into another, while Ziyad and I looked on. She said she would be away for about two weeks, just over the period when they would be revising and then sitting for the exam.

No one in our house talked about what was to happen or what we were going to do, at least not in front of me or Ziyad, who were nine and seven at that time. We still went out into our garden when it was not raining or too cold, but we did not often venture out into the road. Hardly any children came to see us, but Ziyad still went out with Rex whenever it seemed quiet. At about this time he developed a cold and sore throat. It seemed trivial at first, but when his temperature rose and he developed severe earache, our mother got alarmed. Cut off as we were, she wondered how to get Ziyad to a doctor. As he continued to get worse, she turned to Fatima's brother for help. He was in the habit of looking in every few days with news of Fatima's daughters whom she had not seen since she came to stay with us.

"Muhammad," she said, "you"ll have to get to our doctor somehow and bring him back with you. The boy is getting worse by the minute." Muhammad said it might not be possible to bring the doctor and wanted to know what was wrong. Ziyad was usually uncomplaining, but he was clearly in great pain, his face flushed and his hand held against his ear. Seeing him, Muhammad told my mother to stop worrying as he had a remedy for such things. No one was particularly surprised at this, since folk treatments and herbal recipes were a familiar part of life in Palestine at that time, especially amongst villagers like Fatima and Muhammad who had no access to doctors or hospitals. Many a time I remember a bellyache or an attack of diarrhoea settling with nothing more than a concoction of Fatima's herbs.

We now all looked on while Muhammad went to the kitchen and warmed some olive oil in a pan. He then sat Ziyad up and gently took him in his arms. Bending over him, he poured the oil into his ear and waited for a few minutes. He then clamped his mouth over it and began to suck vigorously. After a minute, he moved his mouth away and spat a cloudy mixture of blood-stained oil, mucus and saliva into the bowl. It acted on my brother like magic. The earache seemed to stop instantly and as Muhammad lay him down again slowly on the bed, Ziyad closed his eyes and fell into a deep, natural sleep. The next day, his temperature was down and in a week he was completely cured.

In the meantime, we had begun to run short of fresh food. Fatima was going daily to those shops in our vicinity which were still open and also to the great souk in the Old City for vegetables. My mother stocked up with staples whenever she could, although we already had a large store of food in the loft. But now she augmented it further in case the half-siege we lived in got worse. The village women who used to come from the places just outside Jerusalem like Battir, Beit Safafa, Beit Jala, al-Walajeh and Fatima's own village of al-Maliha, still called to sell vegetables and fruit, but these occasional visits were nothing like they had been.

There was one woman in particular who always used to call at our house, sometimes alone and at other times with her sister. She wore an embroidered caftan like Fatima's, but grubby with soil and dust, and had a white veil draped loosely over her head. Her figure was ample and her face was ruddy from being out in the open. She used to walk barefoot, balancing a great wide basket full of vegetables on her head. Whenever she reached our house, she would rattle the front gate and call out, and Fatima would come out to her. She then came up onto our veranda and put down her huge basket of vegetables and fruit. I remember rich bunches of parsley, fat, blood-red tomatoes, shiny, taut-skinned aubergines and the hugest radishes I have ever seen. She took the same route every time, coming from al-Walajeh through to West Jerusalem and to Qatamon, then to Baq'a and on to the German Colony, finally ending up in the Old City souk, where she disposed of what had remained in her basket unsold.

Only now, she and the others came to our house less frequently and because our road was virtually deserted, they often missed us completely, thinking there was no one living in the houses at all. Eventually they stopped coming altogether. The baker had long ceased to come to the house and my mother started to bake bread once again. As in the past, she would prepare the dough and Fatima would take it down for baking to the public oven which was still functioning. We were eating more or less normally, but many luxury items were now unobtainable.

This was more than could be said for the Jews in Jerusalem at that time. The Arab forces had managed to gain control of the road which ran between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. As this was the main highway along which the bulk of the Jewish community's supplies and transport moved, they began to face real hardship with shortages of food and fuel. Their leaders imposed severe rationing of bread, flour, sugar and fuel. Baths were a luxury since there was no fuel to heat the water, and even the dogs which many Jews kept could not be fed. Water itself was in short supply, since the springs outside Jerusalem and the water pumping stations were all within Arab-controlled territory. The Arabs attacked the railroad as well as the highway, stopping trains and removing from them supplies destined for the Jews. The Jewish leadership complained angrily that the British did not interfere because they were too busy preventing Jewish immigration into the country. The ships carrying Jews from Europe were still coming to Palestine despite a British ban on immigration, and many Jews tried to enter the country illegally.

Nearly one year before, in June 1947, a ship full of European Jewish immigrants called the *Exodus*, had sailed for Haifa and tried to force its way past the British authorities but was turned back. It became something of a *cause célèbre* amongst the Jews, who made much of the plight of the Jewish immigrants thus denied entry to

Palestine and who accused the British of callousness and brutality.[1] But for the Palestinians, it hardly featured at all; people saw it as but one example amongst many of the Jews' determination to invade the country.

"We wouldn't want to deny a haven to ordinary refugees," they said. "The problem with these refugees is that they're not coming here just for safety. They're coming to take over the country."

We suffered in no small measure alongside the Jews. For, as well as enduring the perils of warfare, we witnessed a decline in the public services of Jerusalem throughout March. The post barely reached us and letters we wrote to Tulkarm and Haifa took at least a week or, more frequently, never arrived at all because the mailbags were stolen on the way. Letters to and from Damascus were totally suspended and my mother no longer had news of our grandparents or uncle there. Jerusalem's telephone lines were often out of action and, although we ourselves had no telephone, we used to use the one at Abu Samir's shop until it closed. There was a general breakdown in law and order; theft was commonplace and Jews and Arabs carried arms openly, although if they were caught, the British authorities disarmed and punished them. But the British police were more and more reluctant to enforce the law and this attitude encouraged further independent action on the part of each side.

It was in any case now tacitly accepted that within their respective zones, both Arabs and Jews were responsible for the security of their communities. Apart from the so-called mixed neighbourhoods like Talbiyya, where Jews and Arabs lived uneasily together, neither community was welcome in the territory of the other and people went

[1] The story of the *Exodus* later became the subject of a best-selling novel by Leon Uris, published in 1959, and a Hollywood epic. Both book and film contributed enormously to presenting the birth of Israel in a positive light, depicting the Jewish heroes as plucky fighters, many as displaced victims of the European Holocaust, while making short shrift of the displaced Arabs, usually shown as shifty, violent and crazed.

only if it was strictly necessary. But Sami Haddad, our neighbours' friend who lived in Upper Baq'a dismissed this as so much scaremongering. "The Jews don't frighten me," he said when visiting with his wife one evening. "You know they put these rumours about on purpose to make us nervous and think they're stronger than they really are."

One day, he was in the middle of Jerusalem in a Jewish area known as Zion Square. This was a major commercial centre just off the Jaffa Road where Arabs and Jews had conducted a great deal of business before the troubles, and where Arabs bought merchandise from Jewish shops which stocked European goods new to Palestine. With the outbreak of violence, most Arabs suspended such dealings with Jewish businessmen and generally observed the boycott of Jewish merchandise. Arabs tended to stay out of the Jewish-controlled zones of Jerusalem and vice versa. But Sami Haddad worked for the American airline TWA which had an office in Zion Square, one of these Jewish zones. He had gone there that day on an errand as requested by his office, although he did not much want to.

Sami belonged to his local Civil Defence Committee which organised nightly rotas, rather like those we had had in Qatamon. As chance would have it, the day of his visit to Zion Square had followed the night of his turn to stand guard. Thus he still had on him the gun which he had carried during his night's vigil. Inevitably, he caught the attention of a Jewish patrol which stopped and searched him. Finding the gun, they arrested him and accused him of being an Arab spy. "It would be hard to find anyone less likely to be a spy than Sami," said his wife afterwards. "It was ridiculous." But the Jews wouldn't let him go and locked him up. They then told him he would be released only if he agreed to spy on the Arab camp for them. They promised him large sums of money for his services, but as he continued to refuse, they gave him some food and left him to think about it. "I've never

been so scared in all my life," he confessed afterwards. And as he racked his brains for a way of escape, there was a sudden explosion nearby which made the Jewish guard scatter, and, in the mêlée that followed, he was able to run off. "I never thought the day would come when I'd be glad to hear a bomb going off, but at that moment it was the sweetest sound in all the world!"

The situation in Palestine was so bad that the UN met to discuss it. We heard on the radio that the United States considered the 1947 partition plan unworkable and the country should be placed under UN trusteeship. The few people left in Qatamon heaved a sigh of relief. "Well, now maybe we will see some order restored in the country instead of this madness." The Jews, however, rejected the American proposal out of hand. They were furious at the United States which they accused of betraying them "for the sake of Arab oil". The Jewish Agency declared that the trusteeship idea represented an assault on the rights and sovereignty of the whole Jewish people. We did not know it, but the idea that the Jews of the world had an unassailable right to Palestine was by then deeply entrenched. Since Jews had been deserted by the world, the Agency argued, it meant that they would have to fight on alone and the struggle for Palestine would be that much harder. And indeed we heard that Jewish schoolteachers, doctors and dentists who had never contemplated military action before were lining up at Haganah headquarters asking for guns and rifles.

The news from the UN was a fillip to the Arab side which now succeeded in gaining control of the communications between Haifa, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, the three main cities where Jews were concentrated. The part of the Tel Aviv–Jerusalem road which passes between Bab al-Wad and Jerusalem was under the control of Abdul-Qadir al-Husseini. This man was one of our few charismatic and popular commanders, a relative of the Mufti (whom, however, he did not get along with) and a leader of an irregular Arab force called

Jaysh al-Jihad al-Muqaddas (the army of the holy jihad). He had started life as a surveyor in Ramleh where my father first met him when he and my mother lived there. He thought him decent and loyal with a reputation for being brave, perhaps foolhardy, but totally dedicated to fighting the Jews. In the course of this effort, Husseini had tried to incite the villages outside Jerusalem to attack Jewish settlements. But many of them were too afraid of Jewish retaliation to do so and refused. But though he failed in this, he redeemed himself by holding the road into Jerusalem, strangling Jewish traffic and attacking their convoys successfully. "Perhaps he will save the city for the Arabs," people said in hope.

Life for our aunt Khadija in the Old City was also becoming troubled. Ever since the partition resolution was announced, there had been clashes around the Jewish Quarter, not far from her house. They were not too worried at the beginning because the British intervened repeatedly to keep order. But the Haganah were not satisfied and sent in their own soldiers to protect the Jewish Quarter. They made out that the British wanted the Jews out of the Old City to leave it all in Arab hands. This was unthinkable, they said, because the place was sacred and a holy trust for the Jewish people. The Arabs heard this with considerable scepticism. "No one believes a word of it," said my aunt. "They're only looking for an excuse to get themselves a foothold in the Old City." My aunt's husband Abu Isam, whose shop was in Mamilla near my father's office, told him much the same thing. "They say the Jews want to take control of the Old City." But my father reassured him that it could not happen.

The Haganah started smuggling arms and ammunition into the Jewish Quarter. When the British discovered this, they confiscated the arms in the face of fierce Jewish resistance. At the same time, Arab irregulars continued to attack the Jewish Quarter and the Haganah forces who were based there. Fighting then broke out between the

Haganah and the British army. Several British soldiers were killed, and at the end of March a cease-fire was agreed. However, this turned out to be only temporary and the hostilities started all over again. By then my aunt's family was finding life difficult, especially as my cousins were all very small. My aunt's husband was getting few customers in his shop and they did not know what to do. They could no longer come to see us because of the danger on the roads, nor could we visit them for the same reason. "What a situation," my mother said to us, shaking her head. "Your aunt is not more than ten minutes away from here, but she might as well be in Syria for all the chance we have of seeing her."

As March drew to a close the violence in Qatamon was worse than ever. Sometimes we found it hard to sleep at night for the whistling of bullets and the thunder of shells. We were now sleeping on the floor most of the time, which was hard for my father who had recurrent back pain (he called it "lumbago" and continued to suffer from it intermittently for much of his life). He would groan loudly every time he laid down or got up. There was little respite from the shooting in the day either, when machine-guns could be heard firing, sometimes continuously. Explosions shook our house without warning and we spent our time in anticipation of the next attack. None of this seemed to worry Ziyad who was still collecting bullets and playing at being soldiers in the garden.

But to me this was terrifying and bewildering, so far removed from anything I recognised as normality that I think I became a little shell-shocked. After a while, I accepted each blow silently without protest, as if we were fated to live like that. I learned to adapt by clinging to the small routines of our life which still went on despite everything. Siham had gone to board at her school which left me and Ziyad and Fatima in our bedroom at night. A suspicion bordering on conviction had taken hold of people's minds that the Jewish forces meant to take

over Qatamon and that the battle to repel them would get fiercer. Everyone was afraid, especially the children who screamed and wailed uncomprehendingly through the bombing and the shooting. And so more families packed up and left. But still we hung on, like the Sakakini family and a few others, because we simply could not imagine leaving our home and still believed that somehow a last-minute rescue by the British or the Arabs would take place.

Our parents said no matter what happened, Siham had to take her exams. And in any case, we had nowhere to go. Many of the families who had left had gone to relatives elsewhere, or the men had found temporary work, or they were wealthy enough to bide their time away from Jerusalem in comfort. For everywhere the word went out that, until the problem was solved, leaving the danger zone was only a temporary measure.

My mother kept saying that help must come soon, that the English, the Arab League, the UN or some combination of these could not stand by and allow the Jews to drive us out. In saying this, she echoed many other people who waited impatiently for the Arab armies to enter Palestine and defeat the Jews. But whenever she said this, my father dismissed her hopes with a show of cynicism. "You can believe what you like. They've not done much for us so far." But perhaps he secretly also looked for some such salvation.

At that time, there was much talk of a separate status for Jerusalem when the Mandate was terminated. The city would be put under UN trusteeship and, even if the rest of Palestine was divided into two states, Jerusalem would not be part of either and might continue more or less as it was. The Jews had never accepted this and people around us said that they secretly planned to make Jerusalem their capital. But everyone discounted this as Jewish wishful thinking and further evidence of their greed for our country.

Four

When I look back, I see how that time in my life is overlaid with areas of silence, impenetrable to memory. I was aware that everything had gone wrong with us, but did not know why, or whether my world would ever come back again, the sunny times, the friends, the going to and coming from school. Around me, events succeeded each other with a relentless momentum, heading for some cataclysm. And we were being pushed uncontrollably by this momentum, powerless to stop it. The worst of it was my instinctive sense that my parents were frightened and did not know where we were headed either. Ziyad often ignored orders and went out riding his bicycle. Otherwise, he and I played with Rex desultorily in the garden, for there was nothing else to do.

But the fearful days and nights continued, and all the time the things which were familiar in our lives receded. Now Fatima hardly ever went to the souk and we waited for the village women to come to the house. When they didn't, we had no vegetables or eggs. Siham was not with us any more, something which had never happened

before. She had always been there for as long as I could remember, and though everyone else had gone away at one time or another – Fatima, our father, and our mother who was out so much she might as well have been away – Siham never had. Her absence was deeply disturbing and yet also in keeping with the other bizarre events taking place. My father had little to say when he came home; he just read the newspapers or his books and listened to the radio intently.

Amazingly, the Palestine Broadcasting Service in Jerusalem was still operating, albeit with difficulty. A short while later, however, its transmitters in Ramallah were shot away in fighting on the Jerusalem-Ramallah road. All this time, Ziyad seemed oblivious to everything; he just read and re-read his old comics, *Superman* and *Captain Marvel*, since there were no new ones to be had. Rex was the only one to remain the same. In fact, I think he was happier than he had ever been because we were always at home with him now, playing all the games he loved best.

It was now spring in Palestine. With the coming of April, all the trees in the garden came out in blossom. Although it was still cold, the weather was variable and some days were brilliant with sunshine. For me, the world had shrunk to the confines of our garden and our house in a private enclave, which I made magically immune from the bombing and the shooting. I invented games to play on my own and told my toys stories loosely based on *The Arabian Nights*, such as our mother used to do when we were younger. People still came to our house to see my parents, and my mother went out visiting those neighbours who remained near us. "I'm stifling," she would say. "I must get out." The talk was always the same – terrible things happening all over the country, more people leaving (my uncle Abu Salma among them), no one to save us from the Jews and so on.

And then Fatima's brother appeared at the house one morning looking agitated. He and Fatima stood at the kitchen door talking in

low voices. Then my mother came out and Fatima said that something terrible had happened. They all went inside the house and, after a while, Muhammad came out again with Fatima and they both went off together. We found out that they had gone to the Old City. When Fatima came back, she told my mother that this terrible thing was true, everyone was talking about it. The poor people had fled first to the nearest village, Ain Karim, and then to Beit Safafa, and to al-Maliha, which was how Muhammad got to know about it. Some of them escaped into Jerusalem itself, to the Old City, where they told their terrible stories. Incomprehensible snatches of sentences came across to me and Ziyad, all about fearful happenings and killings of women and children.

My father came home and they talked more, but in such hushed voices that we could not hear them. What was this terrible thing? Fatima would not say and neither would our parents. A few people came over to our house that evening, saying that the Jews were threatening to do it again and that everyone believed them. The next morning – was it then? It seemed so, and yet when I looked back long after, I was not so sure and, amazingly, no one in our family could remember the exact date of that momentous day; my father thought it later in April, my sister said it was earlier. A baffling amnesia has enveloped that time. I woke up that morning with a feeling of nameless dread, as if I had had a bad dream which I could not recall. Fatima and my mother were long since up, and I heard them pushing furniture, opening drawers and cupboards in my parents' bedroom. No one said anything to me, not even Fatima, and so I went and woke Ziyad up.

He was bad-tempered and tried to push me away. "There's something going on," I said urgently. "There always is," he grumbled and turned away, covering his head with the bedclothes. Siham was not back yet, although the two weeks she said she would be away

were up. Perhaps I could ask about that, but when I went into my mother's room I saw that there were suitcases on the bed and clothes on the floor. Before I could exclaim she pushed me out and told me in a tense, irritable voice to go and play, but to "stay inside the house". A panic began to seize me and I went out to the back of the house and through the garden door to the shed which served as Rex's kennel. He was lying down in front of it sniffing the air. As soon as he saw me he sprang up, his tail wagging. Though I knelt down and hugged him and tried to draw comfort from him, it did not still the anxiety welling up inside me. I went back inside and now my mother was in the *liwan*, wrapping up our china plates in newspaper. "Against the bombs", she was saying to Fatima. "They might not break this way."

"Have you had your breakfast?" asked Fatima. I shook my head. I had no appetite at all; I just stood there looking wanly at what they were doing. They ignored me and my mother went on wrapping the plates and handing them to Fatima who put them into a cardboard box. After a while, Muhammad appeared and told my mother that he had found a car, but it would not be available before evening. "Are we going somewhere?" I asked in sudden alarm. Someone finally spoke to me, "No, it's just to fetch your sister back from school," said my mother. I was overjoyed with relief. Siham was coming home and all would be well. Whatever this strange thing was which had overtaken our house, Siham would explain and we would go back to normal.

When Ziyad finally got up, I told him everything that had happened that morning. "When Siham is here, she'll tell us what's going on," I finished. "You're just stupid," he said testily. "How can she know? She's been in school taking exams. I'm going to get to the bottom of this." But as the day wore on, he was little wiser than I had been, except that my mother said we would know everything later when Siham got home. There was more packing, this time it was blankets from the big chest where my mother kept such things. We

discovered that she had also taken some of our clothes away from the cupboard in the bedroom.

"Fatima, please tell me what's going on," I pleaded. "Are we going somewhere?" But Fatima only answered, "Don't worry, your mother will tell you very soon."

When my father came home in the afternoon we all had lunch as usual. I sat with them at table in the dining-room – not with Fatima – because her brother Muhammad had stayed overnight and the two of them were eating in the kitchen. The atmosphere was full of tension and unspoken anxiety and I wished I was eating with Fatima as I had always done. But I told myself that I would do so tomorrow. After lunch, my mother and father went silently to their room, having evaded our questions by saying we would know later when we were all together. Ziyad and I took the remains of our half-eaten food out into the garden and gave them to Rex. Because the butcher in the road had closed down we could no longer give him all the leftover meat and bones which he was used to. So he ate whatever we could spare and my mother gave him bits and pieces while she was cooking.

It was late afternoon. We sat around aimlessly, uneasy and apprehensive. There was the sound of occasional shooting, but it was far away like the sound of distant thunder; thus far the day had been relatively quiet. I kept going to the garden wall which looked out on to the road and watching for Siham. It was windy and I got cold, so I went back into the house, but as soon as I warmed up, I went out again. It was while I was warming up inside that Siham arrived. It seemed like a year since I had last seen her and I rushed to put my arms round her. But she was upset and crying. "I knew it," said our mother. "You've gone and failed your exams!"

"No, I haven't," sobbed Siham. "But why couldn't you have waited at least until we'd had our party? We've worked so hard and we were going to celebrate the end of exams tonight. I was really

looking forward to it. Please, please, can't we wait just one more day?" Muhammad had turned up at the school without warning, since there was no way of making contact beforehand, and had announced that she must come home with him in the taxi without delay. "And anyway, what is all this Muhammad says about us leaving?"

"It's true," replied my father. "Your mother and all of you are leaving in the morning. It's not safe here any more, not after Deir Yassin."

What was he saying? We could not be leaving. It could not be true. I followed Siham into our bedroom, full of agitation. "Where are we going? What does it mean? Why won't they tell us anything?" She took my arm in her hands. "God, why are you so thin?" she asked. "They didn't want you and Ziyad to know in case you told anyone else." (At this time, the AHC had given strict instructions again that no one was to leave the country, and people who intended to go were therefore careful to avoid discovery.) "And besides, they didn't want to upset any of us. I think we're going to Damascus to our grandparents' house."

"But why do we have to go?" She started to explain that it was not safe to stay on, but, as she spoke, the words suddenly lost meaning. A numbness began to come over me and I had a sudden feeling of utter helplessness. I had never met my grandparents and I didn't want to. I wanted to stay here at home, despite Deir Yassin (whatever that was) and however bad the shooting got. Siham suddenly put her hand to her mouth and gasped. "Oh no!" she cried, "My watch. It's still at the watchmaker's. How am I going to be able to get it before we leave?" The watch, which was being mended, had been given to her by our parents, she was proud of showing it off. "It doesn't matter. I'll pick it up for you when I come back," said my father. He was intending to escort us until we had arrived safely in Damascus and then return to Jerusalem. He had informed them at the office of his intention

and had been given a short leave of absence. But the head of his department hinted that this might be longer than my father thought. When he asked what this meant, the other smiled and replied cryptically, "Oh, well, you know how it is. In Jerusalem these days anything can happen." My father chose to ignore this and said he would be back to work in two or three days, long enough to cover the time of the journey to Damascus, an overnight stay and the journey back. On this basis, my mother had not packed a separate suitcase for him and had taken only a few summer clothes for us because, as she kept saying, "We won't be gone for long. It's not worth taking much more." But even though she had packed so little, the house already had an empty and deserted look, rather like Emily's house had been.

I do not remember how we spent that evening nor how we slept afterwards. That time belongs to one of those impenetrable areas of silence. I do not know if my parents took their leave of our neighbours or if anyone came to say goodbye. But the next morning, when we got up, events moved rapidly. Whatever the reason for the respite in the fighting the day before, it had now resumed with vigour. In recent weeks, mortar bombs had been added to the usual gunfire and shooting, and we could hear heavy thudding from the direction of the St Simon monastery. This was a large and ancient place surrounded by trees which stood at the top of the Qatamon hill to the other side of our road. The Jews said it was a stronghold of Arab soldiers and arms and had been planning to attack it for weeks. In the interval between explosions there was an eerie silence. The street outside was deserted. My mother said, "I hope Muhammad can make it." He was supposed to bring up a taxi for us from town, an enterprise that would be something of a miracle to carry through, given the danger of reaching Qatamon. No cars ever came here any more, but Muhammad said he was confident he would find one.

And indeed, in a short while, the taxi appeared with him sitting in the front seat next to the driver. The latter was clearly nervous and told us to hurry. My mother had our case and the old blankets ready in the *liwan*, and Ziyad, who had been very quiet that morning, now said he wanted to take his bicycle along. "Don't be silly," snapped my mother. "But I want to take it," he insisted. Everyone ignored him. Siham had a winter coat which our father had brought back for her from London. It had been too big for her when he bought it but now it fitted and she had scarcely ever worn it. She now tried to pack it with the rest of our clothes, but it was too bulky. "Never mind," said our mother, "leave it for when we come back."

Muhammad and Fatima took down our cases over the veranda steps towards the gate, leaving the front door of the house open. Through the door, Rex now ran in, undeterred by his usual fear of my mother and started to jump up all over us in great agitation. He made a high-pitched, keening sound I had never heard before.

"He knows we're going," Siham said. "I don't know how, but he does." Ziyad and I could not catch hold of him long enough to pat his head and calm him down. He kept rushing from one to the other so fast that his hind legs slipped on the floor. But I managed to grab him and hug him tightly to me. Fatima came back in and tried to say that the car was now ready, but she started to cry. My mother put a hand on her shoulder, "There, there, we'll be back. It won't be long." But Fatima just went on crying. Then she said, "I've got to cry now because I'll be too shy to cry when we say goodbye at the depot." She meant the place in town where we would stop to change cars for Damascus.

There was a loud explosion outside. My father said we must now leave. He had a heavy brown overcoat on his arm which he now gave Fatima. He had bought it in England for himself and it had a label inside the collar which said Moss Bros.

"This is for you." And as Fatima started to cry again, my father said hurriedly, "Here, take the key and keep it safe." This was the key to our house where Fatima was going to stay until we all returned. She put it in the side pocket of her caftan and wiped her eyes. "I'll look after everything, have no worry."

We came out with Rex still running round and my father locked up. We put Rex into the garden and closed the gate on him in case he ran out into the road on his own. I lingered, looking back at the house. The shutters were all closed and silent and the garden seemed to hug the walls, as if to retain their secrets. Enclosed in that space was all the life that I had ever known and I thought what a dear, dear place it was.

A deafening burst of shooting. My mother ran forward and dragged me away. My father got in the front of the car with Muhammad and Ziyad and the rest of us squeezed into the back. I sat on Fatima's lap and wondered whether I dared ask if I could go back for my teddy bear, Beta, which no one had thought to pack for me. I thought of him left all alone with Rex in that silent, shuttered house. Ziyad was quiet in the front seat. He too was thinking about Rex and whether he could have managed somehow to smuggle him into the boot of the car. But as we were about to move off, my father suddenly said to the driver, "Wait!" A soldier from the Arab defence unit which was encamped at the British zone checkpoint was striding purposefully towards us. He was armed with a rifle and had a gun at his side and there was no doubt that his business was with us.

My father got out of the car and greeted him politely. Rex started to bark and jump up against the gate. The soldier peered into the taxi and examined each of us in turn. "Where are you going?" he demanded. "Don't you know it's not allowed to leave. AHC orders." "It's all right, I understand," said my father calmly "but this is my wife and these are my children. I'm simply taking them to my father-

in-law's house for safety. I will be coming back straightaway." "All right," replied the man, "make sure that you do." He checked the suitcase and then, apparently satisfied that it contained nothing but our clothes, he nodded to my father. "God be with you."

My father got back into the car and my mother said, "Why can't they make up their minds? One minute they tell us all the women and children are to leave and now they're saying we shouldn't. And anyway, what's the point now with everyone already gone?" My father told her to keep her voice down. As we started to move off, I twisted round on Fatima's knee and looked out of the back window. And there to my horror was Rex standing in the middle of the road. We can't have closed the gate properly and he must somehow have managed to get out. He stood still, his head up, his tail stiff, staring after our receding car.

"Look!" I cried out frantically, "Rex has got out. Stop, please, he'll get killed." "Shh", said Fatima, pushing me down into her lap. "He's a rascal. I'll put him back when I return and he won't come to any harm. Now stop worrying."

But I stared and stared at him until we had rounded the corner of the road and he and the house disappeared from view. I turned and looked at the others. They sat silently, their eyes fixed on the road ahead. No one seemed aware of my terrible anguish or how in that moment I suddenly knew with overwhelming certainty that something had irrevocably ended for us there and, like Rex's unfeigned, innocent affection, it would never return.

The short journey to the taxi depot in the Old City opposite the Damascus Gate passed without much incident. We were stopped again at the checkpoint outside the zone, and my father explained once more why we were leaving. When we reached the depot, we got out and transferred our luggage to a taxi which would take us to Damascus by way of Amman. To reach Damascus from Jerusalem,

one would normally have taken the northern route through Ras al-Naqura. But all that part of Palestine was a raging battleground and no car could travel that way. Hence we had to take the longer and more roundabout route through Amman. The taxi depot was bustling with people leaving Palestine like us. There was a different atmosphere here to the one we had got used to in Qatamon. As it was a wholly Arab area, there was no sound of gunfire and, though it was full of crowds of people crying and saying goodbye, it felt safe and familiar.

Fatima stood by the car which would take us away. For all her efforts at self-control, tears were coursing down her cheeks. She embraced and kissed the three of us in turn. My father said, "Mind you look after the house until I come back," and she nodded wordlessly. I clung desperately to the material of her caftan but she gently disengaged my fingers. As we got into the taxi and the doors were shut, she drew up close and pressed her sad face against the window. We drove off, leaving her and Muhammad looking after us until they were no more than specks on the horizon, indistinguishable from the other village men and women who were there that day.

No doubt my parents thought they were sparing us pain by keeping our departure secret from us until the very last moment. They also believed we would be away for a short while only and so making a fuss of leaving Jerusalem was unnecessary.

But in the event, they turned out to be woefully wrong. We never set eyes on Fatima or our dog or the city we had known ever again. Like a body prematurely buried, unmourned, without coffin or ceremony, our hasty, untidy exit from Jerusalem was no way to have said goodbye to our home, our country and all that we knew and loved.

I did not know until much later that, although my parents had accepted for some time that we would have to leave Jerusalem, if only for a while, there were two major events which had finally persuaded them to go. The first was the death of Abdul-Qadir al-Husseini and the second, close on its heels, was the massacre at Deir Yassin. In the first week of April, the battle to control the road to Jerusalem had raged between Jewish and Arab forces. Fighting was particularly fierce at the strategically important village of al-Qastal, ten kilometres to the west of Jerusalem. This was built on top of a hill and derived its name (castle) from an ancient fortress whose remains still stood there. It was there, as the Arab side was winning the battle (in which Husseini was joined by our Qatamon commander Abu Dayyeh and his unit), that he was killed by a Jewish soldier from the Palmach. This was a special unit of the Haganah whose men were highly trained for difficult or dangerous assignments.

While Abdul-Qadir's death meant little to the Jews it had a profound impact on the Arab side. Even my father, who was sceptical about the Arab forces' chances of success, shared in the general hope embodied in Abdul-Qadir's courage and commitment. His death was therefore seen as an omen of impending disaster. In the wake of his killing, it was said that the Arab fighters were so overwhelmed with grief that most of them escorted his body back to Jerusalem. This emotional send-off left al-Qastal unguarded and enabled the Jewish forces to regain it later that day. They were exultant and claimed that the Arab fighters were deserting in droves and returning to their villages. Traces of that triumphalism are still evident today. When I saw al-Qastal on a sad, windswept day in 1998, Israeli flags were fluttering from its old castle walls and placards declaring it to be the site of a major Israeli victory.

So great was people's shock and grief that Abdul-Qadir's funeral at the Dome of the Rock in the Old City on April 7 drew a crowd of

30,000 mourners. Two days later, on April 9, Irgun and Stern Gang gunmen perpetrated a massacre at Deir Yassin, a small village on the outskirts of Jerusalem. This was the unmentionable thing which Ziyad and I were not allowed to know. The people of Deir Yassin were mainly engaged in stone quarrying and had been peaceable throughout the troubles besetting other parts of Palestine. They had even concluded a non-aggression pact with the nearby Jewish settlement of Givat Sha'ul, approved by the Haganah, at the beginning of April 1948.

The accounts of what the Jewish attackers had done to the villagers were truly shocking. The survivors who fled came with stories of mutilation, the rape of young girls and the murder of pregnant women and their babies. Some 250 people were massacred in cold blood (though recent estimates have put the number at between 100 and 200). Twenty of the men were driven in a lorry by the Irgun fighters and paraded in triumph around the streets of the Jewish areas of Jerusalem. They were then brought back and shot directly over the quarries in which they had been working and into which their bodies were thrown. The surviving villagers fled in terror, and the empty village was then occupied by Jewish forces. The worst of it was that the gangs who had carried out the killings boasted about what they had done and threatened publicly to do so again. They said it had been a major success in clearing the Arabs out of their towns and villages.

In this they were right, for news of the atrocity, disseminated by both the Jewish and the Arab media in Palestine and the surrounding Arab states, spread terror throughout the country. But because of Deir Yassin's proximity to Jerusalem, the news reached us first and led to an accelerated exodus from our city. The rest of the country was powerfully affected too. Menachem Begin, the leader of the Irgun, said with satisfaction that the massacre had helped in the conquest of

places as far away as Tiberias and Haifa. He said it was worth half a dozen army battalions in the war against the Palestinian Arabs.

On April 30, the Palmach unit of the Haganah launched a huge attack on the St Simon monastery. They overcame the contingent of Arab fighters inside and within twenty-four hours had taken control of the monastery. Fierce fighting ensued between them and the Arab battalions defending Qatamon for a full two days before it was brought to an end by the British army. Ibrahim Abu Dayyeh fought and was wounded in this final battle. A twenty-four-hour truce was agreed between the two sides, but before it ended the Jews had occupied the whole of Qatamon up to the boundary of the British zone. The Sakakini family had been the last to stay on, but on April 30 they too left their home.

Throughout April, the Arab League was deliberating over plans of invasion to defend Palestine. These involved various combinations of Arab forces which would cross into Palestine from the neighbouring states and rescue the Palestinians. But none of them came to anything, while the Jews continued to consolidate their hold on the parts of the country they had conquered. In Jerusalem, they had control of most of the new city, which included our neighbourhood, while the Arabs retained the Old City.

We heard that Fatima kept going back to check on our house for as long as she could brave the journey. But in the end, it was too dangerous and she could go no longer. Her own village, al-Maliha, was conquered by the Jews (Israelis by then) in August 1948 and its people were made refugees. She escaped to the village of al-Bireh, east of Jerusalem and still in Arab hands, where we presume she stayed. After that news of her died out. In the chaos that attended the fall of Palestine and the mass exodus of its people, lives were wrenched apart, families brutally sundered, life-long friendships abruptly severed. No organisation existed to help people trace those they had lost.

And so it was that we too lost Fatima, not knowing how to pluck her from the human whirlpool that had swallowed her after our departure.

As for Rex, whom we last saw that April morning in 1948, no news of him reached us ever again.

Five

My father escorted us as far as Damascus, a journey of which I have no memory. Siham says that when we reached Amman, we went to the house of my mother's old friend Um Samir who had left Jerusalem long before we did. She tried to give us lunch but no one had any appetite and my father was in a hurry to reach Damascus. So we got back into the car and drove on into Syria crossing the border at Der'a. And as we drove towards Damascus, Siham marvelled at the sight of people here looking normal, strolling about, sitting in the sun, even picnicking on the banks of the river. "Why don't they look sad?" she asked. "Don't they know what's happened to us?" We looked with wonderment at the signposts, which were all in Arabic. We were used to seeing them in English and Hebrew as well in Palestine. We reached my grandparents' house in the evening. They were warm and welcoming, my grandmother hugging and kissing us repeatedly. Ziyad, who had been excited by the journey to Damascus and agog to see new places, looked pleased with our new surroundings. Our grandparents had only known us by our photographs

before and they made much fuss of meeting us in the flesh. They gave us supper, bread and a sort of hard ball-shaped cheese immersed in olive oil.

The next morning, our parents returned to Amman (our mother had decided to go as well), intending to continue at once to Jerusalem. But they were advised to go no further, for all of West Jerusalem, especially Qatamon, were virtually impassable. Taxis were unwilling even to go to the Old City. Government offices, including my father's employer, the education department, were being closed down one by one, it was said. They stayed for four days in Amman, hoping to find a way back and unwilling to believe that they could not return. It was at that moment that my father first started to feel a sense of finality, that somehow and with what seemed like incredible speed, it was all over, not just for Jerusalem but for all of Palestine. While in Amman, they met by strange chance the Karmis, the couple who had bought the house next to ours in Qatamon. They had a sad story to tell. Soon after we left, the attacks on the district, especially on our road, had escalated. One night, a bomb landed just behind their house and they fled in terror, still in their night clothes. "If only we'd gone when you did," they said, "at least we would have left with dignity."

Our grandparents' house was very different from the one we had left in Jerusalem. It was situated in Harat al-Akrad, an old run-down suburb of Damascus with rubbish tips and a maze of narrow, unpaved alleyways, a world away from the prosperous roads and spacious villas of our part of Jerusalem. Some alleys were so impenetrable that cars could not pass through and people were dropped off at the open space outside and had to go the rest of the way on foot. The house was old-fashioned and had a central open courtyard with rooms around three sides of it; "inverted", Ziyad called it, because the windows looked in instead of out. To get from one room to the other, one had to cross the courtyard, which could be unpleasant if it was raining or very

cold. There were flower-beds against the whole length of one wall and potted plants against the other walls.

The kitchen was built of rough stone and it was dark and gloomy. Opening directly into it was a small toilet, a common arrangement in old houses of that type. This was a traditional toilet, a pear-shaped cavity in the ground with two ridged tiles on either side to prevent slipping. One placed one's feet over the tiles and squatted over the cavity. In the corner was a water jug and a cloth for washing and drying oneself afterwards. I dreaded using this toilet because it was so dark and the hole in the ground so black that I always imagined something unspeakable would arise from it and grab hold of me. It symbolised for me all that was hateful and different about Damascus. We had had two toilets in our house in Jerusalem, white-tiled and fresh and clean, and both had seats. We used one and Fatima used the second one, but she always squatted over the seat as if it had been a toilet in the ground to which she was more accustomed.

The only other relatives we had in Damascus were my uncle Abu Salma and his family. They had preceded us into Syria by a month or so, driven out of Palestine like us by the increasing danger. The fighting in Haifa had forced them to move at the beginning of March to nearby Acre, to take refuge with my aunt's family. They waited to return, but things in Haifa got worse and more and more people kept flooding out of the city. Seeing how rapidly the situation was deteriorating, my uncle decided after a week to withdraw his family "temporarily" to safety in Damascus.

Soon after we arrived in Damascus, my aunt Khadija's family joined us, having reluctantly accepted that they had to leave Jerusalem as well. Abu Isam's business had declined to the point of extinction. In the end, they were forced to leave their house and their shop with all its furniture and fittings behind. They had four children, three boys and a girl, and from the moment they arrived they seemed to be all

over the place. I hated them because they crowded us out and the youngest two cried a lot. This did not worry Ziyad who had played with Isam, the eldest boy, when we were in Jerusalem. They now resumed their friendship. But I had no special playmate and felt differently. Before we came, my grandparents slept in the room opposite the entrance lobby and my uncle slept in one of the two rooms at the back of the courtyard. The other back room was used as a sitting room in winter when people could not sit outside. The house was not large, but adequate for the three of them. And at the time when we came my uncle Taleb was away in Belgium, training as a telephone engineer, and my grandparents had the whole house to themselves.

However, with the arrival of two families every room was taken up. My parents slept in the bed in my uncle's room and my brother and I slept on a mattress on the floor. In July, my father left for England and my uncle came back home a month later. He appropriated his old bed, and so my mother joined me and my brother on the floor. My sister slept in my grandparents' room, on the floor separating their two beds. They woke her up early every morning when they got up to perform the dawn prayer, but she thought them sweet and did not mind. All six of my aunt's family occupied the second back room, opposite my uncle's bedroom. They all slept on the floor on mattresses borrowed from the neighbours when my grandparents had run out of bedding.

Since the room my aunt's family slept in had ceased to be a sitting room, and the April weather was still cool, everyone sat outside in the *liwan* all muffled up. The classic *liwan*, unlike ours in Jerusalem, which had merely meant lounge, was a feature of old Arab houses like my grandfather's. It was positioned between the two back rooms and was walled on three sides with the front opening onto the courtyard. It functioned as a semi-formal reception room; benches covered with cushions were built against the wall on its three sides so as to seat a large number of people, although they had to sit in rows. This seating

arrangement derives from that of the traditional Arab *majlis* going back to the Bedouin tribal tents where the men sat together along the sides with the sheikh at the top. It is still to be seen today, upgraded and opulently furnished, but essentially the same in the palaces of sheikhs and princes throughout the Gulf countries.

I could not get used to sleeping on the floor alongside my mother and brother. It was uncomfortable and my mother would come to bed late and wake me, or Ziyad would push me off the edge of the mattress in his sleep. As soon as my uncle returned from Belgium, I would leave them and crawl into his bed whenever I could. This disturbed his sleep, but he didn't have the heart to throw me out. "You were such a poor frightened little thing," he said years later. Even today, I can still recall the feel of his flannel pyjamas against my face and the warm smell of him as I snuggled into his back. He seemed to me like a safe and tranquil island in a sea of madness. We had all warmed to him from the first moment we saw him. He was an attractive, likeable man with long-lashed brilliant green eyes, and fine handsome features. I remember how many of the women in the neighbourhood eyed him surreptitiously.

Both my uncle's departure to Belgium and his return caused a great stir in the neighbourhood. For anyone to travel so far afield was a great event and when he returned home in August 1948 the whole street turned out to greet him. The women ululated from the doorways, a high-pitched sound made by flicking the tongue rapidly up and down against the roof of the mouth which traditionally accompanies all Arab celebrations. People thought he had brought a touch of European magic with him and everyone wanted to see him. And indeed he did seem to have a magic tape recorder which he proudly displayed. "It recorded not on tape but on a sort of thin wire" Siham remembered. "It was like nothing anyone had ever seen before."

Of course, it would have been unthinkable for either of his sisters,

my mother and my aunt Khadija, to have had a similar educational opportunity. As was the custom, they only had had an elementary education, enough to read the Quran and be able to write in a rudimentary way. Girls were only there to get married, went the prevailing wisdom, so why waste too much effort in teaching them what they would never use. In addition, there was the constant fear that once a girl knew how to write, she might start to correspond with men and be led into improper ways. My mother had barely learned enough before she was removed from school at the age of ten.

I particularly had it in for my two youngest cousins, Hisham, who was three years old, and Hind, who was about eighteen months. She was pretty and chubby with black hair and red cheeks, where I was thin and hollow-eyed. My mother made a great fuss of both of them, hugged and kissed them, especially Hind, and gave them chocolates to eat, but no one took any notice of me. I felt ugly and scraggy and jealous of both of them. Hisham once followed me climbing a ladder up to the flat roof. I turned to see his skinny, pallid figure clinging on to it fearfully. In a fury of jealousy, I pushed hard at his scrawny chest and tried to kick him off. It was a miracle, said my aunt afterwards, that he did not fall to his death. He managed to cling to the rung of the ladder when my mother rescued him.

No one had a good word to say for me after that. Guilt was now added to my sense of exclusion and misery. Child psychology was not an art known either to my mother or any of those around her. Children, like adults, were expected "to get on with it" and I was left to fend for myself. Nor could I turn for consolation to my brother, as had happened sometimes in Jerusalem. Things had changed between us and I had grown increasingly resentful of him ever since coming to Damascus. Much of the previous harmony when we played together in Jerusalem had been dispelled. In those days, he was amiable and easygoing and I could often get the best

of him. And we had Rex to share. But here it was different.

People thought he was special and better than me because he was a boy. They said that as he was the only son, just like his uncle, he must be treated especially well. My mother would now make me lay the table and also clear up, whereas the arrangement in Jerusalem had been that one person would lay the table and another would clear up. When I complained that it was unfair and he ought to do half, she told me that he was a boy and sisters must serve their brothers. Siham said, "Don't worry, that's how it is and we must get used to it." When Ziyad was born, the family in Tulkarm had slaughtered a sheep to celebrate the birth of my father's first son. But when I was born, she said, no one killed any sheep for me and it used to make me cry. This was of course the traditional Arab position. Sons were prized over daughters and women were reared to indulge and look up to the males of the family. In return, the males were expected to protect and support their mothers and sisters. But at the age of eight, this did not cut much ice with me. It just seemed an arrant injustice and I resented and hated my brother for it, as if it had been his fault.

But I did not envy him one ordeal, regarded as a celebration and affirmation of my brother's nascent manhood. This was the ceremony of circumcision, which Ziyad had to undergo while we were in Damascus. When Grandfather found out that, at twelve, Ziyad retained his foreskin, he was outraged. He questioned our father as to how this scandal had been allowed to happen, since it was the custom for Muslim boys to be circumcised in the first years of life and certainly before the age of ten. (Today, Muslim babies are circumcised soon after birth.) Our father lamely explained that it had slipped his and our mother's attention, what with the troubles in Palestine and the fact that he was away in England for some of the time. But this did not mollify our grandfather who proceeded to make urgent arrangements for the circumcision.

Such occasions were dominated by the men of the family. The women's role was to make the special foods and sweets which were served at the end of the "operation". On the morning in question, Ziyad was awakened early and dressed in his circumcision gown. This was a long and loose white tunic made of silk from which his dark head and bare feet protruded comically. The men of the family began to arrive, my mother's cousins and more distant relatives all in their best clothes, until the courtyard of the house filled up. Ziyad was sat on a chair at the base of the *liwan*, where he was soon surrounded by the men, joking and jollying him along. I watched him from the window of our uncle's bedroom, for none of the females could attend. He looked scared and alone there on his chair.

The man who was to carry out the circumcision now appeared. He was the local barber, and looked none too clean. The implements he was to use on my brother, a shaving knife from his shop and a long-handled hook, looked grimy. My father asked if his instruments were clean and if he wanted to wash his hands first. "None cleaner!" the man answered cheerfully, declining the offer of a wash.

Without further ado, he turned towards Ziyad and lifted the hem of his gown to expose his small penis. He grasped it in his hand and using his long needle, he hooked the foreskin with it and pulled it right down. He then severed it with one cut of the shaving knife. Blood seeped down Ziyad's thighs as the barber held the piece of flesh aloft for all to see. At this point, the women ululated from inside and Ziyad looked as if he was about to faint. Watching in horror, I thought I would faint too. His face had a greenish tinge and his jaws were clenched, but he never uttered a sound. The barber put a bandage over his bleeding penis and pulled down his gown over his legs. My grandfather gave him a jug of water which he took to the flower-bed and poured over his instruments, but he still did not wash his hands. He then looked round for his fee which my father had ready, and

having pocketed this, he nodded his head at the assembly and went off.

Ziyad was now congratulated and patted on the head by the men who all had presents for him. After a while they withdrew, and the women could bring out the food and sweets. These were delicious, but Ziyad looked dazed and ate nothing. When the men had gone, it was the turn of the women of the family to come and visit with more presents for Ziyad. My grandmother picked up the foreskin, which the barber had thrown carelessly on the ground, and buried it in the flower-bed beside the kitchen. To her dismay, Louliyyeh, the cat, tried to dig it up again and was shooed off angrily. I do not know how much of the ceremony Ziyad took in, for he was in pain and when he stood up, he had to hold his gown away from his body to keep it from touching his sore and bandaged penis. Even looking at him made me shudder anew at the memory of what I had just seen, and I thanked God fervently that I was not a boy. It was a fortnight before he had healed sufficiently to wear his usual clothes once more.

Although many of my memories of that time are clouded, I remember that I was not sorry to leave Syria. It seemed to me that in the eighteen months we spent there nothing good ever happened except perhaps for the cats. My grandmother and uncle were devoted to cats, an unusual thing in the Arab world, where both cats and dogs are considered unclean and objects of revulsion. The figure of the scrawny cat scavenging for food in rubbish piles and evading the odd kick, is a familiar one throughout the Middle East, even today. Yet, in my grandfather's house cats were kept as pets, fed and relatively cosseted. My mother had grown up with a succession of cats, most of whom were feral and tended to run off. My grandmother's cat Louliyyeh – meaning pearl – was a handsome grey tabby with a white breast and grey-blue eyes. My grandmother had a habit of shoving the cat into bed with her to keep her warm in winter. She would push the cat down to the bottom of the bed and place her feet on it, as if it had been a hot-water bottle. The cat would object violently, miaowing and struggling, and my grandmother would shout and curse her and tell her to lie still. This irritated my grandfather who would scold both of them and swear that no cat would enter his house again.

My grandparents and Uncle Taleb in the liwan *of their house in Damascus, 1949, clutching members of Louliyyeh's litter*

But the worst thing about my grandfather was the way he made me and my brother pray with him as near to five times a day as he could. Everyday, we would spread our prayer mats and stand obediently behind him, while he led the prayer. When Muslims pray, they go through a set of prescribed motions which involve standing, bowing down to the ground and sitting on the haunches. The worshipper may not turn round or look away or be disturbed until the prayer is over, and this ritual is repeated five times a day. After a while, Ziyad and I devised a way of relieving the monotony of the prayer, especially

when we were not at school and had to pray the full five times. Once my grandfather had turned his back to us to commence the prayer and we knew we were safe, we would quickly spread our children's comic on the floor between us. Each time we prostrated ourselves in the prescribed ritual, we would turn over the page of the comic, and by the time the prayer ended, we would have managed to get through half of it. This worked well enough until one day, to our horror, my grandfather turned round unexpectedly and saw what we were doing. Without further ado, he delivered us each a ringing blow to the head and went angrily in search of my mother. "This is what comes of bringing them up like heathens," we heard him snort.

Tears stung my eyes. I didn't want to be there in this poor, overcrowded, miserable house. I wanted to be back in Jerusalem with Fatima and my toys and our dog. I pined for them and thought about them every day. I hadn't wanted to come to Damascus and I didn't know why my father had gone away barely three months after our arrival. Our mother had even less time for us than she had had in Jerusalem, but it had not mattered then because I had my home and Fatima and all the familiar things. Now all that had evaporated as if it had never been, and I could not guess whether we would ever return, or whether we would live in Damascus for good, or whether I would see my father again.

It was a curious thing, when I look back, that not long after we reached Damascus no one spoke of our home any more. Our parents did not talk about Fatima or Muhammad or the house or even Jerusalem. It was as if only I preserved their memory. They seemed wholly preoccupied with the immediate present, as if we had materialised out of nowhere in my grandparents' house. No one questioned this strange turn of events, least of all Siham and Ziyad. And so, bewildered and lost, I took my cue from them and kept my confusion to myself. My allegiance to Fatima, to our house and to my childhood

became a private affair, my secret to cherish and protect. It was a world away from Damascus which I thought then was a horrible place, or at least the part of it which I knew. It was poor and the streets were dirty and full of grim, unsmiling people. Once, when I went running off with my cousin to the market to buy my mother a bag of sugar, a man with a beard and a long robe darted out of the crowd and grabbed hold of my hair. I had long plaits and he pulled them so hard, it hurt. "Cover your head, you shameless girl!" he cried. "Have your parents no shame?"[1]

When we had first arrived in Damascus, my father used to go out every day looking worried. When he came back, I would hear him telling my mother that he had found nothing. We had left Palestine with £330, a sum which was dwindling fast, since my grandfather could not provide for us and soon more money would be needed. Some of my father's friends who had left Palestine at about the same time had managed to find work out of Damascus. They went to the smaller Syrian cities, Homs, Hama, a few to Aleppo, where they became schoolteachers but all were unhappy. These were men who had progressed beyond school teaching, no less than my father, and each had developed his own career in Palestine. They had all had high hopes for their futures and going back to teaching in small schools was a setback none had ever anticipated. "They're lucky to get any work at all," said my grandfather. "God knows Syria is flooded with Palestinians looking for jobs, and every day there are more and more coming in. How will we ever cope?"

Desperate-looking men came to the house and spoke of nothing except their predicament: no work, no jobs, no money. Many of these

[1] In Islam, women are enjoined to dress modestly – a preference that has often been interpreted to mean that they should cover their hair, arms and legs. This form of dress is supposed to be adopted only after puberty, but Muslim fanatics will often insist on veiling pre-pubertal girls as well.

were people from Safad who had come to Syria in early May, less than a month after we did. They had come suddenly in a terrible crush, 10,000 of them or more, the whole population of Safad, it was said; old people and women and children, soon to be followed by the men who had stayed behind in the hope of a truce with the Jewish army. They had nothing but the clothes on their backs and they spoke wildly of being pushed out of their homes in the night with guns and mortar bombs. The rains were unusually heavy in Palestine that year – we would have had a wonderful crop, people said – and they had waded through deep mud and rivers of water to reach the Syrian border eight miles away. They arrived dazed and exhausted, their clothes and shoes sodden with water.

"Poor souls," said Um Said, my mother's cousin who lived in the street above us. "There was nowhere for them to go. We heard that a lot of them were being put in tents while the government worked out what to do with them. Their tents were swimming in water. They said the Jews would never let them go back, but God knows best." The local mosques and schools were given over to the refugees and everyone in the neighbourhood went with their blankets and sheets and mattresses, clothes, food and whatever they could afford. My grandmother cooked for them every Friday and the men of the family took the pans of food down to the mosque. "What a terrible thing is happening in Palestine," said Um Said. "God help us all". The government started to distribute staples to the refugees and, as soon as this was known, a number of the poorest amongst the local inhabitants began to claim that they were Palestinians too. "What a shameful disgrace," said my grandfather.

Some of the Safadi people turned out to be relatives of my mother's family whom they had not seen for many years. For her ancestors came from Safad and one branch of the family later moved to Damascus where my grandfather was born. Now a few of his relatives

found out where he lived and came to visit, but were in such a sorry state that it made my grandmother cry.

"We woke up one night to see the house opposite on fire," said Mustafa, a distant cousin of my grandfather. "And then we heard the bombs. They were so loud and made such a flash we thought they were atom bombs. The children started screaming, I opened the windows to see what was happening but we were all so panicked we didn't know what to do. 'The Jews are coming', people were shouting, 'the Jews are coming.' I went outside and the street was full of people pushing against each other trying to get away. I rushed back in and got Nahla and the children. We dressed them quickly, but there was no time to take anything with us, just the clothes on our backs. My father couldn't get up – he's been ill and he can't walk far. So we had no choice but to leave him behind. But I told him I'd be back to get him."

"What a terrible thing, what a terrible thing," said my grandfather, shaking his head.

"Anyway," continued Mustafa, "we walked along with everyone else in a great crowd. The children kept falling down and it was raining and bitterly cold, but we had to keep on walking because the Jewish soldiers were behind us."

"Where were the Arab fighters all this time, the AHC, the Arab Liberation Army?" asked my father.

"What Arab fighters?" said Mustafa bitterly. "They were as scared as we were. I don't suppose they'd ever heard bombs like that before either. Even the battalion from the Arab Liberation Army which was supposed to defend us actually pulled out with the Jewish soldiers on our doorstep. We asked the Jews for a truce, but they refused, and so we were just left to our fate. Mind you, they didn't have it that easy. When the assault began, some of our men fought them as hard as they could. In some streets, the Jews had to get them out house by house,

but in the end, what could we have done? We're just ordinary people, no match for an army." He paused and everyone looked at him. "All those who could walk went in the end. The very old ones, like father, were left behind because they couldn't move and there was no way to move them out. God knows what happened to them."

It later emerged that the Jewish troops rounded up these old people, whose average age, according to the Jewish military commander in Safad, was eighty and who were all Muslims, and expelled them to Lebanon in early June of 1948. That left a small number of elderly Christian Arab Safadis still clinging to their homes. But these were also removed, driven in lorries to Haifa, where they were placed in the care of two convents there. Not one of the inhabitants of Safad was ever allowed back and, in the chaos of their various expulsions, I don't know if Mustafa ever saw his father again.

Out in the street, the talk was all of Palestine and Palestinians. Men in pyjama trousers stood around and talked of Safad and of politics in general. The custom in the poorer parts of Damascus was for men to wear their pyjamas in the day as well as at night. Sometimes, they "dressed up" by wearing a shirt over the pyjama trousers and if it was cold they might slip a jersey over the shirt.

After a few months of looking fruitlessly for work in Syria our father left us to go to England. This had not been an easy decision for him to make and only arrived at after much hesitation and disappointment, not to mention opposition from my mother. Finding that he could not return to his job in Jerusalem, he realised he would have to find new work, "until the situation in Jerusalem settles", explained our mother. He searched in Jordan, but Amman in those days was a small provincial place with little capacity for absorption of qualified people like him, and he had already turned down the only good position with the

bank the year before. Abu Ahmad, our old neighbour who had ended up in Cairo, wrote to my father through his cousin in Damascus, urging him to come. He said that Cairo was a paradise on earth, there were jobs to be had and money to be made. My mother was excited when she heard this.

"Perhaps it's true," she said. "Perhaps that's where we should go until we can return to Jerusalem." Egypt was the home of glamour in the Arab world. It had a film industry, produced the most famous singers and entertainers and published the best-known newspapers and magazines. Cairo was the foremost centre of style and fashion, but also of intellectual and political life. Every Arab aspired at least to visit there and many would have liked to stay.

But my father did not agree. "I wouldn't trust Abu Ahmad if he were the last man alive," he said, "not after that business in Palestine." There had been much talk in Jerusalem that Abu Ahmad was one of those who sold land to Jews. He worked as an estate agent and made a reasonable living but no more. When he suddenly got rich, the rumours started that there was only one way this could have happened – by selling land to Jews. My father once saw him slipping into the offices of the Zionist land agency in Zion Square in Jerusalem. It was well-known that the Jews who came to Palestine from the 1880s onwards were desperate to acquire land. They would have paid any price to get hold of it, often backed by wealthy Jewish sources from Europe and America. And at first, some Palestinians sold them land and became wealthy in the process. But gradually the realisation grew that this was not as innocent as it seemed.

"They've got a plan in mind," people said. "They want to take over our country." Selling of land to Jews after 1946 became an act of treason in the eyes of the AHC, even on occasions punishable by death. One night in the summer of 1947, when our neighbours were all congregated at the house of Abu Ahmad and there was much