CHAPTER 1

I

December 2012, Al Yarmouk

I struggle to disentangle myself from the blankets wrapped around me and I finally get up, after an hour spent tossing and turning on the mattress, my eyes always returning to stare at the ceiling.

The cellphone tells me its ten o’clock. Normally that would be late, but today is Friday and there are no classes. I can take it easy, simply because I have nothing to do. Instinctively my hand moves towards the stereo – I need a bit of music to wake up properly. I stop myself just in time, my finger over the play button. I mustn’t make any noise, but I’m always forgetting. The music might attract attention and that’s the last thing I need right now.

I sigh and run my fingers through my hair. I’ll do my stretching exercises in silence, just like every morning. I have a well-tried and tested routine of exercises and positions that always manages to sort me out. Slowly I stretch my legs and my back, my neck and arm muscles, I loosen my shoulders. My body awakes, it responds to my attentions. It’s a cure-all, especially after the bad night I’ve just had.

I’d like to eat something, but that’s wishful thinking and I don’t even open the cupboard. Instead I’m sure there’s some coffee. But I’m wrong, the tin is empty. In a fit of anger, I throw it towards the trash can, but my aim is off. I let it roll on the floor, without worrying about picking it up. Do we have water? We have water. I dive under the freezing shower, rubbing myself down as much as possible with the little piece of soap that’s left.

“So what can I wear today?” I think to myself ironically, and a bitter smile crosses my lips. A pair of jeans and a creased t-shirt, that was all I had left, apart from a sweatshirt I used as a pajama and my dance tracksuit. I dress slowly, and then I put my hands in my trouser pockets. They’re empty.

The anxiety grows while I root around under my pillow, among the containers in the kitchen, behind the little camping stove. I look in my shoes, I run my hand over the highest shelf, I look in all my usual hiding places and then every tiny corner of my tiny apartment. But I find nothing. I’m penniless.

When was the last time I actually used a coin? I no longer remember. Usually I eat at the dance school canteen, because there I don’t have to pay. Perhaps last Friday? I curse myself for not having been more careful, for not having kept at least something. Classes start again in two days’ time. And what am I going to eat in the meantime? How am I going to manage, with nothing in my pockets?

I throw a punch at the wall, and this time I couldn’t care less about making noise. Let them hear me, if they want to. Let them come and get me in this hole-in-the-ground apartment where I’m hidden away, like a rat, in the midst of the dark and the dust. I can’t go on living like this. Where’s the sense in it?

I fall into a sitting position on the floor, my back against the wall, holding my knees between my arms. I can barely keep the tears back. Calm down, Ahmad. This isn’t the right moment to let yourself go, to let yourself be overwhelmed by the dejection. There’s still something worth saving. Something worth fighting for.

A rumble from my stomach tells me it’s time to get up and get out. It doesn’t matter if I have no money, I must go look for food. And once I’ve found something to eat, I’ll be able to think more clearly about all the rest.

I get to my feet again, brushing the dust off my clothes. I get my bicycle, I close the door behind me and slowly I go up the dark, narrow stairs that lead to the ground floor. Then I go out onto the street and finally I feel as though I can start breathing again. My eyes are so used to the semi-darkness of my den that the sunlight actually hurts them at first. Then, gradually, the image of the landscape around me takes shape – I see the forms of things, I rediscover the beauty of the colors, of life.

Life. Perhaps that isn’t the right word, but it’s the only one I have. In truth the only thing I see, under this sharp blue winter sky, is the rubble. Piles of stone, broken cables, metal poles sticking out. Dust, again. And devastation. This is my present, what is left of my world: a dumb and shattered testimony that doesn’t tell my story. I walk with my head bowed, searching among the rubble for something familiar, or something useful, my hands on the handlebar of my bicycle – the road is so ruined and dirty that I can’t actually ride it. I move slowly, one step at a time, without a precise destination, just making sure I avoid the holes and the rocks scattered all over the surface.

And to think that up until not so long ago, everything around here was living, frenetic, vibrant. There were people everywhere, walking along the road or sitting outside the shops, waiting for customers or chatting with the passers-by, smoking and drinking, no cares about the future or about that intolerant God, the one the fanatics instrumentalize for spreading destruction. There were voices and laughter, music and car horns blowing, and then the aroma of the tea, the spices and the honey …

Another cramp in my stomach reminds me that it’s time to stop thinking about food; it would be better now to invent some way of actually getting hold of some. I realize it’s hunger that now gives me direction as I walk. I understand suddenly that I’m not wandering the ruined streets of my town, but I’m heading in a precise direction: I’m going back to my house. Or at least, back to what’s left of it. In my daily trips around Damascus I had always avoided coming back to this area, out of fear of having to suffer even more. There’s nothing left for me in my old neighborhood, apart from nostalgia and regret. But today, it appears, there is no choice. So be it – if that’s where my heart leads me (or my belly … right now there’s not much difference) – then I’d better get a move on.

I get on the bike and start pedaling hard, increasing speed as my destination gets closer. I’m moving fast along Palestine Street, dodging cracks and rubble, while I slowly recognize what remains of the buildings as they once were. Some are completely destroyed, others are still standing, but they seem empty now, and everything is enveloped in an unnatural silence that strangles every crumb of hope.

Here it is, my home. I recognize it only because I know exactly where it is, but not much remains of its original form. It has been reduced to one wall left standing, supporting a piece of roof and a few stairs here and there. Everything else has collapsed – just large, shapeless blocks of concrete and bent iron rods.

I let the bike fall to the ground and continue on foot. The tears well up again in my eyes and I feel myself overwhelmed by a mixture of anger and sadness, together with a profound, desperate sense of impotence. I clench my fists and my knuckles turn white. I had lived in this building ever since I was born. Together with my relatives, I had built the top floor, one bucket of concrete after another. And then last month, an entire lifetime’s work was destroyed in a few hours – not just my work, but the work of my family, my uncles and grandparents, and all the other inhabitants of this neighborhood who wanted nothing more than to be left in peace.

Who’s responsible? It doesn’t matter much. The government, the rebels, Isis … whoever they were, they’re all part of the same scum. Nothing is left now for your power games, apart from this pile of dust and rubble. I give a good kick to a small lump of concrete and, as it rolls across the square, I realize that it’s the first sound I’ve heard since my day began.

I’d like to shout, attract some attention. I’d really like to know if I’m the last one left around here or if there’s anyone else. Someone I could talk to, share this fate with, search together for something to eat. But I can’t. I’ve already made too much noise, stupidly venting my feelings on that piece of concrete. I have to calm down, again. There’s no other way.

I sit on a slab of concrete that, who knows, might even be the floor of my old bedroom. Why have I come back here? What sense does it make? There’s no one here to help me. My mother is in Palmyra with my brother and my sister. I’ve no idea where my father and his woman are, and frankly I really don’t want to know. Saeed is working in Dubai and … his mother. His mother, as far as I know, might still be in Damascus. And she’s known me for years, so she might give me a hand. While the idea of having to beg for food disgusts me, I’m afraid I have no choice.

I have to call her. Going to look for her without being sure of finding her is too dangerous. Best to phone first, find out where she is and how I can get to her. I take my cellphone, look for the number in the contact list and press the button, but nothing happens. No “beep … beep” to save me, to break this increasingly suffocating silence. I look at the screen – that’s why the phone makes no noise, there’s no reception in the midst of the rubble. I squeeze it firmly in my hand and it’s all I can do not to throw it too against a wall.

Then I lift my eyes towards what remains of my old home. Here’s an idea – if I were to try climbing up to the roof, perhaps I could get a signal. I stand up quickly and move towards the wall. I put one foot on a step, the other in a little hole and pull myself up. A hold, a foothole, a cable – little by little I manage to move upward like an expert rock climber. I’m scared, but I keep going. My hands grip the concrete, I calibrate my weight, I use my toes. I don’t think of slipping, my body smashing to the ground, or being hit by a bullet. I just keep climbing until I reach the top. Sweating, tired, but happy with my achievement.

Until I look around me. From up here the devastation is even worse. It’s like being in a huge archeological dig, in the midst of the ruins of an ancient civilization worn away by time. It’s absurd to think that all this happened so quickly, not because of the natural flow of time, but because of the madness of mankind. Wherever I look I see only ruins, silence and death, and a fine dust that burns my eyes and my throat. And yet I am still here, alive … Inshallah.

I have to hurry.

I crouch down to keep myself out of sight and grab the phone. I call again and this time I hear the ringing tone. I hope Saeed’s mother answers. Aunt, please, let me hear your voice. Let me hear that you’re there, that I’m not destined to be left here alone to die of hunger.

“Ahmad?!” she suddenly answers, and her voice is sweet music to my ears.

“Aunt, yes, it’s me … how are you?”

“Finally! Did you want me to die worrying?” she asks, almost shouting. “What happened? Why didn’t you keep in touch?”

I tell her briefly about my situation and, even before I can ask for help, she says, “Get over here straight away. You’re like a son to me, we cannot be alone in a time like this, I need you.” And then she hangs up.

Her voice worries me, I use all the energy the phone call has given me to get down from the roof as quickly as possible and to get on my bike. I’ll soon be with her – I’ll have a shelter, a warm meal, and at the same time I’ll be able to help her too, we won’t be alone anymore in the midst of this solitude and devastation, and I couldn’t be happier.

Or perhaps yes, perhaps I could be happier, if I had somewhere else to go. If I could manage to leave all this behind me and to start again, as far away as possible from here. If I could finally find the courage to escape.

II

1948, Palestine

Escape. At eight years of age, with your own family. Aisha Mawaid lived in Saffuriya, near al-Nasrah. She didn’t understand why she suddenly had to leave, but someone told her that in the towns nearby the Israeli soldiers were killing Palestinian civilians, people like her. They promised her they would all come back home in a few days’ time. There was no need to fret too much. But, for the moment, the only solution was to escape.

She took nothing with her; none of her relatives took anything. They left the small family farm and all it contained: a horse, a donkey, the many tools that had been made and accumulated over the years, tools used to work the land that had always fed them. They abandoned the olive trees, the vines, the figs. They didn’t even take their gold and their valuables, convinced they’d find it all intact on their return. They took only some old blankets to keep themselves warm in the cold nights. Before running away, Aisha took off her favorite earrings. She’d seen the soldiers rip them from the ears of girls her age, without opening them first. It wasn’t the right moment to wonder about too many things, but the sight of the blood and the violence and the sound all their shouting was enough for her to intuit what had to be done to survive.

It was 1948, the year of the Palestinian exodus during the Arab–Israeli War, and in that same period a young boy of twelve also chose to escape. He lived in Lubia, ten kilometers west of Lake Tiberias in the north of Palestine and they’d put a rifle in his hands and ordered him to shoot, to kill. He didn’t believe in their cause and deserted, joining up with the rebels. His name was Ahmad Joudeh. Following the Israeli victory he had to flee to Lebanon; during their escape he lost his family, but found them again by chance in a refugee camp. From there they moved together into Syria, and with other Palestinians they settled on some land just outside Damascus, towards the end of the 1950s.

Some time later a photograph of that boy, by now a man, was shown to Aisha. She was already with a man, but wasn’t really sure about him, while her father wanted her to get married as soon as possible. The man in the photograph was wearing a policeman’s uniform and had a proud and penetrating gaze, vaguely melancholic, with two eyebrows as thick as the moustache that crowned his thin mouth. She looked at the photograph and, a bit because of how handsome he was, a bit because of her father’s haste, she just said, “Yes.”

That was how my grandparents came to know each other. Aisha joined him in Damascus, where he worked as a traffic policeman, and they got married. It was 1963. She was beautiful, very beautiful, and she was also very intelligent. She was my grandfather’s second wife, but effectively she managed to become his first wife, the favorite, and remained so right up to the end. Wafik, my father, was born of their marriage.

Theirs was the generation that founded Al Yarmouk. They invented it out of an arid and flat no-place on the southern outskirts of Damascus. It was a dead land that over the years filled up with people and was transformed into the largest and liveliest Palestinian community in Syria. My family’s neighborhood, which over the course of time had become a true residential area, appeared as a triangle from above, bordered by two wide roads that both began in the same square and ran southwards, moving diagonally away from each other: one was called Palestine, the other Al Yarmouk. These two roads were then united by a road that formed the base of the triangle, a road known as Lubia, like the town in which my grandfather was born, a town that no longer exists. All the roads in the area carried the names of Palestinian towns and cities or Palestinian heroes.

It was a grey neighborhood, of solid concrete, consisting of high rectangular blocks interrupted by windows. There were television antennas and cables everywhere, which broke up the regularity of the cubes in which we lived. It seemed impossible that all this had been built in the space of a few decades. Al Yarmouk lay fixed and motionless, timeless, as if it had existed since time immemorial and as if it would exist eternally.

There was no money for making the external walls look pretty and the only color in the neighborhood was dedicated to the schools – blue. A gentle and reassuring blue, just slightly darker than the blue of the sky on a sunny day. It was the blue of UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, which built schools in our camp and in other camps and areas that housed refugees. But it was a blue that clashed with the surroundings, that didn’t go with the shades of grey, sometimes beige, of the other buildings, and the light brown of the ground and the dust, and the black of the women who wore the veil and the anyway sober colors of those who didn’t wear it. Like my mother.

“Why is the school blue?” I used to ask her.

“Because that way it can’t be seen at night and the planes can’t bomb it,” she would reply.

III

January 2013, Al Yarmouk

I am Ahmad. Ahmad Joudeh. I bear the name of my grandfather, I am twenty-three years old and my world has always been Al Yarmouk. Until not long ago, I lived in a big home with my family, consisting of grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, parents and brothers and sisters: it was a very busy building in which you could never get bored. Here I spent my days, except for when I went out to school and, above all, when I went to dance classes – my greatest passion, my *raison d’être*, something I have never relinquished even when this has meant clashing with members of my family. Then, with the beginning of the war in Syria, things suddenly changed.

I’ve been living with my aunt, mother of my friend Saeed, for about a month. She welcomed me warmly, really as if I were her son and at home she doesn’t wear the hijab so as not to make me feel like an outsider, even though no one knows I’m here. At the beginning it was just us, her and her two daughters, and I had a room all to myself, but then people started arriving: Saeed, his aunt, his nieces and nephews … And then I began to feel a bit of an intruder, it didn’t seem right to be occupying a room that should really have been for another family. I had a tent with me and I decided to move up unto the roof, so that I wasn’t stealing space from anyone, but I was still close to the last friends I had nearby. The truth is I have no alternative, I don’t know what I would do without their help, and then there’s that fact that getting to Al Yarmouk has become so dangerous I can’t go back.

We’re at the beginning of January and it’s cold, but I mustn’t complain. The only thing that really weighs me down is having to stay sitting or crouching up on that roof – there are snipers everywhere and the risk of taking a bullet to the head is a real one.

“Ahmad? Are you there?” I hear the whispering through the cloth of the tent. I open the zip and recognize Saeed there in the dark, crouching with two plates in his hands.

“Here I am! But hurry up, otherwise the cold gets in.”

We both laugh, but it’s an ironic laughter and a bit forced, given our situation.

“What have we got this evening?” I ask.

“Rice and potatoes, the house speciality… ”

“Well … at least it’s warm.”

Since the fighting started in Damascus, the price of food has increased terribly – ten times more than it was before. Bread, rice and potatoes are all that my new family can afford. If we’re lucky, once a month we can treat ourselves to a chicken, to be divided between six of us.

“Have you heard from your mom?” Saeed asks.

“Yes, I finally managed to get hold of her today. She says she’ll be back next month, with my brother and my sister. We’ll all move to Al Tadamon, to the house her cousin offered her. It’s a small apartment, but if we squeeze up… ”

“Better than a tent on the roof … Anyway, I don’t understand why she wants to come back to Damascus. Couldn’t she stay in Palmyra? At least there she’s safe.”

“Yes, but the money she had is running out, she needs to get back to her work in Damascus.”

Saeed and I spent the rest of our supper in silence, our eyes fixed on the plates that emptied too quickly. When we finished, he went back down to his home, with his family. Before he went I hugged him and thanked him again, as I did every day. His presence now is fundamental for me. I often think that if it weren’t for him always encouraging me, I’d really struggle to keep going.

“See you tomorrow. Remember we have to wake up half an hour early to go through the choreography? We won’t have time during the day, and the company rehearsals start at four o’clock.”

“Of course, Ahmad. Goodnight.”

Goodnight to you too, Saeed.

I watch him scuttle off towards the stairs and then disappear, swallowed up by the darkness. Just like every evening, I pile up all my things in a corner to free up the mattress and then I lie down, pulling the blanket over me. I ought to sleep. The last exams at school are taking place and tomorrow I have to be rested and concentrated. But sleep, tonight, doesn’t want to come to me.

It’s already cold, so I open the tent flap a little – at least that way I breathe a bit of fresh air and I have the impression that above me is not just a sheet of plastic, but a dark blue mantle out of which a myriad of stars are peeping. I struggle to move a little in the tiny space of the tent … and there it is, before my eyes Mount Qasioun stands out. Huge, imposing, illuminated by the moon.

It’s a familiar sight, one I’ve always known, and one I try to hold on to so as not to let my past slip away from me. Because I do have a past, even though sometimes that now seems impossible to me. I chase my memories through the rubble of the war, amidst the bombing and the fear, until a series of snapshots come to me – child, adolescent, young man.

Mount Qasioun, the night, the moon. When was the last time I saw this scene before me?

1998, Al Yarmouk

IV

It was a time of freedom, often of fear, always of the struggle. In my neighborhood we lived out in the open air, everyone together, and the streets were full of people coming and going, or simply standing there to watch the toing and froing, seeking out some pastime to make the days go by more quickly.

Every time the Israelis and Palestinians clashed, we heard about it in Al Yarmouk and the demonstrations would start. I would watch them from on high, up on the roof, lying belly down: a great seething of restless bodies, a choir of fervent voices, screaming against the violence inflicted, shouting for the land they had unjustly been deprived of, promising revenge, announcing reprisals. Amidst the dust from the ground and the smoke from the burning flags, the patriotic songs of our people rose up. I knew those songs well, not only because we learned them at school, but because I heard them echoing continuously, at all hours of the day, through the streets of our quarter.

There was an enemy, this I had understood. A cruel enemy that had to be fought. Invisible, but always present. But who were they? What did they look like? In my childish thoughts, homeland, land, hatred were just abstract concepts that I struggled to interpret. What instead was clear to me, because I saw it every day with my own eyes, was that apart from the enemy there was always something to argue about. There were fights everywhere, throughout the neighborhood. Constantly. Fights would break out for a wrong word spoken, even just for the look on a face. Insults and blows would fly, people even used knives, sticks, clubs. From a tender age I became used to seeing blood flow, and it filled me with terror. This is why, as soon as it was possible, I would run to hide up on the roof: the world, seen from above, seemed a better place to be.

One day, a day like many others, I was up there, busy admiring the view. The jagged horizon of Al Yarmouk fascinated me – the irregular roofs, all at different heights, the domes of the mosques, aquamarine or gilded, the minarets, the rusty satellite dishes adding a pleasant touch of red. Gazing slightly farther, I could make out the center of Damascus, the city. Here too there were the square-shaped and anonymous buildings just like mine, with their windows resembling the eyes or nostrils of some strange monster, but there were also small houses nestled between the bigger buildings. How could people live in there I wondered? They must have been cramped, in such a limited space. Perhaps these people didn’t live with their grandparents, their aunts and uncles and cousins as I did? This seemed impossible to me.

At a certain point my thoughts were interrupted by a strange noise. Curious, I turned to look down into my neighborhood. As I focused I managed to make out a small flock of sheep advancing towards the square on which my building stood, the biggest square in Al Yarmouk. They were coming along Palestine Road, kicking up a great cloud of dust, surrounded by men armed with sticks who prodded the sheep now and then to keep the laziest of them on the move. This was an unusual spectacle, so I decided to give it my full attention. I could never have imagined how it was going to end.

Paying no heed to the dust and the gravel, I lay belly down on the roof, my eyes glued to the bizarre scene. When they reached the square, the sheep were tied to some poles planted in the ground. In the meantime various men came out of the houses and the shops: they were all talking to one another, rushing up and down, busying themselves with the animals. There was a strange excitement in the air, as though there was some sort of electric current running through it.

Then there was silence. From the butcher’s shop in the square a big man had arrived, a man with a long black beard who brandished in his hand a big knife, at least as long as his entire forearm. My heart began beating quickly, I felt it pulsing violently against the concrete of the roof.

The butcher advanced towards one of the sheep and kicked it before using his foot to press its face to the ground. He called to another man I hadn’t seen before and held the knife out to him. The man took it, even though he seemed slightly hesitant – or at least that’s how it seemed to my terror-filled eyes. Then he shouted, “Bismillah!” – in the name of God. He crouched down to the sheep and with a quick blow, he cut its throat. The animal’s head was bent backwards, still attached to its body by the spinal column, as it convulsed and emptied itself of its blood, which spurted all over the concrete and mixed with the dust, shining in the afternoon sun.

I wanted to shout, to run away, or at least to close my eyes, but I couldn’t. I was paralyzed by the horror, by my disgust. My muscles had become harder than stone. I remained there stretched out prostrate, silent, watching, like all the men in the square as the sheep slowly died in what I imagined was terrible suffering. It took at least five minutes for it to stop trembling. And the blood continued to flow, staining the sheep’s white coat and the ground in the square.

When it finally died, the man who had killed it returned the knife to the butcher. Then he put his hands into the still-warm blood of the poor animal before stamping both palms on a wall, leaving there two sinister and bright red handprints. Then he disappeared in the crowd.

The butcher moved a few steps away, grabbed another sheep and repeated the macabre ceremony: the foot on the animal’s face, the knife given to another man, the cut, the blood, the convulsions of the dying body, the death. Then a third sheep, a fourth, a fifth. I counted at least ten before I managed to move, managed to return to my senses. I was breathing deeply as though just awakened from a bad dream.

“Enough!” I shouted. But with all the fuss down there, no one heard my voice. The square was littered with corpses. The blood had entered into every crack in the concrete, it had dirtied the clothes of those present, it had spurted on the walls. Someone started rinsing down with buckets of water, creating red rivers that flowed rapidly down Palestine Road, returning along the way the sheep had taken to reach the square.

I was horrified as I stood up quickly and started running down the stairs. “Enough,” I kept saying to myself. I’d decided to go down into the square and confront the butcher. I would speak to him, I would tell him that he was wrong to be so cruel with those poor animals. I had no doubts whatosever: I would manage to make him see reason, to persuade him. Perhaps, on listening to me, he’d even decide to change job! In the ingenuousness of my thoughts, this seemed to me to be perfectly plausible.

On the top floor, where my aunt and uncle lived, you couldn’t hear a pin drop. Just as well – I had no desire to meet anyone right then, absolutely no wish to start explaining why I was so upset. I continued down past the other floors, jumping two steps at a time, convinced that no one had noticed me and that I’d be able to complete my mission, when all of a sudden, as I was on the very last flight of stairs … “Ahmad!”

I had forgotten about my grandmother – she was the one who always knew exactly where I was.

“So where have you been this time? You weren’t up on the roof again, were you?” she asked, inspecting my dust-covered clothes, which suggested to her she was right.

I didn’t answer. Deep within I was still hoping I’d manage to slip away from her and run into the square to do my duty.

“Get a move on, it’s time to get washed, otherwise we’ll be late,” she said, taking me by surprise.

“Late?”

“I knew it … you’ve forgotten. There’s the party this evening, for the wedding of Abd Alaziz and Mohammad’s daughter! The whole neighborhood’s going to be there and we of all people cannot not be there.”

The wedding! That was what the massacre I’d witnessed was all about! Suddenly it was all clear to me, and yet I still felt upset. Fair enough, the sheep had been slaughtered for a wedding feast, but was all that cruelty really necessary? Couldn’t the butcher at least have stroked them before killing them, rather than kicking them? And now I knew for sure who the man was who’d killed the first sheep: the groom, er Abd. But how will his wife be able to love a person capable of such cruelty? (it’s a tradition). I kept fearing Abd after that, and I wondered if his wife could really like him.

Sulking, I followed my grandmother back into our house. The door, behind us, remained ajar without actually closing. This had been one of her ideas and I’d stopped wondering about it: she’d had all the locks and bolts in the house – the main door and those of all the rooms – set up so that the doors were always ajar, when they weren’t wide open.

In my room I took my clean clothes – the finest ones, my party clothes – and I headed off towards the bathroom. She waited for me in the corridor, to make sure I didn’t attempt an escape.

“Granny Aisha,” I said, “I saw them kill the sheep.”

“Ah yes?”

“It was terrible, the most disgusting thing in the world. Why did they kill them like that? They hadn’t done anything to anyone!”

She put a hand to my head, stroked my hair. Even when she was angry, when she was late and it was my fault, her voice was always full of sweetness. “Do you remember last week, when I made that stew for you?” she asked. “You had three platefuls, if I remember well. You kept saying you wanted more, said it was very good. You know what was in it, don’t you?”

I stood there for a moment with my mouth open, then I turned my eyes to the floor in defeat.

“Exactly, there was mutton in there. And the raw chicken liver you love so much? That too comes from an animal. An animal that was slaughtered so that you can eat it.”

She was right, there was no way out. I had no idea what to say, nothing intelligent came to mind. So I simply said the first thing that did come to mind, “There was no need for them to kill a sheep for me, because I certainly won’t be eating any after everything I’ve seen.”

“There you are, well done, don’t eat sheep. But hurry up now – before long your grandfather will be back home and you don’t want him to see you in this state. Go get washed, come on!” Before returning to her chores, Granny Aisha gave me a smile in which I think I saw a bit of pride in my stubbornness.

“Hey! Hey! Ahmad! Ahmad! Ahmad!” I heard my name shouted just as I was going into the bathroom. It was Uncle Omar calling me. I went into his room and I saw him there, in bed as usual. As usual because he was completely paralyzed from his neck to his knees – all in one piece, he couldn’t bend his hips, nor his back.

“Ahmad, I need to piss now!” he said, a big smile stamped on his face.

My uncle needed all sorts of attention that kept us all busy and we all helped out both because it was impossible not to love him and because he himself had a heart of gold. Generous and really funny, he always managed to find an excuse for laughing about everything, even about his own condition. In this case my job was to turn him on his side, undo his trousers, put the chamber pot in position and turn my eyes elsewhere. When he’d finished I would empty the pan and I was free.

“So, what have you been up to today?” he asked while relieving himself.

“Nothing much … I saw them getting things ready for the wedding this evening,” I replied. I didn’t want to speak about the sheep again.

“I could hear the noise even in here! It’ll be a great party, no doubt. There’ll be plenty to eat, to drink and then music and dancing … you’ll have a good time, I’m sure.”

I, however, was really not so sure at all.

“I bet,” he continued, indicating with his eyes my torn trousers and dirty knees, “you’ve been up on the roof to watch the preparations, no? You can’t imagine how much I’d like to come up there with you! Don’t worry though, I won’t say a word – I know you like being up there on your own, with no one disturbing you. But if I could, I swear I’d run up those stairs just to sit in silence with you!”

Out of instinct, I leaned over to kiss and hug him – his kindness never failed to astonish me. And then, without ever really having to talk, I felt that Uncle Omar was one of the few people who really understood me.

“But get a move on now … you don’t really want to get your grandmother angry, do you?”

About an hour later, fresh and clean – to the immense joy of my family – I finally went down into the square wearing a perfectly ironed white shirt. There was no trace of the afternoon’s slaughter now, to the point where I wondered for a moment whether it had just been a nightmare. And the spectacle before me now actually took my breath away – there were colored garlands hanging from one side of the square to the other together with long lines of light bulbs giving off a warm and gentle light, which glinted off the many plates and silver cutlery on the countless tables. At least a hundred or so chairs had been brought into the square for the occasion, and as many more again were on their way. I could smell a subtle aroma of spices that made my mouth water – nothing like the terrible smell of blood just a few hours previously.

I didn’t even have time to fully take in that incredible scene – as soon as I put a foot outside the door, I was overwhelmed by a bunch of excited kids. They were my cousins, all fifteen of them.

“Ahmad! Come here!”

“Finally you’ve arrived! Look over there … the kids from the school are here too.”

“No, wait! Let’s take him to see the musicians first! Look, Ahmad, your dad’s with them too!”

They surrounded me and bombarded me with questions, pulling me by my hand and shirt in every direction. But I was the oldest and I had the power to calm things down with a sharp and decided response. In truth, even though it cost me a bit to admit it, I was beginning to feel slightly hungry.

“Shall we go eat something first? What do you say?”

Anything I proposed would have received the same joyous reaction. Jumping, running and shouting, we crossed the squared and headed for the main banquet table.

A lady gave me a dish, without my even having to ask for it. In it was meat, warm and smelling good, covered with a paprika sauce. It looked really good. But I only ate the sauce.

“My dad cooked it,” said one of my many cousins, proudly.

“They brought the sheep in this afternoon. You should’ve been there, Ahmad, there was blood everywhere … awesome!”

I didn’t answer, busy as I was trying not to vomit.

“Do you want the meat?” I said, holding out my plate to the random cousin standing there before me. “Really I’m not really that hungry.”

He ate it up in an instant, while I continued to struggle in keeping down the little food I had eaten. As soon as he’d finished, we started playing. I ran up and down the square with my cousins following me. We ran among the guests, dodging the chairs, passing through the grown ups’ legs, under the tables, and a little dog joined us, barking. I quashed the hunger and the upset in my stomach with a handful of sweets that I stole from a tray. At ten years of age our worries fly away in a rush and I, that evening, just wanted to enjoy myself.

Still moving as a gang, we headed for the musicians in the center of the square. They were tuning their instruments and in front of them stood some men in a circle, hand in hand. They were about to dance the *dabka*, a frenetic, joyous dance, consisting of jumps and acrobatics with quick jerking steps, while the first in line swings a rope or a handkerchief in the air with his free hand.

Someone grabbed my arm and abruptly stopped my running – it was my father.

“Here, take it,” he said, putting the microphone into my hand. It always ended up like this at weddings, or at any occasion where there was an audience to entertain. Dad said I had a fine voice and for this reason I absolutely had to sing, accompanied by my brother who played the oud, a type of guitar that comes originally from Persia.

Amjad was already there, alongside our father, his eyes turned to the ground and that air of melancholy in his expression, the one that never left him. I didn’t understand my brother, and I really didn’t know him that well. The only thing we had in common was music. We didn’t even live together because I lived with my grandmother, and he lived a few floors up with our parents.

“But Wafik, we already have a singer!” one of the musicians tried to protest.

“Just let my boys do a couple of songs! They’ll amaze you all!”

My brother, in silence, moved over to the oud player and took the instrument from his hands, not rudely, but decidedly. He sat down next to me and we began immediately with a number from our repertoire. The men who wanted to dance in the middle of the dance floor let go of one anothers’ hands, some of them moved away, others sat down to listen, a trifle annoyed by this change to the program but pleasantly surprised in any case – I sang really well and my brother was an excellent oud player.

It must have been a nice moment. I would have liked to witness it as a member of the audience – the warm light, almost red, of the sunset; the many decorations hanging above our heads; the evening breeze cooling the sweating faces and the music seeming to cradle us all, even those who paid no attention at all.

Then, suddenly, from the other side of the square came the growing noise of raised voices, which soon escalated into shouting. People stopped listening to us and ran to see what was happening. Left with no audience, Amjad and I ran over to that dark corner, where the shouting and the dust were coming from.

There was a fight under way. A generalized brawl, difficult to say how many people were involved. It was taking place right outside my uncle’s real estate agency, which for the occasion had been transformed into a bar for serving coffee to the guests. I immediately recognized two men in the midst of the brawl – Hisham and Abid.

Hisham was the director of the agency. He’d left school at the age of nine and didn’t know how to read or write, but this didn’t seem to be a problem at work. He was the most handsome of his brothers, the most elegant and the one who was the best dancer. My other uncle, Abid, was easily recognized – he was the one swaying to and fro. He’d acquired the bad habit of drinking too much, every day. He was almost always drunk and even when sober was always confused, and perhaps for this reason he was the kindest of them all. He often argued with my other uncles, because of his alcoholism. The truth is that everyone in the neighborhood enjoyed a drink, but Abid more than most.

Now my uncles were really laying into one another. There was so much confusion that you couldn’t really understand who was fighting who. Getting closer to the brawl I could make out a few phrases here and there:

“Just leave my sister alone!”

“It’s not my fault if you lock her away in the house. Of course she goes to the window to look at the men.”

“Don’t you tell me what to do!”

“And don’t you tell me where to look!”

I was used to such scuffles, and I knew perfectly well that this one too wouldn’t peter out until all those involved had fallen to the ground, their energies completely spent. But this didn’t seem likely to happen any time soon because who stepped in to stop them ended up being struck by some random blow and then joined the brawl, which thus continued to grow.

My uncles had their flaws, but they were strong and brave. Many times they had rushed to our aid, protecting us from the dangers of the streets. I decided that this was a good opportunity to return the favor.

I immediately gathered all my cousins together, all of them excited by what was happening. “Guys, come over here,” I said. “We’ll show them now. Follow me!”

With a long trail of children behind me I plunged through the wall of grownups beating one another up, reached the door of our building and started climbing the stairs, stopping at the first floor.

“Everyone grab a container, as big as possible. Those who live here get them from your houses, and get another one for the others. Fill them with cold water and then run up to where I’ll be, on the roof. Understood?”

“Yessss!” the chorus replied, full of adrenalin.

I too went into our apartment and grabbed a couple of saucepans and I was about to leave when I remembered Uncle Omar’s chamber pot. At that moment he was awake and was watching television.

“Uncle, can I take your pot? It’s for something urgent, I’ll explain later.”

“My pot? If you really need it … actually, wait a minute! First let me empty my bladder please,” he said to me with his usual smile.

“But of course,” I said, with an even bigger smile.

There were 16 of us in total, each with a container full of water in our hands, plus Uncle Omar’s special container, which I kept firmly between my legs. We looked down and, because it was dark, we couldn’t really make anything out – it was as though there was a monster down there, agitating its thousand arms in every direction, and the dust they were kicking up was rising toward us, making it even more difficult to see.

“Right, we’ll send down three waves of water, five saucepans at a time. There’s no point trying to take aim, we’ll throw it at the group and just hope we hit the mark. My countdown – three … two … one … Water!”

The content of the first five saucepans was released, the water striking more or less where we hoped it would. But the only tangible result was that the rising column of dust had dissolved. The dust, now mixed with water, fell on the men below and their eyes were full of dirt, so that their punches were now being thrown blind.

“Another five, quickly! Now we could see better and could be more precise. Countdown – three … two … one … Water!”

The second wave was much more effective – the brawlers, soaked now, quickly moved away so as to avoid another shower. But the strongest, or the most furious, stood their ground, and among them were my uncles. Suddenly I recognized someone else – it was the butcher who had killed the sheep that afternoon. I was sure it was him because I recognized the way he moved and his long, thick beard. What better opportunity to avenge those poor animals whose throats he’d cut?

“We’re on again, guys, last round. Fewer people to water this time – aim for those you don’t like! Ready? Three … two … one … Piss!” And the last wave rained gloriously down, putting an end to that pointless brawl.

While my cousins and I were busy laughing and cheering over our achievement, someone down there finally realized we were up on the roof and started shouting at us. Those who recognized their sons shouted up with the worst threats, while the others made do with a barrage of generic insults. We decided to disperse so as to attract less attention. My cousins ran down gradually and mixed with the crowd as though nothing had happened. Me instead, I stayed up on the roof to enjoy the view from above. I couldn’t take my eyes off the butcher, the man I’d chosen to water personally with the contents of Uncle Omar’s pot. When I saw him pulling his shirt up to his nose to sniff it, I knew I’d hit the mark.

I lay down on the concrete, satisfied, without even worrying about dirtying my good clothes. The party was already underway again – the voices coming up to my ears were full of joy and cheerfulness. The music, the lights, a drunk in the corner heading off home swaying this way and that, perhaps leaning on a shoulder belonging to someone he’d been fighting with a few minutes previously. That was Al Yarmouk – chaotic, sometimes violent, but united in a common destiny that the daily fights couldn’t diminish.

Then I lifted my eyes: soaring away from the party, beyond the roofs and the minarets, they went further even than the entire city of Damascus, with its lights and shadows, and came to rest on the massive dark outline of Mount Qasioun. With its foothills constellated by tiny houses that I could barely make out and its ridge climbing toward the summit, challenging the sky. The ridge ran toward the moon that bathed the sky in its light and made it shine, as if it were made of silver.