

AKRAM

“It’s too dangerous, Akram” my uncle said, “Only a fool would take such a risk.” Spoken, of course, without a trace of irony as the smell of sulphur and death lingered in our nostrils. “This is your home,” he said, “Why would you leave it behind?” But a country isn’t a home any more than four walls and a roof are. They’re merely circumstances – the places where fate deposits us on this earth. Home is where you feel safe and secure. Some are lucky enough to be birthed into such places, others are not. I thought I was one of the lucky ones. And I suppose, relatively speaking, I was. Until the siege began.

(Beat.)

At first we hoped it might end soon – in weeks, maybe a month or two. What match could the rebels be against the might of the government’s forces? But they were. Or rather, the government wasn’t nearly as all-powerful as we’d been led to believe. So weeks turned into months, months into years, and all to a soundtrack of crackling sniper fire, thudding mortar rounds, and the dread-inducing whir of the gunships hovering above, idly dropping their barrel bombs on a whim, followed by the inevitable wail of ambulances and the inevitable wail of the bereaved.

(Beat.)

Our home was small but room enough for my parents, my brother and myself. And we were fortunate as we had a cellar in which we could shelter on the days when the shelling was more intense. Very occasionally, we’d be blessed with a day when the sound of gunfire and explosions was almost stilled. It was on just such a day that my mother asked me to fetch rice from the cellar as she began preparing our supper. I’d barely reached the last step when suddenly the entire world around me burst apart in a violent rage of flying debris – a deafening, thundering end of days. When the White Helmets dug me out they said I was lucky to be alive and unharmed, save a few cuts and bruises. My family and my home, meanwhile, had been erased from the earth. Luck, perhaps, is in the eye of the beholder.

(Beat.)

I went to live with my uncle Hosam and his family after that. Eight of us crammed into two tiny rooms in an apartment building, the top two stories of