

My father gives me the journal and tells me this is where I should write. I can write anything I want, anything at all. I can write when I want and as much as I want. 'My First Dairy', I write on the first page, and sign all the others with my initials. For the first time since I can remember, I feel like I am finally a self-governing entity. I am independent, self-sufficient and unconstrained.

I have never felt this way before. I won't feel that way again.

I get older. By the time I'm in the third grade, I have my first pen pal. My school in Damascus, Syria, has given us the names of other nine-year-olds in exotic parts of the world like Detroit, and encourages us to write and introduce ourselves to them. They will learn about Damascus through us, and we will learn about those great United States through them. But you're not Syrian, my father tells me at home when I announce that I am now, for all intents and purposes, a Syrian cultural attaché. We have been in exile in Damascus since I was a baby. My father tells me stories every day about Pakistan, hoping to romance me about a country I have — at that point — only ever seen twice. And though I am interested, though I love the country because I see my father's sorrow at being away from his homeland, I love it for him. I love it because he does, for his sake.

Damascus, as far as I'm concerned, is my home. It is 1990. Damascus is, and will always be, the world's oldest continually inhabited city, a Biblical city; it is where Saul converted to Christianity. It is one of the few spots on earth where, on the outskirts, Aramaic is still spoken. It is the burial place of the Prophet Muhammad's granddaughter Zainab; every day, thousands of pilgrims flock to her shrine. Growing up in Damascus, I do not know whether I am Sunni or Shia. I know I am Muslim — that is enough. I have friends who assure me at school that they are nothing — they are neither here nor there on the religious spectrum. No one makes any fuss. Everyone belongs, even me, the exiled Pakistani.

Damascus is centuries old; every cobblestone, every jasmine bud, breathes history. But it is also a city of the living. I walk on the streets of Mezzeh and Abu Rummaneh with my friends. We walk on the pavements holding hands so we will not lose each other, but that is our only safety concern. We are young girls, 10 years old, then 11. Later, when I have left my home and returned with my family to Pakistan, I spend my summers in Sham, or as the Arabs call it, Bilad al-Sham. The country of the Levant. I am 16, 18, 21, 26. I still walk on the streets with my friends, though we have stopped holding hands.

It is in Damascus that I learn how to swim. My father winds up a toy boat and I chase it in spring water so cold, it turns your lips blue after half an hour. I must be about three years old. When I am underwater, my eyes open, and stinging slightly from the chlorine, I feel totally at liberty. I can go anywhere. But why would I? I am so happy here.

It is in Damascus that I make my first friends, have my first disappointments, where I first do well and where I first fail.

Sometimes, I think my heart is buried under the rocks of this city, so much of me belongs here.

Then I am 11, and my father tells us we are returning to Pakistan. He is overjoyed; I have never seen him so happy. My parents give me one suitcase and tell me to pack up my life in Damascus; we are leaving in a few weeks. Forever? I don't ask, because I know what they will say. They will say what they have said since I was small. This isn't your home. Not your real home, anyway. But they don't know.

They don't know that I can't put what Damascus is to me in one suitcase.

I am 11 when I leave this place of everything. Every moment here made me feel free. But I leave. And for the rest of my life, something is missing. I live in other cities but they are not the same. In Karachi, I feel restless. In New York, at university, I feel lost. In London, doing my Masters, I feel happy but unfocused, unclear.

Now I am 32, and Damascus is no longer free. It is a city engulfed in war and violence. I cannot imagine that city. I cannot imagine my Damascus as the place where the shrine of Bibi Zainab has been bombed and where Christians are fleeing before the day comes when they are told to pay a tax or convert. I cannot imagine a Damascus where a girl of 10 years old, or 11, cannot walk down the old streets of Abu Rummaneh holding her friend's hand.

Joan Didion said, 'We tell ourselves stories to live.' But we tell them to feel free, too.

People will always try to invade your stories, though they needn't bother. *The New York Times* and Al Jazeera and every other person who is now an expert on Syria rewrites the place I knew so intimately, trying to re-colour the place of my past. I tell my stories because everyone is allowed their stories. There is not one story, never. There are millions of them, and every one of them is true.

Writing this, at points, I forgot whether we were speaking of freedom or of belonging. A strange trick of memory, I suppose. I lost Damascus two times. The first time I lost it, I left. The second time, it left me. I've felt free since then, but never quite in the same way. ●



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