man@the_airport

HOW SOCIAL MEDIA SAVED MY LIFE

One Syrian's Story

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INTRODUCTION

SIX MONTHS AFTER I arrived in Canada, I was invited to speak at the Canadian Council for Refugees Spring Consultation in Victoria, BC. It was a sunny day, but the wind was chilly, the kind of breeze that makes you want to spend ten more minutes under the blankets before you get out of bed. I was on the ferry and pulled out my cellphone to take some photos. I loved how Whistler was in the mountains, and still only an hour from the open ocean. I couldn't believe how far I'd come—life was strange, weird, unfair and generous all at the same time. Only a few months before, I'd been in a crowded detention cell in Malaysia, and now I was having poutine on a ferry. In Canada! In the country that every refugee dreams of. Why me? I smiled as I looked at the snow on the distant peaks. I wish my family were here to see this beauty, I thought. I wish they could feel what I am feeling now: safe, legal, hopeful and, yes, finally happy.

The three-day conference was entitled "Roots: Reconciling the global with the local," and one of the other speakers was Carey Newman, a Kwagiulth and Coast Salish artist and a professor at the University of Victoria. It was the first time I'd met and had the chance to listen to a First Nations person. Professor Newman went to the podium and took the mic, but before he started his speech, he began with what sounded like a prayer. He called on his ancestors so their souls could be present and join us, he called on their wisdom and bravery, he called on their history so it could not be forgotten.

Carey was reminding us of all of the suffering his people had faced in a calm, peaceful, musical and painful way.

I was on a chair in the audience when this happened, holding my cup of coffee. I put it down on the floor, took off my glasses and placed them on my knee. I loosened my new tie a little and chewed the inside of my lower lip, something I do when an idea hits me hard and I can't stop thinking about it. Three scenes came into my mind when I closed my eyes: the New Zealand Maori and their haka dance; here, with the prayer of the Indigenous people of Canada; and the long nights filled with stories next to the stove in my village. All three were connected somehow in my mind.

Carey began his speech and was showing some photos, but I could not move. I opened my eyes for a second to have a look at what he was presenting, then closed them again. I did not want to lose the connection I felt at that moment; I did not want to forget what was in my mind. I shook my head and thought, Yes, it's one human civilization we have, not many. And we are not in conflict, even as powers try to convince us we are. We are all connected with each other as human beings, whether we are aware of it or not. We have so much in common: our behaviour and our traditions. I whispered to myself, Only one, only one. Only one human civilization: east, north, south, west, it doesn't matter; different cultures, we are all human.

As I listened to Carey's speech, I thought, we Syrians sing too. We sing war songs, even at our wedding parties, and in these songs we name our ancestors too. The same way the Indigenous people do, not to call their souls but to remember their deeds. And we dance the same way the Maori do in New Zealand—no scary faces, but clapping our hands firmly and calling out with very loud voices.

It was the first day of the conference, and although I was scheduled to be the closing speaker on the third day, I had my speech all ready. But when I went back to my room, I pulled out my notes and added this: Sir, I heard your prayer, and I feel that you and I, we are similar to each other! We also have been forced by circumstances to leave our land and the people we love behind, and no matter how much joy or success we have in our new home, we will always feel the pain of loss. Thank you for accepting us into your land, thank you for your forgiveness.

Current happiness and success, past pain and loss—in my mind these are all connected. I can't separate my childhood, the care my parents gave me, the way they treated me and educated me and the strong relations I have with my siblings from the battles I have been forced to be in and the difficulties I have faced. While I was not a refugee at a camp in Turkey, fleeing from the war in my country, I cannot separate my experience from that of others seeking safety and asylum, be it from Syria or Burma or Somalia or Afghanistan. I cannot separate what it means to be a Syrian from being a new Canadian. When it was my turn to speak, I stood up and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Hassan Al Kontar. I am a proud Syrian and I am a proud future Canadian."

So, to begin

Now that I was safe, after eight years, I needed to tell my story, but how? Beginnings are hard and become harder as you age, and I was now almost thirty-eight years old. Should I hit the speaking circuit, sharing my "wisdom" with the audience? Someone once sent me a link to a video of a motivational speaker who said, "If you fall, fall forwards." I imagined myself saying to him, That sounds great, buddy, but can you please tell me what difference it makes? A fall is a fall—forward, backward, it doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is that it's okay to fall. They make saying "Give it 110 percent" sound amazing, but I want to ask them, How exactly? There is only a hundred in 100 percent.

So, I needed to write a book. But how should I go from 140 characters to thousands of words? I don't sound or behave like a writer. I always imagine them with messy hair, long beards, oblivious to their appearance because they understand life differently than most of us. I imagine them glancing around rooms checking for details, smoking a lot and, of course, drinking their favourite whisky. They use big words that no one can understand, yet you feel the music in them.

Still, how hard could it be? (It turned out to be very, very hard.) I needed to come up with a plan, so I promised myself that every day I would write for an hour before I went to work and one hour before I went to sleep. For the next two weeks I kept telling myself, Tomorrow, I am going to start. But I didn't.

Then I met a writer, sort of. One cold, sunny Thursday, I was working at the Scandinave Spa in Whistler, a beautiful place—warm inside, charming view, surrounded by mountains and trees, quiet with the kind of music they play in yoga classes. A woman—mid-fifties, thin, tall, salt and pepper hair—came in and ordered an Americano. She chose a table next to the fire, took out two books, some blank paper and a pen and start writing. Just before I called out her order, she closed her eyes and started what looked like a dream, moving her head left and right, up and down. She looks like a writer, I told myself. Either she is imagining the characters or trying really hard to sleep.

I did not want to interrupt her, so I quietly placed the coffee on her table. She continued to hold her pen but wrote nothing. Three minutes later, she opened her eyes, grabbed her things and left without drinking even a sip. That's weird, I thought, but she is a writer, and this is what they do.

Business was slow, so I took a sip of her coffee, opened a Word file on the office PC and wrote, "Beginnings are hard . . ."

Where should I start? My time in the airport, my time in jail? Maybe I needed to start with my family and where I came from—

describe my late father, my forever ideal, the way he prepared me mentally and physically as if he knew that life was going to give me a hard time. Or my mother, the only person I know with absolutely no enemies. She too must have known that life was going to be hard, otherwise why did she force me to go to English summer school all those years? How about my younger brother, Ammar, who made a different decision to me? I rarely spoke about him publicly because I was trying to protect him, or maybe I was trying to protect myself from a kind of pain I could not carry. I had the whole world in one hand, and him in the other. When I presented myself in my videos from the airport, delivering "statements with a smile," I had sounded funny and positive. This book needed to be like that.

Before I could come up with a way to start, I heard a voice saying, "Half caf, half decaf, almond milk and extra foam."

That is complicated, sir! I thought. You must be a writer too.

Chapter One

The Olive Farm

FOR THOSE OF us who leave our country for a better future, memory stands still. New buildings, towers, roads, and fancy restaurants may have sprung up, but in your mind, the face of your city remains always the same. If you are no longer there to witness the changes, then you can't imagine them happening, just as you can't imagine that the people you knew can change as well. After years away, you hardly notice the way you've erased all the negatives from your memory, and how your home country has become an ideal—the most beautiful place on Earth. Friends and family may tell you what's new, what's different, but your mind? Well, it just will not absorb it. Later, you will wonder if it is a bad thing to keep the idealized home in your mind untouched, frozen in time.

For most of us, war is something you read about in history books, watch in movies or documentaries. It's not something that happens in your home, to the people you love. If you were a Syrian living abroad in 2011, you changed the TV channel every minute, with the false hope that someone would suddenly say it had all stopped.

Children, their eyes lost and confused, running terrified with their toys in their hands, refusing to forget their innocence in the midst of destruction. Mothers crying with their hands open towards the sky, trying to save those they love and stop the madness; fathers who knew that the normal circle of life is for their children to bury them. But not in Syria, not anymore: wives losing their husbands, coffins on shoulders, rockets and houses falling, tanks moving into cities and terrorists blowing themselves up in the middle of civilian areas. Kidnappers, murderers and rapists everywhere.

The army that I had naively thought belonged to the country turned out to be dedicated to protecting its own interests and those of its leader. On the other side are young men who tasted the sweetness of shooting a weapon and the addiction of the fight. Anger became the master and revenge ruled the streets. I had a wild desire to shout at all of them, “Stop, just stop! We can fix this, we can solve it.” Later, I kept quiet because both sides were ready to attack me for not believing in their solution. I told myself, these are not the people I left five years ago. This is not my country. But we were marching into the dark, and no one would be able to stop us.

I, like all Syrians, had to make a decision, a life and death decision that would change my life forever. No one is ever ready for such a decision. It’s not the kind you are used to making—renting a new place, changing jobs, buying a car, having the courage to ask that beautiful woman to be your girlfriend. My life, future and destiny lay in the hands of strangers desperately trying to remain in power. Depending on which side I supported, I would be brave or a coward, a patriot or a traitor.

I needed to ask myself the right questions, the difficult ones, the ones no one can ever agree on. Who is right and who is wrong? On which side should I fight and why? Do I need to go back? If so, what about my future? What about my family? Am I the type of man who will have no problem carrying a gun and shooting someone in the name of freedom, or to protect the regime of a corrupt dictator? Who would I be protecting and who would I have to attack? Night after sleepless night, I confronted the reality of this war and what it meant for me, knowing that whatever I decided, I was going to pay for it.

It was our olive farm that finally made up my mind.

Sweida, where I was born and raised, is a small city of half a million inhabitants, a hundred kilometres south of Damascus in a mountainous area. Everyone knows everyone, and it's very social: hunting, playing cards or watching soccer games. Government employees during the week are farmers at the weekends. Time is not very important there, there is no rush. If you miss your bus because you're chatting with an old friend, you can always catch the next one. They even have a saying for that: "Take it easy, it's not like you missed your meeting with the minister." The area is known for growing apples and grapes in the mountains and olives in the plains.

The farm was between our town and the next one, surrounded by other olive farms owned by relatives and delineated by hand-built walls of black stones that gave the place a timeless air. A grapevine grew along one wall, guarding the rows of olive trees. In one corner some almond trees added a garden touch. A small building, two rooms and a terrace, sat atop a hill overlooking the whole farm. We used one of the rooms to store equipment and the other to avoid the midday heat. There was no electricity, but a small generator powered a water pump and, on the rare occasion we decided to stay the night, we attached a lamp to the car battery.

The town dates from the Roman Empire and, if you listen carefully, you could hear the voices of those who once walked and lived there. My grandfather's house, which is still inhabited by one of my father's uncles, is ancient, full of small halls and built of natural black volcanic rock that cools the temperature during the summer. For the winter, there is an old stove that burns dried animal manure instead of wood, an old innovation based on the abundance of cattle and the absence of forest. During the long winter nights, villagers use their stoves to boil wheat. They add sugar and eat it while retelling stories and poems, mostly about our battles against Ibrahim Pasha, son of the great Muhammad Ali, ruler of Egypt at the time of the Ottoman Empire, and against the French General Michaud in 1925. The memories of how we defeated them and kept both our land and our dignity are a part of our DNA and our stories include even the smallest details, down to the individual names of those who fought generations before. We are Druze, a minority in Syria (only three percent of the population); throughout our history we have encountered many attacks, wars and reconciliations based on our beliefs. This is why, in all the countries where we exist (Syria, Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon), we live in the mountains, where the higher ground gives us isolation and protection, the better to defend ourselves. Although we never fought for power, we have been a major player in the history of Syria.

My city has a history of resisting occupation and, even during our wedding celebrations, we sing to what we call our time of glory, our legacy. Historically rebels who adore freedom, we could not cope with the changing regimes who took control of the Syrian throne, so from the turn of the last century, we started travelling, mostly to Latin America, particularly Venezuela. Almost every family in Sweida has some cousins living there and in other Latin American countries. I myself have many cousins there whom I have never met.

The second wave of emigration came when the previous Syrian president came to power in 1970. He imprisoned some well-known politicians from Sweida and killed others. Knowing our freedoms were going to be taken away from us again, many Druze began to leave and, since the Gulf states were newborn with oil and money, close to home too, we started leaving for there.

If it is true that the man is the son of his environment, then the people who live in Sweida are shaped by land that, despite the olive farms and some seasonal crops, is barren—an endless horizon of medium-sized black rock hills full of caves housing hyenas, wolves, snakes and scorpions, dotted with wild pistachio trees dating back to Roman times. The people there are serious people who don't joke, not with strangers anyway, who stand with each other in time of need, knowing their survival depends on being together. They may have their squabbles but, in the face of an external threat, they become one, and words like dignity, honour, pride and generosity mean everything.

If you, a tourist or explorer coming from a western country, were by chance to visit our town, you would meet simple people with simple needs leading a simple life—smiling, calm, hospitable people, fairly well educated, who would welcome you any time, day or night, and insist that you eat with them. "You can stay as long as you want, the last bus for the city leaves the station by 5:00 p.m. and there is no cellular service." If you got closer, if you stayed longer and they let you in, if you set aside your preconceived ideas of the mysteries of the East—magic nights in the desert, riding camels guided by the stars, living in tents, looking after sheep—you would start to see them differently, and you might realize that this was the problem with every invader who tried to rule this land. They made no effort to understand these people.

So, if you had the chance to have a closer look, you would discover this—they know their land, they are the masters there. They don't attack, but protecting their land and their women is their definition of masculinity. If that were to fail, they could no longer exist, their life would have lost its purpose. Sharply clever by nature, they are generous men of few words, but that all can change in a second. If you come seeking protection, they will protect you no matter what. But if you come as an invader, the volcano that shaped their land thousands of years ago will suddenly erupt. Anger becomes madness—they will be willing to burn themselves down as long as you burn along with them.

The middle class, the majority of this society, provides the community with agricultural products and traditional industries, along with intellectuals, doctors, engineers, officers and skilled workers. This is a community that understands that education is its best and only weapon. They are the writers, poets, artists and athletes. They are the ones who dream of a better country, freedom and democracy, with no corruption. They would be the ones who started protesting, armed with songs from their wedding parties and the principles of their ancestors.

We used to go to the farm every weekend during the summer, and I was not a huge fan. It was hard work, physically demanding—far from the city, friends and TV—and so quiet it was scary. But it was enough for us that my father loved it, a hobby among many, so we went with him, and during the olive harvest the whole family, including my mother and older sister, Solaf, would work. Over time, I started to understand why my father took us with him—so we could know the value of the land and the trees, and that there is happiness in labour and being productive. But mostly he wanted to remind us of our heritage.

One typical summer weekend when I was in Grade Seven, my father and I were having our break under the shadow of an olive tree. The sunlight penetrated the shade through the leaves, a breeze was moving the twigs, and I was trying to sway with it to avoid the heat. Behind us, a hose nourished the same tree, well water so cold and fresh it seemed to come directly from heaven, hitting the red soil with a sound like a small fountain, turning it into something that looked like chocolate and sending a distinctive smell in the air. It sticks with me to this day, the sound of the water and the smell of the soil after rain.

In front of us lay our breakfast, a simple meal of olives, black and green, thyme with olive oil, yogurt, flatbread, cucumber, green onion, green mint, tomato and extra-sweet tea, the way the farmers prefer it, the sugar giving them the energy to continue working. Because I was never a fan of tea or sugar, I was pretending to drink just to fit in.

Without any introduction, my father put down his tea glass, took a quick look around, smiling at the trees, then turned to me and said, "I grew you both together, you know, you and the trees. They are almost your age. Don't let them die thirsty! Add some more rooms to the house, furnish it appropriately, install electricity, plant the remaining land and, no matter what happens, don't sell the farm. It is your and your kids' connection to this village, to your roots."

I still don't know why he picked that day, long before the war started, to remind me of my legacy. But I could feel the presence of history, smell it all over the place, and I looked at him with my eyes narrowed, so he would be able to tell how serious I was and that I understood him. I said just a few words, but it was enough for him to let me drive the car almost two kilometres back to the village as a reward. I think he was looking for some kind of reassurance, to make sure that his message had been heard. What I had said to him was, "If they gave me the weight of this farm in gold, I would not sell it."