
Opening Extract from...

The Girl from Aleppo

Written by Nujeen Mustafa

With Christina Lamb

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NUJEEN MUSTAFA
WITH CHRISTINA LAMB

THE GIRL FROM ALEPPO

NUJEEN'S ESCAPE FROM WAR TO FREEDOM

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1

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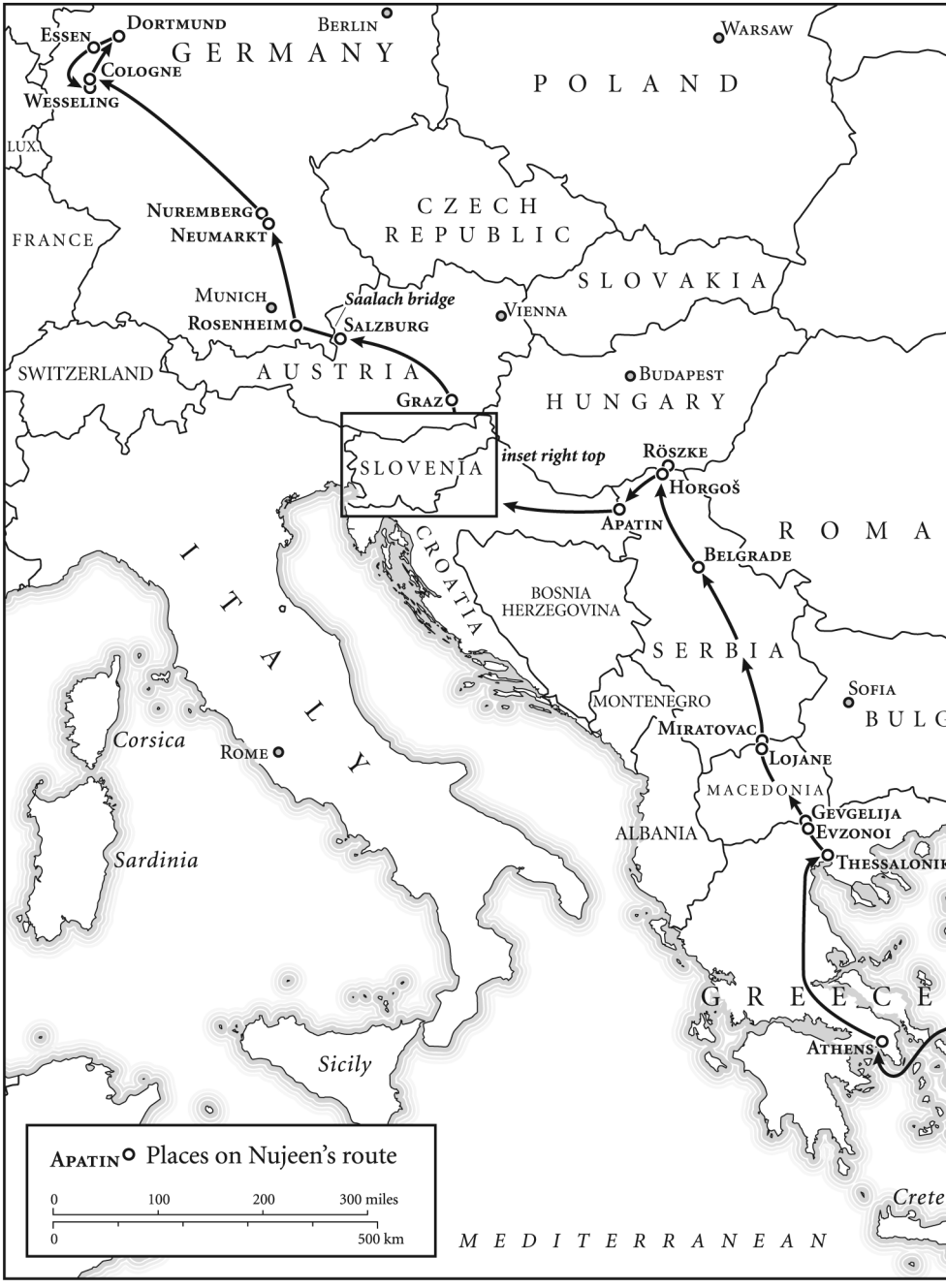
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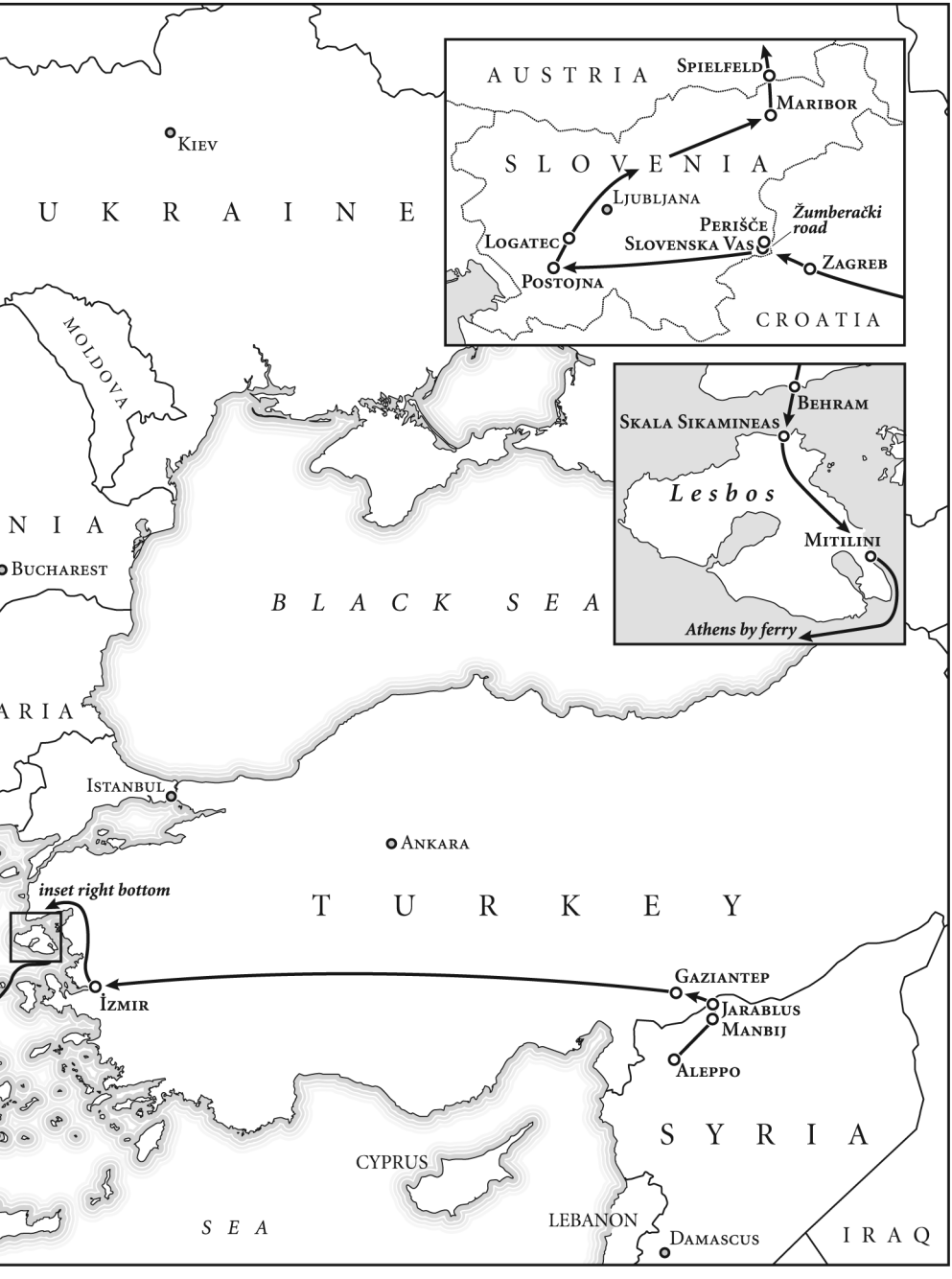
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I see Earth! It is so beautiful.

Yuri Gagarin, first man in space, 1961

Contents

Prologue: The Crossing 1

PART ONE: To Lose a Country

1 Foreigners in Our Own Land 11
2 The Walls of Aleppo 23
3 The Girl on TV 35
4 Days of Rage 45
5 A City Divided 59
6 A War of Our Own 75
7 Gone with the Wind 89
8 Forgive Me, Syria 101

PART TWO: The Journey

9 Widen Your World 113
10 In Search of a People Smuggler 127
11 The Route of Death 139
12 Freedom like a Normal Person 149
13 Through the Beautiful Gate 161
14 Hungary, Open the Door! 173
15 The Hardest Day 187
16 The Sound of Music 203
17 Thank You, Mama Merkel 215

PART THREE: A Normal Life

18 Foreigners in a Foreign Land 231
19 A Schoolgirl at Last 241
20 A Scary New Year 247
21 A Place Called Home 253

Postscript: The Only Candle 269
Appendix: My Journey 279
Acknowledgements 285
Index 287

THE GIRL FROM ALEPPO

Prologue

The Crossing

Behram, Turkey, 2 September 2015

From the beach we could see the island of Lesbos – and Europe. The sea stretched either side as far as you could see and it was not rough, it was quiet, flecked only by the smallest of white caps that looked as if they were dancing on the waves. The island did not look too far off, rising from the sea like a rocky loaf. But the grey dinghies were small and low in the water, weighed down with as many lives as the smugglers could pack in.

It was the first time I had seen the sea. The first time for everything – travelling on a plane, in a train, leaving my parents, staying in a hotel and now going in a boat! Back in Aleppo I had barely ever left our fifth-floor apartment.

We had heard from those who had gone before that on a fine summer day like this with a working motor a dinghy

takes just over an hour to cross the strait. It was one of the shortest routes from Turkey to Greece – just 8 miles. The problem was that the motors were often old and cheap and strained for power with loads of fifty or sixty people, so the trips took three or four hours. On a rainy night when waves reached as high as 10 feet and tossed the boats like toys, sometimes they never made it at all and journeys of hope ended in a watery grave.

The beach was not sandy as I had imagined it would be but pebbly – impossible for my wheelchair. We could see we were in the right place from a ripped cardboard box printed with the words 'Inflatable Rubber Dinghy; Made in China (Max Capacity 15 Pax)', as well as a trail of discarded belongings scattered along the shore like a kind of refugee flotsam and jetsam. There were toothbrushes, nappies and biscuit wrappers, abandoned backpacks and a slew of clothes and shoes. Jeans and T-shirts tossed out because there was no room in the boat and smugglers make you travel as light as possible. A pair of grey high-heeled mules with fluffy black pom-poms, which seemed a crazy thing to have brought on this journey. A child's tiny pink sandal decorated with a plastic rose. A boy's light-up trainers. And a large grey floppy bear with a missing eye that must have been hard for someone to leave behind. All the stuff had turned this beautiful place into a rubbish dump, which made me sad.

We had been in the olive groves all night after being dropped off on the cliff road by the smuggler's mini-bus.

From there we had to walk down the hill to the shore which was about a mile. That may not sound much but it feels a very long way in a wheelchair over a rough track with only your sister to push and a fierce Turkish sun beating down and driving sweat into your eyes. There was a road zigzagging down the hill which would have been much easier, but we couldn't walk along that as we might be spotted and arrested by the Turkish gendarmerie who could put us in a detention centre or even send us back.

I was with two of my four elder sisters – Nahda, though she had her baby and three little girls to handle, and my closest sister Nasrine who always looks after me and is as beautiful as her name, which means a white rose that grows on the hills of Kurdistan. Also with us were some cousins whose parents – my aunt and uncle – had been shot dead by Daesh snipers in June when they went to a funeral in Kobane, a day I don't want to think about.

The way was bumpy. Annoyingly, Nasrine pulled the wheelchair so I was facing backwards and only got occasional glimpses of the sea, but when I did it was sparkling blue. Blue is my favourite colour because it's the colour of God's planet. Everyone got very hot and bothered. The chair was too big for me and I gripped the sides so hard that my arms hurt and my bottom got bruised from all the bumping, but I didn't say anything.

As with everywhere we had passed through I told my sisters some local information I had gathered before we left.

I was excited that on top of the hill above us was the ancient town of Assos which had a ruined temple to the goddess Athena and, even better, was where Aristotle once lived. He'd started a school of philosophy overlooking the sea so he could watch the tides and challenge the theory of his former master Plato that tides were turbulence caused by rivers. Then the Persians attacked and made the philosophers flee and Aristotle ended up in Macedonia as tutor to a young Alexander the Great. St Paul the apostle also passed through on his own journey to Lesbos from Syria. As always my sisters didn't seem very interested.

I gave up trying to inform them and watched the seagulls having fun gliding on thermals and making noisy loops high in the blue, blue sky, never once stalling. How I wished I could fly. Even astronauts don't have that freedom.

Nasrine kept checking the Samsung smartphone our brother Mustafa had bought us for the journey to make sure we were following the Google map coordinates given to us by the smuggler. Yet, when we finally got to the shore, it turned out we were not in the right place. Every smuggler has their own 'point' – we had coloured strips of fabric tied round our wrists to identify us – and we were at the wrong one.

Where we needed to be wasn't far along the beach but when we got to the end there was a sheer cliff blocking us off. The only way round was to swim, which we obviously couldn't do. So we'd ended up having to walk up and down another rugged hill to reach the right point on the shore.

Those slopes were like hell. If you slipped and fell into the sea you'd definitely be dead. It was so rocky that I couldn't be pushed or pulled but had to be carried. My cousins teased me, 'You are the Queen, Queen Nujeen!'

By the time we got to the right beach the sun was setting, an explosion of pink and purple as if one of my little nieces was squiggling coloured crayons across the sky. From the hills above I heard the gentle tinkle of goat-bells.

We spent the night in the olive grove. Once the sun had gone the temperature dropped suddenly and the ground was hard and rocky even though Nasrine spread all the clothes we had around me. But I was terribly exhausted, having never spent so much time outside in my life, and I slept most of the night. We couldn't make a fire because it might attract police. Some people used the cardboard dinghy cartons to try and cover themselves. It felt like one of those movies where a group go camping and something terrible happens.

Breakfast was sugar cubes and Nutella which might sound exciting but kind of sucks when it's all you have. The smugglers had promised we would leave early in the morning and by dawn we were all ready on the beach in our life jackets. Our phones were tied inside party balloons to protect them on the crossing, a trick we had been shown how to do in İzmir.

There were several other groups waiting. We had paid $1,500 each instead of the usual $1,000 to have a dinghy just

for our family, but it seemed others would be in our boat. We would be thirty-eight in total – twenty-seven adults and eleven children. Now we were here there was nothing we could do – we couldn't go back and people said the smugglers used knives and cattle prods on those who changed their minds.

The sky was cloudless, and close by I could see that the sea wasn't just one colour, the uniform blue of pictures and my imaginings, but bright turquoise next to the shore then a deeper blue darkening to grey then indigo near the island. I knew the sea only from National Geographic documentaries and now it was as if I was part of one. I felt really wired and couldn't understand why everyone was nervous. For me it was like the biggest adventure!

Other kids were running and collecting pebbles of different colours. A small Afghan boy gave me one the shape of a dove, flat and grey with a white marble vein running through it. It was cool to the touch and worn smooth by the sea. It's not always easy for me to hold things in my awkward fingers but I wasn't letting go of that.

There were people from Syria like us as well as from Iraq, Morocco and Afghanistan speaking in a language we didn't understand. Some people swapped stories but most didn't say much. They didn't need to. To be leaving all you knew and had built up in your own country to make this dangerous and uncertain journey, it must be bad.

As morning broke we watched the first boats go out. Two set off more or less straight but two were going in all direc-

tions. The boats didn't have pilots – what happened was the smugglers let one of the refugees travel for half price or for free if he drove the boat even though none of them had any experience. 'It's just like riding a motorbike,' they claimed. My uncle Ahmed was going to be driving our boat. I guessed he'd never driven one as we had never been to the sea and his old job was running a mobile-phone shop, but he assured us he knew how.

We'd heard that some refugees gun the motor to get halfway across to Greek waters as fast as possible and they burn out the motor. Sometimes the engines don't have enough fuel. If that happens the Turkish coastguard catch you and bring you back. In Café Sinbad in İzmir we'd met a family from Aleppo who had tried to cross six times. We didn't have money to keep trying.

Around 9 a.m. Uncle Ahmed called the smuggler, but he said we must wait for the coastguard to go. 'We have chosen the wrong smuggler,' said Nasrine. I worried we had been cheated again. We hadn't expected to be here so long and were soon hungry and thirsty which was ironic as there was so much water in front of us. My cousins went to try and find water for me and the children but there was nothing near by.

The day got hotter. Though the smuggler had arrived with dinghies for us and the other groups, he said we couldn't go until the coastguard changed shift. The Moroccan men were half naked and started singing. As the afternoon came, the waves started to get higher, making a slapping sound on the

shore. None of us wanted to go at night as we'd heard stories of kind of pirates on jet-skis who board boats in the dark to steal motors and the valuables of refugees.

Finally, around 5 p.m., they said the coastguards were changing guard so we could take advantage and go. I looked again at the sea. A mist was coming down and the cry of the seagulls no longer seemed so joyful. A dark shadow lay over the rocky island. Some call that crossing *rihlat al-moot* or the route of death. It would either deliver us to Europe or swallow us up. For the first time I felt scared.

Back home I often watched a series called *Brain Games* on National Geographic which showed how feelings of fear and panic are controlled by the brain, so I began practising breathing deeply and telling myself over and over that I was strong.

PART ONE

To Lose a Country

Syria, 1999–2014

Before they are numbers, these people are
first and foremost human beings.

Pope Francis, Lesbos, 16 April 2016

1

Foreigners in Our Own Land

I don't collect stamps or coins or football cards – I collect facts. Most of all I like facts about physics and space, particularly string theory. Also about history and dynasties like the Romanovs. And controversial people like Howard Hughes and J. Edgar Hoover.

My brother Mustafa says I only need to hear something once to remember it exactly. I can list you all the Romanovs from the first one Tsar Mikhail to Nicholas II who was murdered by the Bolsheviks along with all his family, even his youngest daughter Anastasia. I can tell you exactly what date Queen Elizabeth II became queen of England – both the day her father died and her coronation – and the dates of both her birthdays, actual and official. I'd like to meet her one day and ask her 'What's it like having Queen Victoria as your great-great-grandmother?' and 'Isn't it odd everyone singing a song about saving you?'

I can also tell you that the only animal not to make a sound is a giraffe because it has no vocal cords. This used to be one of my favourite facts, but then people started calling our dictator Bashar al-Assad the Giraffe because he has a long neck.

Now here is a fact I don't think anyone should like. Did you know that one in every 113 people in the world today are refugees or displaced from their homes? Lots of them are escaping wars like the one that has ravaged our country Syria, or those in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. Others are running from terrorist groups in Pakistan and Somalia or from persecution by mullah regimes in Iran and Egypt. Then there are ones fleeing dictatorship in Gambia, forced conscription in Eritrea, and hunger and poverty in countries in Africa I never saw on a map. On TV I keep hearing reporters say that the movement of people from the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia into Europe is the largest refugee crisis since the Second World War. In 2015 more than 1.2 million came to Europe. I was one of them.

I hate the word refugee more than any word in the English language. In German it is *Flüchtling*, which is just as harsh. What it really means is a second-class citizen with a number scrawled on your hand or printed on a wristband, who everyone wishes would somehow go away. The year 2015 was when I became a fact, a statistic, a number. Much as I like facts, we are not numbers, we are human beings and we all have stories. This is mine.

* * *

My name is Nujeen which means new life, and I guess you can say I was unexpected. My mum and dad already had four boys and four girls, and by the time I came along on New Year's Day 1999, twenty-six years after my eldest brother Shiar, some were already married off and the youngest one Nasrine was nine, so everyone thought the family was complete. My mum almost died giving birth to me and was so weak afterwards it was my eldest sister Jamila who really looked after me, and I always thought of her as my second mother. To start with, the family was happy to have a baby in the house but then I didn't stop crying and crying. The only thing that would stop me was putting a tape recorder next to me playing *Zorba the Greek*, but that drove my siblings almost as mad as my crying.

We lived in a dusty neglected desert sort of town called Manbij in northern Syria, not far from the border with Turkey and about 20 miles west of the Euphrates river and the Tishrin dam which gave us electricity. My earliest memory is the long swish of my mother's dress – a light-coloured kaftan which fell to her ankles. She had long hair too, and we called her Ayee and my father Yaba and these are not Arabic words. The first fact to know about me is I'm a Kurd.

We were one of five Kurdish families on a street in a town that was mostly Arab; they were Bedouin but they looked down on us and called our area the Hill of the Foreigners. We had to speak their language at school and in the shops and

could speak our Kurdish language Kurmanji only when we were at home. This was very hard for my parents, who didn't speak Arabic and were anyway illiterate. Also for my eldest brother Shiar, who other children made fun of at school because he couldn't speak Arabic.

Manbij is a folkish kind of place and strict about Islam, so my brothers had to go to the mosque, and if Ayee wanted to shop in the bazaar, one of them or my father had to accompany her. We are Muslims too but not so rigid. In the high school my sisters and cousins were the only girls who didn't cover their heads.

Our family had moved from our lands in a Kurdish village south of the city of Kobane because of a vendetta with a neighbouring village. We Kurds are tribal people and my family are from the big Kori Beg tribe, descended from a famous Kurdish resistance leader Kori Beg, which seems to mean almost every Kurd is a cousin. The next village were also Kori Beg but a different clan. The problem with them happened long before I was born, but we all knew the story. Both villages had sheep and one day some shepherd boys from the other village brought their flock to graze on our grass, so there was a fight with our shepherd boys. Shortly after that some of our relatives were going to the other village for a funeral and on the way were fired upon by two men from the other village. When our clan fired back one of their men was killed. They vowed revenge, so we all had to flee. That's how we ended up in Manbij.

People don't know much about Kurds – sometimes it seems to me we are completely unknown in the rest of the world. We are a proud people with our own language, food and culture and a long history going back 2,000 years when we were first recorded as Kurti. We are maybe 30 million people, but we have never had our own country. In fact we are the world's biggest stateless tribe. We hoped we would get our own homeland when the British and French divided up the defeated Ottoman Empire after the First World War, just as the Arabs thought they would get their own independence as promised after the Arab Revolt. The Allied powers even signed an agreement called the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 which recognized an autonomous Kurdistan.

But the new Turkish leader Kemal Atatürk who had led his country to independence, would not accept it, and then oil was found in Mosul in what would have been Kurdistan and the treaty was never ratified. Actually two British and French diplomats called Mark Sykes and Georges Picot had already signed a secret pact to split the Levant between them and drawn their infamous line in the sand, from Kirkuk in Iraq to Haifa in Israel, to create the modern states of Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. So the Arabs were left under colonial rule, between borders which paid little heed to tribal and ethnic realities, and we Kurds were left divided between four countries, none of which likes us.

Today about half the Kurds live in Turkey, some in Iraq, some in Iran and about 2 million of us in Syria where we are

the biggest minority, about 15 per cent. Even though our dialects are different I can always tell a Kurd from any other person in the world – first by the tongue, then by the look. Some of us live in cities like Istanbul, Tehran and Aleppo, but most live in the mountains and plateaus where Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran meet.

We are surrounded by enemies, so we have to remain strong. Our great Kurdish Shakespeare Ahmad-i Khani wrote in the seventeenth century that we are like 'towers on four corners surrounding the Turks and Persians … both sides have made the Kurdish people targets for the arrows of their fate'. Yaba believes that one day there will be a Kurdistan, maybe in my lifetime. 'He who has a history has a future,' he always says.

The funny thing is many of the famous 'Arab' heroes are Kurds and no one admits it. Like Saladin, who fought off the Crusaders and kicked the Europeans out of Jerusalem, or Yusuf al-Azma, who led the Syrian forces fighting the French occupation in 1920 and died in battle. There is a huge painting of Saladin and his Arab armies in the reception hall of Assad's palace and we have so many squares and statues named after Yusuf al-Azma, but no one says they are Kurds.

Instead the Syrian regime call us *ajanib* or foreigners, even though we have lived here since before the Crusades. Many Kurds in Syria don't have ID cards, and without those orange cards you can't buy property, get government jobs, vote in elections or send your kids to high school.

I guess Turkey is the hardest place to be a Kurd. Atatürk launched a campaign called Turkification, and Turkey doesn't even recognize Kurds as a people but calls them mountain Turks. Our family live both sides of the border, and one of my aunts who lived in Turkey told us she couldn't even give her son a Kurdish name but had to call him Orhan, which is Turkish. Nasrine went to stay with her once and told us they don't speak Kurdish and turned off the radio when she played Kurdish music.

Here is another fact about Kurds. We have our own alphabet which Turkey does not recognize, and until not long ago you could be arrested there if you used the letters Q, W and X, which don't exist in the Turkish language. Imagine going to jail for a consonant!

We have a saying, 'Kurds have no friends but in the mountains.' We love mountains and we believe we are descended from children hidden in the mountains to escape Zuhak, an evil giant with two serpents growing from his shoulders, each of which had to be fed the brains of a boy every day. Finally, a clever blacksmith called Kawa, fed up with losing his sons, started feeding the serpents with sheep brains instead and hiding the boys until he had a whole army of them to slay the giant.

Kurds together always tell stories. Our most famous story is a Kurdish *Romeo and Juliet* called *Mem and Zin*. It's about an island ruled by a prince with two beautiful sisters he keeps locked up, one of whom he calls Zin. One day Zin and her

sister escape to go to a festival disguised as men and meet two handsome musketeers, one of whom is Mem. The two pairs of sisters and musketeers fall in love and a lot of things happen, but basically Mem is imprisoned, then killed, and Zin dies of grief at her lover's grave. Even after death they are kept apart when a thorn bush springs up between them. The story starts by saying, 'If only there were harmony among us, if we were to obey a single one of us, he would reduce to vassalage Turks, Arabs and Persians, all of them,' and many Kurds say it symbolizes our struggle for a homeland. Mem represents the Kurdish people and Zin the Kurdish country, separated by unfortunate circumstances. Some people believe it's true and there is even a grave you can visit.

I grew up hearing this story but I don't really like it. It's quite long and I don't think it's realistic at all. Actually I preferred *Beauty and the Beast*, because that's based on something good, loving someone from the inside, for their personality, not the outside.

Before he got old and tired and stopped working and spent all his time smoking and grumbling about his sons not going to mosque, my father Yaba was a sheep and goat trader. He had about 60 acres of land, where he kept sheep and goats like his father before him going right back to my seventh grandfather, who had camels and sheep.

My elder siblings tell me that when he started he would buy just one goat a week in the market on Saturday then sell it elsewhere the following week for a small profit, but over time he had a flock of about 200. I guess selling sheep didn't make much money, as our house was just two rooms and a courtyard with a small kitchen which was a squash for so many people. But my eldest brother Shiar sent money, so we built another room where Ayee kept her sewing machine, which I played with when no one was looking. I slept there with her unless we had guests.

Shiar lives in Germany and is a film director who made a movie called *Walking* about a crazy old man who walks a lot in a Kurdish village in southern Turkey. The man makes friends with a poor boy who sells chewing gum, then their area gets taken over by the military. The film caused an outcry in Turkey because the old Kurdish man slaps a Turkish army officer, which some people protested shouldn't be shown – as if they can't tell the difference between a movie and real life.

I had never met Shiar as he left Syria in 1990 when he was seventeen, long before I was born, to avoid being conscripted and sent to fight in the Gulf War in Iraq – we were friends with the Americans in those days. Syria didn't want us Kurds to go to its universities or have government jobs but it did want us to fight in their army and join its Ba'ath party. Every schoolchild was supposed to join, but Shiar refused and managed to escape when he and another boy were marched

to the party office to be signed up. He had always dreamt of being a movie director, which is strange because when he was growing up our house in Manbij didn't even have a TV, only a radio, as the religious people didn't approve. When he was twelve he made his own radio series with some classmates, and he sneaked every opportunity to watch other people's TVs. Somehow our family raised $4,500 for him to buy a fake Iraqi passport in Damascus, then he flew to Moscow to study. He didn't stay long in Russia but went to Holland, where he got asylum. There are not many Kurdish film-makers, so he is famous in our community, but we weren't supposed to mention him as the regime don't like his films.

Our family tree only shows men, but it didn't show Shiar in case anyone connected him with us and caused problems. I didn't understand why it shouldn't have women. Ayee was illiterate – she had got married to my dad when she was thirteen, which means that by my age today she had already been married four years and had a son. But she made all our clothes and she can tell you where any country in the world is on a map and always remember her way back from anywhere. Also she is good at adding things up, so she knew if the merchants in the bazaar were cheating her. All our family is good at maths except me. My grandfather on my mother's side had been arrested by the French for having a gun and shared a cell with a learned man who taught him to read, so because of that Ayee wanted us to be educated. My eldest sister Jamila had left school at twelve as girls in our tribe are not supposed

to be educated and stayed at home and kept house. But after her, my other sisters – Nahda, Nahra and Nasrine – all went to school, just like the boys, Shiar, Farhad, Mustafa and Bland. We have a Kurdish saying: 'Male or female, the lion remains a lion.' Yaba said they could stay for as long as they passed the exams.

Each morning, I sat on the doorstep to watch them go, swinging their schoolbags and chatting with friends. The step was my favourite place to sit, playing with mud and watching people coming and going. Most of all I was waiting for someone in particular – the salep-man. If you haven't tried it, salep is a kind of smoothie from milk thickened with powdered roots of mountain orchids and flavoured with rose-water or cinnamon, ladled into a cup from a small aluminium cart, and it is delicious. I always knew when the salep-man was coming as the boom-box on his cart broadcast verses from the Koran, not music like other street vendors.

It was lonely when they had all gone, just Yaba smoking and clacking his worry beads if he didn't go to his sheep. To the right-hand side of the house, between us and our neighbours who were my uncle and cousins, was a tall cypress tree which was dark and scary. And on our roof were always stray cats and street dogs which made me shiver because if they came after me I couldn't run away. I don't like dogs, cats or anything that moves fast. There was a family of white cats with orange patches which spat and swore at anyone who came near and I hated them.

The only time I liked our roof was on hot summer nights when we slept up there, the darkness thick around us like a glove and a fresh breeze cooled by the emptiness of the desert. I loved lying on my back and staring up at the stars, so many and so far stretching into the beyond like a glittering walkway. That's when I first dreamt about being an astronaut, because in space you can float so your legs don't matter.

The funny thing is you can't cry in space. Because of zero gravity, if you cry the way you do on earth the tears won't fall but will gather in your eyes and form a liquid ball and spread into the rest of your face like a strange growth, so be careful.