

The Gates of Damascus



Someone else's things are in the house: school notebooks that don't belong to Asma, a cardboard box of cheap cookies Hala would never buy, a small bottle of Syrian perfume. My cupboard is full of junk, and there's an unfamiliar dress hanging on the line.

Hala comes in around noon, in a hurry, plastic bags full of groceries in both hands. She looks tired – her face is swollen. 'I thought you'd never come back!' We hug, clumsily as always.

'We have guests,' she says.

'Yes, I noticed.'

'Sahar and Aisha, they're not staying long.' Sahar is a Christian, I suddenly remember, her husband a Muslim. There you have it – the religious differences everyone has been talking about during the last few days don't apply to Hala and her friends.

'Have you heard the news? They say the prisoners are going to be released. Sahar is having her house fixed up; that's why she's staying here.'

'What about Ahmed?'

Hala shrugs. 'He asked me to bring him his winter clothes. That means he's planning to stay for a while.'

She begins peeling potatoes in the kitchen; the children will be coming home any minute. I bring in the folding table from the hallway, pull up a plastic chair and apply myself to the green beans. Hala gives me a searching look. 'How was it? Anything interesting happen?' She sounds skeptical.

I tell her about Father Léon's weird cap, the grumbling hikers, the ups and downs of Louise's love life. I suddenly realize that when I arrived in Syria I didn't even know whether Hala was a Christian or a Muslim – we didn't talk about those things back then.

'Do you consider me a typical Christian? Have you ever thought of me that way?'

Hala laughs in surprise. 'No, what makes you think that?'

'Oh, I don't know, I just wondered.'

She says nothing more about it. She doesn't seem at all interested in what's preoccupying me. She tells me about Tété, Zahra, Shirin and Farid. Every name she mentions is accompanied by a heartfelt 'umph!'. Shirin has moved in with

Farid. 'You know what? The cows wake them up every morning.' Hala makes a disgusted face. To wake to rural sounds – as a city dweller, she can't imagine anything worse. 'Farid is used to it, of course, but Shirin...' She lights the oven, puts in a casserole dish of potatoes, onions and ground beef, and says peevishly: 'Just the thing for them, they can drink fresh milk every day.'

Tété is worried sick that they 'll want to move in with her again before long; after all, how can they make it through the winter without heating? 'She's begging me to come and live with her for the next few months,' Hala laughs. 'She says I can even bring you along!' Asma's school is closer to her house, Tété reasons, and it would save on the heating bill. 'The price of oil has gone up again: one hundred pounds for two days' worth. How can a family ever afford that on a monthly salary of two thousand pounds?'

'But everyone here has more than one income, don't they?'

It pops out before I know it. That's what Father Léon says, and he's right too, everyone here has something going on the side. But Hala isn't used to having me contradict her – until now, she's been my principal source of information about this country. 'No, not at all,' she protests, 'most people have to make do with just their salary.' More and more children are being sent out to work, she says. Every morning on the way to the university she passes a little boy, who must be about eight, selling bread; when she comes home in the afternoon, he's still standing there.

How long have I been gone? Barely three days, but Hala talks to me as if I've just come from abroad, as though I know nothing about what goes on here! Before I have time to reply, Asma and Aisha rush in. They throw their schoolbags on the floor, change their clothes and lock themselves in the front room with a Madonna tape.

Hala tosses my clothes in the washing machine, sweeps the courtyard, scolds the neighbors who have their TV on much too loudly, runs back and forth between the kitchen and the bedroom, and grumbles the whole time about a colleague of hers at the university. He knows nothing about the subject he teaches – what he would really like to do, she says, is become head of the *mukhabarat* (the Syrian security police).

Gradually I feel my defiance ebb away. The clarity of the last few days, the empty desert landscape, the broad hallways in Ibrahim's house, the cool guest room with its high bed – it all starts to seem like a mirage. I'm back at the school of hard knocks.

After dinner, Hala, Sahar and I lie on the bed in our nightgowns. Asma and Aisha are doing their homework in the front room, and Madonna blares through the walls. Sahar is excited by the rumors about the release of the prisoners. Aisha and she have already been to the tailor's for new dresses.

'You'll never guess who I ran into this morning,' Hala interrupts her. 'Who?' 'Omayya!' Omayya's husband was released a few years ago after fifteen years in prison. 'Well?' Sahar asks inquisitively, 'what did she say?' 'She cried, right there on the street. "Don't wait for your husbands," she said. "I waited so long for mine and now I wish they'd lock him up again."' "

'Why?' I ask.

Hala sighs. 'He's become old, he doesn't know how to be happy anymore. The only thing he thinks about is how his friends in prison are doing.'

'Did you see Tadmor prison?' Sahar wants to know.

I shake my head. 'No, *abuna Léon* wasn't so interested in that.'

I tell her about Louise. 'By the way, how did you do it? Weren't your parents opposed to your marrying a Muslim?'

Sahar thinks about it. 'At first they were, but later on not anymore.'

'What if they had tried to stop you, what would you have done then?'

She laughs. 'I didn't need their approval, it was my life. We belonged to the same political movement, we didn't care much about religion - we had other things on our minds!' I'm reminded of what a Lebanese acquaintance once told me about leftists in the Arab world. They had done nothing to change tribal consciousness, he said, they had simply started a new tribe: the communist one. There they found the security they had known before among their own people.

That night Hala and I sleep in the same bed again. We both lie dreaming, tossing and turning. In my student quarters in Utrecht I find that three little urchins have moved in with me. I try to explain to my roommates that I can't work with these kids around, but no one understands what I'm so worked up about.

Hala dreams that she's at a reception, where she meets a very bad Egyptian actress. While she's talking to her, she suddenly discovers that she forgot to put on her shoes. She's embarrassed: a faculty member of the University of Damascus without footwear! But a bit later she feels an enormous rage welling up inside her. She looks at the actress with fire in her eyes and shouts that she doesn't even *want* to talk to her.

I'm startled awake by the rasping gutturals of the muezzin in the nearby mosque. It's still dark outside. *Allahu akbar, Allaaaah* ...It sounds like he's sitting in the

corner of the room. How have I been able to sleep through this for the last few months? Once my eyes become adjusted to the dark, I see that Hala is awake too. She looks at me and smiles, but says nothing.

At first, Asma was wild about her new paramilitary uniform. She put it on as soon as Hala brought it home, stuck a toy pistol in her wide leather belt, took her whistle out of the drawer and ran outside. She wanted to keep it on as long as she could at night. It took some getting used to – it was like having a little soldier around the house. After her bath she would lie in front of the TV in her pajamas, her kepi on her head.

But the first morning she had to go to school in uniform, she acted bashful. She turned endlessly before the mirror in the hall, schoolbag strapped to her back. At the bus stop she was reluctant to join her classmates; some of the girls were wearing white headscarves with their uniforms.

By now the novelty has worn off: after school she kicks off her khaki pants in the bedroom, her shirt and kepi fly through the air. One afternoon Hala picks up the pants with a sigh and discovers a tear in them. 'Look at this – what a little monkey, these have to last her six years!' Schoolbooks and notebooks with pictures of Assad on the covers lie tossed all around. Classroom stories seep into the house and begin coloring our lives.

Asma would like to be put in a different class, where more of her former classmates are, but when she asked the teacher about it, her reply was: 'Do you have a *wasta*?' This same teacher appointed one of the girls to inform her about everything that goes on behind her back. 'That's how they teach children to spy, even at this age,' Hala sighs.

Sometimes we pick up Asma from school. In the taxi one afternoon she asks: 'Mama, are the *ikhwan muslimin* – Muslim Brothers – bad people?' Hala looks at the taxi driver in alarm, signals to Asma to talk more softly and whispers: 'Why do you ask that?' Asma says they learned a new song at school. Later, when we sit down to dinner at the kitchen table, she sings it for us. It goes like this:

*We vow to combat imperialism
and Zionism, and backwardness,
and that their criminal accomplices, the Muslim Brothers,
we shall destroy*

They have to sing that every morning in the playground. The last line in particular echoes in Asma's mind. 'But do you know who the *ikhwan* are?' Hala asks. 'Those

are the boys in prison with Papa, the ones who sometimes come over to say hello when we visit him. Remember Rafik? Does he look like a bad person?’

No, Asma has to admit, Rafik doesn’t look like a bad person. She eats her soup slowly, deep in thought. Then she asks another question. It has something to do with me, although I can’t find out right away what it is. Hala answers her quietly, but Asma’s voice keeps getting louder. She angrily brushes aside all Hala’s demurrals. I listen in amazement: this demagogic tone is so foreign to Asma, it’s as if a fourth person had joined us at the table.

‘What are you two talking about?’

Hala is visibly embarrassed. ‘Asma wants to know why you don’t become a Muslim.’

I laugh. ‘How did she come up with that?’

‘Oh, the things people say around her ...Christians believe that Mary is the mother of Jesus, they say, and therefore the wife of God, which is impossible according to Islam.’

‘Where does Asma get these stories?’

‘From her religion teacher, apparently.’

Asma gives me a fierce look; the fire of this morning’s religion class burns on. Islam is the most recent religion, her teacher said, and therefore the best.

‘What do you tell her?’ I ask Hala.

‘What can I tell her? I don’t want to say things that will get her into trouble at school, I don’t want her to become alienated from her classmates. I can only hope she’ll eventually discover the truth herself, like I did.’

Asma has left the table. Hala follows her with her eyes as she runs outside with her whistle around her neck. This isn’t the first time they’ve had these discussions. Last spring Asma came home from school thoroughly upset. At first she didn’t want to talk about what had happened. She just wanted to cry, she said, that’s how bad she felt. That evening Hala suggested that they take a walk, like two grown-ups who have something important to talk about. During the walk it all came out, bit by bit. A girlfriend had told her that Mohammed didn’t receive his knowledge directly from Allah, the way the religion teacher said, but from Buhayra, a Christian monk he met on one of his journeys. It’s a story Christians often tell about the Prophet – Hala had heard it before. ‘And it’s probably true; of course Islam adopted some things from Christianity.’

‘Did you tell her that?’

‘Oh no. I can’t tell her everything I’m thinking. To me, Islam is an old carpet:

beautiful to look at, but old nonetheless. But if I told her that and her teacher heard it, she'd think I was a communist!' She stares sadly into space. 'Who knows, maybe the things they teach Asma at school are a good preparation for times to come. Maybe before long there won't be any place for ideas like Ahmed's and mine.'

The TV is on, the cassette recorder is playing and the folding table has been moved from the kitchen to the front room - Asma is doing her homework. Sometimes she calls Hala in to help. They bicker about the law of gravity: Asma doesn't understand it, Hala can't explain it. That evening Hala has to quiz her. Another person takes possession of Asma as she recites her lessons, her legs folded under her, her body held taut as a wire. Sometimes I recognize the rhetorical, hollow tone of the speeches of Arab leaders; at other times, the entreating voice of the imam in the mosque. When she's in a good mood, I'm allowed to test her French. Her textbook was published in 1971. It contains drawings of French children, of cats and dogs and French villages in the snow - 'every Sunday, Delphine and Marinette go to church with their parents'.

I'm amazed at the complicated French sentences Asma is able to recite by heart; little stories by Guy de Maupassant, poems by Victor Hugo. They're delivered in tight little packages, with not a single word left out. Afterwards, when I ask her a simple question that isn't in the book, she laughs shyly and Hala has to translate what I've said.

'Did you learn everything by heart too?' I ask Hala.

'No, at least not that way. A military regime doesn't want people to think', she says, 'it would rather have them recite everything.'

That evening I have to go to Father Léon's house to drop off the things I borrowed from him. 'Maybe I'll ask him to come by and visit us sometime,' I say. 'I'm sure both of you would like him.'

When I come home Asma is already asleep. Hala is lying on the bed in her room reading *Le harem politique: Le Prophète et les femmes* by the Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi. Not the prophet again! Father Léon was right when he said that the Sunni Muslims wallow in Islamic history.

Hala looks up from her book. 'Interesting?' I ask. She doesn't fail to notice the irony in my voice - she senses exactly what's on my mind since my walk through the desert with Father Léon. She nods. 'But I never thought I'd read something like this.'

‘So why are you reading it?’

She puts down the book with a sigh. ‘Did you hear Asma at the table this afternoon? That teacher of hers comes up with the biggest nonsense about Islam, just like the fundamentalists. I want to be able to defend myself when people attack me, and I can do that better with the words of the Prophet himself than with Marx or Sartre. Do you think people understood Ahmed and his friends when they talked about communism? No, they only understand the language of religion.’ Even the communists realized that after a while, she says, but just when they were trying to find common ground with the Muslim Brothers, to form a united front, they were arrested.

She likes the book. ‘There’s even something in it that will appeal to you.’ She reads me a passage in which Mernissi explains that, to Westerners, the past is like dessert, while Arabs regard it as the main dish.

Hala is sitting up now and laughs secretively. ‘Asma and I had an interesting talk after you left.’

‘About what?’

‘How can Father Léon come to visit us, he’s a Christian priest, isn’t he?’ Asma had asked as soon as I pulled the door shut behind me.

‘That doesn’t mean he can’t come to visit us.’ Hala had said.

‘But the Christians don’t like us, do they?’

‘Who says they don’t? Where did you hear that?’

‘I can tell at school,’ Asma said. ‘The Christian children always play by themselves, they don’t like us.’

‘What about Sahar, she doesn’t have anything against us, does she?’

Asma had to think about that one. Sahar, that was different, she said.

‘And what about Lieve? She’s a Christian too.’

Asma thought again. ‘Maybe she’s not a real Christian,’ she wavered. When Hala insisted that I was, Asma ruled: ‘No, Lieve is Lieve.’

It’s growing cooler in the streets of Damascus – Hala had warned me that the seasons change abruptly around here. Close to Tété’s house, little stands selling prickly pear have appeared, and Tété has spent days bottling citrus fruit and *makdous* – eggplants stuffed with walnuts and hot peppers. At home, Hala puts away the floor fan and covers the bed with heavy blankets. She buys fresh olives at the market and pickles them in brine. They taste bitter, but the Damascenes like them that way – it goes with the season.

The smell of autumn is in the air, an intimate, cosy smell that reconciles me to the

domesticity of my life in Damascus. The jasmine tree has lost its scent, the leaves of the fig tree in the courtyard have begun to change color and there's a new sound in our street: *Blooopblooop, blooopblooop*. The first time she hears it, Hala pricks up her ears and runs outside. It's the man who sells heating oil; there's a barrel on the roof that he fills to the rim.

The cigarette boys squat down together in the evening and warm their hands at the chestnut-seller's fire. Whenever I get out of the taxi and see them in the distance, my heart begins to pound. Their leader's leather jacket shines under the streetlights. Ever since I saw him coming out of his house with his groggy face and wrinkled T-shirt, I've felt a peculiar bond with him. But he himself seems to have lost his bravura since that meeting. His friends still judge him when I come by, but he no longer calls out to me, he only looks at me out of the corner of his eye.

His presence imparts a certain wistfulness to our street. One evening when he's not there I saunter home, disappointed, searching for a glimpse of his jacket and his proud head with its combed-back hair. Suddenly I remember Siham's story. She lived in a neighborhood just like this one, in the old part of Baghdad. As she was walking home one evening, a young man came up to her. He pressed his body against hers and she smelled his breath - he had been drinking. He kissed her, hard and desperately. She was too stunned to resist, but before she even realized what had happened, he murmured 'Excuse me, excuse me' and ran off around the corner. Only then did she smell his scent - a pleasant, spicy smell. For months the mysterious meeting was on her mind: she kept feeling his body against hers, smelling his scent. She searched for him in every young man she came across. She was twenty-five when I met her; that stolen kiss in the night seemed the most substantial thing that had ever happened to her.

Hala and Asma are taking a bath together. They talk and chortle like turtle doves; I listen to them with a mixture of tenderness and envy. They're discussing who's the best hairdresser in Damascus, Georges or Johnny. Wrapped in her robe, a towel around her head, Hala comes walking into the bedroom - 'Oh, are you back already?' Asma calls from the bathroom to ask for a robe, using her sweetest voice. 'Coming right up, *ya habibi*.'

Hala winks at me. *Habibi*, my dearest, is a masculine form of address.

'My daughter is growing up,' Hala whispers laughingly. Not long ago, Asma was looking at herself in the mirror in the hall. 'When will the boys start calling out to me?' she wanted to know. 'Soon,' Hala said, 'but only if you start dressing less

boyishly. They won't whistle at you if you always wear jeans.' Some time after that, Asma asked her about the difference between a girl and a married woman. Hala gave her a vague answer about a married woman usually working more around the house and taking care of the children, but that apparently wasn't what Asma was waiting to hear. Tonight she started talking about it again. 'Mama, is it true that girls have something fragile inside them?' She heard that from Leila, one of her girlfriends at school. When a woman marries, Leila claims, that delicate membrane gets broken. 'And if a woman is divorced and then marries again, Mama, does it grow back by itself?'

The curse of virginity! The same curse Hala decided to shake off at the age of eighteen. 'It all repeats itself,' she says. When Asma comes out of the tub she throws herself on the bed and looks at me, eyes gleaming, still under the spell of the chatter in the steam bath. Her hair is wet, her skin glistens, she smells soapy, and when I reach out an arm to her she snuggles up to me.

She peers at Hala through her wet hair. 'Tell Lieve about Rami,' she says. Rami is a classmate she's had a crush on for months. Of course I've already heard all about him, but Hala plays along. Asma shows me the picture she keeps in her wallet, next to the one of her father: a plump little boy with a worried expression – not exactly what you'd call a playboy. But Rami is popular, and Asma isn't his only girlfriend: she's second in a line of five. While Hala combs her unruly curls, Asma announces that she's going to invite him over for lunch next week. When he comes, she says sternly, Hala and I will have to stay out of the room.

That evening she lies in front of the TV and sings along exuberantly with the commercials for Lebanese shampoo, powdered milk and corn oil. She changes channels with her foot. Suddenly, Assad appears on the screen, seated across from a blonde female journalist. They're talking about the peace conference in Madrid. Hala comes in from the kitchen. 'This was taped at his new residence,' she remarks. 'See those enormous vases? Just like in Saudi palaces.'

'What's he saying?'

'Wait, they'll translate it in a bit.' She's right: later we see the interview again, this time subtitled in English and French.

Assad's shirt is blue, then white, depending on the quality of the reception. The American journalist asks him about political freedom in Syria. Assad smiles affably and points out that there are only two political parties in America, but seven in Syria. 'And now the only thing we'll hear for days is how wonderful the

Americans think our president is,' Hala grumbles.

Tomorrow she has to visit Ahmed; the preparations take up all her time. In the bedroom I find her standing high on the ladder, her head practically hidden in a leather suitcase on top of the cupboard. She pulls out a baggy beige sweater and looks at it lovingly. 'I knitted this for Ahmed myself.' She tosses it to me. 'Put it on the pile. It doesn't look so great anymore, but Ahmed would wonder why it wasn't there, he'd think something was going on.' He still wears the blue shirt he had on when he was arrested, even though it's in tatters by now.

'Maybe I should buy him a shirt,' I say.

'You'll probably still be here when he comes home.' Hala has turned around.

'Don't you think? You heard what Sahar said, didn't you? The prisoners are going to be released. After all, Assad has to show the Americans that he's a real democrat!' She laughs. 'Nothing's happened around here for eleven years, then you come along and everything happens at once. The presidential elections are coming up in December. There's no way you can leave now.'

'But I can't just wait here until they free Ahmed. Who knows how long that will take? I can't stay away that long. What would my boyfriend say...?'

'Why don't you have him come over?'

'And stay in this little house?'

'We could all move out to Wadi al-Nakhleh.'

'And take Ahmed along?'

'Why not? Or maybe Ahmed would rather stay here alone.'

'I'd have to have my winter clothes brought over from Holland, and send my summer things back.'

'I'd wait before sending those summer things if I were you. Maybe you'll still be here next summer.'

It's nice to bob along on her sea of fantasy. The air suddenly tingles with excitement again, and the end of my stay fades into the indefinite. Who knows, maybe important things are about to happen here.

Hala has come down from the ladder. The floor of the cupboard is covered with more plastic bags full of things. Last winter she was in mourning for her father - she hasn't looked at her winter clothes for two years.

'Take a look at this.' She sits down in the cupboard and hands me a light-pink compact. '*Amour absolu*' is printed on the lid in graceful letters. I open the little box and carefully pick up the powder puff. 'It's at least forty years old,' Hala says.

'It was one of my mother's wedding presents.'

'And from the looks of things she never used it.'

'No, she gave it to me just like this.' She carefully wraps the box back up in its white tissue. Sighing, she explores further. 'All this junk, what am I going to do with it?' She pulls out a muff with a fake gold chain, stands before the mirror and presses it to her side coquettishly. 'What do you think?' It's not her style. 'I'll wear it when Ahmed comes home.' We both know that's not true.

She digs in the cupboard again and comes back up with a black shawl with a picture of St. Peter's on it. 'Remember that Italian cinematographer in Baghdad? She gave me this.'

'And you put it in the cupboard right away.'

'Sure, what else would I do with it?' I catch a glimpse of the little bathrobe and the T-shirt with a motorcyclist on it that I brought for Asma. Meanwhile, Hala has run across three flat boxes with silk nightgowns in them. 'Look, I bought these when I thought Ahmed was coming home.' Pink and light-blue little nothings with bows – she's never worn them and she wonders whether they're still in fashion.

'Why don't you give them to Shirin? I'm sure she'd be happy to have them.'

Hala looks at me from between the piles of clothing, incomprehension on her face.

'But Lieve, these are my dreams!'

'How do I look?' She's standing in the doorway, bags full of winter clothes and books in each hand, taut from head to toe, braced for the journey. 'Well, those earrings...' The silver hoops with tinkling bells and blue stones are much too heavy for her little face. 'Ahmed likes them,' she says bravely, 'I do it for him.'

This time she's going alone. I hug her – now it's as though she's the one going on a trip. But it's only a little past noon when I hear the gate open again. She has his summer clothes with her, and a present for me: a pen box made of wood and palm resin, decorated with copper arabesques and lined with red velour.

She collapses on the couch. 'If you knew what I've been through this morning!' She had to wait forever before they let her in, so she started talking to the woman in front of her, someone she'd never seen before. 'Is your husband in there?' The woman nodded. 'Politics?' The woman turned up her nose in contempt. 'No, money.' She looked at Hala without a smidgen of curiosity. 'What about you?' Hala thrust her chin in the air and said: 'Politics.' Neither of them said a thing for a moment; Hala was trying to imagine what 'money' could be about. 'Bribes?' she enquired. The woman threw her a withering glance: 'That's what they say.'

The rumors about the political prisoners being released had made everyone nervous. When their names were finally called, they saw that the guards had an enormous dog with them to sniff out any drugs being smuggled in. Some of the women were frightened and started screaming. The dog was as big as a pony, and Hala didn't dare walk past it either. One woman took the bag of sugar she'd brought for her son and threw it at the guards. This caused such a commotion that they had to take the dog away.

Then, out of revenge, the guards began skimping on the food the women had brought for the prisoners. They confiscated Ahmed's mother's homemade *kibbe*, and another woman had to leave behind a plate of fish. 'They're afraid to surrender power,' Hala says, 'they want to show us they're still the boss.' But the women protested so loudly that the guards finally had to give in again.

'What did Ahmed say?'

'He doesn't know. He's hoping, but at the same time he's afraid to hope.' A smile crosses her face. 'He says he'll cook when he comes home, and that he wants at least four more children. I just let him talk, I didn't feel like arguing with him.'

She looks at me, a gleam of amusement in her eyes. 'He even said I should try to convince you to have children!'

The Jordanian spy he had spent a lot of time with had been transferred to the prison at Tadmor, making Ahmed's life a lot less interesting. 'In fact, he's desperate. If he were a criminal he'd at least know how long he had to serve, but this way... no one knows when it will be over.' Some of the prisoners have been called in by the *mukhabarat*. Since then all kinds of rumors have been making the rounds about a document the prisoners have to sign before being released.

'What would Ahmed do in that case?'

'That depends on what he has to sign,' she says despondently. 'Leaving the prison with his tail between his legs after serving eleven years for his ideals - that's not Ahmed's style.'

Campaign posters start appearing in the streets of Damascus. I look around wide-eyed. At the beginning of a busy shopping street hangs a banner reading: 'The shopkeepers of Salhieh say 'yes' to President Assad, the true Damascene'. The bit about the 'true Damascene' in particular makes Hala laugh. Armored vehicles with photographs of the president zip by, and amateur painters give their fantasy free rein: from the side of a bank in the center of town, Assad's stern features stare down at us from a canvas twenty meters high. Elsewhere they've given him

a baby face and fat little arms – just like a cherub.

Meanwhile, the peace talks are rapidly approaching. One morning in bed I hear the BBC correspondent wonder aloud whether there are enough halal restaurants in Madrid; in the front room, Hala is listening to Radio Monte Carlo. We don't learn much from the Syrian press, and Hala says that's the way it will stay – the journalists Syria has sent to Madrid are notorious dunces. They speak only Arabic, but that doesn't matter – they'll obediently write whatever their editor-in-chief tells them to. On the first day of the conference, Hala and I are out running errands for Tété. Am I only imagining things, or is the city in a more subdued mood than usual? In the taxi everyone listens tensely to the radio; no one says a word. I think of Sadat, who signed the Camp David agreements – two years later he was dead.

Most of the sellers at the *souq* are also glued to the radio. Now that things have come this far, I feel a slight exhilaration, but when I look at Hala I see tears running down her cheeks. 'For years they've been stirring us up against Israel, and now they suddenly go over our heads and cook up something completely different!' She takes a handkerchief from her bag. 'No one ever asks us a thing, they do exactly what they want.' I can imagine her sense of helplessness. Her years of passive resistance have been fruitless; the world has rolled on without her.

'It's all so confusing,' she says defiantly. 'If only they'd just say what it's all about – but while our Minister of Foreign Affairs sits at the table with the president of Israel, the papers still talk about the 'Zionist foe'. Assad puts on his left blinker, but turns right.'

We have lunch at Tété's. Farid and Shirin are there too. Suddenly Tété says: 'May Allah punish the Israelis and undo everything that happens today in Madrid.' The sentence clatters on the table like a weapon, but no one picks it up. Farid acts as though he has heard nothing. Hala looks at me conspiratorially – even she doesn't harbor such radical thoughts. 'My mother has been listening to the radio all morning,' she says in an attempt to smooth things over. 'The Israelis are keeping up the bombing of southern Lebanon.' For her mother, this conference is unacceptable. 'It's like...', Hala searches for an accurate comparison, 'like someone asking her to walk down the street in a bathing suit.'

Back at the house, Hala turns on the TV right away. 'Maybe Assad has decided in his infinite goodness to give us back Jordanian TV.' She flips through the

channels, hoping against hope. Jordanian TV is much more varied than its Syrian counterpart, but it's been jammed ever since the Gulf War, because Jordan sided with Iraq. This evening we once again have to settle for the Syrian news.

The camera roams from the Palestinian speaker to al-Sharaa, the Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs, and from him to the Jordanian delegation. There we have Shevardnadze, then Baker... no sign of the Israelis. We sit in front of the TV for the next three evenings. The speeches by the members of the Arab delegation are broadcast in their entirety: endless, numbing monologues that blend in with the monotonous drone of Asma reciting her lessons.

Hala remains on an emotional roller-coaster. At somber moments she says that these talks will cost the Alawites dearly, that they will bear the eternal shame of being the first to make contact with the Israelis. Then she complains about how the Israeli delegation is kept off-camera. 'Al-Sharaa is sitting in the same room with Shamir,' she shouts one evening in desperation, 'why can't I see that, what do they have to hide?' We remain hopeful to the bitter end, but when the conference is over we still haven't caught a glimpse of the Israelis.

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Lieve Joris

Lieve Joris, who was born in Belgium and lives in Amsterdam, is one of Europe's leading nonfiction writers. She has written an award-winning book on Hungary and published widely acclaimed reports of her journeys in the Middle East and Africa. Her books about the Middle East include *De Golf* (The Gulf) and *The Gates of Damascus*.

In 1985 she set sail to the former Belgian colony of Zaire, where her great-uncle had been a missionary. The journey resulted in *Back to the Congo*. 'For years we have been without a major book about Africa,' the Polish writer Ryszard Kapuściński wrote. 'Lieve Joris' book fills this painful, rather disgraceful void.' Congo became a recurring theme in her work, leading successively to *Dans van de luipaard* (The Leopard's Dance), *The Rebels' Hour* and *De hoogvlaktes* (The High Plains). *The Rebels' Hour* was nominated for the T.R. Fyvel Book Award. For the French edition of *The High Plains*, Joris was awarded the Prix Nicolas Bouvier 2009.

Mali Blues, the account of her travels through Senegal, Mauretania and Mali, gained Joris the Belgian triennial award for Flemish prose (1999) and the French Prix de l'Astrolabe 1999.

Joris' books have been translated into English, French, German, Spanish, Catalan, Norwegian, Hungarian and Polish. She is currently travelling back and forth between Africa and China, doing research for her new book.

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