

THREE



I STEPPED OUT OF THAT CROWDED, overflowing, noisy flat one bright morning. It must have been early summer, I suppose, because the night had been cool and the day looked as though it would be hot.

Oranges in No Man's Land

There had been a ferocious gun battle raging through the streets around us all through the night. There was an invisible line across Beirut in those days. It was known as the 'Green Line' and it divided the city as surely as a wall, though there was no actual line to be seen, only a vast maze of bombed-out buildings, infested with gunmen and a few old people. The different groups controlled the opposite sides, and the battles were fought across it.

Back then, I never understood who was who or what was what. I still don't really know. What were they all fighting for? Religion? Politics? Was it the rich against the poor? Sometimes I wonder if the fighters themselves knew what they were doing.

That night, they'd been hard at it. The whole city had echoed to the crash of exploding bombs and shells and the rattle of machine gun-fire. Vehicles had roared through the streets, their tyres squealing, and ambulance sirens had sounded in the distance.

Elizabeth Laird

It was quiet in the street now. The fighting was over for the time being. The sky should have been a bright blue, but a light fog hung over the city from the dust of the ruins and the smoke from the burning buildings.

There had been so much noise in the night I hadn't slept much, and I was yawning my head off. I hadn't wanted to go out at all, but Granny had insisted.

"Go down to the checkpoint quickly now," she had said. "The refugee truck's coming today. They're going to give out cooking oil. If you get there early you'll have a better chance of getting something."

"Can't Latif go?" I'd said, frowning at Latif, who'd broken out a cardboard packing case on to the dust covered floor, and was turning somersaults on it.

"No, *habibti*. He'll only get into trouble. Go on, now, there's a good girl. The oil bottle's nearly

Oranges in No Man's Land

empty. How can I cook without it? You want to eat, don't you? And take Ahmed with you. He's been pestering to go out since he woke up."

So I'd picked Ahmed up and set off. He was a weight, I can tell you, ten months old and hefty with it. I carried him on my hip, but I kept having to change him from one side to the other.

The street was strewn with rubble, and I was wearing rubber flip-flops, so I had to pick my way carefully to avoid the fresh splashes of broken glass.

I can picture it clearly now, though at the time I hardly noticed the mess all around. There were twisted bent spikes of metal sticking up from the pavement. They had once been street lights. The gaping dark openings on each side of the road had been busy, crowded shops. The wooden stumps in the middle of the roundabout were all that remained of palm trees. Their lovely long green fronds had long since been shot away.

Elizabeth Laird

All over the tarmac there were circles like you see on the water when you drop a pebble into a pond. They were where shells and mortars had fallen.

The check-point wasn't far. I slowed down as I approached it. You had to be very cautious with check-points. You had to watch out and look carefully to make sure that the men guarding them were from a friendly militia. The checkpoints had a little flag stuck up on a pole, or one hanging across the chain that they used to stop the traffic going down the street, to tell you which militia was running the checkpoint. Sometimes there were posters, too, of the different political leaders. Our flags were green and black.

There were four militiamen there that morning. They had built up two walls of sandbags on either side of the street and had run a chain across between them to stop vehicles going through. They all carried automatic weapons, slung casually over

their shoulders. They didn't frighten me, though. I knew their flag was the right one for my sort of family. I recognised their accents too. They were the same as mine. They came from the far south of Lebanon. They were Shia Muslims, like us.

Even so, I could never be really relaxed around the militiamen. They had guns, after all, and were very used to using them. I never quite knew what they might do next. Some of them had seen so much fighting and killing I wasn't sure if they knew when to stop.

My heart sank when I came round the corner and saw the check-point, because the little truck that usually brought supplies in for refugee families wasn't there. I can remember standing awkwardly, not quite knowing what to do, pushing a stone around with the point of one rubber sole.

One of the militiamen had taken off his scarf and was retying it round his head. He saw me

standing there, feeling foolish, and beckoned me across. Shyly, I went up to him.

"Looking for someone?" he said.

"The truck. My grandma heard it was coming today. With cooking oil."

One of the other men heard.

"You'll be lucky. After last night's bombardment? They haven't cleared the roads yet. Tomorrow, *inshallah*. Come back tomorrow."

The light glinted on the gun he was cradling in his arms. Ahmed saw it, and reached out to touch it. I snatched his hand back, but the man laughed.

"Hey, little tiger. A fighter already?" He put his gun down on the ground and reached out his arms. "Here. Give him to me."

I didn't want to. How would I know what he might do with a baby in his arms? But Ahmed was struggling and reaching out. He wasn't scared at all. He wanted to pull at the militia-man's headscarf.

Oranges in No Man's Land

"Don't worry, sweetheart. He'll be fine with me." The man had taken Ahmed already and was holding him gently, expertly ticking his tummy. I relaxed a bit. I could see he was used to babies. Ahmed wriggled. He'd gone red in the face and was laughing so hard he was gasping.

"I love him, God save me," the man said. "When I see him, I see my own son." He seemed quite sorry to hand him back to me. "Come tomorrow, and bring him with you. The truck's sure to be here then. You'll get your supplies. And I'll get some extra milk for him if I can."

So I had to turn back then, and go home.

FOUR



GRANNY was cooking when I got back. She was squatting over a small kerosene stove she'd managed to get hold of, stirring a stew of chick peas.

I never thought about where our food came from. Somehow, there always seemed to be

Oranges in No Man's Land

something to eat. Now I realise that Granny must have performed miracles to keep us all fed. There were handouts from the refugee organisations of course, but they were never really enough. Sometimes she used to leave Ahmed with me and tell me to keep an eye on Latif. Then off she'd go, a determined look on her face, holding one hand to her side to support her painful hip. She'd come back an hour or so later with some fresh vegetables, or a little piece of meat, or some cheese wrapped up in a cloth.

"No oil," I said, dumping Ahmed down on the floor and easing my aching shoulders. "The truck wasn't there. The soldiers on the check point said to try again tomorrow."

"You didn't hang about talking to them I hope?" she said with a disapproving frown. Granny was always fussy about me talking to strangers.

"It's all right, Granny. They were kind. One of them played with Ahmed."

Elizabeth Laird

She pursed her lips, but didn't say anything more.

Ahmed took off at a fast crawl towards the sound of toddlers playing beyond the cloth which Mrs Zainab had hung up for us to give us our own 'room'. I was about to go and fetch him back, but Granny gave me a smile, then put up her hand to wipe her forehead.

"Don't worry about him, *habibti*. Mrs Zainab's there. She'll look after him." She passed me the spoon she'd been using to stir the stew. "Watch this, will you? It'll stick and burn if you're not careful. I must lie down for a minute."

I think that was the first moment when I realised that something was wrong with Granny. She'd always grumbled about her sore hip, and I'd always known she had to take pills for something or other, but I'd never thought about it much. Why would I have done? She'd always been there, as far as I was concerned. She'd always looked after us,

Oranges in No Man's Land

even when Mama was alive. She would be there forever, or so I'd thought.

Now, for the first time, I saw that she was pale and her face was puffy round the eyes.

"Are you all right, Granny? Have you taken your medicine?"

"I'm fine. Keep stirring. It only needs a few more minutes."

She limped over to the mattress. It looked quite odd, that bare, dusty old mattress, lying under the remains of what must once have been a beautiful mirror hanging on the wall above, but I'd long since stopped noticing. What worried me now was that Granny seemed to be shivering, and although it was warm since the chill of morning had worn off, she was covering herself with a blanket.