

Sard \ Nightmare Chase

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Unlike butterfly wings that tear apart the moment they're caught, there are memories stuffed so full of gunpowder that they will tear you to pieces if you even think about catching them.

I didn't stop crying from the moment I heard Firas had been killed.¹ I stayed in my room for a week. The moment of assassination followed me like a movie scene stuck on an endless loop.

Firas walks toward the kitchen. A man emerges out of a wall and puts a gun against his head. The man stares into my eyes and slowly pulls the trigger. I try in vain to scream. Then I start to cough, trying to dislodge the rusty nail stuck in my throat.

Memories of our childhood flash before my eyes like a film reel. His ghost reproaches me wherever and whenever I find myself alone. It was a miracle I could stop myself from vomiting that time in the bus. But I couldn't hold back the tears when the other passengers turned and stared. That's when I stopped using public transport. I could no longer deal with my surroundings. I stayed away from the school where I worked.

I tried to stay away from people too. I spent my whole time down by a river. But hardly a day went by without someone coming up behind me and asking the inevitable question, as if all the people I knew in the town agreed to ask it:

“Why are you sitting alone?”

The question irritated me, made me feel like a criminal caught in the act. I became aggressive, extremely aggressive. My relationships with those around me became tense, and finally I went to a psychiatric clinic. I had no other choice.

Although the doctor showed me a great deal of kindness, I couldn't deal with him. I hated the feeling of pity in his eyes when he gave me a tissue to wipe away my tears.

The meeting ended after twenty minutes with a prescription for sedatives that I threw in a letterbox as I left the clinic. As soon as I found a new doctor I replaced them with another. In a year, I changed psychiatrists more times than I'd changed cigarette brands in my whole life.

A pile of useless medication accumulated on the table. The sleeping pills didn't stop the nightmares, though they may have helped me forget them for a while when I woke up. But in the end my memory triumphed over all the shipments of drugs those—mostly kind—men in clean white coats prescribed.

There was no option but to try cognitive behavioral therapy. That's what the family doctor said categorically while handing me a piece of paper with the address of a clinic where she suggested I seek treatment. She promised the costs would be taken care of even though insurance companies didn't cover cases of this kind.

And without any idea of what behavioral therapy was, I went to the appointment.

"Right, let's begin with the end," the therapist said during the first session, handing me a pen and a pile of paper without any of the usual pleasantries I'd become accustomed to at psychiatric clinics.

She was wearing a green embroidered skirt and a cumin-colored shirt. We moved to sit opposite each other at a simple table in a sunny corner. She picked up her pen, indicating that I should do the same. She was starting off on the right foot, I told myself, when she didn't ask me to surrender to a bed, like those men in clean white coats did.

The treatment was based on the idea of recalling nightmares and noting them down with alternative endings. It was like a scriptwriting workshop. I liked the idea

of recycling nightmares. I chased after one, remembering the incident indexed by it, giving it a title, and not letting it out of my grasp until I had an alternative ending for it.

Write to survive . . . keep going on your own. That's what the woman in the embroidered skirt said during our last weekly meeting, as she handed me a summary of all the papers I'd written during our thirty sessions, without setting a date for another meeting.

The nightmares were written down in clear handwriting, the opposite of my own scrawl. Under each nightmare was the event that caused it, and above it the title we had given it together.

It had been a long time since I'd written whole pages by hand.

POINT-BLANK CORPSE

I'm leaning on my crutches and panting after trying to catch the tram, waiting at the stop. But the driver shuts the doors as soon as I arrive. "I'm a cripple," I plead. I try to pry open the door with a crutch. But I find my hands are covered in blood, my fingers covered in cuts. Then a policeman in a French uniform starts shooting. I fall to the ground, right next to a corpse, its eyes gouged out.

On February 29, a few minutes before midnight to be exact, it was very cold and we were sitting in his car. "News bulletins warn of a snowstorm," I said, trying to wrap up a long conversation.²

"Don't believe their bulletins," he warned.

It was still a peaceful revolution, notwithstanding the militias surrounding Yarmouk Camp spreading like fungus in the damp. Total darkness and absolute silence enveloped the empty street. The interior lights above the front seats of his

car lit up our faces. We were clear and easy targets. I was ready to get out of the car, he was ready to get going, and, on the dark pavement opposite us on that narrow street, there were thirteen bullets ready to be fired. Sudden flashes of blinding light: *bang bang bang bang*. It almost sounded like a choir of camera flashes pointed at a celebrity on a red carpet.

My mind couldn't explain the tingling feeling I felt those first moments. I raised my hand to cover my face, but a bullet sliced off a piece of my thumb and fell next to the bits of his brain. I saw blood dripping on white bone in my hand and a body fall toward me, and I saw his face for the last time, details of his childhood face mingling with it. I could hardly make out his eyes before another bullet exploded his face entirely. I felt fragments of bone shattering all over my face, and then blood covering my eyes.

Life became a bit different afterward:

I was nicknamed "the cripple." I couldn't sleep. Some of the bullets refused to leave my body, so metal detectors became another reason, together with my temporary travel documents, why border guards would swarm around me at airports as if I were a statesman or a drug dealer.

MICHELIN

I'm driving my car near my house in Yarmouk Camp, and a French police car is tailing me. Suddenly my friend's kid appears in front of me laughing, and then disappears under the car. I get out panicking, and when I bend over to look under the wheels for him, a red cat pounces and scratches my face.

Three days after the Free Syrian Army took control of Yarmouk, Siham and I decided to enter the camp. I wasn't used to

walking on crutches yet, which is why we borrowed her brother's car. A security official wearing civilian clothing was making cars take a detour onto 30th Street, three streets away from my home, where I used to live. A military vehicle had set up a temporary roadblock for the regime. The cars inched forward slowly in the traffic. A few meters away from the checkpoint we spotted bodies piled on top of each other by the sidewalk. Siham gasped and turned to face the other way. The cars kept inching forward, no one daring to stop and do something about the pile of corpses, the soldiers fanned out in the traffic surveying everyone's behavior. The scene made it feel as if the presence of corpses dumped on a sidewalk was the most normal thing in the world, not even worth a second glance. The cars kept inching beside the corpses the few short meters toward the checkpoint, when suddenly a gun went off next to us and someone shouted:

"Sniper!"

I started screaming while somehow giving orders at the same time: Quick! The sniper's above us. Watch out! Corpses on the right. Left! A bullet whizzed past us and hit the military vehicle. Reverse! Quick! U-turn! The car reversed toward the corpses strewn by the pavement. I felt something jamming the back wheels. It wasn't long before it exploded, and suddenly the car was facing the right direction. Siham put her foot down hard on the gas. The car skidded as if stuck in mud, a second of wheelspin on top of the thing that had exploded, and then we were speeding away. I looked back and could make out the traces of a human head crushed into the ground, the tires stamping bits of the hollow face into the ground wherever we went. We didn't stop until we reached Bab Musalla. I got out of the car and bent down to look at the back wheels. Some scalp with short ginger hair

was stuck to the Latin letters embossing the wheel with its brand name.

“What the hell are you looking at? Thank God we’re still alive,” Siham said loudly.

I got back into the car, realizing that she didn’t understand what had happened. “Is there something wrong with the back wheel?”

“No.”

“Then what were you looking at?”

“The brand.” The answer left my mouth without thinking. My brain was held prisoner to a perverse question. Was what I’d seen a bit of eyebrow or a bit of scalp?

In the evening, a blog announced that five bodies had been found next to a regime checkpoint that had come under attack; among them was a corpse whose head had been disfigured. The blog gave the name of the person and his photograph. The man in the image was smiling, a lock of red hair covering half his forehead.³

THE MISSING LEG

I’m crossing to the opposite bank of the river when, in front of me, I see a leg disappear below the surface of the water. At first, I think it’s my own leg. I look back. I’m kicking the water with both legs. I start to think. I swim quickly toward the fleeing foot, trying to catch up with it. When I get close, my mouth fills with blood.

The barrel bomb chose the smallest house in the village to land on. I used to see this tiny mud-brick house, set at a short distance away from the other houses in the village, whenever I went to get bread from the nearby neighborhood of Adra. I would never have imagined that the green helicopter could have valued it so highly. If it really was a target, then a huff and a puff

could have blown the house down.

People were gathering the scattered body parts in silence. Ever since death became an everyday occurrence, they’d stopped cursing. The barrel bomb or rocket would scatter the body parts, the people would gather them, bury them, clear the place up, and then go back to their lives. That’s how life goes on here.

The barrel bomb turned the house to dust. “That makes it easier,” a friend volunteering with the civil defense told me. A man stood on a mound of rubble shouting at people to gather together the limbs:

“Check before you bury, for God’s sake. Don’t put this bit together with that bit unless you’re sure they both belong to the same guy. It’s *haram*, it’s forbidden. Dead bodies are sacrosanct. Even a finger, it’s forbidden to put one guy’s finger in another guy’s grave.”

Six bodies were arranged next to one another. A man came carrying a hand with only three fingers. His eyes wandered slowly over the bodies before he placed the hand next to one of them. Another man placed a long piece of flesh that looked like a nose next to a corpse with a disfigured face.

The men stopped their search through the dust that was once a house, and then took the bodies away for burial.

“There’s one leg missing, guys. Find it!” the man standing on the hill shouted. Indeed, there was the corpse of a fat man with a missing leg. Blood was still seeping out of the man’s head. It looked as if shrapnel had entered his neck and jaw from the left. “We haven’t left a stone unturned,” one of the guys replied. “I know, but have another look. God knows you’re doing a good deed,” said the man.

In the end, they gave up searching and put the corpses straight into the truck. The severed corpses were wrapped in bits

of cloth like a shroud. “Lord Almighty,” the four men panted as they hoisted the obese man onto the truck. “God have mercy on them,” another said. “But the deceased who was hit in the neck doesn’t seem to have a drop of blood on his trousers. How did he lose his leg?”

I could see for myself: the guy was right. They looked at each other, and then the short guy started to feel around the deceased man’s trouser leg. The man originally had only one leg.

A hundred meters away, there was an electricity pylon with a prosthetic leg tangled up in the wires.

FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS

Human pus sticks to my body like rotting flesh. I turn on the tap to get the smell off. The temperature rises until I feel as if my skin is disintegrating. I try to leave but the bathroom door is shut. I feel like I’m suffocating, when I see two rats between my legs that have stopped trying to devour each other and are looking at me at the same time.

The monotony of daily life came to an end for the displaced families that supported the revolution from southern Damascus when regime-supporting families arrived at the shelter from Adra, fleeing after Jaysh al-Islam seized control of the suburb. They turned a few unfinished buildings in a remote orchard on the outskirts of Damascus into something that resembled a small city. Cars came and went every day. A few friends set up a school for children. A man took over a small, empty space between two trees to open a little grocery store. When the last families arrived, those displaced from southern Damascus became more careful about using the word *revolution*, while those displaced from the regime-supporting side of

Adra would slip the word *conspiracy* into every conversation regardless of subject. Despite that, the women would prepare food together, while the men would discuss collaborating on work. But things changed when some of the displaced from the regime-supporting side of Adra appeared wearing military uniforms and carrying weapons, asking the rest of the men to volunteer with them. The shelter was soon transformed into a forward base for the National Defence Army, and the displaced started to mix less and become more suspicious.

The men who took up arms would launch attacks on neighboring orchards, returning from battle with a chicken or some food, and these spoils were often the cause of all the rumors of suspicious bartering between armed men and widows. Only the children kept on playing together.

One evening, a very hot evening to be precise, a few meters from the school gates, some of the armed men from the National Defence militia were gathered around a sixty-year-old man who was taking his last breaths while they shouted, “Wahhabi! Wahhabi!” relentlessly kicking and beating him with the butts of their rifles. Earth and dried blood covered the skinny man’s mouth as he was thrown on the ground without putting up any resistance. Suddenly one of the armed men started to scream and stutter incoherently, working himself up into a rage: “Our children, you bastard, our country, you want to steal our children, you son of a bitch!” Then he picked up a rock, balanced it on his stomach, and dropped it on the man’s face, shattering his jaw and teeth. The hysterical shouting grew louder.

They’re feigning anger, they’re not really angry, I told myself. I actually knew some of those men. We’d sat and sipped tea together more than once. Where had

this brutality come from all of a sudden? It was as if they were imitating a torture scene from one of those YouTube clips that had gone viral.

“How do you know he’s Saudi?” one of the displaced from southern Damascus asked. The man was met with a threatening glare. He clocked it. “Who told you that son of a bitch is Saudi?” He was pressing his son’s face against his stomach so that he couldn’t see the dead body. “Why are you scared your son will see? Do you want him to turn into a sissy like you?” said one of the armed men. Then he called over a group of children and told them to stamp on the man whose life had just been taken. One of the children hesitated, then tried to back away from the corpse, but a woman who seemed to be his mother shoved him forward.

The people there were split into two factions, and it looked as if war were about to break out. A man grabbed his son’s hand and shouted at his other son to leave immediately, in a defiant challenge to the armed men. Our eyes met for a moment as he passed by me to leave, and I felt ashamed of my silence.

People were staring daggers at each other. The armed men gripped their rifles while the other group’s eyes wandered in search of anything that might be used as a weapon. A momentary heavy silence, broken when an old crippled woman in the distance called for her daughter to come prepare the flour for her. “I’m coming!” the girl replied and then left. A few others took the opportunity to leave.

“Leave that dog on the ground in front of those cowards. Don’t even think about moving him,” said one of the armed men, who seemed to be enjoying his power over those who’d stayed. The crowd dispersed and the blame began, each side denouncing the other. I picked up my crutches to leave; I had no desire to stay there, but something drew me toward the body.

From the man’s features and his clothes, he seemed to be a poor farmer. He was wearing an old military coat made of “Korean felt,” which was common for Syrians to wear during the siege thirty years ago. It hadn’t been produced since then, and only the very poor still wore it, rain or shine. Not all the poor, only those forced into acquiring the skill of preserving clothes for thirty years. Was that why they thought he was a fighter? Despite being covered in bruises and wounds from the beating, the deepest mark that had been left on him was by the sun on his skin, so clearly carving out his features. He was a peasant, or a shepherd, I told myself, or perhaps a security guard who worked on a farm. I left.

But the corpse remained for two days before it was thrown into a nearby dumpster. Soon, men were assigned the task of taking out the trash, after a rat attacked a child passing by. “We can’t bear it any longer,” one of my friends volunteering at the school told me over the phone. “Tomorrow we’re sending a delegation to the military officer in charge of the area to ask him to intervene and bury the corpse. Come with us.”

After the meeting with the officer, we went to bury the body. It wasn’t hard to convince him. The temperature had hit 35 degrees Celsius, and they couldn’t bear the smell either, it seemed.

They stipulated that he be buried in that same place near the dumpsters. The sound of the flies was terrifying. A herd of rats fled the body as soon as we arrived. One bloated rat was thrashing violently near the body; it couldn’t escape. “It’s dying,” said one of the men.

One look at the decomposing corpse was all I could manage. I leaned on the man in front of me. The earth was spinning. My stomach was churning. Something was spinning upward inside my stomach. I used all of my strength. Something was about to explode. I tried

to close my mouth with my hand, but a cascade of vomit burst out toward the corpse. I pressed down on my stomach with both my hands. My guts were exploding. The man in front of me, whom I'd been leaning on, started to vomit too, then another, and another.

It was a collective vomiting party over a corpse. The men dug a hole deep enough to hide the decomposing body. The rat bites around his neck looked fresh. His right hand was stripped of flesh. It was impossible to pick up the body. They tried rolling it, but the stick they used to push the body sank into the flesh. In the end, a man used a shovel, and the burial began.

The rat was still thrashing around, so I kicked it toward the hole in the ground.

Burying the man and the rat in a single grave.

CORPSE TRUCK

I feel like I'm suffocating. I try with difficulty to ascend in the elevator. A few people try to exit through a narrow window. I start sweating heavily. I won't be saved. My body is wider than the window. I will die. Suddenly I'm on the other side of the window in open ground. Khaled is eating something while weeping. Beside him is the body of a small child, his ear cut off and thrown next to him on the ground.

Mike Tyson's features at Muhammad Ali's funeral reminded me of that famous match where he bit his opponent's ear. That boxing match took place twenty years ago, when satellite dishes were still a novelty in Damascus.

The night of the match, I was walking with Khaled Shibli in the orchards opposite our house in Yarmouk Camp. It was past midnight. We were surprised by the policemen gathered around the corpse of a child who had been hanged from a branch of one of the olive trees after he'd been raped. I didn't cry at the time, but

Khaled couldn't bear the scene, and he wept.

Ten years after the incident, Khaled slit his wrists in a suicide attempt after municipality workers demolished the annex he'd built because he didn't have enough money to pay the bribe the head of the municipality demanded.

The emergency medics at the Palestine Hospital managed to save his life in time for him to witness starvation during the siege of Yarmouk. He didn't die then, but he was among the dead refugees found in that truck abandoned on the side of the road in Austria.

CHARLES DE GAULLE AIRPORT

An angry man is coming toward me with a knife. I jump up from my seat to run out of the cinema. But I fall down immediately. Everyone around me starts laughing. I crawl out of the cinema, my legs amputated. The marble floor is smeared with blood, and a woman there can't stop laughing.

I never needed my skillful ability to hide my tears under words as much as I did that day. Thirty hours had passed since I kissed my father's hands for the last time before leaving Damascus. I needed a little bit of calm to check whether my heart was weeping, the heart that had been separated from my body ever since I made the decision to leave. I was drinking coffee on the Corniche in Beirut when I got the embassy's response that General Security had refused to extend my twenty-four-hour Lebanese visa, which was only granted to me in the first place after the intervention of the French Consulate. There's a positive side to the relationship between border guards and refugees, I told myself, smiling; they turn you into someone important without even realizing it.

I arrived at the Beirut airport five

hours before the flight to make sure I got the exit stamps before midnight. A wheelchair transported me from the entrance to the check-in desk. Apart from the time Firas transported me through Yarmouk Camp on a vegetable cart, this was the first time in my life I'd been rolled along while sitting down. We passed by the scales for weighing luggage. A woman with a Syrian accent was lifting large suitcases that were then taken away by the leathery conveyor belts toward an airplane heading to Berlin. At the adjacent gate, there were UN soldiers in elegant blue uniforms, who'd been captured and then released by Nusra Front in the Golan, preparing to board their flight to Fiji. Where exactly is Fiji?

In fact, I wasn't really concerned by those soldiers as much as I was by the contents of the refugees' enormous suitcases. Was there some sort of relationship between the size of the luggage and the residency type its owner is entitled to? Let me rephrase the question: Is a refugee, who left behind a house destroyed, who left behind the corpses of relatives strewn on the roadside for lack of time to bury them, who made a journey from continent to continent walking barefoot, or maybe swimming between the sharks—is this refugee equal to another who had the time to draw the curtains, to lock the door calmly, to bid farewell to the neighbors, even to remember to buy five kilograms of the green Al-Arjawi zaatar that his children love? Sometimes a suitcase is a clue to a person's relationship to the country he's fleeing, I said to myself.

I was entertaining myself with these questions so as not to think about what to do about my heart that had been separated from me ever since I made the decision to leave. Does one remain a human being, a person, after being separated from one's heart? Another question for those of us who flee.

At 9 a.m. the plane landed in Charles de Gaulle Airport. Another person was pushing me on a more stylish wheelchair. I looked around for the heart that had been separated from me but couldn't find it. I was trembling with fear. With a lost child's desire for safety, I took out my phone to check if I had a signal. I called a friend who was anxiously waiting for me to arrive, and who knew my arrival time. I woke her up:

"I'll meet you at Châtelet. I'm tired and I don't want to go all the way to the airport. Don't worry, it's easy to get there from the airport on the RER B."

"Châtelet?! Ayr O Ayr Beh?!"⁴

I called another friend, who told me he was tired, but that of course we could meet up tomorrow.

"Where are you staying?" he asked me.

"I've decided not to stay in Paris," I told him.

"That's for the best. Where should we meet up tomorrow?" he asked, ending the conversation.

"At the train station. Do you know where it is?"

"Yes, I know where it is," he answered ironically, with a laugh he tried hard not to show but which still cut deep.

He'd been living in Paris for years, and of course he knew where the train station was. But I felt so fragile that even if I'd suggested meeting at the Eiffel Tower I would have asked if he knew where it was. Still, I felt stupid. I cringed and hid my face out of embarrassment. A burning desire for some creature to hug me exploded inside me. I clutched my crutches and bag tight, and I curled myself up in an attempt to resist the overwhelming desire to cry. I need my mother. The heart that had separated from me screamed at me to return.

Immersed in my own world, I hadn't noticed the person pushing my wheelchair had completed all the entry procedures. I registered his impatience only when I saw his foaming mouth, speaking in a foreign language I couldn't understand. I shook my head to indicate that I couldn't understand what he wanted. I tried talking to him in English, but his face went even redder, and at last he pushed the chair angrily, tipping it forward slightly like a truck driver trying to dump his load. I realized that he wanted me to get out of the wheelchair immediately, and while I was still curled up in the same position with my crutches and my bag, I tried to stand up, forgetting that I couldn't. As soon as my feet touched the ground, I felt knives being sunk into my knees. I staggered forward slightly, then fell flat on my face.

Fragments of my laptop were scattered around me. He stretched out his hand to help me, but I pushed it away petulantly. People were looking at me. Tears amassed, a flood then an explosion.