I

It wasn't because they might be diseased, though many of them likely were. No, it was because they lived under the siege, just like you. The cats were as innocent and as thirsty, as emaciated and starving as you.

'It would be like eating your neighbour,' you said.

A cat has seven souls in Arabic. In English cats have nine lives. You probably have both nine lives and seven souls, because otherwise I don't know how you've made it this far.

What determines whether you survive or not? Chance. But chance doesn't inspire hope. Instead, you say there are strategies, two strategies to be precise. The first piece of advice came from a friend in the Syrian army, who said that imagined freedom is a kind of freedom.

'When they wake us up in the middle of the night and pour ice water over our naked backs, convince yourself that you are choosing this, that it's your own choice.'

The second piece of advice, and you can't remember who gave you this, is to never look back and never feel regret. Not even about the things you do regret.

When you tell me about your childhood, I think about the Russian-American author Masha Gessen's words. 'Do not be taken in by small signs of normality,' she writes, on how to survive in totalitarian times. Your childhood was bathed in light and sunshine, in safety and love. All the small signs of normality.

1

IT WAS HIS older sister's idea to fetch a kitchen knife to save the sparrow. The little bird sat stock still, chirping urgently, in the glue their parents had smeared across a couple of flattened cardboard boxes on the roof terrace. The glue was meant to catch mice but the sparrow had got stuck instead. Down below, the streets and square courtyards of Homs shimmered in the heat. The air was thick with exhaust fumes and the sweet fragrance of jasmine, which climbed over stone walls and iron gates, but the occasional refreshing breeze reached seven-year-old Sami and his nine-year-old sister.

They leaned over the bird. Hiba gently cut away the glue from under its claws as though she were a top surgeon from Damascus and not a schoolgirl with a short attention span. But they soon realized there was glue in the bird's feathers and it wouldn't be able to fly. Sami carried it in cupped hands down the stairs to the bathroom, careful not to trip – take it slow, his sister told him – and they rinsed and washed the sparrow in the sink, making sure the water was neither too hot nor too cold, the jet neither too powerful

nor too gentle. The light brown ball of fluff rested in his hands while Hiba softly dabbed the trembling body with the green towel.

'What are you doing?' their mum asked from the kitchen.

Their parents, Samira and Nabil, would sit in there on the weekends, discussing matters relating to the children and the house, listening to Fairuz' soft songs on the radio. Sami heard the clinking of their cups, black coffee in which cardamom pods rose and sank, and the sound of his father clearing his throat as he wiped crumbs out of his moustache, the part of his appearance he was proudest of.

'Saving a bird,' Sami replied.

'No more animals,' Nabil said.

'No, we're going to release it now,' Hiba promised, in the same tone she used to tell her teacher she hadn't glanced at her classmate's answers on the test.

They reached the top of the stairs and opened the terrace door. The sun loomed high above their heads like a mirage, impossible to look straight at. Hiba took the sparrow and held her hands up. Fly, little bird, fly! But the bird sat still, curled up and without emitting so much as a peep.

'It's because its wings aren't dry yet,' his sister said.

So they sat down on the sun-warmed roof, under a sky as blue as the pools in Latakia, to wait for the last of the moisture to evaporate. The kitchen knife glinted. Hiba held up the newly sharpened edge and the light that bounced off it blinded the two chickens and drove them clucking back into their coop.

The heat made Sami drowsy and happy at the same time. It reminded him of a similar day the week before,

which, in spite of its simplicity and unpredictability – or maybe because of the randomness of the moment – made him feel warm inside. Sami had lost his balance on a bicycle. Perhaps there had been a small rock in his path. Whatever the reason, he had taken a tumble. For a split second, he had been weightless, alone and insignificant, like a cloud of dust swirling through the white morning light. Nothing could stop him. No one knew where he was. No one except for Hiba, who ran inside and told on him, saying he had borrowed the bike, even though he wasn't allowed, and ridden it out on the main road, even though there were cars there. Then the moment had ended and everything returned to normal. But for an instant, he was sure of it, he had experienced absolute freedom.

The guilt he felt at taking the bike without asking made him keep quiet about his little finger. It hurt more than anything he had ever felt before, and stuck straight out like a bent feather on an injured bird. He tried to hold back his tears but Grandma Fatima noticed. She noticed the scrape on his right knee, where blood was beading, and him trying to hide his hand behind his back.

'Let me see,' Fatima said, and closed her wrinkled hand around his little finger.

She recited an elaborate chant, a monotonous half-singing that breathed tenderness and solemnity. Words that ran like a red thread through his childhood.

'There,' his grandma said and opened her hand. 'It will be fine tomorrow.'

He went to bed and tried to think of the pain as a cloud hovering above him. The cloud was still there in the

morning, now edged with rain. His sheets were wet too. When Samira found out, her face changed colour and she scolded both her son and her mother.

'Why didn't you go to the doctor? Your finger's broken.'

His chest burned again. Because he had fallen on the bike, because he had wet his bed, because he had believed in his grandmother's stupid chants. If her words of wisdom couldn't be trusted, what was safe and unchanging? Nothing seemed to last for ever. Soon even their sparrow would leave them.

Their sparrow. That was how Sami thought of it, even though it had only been in their possession for a short while. For an hour or two, their rescue operation had been so exhilarating they'd lost track of time. He felt a bond with the bird, as though a connection had been created simply by watching its dark pinhead eyes. By touching its downy feather coat. Feeling its light weight in his hand. He felt responsibility and love for it; no, he didn't think those words were too big. He would miss it when it spread its wings and disappeared across the sky.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of inane whistling and he felt a shudder run down his spine, despite the heat. When he looked over the roof ridge, he saw the neighbour's daughter ambling about their courtyard.

'Don't worry, I'll protect you, little sparrow,' Sami whispered.

The girl always popped up when you least expected it. Behind the bins or in a doorway, or she would drop out of a tree. She wore glasses and had two stiff plaits and was a head taller than him. Why did she pick on him? Possibly

because he offered no resistance. There was a methodical stubbornness about the blows. He lay on the ground and tried to curl up and protect his face. It was widely known the girl's mother was a secret drinker and that her daughter probably took as many beatings as she handed out. But in that moment, he felt no compassion. Such injustice, that someone could lay into a body so small and insignificant without God, fate, a passing neighbour or the world at large intervening.

Hiba distractedly twirled the knife on the cardboard. Sami grew more sleepy. He couldn't put it into words, not then. It was a dizzying feeling, amplified by the bright light, like the feeling of being thrown off the bike. The thought solidified later in life: perhaps there was no fate to control him, perhaps he was completely and utterly free. When you took a step in any direction, you immediately faced a choice and then another one. Time forced you to move. Every second was a new start in which you had to act.

But that was a dangerous thought that went against everything he had been taught. You were supposed to trust in fate and the higher powers. God, first and foremost, then the leader of their country. Or was it the other way around? Hafez al-Assad first and God second.

Sami and his sister were sitting on the roof terrace with the knife and the bird, almost dry now, between them. The sparrow's heart was beating rapidly in its chest. Afterwards, you might regret it and ask what might have happened if you had done this or that, if you hadn't cycled on the main road, if you had put up a fight the very first time you met the girl next door, if you had listened a little bit less to what

other people thought and said, like your older sister, for instance. But by then, it was too late.

'You have to throw it,' Hiba said, interrupting Sami's contemplation.

'What do you mean, throw?'

She showed him how he should lift his cupped hands up and out, to give the bird momentum and make it understand it had to unfurl its wings.

'That's how they learn to fly, their mums push them out of the nest,' his sister said.

'But our bird already knows how to fly.'

'Exactly, it just needs to be reminded.'

They each kissed the bird's beak and stroked its back. In that moment, he regretted not giving it a name. If it had had a name, it would stay with them, a name would anchor his love for it. Instead he whispered, *teer ya tair*: fly, bird.

He raised his hands and hurled the sparrow into the air and, for a moment, it looked like it was flying in a wide arc out across the rooftops and courtyards of Homs, through the shimmering blue sky, before it plummeted towards the asphalt three floors down, broke its neck and died.

2

HE IMAGINED A quilt and that it was his country. Sami's mother used to collect patches of fabric, from ragged jeans to old curtains and torn tablecloths, and sew them together on her shiny black Singer. Their country looked like one of her quilts, made out of fourteen pieces. Some edges were as straight as if cut out with a pair of scissors. Homs' governorate was the largest part, occupying the middle – most of it was camel-wool, the colour of sand, and showed Palmyra, whose Roman ruins attracted pilgrims and tourists. At the other end of the cloth, a blue thread seemed to wander, surrounded by orchards and cotton farms. The stitches became more sprawling in that part, more broken and colourful. A silk blue patch of water, a cross-stitch of roads and hills.

In that corner was Sami's hometown, Homs, which gave its name to the province. Looking more closely at the blue thread – the Orontes river – it divided the city in two. To the east was the centre and the most important neighbourhoods, and to the west, the new and modern al-Waer suburb.

Yes, both the country and the city resembled the quilt Samira held in her hands: an incongruous collection of pieces, which she patiently sewed together with equal parts frustration and love.

Homs was the country's third-biggest city and home to about a million inhabitants, situated on the river banks near the Crusader castle Krak de Chevaliers. There was the old clocktower, the Saint Mary Church of the Holy Girdle and the Khalid ibn al-Walid Mosque, but the city didn't attract as many tourists as the capital Damascus or the commercial centre Aleppo. Homs was primarily a city for the people who already lived in it, an unassuming place. No one was particularly rich and no one was particularly poor; everyone ate the same kind of food, as the saying went.

Sami's home was in al-Hamidiyah, in the Old Town, the most condensed part of the city. Several of the houses had shops and cafés at street level while the owners lived upstairs. Sami could recognize his home streets from the smell: fresh coffee, roasted almonds and diesel steam. Their house, like the neighbouring houses, was striped, built with dark and bright stone. When Sami was born his father had had a small shop to make ends meet but it had been closed down long ago and made into a garage. They reached the apartment from an outside staircase. It had two levels, three if you counted the roof terrace.

The house had originally been built with a square courtyard, which an orange tree brightened during the day and a starry sky illuminated at night. But as the family grew,

floors had been added and the courtyard built over. Now the pride of the house was the children it contained, not to mention all the animals. Sami and his mother would place bowls of leftovers on the stone steps for the neighbourhood cats. From time to time, a cat or two would move in, and they were usually allowed to stay so long as they didn't get pregnant or pee on the Persian rug. Two hens lived in a mesh-encircled coop on the roof terrace, alongside a turtle on a water-filled silver tray.

The white duck, however, that had been Sami's special pet, had vanished without a trace. His parents had told him it was sick and they had taken it to the vet. That night, they had meat for dinner. When his mum leaned across the table and asked if he liked it – pulling a face as though trying to stifle a giggle, and then she coughed and Nabil handed her a glass of water – his sister said they were eating his duck. Sami didn't want to believe it. Besides, only half of what his sister said normally turned out to be true. But they wouldn't tell him where the white duck had gone. The meat on his plate was light and tender and had tasted juicy up until that point, but afterwards he wasn't really hungry any more.

After dinner, Sami went to the biscuit jar and comfort-ate some of the sweet pistachio rolls in it. He was not allowed to do so and to emphasize the point his mother had placed a note at the top of the jar that read *God sees you*. Samira was the only one in the family who turned to Mecca five times a day and fasted during Ramadan. Sometimes the others joined her so as not to make her sad. She was the heart of the family, tall, imposing, with a thick

braid that swung far down her back when they were at home. Like many women of her generation, she didn't work, aside from the work required to bring up three children, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Sometimes, however, Samira made tablecloths that she sold in the market. She had started sewing at the same time she started wearing a hijab. It was a few years before, not because she had to, but because people around her were. Samira wore it on special occasions and with her fringe visible, more in the style of early Hollywood starlets. She made her first headscarf out of one of her mother's polka-dotted 1950s dresses. When she had the sewing machine out anyway, she also took the time to make things for Sami and his siblings. A skirt for Hiba, a pair of sweatpants for their big brother Ali, a jumper for him.

The jumper was yellow and black with two penguins on the front. Sami wore it every day, until he went to a classmate's birthday party and someone called him an egg yolk. That made the jumper lose some of its charm, but the penguins still captivated him. His dream was to one day travel to a permanently cold place with snow and ice – his older brother talked about exotic places like Svalbard and Antarctica. He imagined the cold did something to the people there, that it created a silent mutual understanding. They dressed in thick jackets and blew smoke rings and had a common enemy, namely the biting winds. He figured there would exist a deep bond between humans and animals there. So long as you respected each other's habits and didn't act unpredictably, you could live side by side. Penguins would waddle about, polar bears would hunt seals,

seals would dive into their holes in the ice in search of fish. And he for his part would live in an igloo, staring himself blind at the white landscape.

'Hey, egg yolk, what are you staring at?'

The girl next door pulled his jumper. She pulled so hard the sleeve ripped. Samira offered to fix it but Sami said there was no point. The fabric had faded after many years of use anyway. By this time his mother was wearing a headscarf every day, careful to push in any stray wisps of chestnut hair. Like Sami with his yellow jumper, she never explained why she stopped wearing it the way she had before. She only said it felt more comfortable.

His mother seemed to feel guilty about the white duck and gave Sami a calligraphy set. The sharpened edge of the wooden pen was dipped in black ink and scratched across the paper. He slowly moved from right to left, letter by letter. His siblings each received a sign with their name on to put on the door of their room.

First, he wrote his brother's name, Ali, who was the oldest and tallest of the three. Sami looked up to him. When he walked, his tanned arms were in constant motion, as though he were restless or on his way somewhere important. Ali didn't like being told what to do. He was sociable, well-liked and always surrounded by friends, who didn't even seem to notice he had a stutter. He did well in school but it was not his first priority. That was why he got into so many arguments with their father. Nabil believed people should apply themselves and work hard, and, for some mysterious reason, that precluded spending a lot of time with friends.

Sami wrote Hiba's name in smaller script on his own sign because they shared a room. They played and fought almost all the time. He didn't think of her as different but was aware something separated them. He could tell from the way their father gave Hiba, but not his sons, little presents, like jewellery and sweets. When Sami pointed that out, Nabil asked if he was a girl. It was the same thing when Hiba was allowed an extra hour of computer games.

'Are you a girl? No, well, there you go then.'

The computer had been a compromise in the family. Their father had also agreed to have a TV, so long as they put the remote in a plastic case to protect it from dust. For Nabil, the radio would have been enough. He listened with his chair turned to face the set, claiming he could hear better when he saw where the sound was coming from. Their father worked at the train station and had little time for new-fangled things. The railroad was a remnant of another era. Most people drove between cities; tourists and the odd commuter were the only ones who chose the train. Sometimes Sami went with his father to work. A white-haired man with a watch chain in his waistcoat would cycle up to the rails and turn the tracks when a train was approaching. Automated switches and the internet, what were those things? Nothing but a fad.

In the end, their father let them talk him into buying a computer. He had grown up in less affluent circumstances and wanted his children to have what he hadn't. Samira sided with the children and was used to having her way. Her strong will had come in useful when she and Nabil had first met and fallen in love. Her family were better off

and considered more cultured, and required a good deal of convincing before they approved the marriage.

Not long after the wedding – perhaps not long enough – Ali was born. A couple of years later, Hiba arrived. His parents had grown blasé with two children before Sami, their relatives would say, and that was why there were no baby pictures of him. In his first photograph, he was six and dressed in the black-and-yellow penguin jumper.

'That's because our parents found you in the street,' Hiba said at the dinner table once.

Sami ran into his room and pulled his quilt cover over his head, pretending he was hiding underneath all the rivers and deserts and hills his country contained. He knew Hiba was lying but he couldn't be completely sure. Maybe something about him was different, maybe he didn't belong? A corner of the cover was lifted and Hiba's cat-like eyes squinted down at him.

'I was just kidding, you're my brother.' She pointed to three white dots next to the thumb on his left hand. 'Look, this is where I bit you when you were little.'

Sami followed his sister back into the kitchen so as not to miss dessert. When they gathered around the table, their father said they needed him to write one more sign. Samira stroked Nabil's back, and he returned her smile and gently put a hand on her belly.

'Is it true?' Hiba gasped. 'Are we getting a little brother?'

Sami muttered silently, looked down and scratched his spoon against the plate.

3

A COOL BREEZE wafted around his ankles when Sami put his feet down on the floor. He checked that the envelope was in the outer pocket of his new backpack, a gift from when he turned twelve last month, and felt a thrill of anticipation in the pit of his stomach. He even beat Hiba into the shower and didn't have to worry about the hot water.

No one seemed to notice that Sami wasn't touching his breakfast. Samira was busy pitting black olives, asking Hiba about her chemistry homework and reminding Ali to pick up the chocolate cake on his way home from school. It was 1999 and that evening they were celebrating Malik's first birthday. Malik, who was at that moment smearing hummus all over the kitchen table while screaming for attention, his cheeks a deep red. Sami felt he resembled a pet more than a new sibling.

Sami crept into the hallway and noticed that his grandpa Faris was already standing in front of the oval gold-framed mirror next to the mahogany chest of drawers. Half of him was in shadow; a ray of sunlight across his face lit up one

cheek, his strong nose, a thick moustache that hid his top lip and his wavy raven hair, similar to Nabil's, which made him look like one of the Roman statues at the national museum. He spent at least fifteen minutes in front of the mirror every morning in the quest for a perfect side-parting.

'Would you like a couple of drops?'

Sami's friends used hair gel but he preferred hair oil. It was fragrance-free and smooth to the touch and had an aura of elegance, which probably sprang more from Grandpa Faris than the oil itself. He was wearing pressed suit trousers, a snow-white shirt and patent leather shoes. His cane was made of walnut and specially ordered from Aleppo. Walking with Grandpa Faris was like being out with a celebrity. He said hello to his neighbours, asked about sick relatives, girlfriends and newborn babies, smiled at clever anecdotes, dispensed advice to people who found themselves in a pickle and listened whenever anyone needed to vent.

'You should run for parliament,' people would tell him.

Grandpa Faris would laugh and raise his hand in self-deprecation, which inevitably made his admirer insist.

'You should. I would vote for you!'

Grandpa Faris would resist making any sarcastic response about the so-called voting procedure, the kind of comment he sometimes made when they were alone, just the two of them.

'When you're older, you'll see how it's done. They give you a ballot with two boxes, yes or no, to the sitting president Hafez al-Assad. Because our leader is a generous man who listens to the will of the people, they are given a completely free choice . . . yes or no . . .'

Sometimes Sami accompanied Grandpa Faris in the evenings, at the hour when the moon rose through the sky. The walk took them to the famous *souk*, the old market in the city centre, where the winding alleys opened into food stands and small shops that sold everything between heaven and earth. That was when Grandpa Faris would tell him about the French company he had worked for in the 1940s, when Syria was under French rule. Granted, the French had been no angels, and a lot of people had been killed back then, but they were respectful, according to Grandpa Faris. Like if the French soldiers were chasing a suspected rebel and he ran into a church or a mosque, well, they wouldn't run after him and shoot him in there. Some things had been sacred, even to the French occupiers.

'Besides, it's thanks to the French we eat *croissants*,' he said. 'And some of the words you use are from the French, like *canapé* and *chauffage*.'

Now they were standing side by side in front of the mirror, each applying oil to a dark swirl of hair. Grandpa Faris tilted Sami's chin up, adjusted an out-of-place strand and asked if there was something special happening that day. It couldn't be helped; Sami's cheeks flushed.

'It's just a theatre play at school.'

'Then maybe you'd like to try a bit of perfume?'

Sami studied the result in the mirror. Newly ironed khaki shirt, oil-combed hair and a cloud of oud around him. Then he passed the kitchen, where Malik had moved on to throwing olives on the floor, and hurried out the door.

*

His best friend Muhammed was already waiting at the corner, his freckly face hidden beneath a bird's nest of curly hair. Sami was jealous because his friend was taller than him, but he was also proud because everyone believed that Muhammed was in high school already, which made Sami feel mature by association.

'Wow, what's that smell?' Muhammed asked, sniffing the air.

His friend had recently started wearing spectacles and the thick glass made his eyes look bigger, like he was in constant surprise.

'Nothing,' Sami said. 'Come on. Let's see who gets to Nassim first.'

The street had flooded after the night's spring rain and they zigzagged between pools that looked like drops of the sky had fallen on the asphalt. There was the rattling sound of metal shutters being pulled up, the chirping from small birds, the cries of mothers who shouted at their children to hurry up for school. Muhammed seemed to win the race but slowed down at the end to give Sami a chance to catch up.

'It's not fair,' Sami panted. 'Your legs are too long.'

'Too long! Your legs are too short.'

They walked into Nassim's store, which was similar to many of the small shops on the street. All owned by old men who spent their days listening to the radio channel Monte Carlo, talking to customers and filling the shelves with goods from floor to ceiling.

'You are lucky, boys, the bread car just came.'

Sami bought them a croissant each, and Muhammed promised to pay him the next day, which he rarely did, but

it didn't matter. Muhammed had lived with just his mother and three siblings since their father was imprisoned when Muhammed was little. It wasn't something they talked about. Like Sami never mentioned that Muhammed's school uniform was slightly outgrown, the colours faded and the sleeves frayed. Sami's mum usually put an extra apple or banana in his backpack to give to his friend at lunchtime.

'Bye, Abu Nassim, see you tomorrow.'

'Bye, boys, be good and study well.'

On the street they greeted a teacher, and when they passed an all-girls school, they slowed down and peeked silently through the fence. Their school was mixed, with boys and girls, but there was something special about that place. At least, up until recently, when Sami had found a new interest in his own school.

Their school was built out of basalt – Homs was known as the city of black stones – and surrounded by high walls and fences. Songs with zealous choruses echoed across the schoolyard from speakers. A lot of them were about the invisible enemy just down the road: Israel, waiting for a chance to destroy them. Back then, he didn't connect the songs with a real country with real inhabitants. It was just part of the school day, like maths, art and military studies.

Sami lined up with his classmates and waited for the morning lecture, delivered by their headmistress, an older woman with candyfloss hair gathered in a tight bun at the nape of her neck. First the Syrian flag was raised, then the flag of the Baath Party.

'Repeat after me,' the headmistress said as feedback surged through the speakers. 'With our soul, with our blood, we submit to al-Assad.'

'With our soul, with our blood, we submit to al-Assad!'

'And what do we fight for? Unity, freedom and socialism.'

'Unity, freedom and socialism!'

She inspected the rows of khaki school uniforms over her rimless glasses. The morning assembly continued with her scolding the students, one by one or in groups, while thwacking the ground with a switch. Sami had never seen her use the switch on anyone but even so it was a relief when, after repeating her phrases about the almighty father of their country, the eternal and wonderful, they were allowed to march into their classrooms. Especially since this term he had been sitting behind a girl he had only recently noticed.

Yasmin never raised her hand if she could help it, but if she was asked a question she always knew the answer. Sami studied the back of her neck during English class until she turned around and he looked down at his notebook. He wondered how it would be to run his hand through her dark hair, gathered in a ponytail, and feel the gentle curve of her head under his fingertips.

A few months earlier, while he was lost in thought at his desk, a crumpled-up note had hit his cheek. Sami saw Muhammed's crooked grin on the opposite side of the classroom. His best friend had a way of butting into situations that were none of his business. Sometimes in an attempt to come to the rescue, like by taking the blame if

Sami forgot his homework, or, like this time, by throwing a note to set things in motion. *1 + 1 = 69.* He wasn't sure what it meant but he sensed it referred to something adults did in secret.

'Can I borrow your pen?' Yasmin asked.

'This one?'

'Yes, it's a pen, isn't it?'

He gave it to her and the note accidentally slipped from his hand. 'Oh, I guess I wrote that wrong . . .' he mumbled when she read it.

'I guess you did. It's actually two,' she said and drew a *2*. 'Which is also good.'

After that, Yasmin always greeted him with an *ahlain* or *marhabtain*, two hellos or double hi. If Sami grabbed a juice box in the canteen, Yasmin would appear behind him. *Shouldn't you be grabbing two?* When they were sitting on a stone bench in the schoolyard and someone asked if there was room for them, she said, *Sorry, this is a bench for two.* They lay down on their backs with their heads close together and looked for shapes and signs in the clouds. When he quickly kissed her on the way home, under a tree with low-hanging oranges, she said: *Two.* Everything was better doubled.

Yasmin and he spent all their time together, just the two of them, for a while. Then a new boy started in their class. Haydar. He wore the same school uniform as the rest of them, but it looked more ironed, and he had a silver wristwatch as well. The school guard wasn't supposed to accept jewellery but she only smiled and let him pass at the gate. Both the guard and their teachers were delighted at Haydar's

politeness and sarcastic jokes, little knowing that during break-time he swore more than all the other students put together. Worst of all was that the new boy was good-looking. Handsome, even. High cheekbones and dark eyes under thick, blond hair. Yasmin invited Haydar to join their games and let him sit with them at lunch. *There's only room for two*, Sami wanted to say, but heard how silly it would have sounded.

He noticed how Yasmin changed when Haydar was around. Before, she loved asking him to crack his knuckles. Now she said it sounded gross. Before, they would compare comic books, but since Haydar didn't bother with reading, now Yasmin didn't either.

This particular day, during lunch break, the envelope was burning in his breast pocket as the students gathered around the kiosk to buy croissants and *manakish*, a sort of mini pizza with thyme and sesame seed. Sami looked out for Yasmin but just as he spotted her among a group of girls playing basketball, the bell rang.

Military class was next. Their usual teacher was ill and there were no substitutes, so their religious studies teacher filled in. She wore a silver cross around her neck and balanced her short and stout body on a pair of black heels. She was a mild woman who took the time to answer their questions, and sometimes her eyes would wander to the orange trees outside the classroom as she took off on philosophical flights of fancy. In the schoolyard, however, she underwent a personality transformation before their very eyes.

Clouds hid the sun, plunging the schoolyard into

shadow, when she called out for everyone to line up. The first fifteen minutes was theory. She held up a Kalashnikov, described the various parts – the wooden butt, the magazine, the adjustable iron sight – and where to insert the cartridges.

'This is the setting for fully automatic, and this is for semi-automatic, in other words, for firing one bullet at a time.'

A student raised his hand.

'Miss, how fast can you shoot?'

'Well, it depends on the model, but this could probably do six hundred rounds a minute.'

Then it was time for practical exercises, but not with the rifle. Their teacher ordered them to do gymnastics and formations. Dressed in their school uniforms, they obeyed her commands. When Yasmin fell and scraped her knee, she was told to do ten extra push-ups. When she was done, Haydar held his hand out to her and the silver watch shone in the shade.

'Straight line!'

The teacher asked Sami to stay after class was over. Why had he looked so distracted? She leaned forward and sniffed the air. He was afraid she would comment on the perfume, even though she herself walked around in a cloud of artificial lavender, but she pointed to his oil-combed hair.

'Ask your mother to take you to the hairdresser. Your hair is getting long.'

He had not managed to talk to Yasmin yet, but then he saw her waiting for him on the front steps. There she sat, with

a beaming smile and sparkling braces. Haydar sat next to her.

'Hello, hi,' Sami said.

'Hello,' Yasmin replied.

Haydar rummaged around in his bag and said there they were, the theatre tickets.

'Great, what are we seeing?' Sami said.

He tried to sound normal, as though his heart was not in his mouth. The envelope he had brought from home, which had been sitting in his breast pocket all day, contained exactly that, theatre tickets. He would have preferred to take Yasmin to the cinema, but Homs had only old cinemas that showed black and white films and were rumoured to be places where criminals went to strike deals.

'We only bought two,' Yasmin said, shifting uncomfortably. 'They're for *Romeo and Juliet*, and you don't like it.'

Granted, he didn't, but he could have liked it if they had asked. The tickets he had bought were for a comedy that Yasmin would probably find childish, he realized now.

'All right,' Sami said. 'I hope you have a good time, then.'

'I'm sure we will.'

Sami rocked back and forth on his heels and grabbed the straps of his backpack. Yasmin moved closer to Haydar, who smiled and laid an arm around her shoulders.

'I think I'm going to stay here for a while,' Yasmin said. 'But I'll see you tomorrow, right?'

She said it breezily and naturally, as though there were a tomorrow.

An oily strand of hair fell into Sami's face. When he

walked across the schoolyard and out through the gates, he felt both more watched and more invisible than before. From that day on, three was apparently a crowd, the answer to all questions was two, and one felt lonelier than ever.