

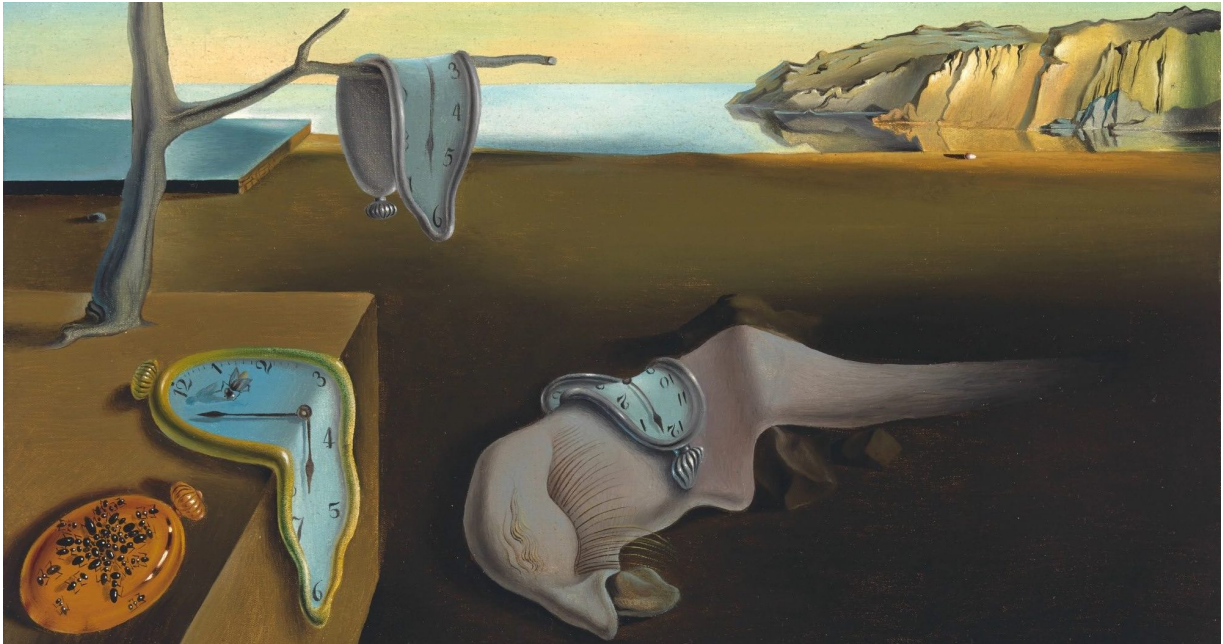
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Waiting for “amnesty”

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For Syrian political prisoners and their families, life is a perennial wait for an amnesty that in many cases never comes, writes the daughter of a political prisoner who would later be incarcerated herself in turn.

1999

The telephone rang. Thanks to the caller ID service newly introduced to Syria's telecommunications system, we could see it was a foreign number. When I answered, I heard my aunt's voice, panting as though she were about to have a nervous breakdown.

"I read his name in the paper! I swear to God Almighty! It was written wrong, but it was his name. They're saying there's an amnesty... and his name... is written... wrong!"

Waiting is the central theme of most of my memories from that period and the one prior to it. In 1992, some of us were not even aware that one (or both) of our parents were political prisoners. We were young enough to believe the lie our elders told us; that they'd traveled to a faraway place for work, to secure a better life for us all. The lack of technology at the time made it easier to believe the lie; the explanation that their workplace had no phone sufficed for us to accept their absence, even when for some it lasted five full years. All that remained of their presence were the memories recounted by our grandmothers; and the letters full of longing, and orders to behave well, and promises of a brighter future—letters which one of our kind aunts would write in secret and read aloud to us, the children suffering temporary orphanhood, between bouts of crying.

When rumors of an amnesty abounded in 1999, however, life began to take on a new form. For us children and adolescents, the prospect of an amnesty meant going through the happy preparations that always preceded the monthly visit, only this time for longer. The regular preparations would take up the entire day before the scheduled visit, with food being readied and necessities purchased. When the amnesty rumors circulated, on the

other hand, houses would go many days in a row fragrant with the smell of the missing people's favorite dishes, the mothers somehow becoming more beautiful. They were times of unprovoked smiles from ear to ear; the replacing of old clothes with new ones; and a sudden smooth sheen to the ladies' legs, the cause of which mystified us.

Once the rumors fizzled away without result, I recall the unceasing fury in the elders that we youngsters couldn't comprehend. Disappointment and helplessness overturned all the preceding festivities.

I've never since been able to grasp the psychological repercussions on the mothers, wives, and lovers who were let down on that occasion. All I can remember, and could understand at that age, were, first, that the waiting ended in astonishing bitterness, the likes of which I haven't seen since, not even after all the subsequent disappointments; and, second, that perhaps my father wasn't released because his name was written wrong!

2000

On June 10th, I left an evening class of a preparatory course for high school. The vibe among the students gathered outside the institute suggested something terrible; they were whispering to each other with fearful faces.

I heard what they were whispering, but didn't believe it. I wasn't able to absorb the fact that the miracle had happened. I thought death was something that only

happened to ordinary people like myself and those I loved, not to a colossus with the power of ruling people's lives. I went to the phone booth on the main road and dialed our home number. Within an instant, I heard my mother's stern voice.

"Come right now."

"Does it mean Dad...?"

"Come right now!"

Ordinarily, I was forbidden to take taxis except in emergencies. I wasn't yet seventeen years old, and as a girl raised by her mother alone, the fears for my safety were compounded. The gravity of this event, however, necessitated throwing caution to the wind.

I got out the taxi, leaving the stunned driver and the radio that had begun playing the Quran. I ran to my house, tripping and tearing a shoe in the process, continuing barefoot, repeating the words, "Dad, Dad, Dad!" as though he were waiting there for me.

What would his smell be? I wondered. His voice? His appearance when he woke up? Would his hands feel cold to the touch, as they did during my visits? If so, how would he respond if I brought up the French saying, "Cold hands, warm heart"?

I entered the house, where everyone was crying out of "joy." One of the cousins—who didn't know the missing uncle—remarked that tears of joy look like tears of grief.

Forty days passed, and the new orphan president showed

no intention of pardoning the prisoners of conscience his late father had incarcerated during his thirty years in power.

Only after another year had passed was my father released at last in an “amnesty,” after more than fourteen years in prison, just a few months before the end of his sentence. The word “amnesty” has left a bitter taste in my mouth ever since.

2007

In 2007, a referendum on a new presidential term was scheduled to take place. I was happy with my job in one of the largest companies in the country, despite the fact it was linked to the economic interests of the regime.

Hats adorned with the president’s photo were distributed among us, along with flags and CDs containing the newly-produced songs inspired by the occasion. I couldn’t throw these away, so I kept them in the drawer and took them with me at the end of the day. I planned to get rid of them and pretend to have forgotten about them.

The rumors of an amnesty were a feature of the “elections,” and I allowed myself to hope that my brother Thaer would return to us, after the second anniversary of his arrest following a report accusing him of working to overthrow the regime, years after he took part in one of the “Damascus Spring” gatherings. I thought that, perhaps, my participation in the summer celebrations might suffice to

dispel the “Spring”-related accusations against my brother.

I entered the office on the morning of the appointed day full of conflicting feelings. Don't even think of escaping. Days off are forbidden today, even for medical reasons. Your absence would be a mark of shame on your employment record, and wouldn't help your brother at all.

I turned on my computer and opened YouTube. The new CDs were playing throughout the whole building. I loaded up the Julia Boutros song, “I Breathe Freedom, Don't Cut Off My Air,” but was too scared to turn the volume up.

That day, I was driven to commit my first act of treason. I'd never participated in a referendum before; frankly I had no interest in it, just as no one had any interest in my vote. Yet showing loyalty on this occasion was a requirement for my job and my brother's safety.

2014

Date: 21 May, 2014. Location: Al-Malki Street, Damascus, heading towards the Assad Library. Banners of support and early celebration walled both sides of the road. The city looked like a lady of the night finished with her business, naked, shameless, undesirable—but whose tears you could smell and eyeliner you could see running down her cheeks if you came closer.

Once again, I was waiting for an amnesty. This time, it was because Thaer hadn't been able to restrain the blood

pumping in his veins—his name, after all, means “revolutionary.” Four years after his release, he was arrested again after an injury in a demonstration in mid-2012.

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Date: June 2014. Location: My room, after returning from visiting a friend in [Adra Women's Prison](#).

Faten refused to vote, despite being in a place where refusal is not an option. There, all acts are supposed to become meaningless, relegated to the sole aim of survival—yet Faten refused to carry out meaningless acts.

I initially met Faten in 2011, at the first demonstration I attended. She caught my eye that day, with her spirit full of energy and hope. When I heard she'd been shot three days prior, I was shocked. I asked her how she was so crazy as to take part in a demonstration where she might have to dodge a barrage of bullets while her wounds were still fresh. “Freedom is written with blood!” she replied. She was crazy enough for the task; I, on the other hand, had been a coward due to my fears for Thaer. After that answer of hers, however, I was a coward no more.

Later I learned that, for Faten, dignity too was “written in blood.” I started searching madly for news about her on the Internet. I also searched for the video of the demonstration that brought us together. What she did had given me a new sense of hope—I'm not alone, I'm not alone! Faten is still

here, and she's not alone either. Hundreds of Fatens and Thaers remain steadfast here and elsewhere, each of them engaged in acts that are anything but meaningless.

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Date: 9 June, 2014. The result of the referendum was announced, and along with it an unexpected amnesty. No one had been waiting for either of these. What we had been waiting for was Faten and Thaer—yet neither one of them came.

December 2015

At three o'clock in the morning, the cold biting my limbs, I walked the streets of Beirut. My nostalgia didn't warm me up, but Beirut is warmer than Damascus—Damascus, which I had thought the warmest city in the world.

But, of course, Beirut is a coastal city. Yet you know another coastal city? Latakia.

Ever since my mother's first visit to Beirut, she's always said we have the most beautiful beach in the world, "but the government doesn't take care of it." Here, too, they don't take care of it, but that doesn't matter—the comparison is not important, nor is whether the government cares or not. All that matters is that I am here,

in Beirut, and my mother is there, between Damascus and Latakia.

On my balcony I planted a jasmine sapling. I'd always made fun of the saying that "Damascus is the city of jasmine," but the jasmine of my city has assailed me ever since nostalgia began to creep up on me.

I was obliged to leave Damascus with a one-time departure permit issued by the regime's terror courts. I arrived at the border carrying my cell phone opened to show a picture of the court issue number sent to the Immigration and Passports Directorate, to show to the border officer if necessary—my "one-way ticket" out of the country, in the words of the judge who "gave me my freedom and unshackled my hands," as the Ibrahim Nagi poem sung by Umm Kulthum goes.

At three o'clock in the morning, I walked the streets of Beirut, alone, shedding the same tears I shed when the car crossed the border, emitting the cry of a newborn exiting a dead womb. At the same instant, a dagger stabbed my heart when it suddenly occurred to me I was taking my last look at Syria.

Pain. Numbness flowing from the heart to the fingertips.

I started a new life here, trying to live through the small details, after the large details had lost their meaning. Yet all the details of my life back there still follow me. I get my coffee beans from Syria, having decided with absolute certainty that the coffee here tastes like soil.

Nostalgia is a very deceitful game. The Damascus I long for is the one that existed before the end of 2012; everything

that happened to the city since then would be impossible for any sane person to long for, and has disappeared completely from my memory.

In a scene from a Syrian series, the actress asks her Palestinian boyfriend, "If Palestine returned, would you go back?" After over two hours, he finally answers that naturally he would. She laughs in surprise, because her question made no sense in the first place.

Recently, the question has begun occurring to me. If Syria returned, would I go back? But what are the chances of it "returning?" Given that the ideal outcome has become implausible, the only remaining possibility is that I might be "permitted to return;" a prospect I'm embarrassed to even consider. Still, I wait for it the same way a detainee waits for their release, not because it's the freedom they dream of, but simply because they miss the smell of their bed.

I don't know what makes me more embarrassed; my feelings about the matter, or the reaction of others. He [Assad] won't leave... Alright... If everyone you knew lost their memory and forgot you entirely ... Would you go back?

I always tried to ignore my mother's enthusiasm when she passed on news from the neighbor: "He said an amnesty's coming!" I would look at her with exasperation and I repeat, "I think you're the one who should leave, instead of hoping for me to go back to that swamp." But I have to admit that for a while now I too have been keeping up with neighbors' news, social media posts, and media reports.

I contact my lawyer almost daily to ask if there's anything new regarding my case.

“Postponed in absentia!”

“Okay, well as long as they haven’t sentenced me in absentia, do you think they’re waiting for an amnesty? Are there any rumors of that?”

I think of all the possibilities—of the shame I would feel if I returned to “[the homeland’s embrace](#),” of the judgments I would face; of the loneliness my mother would feel if I never came back; and, most importantly, the loneliness of my own soul.

What am I thinking?! It’s three-thirty in the morning. I sit on the sidewalk and light my last cigarette, alone like the little girl selling matches. I start lighting the matchsticks up, one after the other, and in the fire, I see it—Damascus, before the end of 2012—and no longer feel cold.

February 2016

“To the honorable judge, respected president of the terror court, I hope you will examine my case with a merciful and compassionate eye.”

- Is that phrasing appropriate?

- It is!

- Would we be released if we write a mercy plea?

- I don’t know!

I no longer know anything and no longer care; I no longer even count the days. At first, the word “amnesty” irked me—I would make fun of anyone wishing for it. I don’t want anyone to pardon me. In my ears, there would ring the old saying about the virtue of “forgiveness when punishment is possible,” yet punishment shouldn’t be possible! No one can “forgive” me for a crime I haven’t committed.

Back then, as far as I saw it, to openly await an amnesty was to implicitly acknowledge my guilt and their ability to punish me—an acknowledgment I couldn’t accept, and a possibility I refused to entertain. I would rather remain a prisoner.

The first time I noticed my weakness concerning this point was some months later, when the death of the “First Lady” was announced on TV.

- His mother passed away, there must be an amnesty coming!

- Why would they do that?

- Maybe so we can pray for the deceased!

- Pray?! Ha! Don’t you think we should celebrate?

- I don’t know, but it doesn’t seem appropriate! All deaths are sacrosanct, no matter whose.

- Alright then, let’s all be sad. Lord, let an amnesty be issued!

It seems my despair began to possess me that day. The worst thing that can happen to someone who believes in

their own innocence is that they start wanting to leave prison at any price.

I remember a campaign initiated in my teenage years by relatives of ours and the wives of prisoners to press their husbands to sign documents. At first, I didn't understand the reason for the dispute; what is this signature that warranted such sadness and tears? As I later discovered, they wanted their husbands to sign papers pledging to never commit any act deemed insulting to "the state's prestige"—an implicit confession of guilt. My own position on the matter was unclear; I was unsure whether to sympathize with the desires and helplessness felt by the women, or with their husbands' wishes to retain what was left of their dignity.

And here I am now facing the same struggle with myself.

Today, we were asked to write "mercy pleas" to the court, and I couldn't refuse. I remembered the look of panic in my brother's eyes in the court a few days previously while he awaited his sentence. Of course, it was postponed for three months, as was the case for all the inmates. His panic was likewise deferred.

How can you ask for mercy from your executioner while maintaining your pride? It was a very difficult decision to make, impossible to do without looking down on oneself.

A snippet from the police magazine was posted on the wall of the first dormitory in the fourth wing. It read, "President Assad issues a general amnesty for all crimes committed before 9/6/2014." We were forbidden from removing it. It was posted in the first place because it contained an image of the president, but for us, it was like a talisman;

reminding us every day that, since a pardon was issued in the past, another one must be coming in the future!

26 August, 2016

Dania chose the first row in front of the television screen. She lay down on the ground, resting her cheek on her palm, while her body shook back and forth. With her other hand, she held the metal bars of the bed, as if looking for something to keep her upright.

“The country’s gone! The country’s gone.” She lowered her voice so nobody would hear her. “The country is gone,” she whispered again, tears silently falling down her cheeks, as though she feared the country really would be “gone” if she were to cry audibly.

But the country is in fact “gone,” Dania. What you’re seeing on TV is reality. Yesterday, on the 25th, the regime reached an agreement with the Free Syrian Army in which the latter surrendered the city. In exchange for this, civilians are to leave the city for [shelters](#) in regime-controlled areas, while the fighters and their families will be evacuated to Idlib Province after handing over their medium and heavy weaponry.

Civilians, fighters, and their families—do you know them, Dania? They’re the relatives you’ve spent two years here on charges of financing. Tomorrow they’ll leave, taking with them your cause, your faith, your past, and your future. They’ll be forced to leave you here, a captive of the cursed present.

Dania didn't sleep that night, nor eat that day. Nor did she make her usual phone call to check up on those of her relatives who had remained in Damascus after 2012, when they were forced to flee Daraya shortly before the siege began. The next day, she watched the second and final batch depart in silence. She didn't eat or call her relatives, nor was she able to sleep.

On the morning of the third day, she was the first in the dormitory to rush towards the phone. She asked to call her family. She was shaking while speaking, but gradually her tone of voice began to change and her demeanor calmed.

"You're sure? You're sure?"

She was asking the person on the other end to confirm each word they were saying.

Then she rushed back to the room and exclaimed, "I'm leaving tomorrow!"

- That's nice, Dania. Where are you going, and how are you getting there?

- I'm leaving here, to my home, for sure. My dad just told me all the girls from Daraya are leaving. What do they want with us here? We're no longer needed!

- You're sure?

- Yes, yes, I'm sure. The lawyer told my dad, and everyone outside is talking about it. They've written about it on the Internet—the Daraya amnesty.

That it was on the Internet seemed to give her unshakeable

conviction of the certainty of release. She started taking out her clothes and belongings and distributing them to the rest of the women, who surrounded her, greedy for any loot they could pick up.

Ten days passed before the dormitory supervisor winked at them and whispered, “Girls, give Dania her things back, the poor woman has nothing left to wear!”

A dead woman walking: that’s what Dania was for six months after that episode. Her paleness was so frightening that if you looked close enough, you could just about see the blood in her veins, flowing as slowly as the time passed while she awaited her amnesty.

1 January, 2019

I heard the ring of the cell phone, glanced at the number, and knew it was her. Since I got out, Dania hadn’t stopped calling me from inside the prison whenever she got the chance. This time she was shouting, panting as though she were about to have a nervous breakdown.

“They said they read my name on the Internet! I swear to God Almighty! It was written wrong, but it was my name! They’re saying there’s an amnesty... and my name... is written... wrong!”

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