and yet I could not take my eyes off the place where his fingernails had been ripped off. Questions that I could not ask him raced through my

mind. What had he done to deserve such agony? Was he an informer? Had he tried to escape Iraq and been caught? Was he part of the secret network attempting to overthrow the dictator? I never asked. Nor would he have answered. We were living in a republic of fear. He became one of those shadowy figures one holds in one's mind forever, hovering in the fringes.

The man, whose name I never knew, seemed to bear no resentment that he had been disfigured in such a public way. Because hands are one of the first things we usually notice about someone, every time he stretched out his, one knew immediately he had done something.

Or perhaps he had done nothing at all. Perhaps it was a horrible mistake. Such things happened all the time under dictatorships. People get locked up for years, forgotten, then the key turns and a jailer says, 'You can go now.' They never know why.

The day Saddam's regime fell, in the feverish chaos, I went to search for the man with no fingernails to open the seal so I could use my sat phone. But he, like most of the regime staff, had fled.

I went back to Iraq many times after that, but I never saw the man with no fingernails again – except in my dreams.

**I**n northern Lebanon, in a town now inhabited by the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and many fighters who are recovering from severe injuries, I do what I do in most war zones: I go to the nearest hospital. In the hallway of a small rehabilitation clinic, I pass a man who recently had twenty-nine bullets removed from his body. Then I meet a paralysed man strapped to a board who is playing with a child – an orphaned child. The man had been badly beaten and left with a fractured spinal cord.

'Every time they hit me,' he said, 'they screamed, "You want freedom? OK, take this! Here is your great freedom!"'

Then I meet a man I am going to call Hossam, a student of human rights law, who sits on a bed trying to re-enter the human race.

He is twenty-four years old and dressed in baggy dark trousers, a T-shirt, and has a full beard and a shy but gentle demeanour. He keeps

trying to buy me packs of Winston cigarettes, but I keep refusing, and he keeps insisting, gently, that he must give me a gift. On his hands and arms I see cigarette burns that I suspect are not self-inflicted.

On another bed, pushed against a wall, a fourteen-year-old boy sits and listens. When I suggest he leave the room for the interview, which I know is going to be painful, the boy explains that his father was killed in front of him, so he can take whatever else is about to come.

Hossam is Sunni and religious, but he still shakes my hand and gets off his bed, limping, to get me a chair. He tells me that he comes from an educated family; his father a civil servant, his brothers all university-educated.

Then he begins to tell his story without words. Slowly he removes his T-shirt. A thick, angry scar that begins under his mid-breastbone swims down to the proximity of his groin. He sighs, lights a cigarette and starts to talk in a low voice.

Hossam comes from Baba Amr, the district of Homs, Syria's third largest city, which became an icon for the suffering of civilians when it got pummelled and overrun by Syrian government troops and paramilitary units beginning in December 2011. He admits that he was one of the organizers of the at-first-peaceful demonstrations against the government, but denies that he is a member of the FSA.

'It was about freedom and rights at first,' he says. 'Then came bullets.'

On 8 March 2012 at about 7.30 p.m., there were shouts outside the door of his family home. He heard men speaking a foreign language that he believes may have been Farsi. At first he refused to open the door. 'I said, "We are civilians! We have rights!"'

But the soldiers – whom he said were not wearing uniforms, meaning they could have been paramilitary – fired intimidating shots, and his brother opened the door. The men shot the young man through the chest at close range, and the force of the bullet pushed him against a far wall where he fell, dying.

They swarmed into the house like bees. Hossam thinks there were about thirty of them. They shot Hossam in the shoulder and in the

hand as he tried to cover his face for protection from the blow he thought was coming. He holds up his deformed fingers, and touches the angry red circle on his shoulder blade. The impact of the bullet made Hossam reel backwards, and he ended up lying next to his dying brother, looking him straight in the eye.

‘I was watching the life go out of him,’ he says quietly.

The men then picked him and his brother up by their feet and hands and hauled them, along with several dozen men from the neighbourhood, into a truck and threw them in, one on top of the other. They said they were going to use them as human shields. Some of the men in the truck were already dead, many were badly beaten and lay groaning in agony. Others had been shot.

‘One guard pulled a man up by his ear and said, “Say Bashar al-Assad is your God.” The man replied, “I have no God but God,” and the guard shot him and tossed him onto the pile of bodies.’

Hossam was bleeding but his brother was closer to death. They took all of them off the truck when they reached the military hospital, and the minute they closed the doors, they began to beat Hossam brutally with sticks of plastic and wood.

Hossam’s brother and the other men were flung into an underground room that served as a morgue. This was the same room where, from then on, Hossam was thrown every night to sleep after he was tortured, on top of the dead bodies. He described how he would lie awake listening to people breathing their last breath.

On the first day, Hossam’s torturers, who were Syrian and told him they were doctors, brought him to something like an operating room. There were about four of them. They strapped him down.

‘Are you a fighter?’

‘No, I’m a student.’

‘Are you a fighter?’

They held his penis and took a blade and said, ‘OK, cut it off.’

They pressed the blade into his flesh, enough to draw blood, then began leaning painfully on his bladder, forcing him to urinate.

‘Why do you want to kill me?’ Hossam asked.

‘Because your people are killing us,’ he was told.

Then they electrocuted him. This went on for three days. Beatings, burnings, cuttings. The worst, he says, was ‘the cutting’.

‘They came for me. I lay down on a table and closed my eyes. I saw them cut my gut with a scalpel.’ He tells me that he must have been in shock because the pain did not seem to reach his brain. ‘Then they lifted something out of my body – I felt pulling. It was my intestine. They stretched it. They held it in their hands and lay it on the outside of my body. They made jokes about how much the rebels ate, how much food was inside my intestines. Then they sewed me back up, but in a rough way so that there was skin and blood everywhere.’

He tells me his stomach was ‘open’ for two days before they properly stitched the wound closed.

The next day the torturers – who clearly must have had medical knowledge – punctured Hossam’s lung. They cut an incision that runs from under his nipple to the middle of his back. They inserted what he described as a small plastic suction tube.

‘I felt the air go out of my lung,’ he says quietly. ‘My right lung had collapsed. I could not breathe.’

**H**ossam is alive only because on the third day of his torture he was left hanging upside down for nearly five hours. He tells me how he was ‘used as a punching bag by nearly everyone that went by as a way of having fun’, until, that day, when it was quiet, a doctor suddenly knelt before him.

He whispered. ‘My job is to make sure that you are still alive and can sustain more torture. But I can’t watch this any more.’ The doctor shook his head.

‘Your heart has technically stopped twice, once for ten seconds and once for fifteen.’ He leaned forward and opened a notebook.

‘I am going to close your file and write that on the second attempt to revive you, I failed. Do you understand what I am saying? You are dead.’

As the doctor walked away, he said, ‘If Allah intends you to live, you will find a way to get out of here.’

It took several minutes for Hossam to understand what the doctor meant. He was giving him a chance to escape, to live. The doctor ordered that Hossam be taken down from his ropes, and he was tossed back into the morgue. As he lay there, he thought of his dead brother, somewhere under the pile of bodies.

Hossam's story is so grisly that, in spite of his obvious wounds, part of me, a small part of me, wonders if it can be true. How can someone actually survive such treatment? This is what torture also does. In its worst form, it makes us doubt the victims.

**A**fter an hour among the dead, in pain so brutal that he could think of nothing but the blood coursing through his ears, a nurse came into the room. She whispered that she had been paid by the FSA to bring out any men who were still alive. She told Hossam to follow her instructions carefully: she would give him a Syrian government uniform, and a number, which he must memorize. She made him say it twice. He mumbled that he could stand no more, and she gave him an injection of painkiller. Then, she gently lifted him up and helped him put on the uniform.

With his arm around the nurse for support, they walked out of the courtyard of the military hospital. It took twenty minutes to walk a few feet; but he tells me that it felt like days. A guard asked him for his serial number. He gave the number the nurse had rehearsed with him while she looked on nervously.

At the end of the gate, a car was waiting. It was someone sent by the Free Syrian Army. They opened the door and the nurse helped him in and turned away without looking back.

He was free.

## 2. Daraya

**D**araya, a suburb seven kilometres south-east of Damascus, was once known for its handmade wooden furniture. It is also allegedly the place where Saul had a vision of God, became a believer

and apostle and headed for Damascus.

In August 2012, more than 300 people, including women and children, were killed – the town was ‘cleansed’. It marked a turning point in the war. I was driven by a Sunni resident, Maryam (not her real name), and we passed easily through the government military checkpoints manned by young boys with stubble and Kalashnikovs who looked as though they would be more comfortable in discos than in this war zone.

Maryam’s family came from Daraya, but they had been at their holiday home near the coast when the massacre took place between 23 and 25 August. As we drove, she took in the destruction with a certain sangfroid, but it was clear that she was shocked. She had not yet decided if she supported the government or the rebels. But as an open-minded, educated woman, she wanted to see for herself what was happening in her country.

The government line was that the massacre was a prisoner exchange gone wrong; the FSA said it was an attack and cleansing operation.

‘Syrians could not do this to other Syrians,’ she said, her voice shaking. It appeared as though the government tanks had rolled right down the centre of town, destroying everything in sight, crushing the street lights, the houses, even the graveyard walls.

There were shattered windows and glass everywhere and I saw a lone cyclist with a cardboard box of tinned groceries strapped to a rack over his back wheel. But there were no other civilians on the streets. The buildings appeared crushed like accordions; it looked as though people had either hidden or run away as fast as they could.

The Syrian opposition was giving figures as high as 2,500 massacred, but the local people I managed to find told me the number was closer to 1,000 people killed, mainly men and boys.

One month on, there are still no clear figures, but the number 330 is usually quoted. But everywhere I went that day in Daraya, I encountered the distinctive smell of the dead decaying.

I met one of the witnesses, a man who had just been released after six months in prison. His crime? There were often demonstrations in the streets. But this man said he wasn't even at a demonstration when he was arrested.

'They picked up the wrong guy and forgot about me.' He had been led outside in the prison yard, naked but for his underwear in the freezing winter cold, doused with ice water, then left hanging from ropes for hours and beaten. But he somehow survived.

After a while, Maryam and I went to look for the gravedigger to see if he could give us a count of the dead. There was a crowd of people gathered who were reading a sign put up by desperate families – a list of the missing. They told us that they came every day to see if they could find their loved ones. One man told me he had been looking for his elderly father for three days before finally finding his body decaying in the heat on a farm outside Daraya along with the bodies of several young men.

'But why kill an old man? Why?' Then he said what I kept hearing, over and over on this trip: 'Syrians cannot do this to other Syrians.'

### 3. The Balloon Has Not Yet Burst

My first trip to Syria was in the stifling heat of summer. I arrived in a local taxi from Beirut. The first thing I saw once I crossed the border was the enormous colour portrait of the leader, common to all autocratic regimes. This was of the youthful, triangular face of Bashar al-Assad.

The second thing that attracted my attention was a Dunkin' Donuts, which seemed odd, even in a sophisticated country like Syria. I was aware I was entering what has been called the second most dangerous regime next to North Korea, so I was shocked to see such an American symbol. It's the kind of thing one would expect to find on an U.S. airbase in Kandahar, for example, with well-fed American soldiers lined up to buy pink-sprinkled donuts, rather than skinny, suspicious-looking Syrians.

As it turned out, the Dunkin' Donuts was a fake. It only sold toasted cheese sandwiches. I bought one, watched all the while by three men with moustaches, smoking cigarettes – clearly Mukhābarāt, the infamous Secret Police.

In Damascus, people whisper when out in public. When a waiter arrives at a table, people stop talking. The Mukhābarāt are often so obvious that they could come from central casting. They could easily have been the same men who followed me in Iraq a decade before – the same cheap leather jackets, the same badly trimmed, downward-turned moustaches.

I had come to Syria because I wanted to see the country before it tumbled down the rabbit hole of war. That first trip in June 2012, Syria was on the brink. I checked into a hotel where the United Nations military observers who were there to monitor Kofi Annan's six-point plan in an attempt to bring peace – glum-faced men who were no longer allowed to operate because they had been shot at too often – sat drinking coffee after coffee and making jokes about the Russian hooker bar downstairs.

One Thursday – the start of the Muslim weekend – I came in after an exhausting day of talking to people who were uncertain of whether or not their country would exist in a year or two. They were Christians, but liberal. They did not support the government's crushing of peaceful protests in the beginning of the uprising; on the other hand, they were terrified of what was coming next.

'Jihadists?' they asked. 'Salifists?' This is what everyone was worried about, what everyone claimed to distrust: 'Who's next?' Syria, like Bosnia, is multi-ethnic: home to generations of Greek Orthodox, Christians, Sunni Kurds, Shias, Alawites and even a residual population of Jews – 'a melting pot' as the foreign minister's spokesperson, Jihad Makdissi, a Christian with an Islamic name, has called it. But for how much longer was that melting pot going to hold?

To get the weekend going, the hotel sponsored a pool party that looked to me, with the smoke rising in the background from shelling in the southern suburbs, like a re-enactment of Sodom and Gomorrah.

A half-dressed Russian woman danced onstage by the pool, gyrating her skinny hips. Voluptuous wealthy Syrian ladies – all teased hair, glossy lips and silicone-enhanced bosoms – strutted in bikinis and high heels. Men also wore the briefest of swimming trunks and drank what the Levants call ‘Mexican beer’ – Lebanese beer served with a slice of lime in a salt-rimmed glass.

The party was obscene in a city that was verging on civil war. I stood on my balcony and watched this denial of the drum roll of impending carnage. These people’s lives were falling apart. But the bubble had not yet burst.

#### 4. The Believers

For two weeks running, I witnessed the fevered hedonism of the Thursday-afternoon pool parties at the Dama Rose Hotel. The first week was like every other. The hairdressers’ were full of ladies of leisure getting hair extensions, mani/pedis and false eyelashes. The roads were clogged with luxury cars heading outside the city to amusement parks – the ones that were still open – en route to country villas for parties, weekend picnics or dinners. Restaurants such as Narenj, which takes up nearly half a block in the Old City and serves traditional Arabic food to the elite, were packed.

But what was unusual about the Dama Rose pool parties was that they were taking place in a hotel that was, ironically, also home to those 300 frustrated United Nations soldiers from fifty different countries who had been brought in to monitor the situation.

From 14 June onwards, when their operations were suspended because it became too dangerous for them to work – their convoys have been attacked, shot at and harassed – the men sat around in the hotel lobby, looking bored, just like the Mukhābarāt.

The blasting house music wafted up to the third floor where Major General Robert Mood, who was then head of the UN Supervision Mission in Syria, tried to negotiate ceasefires, and where his civilian staff shut the windows, put their heads in their hands and wondered

what the hell was going to happen to their mission. It would be suspended a few weeks later and Syria would be added to the long list of United Nations failures.

That first week, people danced around to a pumped-up version of Adele's 'Someone Like You', but by the second week, there was an air of sombre reflection to the party. People drank, the house music blared, the UN staff complained about the noise, but the Russian dancer was gone. And this week, people left early, rushing to their four-by-fours with distinctly worried looks on their faces.

In the distance, beyond the pool, towards the al-Marjeh neighbourhood, just across from the Justice Courts, there was a larger curl of smoke: two car bombs had exploded earlier that day in the centre of Damascus.

I had left town that morning to visit a remote convent where pro-government – meaning those who support the regime of President Bashar al-Assad – nuns made apricot jams and spent their days praying to the relics of Takla, an ancient Christian saint.

Takla had been an early convert of St Paul, who was running from the Romans when she found herself facing an enormous mountain. Miraculously, the mountain opened to let her pass on to her escape. Syrians and people came from all over the Middle East to be healed at the place of that miracle.

Like many people who support Assad, the Greek Orthodox nuns feared a fundamentalist Islamic regime in their country. I sat with one sister who wore an old-fashioned wimple and served me sugared coffee and biscuits. She spoke Aramaic, the ancient language of Christ, and vehemently defended the regime.

The nuns would not believe that Syrians could massacre each other, she said. When I pointed out that earlier in the summer the United Nations had released a report pointing a finger at the Assad regime for the massacre of civilians at al-Houla, she ignored me, asking a younger nun to bring in a plate of sugared apricots.

This was the same week that the offices of a pro-government television station had been bombed and a fire had broken out

between opposition and pro-government forces. And yet, in Maaloula where the convent was situated, in this village that lies on the road between Damascus and Homs, I felt an unexpected quiet peace.

I remember thinking this would be a good place to hide if full-scale war broke out, and I slipped away from the nuns to explore the convent. Downstairs, the nuns slept in monastic cells, which looked out over the mountains where St Takla had fled. In the courtyard, I saw Syrian couples who had come here to pray for fertility or for the healing of various ailments: you went into a candlelit cave and held a wooden foot, or stomach, or arm, or whatever part of the body ailed you, and prayed to St Takla.

The sun bore down on the car on the road back, and in contrast to the cool convent with its sense of hushed protection, the Damascus bomb site stank of burned rubber. Skeletons of charred cars remained. It was a miracle that no one had been hurt by these explosions caused by ‘sticky bombs’ – handmade bombs taped to a bottom of a car at the height of rush hour just across from the Justice Courts.

‘Real amateur hour,’ one UN official said to me later. ‘The bombers didn’t know what they were doing – it’s just a scare tactic to make the people hate the opposition.’

And it worked. People blamed the opposition and ‘foreign interventionists’ for the explosions. Crowds of people gathered, angry that their city was quickly falling victim to the devastation that was spreading across the country.

‘Our only friend is Russia!’ one well-dressed man shouted, his face contorted with rage. ‘These are foreigners that are exploding our country! Syria is for Syrians!’

It is a common belief that the bombs and the chaos spreading throughout the country are being caused by a ‘third element’. Especially in Damascus, which has long been an Assad stronghold, people refuse to believe that the opposition will rule their country without turning it into a fundamentalist Muslim state.

Damascus has many faces. There are the opposition activists who are working night and day to bring down Assad, the ones who meet me in secret. Sometimes, when I return to my home in Paris, I hear news through the grapevine that they have disappeared. These are the ones who risk going to jail for up to forty-five days without charges. Even peaceful protesters have been thrown in jail simply for demonstrating. Their families are not told of their whereabouts.

Twice I visited the Damascus Opera House – the second grandest in the Middle East in this city named by UNESCO in 2008 as the Arab Capital of Culture.

‘I do not want to give the impression that we are like the *Titanic* – the orchestra plays on while the ship sinks,’ explained one classical musician. We were sitting in her office and she motioned overhead, meaning the room was probably bugged.

On another visit, I went to see the Children’s Orchestra practising, led by a visiting British conductor. When I mentioned that he was brave to be there, he said, with a worried look, ‘Should I get out soon? How long do you give it before all-out war?’

I reassured him, but in fact, I thought, the country was already in a full-scale, if guerrilla, war.

Some of the musicians were very young – around eight – with tiny hands holding their instruments, but others looked like teenage kids anywhere – Brazilian surfing bracelets, baggy jeans, long flowing hair. They practised the incredibly touching song of innocence, ‘Evening Prayer’, from Humperdinck’s *Hansel and Gretel*.

I sat for a good while watching the fresh young faces, intently reading the musical scores and holding their instruments with care, and wondering what this room would look like if I returned at exactly this time next year. How many of these boys would be sent to mandatory military service? How many would flee the country? I tried not to think about whether any would no longer be living.

**M**aria Saadeh (Arabic for ‘happiness’) lives in Star Square in the old French mandate section of Damascus, in a 1920s building that she helped renovate. A restoration architect by training (educated in Syria and France), she was recently elected, without any experience, as the only Christian independent female parliamentarian.

The Christians are frightened. On Sundays during my stay, I go to their churches – Eastern Christian or Orthodox – and watch them kneel and pray, smell the intense wax of the candle and see the fear on their faces. Will we be wiped out?

The Christian minority fears that if a new government – and perhaps a Muslim fundamentalist one – takes over, they will be cleared off the face of Syria, off the face of the Middle East, the way the Armenians were driven out of Turkey and massacred in 1914.

‘Christians to Beirut, Alawites to the coffin,’ is one of the chants of the more radical opposition members.

Maria seems confident for the moment. She sits on her roof terrace in a chic apartment building, her two adorable children, Perla and Roland, peeking their heads through the windows and a Filipina maid serving tea. It could be an ordinary day in peacetime – except that, earlier that day, in another Damascus neighbourhood, there was a car bomb and no one yet knows the number of people killed.

Earlier in the week, I had gone to a private Saturday-night piano and violin concert where the director general of the opera house, an elegant woman of mixed European and Syrian background, performed Bach, Gluck and Beethoven.

The concert was held at the Art House, an elegant boutique hotel built on the site of an old mill that has water streaming over glass panels on parts of the floor. The audience was sophisticated. There were women in spiky heels and strapless black evening gowns mingling with artistic-looking bohemian men in sandals and casual chinos, and their children.

Everyone rose at the beginning of the concert to pay homage to the ‘war dead’ with a minute of silence. The violinist wore a strapless red silk dress and high heels, and received a standing ovation. Afterwards,

the audience filed out to an open-air restaurant where champagne was served. I overheard several people talking in hushed voices about what had happened around the city that day: explosions, fighting near the suburbs.

‘A symphony,’ one man said, toasting hopefully with his glass of champagne, ‘that we will live through for the next few years.’

## 5. Firis

One steaming Saturday morning, I drove to the neighbourhood of Berzah, which is a toehold of the opposition inside Damascus. There are frequent protests here, and the government soldiers crack down with arrests, shootings, injuries and deaths. Berzah is known as one of the ‘hot spots’: areas around Damascus where it is evident that the war is now creeping closer. Douma, where dozens of people were killed in one day in July, is another hot spot. These days the hot spots are engulfing Damascus.

Berzah is also the site of the government-run Tishreen military hospital. One morning, I go to a funeral for fifty soldiers, all killed fighting for Assad. I watch silently as men load the mangled bodies – disfigured and broken by car bombs, IEDs, bullets and shrapnel – into simple wooden coffins, which are then secured with nails before being draped with Syrian flags. The men then march with the coffins, in full military style, to the sound of a marching band, into a courtyard, where families and members of their regiment wait, many of them weeping. It is an acute reminder of how hard al-Assad’s forces are getting hit by the opposition, who are resorting more and more to guerrilla tactics. A senior official at the hospital, who refuses to give his name, says that 105 soldiers are dying every week.

Upstairs, on the seventh floor of the hospital, a thirty-year-old major lies under a sheet, his right leg and arm missing. At the end of May, Firis Jabr was in a battle in Homs where he says he was ambushed and gravely injured by ‘foreign fighters: Libyans, Lebanese, Yemeni’.

Despite the fact that he now is missing nearly half his body, and his anxious fiancée is standing attentively near his bed, Firis, who is

Alawite – an offshoot of the Shia religion to which the Assad clan and many of his followers belong – has a huge smile on his face. He introduces me to his mother, whom he calls ‘Mama’ when I ask her name, and she makes us coffee from a small hotplate in the corner of the room. She serves Arabic pastries with pistachios. She tells me that she is a widow and Firis is her eldest son.

Like nearly all the pro-government supporters I meet, Firis says that he believes in Assad and will continue to fight, as soon as he is fitted with his prosthetics.

‘I have two loves,’ he tells me, trying to lift himself up with his useless side, ‘my fiancée and Syria.’

Later I meet a Syrian friend for tea. She shakes her head sadly when I tell her about Firis.

‘It has started,’ she whispers sadly. ‘The beginning of the end of what was Syria.’

## 6. Among the Alawites

On my second trip to Syria, a little more than a month later, I felt I was in a different country. The evolving war had become a real war. The faux light-heartedness that had existed – like a balloon – had been popped. Four men in Assad’s closest circle had been assassinated, probably with the help of FSA members who had infiltrated the government. People were expecting the fall of Damascus, or worse. There was heavy fighting in other parts of Syria – in Idlib, Aleppo and in the suburbs of Damascus.

I was told by a local reporter that two thousand people had fled the capital alone. Refugees were flooding the Turkish, Jordanian and Lebanese borders. There were fears for the winter.

The Dama Rose Hotel pool parties had halted. The UN had been pulled out except for a skeleton staff; one night I watched a strange karaoke evening – an attempt to be jolly in a miserable place – in the bar. I sat smoking a narghile – a water pipe – and listened to shelling coming from inside Damascus.

I went back to Homs to see some of my Syrian friend Maryam's relatives, and had lunch with her family. Everyone ate quietly while we heard the shelling emanating from a nearby government base. Then, while the older ladies rested on sofas for their after-meal repose, I spoke quietly to the men, asking if they were frightened.

Many people had left, they told me, or were leaving, and they pointed in the direction of the sound of the shelling: 'This is the background music of our lives.'

The next day, we drove towards Latakia, in the Alawite heartland, to see the mausoleum of Hafez al-Assad, the father of Bashar, who had been president from 1971 until his death in 2000. I drove down with Maryam and her husband, passing through checkpoint after checkpoint, and as we got closer to Qardaha, where Assad is buried, there were stone lions everywhere – Assad means *lion* in Arabic and it's the name Bashar's grandfather had adopted.

Maryam, who wears a hijab, said, 'We are in the land of Alawites now.' She paused. 'I feel uncomfortable.'

But at the Assad family mausoleum, the guards – young men in sombre blue suits – were friendly; shocked, even, to see a foreigner. They gave me tea and escorted me inside to the green-covered graves where Hafez and two of his sons were buried. They said Hafez had been the first Alawite to go to high school. The air was heavy with the scent of roses and incense. I looked at an empty corner and wondered if the current president, Bashar, was going to find his place there, sooner rather than later.

'We may never see this again,' Maryam's husband said as we left, passing another lion. 'If the regime crumbles, the opposition will tear this place down to the ground.'

When we left, we climbed higher into the green Jibal al-Alawiyeen mountains and stopped to eat at a roadside restaurant. A river rushed below us. The waiter was blue-eyed – many Arabs in the Levant are, but in particular Alawites – and said he had moved to Latakia when he was a child. As an Alawite he constantly felt marginalized: even as part of the minority that controlled the country. Seventy-four per

cent of the country are Sunni Muslims, yet the Alawites control most of the government jobs and postings.

‘The Europeans don’t understand us,’ the waiter said as he brought platters of barbecued chicken and bottles of beer. ‘As Syrians, we are all losing so much.’

At another table, two Alawite businessmen offered us *rakija*, a form of brandy made with anise, and came to join our table. We spoke openly of politics, but when I mentioned the regime’s reputation for torture and detention, there was visible stiffening.

‘That does not happen,’ one of the businessmen said. ‘It’s propaganda.’

Then the men excused themselves politely and left; Maryam was embarrassed.

‘You should not have asked that,’ she remonstrated quietly.

‘But it’s true,’ I said.

She turned her face away, and in a cloud of narghile smoke replied: ‘Syrians cannot bear that we are doing this to each other. Once we had a common enemy – Israel. Now we are each other’s enemy.’

## 7. The Shabaab

The war had come to Damascus – hit-and-run operations by the opposition; bombings in defence of their minute strongholds. The government, which has tanks and aircraft, kept to the high ground and pummelled opposition fighters from above. The FSA are said to be armed by Qatar, Saudi Arabia and to some extent by the United States, but when you see the fighters – the *shabaab*, the guys – you see what they need is anti-tank weapons and anti-aircraft guns. They have none. Their weapons are old. Their uniforms are shabby. They fight wearing trainers.

Zabadani, a town close to the Lebanese border on the old smugglers’ route, had once been a tourist attraction but is now empty except for government gunners on the hills and FSA fighters in the centre of town. Before the war, the town was more or less a model community: mainly populated by Sunni, but a friendly place where people were welcomed, and where ethnicity and religion did not matter.

‘There is a feeling of belonging in Zabadani that the regime deprived us of,’ said Mohammed, a young journalist I had met in Beirut who was born and raised in Zabadani, but who had been forced to flee. ‘We felt *Syrian*. Not any ethnic or religious denomination.’

I crowded into a courtyard of an old building in town, which was protected from shelling on all sides, with a group of fighters on what they counted as the fifty-second day of straight shelling in Zabadani. They did the universal thing soldiers do when they wait for the next attack: drink tea, smoke cigarettes and complain.

What did you do in your former life? I asked this ragtag bunch.

One was a mason; another a truck driver; another a teacher; another a smuggler. Thirty years ago, the roads from Damascus to Zabadani were infamous for smuggling.

‘You could buy real Lacoste T-shirts, anything, for the cheapest price.’ Everyone laughed. Then there was the sound of machine-gun fire and the smiles disappeared.

At the Zabadani triage hospital, which keeps getting moved because it keeps getting targeted and blown up, the sole doctor was stitching up a soldier who had been hit in a mortar attack. The current hospital location had been a furniture shop and was well hidden in the winding streets of the Old City, which had been taken over by the FSA. As the doctor stitched in the dark, he talked: ‘Both sides feel demoralized now,’ he said. ‘But both sides said after Daraya’ – referring to the massacre – ‘there is no going back.’

The doctor insisted on taking me back to his house and giving me a medical kit for my safe keeping: ‘You need it,’ he said. As I left, his wife gave me three freshly washed pears.

‘The symbol of Zabadani,’ said the doctor. ‘They used to be the sweetest thing.’

**T**here are no templates for war – the only thing that is the same from Vietnam to East Timor to Sierra Leone is the agony it creates. Syria reminds me of Bosnia: the abuse, the torture, the ethnic cleansing and the fighting among former neighbours. And the sorrow

of war too is universal – the inevitable end of a life that one knows and holds dear, and the beginning of pain and loss.

War is this: the end of the daily routine – walking children to schools that are now closed; the morning coffee in the same cafe, now empty and shattered with glass; the friends and family who have fled to uncertain futures. The constant, gnawing fear in the pit of one's stomach that the door is going to be kicked in and you will be dragged away.

I returned to Paris after that second trip, and thought often of a small child I met in Homs, with whom I had passed a gentle afternoon. At night, the sniping started and his grandmother began to cry with fear that a foreigner was in the house, and she made me leave in the dark.

I did not blame her. She did not want to die. She did not want to get raided by the Mukhābarāt for harbouring a foreign reporter.

The boy had been inside for some months and he was bored: he missed his friends; he missed the life that had ended for him when the protests began.

For entertainment, he watched, over and over, the single video in the house, *Home Alone*, like Groundhog Day, waiting for normality to return so he could go out and play, find the school friends who months ago had been sent to Beirut or London or Paris to escape the war, and resume his school lessons.

'When will it end?' he asked earnestly. For children, there must always be a time sequence, an order, for their stability. I know this as a mother. My son is confused by whether he sleeps at his father's apartment or his mother's and who is picking him up from school.

'And Wednesday is how many days away?' he always asks me. 'And Christmas is how many months? And when is summer?'

'So when is the war over?' this little boy asked me.

'Soon,' I said, knowing that I was lying.

I knelt down and took his tiny face in my hands. 'I don't know when, but it will end,' I said. I kissed his cheek goodbye. 'Everything is going to be fine.' ■