

Excerpt from
A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution
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What a strange morning.

I wake up and touch my skin. I am just an idea, a character in a novel. I drink my coffee and believe that I am only thinking about a woman I'll write about one day. I am a novel.

I am living through a more realistic novel than I could ever write. Yesterday evening a few young men and women who went out to demonstrate on al-Hamra Street near my house were arrested. My friends no longer tell me the time and place of the demonstrations because they have lost faith in me and don't believe my promises that I won't participate in them anymore, that I'll be satisfied to watch from afar in order to keep writing. The last women's demonstration made them worry about me. I received quite a few reprimands. The demonstration passed nearby my house and I could hear the ambulance sirens spinning around the place. From afar I could see people pushing and running. The demonstration started in Arnous Square. When I met up with my writer friend who had participated in the demonstration she reported the following details:

"We all assembled in Arnous Square. I thought I wasn't going out into the street because we were all being watched after all. I had been thinking about working in some way other than going out for demonstrations, but I thought it was important for us to go out to demonstrate in the squares and not just inside the mosques. My girlfriend and I went out, we were all over the place, monitoring the presence of security forces. We went and sat on the steps in the square and started singing patriotic anthems. Then young men gathered around us and we all sang for the homeland, for Syria. There were about 150 men and women demonstrators, we videotaped it, we started singing the national anthem, *Guardians of the Realm, Peace be upon You*, unfurling and holding up high the banners upon which we had written, *No to the Siege, No to Violence, We Want a Civil State*. Then we started marching with our banners, singing the national anthem and heading towards al-Salihyyeh. When passed through the middle of al-Salihyyeh, the people in the market stopped on both sides of the street to gawk at us in amazement and fear and some in sympathy. We stayed there for about seventeen minutes singing *Guardians of the Realm Peace be Upon You*. Then the violent attack by the security forces began. They surrounded us. When they attacked we all started running, and people fell down on the ground. My girlfriend fell down too. I helped her up, and a man outside the glass storefront of one of the shops hit her. One of the al-Salihyyeh shopkeepers rushed over and hid her inside his shop. Then a security goon broke into the shop while we were hiding inside. The shopkeeper told him, 'There are women changing inside.' The shopkeeper came and showed us a safe route for us to escape. During the demonstration there was a young woman filming and the security forces attacked her and took away her phone. One of the young girls got arrested. They pulled out all the young demonstrators from inside the shops. Then they parked a bus outside the shop and put the young men inside. The people had all started asking what was happening and the security forces told them, 'Nothing to see here, folks, these people are thieves.'"

“Everyone who got detained is still under arrest. The security forces are everywhere, the regime resorts to turning city employees and government workers into private vandals and security agents, deploying them in the streets and squares in order to inform on the people’s movements and assemblies. They’re being threatened with their daily bread, with being fired from their jobs if they refuse to cooperate with the security forces.”

Now here I am in my house, suspended up on the rooftop opposite al-Hamra Street, living in anxiety and fear, clinging to my daughter out of concern for her because of the threats that I receive over email and on the phone. Despite the fact that I adhere to strict silence, I am scared. I am the daughter of a well-known Alawite family, a family that supports the regime absolutely and that now considers me a traitor and a shame upon them, to the point that some members of the family announced on Facebook that in Jableh I am no longer considered one of them, publicly disowning me. That wasn’t their first public statement. According to their social mores, my leaving home when I was sixteen caused multiple scandals. I had consecrated myself to the promise of a mysterious freedom in life. I never cared what they thought about me. But my nuclear family had always mattered to me. Despite my perpetual disagreement with them, I had always been connected to my mother, father and siblings in an emotional sense, in such a way that made the situation all the more tragic and painful.

The mere mention of those days – my mother’s crying eyes – causes me to break down in hysterical tears. Just thinking about how the regime has turned the Alawites into its own human shield sends me into a bottomless pit of sorrow. Sometimes it seems as though everything that is happening in Syria, everything within its four walls, is happening against me.

In everything that happened I am the big loser. Among my family and my childhood friends, amidst all that is right and true, I am a dead woman, yet still present somehow. My life has irrevocably split in two all at once. I am alone. My life has become the most realistic novel. I’ll write all about it one day if I manage to survive. Then I will be the one secrets about the Makhloufs, the Asads, and all the Alawite families who strayed from their religious path in order to decimate the Alawite sect.

About a week ago I wrote on my Facebook page: *Our grandfather, Aziz Bek Hawwash, was the leader who refused the establishment of the Etat des Alaouites by demanding that France safeguard the unity of Syria. My grandfather on my mother’s side, Uthman, fought in the resistance against the Ottomans, and the people of the mountain and the coast know of his many acts of heroism. My grandfather Ibrahim Salih Yazbek gave all his possessions and land to the peasants. That was before the land reforms of the sixties. That’s right, I’m the granddaughter of those men, the granddaughter of al-Makzun al-Sinjari, of al-Khasibi, of Ikhwan al-Safa and al-Mutanabbi. You all are the grandchildren of truth, you are not the grandchildren of a mistake.*

That comment shook things up even more with my family and with the security forces, who had been deleting most of the comments I wrote. For a second time they announced they disowned me, the heretical traitor. It wasn’t only my family. A number of families in the village announced they disowned me. Once again I started receiving threatening letters and obscene phone calls. The senior security officer summoned me again. In that comment I wanted to mention one more time who the true luminary Alawites were, as I had done when I wrote before about how Imam Ali bin Abu Talib chose truth over power and paid for it with his life.

I was sending a message to the Alawite Baathists and security agents who were handing out leaflets about me in Jableh and the surrounding villages to stir people up to kill me and get rid of me. I was also sending messages through interviews and meetings with

some Alawite clerics, but that was in vain. The situation was only getting worse.

I arrived at the first meeting with the senior officer on the verge of collapse, because the two men who had accompanied me from home in a white car had blindfolded me, which was something that confused me. I hadn't thought of telling anyone. My daughter was still in the village. At that point, I thought my detention was sure to come soon, and that it would last a long time.

I arrived in a strange place, perhaps it was in al-Mezzeh, I could not be sure, but I found myself in a big office with the senior officer. He scowled at me, looking me up and down in disgust, as if he were staring at a squashed bug or a disintegrating corpse. Then he drew closer, grabbed me by the wrist, crushing my hands and burning my skin and suddenly he slapped me in the face, knocking me to the ground. Then he spat on me. *Cunt*, he said. My eyes were shut and I could hear a loud ringing in my ears from the blow. I felt like I was losing my balance, like I was convulsing. I didn't get up. I didn't even try. He shouted at me to get up but I really couldn't, my body was frail. I lost my balance. What a joke, a single slap could make me fall down. He shouted, *Get up!* I didn't move. I threw my head back, closed my eyes and thought to myself, *I'm not getting up, let him do what he wants.* The knife that I carried around in my purse was under my bra, the same small switchblade, and I thought about how if he or anybody else tried to insult me, I wouldn't hesitate to plunge the knife into his heart. Up until that moment I had been thinking I was going to be detained for a long time. I knew their anger at me went beyond every kind of anger. I heard the sound of footsteps, and I felt his hand reach out and pick me up. I didn't exactly feel how he sat me down in the chair, but my head fell, and when I straightened myself out, the spinning in my head stopped. He laughed, "Well well well, what a hero, you went down with just one slap." I opened my eyes. I didn't cry. I wanted to cry, the slap was an insult, but I wouldn't let him see my tears. I stared back at him. After running his finger along my cheek, he said, "Isn't it awful when such an angelic face gets hit."

He slapped me a second time. Then returned to his seat and launched into a long tirade about ties of blood and kinship, about family and about betrayal, the same claptrap I had been hearing for years, about my betrayal and the shame I had brought upon all those around me. When he stopped talking I was staring at his palm and his fingers that I felt had left marks on my cheek, red marks that would turn blue in a day or two.

"What's wrong, cat got your tongue?" he asked. "Your long tongue should be torn out." And he hit me again, the slap was lighter this time. I stood up and pulled out my knife, brandishing it in his face and I told him that if he continued beating me I would plunge this knife into his heart, and that I wouldn't let him or anybody else insult my dignity. He stood up, stupefied, staring at the black knife, and backed away from me a couple of steps. I flicked the switch, the blade swung out of its place and I touched it against the center of my heart, which I could hear beating.

A heavy silence. He was staring in shock. He drew near me again and I backed away a step, saying, "Don't come any closer."

He stopped. He was staring in astonishment and I stared back at him without blinking.

"What do you want?!" I shouted.

"We're worried about you," he said. "You're being duped by Salafi Islamists if you believe what they're saying."

"I don't believe anyone," I said. "I went out into the streets time after time and I didn't see any Salafis. I saw how you kill ordinary people and arrest them and beat them."

"No," he said, "those are Salafis."

"They weren't Salafis," I told him. "You and I both know that."

“If you keep on writing,” he said, “I’ll make you disappear from the face of the earth.”

“Go ahead,” I said.

“Not just you, but your daughter as well.”

In that moment, my heart stopped beating.

Sitting down behind his desk, he said, “Put the knife down, you lunatic. We’re honorable people. We don’t harm our own blood. We’re not like you traitors. You’re a black mark upon all Alawites.”

“I don’t want anything to do with you and other Alawites like you on the outside.”

“All right, what do you have to do then?” I didn’t respond, and he said, “Go on Syrian TV and we’ll agree on what you’re going to say.”

Before he could finish, I shouted, “I won’t do it, not even if you kill with me with your bare hands.” Staring him in the eyes, my sharp tone infuriating him, I said, “Save your breath. I won’t do it. Just leave me alone.”

“*YOU LEAVE US ALONE!*” he bellowed.

I was silent.

“And those articles in *al-Quds al-Arabi*, on Facebook, your activities with the people, the demonstrations?”

“What can I say, I’m inclined towards the truth,” I said.

He let out a resounding laugh and looked at me with pity.

I put my knife away. I knew he wasn’t going to harm me, not this time anyway. Later on, when I started compiling testimonies of male and female prisoners, I would learn that they had spoiled me. His phone rang. He stepped out and didn’t talk in front of me. He came back after a few minutes. I was sad and afraid.

“This is your last warning,” he said. “From now on, you’re aligned with the enemy.”

“I’m not aligned with anyone,” I said. “I’m aligned with the truth.”

He laughed disdainfully and said, “By God, I’d let the people spit on you in the street. I’d let your friends in the opposition spit on you, let you flop around like a fish out of water before even thinking of arresting you. Go on, get out of here.”

Two humongous men came into the room. They were standing there at the ready, dressed in civilian clothes. One of them to the right and the other to the left. The senior officer pointed at me and the two men stood me up. They weren’t violent. They held me like an object that was easy to move. As they lifted me up from the chair by my shoulders, I didn’t resist. I stood up. I found what was happening strange. Were they finally going to arrest me and put an end to this nightmare? Even that would be better than this madness. The officer looked at me scornfully and I looked back at him, trying to judge what was about to happen. I was trying to divine the future from their eyes, from the movement of their bodies and their behavior. He remained impassive, staring at a fixed point in that cavernous room. The two men placed a blindfold over my eyes, or that’s what I assumed because darkness suddenly blanketed my world.

Blindfolded, I smelled a strange odor on the piece of cloth. Then a powerful hand took me, a hand balled in a fist around my elbow, and pulled me. I moved sluggishly, then stopped and shouted, “Where are you taking me?!”

He replied calmly, as if croaking, “Just a short trip, so you’ll write better.”

I was sure they had decided to imprison me, but I wasn’t scared. This was their ultimate recognition of my place in the opposition and it removed me from all the acts of madness which they had been taking pleasure from torturing me with over these last few days. I was pretending to hold myself together. I just wanted to discover that what had been happening for months was only a nightmare and that I was about to wake up from it soon. All

those thoughts shot through me in less than two minutes. I almost fell down on the ground despite the presence of the two men, one on each side, who were holding me up, calmly and elegantly. They must have had orders from him to behave like that, but when I almost fell again and they picked me up I realized we were going down some stairs. One of them had to let me go; apparently it was a narrow staircase. I tried to see out underneath the blindfold but it was on too tight and I started having trouble breathing. I felt like we had descended several flights. I couldn't be sure. I started to get dizzy as putrid stench mixed with strange odors that I had never smelled before. We stopped finally. That searing pain shot up my back. I shuddered, knowing how frail my body was. A hand undid the blindfold from my eyes. I hadn't expected what awaited me to be so dreadful, despite the fact that everything in front of me was dark. Prison, everything I had heard and imagined, everything I had tried to write about – none of that meant anything compared to that moment when my eyes opened: It was a long corridor, I could just barely make out the cells on either side and I almost felt like it wasn't even a real place, just some kind of void in my head that was sick from too much writing. But it was real. A hallway just wide enough for two bodies side by side. Blackness surrounded its edges. A corridor separated from being. I looked behind me but couldn't see anything. In front of me...pitch black. A corridor with no end and no beginning, suspended in the void; I was in the middle of it and the doors were shut. The man standing in front of me opened one of the doors, a sharp creaking that began quickly and ended with slow, sad beats that reminded me of a melody I once heard in a Greek bar. The man took me by the elbow and I saw three people inside. He continued holding my hand as the door opened, and in there I saw them: two or three people. I couldn't tell, but I am pretty sure I saw three bodies hanging in the middle of nowhere, but I couldn't understand how. He moved me even closer. I was dumbfounded. My stomach started to seize up. The three bodies were almost naked. A faint light seeped in; I didn't know it was from a hole in the ceiling but it produced dim lines of visibility that allowed me to see young men who couldn't have been more than twenty years old, or maybe in their early twenties, their tender young bodies clear under all the blood, their hands hanging from metal clamps, and the tips of their toes just barely touching the ground. Blood coursed down their bodies: fresh blood, dried blood, deep wounds carved all over them, like the strokes of an abstract painter. Their faces hung downwards, in a state of unconsciousness, swinging there like sides of beef. I recoiled backwards, but one of the men held me there, as the second pushed me forward in absolute silence. Suddenly one of the young men sluggishly tried to lift his head and I saw his face in those dim rays of light. He didn't have a face: his eyes were completely shut. I couldn't discern any gleam in his eyes. There was a blank space where his nose should be, no lips. His face was like a red board without any defining lines - red interspersed with black that had once been red.

At that point I collapsed onto the floor and the two men picked me up again. For a moment I was swinging in a sticky place, floating, and I hung there for a few minutes until I regained my footing on the ground. I heard one of them say to the others, "Come on man, she couldn't even handle one slap. She'd just die if we gave her the tire!"

Then that smell rushed in: the smell of blood and piss and shit; the smell of rusty metal; a smell like disintegration; a smell like the mouth of a cell, that had to be it.

Suddenly they took me out of that cell and opened another one. The sounds of screaming and torture rang out somewhere, somewhere both far away and nearby. I was trembling. I had never heard such sounds of pain, coming from some place deep inside the earth, burrowing into my heart. The sounds didn't stop until we left the corridor. The second cell opened and there was a young man inside whose spine looked like an anatomist's sketch. He also appeared to be unconscious. His back was split open, as if a map had been carved into it with a knife.

They closed the cell. And that's what it was like, cell after cell, holding me up by my elbows, shoving me inside, then bringing back me out again. Bodies strewn behind stacked bodies - it was Hell. It was like human beings were just pieces of flesh on display, an exhibition of the art of murder and torture that was all for show. Just like that, young men who weren't even thirty reduced to bits of cold flesh in cramped, dank cells. Heads without a face, bodies with new features.

As they were tightening the blindfold over my eyes again, I asked one of the two men, "Are those guys from the demonstrations?"

One of them rudely replied, "They're traitors from the demonstrations."

Annoyed by my question, he grabbed my elbow and squeezed it so hard I felt like he was going to crush it. I didn't know what was going on in their minds but my stomach started growling again. Holding onto me the man pulled me along and though I tripped and fell he didn't wait for me to get up, but continued to pull me after him. My knees were all scraped up on the stairs and then he started becoming even rougher, finally just dragging me along like a sack of potatoes. The pain in my bones was searing as I thought about the young men who had gone out to demonstrate. I shuddered a second time and the quaking was centered deep inside my gut. The stench was in my mouth, the images of the cells coating the darkness in front of my eyes. When we stopped and they took off the blindfold, I saw the officer sitting behind his neat desk and that's when I realized this wasn't a nightmare. He looked at me contemptuously and said, "What do you say? Did you see your traitor friends?"

At this point something rapidly started rising up out of my bowels, as though I was trying to jump out of my skin. In real life, I tell my girlfriends, "A man's touch doesn't make you shed your skin like a snake, not a loving touch." I can say that there are other things that make our skin crawl – unraveling towards death, hurtling toward the abyss. In that moment, instead of soaring, I threw up. I fell down on my knees and they were furious. The officer stood up and looked in astonishment at the fancy furniture that had been soiled but I continued vomiting. My eyes were wet with some kind of liquid, they weren't tears, of that much I am certain, tears fall in droplets and what was coming out of my eyes wasn't like that. I kept having the same thought: Anyone here who goes out to demonstrate in the streets is shot, has to live on the run and in hiding, or else gets imprisoned and tortured like they were.

What kind of courage sprouts so spontaneously, seemingly from nowhere?

My voice was weak but I heard it say: "You're the traitor." I knew he had heard it too, because he bent over and slapped me hard and I fell down onto the floor once and for all. Then things started to fall apart and, before I lost consciousness, I was able to feel that my mouth was open, and warm blood was oozing out onto the ground. In that moment I knew the meaning of the expression, "I swear to God I'll make you spit up blood."

After they hauled me out of there, I went home. I wasn't the person I had been before. I observed myself going into the house, a woman caught somewhere between life and death. I saw her toss a bunch of keys on the table and then light up her cigarette. The woman closed her eyes and put the blindfold back on, as though she were on stage, and those images of the mutilated bodies returned. The laughter of her little girl and her mother's beautiful eyes flicker in front of her, a furtive glance of fleeting hope as she squeezes the blindfold hard enough to blind herself. She feels that deep horrible hole starting to form inside her heart, and as the hole grows, this woman reaches her fingers deep inside, all the way to her neck. The woman becomes a chasm of blisters and pus.

Two days after the incident, one of their websites described me as a traitor and a foreign agent. Then a few days passed and leaflets were thrown in front of the houses in Jableh and the surrounding villages, about my being a foreign agent and a traitor, inciting

people to kill me.

What do they want from me now? I have already fled my house to live in secret. I no longer publish articles. Do they know about my activities with the young men and women? I don't think so. I was really scared for my daughter. I didn't go to my summons, I thought maybe they would forget about it amid everything that was happening, but I got a phone call. It was him, and in a raspy voice he said, "You bastard, even if you go to the ends of the earth, we'll get you."

Trying to buy myself some time in order to catch up with what was happening in real life, I said, "I haven't done anything."

"This is your last warning," he said.

I was about to explode with rage. I had tried to hide. What did he mean? Was it just to frighten me, to scare me into madness?

It is as if I am living in a real-life novel. The characters and events need more depth and the plot needs more breadth if I am going to be able to pull myself together, be strong and take up the strands of my life once more. That's how writing toughens me against the hardships of life. As a novelist I can be more accommodating with myself and with the interlocking strands of my life that are so hard to separate. I am untying a knot the way I would animate a puppet, but the difference is that I am the puppet and the strings and the big, mysterious invisible hand when they came to my house, three or four men, and placed a blindfold over my eyes so we could all go back to the same officer's room. I didn't know whether that was really his office and whether we were actually in the al-Jisr al-Abyad neighborhood in Damascus or in Kafr Sousseh. Distances had become meaningless to me ever since I moved. As the car went round turn after turn and then stopped, I would lose my concentration. The fourth time I went down to the cells, they didn't arrest me and they didn't leave me there. I just wandered around. One day I'll write all about those hellish journeys. I'll try to recall all the details of what happened, how I would come out of the house and they would place the blindfold over my eyes as soon as I sat down in the car and in that moment the world would turn into a black hell. My soul suffered in silence as I was stuffed between two strange bodies, smelling their odors and becoming increasingly panicked. With the blindfold on, I would imagine I was being forced into blindness, as I waited for hands to run all over me. In that pitch-blackness I would take courage in similar situations I had read about as images rolled by in front of my eyes. One time, and here I knew I had lost my wits, I believed blindness could be like a window shutting out the outside world, a secret door through which to enter the gloom, an opportunity to meditate upon the furthest reaches of the soul; blindness became philosophical justice. And that's how I would fight back against the black blindfold covering my eyes. I would pretend I was a character on paper, not made of flesh and blood, or that I was reading about a blindfolded woman forcibly taken to an unknown location, to be insulted and spat upon because she had the gall to write something true that displeased the tyrant. At this point in my fantasy I would feel strong and forget all about how weak my body was, about the vile smells and the impending unknown.