

Luna Ali

There Were Days

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**A book of high social relevance and topicality:
On the war in Syria and political activism in our
time.**



Aras initially perceives the Syrian revolution from a distance; born in Aleppo, he grew up in Germany and was in his first semester of law school in 2011. But as the violence in Syria escalates, the conflict becomes more and more a part of his everyday life. In the lecture hall and at the immigration office, during an internship in Jordan or as a guest on a political talk show, he experiences the anniversary of the revolution anew every year as an interplay between reality and imagination.

In her impressive debut novel, Luna Ali tells how the violence in Syria inscribes itself in the life, actions and language of her protagonist. And so "There Were Days" poses urgent questions about the meaning of political action and collective desire in our present.

Luna Ali, born in Syria in 1993, studied cultural studies and aesthetic practice in Hildesheim, literary writing at the German Literature Institute and anthropology at the University of Leipzig. She has worked as an author on productions at the Düsseldorf, Dortmund and Hanover theatres and in Berlin, among others. In 2023 she received the working scholarship for German-language literature from the Berlin Senate Department.

Sample Translation: Caroline Waight

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2013 – Getting the Process Going

The paving was uneven. The roots had forced their way up in several places, breaking through the slabs. Stone ensnared in moss around its edges. Then a road, no cars, bike racks, a few bikes, a set of steps, a railing, metal. A brown façade, which elicited a sigh from Aras. He hated that building, and because he hated it so much, the sight of it, its rough stone face, he hated everything around it too. Even himself, a bit. He wasn't alone. Probably wasn't alone in hating it, either. On the paving stones beside him were his mother and his former German teacher.

'Thank you for coming. It means a lot to us, it really does!' Aras said to Frau Hoffmann. He was grateful. He nodded.

Frau Hoffmann was a tall woman. Short grey curls, bags puffy under her eyes – the nights grew shorter with age. She had a long, lined face and a slightly stooped back, though not because of the pressures of school routine or the attendant stress. Most of the students were small, arrayed before her on their chairs. It was not her habit to talk down to them. Aras must have thanked her a hundred times, and she had asked him to call her by her first name. But it was too soon, and in Aras's head she was still his German teacher, someone owed respect. 'Of course, I'm happy to!' Frau Hoffmann said.

His mother stood next to them, clutching a folder stuffed with papers. Frau Hoffmann turned to Nadia: 'I don't know if Aras mentioned this to you, but I've actually been to Aleppo. I went on holiday there with my family. A remarkably beautiful city, a gorgeous city.' Nadia inclined her head and asked, 'Did you visit the castle?'

'Citadel,' corrected Aras.

'Yes, of course. I heard it was destroyed.'

'Just the back of it,' Aras said.

'Just the back of it,' Nadia nodded.

As a boy, Aras used to go in and get lost there, the citadel, always on the hunt for a new stage. Once, with one of his cousins, he had gone looking for the hill where Abraham was said to have milked a cow – the reason why the city where they lived was called Halab: white, like the milk. Getting lost in the citadel was a kind of ritual. Inside, time was blurred. There was always something new to find. Once, with another cousin, he discovered the tomb of Salah al-Din's third son. Another time they clambered down into the dungeons, where people had once poured acid. Their search led them eventually to the throne room, one of two spaces preserved in their original condition, although nobody really believed the interiors were original. Still, the patterns, the geometry – Aras had sat down and tried to count the squares, the triangles, the sequences, but they seemed to never end. The citadel was a vast labyrinth, an adventure playground. In it he would never go astray. Other visitors, used to seeing children without parents, would drop him off at the main entrance, where he would wait with the guards, picturing the battles in which the citadel had never been taken – the moat was simply too deep – until at last his family emerged and he re-joined them. Back then they didn't know the citadel's afflictions would persist, or that the increasing damage to the city would come to seem like an inverse prediction of the past, when Aleppo's nickname al-Shaba' – the white mingled with the black – had once referred to marble. Now, it meant ash and rubble.

The ground offered its solid, uneven foundation to other people who stood nearby, their eyes glued to wristwatches, to phones. Nervous glances. Cigarettes appeared in the corners of several mouths, while other people chatted with their companions. Only a very few had come alone, and those were the ones who looked around. It would take nerves of steel to be here by yourself, thought Aras, smiling at them. They hadn't rolled out the appointments system yet, when their phones would put them in a queue, sorted alphabetically.

The doors opened. Anybody standing directly in front of them, the metal doors, was swallowed up. If you wanted to be first through the mill you were first to arrive, because the mill ground slowly. Frau Hoffmann, Aras and Nadia passed through the entryway. Their pace was slow, a pace not rushed, not hasty, not reluctant, not without purpose, but with confidence low. The floor reflected back their steps, tiled; a reception desk was directly opposite the entrance. A corridor on the right led to the Citizens' Registration Office. Their path took them left, up the stairs. The silicone on the banister was red, worn. The door now facing them was mint green, silver-handled, ring-scuffed. Five people were gathered around it. No obvious order. Aras memorised the faces, hoping that they – and perhaps the door as well – would memorise his own, so that when the sixth face came they'd know whose turn it was.

The last time Aras had taken leave of the place was four years earlier, and he'd believed it really was the last time. A fond farewell. Not that he was a credulous person, mind you. When, verdict by verdict, more dead were added to the chants each Friday; when cities were cut off from electricity, water and all forms of communication, when there followed more and more arrests, more and more disappearances; when the dictator, who described his own people as too ill-educated for reforms, decided to smother the revolution beneath a sky thick with hails of bullets – Assad or we'll burn the country to the ground, said the walls, Assad for all eternity, they said and said again; when soldiers who didn't want to fire on their brothers and sisters, on their girlfriends, neighbours and relatives, joined the Free Syrian Army; while Nadia alternately sat in front of the computer screen or stood out on the street, outside embassies, local government buildings or the Reichstag, hoping to hear the one piece of news that would end it all; Aras had realised then that it wouldn't be long before he saw this building once again, and now, after two years, he had. Goodbyes aren't forever.

So while the European Union debated on that very day, a day like today, whether to supply the Syrian rebels with weapons – Germany didn't think it was a good idea, because it would just mean the opposing side would arm themselves still further – the banister opposite the mint-coloured door provided Aras with some small support. The tiles at his feet worried him. They

captured his attention. Black, cracked in certain places, split. Somebody had fought against their power, perhaps, tried furiously to bring the place down with their feet, over and over, others following, a pathetic attempt. Were the cracks evidence that the police had made a pact with the floor, offering it different faces, and the floor, in return, had exercised the harshness of state power? Aras's vision went red.

Nadia and Frau Hoffmann were chatting beside him.

'Can you translate?' his mother asked.

'A man was on trial, and the three judges sentenced him to death,' Aras translated. 'He was offered a last wish, as is often the case. Normally, most people ask to see their mother again, or they ask for food, that sort of thing. But this man thought he was clever, so he asked to learn German.' Nadia was building up towards the punchline. 'The first judge said, "No, we can't grant that wish." The second judge agreed: "It would take far too long. We'll never get round to carrying out the sentence."' Realising he knew the joke already, Aras braced himself for Frau Hoffmann's reaction. 'The third judge said, "We should grant him his wish. He'll carry out the sentence himself."' The others by the door, whom Aras had almost forgotten were there, joined in with Frau Hoffmann's laughter. 'I'll have to tell my students that one,' she chuckled. 'Priceless.'

A silence fell as the others remembered where they were. They looked knowingly into each other's eyes. 'When's the last time you were there?' Frau Hoffmann asked to break the silence, which for her was groundless. 'My mother hasn't been there for thirteen years. I went back for a visit one year before the revolution, I think. In the summer.' Not long ago he'd been looking at pictures from the holiday. They weren't holiday snaps any more, overlaid now with a heaviness that pulled him into the deep. Aras had never been afraid of heights, but he was afraid of falling. He wondered if the heaviness was a kind of longing, but without the pain he wouldn't feel the pull.

The banister drew his gaze downwards, and he thought he could see three more floors, although they had only climbed one. Before he could get to the bottom of the mystery, the door behind him opened. Two people were revealed, two people admitted. Aras's phone buzzed in his pocket. Khalid,

asking, Are you coming to the rally today? Aras's fingers typed out a reply: he'd like to come but wasn't sure how long this would take. Khalid wished him luck.

Three people were still ahead of them, one with a large envelope in her hand, another with her documents in a clear sleeve, and the last with hers in a white plastic folder. The white folder reminded Aras of the milk, of Khalid, in Lidl. Khalid had been looking for milk while Aras was asking Nadia to recite the shopping list again over the phone, yoghurt, ten percent fat – you could finally get it at Lidl, not just at the Turkish supermarkets, which could only be reached by driving half an hour into the city – cucumbers, tomatoes (the big ones), garlic, small onions. They were having a barbecue. Khalid had followed him for a few aisles before approaching him, limping, asking if Aras was from Aleppo. That question, in Lidl. Aras nodded in surprise, nodding simply at being recognised that way. Khalid said he was staying at a nearby hotel, waiting for his surgical appointment. He'd come in from Syria four days ago on a medical visa, he needed help, he knew no German or English, he didn't even know where to find the milk, and he had no friends in the city. Aras thought Khalid was a miracle and backed away from him, not knowing what to say. He showed him the milk, left, came back, and invited him to the barbecue.

They had sat in the community garden. Khalid, Aras now noticed, looked like a typical Arab artist. He had curls, wore a red scarf wound around his neck, although it was summer, and drainpipe jeans with boots, black. He said he'd been shot at a demonstration, in the leg, that strangers had carried him away. Delirious, he'd woken up eventually in Beirut, where they told him he was being flown to Germany for an operation. As to who'd arranged it all, he didn't know, it must have been an angel. They'd been out to arrest him, his student had been shot. The sun was shining, the food, kebabs, berouaz, grilled onions, mtabbal in front of them. Mila was running around between them, barking every now and then to ask someone to throw a stick.

Khalid spoke as though describing the interior of his studio. There was the canvas, and to Aras, sitting across from him, it was as though he inhaled every single second, imagining Khalid borne away on a stretcher in a street

littered with stones, smoke rising, shots fired. Almost the moment he paused, Khalid opened his eyes wide, his legs trembled, a blank stare. Probably there was no stretcher, probably the strangers had hooked their arms under Khalid's and dragged him off, his legs scraping on the ground. No one at that table would ever know how Khalid was taken away from there. Was he going to apply for asylum? He was bound to get in as a political. He said he didn't want to stay in Germany, where he knew nobody, but Sweden, he had his oldest brother there at least, who had emigrated in the eighties.

Then there were the tables, workbenches, and in this voice he said he had bought weapons. He had argued about it with his father, and one time they had even come, them, the shabi7a, to search the house, and he had nearly been caught, but luckily they'd forgotten about the attic, where the weapons were hidden. A pause, the workbenches at the edges of the room, and in the middle always the picture he was working on, paints, canvas, wood, strewn everywhere in the corners, and yet more pictures on the walls. His student had gone to buy milk, just popping out for a moment; Khalid's mother had asked him, and the student had jumped up immediately, said he'd be straight back. He was late. Khalid had thought nothing of it. Perhaps he'd been delayed by a friend asking him for a favour, perhaps by some neighbourhood girl he was in love with – Arabs were always getting lost in daily life, famously taking their sweet time. Quickly? Not in my vocabulary. But the student did not come back. His brother called that night. He's dead, he told Khalid: his student, my brother. Shot. In broad daylight, a sniper. He died with the milk in his hand. Not that he wanted to romanticise his death, said Khalid, but that's how they found him, milk in his hand. It was several weeks before he was able to speak to his mother. He'd seen so many people die, said Khalid, before his very eyes. A war with no soldiers. He had been through a war they wouldn't even call a war. No one at that table suspected that in the coming years it would be impossible to find another word for it, at least not in German.

Khalid's stories mixed in Aras's head with Haidar's. Haidar, who responded only sporadically to his texts, sometimes because the power went out, the internet, or because there was no time, because what little time there was

had to be spent on the bare necessities of life, the milk. Sitting in front of Khalid, Aras thought of Haidar and wondered when he might sit there too. After all, it was only a matter of time. Their hopes of overthrowing the regime hadn't faded, only given way to the certainty that this would be a long struggle, one of hardship and privation. Others would come to mind as well, appearing before his eyes, telling yet more stories, there was no shortage of those. It was easier to think they were just stories.

A bang. Nadia screamed, Aras turned. The door had slammed. He asked her if everything was alright. 'Yes, yes. Everything's fine.' She'd been a little jumpier than usual lately, she told him. 'Two to go,' said Aras into space, as though Nadia couldn't count and Frau Hoffmann couldn't see. He started picking at the skin around his fingernails, letting the shreds fall through the banister and down the stairs, three flights. The view from above and the stairs reminded him of the Secret Police building. The basement, the official had said, that was where it all came out, though what 'it' was he didn't say. Nadia stroked his hands. She did that a lot – she thought the nail-picking was a bad habit. In her eyes it just didn't look very nice.

Those eyes had seen a lot of ugliness in the last two years. The first casualty of war may be truth, but Nadia was sure the truth was still very much alive. She was familiar with the propaganda of the regime. It was sometimes crude and rarely subtle, yet always, to her, transparent. At the very beginning of the revolution, a mother had been asked to go to a hospital to identify her daughter. The daughter's body was mutilated. Her face as well. The mother took the body and gave it back what it had lost, a little dignity. The opposition saw every injury on the body as proof of the monstrosity of the regime.

Nadia had studied the photographs, the before and after: the first a portrait, a young girl with long brown wavy hair, a barrette, brown eyes, large nose. The picture had been edited. Her skin was white, she was dazzling, as dazzling as the sun, so that even the laugh lines were barely visible. The next images: the eyes discoloured blue, the lips swollen, the body decorated with bruises, purple in some places, brown. Wounds, round, left by cigarette butts. Flash photographs, everything a greyish yellow, wan, three toenails and four fingernails missing, the flesh pink, suppurating, filthy.

A few weeks later, a girl appeared on the television claiming to be the same girl, the supposed proof of what the regime was doing to the daughters of Syria. She said she ran away from her parents because they had beaten her, because she'd wanted to get married, because her brothers had abused her. Although she came from the city, where the hard letter Qaf was usually not pronounced, she pronounced it in the interview, again and again, the back of her tongue blocking the flow, cutting off the air she breathed, very briefly, her tongue touching her uvula, as though she were being choked. To Nadia it was a sign the regime was forcing her to say those words. Out of fear she had adopted the vernacular of those in power. Nadia fought about it with her siblings, over Viber, on Facebook, on WhatsApp, over and over, each case anew. There was no shortage. In her eyes there was a truth, a truth worth living for and dying for, even if the world was telling her otherwise.

For the mother didn't recognise her daughter, and yet she wasn't sure. In an interview she wondered if her daughter might have risen from the dead. Could it be? Or had she never been dead at all? What was more likely? And if so, who had she buried?

The fear, the shock, the uncertainty around it, arose from the notion that it was even conceivable for the regime to treat Syrians, to treat children this way. In the eyes of the regime they were not people at all, Syrian women; to the state that was supposed to protect them, they were nothing more than what they would be if they'd begun to flee, people without rights. The body of an unknown girl was buried, and the grave bore the name of Zaynab al-Hossni.

Those familiar with extreme violence as a form of government – when school really was like a prison, and the street was like a prison, and in the prisons people were tortured – felt that the violence inextricably concerned them. For the pictures of the girl and other girls and other women, men, boys, there was no escaping Nadia's gaze. They found their way into her eyes as though she were the girl on the way to school. Tremendous violence, like pain, creates a curious subjectivity. To others, who did not know such violence, it was unbearable. Aras avoided those images, even when they filled his timeline. His finger twitched but his brain issued orders, forced the finger on: not those

pictures, look at others. Among those, however, who were shaped by this violence, there arose a we who beheld it, witnessed it, knew its enemy.

While to Nadia the very same story was merely further proof of the horrors the regime was willing to inflict to stay in power, Aras was appalled by the violence, although he'd heard about it, heard the stories and the jokes about the stories all throughout his childhood, and he'd laughed. There'd been this joke that all the army men were telling: an order had gone out that each man had to have an ear cut off, so one by one the soldiers lined up to have it carried out. One soldier said he'd already had an ear removed, to which the officer in charge replied that they were going to cut first, count second. Everyone in his mother's living room had laughed, Aras had laughed. Now, though, seeing pictures, severed ears, pulled fingernails, burnt skin, shaved heads, sometimes videos, they set off a disquiet in him that bordered on anxiety: heart racing, hands sweaty, chest tight.

The image of a disfigured body produced the sense in him that he could no longer trust his eyes, could no longer trust himself. But then how could he be convinced that the images were real? And he did have to be convinced, not only because he didn't want to believe that somebody could do such thing to another person, although it did happen, but because those images could just as well be fake. They did exist, fake pictures. And Aras knew they would dictate so many things, no-fly zones, embargos, aid packages, declarations of solidarity. Those pictures, after all, had led him to this building. Without them, Frau Hoffmann would not be there.

The brutality of those images had its effect. Aras's world was, to a certain degree, made less real by them, not in the sense that no meaning was ascribed to things, but that the meaning shifted – it flew somehow through space and adhered in the most unusual places. His presence in this building was the consequence of actions taking place elsewhere, actions entirely beyond his control. Aras could read in several different languages who'd shot whom and why, but only after the fact; he had no influence on any of it. Yet his presence in this place was rooted also in an age beyond what was currently going on elsewhere, in one specific somewhere, in Syria. The back-and-forth with which Aras tried to explain how his presence here had

come about – the effect and the cause of this effect – could not be easily arranged into a sequence, even when he tried to work it out logically, linearly, in terms of argument. It existed, the sequence, but there was no point of origin. There was the dictatorship, after years of unstable government in the wake of Syrian independence; there was his father's involvement against this dictatorship, their flight; and there were the protests and their suppression, those existed. There were the borders drawn with rulers and the dominance of Europe, stemming from a violent colonial past, which ensured there was no unrestricted right to mobility; there was a sense of duty towards one's relatives.

To bring his world back to reality, Aras lent a dual meaning to things. The world could be understood through his relationships with his old school, his former neighbours, friends, his family – that was how he tried to explain it to himself, as though it were a plastic film through which his present circumstances would help him build connections to his surroundings. A film that could be added or removed, which sometimes added or removed itself, that was what he saw around him. Only once he understood, or so Aras hoped, what his relationship was with those in power – since he was not their slave, would not be their accomplice, but could be their observer – only then could he get his head around why he was here, in this place he didn't want to be and didn't have to be. It isn't insight into necessity but into the variance of chance that gives sequences their meaning.

The wait had cost Aras a lot of skin, which had begun to bleed in several places. He ran his tongue over a small gap that had formed between nail and nailbed, but the blood kept coming. Rummaging for a tissue, he tore off a corner, spat, and pressed it against the bleeding. The tissue went red. Aras blew on it, the cool air helping to soothe the burning. Tearing off another piece of tissue, he spat, placed it on another cut, blew.

'How's the law degree going, Aras?' asked Frau Hoffmann. He looked up. 'Great. Not even all that stressful, actually, thanks to the grant. I'm learning a lot. Lot of useless stuff as well, unfortunately. But I'm definitely going to do another internship. Best way to figure out the right job.' She seemed satisfied with his answer. The door opened to reveal a person framed, then released

them from this violent embrace, and the next was taken in. It would be their turn after that.

The clock swam into focus – they'd already been waiting four hours. His hands tried to rub the tiredness from his eyes. Since Nadia and Frau Hoffmann seemed to be chatting happily without his help, and Aras's phone had found its way unnoticed back into his hand, his tired eyes began to slowly skim the main news items: anniversary of Halabja, Pope Francis's ties with the military junta in Argentina, arguments over seats at the NSU trial, birds begin migrating home, March too cold, Facebook wants to introduce hashtags, Hugo Chávez suffers same fate as Lenin.

The only time Aras had been in the same room as a dead person, a corpse on a slab, its genitals covered with a sheet, green, the body pale, was at the path department for a lecture on forensic medicine. The thought had disconcerted Aras somewhat. He wasn't sure if he could bear to see a corpse dissected before his very eyes. The pathologist cutting out one organ after another, presenting it, examining it, sharing her findings with them, telling them the gory details of past cases as she folded back the abdominal wall; she'd done the prep work in advance, she said, already emptied the stomach – sometimes you'd find undigested food in there – and she'd wanted to spare the students that. So just the stomach, then, empty as she held it up, obviously a gastric carcinoma, she said, you can see it. The patient had died on the operating table, but whether it was the cancer or the surgeon was what they had to figure out. The relatives' request. Looked like age, though, and obesity-related health problems, she said, opening the pre-slit skin of the chest and removing the lungs. Had it taken her a while to get used to the job, another student had asked. It wasn't easy at the beginning, she said, and there were some tragic cases, those weren't always easy to investigate. Colleagues with children, for example, wouldn't perform autopsies on children, and there were provisions in place for that. But the work was very routine, so you got used to it time, of course. She was holding the heart in her hand.

'Aras, we're next.' He heard his mother's voice. The caseworker who waved them in, who sat in front of them, was short with red hair. She wore a black

blouse, with a rhinestone flower on the right side of her chest. She was silent, so Aras began to speak. 'Good morning!' A pause, then: 'We're here because of the Declaration of Commitment.'

'Yes, so I assumed,' the woman replied. 'You must be the sponsor?' The question was directed at Frau Hoffmann, who nodded.

'You've been informed of your responsibilities?'

Frau Hoffmann nodded again.

'The Declaration of Commitment covers the reimbursement of all public expenses incurred during the stay, including the provision of accommodation as well as any costs in the event of illness or for whatever care may be required. So it's worth taking out medical insurance.'

'We'll get insurance, of course,' Aras interrupted the caseworker, but she went on, unimpressed: 'Naturally, the Declaration of Commitment also covers any forcible implementation of an instruction to leave the country. That includes airline tickets, the cost of a security escort and of detention pending removal. In other words, you will be liable not only for the duration of the Declaration but also throughout any illegal period of stay, as well as for any additional infractions against the law.'

Agitation was welling up in Aras, beginning in his chest and flooding his body. He grew hot, he sweated. Over the next two years, he would experience this agitation again and again. At that moment, after that speech; although he was sure Frau Hoffmann or any other friends who came, whom he'd asked to sponsor his relatives and acquaintances, wouldn't be frightened off, since he'd told them the same thing in the same words, if perhaps in less abstract terms. Instead of 'instruction to leave the country', for example, he'd said 'deportation'. The source of his agitation was that the words he had used to allay the sponsors' fears were now, in the caseworker's mouth, being used to contrary effect – they were meant to scare them off.

Regardless, Frau Hoffmann seemed unimpressed. She said, 'Yes, I already know all that. I read the form on the website very carefully.' It wasn't easy for Aras to find suitable sponsors. He didn't know many people who had the necessary income. Most of the ones he did know he wasn't close enough with to ask, or he couldn't imagine them prioritising human beings above

potential financial risk, and that was an upsetting realisation, at least for him. To Aras there was no easier way to save someone: a signature, a modicum of trust, and the person could simply board a plane. The second upsetting realisation was that money dictated human survival. Something he had previously known only in the abstract now became a concrete reality. In order to sign a Declaration of Commitment, the sponsor had to make a net income of at least 1,450 euros, plus 500 euros for each additional person to be rescued. If they earned above 2,400 euros, they could sign for any number of people. As the years went by, this straightforward option would either disappear completely or be made more difficult, subject to greater restriction.

Simple as it sounded, it was more than just an emotional undertaking between the sponsor, Aras and his relatives. In practice, it was an act of surpassing bureaucracy. They say bureaucracy is about numbers, about hard figures, that the human fades into the background, that it is rational and not emotional. In time, however, it became clear to Aras that bureaucracy wasn't rational at all, that it hinged always on the goodwill of the caseworkers. Some of them he was able to keep on the right side of, while with others problems were inevitable. They would root out any and all irregularities, protracting the whole business as long as possible, and after a while a third realisation dawned on Aras: time wasn't money, but anyone in thrall to the state, anyone whose rights were to be requested from it, would have to wait. Their time was not valuable; any amount of it could be wasted. When bureaucracy did show a gentle side, it was due only to some adroitness of the applicant – his, Aras's – but discovering the secret of that adroitness was another story. For now, bureaucracy was simply another type of Russian roulette. A game the authorities played. Eeny, meeny, miny, moe, you'll be saved but you must go.

'I assume you're the relative?' said the caseworker, turning to Nadia. Nadia nodded and slid the documents across the table unasked. The caseworker made no move to pick up the plastic folder. 'First I need your identification.' The blue passport was plucked from Nadia's handbag, clinging immediately

to the laminated table top. Frau Hoffmann seemed a little alarmed, letting out a soft 'oh dear'.

'A copy, will that be alright?' she asked. 'I forgot my ID card on the scanner. But I have the copy here,' she said apologetically.

The caseworker stood up without a word and disappeared into the room next door. They heard laughter floating through the wall. Aras's eyes swept across it, a wall covered in postcards printed photographs of nature, numerous pictures of dogs, comics, slogans. Miracles start happening when we give our dreams more energy than our fears. It's fine to be a bit mad. Just as long as you have style! Don't worry about looking mediocre. Your personality is much worse. There was a calendar with a red plastic rectangle you could slide across to mark the date, still set to two days ago. Aras was gripped by an urge to slide the red rectangle to today's date.

'I can't process the application without seeing the original,' said the caseworker, returning to announce the decision. 'Oh, surely you can,' said Nadia. 'My brother, he's a doctor. In Aleppo those are really sought-after.'

'Without the identification I can't make sure it's a copy of the original. It's a legal obligation. You must understand that.' Frau Hoffmann spoke up: 'But surely you can check on your computer that I am who I say I am.'

'Do you live in this city?'

'No, in the surrounding area.'

'Well, I don't have access to that. In any case, you'd have to go to the regional immigration office, not here.'

'No, it's my mother who's applying. She lives here,' Aras broke in.

'Without an original form of identification, I can't help you. I have to ask you to leave my office now. There are other applicants.'

The speed of the exchange had left Aras dazed. The room had closed behind them, and he thought maybe they could drive Frau Hoffmann home, get her ID from the scanner, but he couldn't ask her straight away. He didn't want to pressure her. Nadia shouldn't have said that about his uncle – Frau Hoffmann was bound to be feeling guilty now – so Aras said, 'Since when hasn't a copy been enough? When I went through the police checkpoint at the French

border I only showed them a copy. And she could have taken a look at the other documents. It's always the same with that office. Hearts of stone.'

'I'll just give my husband a quick call to see if he's home, maybe he can take a look in the scanner.' Frau Hoffmann, telephone in hand, legs carrying her a few steps away from them. Nadia's eyes dug into Aras's.

'What?'

'You should have said something, made that caseworker feel guilty, Aras.'

'But I told her--'

'Now it's going to take even longer. They rob you of more than just patience, they take every shred of dignity you've got. You practically have to beg them on your knees.'

Nadia would be proved right. Although Herr Hoffmann would agree to drive Frau Hoffman's ID to the immigration office, the caseworker's door would already be locked. This door was open only on Thursdays and Fridays. Since Frau Hoffmann was busy on both days for the next two weeks, Thursday and Friday next week and Thursday and Friday the week after that – and after all the students couldn't teach themselves and class conferences couldn't run themselves and school inspections couldn't conduct themselves – all in all, the upshot was that Frau Hoffmann would have no time over the next two weeks, and then of course the one after that she was going on a well-deserved Easter break to Corsica, a walking holiday, like her sons had wanted. Frau Hoffmann would thus be prevented from attending, which meant the only option would be to grant Aras authority to act on her behalf, so that he could hand over the documents. Yet this would not in fact solve the problem; it would result in a delay of at least three weeks, because the signature on the grant of authority did not correspond precisely with the signature on the ID. At this point Aras would be asked to resubmit the document. On their second attempt, the copy of the ID card would be quibbled over, on the grounds that it was barely legible. On their third visit, the caseworker – a different one this time – would refuse to even look at the document, insisting once again that the application had to be made to the regional immigration office, after which it would be forwarded on to her, and someone would get in touch with him, Aras, or rather with his mother, to

inform them that they could submit the paperwork for his uncle. The fourth time, Aras and his mother would ask to speak to the official in charge, the boss, as Nadia called him.

This conversation was a brainwave that came to Nadia during an argument with a customer whose blouse was still stained despite two cleanings, and this argument was only resolved after a few placatory words from her boss. Although they didn't actually speak to the head of the immigration office, the caseworker returned enlightened and agreed to take the documents. She did, however, reserve the right to speak to Frau Hoffmann on the phone. The paperwork would then be processed, but it would still take time. First, the caseworker would forget to send the documents to the embassy in Beirut. Aras would ring the caseworker to enquire, since his uncle was still waiting for the embassy's call. She would then send the documents, but these would not arrive, reaching the embassy only on the second try. His uncle would receive the telephone call giving him an appointment, he would attend this appointment, but by that time the private health insurance would already have expired. Another appointment, another month; at last, one month after that, he would be able to collect the visa. Aras would book a flight for him, his wife and children, going to pick them up in September. But all this was in the future.