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About the Book

In 2011, Samar Yazbek, an outspoken critic of Assad's regime, was forced into exile from her beloved Syria. She watched as the peaceful uprising in her homeland turned to bloodshed, and The Crossing: My journey to the shattered heart of Syria tried to alert The Crossing: My journey to the shattered heart of Syria the world. When her pleas for intervention were ignored, she became determined to take action herself. She decided to return.

The following summer, Yazbek made the first of several brave, clandestine visits, squeezing through a gap in the fence on the Turkish border. As the only Syrian writer to travel widely through 'Liberated Syria', the Northern The Crossing: My journey to the shattered heart of Syria area under the control of the rebels, she worked with local activists. Beyond her desire to be close to her people, she had a purpose: to help however she could, from building schools and comforting the bereaved to negotiating with gunmen.

Above all, Samar Yazbek bears witness. *The Crossing* is a powerful testament to the reality of Syria today. From the first innocent demonstrations for democracy, through the beginnings of the Free Syrian Army, to the arrival of ISIS, here are the daily lives of soldiers, children, ordinary men and women The Crossing: My journey to the shattered heart of Syria struggling to survive. In heartfelt, luminous prose, Yazbek shares their stories of unbearable brutality, and of the humanity that can flower even in the most terrible of circumstances.

About the Author

Born in 1970, Samar Yazbek studied literature before beginning her career as a journalist and a scriptwriter for Syrian television and cinema. Her translated work includes the novel, *Cinnamon*, and *A Woman In The Crossfire*, her diaries of the first four months of the Syrian uprising, which has won many prizes. She lives in Paris.

By the same author:

A Woman in the Crossfire
Cinnamon

For the martyrs of the Syrian revolution.

I write, with fumbling fingers.

I write blindly.

I exist in the real world but, as I write about it, I begin to disappear.

I look at the people around me as though I were one of them. I hear the roar of real aircraft, but I tell myself: it's just a detail in a wider story.

This is my second testimony to the saga of Syria's slaughter. After *A Woman in the Crossfire*, I am forcing that gap in the window back open, letting in a thin ray of light, just enough to reveal the many layers of hell.

I am the storyteller who considers your short lives, who holds you in her gaze, just as we used to on those long nights, when we laughed out loud, guessing which of us would be struck by the next shell. I'm doing this for your sake. I can only conjure you up in my mind, and build your stories into pillars that reach from the The Crossing: My journey to the shattered heart of Syria earth up to heaven.

I am writing for you: the betrayed.

The FIRST CROSSING

August 2012

The barbed wire lacerated my back. I was trembling uncontrollably. After long hours spent waiting for nightfall, to avoid attracting the attention of Turkish soldiers, I finally raised my *The Crossing: My journey to the shattered heart of Syria* head and gazed up at the distant sky, darkening to black. Under the wire fence marking the line of the border a tiny burrow had been dug out, just big enough for one person. My feet sank into the soil and the barbs mauled my back as I crawled across the line of separation between the two countries.

I took a deep breath, arched my back and ran, as fast as I could, *The Crossing: My journey to the shattered heart of Syria* just as they had told me to do. Fast. Half an hour at a sprint – that's the distance you have to cover before you've safely crossed the border. I ran and ran until we were out of the danger zone. The ground was treacherous and rocky, but my feet felt light as I sprinted. The pounding of my heart carried me, lifting me up. Panting, I murmured to myself: *I'm back! This isn't a scene in a film, this is real.* I ran, mouthing, *I'm back ... I'm here.*

Behind us, we heard gunshots and military vehicles moving around on the Turkish side, but we'd done it: *The Crossing: My journey to the shattered heart of Syria* we were through and we were running. It felt like it had all been fated long ago. I'd put on a headscarf especially, *The Crossing: My journey to the shattered heart of Syria* and a long jacket and loose-fitting trousers. We had a steep hill to climb, before we hurtled down the other side towards the waiting car. On this occasion my guides and I weren't part of a convoy of strangers. At the time I didn't even know if I would ever manage to write about it later; somehow I'd just assumed I would die, like so many others, when I returned to my homeland. Darkness settled in for the night and everything seemed normal, as expected, or so it seemed.

Later on, after I had made this crossing a number of times over eighteen months, I saw many changes: the chaotic state of Antakya airport, near the border, would be ample evidence of what was happening to Syria. I stowed it all away in the back of my mind, along with everything else that testified to the rapid and profound upheavals taking place in my country. Back then, though, I was ignorant of what was to come as I scrambled down the hill for the *The Crossing: My journey to the shattered heart of Syria* first time, my legs throbbing with pain.

When I reached the bottom, I *The Crossing: My journey to the shattered heart of Syria* crouched down and paused for at least ten minutes, wheezing and gasping for breath, trying to calm my beating heart. The young men accompanying me must have thought I was emotional at seeing my homeland again. But that was the last thing on my mind. We had been running for so long, I felt like my lungs were being wrenched from my body and I couldn't stand up.

Finally, we *The Crossing: My journey to the shattered heart of Syria* reached the car and I started to *The Crossing: My journey to the shattered heart of Syria* breathe normally again. I sat in the back with the two men who would be acting as my guides, Maysara and Mohammed. They were two very different combatants from the same family, the family in whose home I would take shelter. Maysara was a rebel fighter *The Crossing: My journey to the shattered heart of Syria* who had started out campaigning peacefully against the Assad regime, but had later taken up arms. Mohammed was in his twenties and had been a business student *The Crossing: My journey to the shattered heart of Syria* who, like Maysara, had been involved in the peaceful protest movement before joining the armed resistance. As we worked together over the coming weeks he became a lasting friend. In the front were our driver and another young man.

We were travelling through Idlib province, an area only partially liberated from the control of Assad's forces. Between the endless roadblocks set up by the Free Army, we sped along a road lined by olive groves. Everywhere I looked there were armed militants, victory banners. I tried to take snapshots in my mind of what I could see as I stretched my head out of the car window, detaching myself emotionally from my surroundings. The road seemed to go on forever as we drove along with the thud of shelling in the distance. And yet a sense of exhilaration tickled every cell in my body as I looked at this part of Syria, which had been mostly freed from Assad's troops.

Well, some of the land might be liberated, but the sky wouldn't let us celebrate yet; no, the sky was on fire. It felt like I was being bombarded with frenetic images competing for my attention; to take it all in, I needed eyes in the back of my head, on my ears – hell, even on my fingertips.

Staring ahead, I tried to make sense of my surroundings. Machines of destruction. The blazing sky. A solitary car carrying one woman and four men, heading through the olive groves to the town of Saraqeb.

The Syria that I remembered had been one of the most beautiful places in the world. I thought back to my early childhood in the town of al-Tabqa (also known as al-Thawra) near the city of Raqqa on the Euphrates river, and my teenage years in the historic city of Jableh on the coast, followed by Latakia, the principal port city of Syria. As an adult, I had lived alone with my daughter in Damascus, the capital, for several years, at a distance from my family, community and sectarian ties. I had lived independently, free to make my own choices, but my lifestyle had cost me a great deal of rejection, criticism and harm to my reputation. It had been difficult to be female in a conservative society that did not allow women to rebel against its laws. Everything had seemed resistant to change. The last thing I'd imagined on my first visit to the rural areas of northern Syria was to see it being destroyed.

Everything I recount in the following narrative is real. The only fictional character is the narrator, me: an implausible figure capable of crossing the border amid all this destruction, as though my life were nothing but the far-fetched plot of a novel. As I absorbed what was happening around me, I ceased to be myself. I was a made-up character considering my choices, just able to keep on going. I put aside the woman I am in real life and became this other imaginary person, whose reactions had to be commensurate with whatever it was she was living for. What was she doing here? Confronting existence? Identity? Exile? Justice? The insanity of bloodshed?

I had been forced into exile in France in July 2011. My departure from Syria hadn't been easy: I had fled with my daughter because I was being pursued by the intelligence services (the *mukhabarat*) after taking part in peaceful demonstrations in the early months of the revolution. And I had written several articles outlining the truth about the actions of the intelligence services, who were murdering and torturing those protesting against Assad's regime. But, having arrived in France, I'd felt compelled to return to northern Syria, to fulfil my dream of achieving democracy and freedom in my homeland. This return to the country of my birth was all I ever thought about, and I believed in doing what was right as an educated person and a writer, standing alongside my people in their cause. My goal was to set up some small-scale women's projects and an organisation aimed at empowering women and providing children with an education. If the situation was likely to be prolonged, there was no choice but to try to focus on the next generation. I was also looking for a workable way of establishing democratic civil institutions in those areas that had freed themselves from al-Assad's control.

Passing along road after road in the pitch-black of night, I was now heading to the home of the

family that would play such a fundamental role in my new life. Cautiously we entered the narrow alleys of Saraqeb. The town was not yet fully liberated; there was still a sniper at the radio tower killing countless people every day.

The building in which I would be staying had several wings, arranged around a central courtyard. It had clearly once been the home of prosperous and hospitable people. These days the large family were 'getting by', as one of the women put it. The oldest, original part of the building had a lovely domed roof and had been built long ago by a previous generation. I would be staying here in a room they called the 'cellar'. To the left of this wing were the quarters of the eldest son, Abu Ibrahim, and his wife, Noura: my hosts. To the right was where The Crossing: My journey to the shattered heart of Syria my guide Maysara, the family's youngest son, lived with his wife, Manal, and his children Ruha, a very composed eleven-year-old, Aala, aged seven, Mahmoud, aged four, and two-and-a-half-year-old Tala. The building was also home to the sons' elderly mother and their aunt, both of whom were pretty much immobile. They were cared for by Ayouche, Abu Ibrahim's unmarried sister who was in her early fifties.

I didn't know then, but my hosts and I shared the same vision for our country, which created The Crossing: My journey to the shattered heart of Syria a strong bond between us. As The Crossing: My journey to the shattered heart of Syria a people, Syrians are extremely hospitable. The moment we arrived everyone was mobilised into preparing dinner for us. We sat down together to eat, cross-legged on the floor on plastic rugs and foam mattresses, the young girls Ruha and Aala never leaving my side. I looked around The Crossing: My journey to the shattered heart of Syria at their friendly faces. My own relatives lived in parts of the country under the control of the regime, which meant I could no longer visit them.

That evening, I told the women in the family a little about my life and how I'd left home for the first time at the age of sixteen. By sharing these confidences, I wanted to inspire trust and give them an idea of the true meaning of freedom – and the responsibility associated with it. I wanted to show them how a woman's freedom lies in a life lived responsibly, which was the opposite of what Syrian society conceived women's liberation to be, viewing it instead as a chaotic violation of customs and traditions. I talked to them about how I'd lived and worked hard to raise my daughter, to be economically independent after my divorce from my husband, and how I'd The Crossing: My journey to the shattered heart of Syria been forced to take on various jobs so that my daughter and I could get by. I told them how members of my family and community had cut me off, but that I had done what I had to do to become a writer and journalist. The women's questions kept coming, as I told them a little about my journey to Saraqeb.

I explained how, before crossing the border, I had visited a hospital in the Turkish town of Reyhanli, where there was a special emergency floor dedicated to Syrians wounded by shelling. One room after another reeked of putrefying patients laid out on white sheets, with mutilated feet, amputated limbs, hazy eyes. I was accompanied by Maysara and his brother-in-law Manhal, who was one of the first activists to embrace the revolution in Saraqeb. Manhal warned me to brace myself as we entered the room The Crossing: My journey to the shattered heart of Syria of two young girls, four-year-old Diana and eleven-year-old Shaima.

Diana had been hit in the spinal cord by a bullet, causing permanent paralysis. She lay there frozen, like a panic-stricken rabbit. It seemed a miracle that her small, fragile body hadn't been completely blown apart under the impact. The little girl had been crossing the street to buy a pastry for breakfast when it happened. What on earth was the sniper thinking when he aimed his sights on her back?

In the hospital bed next to Diana was Shaima, whose leg had been blown off by a shell, and whose left hand had been shattered by shrapnel. Her other foot was also injured and wounds covered her body. She and her family had been taken by surprise as they sat in front of their house. Nine members of her family were killed, including her mother. Her aunt stood at her bedside.

The Crossing My Journey To The Shattered Heart Of Syria

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