

“THE TROUBLEMAKERS”,

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Chapter translated in English:

YUSRA MARDINI

Not everyone is lucky enough to have a good sense of direction, and Yusra is still working on hers. She can get lost everywhere, in Daraya where she was born, and especially now that they have moved to Damascus.

She is stunned by this city that smells of roses, cinnamon and chlorine. Yes, because after all she's always in the pool and that's what she smells most. But the dressing room is a world apart, full of steam, familiarity, fragrant oils to trade, slippers to lose, benches and closeness. Who knows if when he was a young national swimming champion, her father had been the reason behind all those allusive smiles in the girls' locker room? He must have been really handsome, he still is. Of course he's also a pain in the butt, as her Dad is also a coach obsessed with discipline and sacrifice. This stubbornness must be a family trait, this never giving up, this pride. Her friend Ehab always reminds her of this when they bicker after training.

So while she's thinking, she turns the corner and gets lost once again. It was the second on the right, wasn't it, the one with the dog, but now where did the dog go? Wait, over there, where the pots and pans shop is, but no, this city is full of stores like that. Pots and bookshops, okay, let's take a look here, they have good books in English and Yusra speaks very good English, especially with her sister Sara to avoid being understood by their parents.

A few coins for a mulberry granita, purple lips and a pure delight in hot weather. She doesn't know where she is but perhaps Yusra's getting lost isn't really a defect but an

unspoken way to learn about the world; maybe getting lost is a fancy. In short, an excuse to be late, to look around, to also wander through the smaller streets.

Damascus has always been a safe city compared to other Middle Eastern capitals. Here Christian, Jewish and Muslim girls can walk around peacefully without the fear of being harassed. But last year the unrest began, starting in some peripheral areas of the country: some call it the Arab spring, some a civil war. Nobody really understands who's fighting who: there is the government, the regime, there are rebels, there are a lot of people coming from outside, they call them jihadists. But then what the heck is a Pakistani doing with a gun in Syria?

The fact is that their first home was no longer safe and so Yusra, her sisters, mother and father packed up and moved to Damascus. It's safer there, they still have some money saved up. They will continue to go to school and train in the pool every day.

Her specialty is the butterfly stroke. Butterflies love to get lost because they are free. Her father Ezrat was forced to move to Jordan to train the swim team, her mother works as a masseuse and physiotherapist, but the rent is very expensive because the city is full of refugees. There's never enough money, and thanks to the war the Syrian pound is now worth very little.

A month ago Yusra was in Turkey to compete for the Short Course World Championships, and won the bronze medal. For Yusra, being there as a teenager was already a great adventure and her dreams are now light and enormous, they soar over the pool's ceiling as she is immersed in the water, leaving the world outside to lose herself in daydreams once again. She sees herself at the Olympics while everyone applauds and cheers, there's a lot of noise and she smiles.

But a hellish noise startles her out of her daydream. The roof has been torn open, she's blinded by the light. Everyone is screaming. Every sound has fused together into an indistinct cry that leaves the taste of lead in her throat. Dust and rubble dirty the pool water. The only thing Yusra knows amidst all the confusion is that she has to get out quickly.

While she pulls herself over the edge and runs off wet and barefoot she looks for her sisters, her friends, but can't distinguish anything but shadows in the smoke. It's definitely a nightmare but she can't wake up. She can only run, with her swim cap on and her eyes open wide even if she can't really see anything, her bathing suit glued to her body, her breath short, her heart racing. Her feet running among sharp shards.

"Everybody out!" shouts the coach, pointing to the exit. Yusra looks at the pool where she had been swimming just a few minutes before. There's a bomb lying on the bottom: an

unexploded RPG. If it had fallen just a few feet away on the floor, it would have killed them all. Ehab pushes her anxiously and sweetly: "Come on kitty, let's go". They are alive, they go down to the basement where they can hear muffled sounds of explosions.

It is evening now. Her mum has prepared soup and some chicken but nobody can eat. Swimming has become a risk. Swimming was her life, her passion, but now all of her sacrifices have become useless. They've begun to bomb the capital, too. It is not clear who's doing it, if it's the government, the rebels, the jihadists. People see bombs falling over their heads, dark barrels full of gasoline and nails, people are dying without even knowing who killed them.

Nobody can ask anything; no criticism is allowed. Their neighbour had been taken away for expressing doubts about the government, and never came back. Every day his wife goes to the guards and begs for news of her husband, to let her lawyer in, but nothing: it's as if he has been swallowed up along with many others by the dark mouth of the prison. At the same time, in their first house her father had hidden the photo of Sara being awarded by President Bashar Al-Assad, for fear that the rebels would target them.

All of this is unbelievable. Syria has always been the most peaceful of the Middle Eastern countries. Like many things that, however, make no sense, the war progresses and the situation only gets worse.

Yusra continues to go to school, her father insists on spending all their savings on the girls' studies and swimming. She and her sister still go to that pool with the holes in the roof. By now they've made a joke of it: "It's got an air intake hole, to avoid too much condensation from forming". Sometimes they can't train and they have to run underground to the shelters, but it's just become another part of training. You sit on a bench in silence, waiting for the signal that the bombing is over. Everyone looks at each other, counting. Everyone's here. We're all alive. That's enough.

That day, however, when they went back up to the surface, they couldn't see each other anymore. Smoke was still covering everything. Maybe there's a fire. The dust is dense, so much so that you can't see the house. Yusra gets lost, she can't find it. She turns right where the dog that doesn't bark anymore was. There's a thick smell among the rubble that makes her sick to her stomach. She looks up for a single point of reference, Sara grabs her wrist.

She's not lost. They have to escape again, move. Their home is gone, it no longer exists. Books, T-shirts, CDs, pots, photos, money, computer, fan. Nothing is left, all they have is the fact that they're alive, and looking around, they understand that that is already a lot. Indeed, it's everything.

Many of their friends have fled abroad to Germany, Austria, Sweden. Sara insists she wants to go but her younger sister Shahed is only seven years old and the journey would be too dangerous for her. But by now the situation is unsustainable, so their parents agree to send the daughters on their way, with the promise that everyone will reunite in Germany as soon as possible.

They gather what little of their lives is left in the dust and decide to leave the country. There is nothing else they can do now.

Ehab and his brother have disappeared, swallowed up by the black hole that has become this conflict. Ehab and his laughter, that never being able to stand still, Ehab who always wanted to win, who called her "kitty". When a person dies so young, their energy isn't really lost, but redistributed among those who remain. Every day that Yusra manages to survive will also be a day of survival for Ehab. She owes every dream, every goal, every step, every effort to her friend, too. It is as if she lives two lives from this moment on.

The journey to Lebanon is relatively short, but the wait for Turkey is exhausting. The plane is three hours late and they must continue to postpone that horrible moment when they'll have to say goodbye to their increasingly pale mother and little Shahed. There are so many controls, there's more refugees than can be counted by now. The war has put everyone on the same level and Yusra, once wealthy, finds herself in a cold and filthy tent city with nothing to eat, no drugs for the sick. Dignity and humanity seem to be a luxury of the past.

Sara and her older cousin try to get in touch with the smugglers. Her father still has some money set aside, it won't be enough for everyone, for now he wants to pay for Yusra and Sara's journey to Europe. Then he'll find money for the rest of them. He's a swimming coach but he knows how to do everything, and so does his wife. The youngest, on the other hand, must continue to study, even if she's alone, she has to. The older girls are strong and responsible enough to make it. There aren't any alternatives. They'd die in Syria, in Lebanon they'd be like waste in a landfill.

"When the war ends we'll all go home, but now we have to grit our teeth and bear it." Before leaving Turkey for Greece, Europe, their father deposits the money in the account given to him by the smugglers, assuring them that everything will be done safely, promising and insisting that they'll arrive safely. The payment will only be made upon their arrival, with the delivery of a code by the girls. That's how it works, that's the guarantee. None of them sleep that night. Yusra can no longer stay still and decides to go out, to deliberately get lost among the tents. She's hungry, she's cold. A man snores, a woman complains.

A child comes out of one of the tents, asks for help quietly to avoid waking everyone up. His mother is in pain, his little brother is being born, his father doesn't know what to do. They

run towards the volunteer station. Nobody is there. They look for the doctor. They can't find him. It's three in the morning. The stars are shining in the cold air and the mud sticks to their feet. They return to the tent holding only a bucket of water in their hands. The mother has stopped complaining, the father is hugging the new-born, a woman has wrapped him in an old shirt. "Well done, bring the water here so we can wash this little baby." As soon as the cold water touches him, he screams so loud he wakes everyone, pulling in his legs. Everyone starts laughing, saying he's strong, very strong, he'll know how to make himself heard.

Yusra goes back to her tent, it's time to get ready. She and Sara have a backpack on their shoulders.

They get on a van. The darkness behind them swallows every tear.

It's not easy in Turkey, they don't have their father to protect them anymore. They watch each other's backs. The two girls are young and pretty, they have to do everything they can to pass unnoticed by certain men wandering the camp. They must become small, insignificant, transparent. The wait is exhausting.

"The weather must be good or the sea will swallow you up", whispers a woman wrapped in a black dress, an ugly, old witch. Yusra takes a peek at the faces of her fellow adventurers. A couple has improvised a cradle by putting a blanket inside a life preserver. She sees white legs moving around. "She's four and a half months old", the mother tells her. The little girl has a red string with a small pouch tied around her neck. "Her name and all our contact details are inside, you never know." Of course, you never know what will happen and someone might find a four-month-old baby alone in the sea with a red string around her neck.

The time has finally come, they're leaving, here they are almost on the boat, running to avoid being seen by the guards. Yusra is afraid, she's tempted to say it's OK, we can just go back to Lebanon, but then she hears the voice of the old woman repeating in her head. Sara jerks her, making a sign to be quiet and keep moving, but when they get there the smugglers send them back. Not today, you'll have to wait some more. There are too many people.

One more day without eating, drinking dirty water. Many are sick, vomit, have a fever. "You can't leave in those conditions", the trafficker cautions. "Why not?" Yusra asks. "Didn't you tell us it's only forty-five minutes across?" That night Yusra dreams that the sea is a shark that swallows the answer.

Here they finally are, the dawn brightens the horizon just enough to see the tiny boat ready at the shore. Twenty-four people get on. Some are children. "It will be all right *Inch'Allah*,

God willing, everyone stay still so we don't get any water on board", warns the trafficker. Some make the sign of the cross and some whisper the Islamic names of God. Everyone clutches their tiny bag. They leave a light groove in the sand. They look ahead, it's only forty-five minutes but it's all black and they can't see the other coast. The sea is almost beautiful from here towards Europe, they can almost imagine being any two young girls setting off for a study holiday.

But Yusra doesn't like the sea, it's a strange notion for a swimmer, but she's never liked it. In the pool you can see the light bottom, but if you look down in the sea it's an abyss, who knows what monsters could lurk below, maybe giant squid with huge tentacles.

But after fifteen minutes the motor starts jamming. The man steering the boat swears. Everyone holds their breath. He starts getting worked up. He tries restarting it. A large man yells at him: "Leave it!", but there's nothing to do, the motor has stopped working. The children can see the panic in the adults' faces and start crying, clinging to their mothers' necks, who lose their balance. Water is coming into the boat. "This dinghy can't stop, it'll sink", the agitated man shouts. The smuggler is all sweat and hatred; he grabs the suitcase of the nearest woman and throws it into the sea. "Throw out your luggage, we're sinking."

Everything around them is black, Venus shines lightly over the clear sky. You can scream as much as you want, it's not going to move. They throw all their belongings into the water, the motor no longer shows any signs of life but at least the dinghy is lighter. All that Yusra and Sara have now are their T-shirts and jeans, not even shoes.

Everyone works to throw the water out of the boat, but they are immobile, in the middle of nowhere. A dot just waiting to be swallowed, candy for the sea. The children cry, others pray. Hardly anyone knows how to swim. "It was forty-five minutes, fifteen have already passed, we are only half an hour from the coast", Yusra tries to reassure them. "We have to do something, we can't stay here waiting for the dinghy to deflate. Those who know how to swim raise your hand!". At that point Yusra, Sara and two men make the only possible decision and jump into the water. Without their weight the boat floats better, but the waves are very strong.

The butterfly is now a white dot in the middle of black pitch. How long does a butterfly live? She doesn't look around, she doesn't look down, she moves her feet fast, the giant squid will be watching her legs move. Yusra swims and pushes the raft. The children shout with joy, inciting them, the others praying for the strength they'll need. She's out of breath, the water is freezing, her pants are stuck to her legs and are very heavy. "I'm seventeen and I can't drown. I'm a swimmer, it would be ridiculous".

Thirty minutes in a rubber dinghy, five kilometres, two hundred laps in the pool. Super-athletes can do it, water polo players; but you can do if the prize is to survive. It can be done.

Maybe.

Swimming, pushing, it took three and a half hours. We never really understand what our limit is until we reach it: every time Yusra thinks that she can't go any further, that it's over, she's still got one more small breath, another thrust, another kick with her leg. It's the last one, then here's another one from a hidden reserve of life, who knows where. She swims and pushes, she looks at Sara's face transfigured from the effort, the anger, and doesn't recognise her. She looks horrible, like a stranger. But she's her mirror.

Now Yusra can't feel the pain anymore, the cramps, she can't hear the crying of those on the raft. The giant squid is waiting for her down below, maybe it won't be so bad to let it embrace her. Close your eyes, stop swimming, stop suffering; the thought alone is sweet. There's her mother with some broth on the table, the dressing room, the Aleppo soap and the oil that smells of jasmine. Her strong, strict dad and her younger sister putting a magnet on the fridge. Ehab is swimming down below, he looks like a merman, but he's frightening, he surfaces with a sharp scream and Yusra wakes up. What was that? Another kick. She's not the one moving her feet, it seems impossible but yet it's happening.

The sun rises, the raft touches Greek land. Lesbos. They are all safe.

Yusra lies on the ground, trembling, alive. She went beyond every limit. She's not that strong, how did she do it? She's afraid of the sea and even of stupid things like giant squid. How could she have swam for three and a half hours in darkness and frost, weighing just 110 pounds? Someone picks her up and covers her. "Thank you. Thank you for having saved us." She hears muffled and distant voices. Now she wants to close her eyes and get lost.

She's in the central market of Damascus, Suq al-Ḥamīdiyye. She's looking for the sweets that her mum likes for her birthday, those with honey and pistachio from the best pastry shop. She tastes them all. The delicious bits get stuck in her teeth, but she's lost. She turns the corner. There's the dog that barks. She wakes up. She's actually in Berlin and her sister is calling her, with a bag over her shoulder. It's late, the pool light is behind her.

Yusra walked for twenty-five days to reach Germany: on foot from Greece through Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, Austria. A few months later, the whole family met up and obtained international protection, and in March 2016 she was chosen for the Rio Olympics. In the photo she is the youngest athlete smiling, carrying the flag of the National Refugees. Obviously, she got lost many times inside the Olympic village too.

"Turn left where that white cat is always sitting. But who the heck moved the cat?!"
In 2017 Yusra Mardini became the youngest Ambassador ever for the UNHCR (the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees).