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THE MORNING THEY CAME FOR US

Dispatches from Syria

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French Mandate for Syria and Lebanon: 1920–1946

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Damascus – Thursday 28 June 2012

On an early morning in May 2012, one year into the Syrian revolution, I made my first trip to Damascus. It was a suffocating, early summer day with a hazy, opaque light. I arrived from Beirut in a local taxi, which I had hired for slightly less than 100 dollars, paid in cash. The driver picked me up on the road to Damascus and made a joke about St Paul's Damascene conversion, as he loaded my bags into the boot of the car. Then we drove into another country, leaving behind Beirut with its modern beach clubs and crowded Thursday hairdressers and balmy restaurants and noisy clubs, and drove to another land, one that was teetering on the edge of war.

In the New Testament, it says that St Paul was on this same road sometime in the first century AD, when an event occurred. I am not sure, and neither are historians or religious fanatics, whether he heard a voice or was given a sign from God, or whether he just had a sharp and painful understanding that his life was not on the right track. At any rate, a mystic conversion occurred. Paul ceased persecuting the early Christians and instead became a loyal follower of Jesus. His life changed for ever.

It does not take long to get to Syria from Lebanon, which gives an idea of how brutally the land was torn up and fashioned into artificial countries after the First World War, once the Ottoman Empire had collapsed. The modern Syrian state was established as a French mandate, after many false promises, lies and deceptions of the Arabs by the French and British. It left the Syrians (particularly the Alawites, who had felt most oppressed by French rule) with a wilful desire for self-determination. Syria finally gained independence in April 1946, as a parliamentary republic. What followed next was a series of coups, until the Arab Republic of Syria was established in 1963 in a Ba'athist coup d'état planned and led by several men, including Hafez Assad, father of the current president, Bashar.

Looking at that timeline of betrayal and violence, the groundwork had already been laid for the tragedy that would evolve decades after those maps had been redrawn by colonial interlocutors. It seemed forcefully inevitable.

The first thing I saw once I crossed the border into the Syrian hinterland was an enormous colour portrait of Bashar al-Assad, his already vivid eyes tinted blue to make their colour even more intense. The second thing I noticed was a Dunkin' Donuts, which seemed odd, even in a sophisticated country like Syria. It was an awkward juxtaposition, so blatant a symbol of Western commercialism – not a small café serving coffee but a sugar-infested paradise – on a highway leading to Damascus.

As it turned out, the Dunkin' Donuts was not what I suspected. Although it looked like the solidly American version, down to the branded signs and decoration, it only sold toasted cheese sandwiches. I bought one, and was

watched all the while as three mustachioed men smoking cigarettes – obviously Mukhabarat, secret police – stood around the bar, while one of them toasted it. My driver was waiting, twitchy and nervous, and hustled me out once the sandwich had been served.

The atmosphere in Damascus was equally paranoid, something like the old days in Iraq under Saddam Hussein. There was an unspoken quality, a silence despite the blaring horns of those caught in traffic. People whispered when out in public. When a waiter arrived at a table, the people at that table stopped talking. The Mukhabarat could easily have been the same men who had followed me in Iraq a decade before – those same cheap leather jackets, the same badly trimmed, downward-turned moustaches. Many of the Ba'athists I knew from Saddam's portfolio had, in fact, run to another country of Ba'athists after he was killed – to Syria.

I had come to Syria because I wanted to see a country before it tumbled down the rabbit-hole of war. During that first trip, in May 2012, Syria was just on the brink. You could be exacting about definitions and call it an armed conflict between two factions (later three, then four, then more), but I had seen war start like this before, and it was descending on Syria with stunning velocity. The world stood by watching.

I had a visa, therefore I was there legally, but anyway, I felt uneasy: I was watched, observed and followed. I checked into a hotel, the Dama Rose, where the United Nations monitors were also staying: morose men who were no longer allowed to operate because they had been attacked too often. They sat drinking coffee after coffee and making jokes about the

bar downstairs, which was usually frequented by lithe young Russian girls whom they called 'Natashas'. In a few weeks' time, even the Natashas would flee, even though Putin being Assad's ally had made it easy for them to get visas to enter the country.

One Thursday – the day that is the start of the Muslim weekend – I returned to the hotel after a day of talking to people who were uncertain 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 rebellions, but nor did they support an armed resistance. At that point, I was trying to describe the various supporters and detractors of Assad. There were rebels who were fighting him; there were activists who were launching a digital war, using Facebook, YouTube and Twitter as ammunition; and then there were those who had protested in places like Homs in the beginning but had dropped out altogether when some of their fellow activists took up arms.

In a café in Paris, on a bitterly cold day earlier that year, I had met with Fadwa Suleiman, a graceful Alawite actress who, in the very beginning of the revolution, led the protests and became something of a celebrity (before that she had starred in Syrian soaps). Because she was an Alawite, the same ethnic group as Assad, and a protester calling for freedom from the regime, she was instantly branded as the face of the revolution. But she said things had changed. She was saddened to see that 'the revolution is not going in the right direction, that it is becoming armed, that the opposition which wanted to resist peacefully is playing the game of the regime, and that the country is heading for sectarian war.' 'I didn't want

to leave Syria,' she added, 'but I didn't have the choice. I was being threatened and I was becoming a threat for the activists who were helping me.'

Then there were what I called 'the Believers', Assad's followers, some of them as devoted to him as St Paul had been to Jesus, but others who were simply concerned that, as a minority of a minority – Alawites are an offshoot of the Shia branch of Islam – they would disappear if the radical Sunnis came to power.

There was a sub-faction of the Believers who only wanted to save their own skin: they did not want to get hauled away to jail by Assad. They privately did not approve of the regime's torture cells and bombing raids on Aleppo, but they found the news hard to believe, and, above all, they did not want the radical Islamists in power.

Then there was another category: those who believed in nothing other than staying alive, putting a meal on the table, stepping across a street without getting sprayed with shrapnel, or travelling in a car without getting stuck in traffic next to a car bomber.

Sometimes the categories shifted. The longer I stayed, the wider became the range of activists I would come across. I knew some who became Believers after ISIS – the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, sometimes called ISIL, sometimes called Daesh in Arabic – came to power, simply because they did not want to live under that kind of Islam: one where women doctors were beheaded, where children were taught to hate anyone who was not like them, where only the most literal, most radical form of Islam was accepted. There were also rebels who shifted sides, moving from being supporters of

the Free Syrian Army to part of Jabhat al-Nusra (the al-Qaeda faction in Syria), and then making the leap to ISIS.

Equally, many Believers were also losing faith. The Foreign Ministry spokesman that spring and summer was Jihad Makdissi, a Christian with a Muslim name and a degree from the Sorbonne in Paris. In his office at the Ministry, Jihad explained how his country was a 'melting pot' of ethnicity: Greek Orthodox, Christians, Sunni Kurds, Shias, Alawites and Jews. He was rational, intelligent and thoughtful, and it was obvious why he was put in that position – to give a gentler face to the regime.

But Jihad did not stay much longer. One year after my first visit to Syria, I would open the paper and see that Makdissi had defected with his wife and children to the Gulf, making him for ever *persona non grata* – at least under the Assad regime. Some time after that, I met him for lunch in a businessmen's café in Geneva, a few days before the failed Geneva II talks. Makdissi, who was leaning towards a political career, but was not entirely clear about what his platform would be, told me about his final days in Syria: 'I realized that things I had accepted before, I would no longer be able to accept.'

Suleiman, the actress, also fled from Homs to Damascus, thence to Jordan, and finally to France. She said it was in Homs that she saw Sunnis who had initially carried weapons only to defend themselves begin to use these arms to attack regime forces. 'It was then that I understood,' she said, acknowledging that what she had thought would be a peaceful uprising was turning into war. She blamed, above all, not the Syrians themselves, but the 'other countries' (Saudi, Qatar, Kuwait) that were 'arming the Syrian streets. . . Those people

are willing to do anything to take power in the same way that Bashar al-Assad is ready to do anything to stay in power.'

Fadwa wasn't that happy in Paris, she said; she missed her friends, her family and her old life. The life of someone in exile is always hard, more so when your country is in the midst of war and you are outside it, watching through a frosted-glass window. The actress had cut off her long hair when she started marching in Homs, as a symbolic gesture of protest, and in the Paris café that afternoon, with her short hair and big sweater, she looked scrawny, abandoned and cold. But she wasn't going back, she said, running her fingers through the hair she had willingly and somehow symbolically cut off, until Syria was a country she once again could recognize.

The pool party at my hotel that Thursday in early summer 2012 seemed to betoken the last days of a spoilt empire that was about to implode. Smoke was rising in the background from shelling in the southern suburbs, and a gaunt Russian Natasha was dancing clumsily near the pool, oblivious to the explosions. Syrian women with complicated hairstyles involving hairpieces and extensions, blow-dryings and coloured gels, paraded in full makeup, bikinis and high heels. The men wore Vilebrequin-style swimming trunks and drank Lebanese beer with a lime down the neck of a bottle and a salt-rimmed glass. A remix version of Adele's 'Someone Like You' thumped from a stage.

I stood on my balcony and watched the smoke from the bombing in the suburbs, but I also looked at the bacchanalian scene below – at the denial of the beginnings of the drum roll of war. One by one by one, these people's lives were

falling apart, and before they knew it each and every one of them would be betrayed. But the bubble had not yet burst.

For several weeks running, I watched the fevered hedonism of the Thursday afternoon pool parties at the Dama Rose Hotel. That first week it was like every other start of a weekend. By lunchtime, women were rushing to hairdressers; the roads leading out of the city – those that were still open – were clogged with luxury cars. People who could do so were still heading outside the city to the villages, taking their kids to amusement parks, or 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 served traditional Arabic food to the elite, were still packed. I went to a wedding there one afternoon, and was served plate after heaving plate of lamb, chicken, rice, dates, oranges and honey-drenched sweets. I was painfully aware that less than an hour away by car, assuming there were no roadblocks, people in Homs were starving to death, a massacre was going on in Houla, and refugees were crossing the borders of Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan searching for a way to feed their families.

The most surreal aspect of the Dama Rose parties was that they were taking place in the hotel, which was home to those 300 frozen, frustrated UN soldiers from fifty different countries, who had been brought in to be 'monitors'. On a top floor their boss, the Norwegian General Robert Mood, the chief monitor, was installed with his own team.

On 14 June 2012, their operations would be suspended because it became too dangerous for them. Eventually, most of them were pulled out, and a skeleton staff of UN workers

remained behind – frustrated to the end with the encumbering politics.

Not for the first time, the UN was in an uncomfortable position. The UN is always an easy target for journalists and regional analysts. We like to mock their 'bloated inefficiency' (a favourite hackneyed term), and the often too obvious career aspirations of certain officials, which seem to come before their obligation to relieve human suffering. There is the cronyism, the preferential treatment of relatives and friends of senior officials, and vast corruption. But there are also a few committed officials, and more to the point, local field workers, who are determined to help people, to commit their lives, despite being hampered by the international institution's bureaucratic wrangles.

This time, the monitors, who wanted to be in Homs and Zabadani doing their job, were tethered to a hotel. They were on the fringe of a war they were unable to navigate or stop.

For the more honest senior officials, who spoke to me privately, there were deep anxieties that Syria was becoming another failure in the long list of catastrophes that included genocides in Bosnia, Rwanda and Sri Lanka, human trafficking in Kosovo, mass rape in the Congo (under the eyes of peacekeepers), and finally, cholera brought to Haiti in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake.[1]

Veteran diplomats like Kofi Annan, Lakhdar Brahimi and Staffan de Mistura were brought in to negotiate with Assad and the rebels. Annan and Brahimi both quit, at an utter loss over what to do, and in the winter of 2015, de Mistura was still pushing on with a plan for 'freezing' local ceasefires in Aleppo, which, not surprisingly, never got off the ground.[2]

De Mistura, a veteran humanitarian, was determined to keep going, to relieve the unbearable suffering. It took a lot of persistence, after four years of war, to continue to try to forge some kind of path to peace.

The second week in June 2012, people were more sombre at the pool party. There was drinking, the house music blared, the UN staff still complained about the noise, but the Russian dancer was gone. And by the third week, people left early, rushing to their 4x4s with distinctly worried looks on their faces. No one wanted to be out after dark.

On the afternoon of 28 June, I could see that in the distance, towards the al-Marjeh neighbourhood, across from the Justice Courts, there was a larger than usual curl of smoke. Two car bombs had exploded earlier that day in the centre of Damascus. The day before had been the bloodiest day on record since the then sixteen-month uprising had begun. This Thursday, the partygoers were almost non-existent, and the ones who remained were decidedly less cheerful. There was music, but it was not blaring. There was no dancing. Most people were glued to their phones, texting family or friends for news or information.

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Latakia – Thursday 14 June 2012

While I was lying on the floor, they stood over me, kicking me in the teeth and punching me and using their hands and feet. One man put his military boot in my mouth.

I lay there hiding my face as they kicked and thought: 'They are using my body to practise their judo moves.'

And the entire time they were beating me, they kept saying: 'You want freedom? Here's your freedom!' Every time they said freedom, they kicked or punched harder.

Then suddenly the mood changed. It got darker. They started saying if I did not talk, they would rape me.

The morning they came for her, Nada was still in her pyjamas. The air was cool from the night before, so she judged it to be around 6 a.m. She heard the muezzin call out for morning prayer, and heard her father – a welder who always got up in the early light – rising to pray.

For a moment, just when Nada opened her eyes, she tried to forget what the day might bring, imagining that her life was normal, as it had always been – before 2011, before the uprising.

Two days earlier, Nada had received a strange phone call. The number did not register on her caller ID. She stared

at the monitor on her phone, then pressed the green button to accept the call.

'It's me,' he said, 'I'm in prison.'

She recognized the voice. It was a close friend, a colleague. Someone who also called himself an 'activist' like her. He had been picked up by Syrian state security and taken to the Central Prison in Latakia.

'Why are you calling me?' Nada asked, sitting down on the floor, the phone pressed to her ear. But she knew the answer, feeling her stomach turn over in fear.

'Can you get here right away?' he begged. 'Can you come to the police station? They want to talk to you, too.'

It was a signal they had practised since the war started.

It meant the police had caught him. He was probably being beaten, and was told to hand over the names of any fellow activists who were working against the Assad regime. Maybe they had smashed the bottom of his feet with a club, or attached his testicles to wires and turned on the electricity; maybe they had held his head under water until he thought his lungs would burst. Nada tried not to think of him, vulnerable, exposed, in pain. Crying.

Whatever had happened, he had probably cracked and given up Nada's name. But he had done her a favour by calling: it meant she had time to run.

She pressed the red button, ended the call, and drew herself into a tight small ball. She had nowhere to run. All she could do was wait.

Down the road from Nada's childhood home is the mountain town of Qardaha, the birthplace of Hafez

al-Assad, the father of Bashar, who had ruled Syria for three decades. Hafez had been born poor, joining the Ba'ath Party as a student and later becoming a lieutenant in the Syrian Air Force. After the 1963 coup in Syria, which established Ba'athist military control over the country, Hafez al-Assad was put in charge of the Syrian Air Force. In 1966, after yet another coup, he was appointed as Minister of Defence. He gained mass popularity in domestic politics from that point on, allowing him later to overthrow Salah Jadid, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces.

Hafez was born and buried in Qardaha. Upon his death in 2000, he was entombed in a white mausoleum next to his son Bassel, his intended successor, who had been killed in a car crash at thirty-two in 1994. His mother, Na'saa, rests down the road, shaded by a line of bowing trees.

Nada grew up in the Alawite triangle of Syria, and as a minority Sunni, always felt isolated. From relatives, she had heard stories of the Hama massacre in February 1982, of how the Syrian Army and the Defence Companies, under the orders of Hafez al-Assad, besieged the town of Hama for twenty-seven days in order to quell an uprising by the Muslim Brotherhood. Led by the Syrian Army, the siege effectively ended the anti-governmental campaign begun in 1976 by Sunni Muslim groups.

No one knows the exact number killed. Diplomats have reported 1,000, but other sources estimate that as many as 10,000 were slain. Nada was not sure of the number either, when I asked her.

Nada had grown up with these stories – and stories of the subsequent imprisonment and persecution of religious Sunnis – but her reasons for joining the opposition were not religious in nature. She joined because she 'wanted the chance to live in a democracy. As you do.'

In March 2011, as the Arab Spring was spreading in countries all around her, she first heard reports of unrest from the southwestern town of Daraa, just north of the border of Jordan, where the Syrian uprising began.

It started with kids, with graffiti. Fifteen kids, all from the same family, wrote anti-Assad slogans on the wall of their school. They were arrested, beaten, tortured and thrown into prison cells.

Every day, their families went to the local authorities, begging for news of their children. They received none. And from the silence of the jail cells to which Syrians had become so accustomed, finally came a spirit of rebellion. Perhaps it was fuelled by what was happening not far away in Tunisia, in Libya, in Egypt; but people who before had been afraid, and had remained submissive to the repression they had lived with for four decades, rose up. 'It was like watching people who were asleep suddenly wake up,' she said.

On 18 March, the beginning of spring, they gathered, hundreds of them, in front of the al-Omari mosque, and they chanted and cried, shouting for reforms: for an end to corruption, nepotism, unemployment, torture, security forces, secret police, paranoia. For an end to the lack of hope, lack of future, lack of political will. For a change from the life they had known under Assad. Within a week, there were thousands of people joined together.

But from the very beginning, Syrian security forces had been firing on the protesters. Three people were killed the first day. Two days later, seven policemen were killed, and four more protesters. The Syrian War had begun. While it was no surprise that it had started, what was surprising was how quickly it spread throughout the country: from Daraa to Homs, Hama to Aleppo, to Damascus and even to Latakia, the heart and soul of the Assad regime and of his Alawite minority.

Nada joined the opposition as a volunteer, willing to do anything to help. At first, she acted as a kind of runner. She brought medical supplies to the front lines, where opposition soldiers – not really soldiers, but rather her fellow students and friends – were fighting to overthrow Assad. She also made food – rice, vegetables, fruit – and delivered sandwiches. Then she began broadcasting reports of the opposition's message: their goals, their strategy.

It was extremely dangerous work, but important. People took notice of her, and finally, several months after the first shots were fired, she was promoted to chief of the local 'Revolution Media' department. Social media played a huge role in all of the Middle East uprisings, and Nada began to coordinate Facebook and Twitter accounts to help amplify the message of 'a democratic Syria'.

'I believed in what we were doing,' she said, 'and yes, I was afraid. We lived in a country where the security forces and the police were always something to be afraid of. It was hard to get that mentality – the one I had grown up with – out of my head, to try to live as though we really were going to be free.'

She had operated with her colleagues quietly for a year. She now realized that the authorities must have been watching her the entire time. She knew, as did her friends, that it was only a matter of time before they arrested her.

When Nada got off the phone that June morning in 2012, she sat on the floor for a moment and tried to arrange her thoughts. *Think*, she told herself. *Calmly*. She could run. But where would she go? What would she tell her family, who thought she was a student? And how would she get money, a passport and a plane ticket?

She decided to stay. 'I knew I could never outrun them. I had to face them.'

Her first thought was to destroy everything that might link her to the opposition. If she were caught, the rest of the operation would be compromised. She opened her mobile phone, took out the SIM card and shredded it. Then she went through the house, methodically finding and destroying every document, photograph, camera, notebook, memory stick – anything that might be considered evidence.

As she worked on autopilot, destroying her writings, her thoughts, her notes, she thought about what her father and mother would say when the police came for her. They knew nothing of her secret life. They had been excited for her when she became a part-time 'journalist'. But as she ripped up her notebooks and papers and went to the garden to make a small bin fire, she regretted nothing. She felt, as did so many others, that she was in the process of building a new country, a free one. Even as she was doing it, preparing for her last moments before her incarceration, she said she still believed it was the right thing to have done.

Two days later, everything had been destroyed. All Nada could do now was wait for them to come.

Everyone remembers their last morning of normality. The shaft of early morning light streamed through Nada's window onto her bed, making a small pool on her blanket. She remembers her mother's hurried knock on her door. She remembers the whiteness of her mother's face against her hijab and the tenseness of her mouth as she leaned over her daughter, still in bed, and whispered: 'There are six police cars outside; they are shouting out your name.'

Nada sat up and jumped out of bed. There was no time to escape now. She had just thought it would have taken longer for them to come for her.

Still in her pyjamas, she picked up her laptop from her desk and ran to the bathroom, locking the door. She sat on the cold floor, her head in her hands, until she heard them begin to knock, then pound, on the bathroom door.

'You have to open it, Farrah,' one of them said, using her *nom de guerre*. 'Open the door, Farrah. It's only wood. We can break it with one punch.'

They knocked again. And again.

Nada did nothing. She was frozen. She kept the laptop against her stomach, and rocked back and forth on the floor.

'Farrah? We're coming in.'

They kicked the door open easily, and found her on the floor.

Nada is tiny. Her bones are delicate, and her face is almost doll-like, with large blue eyes that make her seem younger

than her twenty-five years. She covers her hair with a hijab, but the strands that escape are baby-fine, and a quiet brown.

One of the men half-lifted her off the ground. Nada weakly asked: 'May I get dressed?'

'Get dressed. Fast.'

She went to her room, heart pounding, and pulled on jeans and a sweater.

What Nada said she remembered most was the stupefied look on her parents' faces as she was forced into the police car. She walked willingly, but they opened the back door and thrust her inside the car. She looked back at her parents, as her father came forward, insisting that he had the right to accompany his daughter. He and the police argued. Nada hardly heard them, but her father eventually got into the car with her. He said nothing.

They drove to the military police station, and though he was silent, her father's presence soothed her. It was only to be a brief respite however, for once they arrived, the police ordered him to leave.

Her father said goodbye, and told her to be strong. 'As I saw my father go,' she remembers, 'I knew I was all alone and they could do anything they wanted.'

Hours later, after the beating had started, after the abuse and the sleep deprivation, after their kicks so fierce that they made her childish orthodontia dig into her gums and break her skin, after the gun butts to her head, face and kidneys became routine – she knew that she was entering a place from which, psychologically, she could never return.

* * *

The lowest depth that a human being can reach is to perform or to receive torture. The goal of the torturer is to inflict horrific pain and dehumanize another being. The act not only destroys both parties' souls – the victim's and the perpetrator's – but also the very fabric of a society. By subjecting men or women to enforced violence, sexual violation, or worse, you transform them into something subhuman. How does someone return to the human race after having been so brutalized?

By early 2012, reports began emerging of mass rape in Syria, on both sides of the conflict. In January, the International Rescue Committee's report included surveys from Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan identifying rape as 'the primary reason their families fled the country'. The number two in charge at the UN's refugee agency, UNHCR, using the IRC report, claimed: 'Syria is increasingly marked by rape and sexual violence.'

While the crimes have been cited by both sides of the conflict, they seem to be perpetrated predominantly by President Bashar al-Assad's men, largely paramilitary agents known as Shabiha, or 'ghosts'.

Although Assad's own government troops were not always the perpetrators, the Shabiha did most of the dirty work when it came to sexual violence. Their tactics were largely to incite fear within communities – to enter towns or villages after the government troops had been fighting nearby, and spread the word that they would rape the women – daughters, mothers, cousins and nieces. Frightened, people would run, leaving scorched earth behind. It's a convenient way to ethnically cleanse an entire region. Fear can be generated so easily.

Sexual violence was not reported to be only against women either. There are many accounts of male rape, particularly in detention. Although prisons and detention centres were usually the most likely places for the crime to occur, it happened at checkpoints and when houses were being 'cleansed' as well.

Following the IRC report, videos began appearing on YouTube, as well as on Twitter and blogs, translating confessions of various captured Shabiha. The danger of such confessions is that some – such as that of the admitted rapist below – could not be verified as not having been given under great duress.

But the testimony given by a captured Shabiha is still chilling documentation.

Question: How long have you been with the security forces?
Response: Since the beginning of the revolution.
Question: What is your aim?
Response: To quash the revolution.
Question: And what else?
Response: We were induced by a certain amount of money.
Question: How much?
Response: Fifteen thousand Syrian pounds.
Question: Weekly? Monthly?
Response: Monthly.
Question: Do you go out to carry out raids?
Response: I go out on a security purpose.
Question: On a security purpose?
Response: Indeed, on a security purpose.

Question: With the army?
Response: Yes, and we raid the houses on the basis we are the security forces.
Question: Security forces?
Response: Indeed. We enter the houses to search. If there are men we push them out of the houses for a few hours. We take all the money and jewels we find. And if there are women, we rape them.
Question: How many women did you rape?
Response: Seven cases of rape.
Question: Seven?
Response: Indeed.
Question: Where did these rapes happen?
Response: Some at the village Al Fawl. First cases at the school, we raped them for six continuous hours. Then we entered another house as security forces on the ground that there are terrorists inside. We entered the house, we have tied the man, stolen jewels and money, and we raped women. One of them is from Knissat Bani Az. And we were four to rape her (me and three shabiha) and she committed suicide following her rape. The other case is a girl, we entered to search her house as security forces and we have stolen money and raped her. And there is another rape in Damascus. We entered her house on the ground we are security forces elements. We entered the house and raped the girl.
Question: And who did you deliver to the army?
Response: Five names.
Question: And who are the security forces you are dealing with?

Response: Lieutenant Colonel —.
Question: Who else?
Response: Two elements.
Question: Who is —?
Response: From the coast [the 'coast' being the Latakia region].

Whether or not rape is being used in Syria as a weapon of war needs to be further examined, but certainly it is a fear-provoking strategy. In February 2013, a United Nations report[3] for the Commission of Inquiry on Syria (COI) at the Human Rights Council stated: 'Syrian refugees . . . reported that one of the reasons that families fled was because of a perceived increased risk of kidnapping and rape.'

The findings below (from the same UN COI report) were based on forty-one interviews connected with sexual violence against men and women.

> Between twenty and thirty soldiers and Shabiha – who she knew by name and who she described as 'Shias' from her village – entered her house looking for the men. Her aunt, three female cousins and three sisters-in-law were in the house, while the men were hiding in the basement. They beat the elderly aunt when she told them the men were in Lebanon. One of the Shabiha took two of her cousins upstairs to a separate room and locked the door while the others stayed downstairs. After the Shabiha left, the two stated that they had been beaten but she noticed the cousins couldn't walk properly afterwards and couldn't explain why they were separated from the rest if they had only been beaten.

While rape in any society is a horrific act of power and subjugation, in Muslim culture, it is devastating. Notions of virginity uphold the central concept of honour in Islam, not only for the victim, but also for the family. The COI reports cited five cases of women who had committed suicide after being raped. The crime was against women as young as fourteen.

'Sexual violence in Syria is not systematic – it's not like Rwanda where it was meant to wipe out a gene pool,' said Dr Zahra, a Syrian gynaecologist I met in 2013 on the Turkish-Syrian border who was working extensively with rape victims. 'But it is happening. It is happening every day.' There were an estimated 9,500 Syrians living in Antakya, where I saw Dr Zahra, at that time, after having fled their country.

'Not every woman who is arrested has been raped. Not all the women whose houses were raided were raped.' Zahra pauses. 'But the ones who have been are deeply traumatized.'

> The girl had been abducted from the street by four men, two in military uniforms and two in civilian clothing. She was taken to an unknown building where she was kept and questioned by people she described as 'Shias from her neighbourhood'. While there she was interrogated by a woman about the work her mother did with the FSA [Free Syrian Army, the opposition].
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> During the interrogation, she was beaten with electrical wire, given injections . . . and had cigarettes extinguished on her chest. She was denied food and water for extended periods of time. On the fifth day of her detention, four

young men were brought into the room, where they raped her. Two days later, she was released.

Her father took her to a gynaecologist outside Syria. In a separate interview, the doctor confirmed bruises, cigarette burns, injection marks on arms, and sexual injuries to the victim. This 14-year-old girl has tried to commit suicide three times, saying 'My life has no value. I lost everything, what has gone will never come back.'

United Nations COI report, February 2013

Nada's time had come.

The police (or perhaps the secret service or intelligence, she was not sure who they were) entered the room, sat down and looked at her as though she were a dog. One said abruptly: 'Talk or we will strip you!'

Nada, however, remained huddled on the floor, shaking with terror. 'I was like one of those little dogs, you know the kind that shake and shake and cannot stop shaking?'

She had never thought this would happen to her, never considered the potential consequences if she got caught working with the opposition. 'I just did it. I did not think – maybe I did not let myself think – of what could happen.'

Still, Nada did not cry, at least not at first. She just lay on the ground wishing she were dead.

Eight months and three days is a horrifically long time to be held captive and tortured. And the pain wasn't just physical. Perhaps the worst part was that her jailers delighted in telling her that her family had been notified she was dead.

In fact, Nada spent her days and nights in a dirty cell not far from her childhood home, but the people she loved most in the world were grieving for her. They believed her body was no longer of this earth. She felt invisible. She felt alone. The psychological torture was more terrifying than the physical abuse.

'To think that the outside world, the people that love you think you are dead when in fact you are alive . . .'

A small, dark cell became Nada's home for eight months. Nada's cell was not even big enough for her already small frame to stretch out in; she remained curled up. The jeans she wore throughout the entire ordeal are still creased in the areas of her body which she was unable to move.

'I kept them,' she says. 'To remember what they did to me.'

In one corner of the cell, there was a hole – an Arabic toilet – and a water tap. 'I kept the water running all the time because I was afraid of rats coming up the drainpipe and biting me.' She could not sleep, and when she did, she dreamed of those same rats covering her body. She would wake up crying and screaming, clutching her body to protect herself from the imaginary rodents.

Other men and women were kept in the cells next to her own. She did not know who they were, but they too would scream out, crying, pleading for mercy, for an end to the torture. Some cried for their mothers.

'This was part of my torture,' she says. 'To hear other people begging, and to know they were coming for me next. When they would stop in front of my door and turn the key – my heart would stop.'

She tried to keep track of time, but it was impossible as her body wasted away. She imagined herself disappearing. Her family too. She had no news of them, nor of her friends, nor of her other captured colleagues. They told her that other activists had betrayed her, that Assad had won the war, and that the opposition was dead. 'I sank into a dark place.'

When she asked for water, they would bring a male prisoner, make him urinate into a bottle, and try to force her to drink it. When she spat it out, they would throw it back in her face. The male prisoner, equally humiliated, would avoid her eyes.

'I remember every single one of their faces,' she says bitterly of her tormentors, of that memory. 'I will look for them. I AM looking for them.'

The stripping led to beatings. The beatings led to further abuse.

She was relentlessly interrogated for names, dates and occasions where she met her fellow Syrian Youth Union colleagues.

There was always at least one interrogator, sometimes more. She would sit; they would circle her like wolves.

She was continually threatened with rape.

'They would say "Talk or we will strip you",' she says, covering her eyes with the swipe of a hand. 'That was their line, their threat.'

One day, when she was not telling them what they wanted to hear, they brought her to an all-male cell where the prisoners were in their underwear.

The men stared at her lustfully. She was one of them, but they were men, and they had been locked up a long time.

'It was horrible,' she says. 'Humiliating. They told me they would leave me with these hungry men and they would take care of me.' She felt like a rabbit surrounded by wolves.

'I am a conservative Muslim woman, I thought I was being given to these men for them to rape me,' she said. 'And so I started screaming. I think I screamed for three hours. Until my throat was stripped raw. They wanted to break me. And they did. Finally, I said, "Okay, I will tell you the truth".'

She said she talked. She told them things. But what she told them was not enough. After several hours, they moved her – the first of many moves – and brought her to a place that she calls 'the horror room'. The room was only as wide as 'a man's body'. They tied her hands to an iron bar behind her back.

Then a man entered with a whip. 'Every time I said something he did not like,' she says, beginning to break into sobs, 'he whipped me.'

Her bloodied and bruised body was then handed over to another interrogator, who was told, 'Okay, now really take care of her.'

'Now the real beatings began,' she says sombrely, 'and the terrible things.'

For more than four years, I roamed refugee camps, safe houses, cities and towns in Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, Jordan, Syria, Kurdistan and Iraq, talking to women who had been raped during the war. Initially I did it as a journalist and analyst; later I worked for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) working on reports about Syrian women who were left alone owing to the war, and were susceptible to sexual predation.

They were hard to find, these women, for most direct victims did not wish to talk with me. I often had to rely on friends or family, who would whisper about such-and-such a woman, and I would do my best to track them down. I never forced them to talk, and if they did not want to see me, I did not push them. I believed they had suffered enough.

Eventually, working near the Turkish–Syrian border in 2013, I was told about a 'safe' house in Northern Syria, near Aleppo, where nearly a dozen women were hiding. All had allegedly been raped by Shabiha, and were being tended to and cared for by a religious woman. But when I finally tracked the safe house down, they had moved – the women were not safe, and they had gone to another village.

Once I had identified the victims, and if they agreed to talk to me, I still had to decipher their language of shame. I tried to explain that I was not going to identify them or expose their terrible secret, and that speaking might, in some way, eventually bring the perpetrators to justice. That was the singular motive of the women – and the men – who agreed to talk to me: that the men who had done this to them would not be able to walk the streets when the war was finished, with impunity. Some told me they spoke to me because hiding their story was like a 'stone weighing down my heart', as one young girl said tearfully.

Many years before, I had had a similar task in Bosnia and Kosovo. Following those wars, the women were often held in 'rape camps' for weeks or even months, and would not use the word 'rape' in their own language. They would say – between sobs – that they had been 'touched'. They would cry, saying that if their husbands knew, they would divorce

them to find a clean woman. They covered up their secret like a bloody wound, and told no one.

The taboo of rape for any woman is enormous. But for a Muslim woman, who is meant to be a virgin upon marriage, it is the end of life, or the life she was meant to live. If she was single before, she will probably never marry. She will not have children, a family. In other cultures, this might be fine; but in the Middle East, where large families are a given, it means isolation from the rest of society.

Later, Yazidi women, from an ancient community in northern Iraq, would report being kidnapped by ISIS soldiers, sold into slavery, held in houses, raped, forced to marry their captors. The sexual violence used against women during the war that rages through Syria (and later, Iraq, when ISIS pushed through the town of Mosul and began to erase the borders between Syria and Iraq) is a way of fighting the men themselves: if we cannot fuck you, we will fuck your women.

Most of the rapes I was able to document were committed in detention. Some happened at checkpoints. Other women were raped in their homes, when the Shabiha entered their villages.

The women who were held in detention report that rape was always the threat used when they were not 'cooperating'. One young woman said that she was imprisoned with her mother and forced to watch the soldiers beating her mother.

'I did not care what they did to me,' she said, 'but to see my mother suffering . . .' The soldiers threatened to rape her mother, before telling the mother that they were going to rape the daughter.

'This was the most terrible psychological pressure. I do not think you can imagine the pain . . .'

Another young woman in Aleppo told me she was arrested for putting up revolutionary posters. She was partially stripped, blindfolded and tied to a chair.

'Then they said they would pass me from man to man.'

When I met Nada in a safe house in southern Turkey, she had been out of prison for some months. But she still had the reflexes of a prisoner, of someone huddling in a corner, protecting her face and her body from blows. Sudden movements made her jump; she would frequently get lost in her thoughts, and stay silent for several minutes, or well up with tears.

She was minuscule in size, thinner than when she had entered prison, which made it hard for me to believe that anyone could beat her with a stick or a whip. She looked as though she would break in two if you touched her. Her body was the size of a twelve-year-old: no breasts, no hips, shoulders hardly wide enough to carry her frame. She wore a lavender hijab and a tight red sweater. The childish clash of colours seemed to emphasize how young she looked.

When we first met, she cowered when I touched her hand in greeting. She seemed broken, vulnerable. She would not use the word rape. She told her story in staccato. But after a while of sitting quietly, her face changed into a myriad of emotions – sadness, pain, then the heavy flood of memory, and finally revulsion. She told of the day they brought in a male prisoner and forced her to watch him being sodomized. As she talks, her voice deadened, she

opens and closes her hand mechanically, clutching at the straps of her backpack. She starts to cry. It very quickly turns to a raw sobbing.

'The things I saw . . . the things I saw . . .' she spits out. 'It is unbearable to explain what I saw . . . *I cannot forget . . . I saw . . . another prisoner being raped . . . a man being raped. I heard it . . . I saw it . . . Do you know what it's like to hear a man cry?*'

She abruptly gets up from the chair where she is sitting, claps a hand over her mouth, and runs into a nearby bathroom. She turns on the tap and begins to vomit.

A friend, who is with her, is also close to tears.

'Yes, Nada was raped,' she says. 'But she can never admit it, even to herself.'

Her friend goes to console her. She comes back. 'She cannot even say the word aloud. When she talks of others and what they endured,' her friend says, 'she is talking about what happened to her.'

There are no words to say to her, no more details to extract. What has happened to Nada cannot be undone. What she has seen and heard cannot be forgotten. It cannot be erased.

A few days later, I offered Nada and a friend a ride in my car to a class in Antakya. They were studying English together, taking a course that Nada hopes will eventually get her a job, and maybe a chance at a new life. When her friend talks about this, Nada offers a fleeting smile, and looks, if only for a moment, like any other young woman her age setting out into life – confident, happy, free.

Then something crosses her mind, and her eyes go grey and dead once again.

'I changed a lot when I was in prison,' she says quietly. Then she smiles. 'But you know, even there, I was the revolutionary.'

In between beatings and interrogation sessions, she confronted her jailers. She chastised them for small things, for prisoners' rights. It gave her a feeling of having some control.

'I made them get plates for the other prisoners!' she says proudly. 'I made them realize we are not just dogs to be kicked and used, but people. I made them put plastic over the broken windows.' She looks faintly triumphant. 'Before we had nothing, then we got plates!'

Small victories for a broken spirit.

One afternoon in Antakya, a friend introduced me to Shaheeneez, a thirty-seven-year-old former teacher. She was dressed in black trousers and a long black belted coat, despite the heat. She wanted to meet somewhere anonymous. When she entered the room, a shadow seemed to walk alongside her.

After she sat, Shaheeneez explained that she is very religious. As she talked, I couldn't help but notice her headscarf, silver rings and watch, her olive, faintly pitted skin, her full nose and defined jawline. She looked strong rather than pretty.

Still, she was nervous and jittery, visibly shaking as she spoke. When I learned that it was only recently that she had got out of a Syrian jail in which she had been held for 'several months', I began to understand why.

As she told it, in 2012 she was arrested at the airport on her way to Egypt from her home in Aleppo. She was going

to a conference. 'I think my name was on some kind of list.' Her actual arrest was probably for political activities, but she is not sure.

After she was taken, the men who arrested her threw her into a state security prison in Damascus. There she was blindfolded and interrogated, often for hours at a time.

'It confused me,' she said, trying to explain what it was like to be asked questions with her eyes covered. 'I heard voices, but could not put the faces to them. It was a tactic, made to scare me more.'

The interrogation exhausted her, but she had no intention of giving away names. She was aware of what they were trying to do to get her to confess. At one point, the interrogators changed their tactics; their voices grew rougher and they began to hit her. One wallop knocked her to the floor. While she was on the ground, they tied her hands together. She remembered how the rope cut into her skin. One of the men hovered over her. Someone tugged at her clothes. She heard a door open, close.

'That is where they abused . . .' she stumbled over the word, '. . . me.'

She said they kept her on the floor. They partially removed her clothes.

'They said they would do terrible things if I did not cooperate . . .' Shaheeneez's shoulders began to shake under her dark coat.

'They said rape . . . then I was on the floor… then I felt something hard inside me . . .'

She paused now in this room far from where it actually happened, but she was still trembling, and she moved to the

window. She opened it, turned her face towards the sunlight, her back to the room. She seemed to gulp air.

'They raped me,' she said. She said it again. Then all the breath went out of her.

Afterwards, Shaheeneez cried for a long time while I sat opposite her. I was unable to say anything that would console her. I laid a hand on her shoulder; she flinched at the touch. The tears rolled off her face onto her collar.

She said she had been seeing a psychiatrist since the violation, but it didn't help. At the time, she had been in love. She had plans to get married and had a life mapped out in front of her.

Her doctor urged her to tell her fiancé the truth. But when she did, he left her. 'He said he could not marry me, that he had to find a clean woman,' she said, adding that it is more than a feeling of being violated, it's one of being completely ruined.

'But I don't think the interrogators did the actual rape. I think that man who entered the room did.' She sat on the bed, sweating and shaking. 'I think it took them less than half an hour. And then, after they untied me and took off my blindfold, I found blood on my legs.' She did not know whether the 'hard thing' was an object they used to penetrate her, or a penis.

She had been a virgin.

Shaheeneez seems as damaged as Nada, but is even less able to cope and continue living. While neither woman will forget what happened, Nada says she wants to move on, to find a new path forward. But Shaheeneez says she cannot forget. The rape, she says, destroyed her life.

'If I get engaged again,' she says, 'I will never tell him.'

* * *

A few days later, I was working inside Atma Camp, the largest internally displaced camp in Syria at that time, home to 50,000 displaced and miserable souls. I was searching for a woman called Rana, who was trying to help a group of other Syrian refugee women who had been raped. In technical terms, they are called 'survivors'.

As far as refugee camps go, Atma was well organized. As far as living goes, it was hellish.

When I found the camp doctor – a young man working in the camp who spoke halting English – and told him what I was investigating, he looked anguished. I had not used the word rape, only 'sexual violence'.

'In Syria, the innocent people suffer the most,' he responded, finally. 'Do you really find women who have been touched? For us, this is the worst thing to do to the men – because they are our women.'

We climbed down a hill, passing the water stations that had been set up as showers and sinks. Only a dozen water stations for hundreds and hundreds of people.

We then realized that a tiny boy was following us. He looked like an ordinary kid, about the age of my own nine-year-old, hiding his face behind a blue hoodie. He was wearing fake G-star jeans.

But then I saw his face: it was completely burnt. His mouth appeared to be nothing more than a hole and his nose was practically non-existent. His ears were flaps of skin, which had been stretched tight into pink crevasses, across his skull.

I asked him his name. It was Abdullah and he told me he was eleven years old.

Even with the doctor as my guide, I didn't find the raped women in Atma. They had been moved. But later, I saw Abdullah again, standing in front of a refugee tent. It was his home.

His parents invited me inside; they told me how he was injured at home in the city of Hama last October.

It was a clear day: good weather for bombing. When the bombs came that day, Abdullah was playing on his computer. It was always so difficult to keep the children occupied inside, his mother says. Hearing the crash of bombs, Abdullah – in his fear – ran outside.

He got the full impact of the bomb that landed near his house.

'I heard the worst thing in the world that day of the bombing,' the father said. 'The sound of my own son's screams of pain.'

He looked at Abdullah, who stared back at him with confusion.

Then he said something that both Nada and Shaheeneez also said to me – the mantra their jailers tormented them with. It is the battle cry of the activists, the first demonstrators in Daraa, filtering down to all the Syrian cities, the provinces, and villages: We Want Freedom.

Abdullah's father turned towards his son's raw face. He asked: 'So is this freedom?'

3

Ma'loula and Damascus – June–November 2012

I was in Ma'loula, watching the morning prayers of a group of solemn nuns, a quiet and reflective moment, when I heard about the car bombs back in Damascus. Ma'loula is an ancient mountaintop town dug into a cliff, renowned for its spiritual healing qualities and restorative air. It was a place I felt drawn to: something of an oasis of tolerance. The residents were mainly Christian – it is one of the last places where Western Aramaic, the language of Jesus Christ, is still spoken – and they vowed at the beginning of the Syrian conflict not to succumb to sectarianism and be dragged into the chaos.

Their determination was all the more remarkable given the town's location. It lies on the main road at an equal distance between Homs and Damascus. It was a defiant place, but their defiance reflected a bitter history.

Ma'loula was besieged during the Great Syrian Revolt in 1925, when rebel Druze, Christians and Muslims tried to throw off the colonial oppression of France. The history of that insurrection lingers. Many older residents were weaned on stories of women and children hiding in the caves of

8

Aleppo – Sunday 16 December 2012

Every afternoon, I saw him. He never changed: not his position, not his posture, not his clothes. Aleppo was desperate in those months, and he, this old man on the road to the hospital, buried up to his waist in trash, seemed to me the symbol of all that was dying in that city. He was standing in a field of garbage, his hands buried deep in some box, foraging. He was scavenging for something to eat.

We were driving in a battered car we had picked up in Turkey, with a driver called O., a nervous, small-boned Syrian man, towards the small hospital that remained open in the faintly lit darkness. Someone in the car, one of my colleagues, either Paddy or Nicole, said, 'I've seen that guy before – he's there every day.' The old man was always in the same place. In the same position. Bent, broken.

Did he ever find anything?

I don't think so. But he kept coming back.

We had come together to Aleppo, the three of us – Nicole, who was small and brave, from Hong Kong, who wrapped her long hair in a dark scarf, and set off with her cameras alone to front lines to look for her friend, Jim Foley; and

Paddy, who was English, and calm. We wanted to write about what people were eating, whether they were starving, how they survived.

The answer was, virtually nothing. On this winter day, there was no power to bake bread: there was no cooking gas. Life here was about deprivation, the driver told us, about yearning, wanting, forgoing. It was about memory and forgetting.

Once, a photographer friend of mine, trying to describe Afghanistan during the Mujahedeen years, called it The Land of the Elastic Hour. I understood instantly what he meant. There are places where time either races ahead like a finely tuned car, or remains impotent. Here in Aleppo, memory is elastic. Sometimes during wartime, minutes are endless. It seems you will never move forward to the next day – a day when there might be cooking gas and a lull in shelling.

This sense of timelessness, of lost time, is set against the fact that Aleppo is ancient – 7,000 years old, and imbued with history. The chronology of the oldest continuously inhabited city on earth stretches back to the latter half of the third millennium BC.

Archaeologists digging in the Mesopotamian ruins found tablets that spoke of the city's military power, its strength, its virility. Aleppo was the end of the Silk Road, weaving through Central Asia and Mesopotamia, a strategic trading point. The horses and caravans carried copper, wool, Chinese silk, spices from India, Italian glass, metal from Persia.

On this December day, three years into the war, I was looking for traces of Aleppo's former glory. I saw nothing but a weakened cavity, a shell. How could a city that was once the third-largest in the Ottoman Empire fade before one's eyes? On this day, a week before Christmas, when I should have been at home in Paris, putting up the Christmas tree with my small son, or shopping for presents and wrapping them in shiny paper, I was in a city that seemed apocalyptic.

The Battle of Aleppo seemed as if it would never end. The conflict was between Bashar al-Assad's government forces – combined with Hezbollah – and various Syrian opposition forces, largely composed of defected Syrian Army officers. I would like to list the components of the Syrian opposition, known as the rebels, but the recipe of warriors changes every day. There is internecine fighting. There is – as often happens in cities and communities that descend into war and anarchy – criminality as a means of survival.

At this point the opposition also included al-Nusra, or Jabhat al-Nusra (The Support Front for the People of Al-Sham), sometimes called Tanzim Qa'edat Al-Jihad fi Bilad Al-Sham, who are the al-Qaeda branch operating in Syria. They were formed in Syria in January 2012 and currently have an estimated 6,000 members.

The Islamic State, or ISIS – who would rise to power later in the war, to fight al-Nusra and the opposition and to drive parts of Syria and Iraq into 7th-century Islam with their brutal *sharia* law – were still somewhere in the shadows, embryonic. Nascent, waiting, forming.

Aleppo, the most industrial Syrian city, also once held the most diversified population. Before 2011, there were more

Christians here than in Beirut. There were Syrian Arabs, Kurds, Armenians, Assyrians, Turks, Circassians, Jews and Greeks. There are thirteen poetic references in the Bible to Aleppo (which from the eleventh century had the Hebrew name of Aram-Zobah).

From Psalm 60: 'to the chief Musician upon Shushan-eduth, Michtam of David, to teach; when he strove with Aram-naharaim, and with Aram-zobah, when Joab returned and smote of Edom, in the valley of Salt, twelve thousand.'

The Valley of Salt is about four hours from Aleppo on horseback, according to a slender document I have read, written by Henry Maundrell, a theologian who travelled the region in 1697. This is where David smote the Syrians.

Who is now smiting the Syrians? They are destroying each other. Brutally, horribly.

The regime forces, led by President Bashar al-Assad, use barrel bombs – a type of improvised explosive device (IED).[12] The bombs are like no other I have witnessed in the dozen or more wars I have lived through. They are unspeakably effective at causing pain: made from a barrel that is filled with shrapnel or chemicals, they are then dropped from a height by helicopter or aeroplane. Militants like them because they are cheap to make (sometimes costing under $300) and can easily be dropped on a highly populated civilian area, with severe consequences.

The image of the aftermath of a barrel bomb: knee-deep rubble, cries of agony, the frantic search for survivors; limbs dissected, muscles and pools of sticky blood. The fact of being alive in concrete, rubble, your legs broken, waiting

for someone to dig you out. The entire weight of an apartment floor crushing your suddenly helpless and broken body.

> I was waiting in front of the bakery in Handarat when I saw a helicopter roaming. It was 9.30 a.m. It circled in the air three times and then dropped the barrel bomb. It fell two metres from me. I saw it falling, but where could I hide? I felt the explosion. I felt the shrapnel going inside my leg . . . The shrapnel hit my neck and leg and my other leg was broken . . . I saw four injured people. They were moving on the ground. I was told in the field hospital that five or six people died.
>
> Elias, seventeen years old, in a statement to Human Rights Watch[13]

Aleppo was a microcosm, in a sense, for the entire war in Syria: the Leningrad of the Syrian war. Or, as one rebel fighter told me, the 'Mother of All Battles'. It started here in much the same way as it did in Homs, in Hama, in Damascus, with pro-democracy rallies challenging Assad's autocratic rule, as part of the larger Arab Spring. It transformed from protests in 2011 to clashes in February 2012. At that point the rebels held the rolling countryside, bursting with crops in the summer, more barren in the winter, and it was still possible to drive from the Turkish border and pass through villages that had not yet been ravaged by war. Farmers were still at work, children still walked to school, tiny backpacks in place. Small schools, small houses: a normal life in a corner of what once was Mesopotamia.

In August 2012, in the heat and dust of northern Syria, the rebels had stormed Aleppo, and the intense fighting began. In this bleak month of December – four months later – opposition forces had cut off nearly all supply routes to Aleppo. Most of the UNESCO world heritage protected sites, such as the Old Town, were destroyed. The lives of the people living in Aleppo were destroyed, too.

There are two important criteria for staying alive here: hiding from the regime's barrel bombs, and finding food. On the government side, people have not been paid salaries and do not get humanitarian aid. On the rebel side, the portrait of daily life is equally bleak. No one respects ceasefires. As is so common in times of war, there is crime, distrust and sorrow.

No one seems to be able to end it, least of all the United Nations, whose peacemaking efforts have failed again and again. At the time of writing, in 2015, the third Special Envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, an Italian-Swedish diplomat who had formerly worked in Afghanistan and Iraq, has been proposing that small local ceasefires, or 'freezings', will take place. But on the morning of 17 February 2015, when de Mistura was set to brief the United Nations Security Council in New York, the government forces launched a new offensive to cut off the main supply road to insurgents in Aleppo.

De Mistura had left Europe faintly confident – he had seen Assad in Damascus a few days before and had got his word that there would be a lull in the bombing for six weeks to allow humanitarian aid to pass through. De Mistura had also announced – to the horror of the Syrian opposition – that

any political process would have to involve Assad. At dawn on 17 February, hours before de Mistura in New York got ready to lay out his freezing plan for Aleppo (which had, in part, been conceived by a young American analyst, Nir Rosen, who was working for an NGO called the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue), the battle broke out.

Later, the rebels fought back. More dead, more bodies lying in the muddy winter of Aleppo. De Mistura gave a grim reading to a few UN reporters gathered outside the Security Council hall, but he would not take questions. Just like Kofi Annan and Lakhdar Brahimi, the two former special envoys, both veterans of ending prior wars, he looked defeated.

As reports were being read aloud in New York, and ambitious bureaucrats beavered away at their desks overlooking Lake Geneva, the history of Aleppo was fast disappearing. The souk and the covered bazaar, which date back to the fifteenth century and were carefully remodelled by governors and a Grand Vizier in the sixteenth century, served as a front line in this battle. In 2012, Stefan Knost,[14] a German historian who had taken part in excavations in pre-war Aleppo, said: 'We must unfortunately assume that either large sections of the bazaar have already been destroyed, or will be destroyed.' Three years later, there were snipers poised in crevices of the old walls, destruction, ruins.

The government forces stayed inside the Citadel, a fortified medieval palace once occupied by Greeks, Byzantines, Mamaluks. The government forces now use the walls of the former UNESCO world heritage site as barriers, and in the heights snipers nest, laying their rifles against the ancient stone.

What occurred inside those walls, in peaceful times when ancient people occupied it? But even history seems irrelevant now. The most important thing is to hide from bullets.

'The most difficult thing is not being able to feed your kids,' Umm Hamid said on my first night in Aleppo. She was a woman of average age, height, weight, everything indistinguishable under her full *abaya*. She had sallow skin, rough-pored and dirty hands, rubber slippers on her feet. We were in her home in Bustan al-Qasr, a neighbourhood between the old Citadel and the Queiq River, where civilians had been killed and tossed aside, their purple and swollen bodies floating on the tide.

Bustan al-Qasr was now a crossing-point between rebel-held and regime-held areas. There were snipers everywhere – positioned on the top floors of government buildings – and the streets were not safe. People needed to move between the two points, to work, to study – the University was on the regime-held side of the city – or to try to find food. There was a marketplace, but it too was targeted by snipers. To reach some buildings, you had to climb through holes that had been knocked out, or rather bombed out, of the walls, and you reached the other side from the inside. Rabbit warrens, little tunnels, short cuts to trick death.

As in Sarajevo during the siege, people used inoperative buses and piled sandbags to try to shield themselves from the snipers. It looked strange at first, then you got used to seeing them and they appeared normal. When we left our car to get

to Umm Hamid's flat, we moved quietly, heads down, silently and quickly. It was always a relief to get into the car, even though in reality a sniper's bullet or a rocket or anything else can cut through the side door or window.

In a few months' time, O., our driver, would be badly injured in exactly that manner, in this same car, in this same city. It would take him a year to recover from his bullet wounds, his broken bones.

By the time I arrived in Aleppo, every neighbourhood was now a fiefdom, dictated by political survival and black-market criminality. The people were caught in the middle. It wasn't clear who was in control of Bustan al-Qasr that week. In August, it was Ahrar Surya, one of the city's largest rebel brigades. No one knew who was in charge on the day I arrived.

O. whispered: 'Best not to ask too many questions.' He found his gun under the car seat, and slid it back under, further away from the foot well. I asked him not to carry it – he stared back at me wordlessly as if to say, you know nothing.

Through the dirty car windows splattered with rain and mud, I could see Umm Hamid's flat from the street, her main window that faced out lit up by candles inside. Nicole went first, then Paddy, then me, up four flights of stairs to the apartment in the dark, the wet tiled floors slippery and cold. Her children stood at the end of one room, shivering. I saw a row of tiny, dirty, tear-streaked faces.

We stretched out sleeping bags in the front room. Through her windows, the street looked baneful: empty except for a few people carrying torches, illuminating small puddles near their feet with a pale yellow light. There were thuds of shelling

and the occasional pop of a sniper's gun. A few FSA – Free Syrian Army – rebel fighters gathered on the corner.

Umm Hamid is a 'laqab' (an Arabic epithet that identifies a person), meaning Mother of Hamid. Her husband was a local sheikh, regarded with respect in the neighbourhood as a decision-maker, someone to trust. Their address had been given to us via safe contacts as a place we could trust, arranged through SMS from the Turkish border via local mobile phones. *How safe is your apartment? When will your husband be back? Will we be able to stay with you without anyone knowing we are there? We'll arrive after dark so no one sees us.*

She made us tea and spoke of the children. 'When they wake up at night and want a glass of water, you can't give it to them,' she said, squatting on the floor and pouring the tea into dirty glasses. 'When they wake up at night and want to go to the bathroom, they can't. When they wake up at night and ask me to stop the bombs, I can't do that either.'

Then there was the lack of food. She spoke of what she missed, of what she had lost, of what she felt she would never regain. 'Before the war, there were fruit trees,' she said, almost longingly. Then she began to talk about them, memory as a way of never forgetting. Apples, tangerines, pears and plums, pomegranates and jasmine.

Nights in Bustan al-Qasr were clamorous. There were more than a dozen people in the flat and the mixture of human sounds, coughing, crying, snoring, laughing, mingled with the shooting and detonations outside the window. When I woke up in the morning, wrapped in a sleeping bag in all my clothes, one of her smaller children was sobbing. She didn't

want to go outside, she said in a broken voice. She was frightened. Please, Mama, she begged.

Umm Hamid dressed the crying girl. She stuffed her miniature hands into socks instead of gloves to keep them warm. She was taking her to queue outside the bakery in the Kadi Askar neighbourhood. There was no one to leave the girl with, she said unapologetically, so she was bringing her to stand in the line with her. They might be waiting all day, she told us.

'If we get there early, we might be lucky,' she whispered to the little girl.

If she were lucky, she would not be living in Aleppo. If she were lucky, she would not have to cook on a wood stove. If she were lucky, her children could play outside, or not be afraid of the balcony, where people shot at you when you stuck your head out. If she were lucky, her husband would not have been jobless for the past four months. If she were lucky, there would be no war.

The Arabic name for Aleppo is Halab. Some people say it means iron, or possibly copper, because the city was a source of these metals in ancient times. But there is also a biblical legend that Halab means 'the giver of milk', because Abraham allegedly gave out milk to travellers when they passed through the city.

But the city called the giver of milk has now ground to a halt, except for the fighting. Umm Hamid has not had milk at home for months. She had powdered milk, she said.

Eventually, Umm Hamid coaxed the protesting girl, holding her by the arm, and we followed her down the stairs. On

the staircase, she saw her younger son wearing rubber sandals outside on the street instead of shoes. December is cold in Aleppo, covered by grey mud and raked by icy wind. She stared at him, but she did not go inside to get him socks: she did not have any. Nor did he have shoes.

She just stared at the boy's feet, purple with cold, then hurried on to the bakery. There was nothing for him to do, and nothing for her to say.

We took the small child to the market and bought him shoes, which he silently laced up. But he was one child. There were dozens, hundreds, thousands in Aleppo that did not have his tiny shred of luck that day.

War means endless waiting, endless boredom. There is no electricity, so no television. You can't read. You can't see friends. You grow depressed but there is no treatment for it and it makes no sense to complain – everyone is as badly off as you. It's hard to fall in love, or rather, hard to stay in love. If you are a teenager, you seem halted in time.

If you are critically ill – with cancer, for instance – there is no chemotherapy for you. If you can't leave the country for treatment, you stay and die slowly, and in tremendous pain. Victorian diseases return – polio, typhoid and cholera. You see very sick people around you who seemed in perfectly good health when you last saw them during peacetime. You hear coughing all the time. Everyone hacks – from the dust of destroyed buildings, from disease, from cold.

As for your old world, it disappears, like the smoke from a cigarette you can no longer afford to buy. Where are your closest friends? Some have left, others are dead. The few who

remain have nothing new to talk about. You can't get to their houses, because the road is blocked by checkpoints. Or snipers take a shot when you leave your door, so you scurry back inside, like a crab retreating inside its shell. Or you might go out on the wrong day and a barrel bomb, dropped by a government helicopter, lands near you.

Wartime looks like this.

The steely greyness of the city. The clouds are so low, but not low enough to hide government helicopters carrying barrel bombs, which usually appear at the same time each day, in the mornings and late afternoons, circling for a while at altitudes of 13,000–16,000 feet, little more than tiny dots in the sky, before dropping their payloads.

What does war sound like? The whistling sound of the bombs falling can only be heard seconds before impact – enough time to know that you are about to die, but not enough time to flee.

What does the war in Aleppo smell of? It smells of carbine, of wood smoke, of unwashed bodies, of rubbish rotting, of the heady smell of fear. The rubble on the street – the broken glass, the splintered wood that was once somebody's home. On every corner there is a destroyed building that may or may not have bodies still buried underneath. Your old school is gone; so are the mosque, your grandmother's house, and your office. Your memories are smashed.

Then there are the endless fields of garbage. The rooms that are as cold as tombs – having gone unheated now for five winters – are all you know. There are so many abandoned apartments. Remember that beautiful house, what it

looked like when someone lived there? Your beautiful life from before is now dead.

The dirt, filth, fear and nausea. All the things you go without – toothpaste, money, vitamins, birth-control pills, X-rays, chemotherapy, insulin, painkillers. Petrol costs 170 Syrian pounds per litre. Today. Tomorrow it might be different.

Then, suddenly, you might catch the odd sight of a man in a T-shirt despite the frozen air, squeezing oranges into juice for the lucky ones with money. Oranges? You wonder who the people are that still have money, and you have dark thoughts about people you used to trust and know well. But with the constant theme of survival surrounding your whole city, your neighbourhood, your life, you really don't know anybody's intentions.

War is the corner near the Old City where people are lined up with plastic Pepsi bottles, to buy a small amount of petrol on the black market. War is the wrecked hospital; Dar al-Shifa, bombed on 21 November 2012, which still stinks of carnage in hallways where stretchers once passed, and where doctors in scrubs and rubber gloves once walked. Now it is a twisted pile of cinderblocks and concrete, broken tiles and glass – a shell exposed to the grey sky.

War is empty shell casings on the street, smoke from bombs rising up in mushroom clouds, and learning to determine which thud means what kind of bomb. Sometimes you get it right, sometimes you don't.

War is the destruction, the skeleton and the bare bones of someone else's life.

★ ★ ★

In 2006, Aleppo won the title of Islamic City of Culture awarded by the Islamic Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO). Historic landmarks were restored. Tourism was up. Aleppo was going to be the new Marrakesh, an exotic destination with pleasant weather, boutique hotels, interesting restaurants and direct flights from Paris or London. An exotic, Eastern city with beguiling buildings made from gold-coloured stone.

Aleppo was famous for its olive-oil soap and its refined houses in the old city. Encouraged by the well-dressed willowy wife of Bashar al-Assad, Asma – who had been profiled in a glowing article in American *Vogue* just before the government ordered security forces to fire on unarmed protesters – fashion designers, artists and writers who were her friends began to buy property. In Paris, just before the Arab Spring, I met the most elegant people who were proud to be flying to Aleppo to buy art and furniture. When the protests started, and I phoned them to ask about what had happened to Aleppo, to their homes, to their parties, they would not take my calls.

But I have seen this happen before. The celerity with which life as you know it breaks down is overwhelming. The beautiful people stop coming. The water stops, taps run dry, banks go, and a sniper kills your brother. There is nowhere to seek recourse, and barely time to grieve before you see a helicopter flying in the sky and hear the thwack of another bomb. You get used to hallucinations appearing in broad daylight. The dead and mangled return to you, over and over, and not just in dreams. Once you see one dead body – the shoes ripped off from the force of an explosion – you never forget what it looks like.

But what you don't expect is that ordinary things – those things that you take for granted in life – disappear too. The man who collects the rubbish no longer comes because there are no functioning civil services. The nurses who draw blood disappear because the hospitals are bombed. Your daily newspaper, your coffee shop, then – eventually – every bit of normality you know is gone.

What you yearn for more than anything is for the ordinary to return. The simple pleasure of going to a shop to buy apples; to smoke a cigarette languidly in a café; the ease of a university student driving from one side of the city to the other to get to her psychology or macroeconomics class without encountering a round of gunshots.

When I think back on my time in Aleppo, the strongest memory I have is of watching the baby die. I have my own child at home. He is healthy and lives in the first world; he drinks milk and eats cookies before bed, studies by an electric light, goes skiing, plays with Lego. He does not know war. His heroes are the heroes of *Star Wars* – the good and evil, the Jedi and the Senators, Darth Vader, Luke Skywalker and Princess Leia. His heroes are not jihadists, fighters, or people who get through the front lines bearing humanitarian aid.

The suffering of children is particularly painful for anyone, but for me, as a mother, when I look into the eyes of the mothers whose children are helplessly dying, I feel like a fraud. I watch this, then I can go home.

It did not take long for this infant in Aleppo to die, maybe ten minutes, possibly even less. The doctor, Khaled – who is so young, only a resident – and the nurses worked on him.

They tried desperately to keep the tiny bundle alive. He had come in with a simple respiratory infection. Nothing drastic, not a gunshot wound, not an artery severed by shrapnel.

I watched them huddled over his body. It was like watching an Olympic race: Khaled's face tense and full of competitive anticipation, the nurses next to him in their hijabs and sneakers. They were competing against time, against death.

But they were losing. They checked the dying baby's fading eyes with a battered flashlight; they took his pulse, and gently thumped the bottoms of his feet to test his reflexes.

But he was gone. Nicole and Paddy and I watched, standing on the side, feeling awkward and in the way, as the life went out of this baby: someone that had been on this earth the moment before was suddenly, irrevocably, dead. Nicole did not touch her cameras; Paddy stood on one side.

Then it was over. His breathing just stopped. The thread was cut.

Now that we were back in the emergency room, I could hear the screams of other people in pain. I was aware of the coldness of my feet against the marble floor and someone else's blood on the wall. Against my will, I began to cry, with a kind of rush of tears dripping off my face onto my down coat. I could not stop them, with tissues or with Nicole's startled glance at me, imploring me to get a grip. I summoned the urge to be in control, but it was impossible. I went into a

small room, practically a cupboard, where they kept supplies. Nicole joined me after a moment.

'You OK?'

A nod. She handed me a fresh tissue. I was thinking of my boy, how he had been born seven weeks premature and how, if he had been born in Aleppo, and not Paris, he would probably be dead.

At the time of that child's death, there were only thirty-one doctors for one million people in Aleppo. Khaled had been promoted by management somewhere – whatever was left of management – from being a resident to heading the hospital. He asked me not to write the name of it, or its location in Aleppo, 'because then it will be bombed', like Dar al-Shifa, a hospital that had been deliberately targeted a few weeks before by government bombs because it was heavily used by civilians.

Targeting public spaces during wartime, especially those that are known to be full of civilians – hospitals, schools, etc. – is a violation of the Geneva Convention. But who here cares about the Geneva Convention? Are Assad's bombers who fly the planes low enough in the sky to drop the bombs, even aware of the Geneva Convention? Has any war ever taken into account the Geneva Convention?

Khaled had a terrible look of defeat on his face as he wrapped the small, dead baby in a triangular blanket, covering the lifeless head before turning to the mother.

She was also young, sitting quietly in a chair next to the examining table, wearing a hijab and a thick brown *abaya*. Her skin was faintly yellow. Hepatitis? Jaundice? Or just

malnourishment, lack of sleep, lack of water and fresh air and good food?

The mother shivered slightly in the cold of the darkened emergency room, but she seemed to be in the kind of pain that goes beyond tears. She looked hollow.

She took the wrapped package, her baby. Her husband touched her shoulder. They stood, with a kind of stooped dignity, and left the room.

'The thing is,' Khaled said, turning to me, his glasses on slightly crooked, 'that the baby died of a respiratory infection.' A respiratory infection that might have responded to a massive antibiotic drip in another country. Nothing serious, nothing that could not be handled. Outside of wartime.

The parents had waited until the baby had barely any life in him before they brought him in: there had been too much shelling in the city and they feared being killed by a rocket as they made their way from their home to the hospital.

What Khaled needed, he said, are ambulances. They cost $40,000 each and would get the wounded and the critically ill to the hospital faster. 'It's not really asking for a lot, is it?' he asked. 'One ambulance?'

We kept going back to the hospital at different hours of the day. The same nurses and Khaled were working. More patients. Another woman was brought into the ER suffering from spasms. Her body was convulsed, her legs and arms shook with tremors as a friend tried to quiet her. Her relatives said she had had cerebral palsy from birth, but her condition was worsening – her lungs were filling with fluid, she could

not breathe. They each took one of her hands and tried to calm her, steady her.

Then she saw us, Westerners, trying to make ourselves small in a corner, and she screamed out, 'If I die, take my children!' She clutched her stomach as though she was having an appendicitis attack. She gave a high-pitched shrill shriek: 'Take them with you! Take them with you!'

Another relative dragged her away.

Khaled had been known in his high school days as a champion foosball (table football) player. After calming the woman, he took off his glasses, rubbed his eyes and said he was taking a break. He had been working since dawn – he was on a twenty-four-hour shift.

He climbed up the four flights to the small abandoned part of the hospital near the roof – no one wants to be near the roof because of bombing, but the doctors took over this space to sleep and eat in between shifts. He told us to follow. There was a foosball table – old, but still workable – on the top floor. Foosball, beloved by European kids. Khaled stood over it, fiddling with the knobs. Something resembling a smile seemed to cross his face.

One of the nurses had made a pot of soup from beans, and someone else had brought bread. The hospital had two things going for it: they got petrol from the FSA to keep the generators going long enough to do surgery, using headlamps to light up their patients' bodies, and they got bread.

'Grateful for small miracles,' Khaled said, dipping a spoon into the bowl. It did not taste so bad: it was thick and, most importantly, it was hot.

He didn't want to talk about the baby, or about the city or the war. 'I'd like to think about something outside of here,' he said. All he would say about the baby was that if it had been peacetime, he would have lived.

There was a tiny girl with us in the room, a local celebrity of sorts. She was a singer. At demonstrations, her brothers and sisters marched her in front of the crowd and she sang protest songs in a stunningly clear voice. She ate a bowl of soup that someone handed her, and then began to sing. Everyone clapped to the rhythm of her song. She closed her eyes and held up her hands and moved in a kind of trance.

Khaled was singing, too, but he looked wasted. 'I can't cope,' he said after a while, and went to bed in one of the hospital cots downstairs. 'See you in the morning.'

A year after I met Khaled, he was married, and his young wife had just given birth in Turkey. I called to ask him about a polio epidemic that had apparently broken out in Syria. He said that his newborn baby had given him hope. 'There is not much hope left in Syria,' he said.

'Are you going back?'

'How can I stay away?' he responded.

Salat is the obligatory Muslim prayers, performed five times each day by the devout. The first, called *Salat al-Fajr,* is at dawn. Prayer takes place again at midday after the sun passes higher. This is called *Salat al-Zuhr. Salat al-Asr* comes in the late part of the afternoon, *Salat al-Maghrib* soon after sunset, and finally the *Salat al-Isha* between sunset and midnight.

The other pillars of Islam are *shahada,* faith; *zakat,* giving savings to the poor; *sawm,* fasting; and *hajj,* the pilgrimage to Mecca. But none affects daily life more than the *salat* in both war and peace.

I have seen soldiers in trenches stop to pray, and farmers in fields, and even my translators have asked to be excused in mid-sentence when they are called to pray.

We had moved apartments, from Umm Hamid's to a secure house in another neighbourhood, where some FSA rebel soldiers and activists were living. The men here prayed reverently. They gathered together in the main room to pray, eat, talk, and, in between, to strategize on their computers.

They were quiet when Nicole and I walked by to use the bathroom – a good one, we said, it was a hole in the ground, but it was ceramic and it was clean – or to make tea on a stovetop, when there was cooking fuel. We had to stay in our room to eat dinner. A neighbour woman left the food on the floor outside our door on a tray, and we picked it up and sat on our beds to eat. I knew we were not prisoners, but I sensed what it might feel like to be a woman in their world.

Today there was a funeral. It was near midday – the sun had not come out at all – when the call of the muezzin broke the cold greyness of the sky. At the graveyard, called Martyrs Field, in the neighbourhood of Salah al-Din, a man named Mohammed stopped to pray. He worked in the graveyard every day. Sometimes, he took his small redheaded son with him to the cemetery. He wore high rubber boots as he scooped up earth with his shovels, laying down the bodies

in their bloody blankets, and then covering them with more earth.

I was worried for the redheaded child, surrounded by the dead, the haunting he will find later in his life when he combs through the memories – if he lives. If he gets through today, this week, this month, this year.

Sheikh Moisin, a religious leader working with Mohammed, says that the bodies sometimes have no heads. Sometimes, he says, they have no faces.

'And your boy sees this?' I say quietly to Mohammed. He looks confused.

'It doesn't bother him,' he answers. 'Death is like life.'

But not in wartime.

Part of the graveyard used to be a park. But the death toll in Aleppo demanded more room for burials. As of January 2015, the United Nations estimated the figure of the total number of deaths in Syria since the outbreak of the conflict at 220,000; but others give higher figures.

Here in Aleppo, the playground-turned-cemetery was essential. Sentiment was put aside and the ground was readied to accept bodies, rather than to have children play. It is so unlike Montparnasse Cemetery in Paris, near where I live, which I often walk through, or, in the spring, ride my bicycle through, in order to think. It is not like the cemetery in America where my father, sister and two brothers are buried, where my mother goes at Christmas, Easter, and on their birthdays to lay flowers and wreaths. It is where the dead go during wartime.

'It is my duty, my work of God, to bury the dead,' Mohammed said simply. He is a man completely devoid of

drama. He says he does not have nightmares from his work, nor is he afraid of the dead.

The redheaded child, who turned out to be only four years old, clung to his father's hand – when there wasn't a shovel in it. Wouldn't the little boy remember mutilated corpses, children's crushed and twisted bodies, or those dead faces caught in the agony of the last moments of their lives?

'Death is death,' Sheikh Moisin said. 'The dead cannot hurt you.'

On the day I visited Mohammed, he was burying a man who, an hour before, had been alive. Muslims try to bury their dead before sunset on the same day, so as to honour the dead: the bathing, the enshrouding in white; the funeral prayer; the positioning of the head towards Mecca. But this is war. Two hours ago, this man had been on the front line, fighting. Then a bomb blew him up. His life was extinguished, fast, like a candle.

He had not been bathed, but someone brought a bloody blanket to wrap him in. Friends brought him to the cemetery, but only three people were standing at the edge of the shallow grave dug by Mohammed.

His corpse was wrapped but his head was exposed. He had fair hair, a pleasant look about him, and slightly bucked teeth. His eyes were ringed with purple bruises – a result of the explosion? The gravedigger shrugged, and asked one of the three men to say their prayers.

'He's smiling,' one of the men finally said, after he had prayed. 'The martyr is smiling.'

A martyr, killed in *jihad*, holy war. A *shaheed*.

'He's not smiling,' another man interjected. 'He looks shocked. The bomb got him when he was not looking.'

'No, you're wrong. The martyr is smiling.'

'If he's smiling, it means he is going to heaven,' the third man said.

The gravedigger said quietly: 'What we know is he is leaving Aleppo.' He pushed the last bit of earth on the grave, shutting out the sky.

From Salah al-Din, we drank some tea to get warm and then drove to the broken-down Old City. A man was selling the usual plastic Pepsi bottle of petrol. A tiny girl walked by him, wearing pyjamas, holding the hand of her even tinier brother. She could be no older than five. Where was she going? She said she had been sent out to look for food.

In the yellow winter light the scavengers were back in the rubbish dump near our new apartment, picking through the mountain of trash for anything that might help them survive. Children were chopping down trees in the park for firewood. The tree stumps looked darkly deformed, grotesque. The kids wore the rubber slippers usually worn by the poolside in tropical climates, and no socks. They slipped as they walked on the freezing ice, the hardened mud.

Later in the day, before dark, we went to the bread queue at Kadi Askar. The people standing there were the same as those that had been there that morning. Now they were colder, hungrier and angrier. The bakery itself was surrounded by barbed wire. It was to keep people out, since starving people

will do anything. People's faces change to desperation when they wait for food. Some waited with a book, others just looked empty, hollow, aching.

It was raining. Cold, fat, freezing drops of rain were falling, but very few people had umbrellas.

The next day, 17 December 2012, the temperature dropped below zero. I remembered my life during the war in Sarajevo, and I wondered if someone here in Aleppo, as in Sarajevo, was recording everything that was happening in the city: who lived, who died, the temperature, how many shells fell, who took what ground. I wondered if someone was keeping a Book of the Dead. That day in Aleppo, without newspapers, radio, TV or Internet, I knew from talking to people that the Free Syrian Army still held around 60 to 70 per cent of the city and were battling to take an old fort outside of town. I knew from watching them that every time there was an explosion, the people in the bread queue shifted slightly. It is terrifying when people no longer react to gunfire, so accustomed are they to its sound.

I knew that people were sickened and weary of war, but what I did not know was that two years later, if I had been able to project into the future, the same thing would be happening. The war would not be over.

All of the stories would be similar. 'I walked into a room and I saw a government soldier with a gun,' said Ahmed, a wounded FSA soldier, waiting near me.

'I couldn't kill him so he tried to kill me.' He paused and stared down at the missing half of his leg. Ahmed was unable to shoot at a young boy near his own age, who in a different world might have sat next to him in a classroom. Seeing

Ahmed's hesitation, the boy had shot at him, blowing off half of his leg.

'Isn't that a nice story?' Ahmed said, his face rigid with pain, before turning away.

In the bread queue the people talked only of the war.

'I have been here five hours.'

'I have been here six.'

They looked for faces they recognized; the faces they knew from before, of neighbours, aunts, uncles and cousins. No one was recognizable any more. I thought of the Stalin years, how the poet Anna Akhmatova wrote of the queues, of the waiting, of the pain of seeing the people she loved standing in line and being unable to recognize them because of the sorrow that had indelibly been etched into their features.

This was the only 'opposition bakery' – meaning a bakery that was not held by the Syrian government and that was run in an opposition neighbourhood. People going there were hungry, rather than political, but they were still angry with the leaders – and not just with Assad. They were angry with the opposition leaders, with the lack of political leadership, with the West, with China and Russia who support Assad, and with the 'guys with the beards' – the radical jihadists who would soon turn out to be a part of the Islamic State.

They were even angry with us reporters sitting in our beaten-up car. Nicole had been born in Hong Kong, and even though her hair was wrapped in a hijab, when they saw her face, they grew angry. China, along with Russia, had blocked the UN Security Council action against Syria. They began to scream and pound at the car window.

What has Nicole got to do with the UN Security Council? Nothing.

But a crowd's anger is terrifying, and O., the driver, reached for his gun, which was more frightening, because if he had a gun, certainly those in the crowd did too. I told him to put it away, and Paddy quietly talked him down. We finally climbed out of the car in a little tunnel made of people trying to help us, and ran into the bread factory.

Another man named Mohammed, who had been a car mechanic before the war, managed the bakery. Mohammed had a thankless task. If the bread didn't rise, if the petrol didn't arrive to start the generator, if there was not enough bread to be sold, the crowd turned on him. The Assad government had sent messages that he would be kidnapped, tortured and killed if he kept running the bakery. He had not listened, he said. He was too busy baking bread.

He shrugged. 'The bread needs to rise so I keep working,' he said. 'And it takes five hours to rise.' He wiped flour off his trousers and led us towards the enormous mixing bowls. He was not afraid of Assad's thugs, or the criminals who threatened him, or even the FSA bullies. He showed up at daybreak every day at the bakery – a cavernous hole of a former factory – to start the process: getting the generators going, turning on the machines, mixing the flour and water, supervising the barren, empty place.

There were only about five people working there – he couldn't afford to pay any more, and no one could make it across the nearby front lines to get in to work. The equipment was ancient.

'If you have a crisis, a war like this,' he said, 'you need to work. Otherwise you think about nothing but the war all day long. I would rather think about bread.' Together, Mohammed and his little team made about 17,000 bags of bread a day – each bag containing fourteen loaves of flat bread. He said this bread was keeping Aleppo alive.

Before threatening to kill him, 'the regime offered me money not to make the bread, so that the people would starve', he said. But now he was protected by the FSA. 'I'd be dead if they didn't,' he said. They even gave him flour and salt, and petrol to run the generator.

Our lives, he told me, depend on whether we can get petrol for the generators.

Imagine this, he said in an exhausted voice. 'Every step I take, everything I do is about whether or not I can get petrol for the generator. I have to feed a city on that hope. Every single day.'

At dusk, pink shapes came out of the shadows. It was now twilight, the hour of the wolf, the hour between the wolf and the dog. Faint stars appeared.

Earlier in the day, in the early morning light, we had dragged our flak jackets, helmets and backpacks stuffed with supplies for a day or longer (water, power bars, an emergency blanket using plastic sheeting sprayed with aluminium, a medical kit) into the back of O.'s beaten-up car. We headed towards Zarzour Hospital.

The chief doctor seemed friendly at first. He invited me to a room to talk, but then, when we sat on the cracked and cold leather chairs, he looked at me with the hardened

eyes of an abandoned animal. He had been working all day and, before that, all night. His body language was of utter defeat, exhaustion. Not just the clear half-moons of darkness under his eyes, but the way his arms hung from his body – weightless. The fatigue of his work bored into his physical being.

'Hundreds of people in here in the past month because of missile attacks,' he said, his voice rising in anger. 'Where is the United Nations? When is the international community coming to save us?' He said the UN had promised that hospitals would not be bombed.

But I am not the UN, I protested, and he cut me off.

'But they are bombing! They are still bombing hospitals!'

I opened my mouth to say something, but any excuse I had was feeble. I shut it and remained silent. The doctor shifted forward in his seat, inched his body closer, and pointed his finger at me.

'Where are they?' he demanded. 'Where is the UN? Who is coming to save us?'

'The UN is not coming,' I said finally. 'You must not wait for anyone. You have to save yourself.'

He stared at me for the longest time. Then he jumped to his feet. He went to the door and asked me to leave. I gathered my things, embarrassed, and stood. As I walked down the hall, he shouted after me: 'One UN official, and only one, came and promised to help. He did nothing!'

All the way down the hall, he continued to shout. 'No one will ever do anything! They promise everything, they do nothing!! We have had enough. We will be alone, as we always have been.'

But I know, I wanted to tell him. I know that we have done nothing. And this is the worse part of it – when you realize that what separates you, someone who can leave, from someone who is trapped in Aleppo, or Homs or Douma or Darayya, is that you can walk away and go back to your home with electricity and sliced bread; then you begin to feel ashamed to be human.

That night, in the darkened apartment lit by torches, I met a young American journalist. He had curly hair and glasses, and was rotund in a childlike way. He was also funny and seemed more light-hearted than the rest of us; a relief from the day at the bakery. His name was Steven Sotloff. He was travelling with a researcher from Washington named Barak; they both spoke Arabic and were working together.

Steve had lived in Yemen, where he had studied Arabic and lived in the Old City. It had been lonely; he had been broke, and he talked about eating potato sandwiches. He and Barak sparred and spoke in jokes. They reminded me of Laurel and Hardy.

Steve moved from Yemen to Benghazi. 'You lived in Benghazi full time?' I asked. 'So where do you go to the movies? How do you go out on a date?'

He laughed and laughed, and said his life was fucked up, like that of all foreign correspondents. 'Don't you wish you hadn't gotten obsessed with Syria?' he asked.

In another chair sat a photographer named Jason who had put together an achingly beautiful book about Russia. He was wearing all his clothes – his thick jacket, hat and thermal gloves – and sat quietly in the chair. He said he had travelled

by bus from his home in Istanbul to Gaziantep. He sat with his cameras in his lap, watching, not talking.

Steve Sotloff, however, talked a lot. He told me was hungry, so I gave him a bag of my freeze-dried food – unappetizing silver packets of flavoured yogurt and muesli, and chicken in a bright yellow sauce I had bought in a camping shop near Saint-Germain in Paris. He ate it hungrily. He said he liked the taste.

His slangy language, his Americanism, in Aleppo, made me smile: the juxtaposition of words and place, his expressions, his kid-like curiosity. I forgot the cold, the anxiety, the gnawing fear in my stomach.

Steve and Jason were travelling cheap and needed rides, so they jumped on the backs of other drivers. Our fixer was a beautiful and nervous man called A. Neither Steve, nor I, trusted him entirely. Everything about A. was ambiguous and uncertain: his name, his age, his past experience as a soldier (it was unclear whether or not he was still fighting with the rebels and, if so, with which brigade). A French photographer had given me A.'s name, and I had contacted him, and arranged a meeting. A. promised, as best one could promise, to keep us safe. I did not entirely believe him.

Nicole wasn't sure either. She was only twenty-six, but had good instincts, having spent so much time in Syria, in Aleppo specifically. There was an old-soul quality about Nicole, youthful as she was. She was a sombre woman, quiet, restrained. She said she was in Aleppo to document the war, to photograph, but she was really here to search for her friend Jim Foley, a young journalist who had been kidnapped.

She had snippets of information – she had been waiting for Jim on the Turkish side of the border when he had

disappeared nine weeks before – and she was trying to weave them together like a detective, tracing his last days, his last hours, trying to find out any more information that might bring him home. She talked about him, and as she did so, there was such tenderness in her friendship and her search for him. She loved him like a brother.

There was another young woman there, too, a Syrian girl, beautiful and voluptuous, with long flowing hair and eyes lined with kohl. She was what the French would call *pulpeuse*, and she spoke and moved with a kind of innate sensuality. She took my matted hair between her mittened hands and tried to comb it; she loaned me a lipstick, eyeliner, a hairbrush.

A. had lost his best friend a few days before we arrived on the front line. He broke down in tears at various intervals – when going out on the back terrace to start the wheezing generator, when talking to us about the situation in Aleppo. He smoked incessantly, never seemed to eat, poured out endless cups of tea. He dropped sugar cubes inside them, stirred, gulped, and poured another cup.

One night, the night of his friend's funeral, he and the Syrian girl sat up all night in the sitting room where Jason used to sleep in a chair. I heard them both intermittently laughing and crying, all night long.

When you saw them together, you could see how damaged they both were. Earlier when we were eating 'dinner' – the foil packets of freeze-dried food – A. said his heart was broken. He cried again, this time with great heaving sobs.

'It's too much,' he said, in English. He repeated it, louder: 'Too much.' The generator went out – again – and the room

went dark. A. put on rubber slippers and went out on the patio in the rain to try to start it again. He couldn't get it going and he came back defeated.

'I'll get more petrol in the morning,' he said, then sat in a chair and said nothing.

That night, the two of them stayed up late. There was half a roast chicken on the table that A. had gone out to the dark street to buy from a vendor. It lay, greasy, on a piece of wax paper on the dusty table.

The two Syrians pushed their sleeping bags together on the floor and lay on their sides facing each other, whispering. Perhaps it was flirtation, though the girl said she had a boyfriend fighting somewhere on the front line, a powerful rebel commander, and that she was a woman of the revolution. Later, as I was trying to fall asleep, I could hear them smoking – crumpling the pack of cigarettes, striking a match, inhaling deeply, exhaling, and laughing. It was 2 a.m. The shooting outside was still going on, and a mortar landed somewhere. I finally fell asleep much later to the sound of the girl comforting A., who was sobbing once again. He sounded like a child, not a hardened fighter.

A few weeks later A. would be murdered while sitting in his car. That handgun he kept below the seat had not helped him. It was a crime related to factions within the rebel groups; it might have been a revenge attack, it might have been a robbery. No one seemed to know, and worse, no one was surprised.

O., the driver who had taken us back and forth to Aleppo neighbourhoods, to bread queues, to the Old City, had also

been shot and badly wounded while driving his car. He survived.

I wrote to the beautiful Syrian girl, but she did not respond. Many months later, I had an email from her, a strange and disjointed message, asking me to join her somewhere inside Homs. In the email, she gave me a time and place, and said she would be waiting. It seemed like a trap, and I did not reply – I was suspicious, paranoid as everyone always is with messages that come out of Syria. I never saw her again, but many months later I got a message from her that she had not sent the message. Someone said it was a way that Nusra, and later ISIS, lured foreigners to be kidnapped.

Steve was the one to write to me about A.'s murder.

'I'm not shocked,' he wrote. 'I always felt a bit uncomfortable walking into his office. He had to have been a target. The people in the city are sick of the mess, and their feelings towards those helping journalists as much as he did must have been negative. I have lost so many friends in this war as well. It's hard to keep it from getting to you.'

We became closer friends, trying to understand why A. had been killed. What had he been doing at the time of his death, and who would want him extinguished?

Steve wanted to go back to Syria, even though he told me he believed he was on a blacklist, and that the rebels were after him for something he had written, which he said was not true.

He wrote to me from Michigan, where he was giving a talk on Libya 'to some Texan oil men', to say that he was drifting

a bit, going to see his family in Miami, then heading back to covering the war. He wrote to me on Facebook: 'I want to turn my full attention to Syria. I should be in Antakya in early April. I plan to be in that area through summer. I'm starting to look into Raqqa[15]/Hasaka as well as northern Hama and Homs . . . I'd be interested in working on the rape issue with you . . . although as you say, men don't get much from the locals on this topic.'

By 16 April, he said he was 'back on the radar' and preparing to go to Syrian Kurdistan. He still wanted to work on the sexual violence project I was completing. He was having money issues, and sometimes feeling spooked by the enormity of travelling alone, without financial and emotional backing. He was also aware that he was on a sort of list: 'apparently the border idiots have me and Barak on a list and I'm trying to find out how/why . . .'

Do those guys really matter? I asked.

'When I'm being accused of responsibility for the Dir Shifa bombing,[16] I think it does,' he responded tersely. 'Even though I did not enter Syria until weeks after that.'

So don't go, I said. Sounds like the fog of war.

'Sounds like the fog of bullshit,' he replied.

He was not frightened though, or if he was, he did not show it.

'We are all naïve,' he wrote to me shortly after another friend of ours was killed in Aleppo in March 2013. 'I still run out to take video on my cell phone when bombs drop out of jets. It's easy to feel invincible, even with death all around. It's like *This is my movie, Sucker – I'm not going to die!* . . . and

on a lighter note, where did you get those food packets when I saw you at Abdullah's. They looked so good behind that aluminum foil in Abdullah's kitchen I seriously almost jacked that shit!'

He returned to the region and on 25 July, he wrote excitedly: 'Hey Mama G! I'm back in Turkey! Have you gotten over your sickness of Aleppo? I may head in early next week.'

He wanted me to meet him and split the costs inside the country. But something that summer made me not want to return to Aleppo. My son was growing too fast, I had already missed too much of his boyhood. I told Steve to be safe, that I wanted to be with my little boy in the summer, that I would come in the autumn and meet him.

'You 2 have fun,' Steve wrote to me, recommending films and ice cream. The last time he wrote to me was a few days before he went missing.

More people were being kidnapped. On another trip, I met a young American girl called Kayla Mueller who had just arrived from Arizona and had come to work with Syrian children. She was with a Syrian friend of mine; she said he was her fiancé. She seemed bubbly and young, naïve and sweet. The challenge of working with Syrian refugees seemed a prospect she was willing to take on, although I could not get an answer from her about who she was working with. A few days later, she would also be kidnapped.

She was twenty-six years old at the time of her death, during a bombing raid in Raqqa, where the Islamic State held her. She never married my friend, and she never had

children. She barely got to work with the refugees she wanted to save.

On 6 August 2013, at 2.14 p.m., I got a message from Steve's Facebook account, written by his friend Barak. *Hi Janine. It's Steve's friend Barak. Steve went into Syria 48 hours ago with Yusuf friend of Abdallah and has gone dark. There are rumors on S-Logistics*[17] *that Yusuf is missing. Do you have contact information for any of his friends inside? Please don't share this information with anyone because no one knows yet.*[18]

We soon found out Steve had been kidnapped and sold to Islamic State. He was held in prison for a year. His family kept it quiet, worried that the kidnappers would realize he was Jewish and that he had studied in Israel, even though he did not hold beliefs that were in line with that state's current government. He shared a cell with other Europeans who were kidnapped, including Jim Foley. He and Jim bonded with the others, sometimes fought, sometimes cried, and then, painfully, watched the others be released as their governments paid a ransom. Steve and Jim must have known – realizing that it was US policy not to pay terrorists – that they would not be released.

In September 2014, Steve Sotloff was murdered, by the 'bearded guys' of the Islamic State, as he had once described them to me. I could not imagine that this smiling, laughing boy, who told jokes and avidly followed the basketball scores of the Miami team he loved, who wrote wise and funny emails, who had offered advice on raising a boy, and who was a generous colleague and friend, had been beheaded.

Jim Foley, too, despite Nicole's desperate search, despite his family's constant interventions, had been beheaded a few weeks before.

I did not, could not, watch the video of either of their murders. But I did see a still photograph of Steve before he was killed, wearing an orange jumpsuit. He had lost weight, a lot of it. His face was no longer chubby and round, and he was not wearing glasses. A random thought crossed my mind: Steve had joked that in Turkey he could not seem to get girls because of his jihadi beard.

Now, his face was clean. There seemed to be no curiosity or youth left in it, just fatigue, an eternal tiredness. He was kneeling in the Syrian desert, looking young, small and weak.

He died brutally in a foreign land, unique in its beauty, surrounded by strangers.

Nicole and I went back to Aleppo in the spring, and this time we stayed with a group of young fighters who were growing more and more radical, more and more Islamic. Now the streets were no longer safe to walk on: as foreigners, we were targets. Now we had to stay in the bedroom assigned to us to eat, where a neighbour woman still left food outside our door on a tray; we weren't allowed in the main room where the men gathered, talking and working on their computers. When we passed to use the bathroom, to wash, to get water from the kitchen, they stopped talking and dropped their eyes.

Aleppo had changed radically, in just a few months. This is when we knew that in desperation, the soldiers who were once fighting for freedom were now radicalized. On the

drive out, passing along the road, I tried to look for signs of the old Syria, the one that was there before the Islamists arrived, and did my best to take photographs inside my head, pictures that I would remember, that would show a country that no longer existed.