

**Khaled Khalifa**

Extract from a novel

**A Tribute to Hatred**

Radwan recalled the child he had been sixty years ago, when at the age of five he learned that he was blind, and different from sighted people. His blindness shocked his family, who neglected him and left him to wander the streets of Ain Arab, a miserable child sitting next to the wall of the mosque, listening to the recitation of the Quran that emanated from Sheikh Bahzad's study circle but not daring to enter that place and sit under the large mulberry in the courtyard of the Omari Mosque. He was a forlorn child; the others stumbled around him without noticing him. The silence and loneliness caused him pain, and he tried to display his talents and the flexibility of his small body to the other youngsters. He would make clown-like movements, jumping into the air and performing a flip before returning to stand on his feet with a smile, as the children applauded him. They would leave him to his loneliness and aimlessness during the nights of Ain Arab; he was protected by the night watchmen who pitied him and permitted him to sleep at the gates of the *souq*, throwing him watermelon peels and the leftover parts. In the winter, he would receive the remainder of the *burghul* and hardening okra sauce on their plates. Sometimes they would allow him to approach and listen to the boring tales they exchanged as they exhaled the smoke of their cigarettes. During the long winter nights Radwan would take refuge in the livestock caravansary, the only one equipped to receive visitors, near the Serail. The wife of the caravansary owner took pity on him and allowed him to sleep on the straw, warmed by the breath of the mules and donkeys tied to their feeding troughs. Ain Arab took to him, and he to it. He would pass his mother's home and slow down so that she would see him. She would take his coarse robe and give him another, the only other one he owned. She would then leave him to his fate, afraid of the anger of her husband, who had married her after she divorced Radwan's father, who began to preach the Day of Judgment in the villages and places of the Bedouin, based on a dream that he would relate to everyone he encountered. The Prophet, on the Night of Destiny,<sup>1</sup> had ordered him to rise and relay the message to Muslims that they should prepare themselves for the auspicious day, listing nineteen signs that the Prophet had enumerated to him in the dream - the first was the birth of a child with toes dangling from his waist. He was very ugly, as a punishment for sleeping with his wife during a lunar eclipse. He wandered in the area after divorcing his wife, upon whom he had bestowed tattered rags, a mud room and a decrepit donkey, a dowry for a woman left to the mercy of men who were snapping at her, circling her home on the cold nights; she knew not what to do before the eyes that laid siege to her, with her blind child. She did not mind leaving Radwan and letting him live in his grandfather's house, as a condition set down by the only man who asked for her hand, as a third wife who would be useful at harvest-time, working on the big landowners' fields. The hatred of blindness choked him in the home of the old grandfather who bore his name, so he fled, and before him lay only the alleyways and

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<sup>1</sup> On the 27<sup>th</sup> of the month of Ramadan.

the open spaces. On moonlit nights he would dream that he was flying above the clouds like a sparrow hawk, hating the nickname “mole” that the children would repeat when they wanted to hurt him. It was with considerable bitterness that Radwan recalled the memory of his childhood years in Ain Arab. He had smelled all of its stones and etched the faces of its people in his memory, identifying them from their voices and odors and joking with them, and never giving in to desperation. He became addicted to loneliness and mocking the stupidity and coarseness of the peasants, sang in Kurdish, learned the trails and long laments of the Bedouin by heart, tried to become a professional mourner but was kicked out on more than one occasion, because of his smile, which would hint that he was making fun of the tribal elders. He was consumed by the idea of becoming a folk healer, so he claimed before a crowd of people that he could cure the paralyzed. When the woman sitting next to him did not rise after he muttered prayers in a trembling voice and rubbed his hand on her head, her seven sons kicked him out into the street. He gave up on the idea, convincing himself that being ascetic when it came to the pleasures of the world was inconsistent with his dreams of enjoying unending delights. During the summer he would sleep in the abandoned tents of the concierges, eating from the fruit of the land and gathering stalks of wheat behind the farm laborers. He would negotiate with women who were cheating on their husbands after picking up the sounds of their lovers and the women’s entreaties from behind the walls of the mud rooms. They would pay him in the morning with eggs, yoghurt and wheat, which he would sell, and keep the small coins in a sack around his neck, saving up for something as yet unidentified. He was attracted by the circus when it came to Ain Arab for a few days and pleaded with the owner to give him a tryout, teach him how to be a clown, and get tigers to jump through a ring of fire. The friendly Moroccan circus owner liked the idea of enticing people by having a blind player. He tried Radwan on more than one occasion; the elephant almost trampled him and he gave up on the third day. The man demanded payment for letting Radwan join the team of the German-speaking magician, who spewed fire from his mouth amid the wonder of the people of Ain Arab. They would sit for hours watching the man, weighed down chains, declaring his hatred of France, challenging the soldiers in a German that was understood by no one, except that the few words he directed toward the onlookers were like magic. He tried to teach Radwan how to pull scarves from his mouth, but Radwan nearly choked on them. He returned to the wild like a sparrow hawk that could not cope with being closed in by walls; he acquired the skill of sleeping on tree branches, avoiding the homosexual men who would come looking for boys to molest. He saw dreams that he could not explain. He became consumed by the idea of leaving after he began to feel that the smells of Ain Arab were hemming him in. He cried in front of the wife of the caravansary owner, so that she would intercede with one of the carriage owners, one whose calm voice told Radwan that he would not be abandoned in Aleppo and that he would be allowed to lie down on top of the sacks of barley. Mahra Khatoun spoke with the carriage owner and paid him a sum to take Radwan to the Omayyad Mosque in Aleppo. On the way there, the carriage owner observed Radwan as he smiled, breathing in the villages and the scent of the river, which they crossed by means of a decrepit wooden raft piloted by an old man who was permanently bored. The carriage owner found him to be entertaining and did not tire of his unending stories. He was going to make him his assistant, after hearing him sing for two hours straight. He took him to the home of Hamid, the record seller, who was looking for talent to form a musical group that would rival the Rashidiyeh School chorus, which was supervised by a Syriani musician who claimed that

Munira al-Mahdiya<sup>2</sup> had sent him an emissary to convince him to compose a song for the epic of Antara, which would be sung before the consuls of foreign countries on the occasion of the Queen of England's visit to Cairo. Radwan relaxed on the chair and asked for a cup of water, with some sugar in it. He sang a Kurdish anthem that he had memorized and translated the meaning with some confusion in front of Hamid, who made him a member of his non-existent musical company, which he was unable to put together. Six months later he was forced to let the smiling Radwan go; there was no regret, or pleas to remain. He did not like the smells of the man's house and became bored by the man's daily fighting with his sharp-voiced wife, who would leave him without food. He continued to remember the long days of sitting in the small record store, listening to Zakariya Ahmad,<sup>3</sup> with whom he fell in love, and wondered about the course of events that had led him to this small place to follow in the path of the great musicians, like himself, as he would say repeatedly, with pride. Radwan memorized many of Zakariya Ahmad's epic songs, certain that the hoarseness of his own voice resembled the sweetness of Zakariya Ahmad, when he sang "*abl al-hawa'*" with such painful sorrow. Radwan kept that album in the sack that he carried and Hamid left him in the courtyard of the Umayyad Mosque. He breathed in the odors that he loved so and finally felt as if he had found his favorite place. He relaxed for a few days with the blind people, who welcomed him in their mocking fashion, trying to keep him away from the money they earned and divided up among themselves from reading prayers for women doing penance on Fridays. Radwan liked their gags and got along with them; he did not feel lonely when he lay down at the end of the night on a fancy rug in the corner of the mosque, deep in sleep and next to his few comrades, who resembled him in their vagrancy and failure to have their own roof over their heads. Seven years prompted Radwan to be proud of his Aleppine-ness; he sought a new affiliation, making up strange stories about his nonexistent family, claiming kinship with long-standing clans whose names, activities and presence he had come to know in a city where people continued to be proud of their relationship to the family and its sanctity, as a social condition for living and preserving traditions that appeared to be quite affected to Radwan. He maintained his silence, trying to penetrate the network of secrets of the life of the blind, who had weaved it around their world calmly, over long years. Radwan had recently come to feel that he belonged to this world, after his vagrant childhood, whose scars continued to cause him sharp pain and was overcome by a desire to flee the commotion by keeping to himself, like a seal searching for death on unknown shores, after having been led there by misleading waves. He would exit the mosque after his blind friends left him behind on the pretext that he was too young, and head for the city's souq, where new odors and loud voices intrigued him. He would stop in front of his shop belonging to my grandfather, who observed him kissing the hand of Hajj Abdel-Ghani, asking to be taught the science of making fragrances, which he found exciting; he was overcome by a strange feeling that intoxicated him. Radwan was pleasant in a way that Hajj Abdel-Ghani liked; he permitted to sit in front of the shop, to sing the songs of Zakariya Ahmad. He often helped distinguish fragrances, which he stored in his memory, the only way that his presence would become necessary in the small shop, where, two months later, he stumbled among the bottles and angered the Hajj, who slapped him. Radwan wept bitterly, returned to the mosque and did not leave it for an entire year, waiting for my grandfather, whenever he arrived for prayers, to shake his hand and speak easily about his pains and his life. He would dwell on his dreams, and on holidays, he would accept the

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<sup>2</sup> A famous Egyptian singer.

<sup>3</sup> A famous Egyptian composer.

present from my grandfather; a new suit that he would bring became a tradition. He liked his smooth talk and humor and convinced my grandmother to add him to the family as a servant, claiming that there was nothing to be feared from the blind. Radwan carried his small suitcase and entered my grandfather's house, to become a necessity that could not be dispensed with. He reclined in the room and became a servant with prerogatives that did not please my grandmother; however, she agreed so as not to anger my grandfather, who was reassured by Radwan and made him his evening companion on rainy nights, when he would feel lonely and did not want to hear anyone knocking at his door. He found a refuge with his servant, who became his friend. "Maryam was five years old," Radwan said, and laughed. He then continued, drinking mint tea that I had brought him as a bribe for him to complete the telling of a tale I found to be fantastical. For a moment I had monstrous thoughts; I saw him tell the story as if he were rising from the chair and going to his bed to die. I feared for him and tried to interrupt him more than once, with a question or by trapping him into providing further details. However, it was as if he had been struck deaf; he drank his tea in silence and then rose, to walk to his room, without wishing me good night. His heavy steps were the opposite of what I expected, after he had cast off the weight of the memories of his childhood, in which he had struggled in order to survive. I remembered the words he repeated often, when I asked him if he missed my grandfather. He said, evenly, "His smell remains. I loved this house and its smell."

Dawn crept in and I was still staring at the empty chair in front of me. I thought that he must have loved one of my maternal aunts and surmised that it was Safa; he would describe her birth to us, and how he took care of her as a child. I didn't think it was Maryam; I felt that he pitied her and thought her to be a miserable girl who had thrown her life away in delusions, like a silkworm that has spun a cocoon around itself, choking in the smell of its body. When it tried to open the little window in order to breathe, the walls collapsed and nothing remained except tears for the lost, happy past.

The night was calm and I did not hear the sound of the bullets. I fell asleep like the dead, without the anxiety of the last few days, and woke to the commotion of returning travelers, who seemed to have been cleansed of their despair following a vacation. Maryam missed her things; she found them scattered and busied herself with rearranging them, her few pictures, the clothes that suggested her early aging, an antique tambourine that she would take out when Hajji Radiya came to her house and was overtaken by the desire to sing religious hymns, by her rug, the two small boxes filled with trinkets that seemed to belong to a woman who had left life behind a long time ago, the copper holder of kohl with Farsi engraving of the name of a princess famous for the beauty of her black eyes, a small bar of bay leaf soap that Maryam used frugally because she believed it was rare, and bead earrings fashionable in the 1950s among high-class women. The fashion had ended quickly and Maryam wore them as if she did not want to believe that the days of happiness, the heated meetings, and the gossip had ended. She spoke to me effusively about my mother, father and brother, exaggerating things to reassure me. At first she made up with Marwa and in the following days, her anger exploded, all in one go. She condemned my lack of head covering, as well as my father's addiction to drink and the way that he would curse my mother, Bakr, and our group, praising the other sect. He still remembered his friends who accompanied him to Alexandria and taught him how to fish, "as if he wanted to anger us, and didn't want to see us," Maryam said as she pointed, trying to dispel the image of her oppressive trip, one full of violations, an image that she had sketched out for her two sisters and two brothers-in-law.

The boredom returned to us as if we were waiting for a miracle to rescue us from our monotony and fear, which began to grow after the violent clashes that took place in Jalloum Square, and which spread to faraway Jumayliyya. The city looked like it was on fire during the day. All of us silently curled up in the basement, amid the smells of lentil soup that Maryam had prepared in an attempt to ignore what was taking place less than 200 meters away from our house. She then burst out into hot tears, expressing her confinement due to the curfew, the killing, and the searches, which had laid bare all of her secrets before the eyes of strangers.

The crying frightened me; my anxious fears returned after Omar had informed me of Bakr's letter, requesting my departure from the organization, since I was under surveillance. He could not stand playing the role of the man of the house if it were inhabited by deranged women who disobeyed him in everything and did not want to open the windows of life. He returned to his old days, with scandals of which Aleppo was no longer aware, amid the destruction and women in mourning over their distant sons, in jail or in the grave. It is difficult to feel neutral when your life is threatened. For a moment I thought that I could only go all the way, after neglecting the university, which had become a place to learn of the coming days' missions. They would leave the pamphlets for me in one of the garbage bins, or a woman would slip them under my coat when I would sit in a *service* taxi; she would then get out at the next stop, with no time to squeeze my hand in solidarity. Fear began to lead me to pleasure and hysteria. I thought it would be difficult to be watched. Someone was counting your breaths, your steps, trying to penetrate your brain, observe your memories, or the images of loved ones. I was terrified by the idea that they could spy on my dreams. I trembled when I felt that I was actually being watched, by a number of men, confused by how many of them there actually were, feeling surrounded by their glances. I would try to look into their eyes in defiance, to keep myself from fainting in the middle of the street. I would concentrate my gaze on the fifty-something milk seller, who had settled at the entrance of our street two months ago and had never left. I was not fooled by his innocence and calm voice, when I would approach and inspect his cart, purchasing milk from him that we would not drink. I began to hate him and looked at him with rancor, hoping for his death. I wrote a report and submitted it to the group's leadership. In it I cursed him and requested his liquidation, awaiting his certain death. I began to look at him as someone who did not have much time to get his family's affairs in order. I distributed some of the pamphlets in small, empty neighborhoods in which I felt the burden of their weight. I tore the rest up and threw them away in a trash bin, like someone fleeing, after I saw a young man who I felt was following me. I regretted doing this after he entered his home, unaware of my presence.

Omar's words robbed me of my courage and left me fragile, like a piece of blotting paper. I swallowed my saliva when a passer-by looked at me; my dreams died in the silence of the city, which had come to resemble a huge graveyard. I thought that running away might save me from this routine, living near my mother once again and trying to return my father to me. I searched for Omar to inform him of my decision. I sat on the steps of his house to wait for him for many hours, defying the looks of the neighbors, which hounded Omar for his transgressions. I went to my grandfather's shops and asked the new workers where he was, but did not find him. I left word at every place that he might appear, feeling lost without him. He was the only person who could save me. I needed someone to end this monotony

and make me calm again, so that I could stand at the door to my room and contemplate the drooping flowers at the end of the spring, and praise a flower for its lazy, late bloom. Omar became more of a wild man with his new friends, merchants who had suddenly risen in the city's *souq* after monopolizing the wheat trade and smuggling it from the state's storehouses to the *souq*, after smuggling household tools and cigarettes, and selling fake influence to mothers distraught over the absence of their sons in jail, seeking any piece of news that would comfort them. They would sell their jewelry and bedrooms for small scraps of paper that would reassure them that their sons were alive. Commerce and partnerships with officers from the Death Battalions and the secret police became common; the price of their loyalty involved letting them loose in the city, with no regard for anything. It became a place ruled by these mafiosos, who coldly fired bullets between the eyes of their enemies. Whole families emigrated, leaving behind their homes or selling them at half the price, fleeing their thuggery and the lack of security. They left in sorrow for their city, where they had enjoyed the blessings of spacious houses and the flirtation of their women at the end of an evening.

The dark picture became darker and the window of hope shrank; the space of the city was abandoned to instinct and hatred. At the beginning of the summer, the sounds of tambourines and people's throats began to be heard, beseeching the Lord. Everyone went on to the roofs of their homes to see the lunar eclipse that gave the city a rare chance to scream and cast out the puss and rotteness that had penetrated people's moments, after the days of curfews and contenting one's self with sitting near heaters and eating sunflower seeds with agitation during the long winter nights. The city prepared to re-perform rituals that had been scattered amid the upheaval of loss that resulted from the huge expansion, the absorption of several hundred thousand migrants from the countryside, searching for a suitable status in an ancient place that had been loved by the famous travelers of history, and whose consuls retained a memory that was not easily forgotten, about the unique and special nature of the place.

Aleppines remembered their last exit into the wilderness and their ascent to the Nusayri mountains, praying for the rain that had been late in coming. A long time had passed without people hearing the sounds of tambourines and voices asking for mercy. They were emboldened by the laxity of the soldiers of the Death Battalions, most of whom had never seen an entire city go forth to entreat the sky, and God. There were tears, and the mothers gave the moment even more emotion, as they tore their clothing. The sounds of their wailing rose amid the beating of tambourines and singing of religious anthems that returned warmth to the throats of people, as they sang their plaintive songs. Throughout the day, Maryam recovered her enthusiasm to go up to the roof, in all her adornment, and hold her tambourine to sing her prayers, amid tears that flowed when the cries of "Allahu akbar" rose and the tambourines had settled into a single, quick rhythm. The moon began its eclipse; its colors changed and blended together, covering the city with a red that was closer to orange, in a magical scene that dispelled my anxiety for a few moments and caused me to believe in the wonder of nature. This tragedy continued until just after midnight, a truce adhered to by both sides, out of respect for the crowds that had been stifled by straying from the city's famous tolerance, its distinguishing mark, thanks to the mixing of peoples, languages and customs. Maryam descended from the roof a changed woman, holding a tambourine that she did not stop beating. I saw her excited face in the shadows of the night. She continued her singing and lamented my grandfather and grandmother, the city, her body, and her

family, with affecting phrases. She summoned them so that they could see the destruction that had befallen us. Zahra tried to stop her and prevent her from entering in a state of complete hysteria, when she began to dance in the courtyard. In a loud voice she began to curse time, for rendering her a neglected woman, calling out to Bakr and describing him as a loved one, so that he would appear, and Salim, so that he would wake from his sleep, and Omar, so that he would scamper like a bird in the courtyard; she missed the sound of his footsteps. I did not approach her because I felt there would have been no use in halting her body, which was unconscious. I could not control my tears and felt that we had been threatened many times with being trampled and scattered under the wheels of the cars of death, which did not stop before reaping their harvest in the city. We had thought about death for a long time and we tried to reduce its grandeur and make fun of it, going so far as to break down the barriers between it and us, as when two people meeting by chance decide to become friends. Or, we would hate it like a deadly enemy who was waiting for us to turn our backs to him, in order to strike a blow. I imagined my body freed of its density, and the dried blood in my veins had lost its warmth. I touched Maryam's trembling hand, surrendering in her bed to a vague destiny, the exhaustion visible on her face; her body trembled, and she went into a deep sleep.

In the morning she could not arise from her bed. Her voice was faint and her eyes sad, defeated, needing us all. She wanted to forget the moments when she became captivately excited, moments that had dishonored her like a woman bidding farewell to her youth with bitterness, regretting that her body and soul had been deprived of pleasure. For three days we sat around her, telling her stories. Zahra and I praised her voice and the flexibility of her body, but this did not please her. She turned her face from us and contemplated the walls for long hours, focusing her gaze on a single point from which she did not stray, as if engaging in a difficult exercise of penetrating the surface of the wall and beholding what lay beyond, a sign to us that she was going to leave despite her gratitude, which we felt from her voice, hoarse, calm, and loving.

Omar arrived in the early morning, tired after a long night. He reeked of strong drink and with an uncustomary recklessness, he had let the remains of women's lipstick blot his shirt. Everything happened quickly; he drank his coffee with us and listened to us distractedly, missing half of what we said due to his inattentiveness. Maryam did not notice his presence, which we thought would shake her out of her despair and loneliness. In a hurry, he encouraged me to go to Beirut, if I could, adding that I was forbidden from leaving the country, and left us a good deal of money. He joked around with Radwan and quickly left us; everything happened quickly, as if we were a plague to be avoided.

It is difficult to need sympathy and not find it. I looked at Maryam, sleeping quietly, reclining on her wide bed like a murder victim, with the decaying face of an old woman. I imagined her in the kingdom of heaven, galloping like a white mare, the white-winged angels fluttering around her like Marwa's butterflies, encased in dust and no longer interesting anyone – she had thrown the boxes into the corner of my room, which had begun to resemble a warehouse, inhabited by vagrants at night. Marwa cried bitterly upon seeing how we had neglected her. She knelt down and used her dress to wipe the dust from the butterflies, calling them various pet names that she still had memorized.

How cruel we can be when we treat the precious things of others with disdain, leaving them to their fate and showing no concern with what they mean to them. I used to think that Marwa had been thrown out of our home for good. Enough time would pass for us to forget her and drive her from our memory, trying to ignore the pain that she had caused us with her disgrace, when she abandoned the traditions of our sect for an officer who had lain in wait for us with his comrades, to kill us and disperse us. I did not take seriously a visit from Maryam, Omar and Zahra; I did not think that she would return to her room to make coffee for her husband, the sound of their laughter rising from the kitchen with Zahra. She entered without asking first, opening the door with her key as Nazir stood behind her, holding her suitcase. He was embarrassed, but the warmth with which we greeted him and Maryam melted the ice. The two of them stretched out on the bed at night, as if they had returned from a short vacation in the mountains. Marwa forgave me and I could not ignore her head being uncovered, her blue dress, which did not completely cover her knees, and the light touch of makeup, which rendered her a stranger to me. I do not know where she hid all of that confidence; her deprivation had ended, revealing a forgiving and intelligent woman who pitied us for living amid scarves that covered us, our souls making us so heavy that we walked fearfully, and slowly, like seals. Her elegant steps in the courtyard and her laughter reminded me of Safa and she began to resemble her a great deal, making me think that they had exchanged their dreams, as if happy to play with each other's destinies.

Nazir left Marwa after receiving news of an attempt on the life of the president of the Republic. He was agitated as he kissed her on the cheek and quickly left us, and on the way to Damascus he was consumed by anxiety. An itch on his neck returned; it had always warned him of danger and had helped save him from certain death during the October War, when his company's position had been bombed minutes after he and his soldiers had abandoned it. Returning to his memory were old images he thought had faded in the crush of questions that returned him to his early days. He remembered the image of his father, Sheikh Abbas, who taught him the forgiveness that cost him so dearly. He left his place to other imams, who issued fatwas of hatred and the need for the sect to close ranks against other sects. They wanted to preserve certain positions in the regime as a guarantee for keeping power in their hands. In whispers, people relayed the secrets of the debates led by Sheikh Abbas in his defense of tolerance as the only way to protect the sect and sustain its shining public image, citing the sayings of leading imams and historical events. Before the other sheikhs he displayed his extensive knowledge of the Quran and the hadiths. His dignified character, popularity, and the influence of his family prevented others from attacking him openly. However, the whispers about him going too far and ignoring the injustice of other sects against his own, when its people lived in the mountains, naked and barefoot, hungry and surrounded by the winter snow, and fear, did not cause him to fall into the trap that was set by one of the sheikhs, in a bid to reduce his influence. He secluded himself in silence in his room overlooking the pine forests and orange orchards, aware that what was about to come was even greater and could not be prevented, if people rallied behind the fatwas of Sheikh Mudarr, which sanctioned the killing of people solely because of their sectarian affiliation. Nazir remembered the images of his father, which came to him hazily, the smile that never left him gave him a strength that calmed his anxiety. He said to himself, "The president was not hurt, in any case; his bodyguard threw himself over the hand grenade and was torn to pieces, and his family will receive a suitable sum and some influence, as a reward for his loyalty." In the evening he arrived at the command building, learning from the faces of the guards who saluted him that all was not well. He calmly ascended the stone steps and sat in the office of the commander's adjutant, listlessly turning



the pages of a calendar for more than an hour as he awaited being called to a meeting whose course he tried several times to map out in his mind. The movement of the guards, the adjutants and the officers in the building bespoke a nervousness and a coming reaction that would be as foolish as the original event. At exactly eight o'clock, four officers whom he knew well entered the room. He saluted them and noticed their coldness toward him. They did not kiss him, as was customary after an absence. The adjutant opened the door of the room and indicated for him to enter. The commander of the Death Battalions was waiting for him calmly, and the marks of exhaustion around his eyes indicated that he had not slept well for the past two nights. The commander was known to be a seeker of pleasure, which rendered it natural to see him in such a state and did not represent a sign of anything exceptional. There were also his irresponsible moods, which surprised those around him because he could commit the stupidest mistakes without worrying about the consequences. He indicated for them to sit and addressed his brief remarks to the highest-ranking among them. He explained the details of the assassination attempt on the president and without dallying, said coldly, "We will attack the desert prison tonight." He then banged on the table with his fist, adding, "Don't let the sun rise on any of them." He distributed a file upon which was written, in Kufic letters, "Operation Sleeping Butterfly," which contained the missions of the four officers, whose hands he warmly shook as he bid them goodbye. The commander then left his office from a side door whose use was restricted to him alone. Nazir felt dizzy after hearing the spur-of-the-moment decision to kill the political prisoners, which would mean attacking them like dogs in a closed arena and enjoying the sight of them dropping like flies. The image that he saw made him nauseous. His stomach churned and his knees became weak; he felt unable to walk. He breathed in the air of Mezzeh and made a definitive decision about what to do, aware that time was not on his side. He had less than an hour before the planes would be on their way to the desert, carrying armed troops going out for what seemed like a wild duck hunt, or an excursion to chase gazelles in the *badiya*. He arrived by car at the airport. The operational commander had preceded him with the other officers, and the troops exited their barracks after hearing the assembly bugle. He approached a colonel to whom he was distantly related on his mother's side, saluted him and asked for a few minutes in private. He informed him that he could not carry out the mission and then reached for his officer's insignia, removed it, and thrust his arms out, as if readying himself for a court martial that could order his execution for disobeying orders. He expressed his willingness to go to any Israeli position and destroy it in a suicide mission. The colonel became angry as he recognized the import of the refusal, especially after his problematic marriage to Marwa, which had been talked about by high-ranking officers who considered it a breach all of the rules, and a demonstration of disloyalty. He did not let him finish the sentence. Nazir gave him the key to his military vehicle and walked to the exit gate, distancing himself from the soldiers who were shouting their loyalty to the commander of the Death Battalions, raising their fists in the air and ascending the ten airplanes, parked on the tarmac in the hazy dawn, which had begun to creep in like an elusive pickpocket, despite all of the traps laid out for him. Nazir turned to see the planes take off in orderly fashion; he did not notice the tears that had clouded his vision of the narrow road before him, between the orchards of Indian figs. For a moment he thought he had misheard the orders, or that he had been exhausted by his heavy thoughts the night before, leaving him unable to comprehend the fantastic imagination required to kill unarmed prisoners in a desert jail from which a prisoner's escape, alive, would be considered a miracle. No imagination could re-tell the story of what happened in the cells, objectively, without being accused of exaggeration. The horrific stories told by a few who made it out made it a splendid place to test a person's

maximum tolerance capacity, or ability to adapt to circumstances, exactly as if it had been a cage filled with hungry tigers that were thrown a tired and hungry human being, unable to even lift his hand to wipe his nose clean.

Nazir found himself in a taxi with three other people who looked fearfully at his camouflage fatigues, unable to comprehend that he was with them alone. He was quiet and sunk in thought and this enforced a silence upon all of the passengers, who were afraid of disturbing him. The old Mercedes headed patiently on its way to Aleppo like a closed coffin. He tried to sink into sleep but the nightmares haunted him and daydreams provoked him. He was about to talk to himself, like a deranged person, when he tried to imagine what was happening at the same moment in which he looked at his watch, estimating that the planes had set down a half hour earlier in the desert, near the gate of the desert prison. As an expert in executing missions, he estimated that his comrades had had considerable time to confirm the readiness of their rifles; their enemies were human sacks, chained in iron, with shackles fixed into the walls. They were certain targets.

The city woke up that hot summer day to stories that were spreading like wildfire, and related again thousands of times. I understood the meaning of Nazir's standing at the door of the home, tired, exhausted and defeated. He asked Marwa to get into the taxi, excusing himself for not allowing Maryam to make him coffee with an embarrassed smile and unintelligible words, muttered with considerable difficulty. He added that he had resigned from the army and that today's events would not be forgotten by the city for a thousand years. Like a fugitive he left with Marwa, who put her hand on his hair and face and whispered, "What is it, darling?" He kissed the palm of her hand and broke out in hot tears, ignoring the astonished taxi driver, who clapped his hands together. He stopped the taxi and got out to leave him alone with Marwa, who was nearly speechless at the sight of him, like a small child. Marwa composed herself and wiped his tears, kissed him on the lips, then ordered the taxi driver to hurry up in time to make it to a person who was on his death bed and awaiting the two of them, so that they could feel his last pulse before his body became cold and he left them forever. Marwa relieved him from the task of explaining and avoiding the sympathetic gaze of the driver with a few words that explained the sight of a man crying over the loss of a dear friend. He was like others, despite the uniform that hinted he was one of those men spread throughout the country who gave orders, forbade things, and used their rifles and guns to liquidate anyone who stood in their path, with no regard for anything, proud of their desire to kill, which made them masturbate at the sight of corpses and fear in people's eyes, joyous at discovering the pleasure that they had never once imagined could be equaled, except by the sacking of cities.

The news spread of how the soldiers coldly descended from their planes, of their entrance into the cells of the desert prison, how they fired at the prisoners, whose brains were splattered on the ceilings, whose corpses piled up in the corridors like rotten oranges randomly tossed into a box inhabited by rats, cast into the forgotten bottom of a ship crossing the seas, bored as it traveling through the moments of its journey. The black flags were raised on the balconies of many homes; silent wails exploded within them. More than eight hundred prisoners were killed within an hour. The bulldozers carried their bodies to a secret place, casting them in a ditch of unknown shape, depth and smell. Those who entered Aleppo and Hama thought that a religious festival of lamentation had begun during the first evening, certain to be followed by a carnival that recalled the rituals of the martyrdom of Hussein, which had inspired artists, orientalists, and strangers passing through Karbala. Hajji

Suad began to cry at me; she embraced me before I went in. I heard her prayer to Husam, in heaven. What she tried not to believe appeared before me like a truth that should be heard clearly. I could not move my tongue and felt the strength of paralysis entering my very nerves. I nodded my head without thinking and fled the room. When I returned to the home I found my mother exhausted from crying, as she sat on the floor of the house. In her hand was a picture of Husam, which she kissed. She rose, ululated and danced like a crazy woman as Maryam, Zahra, Omar and Radwan stood around her, forming a line to prevent her from running into the street, until she fainted and was carried to bed.

Before dawn we set out in Omar's car to the desert prison. Groups of women arriving from every city had preceded us; they came to smell the odor of their children and did not want to believe the story, thinking it a fabrication. The checkpoints and the soldiers' rifles prevented thousands of people who had slept in the open from approaching the prison, which had become totally silent after the corpses had been removed and the walls sprayed down with hoses. It was as if the soldiers had performed a job that was no more than routine, something that they were good at doing over and over again, preserving their isolation, faraway from the silly prying eyes of others. My mother was drowned in silence and we remembered, in the middle of the desert road, that we had not exchanged greetings. We did not grasp each other's hands, like any mother and daughter meeting after a long absence. I put my hand calmly in her open palm. A strange coldness came over me; were it not for the formidable strength of her eyes I would have thought her dead. I could not say a word and when we reached the desert prison, the sight was fantastic, like one of those films made to restore the glory of imagination, where they construct a world that can be felt, or tasted. The scale of the execution "party" was unbelievable. Women dressed in black, holding photographs of their husbands, brothers and sons, knelt on the ground in long lines and appeared to be praying to a god that they had long believed in. Their faces showed the fear of having lost his merciful image; they launched themselves even further into making supplications and asking for their men. They wanted to hear that the story was in fact false, a story that had been told in different ways as if it was a test for the general public, a kind of training in how to tell a story, how to revive the heritage of Arab tales that the caliphs had enjoyed, once upon a time. "We need a Shahrazad," I said to myself, as I saw my mother get out of Omar's car, which had stopped. She penetrated the crowds of women who resembled us and headed for the troop carrier that had closed the road near the faraway prison gate, beating it with her hands and cursing the Death Battalion soldiers who looked at her from within their hiding places in the vehicle, speechless and afraid of the seeing the crowds head toward them.

Hysteria filled the place: vehicles, cars, humiliated men, children whose snot, mixed with sand, were noticed by no one, as they gathered rocks and made them into small headstones, then brought them down by throwing rocks at them, in a game meant to relieve the sharp boredom. There were drinks and sandwich vendors who had discovered an opportunity; they had come forth from the neighboring village and quickly set up their carts. There was the smell of cooked meat, eaten by no one, and hastily prepared salads. It was as if a small city had sprung from the sand. The burning sun did not prevent the women from wailing, their parched mouths and lips cracked from the thirst, as if they were punishing themselves. They had abandoned all the pleasures of the world, wanting to die and join their loved ones. I tried to arrange the stories that the women and men were telling with caution at the beginning. After midday the voice of the storytellers rose, as they failed to mention the

sources of their information. I imagined Husam as a cold corpse, loaded like garbage by the bulldozers, tossed somewhere, perhaps unburied, with the dogs gnawing at him. I became nauseous upon hearing the stories of people had remained alive, carrying their insides and clinging to life, passing the corpses of their brothers piling up in the narrow cells whose ten meters were overflowing with more than eighty prisoners who survived the whips, the tuberculosis and the scabies, to remain alive. No one could say for certain whether the wounded were saved after the departure of the Death Battalion soldiers in their airplanes, as if taking in the cold desert air on a trip so short there was not even enough time for coffee. A long time would pass before the discovery of the details of their entry, and the names of the officers who cold-bloodedly issued the orders. They would be pursued by the curses of the corpses, which caused six soldiers who took part in the killing to go mad, riding horses made of willow branches. They kicked up dust behind them in their far-off villages, fleeing from the imaginary enemies who chased them. They were discharged from the army and returned to their families with medals of honor issued to them by the commander of the Death Battalions, who received all of the soldiers after their return to their barracks. He delivered a speech praising their bravery and gave them a small monetary reward, which they spent on devouring falafel sandwiches before returning to their shabby rooms in the neighborhoods surrounding Damascus.

On the desert road in the night we were silent. My mother was sitting in the back seat next to me and Omar avoided looking at her in the mirror next to him. Maryam sat with her eyes closed and in her hand were prayer beads; we heard only their successive, ordered clicking and her muttered supplications, which we could not make out. The desert road was boring at night and since talking was pointless, we remained silent. I called up the image of bereaved women who had been determined to camp out in front of the prison gate in the open, until receiving the corpses of their men-folk. It was a surreal scene, the kind that could not be repeated. I recalled the images and felt that the car was a closed, moving box, containing the four of us amid the darkness. In the pale light I saw my mother's face, staring at a single point and not deviating from it. I closed my eyes before we reached the gates of Aleppo, once again remembering that we had yet to exchange condolences, as if we did not believe yet that Husam had become a picture to be placed on the walls of our room, which we would look at and bawl, remembering his beautiful eyes, and his fine dress. I recalled his fear the last time I saw him. I was certain that he knew death would be his only path; he would not survive it if victory was delayed, the victory that he realized had become impossible. I wanted to hold my mother and cry in her lap, like any little girl, but the tears froze in my eyes. Hatred took control of my insides; my limbs became cold and I felt as if paralyzed, unconcerned. I entered a dark tunnel and leaving it did not concern me. "I have to keep it together," I told myself, as I saw the lights of the entrance to Aleppo, the statue of the goddess of fertility and beauty that we considered to be blasphemy. I tried to look at it and it seemed beautiful in its implications, the feminine being totally responsible for fertility and beauty. I drove away the idea of drowning under the impact of blasphemous ideas, and my total certainty returned; I imagined Husam in heaven. My ideas grew cold. I calmly stretched my fingers toward my mother's open palm and, calmly, felt her fingers. I felt their coldness and let my fingers press freely into her palm. I needed her support. I held her hand and pressed on it forcefully; it relaxed. I tried again. I cried silently, unnoticed by anyone. Omar's car entered our street after passing Bab al-Hadid, the tanks occupying the four corners of the square. The sound of my crying grew louder and when the car stopped, neither Omar nor Maryam could believe, as they looked toward me, that my mother had died.

It was like an ordinary event. Everything happened quickly, except for that horrible night. Omar asked Radwan to help him carry her body to Marwa's room. They laid her out on the bed and covered her with a wool blanket. A few people began to arrive, among them Hajji Radiya and my uncle Salim, who was neutral about it. He sat next to her head, opened the Quran and read the *Surat al-Baqara* and shorter verses. He distributed sections of the Quran to Maryam, Hajji Radiya and the neighbors, who expressed their sorrow with words that no longer meant anything to me. I was in my room, where Zahra held me. We cried a bit, grew silent, and then went back to our tears in a rhythm whose secret I still do not understand. I heard the voices rise as they completed reciting the Quran, so that her soul would be at peace. In the morning Omar summoned his workers to help him with the arrangements for the burial, which took place quickly, rejecting the idea of waiting for my father and brother to arrive from Beirut. I tried to lift the wool blanket from her face, but could not. I stole a look at her when Marwa arrived, accompanied only by her uncle, Sheikh Abbas, who sat next to Sheikh Daghestani in the courtyard of the home. I only saw him after his return from the cemetery. My mother's death was an ordinary event that did not merit much excitement in a city where more than three hundred such funerals were taking place in a single day, for the victims of the desert prison. Death no longer inspired awe. They buried my mother next to my grandmother, leaving an open space for a grave I assumed to be for Husam. My father objected, after he arrived in the evening and received condolences. He sat next to Omar despite their fight over burying Husam in my father's family plot. Omar accused my father of neglecting his family and having no right to give orders to anyone. How stupid they are, I thought to myself, arguing over an absent corpse. After the condolences, my father left my brother Humam with us and returned to Beirut, cursing Bakr. He held him responsible for the killing of his son and the death of his wife. My brother did not understand what was taking place around him, or why the women were holding him, playing with his hair and confirming that he was now an orphan, having lost his mother. There was something funny about his Lebanese accent. He was ten, a child taken up with involving Bakr's two sons in setting up swings in the branches of the lemon tree, and flying in the air.

Everything in the house became silent and a depressing summer passed. We could no longer sweep up the surprises and the catastrophes that came down upon our heads. It was silly for me to go to my first round of university exams and I looked at the books as if they belonged to another girl, whom I did not know. Zahra and Maryam encouraged me to go, even once, and I thought that leaving the home would relieve me a bit, without it mattering where I was going. After our repeated visits to my mother's grave, I left Maryam, Zahra and my brother Humam, led by Radwan, and went to the Omayyad Mosque. I sat by myself and was overcome by a sense of humility that I had nearly forgotten, as I prayed without counting the number of genuflections. I hoped that Rabi'a al-Adawiya would return to me, to save me from the sea of bitterness and nausea in which I had been submerged for so long. I spent a long time contemplating the engravings of the Omayyad Mosque and smelled the fine rugs. A woman came up to me. She prayed next to me then threw me a piece of paper and quickly left, without looking at my face. I opened the paper. The few words were clearly-written, warning me about going to any home that I knew belonged to women of the group. She asked me to wait for instructions and there were some belated, dry words of condolences as well. I no longer cared about describing Husam as a martyr and tore up the paper. I threw it in the toilet and left the mosque. I lingered in the streets and lifted the scarf covering my face, which I saw reflected in the windows of a shoe store, tired, exhausted, pale, and bereft

of its bloom, its vitality. Everything had wilted. I felt my body under the coat. My breasts were dry sponges that had lost the sensation of being played with by my fingers. I wandered around, then returned to the Armenian restaurant and collapsed on the same chair that Husam had sat down on and tried to smile, unsuccessfully. I ordered food that I did not eat: cheese and sausage sandwiches, and a cup of tea from which I took a couple of sips. To the clientele who observed me, I resembled a woman who was secretly in love and had been dumped. I paid the check and ignored the sympathy of the waiter, who tried to ask me if I was waiting for someone. In the late afternoon I became tired. I sat down in another cafeteria and had a glass of juice, ignoring the rising laughter of young men and women amid the commotion of the tables. I felt unwanted. I did not move and continued to play with the waiters, who were surprised at my generosity, the glasses of juice I ordered without drinking, the tips I left for them. I needed a crowded place. I was surprised how neutral I was toward the young men, infatuated by the coquettish girls. I wanted to stay outside the house and hated its cold walls. I enjoyed the fall breeze in the public garden and wanted to go immediately to my bed. Darkness fell and the streets of Jalloum became desolate, even though it was only eight o'clock. I quickened my pace when I felt someone was following me. I took out my keys and entered the home. The secret police were waiting for me near the door. I saw two men holding Radwan, my brother, Omar, Zahra, and Maryam in my room. A secret policeman grabbed me harshly by my forearm and placed a pair of handcuffs on me. Without saying a word I left with them, my eyes locked on the window in which they were gathered: Omar's face was friendly, pleasant and calm and those around him sought to lift my spirits, encouraging me not to die.

*Translated from the Arabic by Marlin Dick*