

## CHAPTER 2

### Olive Trees

**D**ara'a – درعا – was a fine place to dream. Right at the southwestern edge of Syria near the Jordanian border, Dara'a was just connected – and just secluded – enough. It was a traveler's midpoint between Syria's capital city of Damascus and Jordan's capital city of Amman. An at-times buzzing crossroads for business and cultural exchange between neighboring nations.

But Dara'a bore little resemblance to the two major Middle Eastern cities it sat between. It was a relatively quiet town of about 75,000,<sup>1</sup> mostly unknown on the world's stage. A place with its share of challenges, to be sure – recent periods of drought not the least among them.<sup>2</sup> But a place with a community and a spirit about it, where often people knew one another growing up. A place built on agriculture, where gardens growing countless fruits and vegetables were passed down among families from generation to generation.

A place where one could escape the summer heat in the cool shade of the olive trees.

That was what a young Asma would do, at least. For her, life in Dara'a was simple. Her dad was a respected teacher and she lived in an affluent neighborhood, with relatives all around her. Her house contained a spacious garden, where there stood the brightest symbol of her memories of Syria: an olive tree. "We used to climb it and pick olives together. It was so much fun."

It was amidst that period of comfort that she found her first loves: books and school. Every morning, she would walk to the schoolhouse with her sisters, and every evening she would walk back with a new stack of books under her arm. At home, aside from playing in the garden and eating supper, she would sit alone, reading everything she could get her hands on. Only when she became exhausted from reading would she turn out the lights and fall sleep. She was so enamored with school and everything about it that she would sleep in her school uniform; she simply could not wait to start the next day.

Only one problem. An all too familiar problem for children who aren't blessed – or perhaps cursed – with inordinate confidence: she had trouble speaking up in class. "I was not brave. I was shy." Still, a dream formed within her: that she would grow in confidence and become a teacher like the ones she was so sorely afraid to address in the classroom. A teacher like her dad was.

As the years passed, though, her education stalled, and her dream was laid to the side. "That got interrupted. I got married when I was fifteen years old, so I stopped going to school." In the ensuing years, Asma did not let her circumstances keep her from breathing some life into her

passion for reading and writing. “I finished my education at home. I always had books with me, and I would always write notes in my journals.” Meanwhile, she was adjusting to family life the best she could. She would turn her focus toward becoming the ultimate teacher for her daughter, Tamara, as her husband was gone at work. She would spend her days reading to Tamara, channeling her love of education into her young child.

Asma does not stop to think much about her time in Dara’a; because of the way that time would end, she avoids the topic. “I like to forget,” she says with a kind smile hiding her grief. But when she does think of the good times back at home, she remembers just how sweet they could be. Picking olives in the garden as a child, without a care.

Nearby, and several years older than Asma, was Yasmina. Yasmina had time to establish even deeper roots in Syria before leaving. In her early thirties when she departed, Yasmina had not only dreamed; she had lived out her dream.

She, too, discovered her calling at an early age. Yasmina’s obsession with styling her dolls as a girl led her straight to launching a salon and wedding dress shop as a young woman. Though she did not have as much experience as others when her business first opened, she was up for the challenge. “I learned quickly.” Yasmina ran her venture with great success, planning weddings and preparing brides across Dara’a for their special days.

Each appointment brought another radiant woman anticipating her moment, trusting Yasmina like a sister. Yasmina herself would get married and have two children, Hamid and Laila, living a life of relative peace and prosperity.

The youngest of the trio, Malak learned to dream not in Dara'a, but just a bit further north in Damascus. Her memories of life in her hometown span a shorter duration, since she was only a teenager when she left. But she, too, is persuaded she found her life's mission early on.

Malak lived in a humming home with eleven older sisters and an older brother. Her house had a well next to it and a generator for electricity. Like Asma's house growing up, Malak's included a large garden. Malak, her siblings, and her mother and father grew a range of fruits and vegetables – including, yes, olives. “Our life in Syria was a routine life: school, home, garden. It was a good life.”

The school part was a mixed bag for Malak. Math class: not her style. Geography class: also not her style, except the days when her teacher would ask the class to draw maps on large pieces of construction paper. Malak loved that, and everyone else loved watching her. She started to realize that perhaps God had given her a specific talent and joy that should drive her life.

Art class, then: definitely her style. Malak shined, and her art teacher noticed. This teacher and others would invite her to place her creations all around the school – much to the appreciation of her classmates, the faculty, and the staff. “They were always asking me to decorate the classes and the hallways.” It was then that Malak developed her dream: to create her own art studio in Damascus. As far as everyone around her could tell, she was well on her way.



Then, in a rush, night fell upon Syria. Change came swiftly and it came painfully. It came in the month of March, the year 2011. And it was triggered by, of all things, the acts of fifteen schoolchildren in, of all places, the calm town of Dara'a.

But to understand that change, one must venture back three more months and a couple thousand miles, across the Mediterranean Sea to the small North African nation of Tunisia. There, on a hot day in December 2010, a twenty-six-year-old man named Mohamed Bouazizi was at work.

A street vendor in a quiet Tunisian town, Mohamed was, as is reported, accused by city inspectors of not paying a fine.<sup>3</sup> Believing this to be a clear request for a bribe, Mohamed refused to pay.<sup>4</sup> In response, the inspectors seized his electronic scale and crates of fruit.<sup>5</sup> A crowd gathered, and the confrontation led to a policewoman allegedly slapping him on the face and insulting his father, who had died when Mohamed was three years old.<sup>6</sup> Mohamed went to the provincial government office to file a complaint.<sup>7</sup> But he was refused entry.<sup>8</sup> "Above all," as *Foreign Policy* summarized in an article on his life, Mohamed was "a repressed entrepreneur."<sup>9</sup> It was at that moment of despair – symbolically in front of the government building – that Mohamed decided he could no longer bear the repression.<sup>10</sup>

Mohamed lit himself on fire using paint thinner, and died as the flames engulfed him.<sup>11</sup>

That moment is looked back upon as the moment that ignited the Arab Spring, and the region would never be the same. The Middle East and North Africa was electrified with a passion for a voice in democratic government, an end

to public corruption, better economic conditions, and greater civil liberties. In Tunisia it was called the Jasmine Revolution, and protests erupted until twenty-three-year president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali stepped down and fled the country to make way for democratic elections.<sup>12</sup> Egypt was next. Tahrir Square in Cairo was packed with tens of thousands of protestors.<sup>13</sup> Less than three weeks later, after the death of 846 civilians and 26 policemen in clashes, Hosni Mubarak's rule of almost thirty years would come to an end.<sup>14</sup> Two of the longest-tenured leaders in the region were, all but overnight, out of power.

اجاك الدور يا دكتور.

It's your turn doctor.

Four words in red graffiti on the wall of a school in little Dara'a.<sup>15</sup> Words, along with other revolutionary slogans, directed toward Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, a physician by training. Words painted as a peaceful protest by about fifteen teenage boys.<sup>16</sup>

Words that changed Syria forever.

Already on high alert given the winds of resistance blowing across the region, the Syrian government responded quickly and violently. Ben Ali's more than two decades of rule ended, Mubarak's nearly three decades of rule ended, but the Assad family's then four decades would not go down so swiftly.<sup>17</sup> The fifteen boys in Dara'a were arrested, jailed, and tortured.<sup>18</sup> In response, many in the town erupted in outrage, marching in protest of the children's detention.<sup>19</sup>

Just as Mohamed Bouazizi's fiery death signaled the start of the Jasmine Revolution, a singular moment in

Dara'a – not Damascus, not Aleppo, but humble Dara'a – would come to signal the start of the Syrian chapter of the Arab Spring. Suddenly, Dara'a had transformed from a quiet town to the “cradle of the revolution.”<sup>20</sup> International media later called the events in Dara'a the “spark that lit the flame.”<sup>21</sup> The town was labeled the “heartland of Syria's revolution.”<sup>22</sup>

Tensions escalated over the coming weeks, as police violently cracked down on protesters and, in response, some opposition supporters started to take up arms.<sup>23</sup> The conflict became all too real for residents of Dara'a in late April. Army tanks drove into the town.<sup>24</sup> Troops cut water and electricity, as well as phone lines, and went door-to-door looking for protesters.<sup>25</sup> Snipers on mosques and in helicopters loomed overhead, according to Dara'a residents.<sup>26</sup> As one shared with *The New York Times*, “There are bodies in the streets we can't reach; anyone who walks outside is getting shot at.”<sup>27</sup>

This ten-day siege left hundreds dead, and the bloodshed only escalated from there.<sup>28</sup> Violence between government forces and newly formed opposition groups in the region heightened to a point at which shellings and bombings were commonplace.<sup>29</sup> Over the next two years, it became clearer and clearer to many families in Dara'a, Damascus, and across the area that their primary hope of safety would be to leave.

This is the context in which the Za'atari refugee camp was born. Just across the Syrian border in Jordan, close enough to hear the sound of artillery from Dara'a at night, Za'atari was established in July 2012.<sup>30</sup> As fighting escalated, the population exploded later that year and in

2013 – with the camp growing from settlements in only what is today’s northwest quadrant, to expanding into the southwest, to filling out the full rectangle.<sup>31</sup> The overwhelming number of Syrian families fleeing to Jordan led to the creation of a second refugee camp, called Azraq, nearby.<sup>32</sup>

As put in the poem “Home Was Your Refuge, Now They Call You Refugee” by British Indian poet Nikita Gill: “Home is where / You had to teach your children / How to run from men who are dressed / In war and blood.”<sup>33</sup> This was the lived experience of the residents of Dara’a, Damascus, and Syria more broadly, and the transformation from calm to unrest to war happened before anyone could prepare for it.

Asma, Yasmina, and Malak prefer not to talk much about their sudden departure.

Asma was the first of the three to go. It was just twenty days after her second daughter Maya’s birth, but there was no choice or time to prepare. Her house had been burned down, and she had lost most of her belongings – including her journals. Asma joined a group of family members and neighbors who were huddling together to make the dangerous trip to Za’atari. For baby Maya, who had just entered the world, this was the most offensive of beginnings: to be kicked out of your home, at no fault of your own. As Asma summarizes her family’s move: “I hated the way I came here.”

Yasmina held out a few months longer, continuing to operate her salon and wedding shop but carefully watching as the residents around her began to flee and the wedding celebrations dwindled.



She was pregnant with her third child, Ashraf, when she could hold out no longer. “When things turned to be very bad around Ramadan 2013, we left. I was seven months pregnant, my son had just had an operation, and my husband was sick.” It could not have been a worse time to have her life completely uprooted.

Malak left Damascus around then, too. Her parents were worried for her and her siblings’ future. “Things changed, and it became very hard to live in Syria. My mom was worried about us.” She remembers the moment she left her luxurious home, unwilling to accept that the next morning she would wake up in a tent inside a refugee camp.

“The time I left Syria was really hard. I was crying. It was a very hard experience. Harder than hunger.”

“But thank God I was able to forget.”



Dara’a and Damascus lived on beyond the departure of Asma, Yasmina, Malak, and others, but without so many of the people and activities that once brought life to those places. Without Yasmina’s salon or Asma’s passion for education or Malak’s art.

Yasmina’s house was destroyed. Asma’s was burned to the ground. Malak’s dad has a video of their family’s former home on his cell phone, sent by a friend who stayed back. He shows it to those who visit their current home in Za’atari, with a mix of pride in what he had built and sorrow in what he has lost. A sort of reminder that, lest any visitor

think this is normal to him, it is not; it is his worst nightmare, the type of nightmare that could happen suddenly to anyone living a “normal life.” Yet, still, he holds a resilient pride in emerging on the other side and entertaining guests yet again, regardless of whether the center of gravity is a spacious home in Damascus or a trailer in Za’atari.

As the shaky camera image on his phone moves from one room to the next, the visuals are clear: rubble, busted walls, belongings strewn about and covered in ash. Nothing stands untarnished.

Nothing, perhaps, but the olive trees outside. A reminder of the people that had once breathed life into Syria – the girls like a young Asma who would climb their limbs and gather their fruits, and the emerging artists like Malak who would paint under their shade.

A symbol of peace and life still standing amidst a place destroyed, in the blink of an eye, by an unexpected war. Tunisian poet Asma Jelassi and Syrian poet Widad Nabi, who fled Aleppo during the war, wrote about the mix of haunting reminders and sweet memories that accompany distant thoughts of home. In their words:

Dejection is  
 To visit the ruins of your house in a dream  
 And return without having its dust clung to your  
 Hands.<sup>34</sup>