

**Nather Henafe Alali**

**A Room without Windows**

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**Nothing is harder than being free**

Nather Henafe Alali tells the story of a loving couple. When he is seriously wounded and vanishes, she sets out on the perilous journey to Europe. There, she meets his best friend, and this encounter seems to mark a turning point in their lives, for in this tumultuous century nothing is implausible.

Alali's poignant debut novel is a story of loss and exhaustion, a tale of how war can rob people of their homeland but not their hope, their will to live or their resilience. This is a gripping, hard-hitting book about loneliness and exile. Angela Merkel's statement 'Wir schaffen das'—'We can do this'—rings with existential significance for Alali's heroes.

**Nather Henafe Alali** has lived in Germany for four years. In 2011 he was one of the many students who took to the streets in peaceful protests against the Assad regime. As a journalist he campaigned for freedom, democracy and human rights in Syria. He was arrested, but after his family paid a ransom to obtain his release from prison, he fled to Germany via Lebanon and Turkey. Now he has written a novel based on his experiences.

Translated by Simon Pare

Ever since Aziz had left with Salim's body, Hayat spent the days hoping for their return, staring out at the dreary, abandoned neighbourhood whose inhabitants were waiting quietly for death to come. The house felt empty without the peals of laughter with which Salim had always scoffed at death before they faded to nothing in the final months of his depression. Their lives had lost all meaning without his banter to cheer them up. Aziz no longer sat next to her either, lost in thought, smoking one cigarette after another—a habit that had always made her gripe. She missed the calm silence he would keep after one of his fierce arguments with Salim about violence, dominance, death and their country. How bland everything was without the two of them. It wasn't only the waiting that tormented her, though; she was in the final stages of pregnancy too. Now she had no one left to share her horror and take on even a little of the pain. She had become a stranger in her own country. She longed for a swift death to release her from this icy silence, broken only by explosions and bombers thundering overhead.

Her small son's anxious whimpering at the noises of war was almost a welcome interruption. Things had got even harder for him since the loss of his father and his father's friend. Salim and Aziz's pranks used to distract him from the hardships of war that was incomprehensible to a child of his age. Now he would often wake up from his nightmares having wet the bed with fear. Slowly, he was growing and could move around the house with increasingly steady steps. He missed his father. He had always felt safe in his presence, the tenderness he received making up for the cruelty of a homeland that had robbed him of those wonderful childhood moments, pulverising them into nightmarish fields of ruins, and making him too scared to leave the house because the streets outside were populated only by the ghosts of the dead.

Hayat craved for conversations about something other than death and tragedies, for conversations with other women that revolved exclusively around their children's upbringing and household chores. She was dying for a cup of



coffee, even without sugar, or to go to one of the cafes in the old quarter where she used to drink mint tea with her girlfriends. They would chat about cooking recipes and gossip about other women or go out together in the evenings to wedding and engagement receptions where there was always music and dancing. Those things were long gone, replaced by a meaningless life in besieged neighbourhoods where she was deprived of even the most basic contact with other people. Families no longer dropped in to see each other in the evenings; they had either withdrawn or were gradually wasting away.

The walls of their lives had closed in. There was no longer any space in this part of town for her complaints about headaches, to which Salim's comment had always been that she must have skipped her morning cup of coffee. There were hardly any other women around with whom she could even chat. None of her sisters was there for her to bemoan her marriage troubles, nor did she have her mother to confide in. She longed to turn back the clock a few months and tell death to its face: You've carried off those around us, so now take us too. She told herself that it would have been better if a shell had killed all five of them at once. A small-calibre rocket would have been enough to wipe out them all in one fell swoop—herself, her children, Aziz and Salim. That way she wouldn't have to endure this terror alone; she wouldn't have to be a weak mother. She had no one to lay an arm around her shoulders now, no one to tread this uncertain and perilous path with her and hold her at night as she grieved for her scattered family. Now she had neither her relatives nor her beloved husband nor their friend Aziz, whose stoical, philosophical manner she had so often admired early in the morning, still depressed from waking up, as he went about brewing coffee. He made it watery to save powder, because coffee had become a rare and costly commodity inside the city under siege.

What are the people out there actually doing? One night, when silence had once more stolen into her house, that question had suddenly hung heavy in the room.

'What do you think people beyond the siege lines are doing right now?' Hayat had asked Salim and Aziz. 'Imagine we weren't here right now. What



would we do? We'd walk and walk and walk . . . Wander aimlessly, wherever our fancy took us. The main thing is that no one would block our path. We'd stroll along the promenades, eat ice cream (the real thing, homemade) and drink ice-cold tamarind or liquorice juice to escape the scorching, everlasting summer of unbroken sunshine. We'd sit, safe from prying eyes, in one of the lovers' cafes we used to sneak into, looking for a place where we would be invisible behind raffia screens. What was it like, again? Didn't the moon seem more beautiful from there? Or does it merely look paler here than elsewhere? At night we would relax to the music and smoke a shisha, order a plate of tabbouleh with a little lemon juice drizzled on it and read all the books our dictator has banned, all the abusive rhymes about our wannabe sultan . . .'

Hayat's words had made Salim feel uncomfortable and guilty that he hadn't made it out of this place. During his final days he'd been racked with regret regarding the situation in which Hayat and his young son found themselves; it nagged at his soul and gave him a desperate craving for cigarettes. Aziz, on the other hand, resisted the urge to comment on Hayat's words and modest wishes. However, he did want to rein in her yearning for the now-remote ordinary life and curb the anguish whose jaws she had run into like a hunted animal.

'What do you think people out there are doing, Hayat? The same things you would do . . . They're sitting there over a cup of coffee or a nice glass of wine, nibbling homemade pastries as sweet as our homeland. Or watching football and cheering on their favourite team with unwavering, sullen passion. Life is just as banal whether you're in a besieged area or outside, my dear. We all die in the end, and all our experiences, the painful ones and the rare happy ones, are forgotten.'

Hayat felt as if Aziz was mocking her wishes. Yet she didn't react for fear that he would destroy her arguments by emphasising their present circumstances. She found it hard to cope with a broken man like him. She still had hopes of another life than this one where her milk had dwindled to such an extent that she couldn't even breastfeed her child properly. She missed being a normal woman, a woman who liked to go shopping—merely for the sake of shopping—



and visited her neighbours' home to pass the time of day without having to listen to stories of death, torture and fleeing.

Here, she had only her conversations with Salim and Aziz, their monotonous discussions and silences whose endless loops they were incapable of breaking. Death alone could overcome this silence when fresh air raids plunged the neighbourhood into chaos. They triggered a frantic search for the missing under the rubble, followed by desperate efforts to carry the wounded to one of the makeshift, short-staffed medical posts where the doctors and paramedics were already crushed by the misery they witnessed. She would have liked to help out as a nurse, saving lives, doing something more useful than listening to the trifles over which Salim and Aziz argued like fighting cocks but which she found meaningless. She dreamed of being able to give birth to her baby and lead a normal married life, untainted by the foul stench of tyranny. But it had infected everything. Her prospects of living an ordinary life had gone up in smoke.

Still dwelling on her memories of those debates, she slumped onto the sofa where Aziz and Salim had so often sat, talking themselves into a frenzy as she watched. She smoothed the fabric with her hand and asked, 'So, sofa? Do you miss them both as much as I do?'

Hayat had begun to talk to herself to avoid losing her way in the no-man's-land of her thoughts. She had accepted the siege from the outset because it meant she could stay by Salim's side. This had helped her make it through the initial stages without complaint. But the sustained siege had worn her down both physically and emotionally. The years passed, and her son grew older and asked questions to which she had no answer. 'Why are we here, Mum? Mum, where is Dad?' Mum, where has Uncle Aziz gone?' Words failed her. There had been no way out of the besieged area before, and without Salim and Aziz this option was even more remote. Who would help her to bribe the soldiers at the checkpoints? Who would soothe her worries of being arrested and raped behind the wall of a half-finished building, then accused of terrorism? She must be a terrorist, for why else would anyone terrorise her? That was how it always



went: everything was twisted so that people put up with even the most horrific conditions.

Truth had become a slippery concept. 'Yes,' she would admit, 'we are terrorists, miscreants, mercenaries, highwaymen, a stain on humanity . . . because we are trapped here. Yes, being bombed every day and eliminated one by one serves us right . . . And if the hail of bombs doesn't kill us, we'll starve . . . We are resigned.'

But what had the small children done wrong? They had merely happened to be born in this dark place. They had no idea what the word 'fruit' meant and had never even tasted chocolate . . . How are they going to cope if they make it into the outside world one day?

She didn't want to give up so easily. She wanted to shout at the top of her lungs. She thought of Salim, who had spoken to her in a long dream. 'Chin up. Never give up. This isn't a good time to be weak. We still have many tears to shed.'

And what good would it do to cry in this dark corner of the world, which had lost any sense of shame? She finally had to face up to her helplessness.

'What tears are we still to shed, Salim? Please tell me because I cannot bear to go on worrying. I've had enough of brooding, enough of the bed being empty without you. Enough of this house, emptied of the irritating smoke of your cigarettes and your relentless obstinacy. You wouldn't listen to me when I begged you not to sit around outside the house. And now every day I ask people why the two of you didn't return from the clinic. I never saw your corpses. How can I be sure you're dead? They hide even the truth about the dead from us.'

'Chin up, Hayat. There's still a long way to go.' Salim's voice came to her from far off. 'It's a big world out there, my love. If there's no air for you to breathe here, maybe you can find a place somewhere else.'

Yet she choked her all the more at these words that only she could hear. They reminded her of the insurmountable pain of their separation.



'I'll try, Salim, but I can't promise you anything. Will you ever come home, Salim? Don't die completely, I beg you. Die only a little. Die only for a moment. Die for a few days, but don't let death take you entirely, don't let the far side swallow you for good. Die for a week or a month, but you must come back!'

Salim had always been stubborn, and he still was now. He crossed over into a world beyond human imagining while his children remained behind with only a dark future before them. Hayat had been expecting this moment for a long time.

She now pictured the future in the darkest of shades, as black as the thick clouds of smoke that obscured the sky at sunset every day. She missed Aziz's sayings, which Salim had so often dismissed as empty bluster. Like her husband, she generally hadn't understood what Aziz's point was as he became entangled in long words and sentences.

'Where on earth did you pick up such strange expressions?' she had repeatedly asked him.

In the beginning he had simply shaken his head, but eventually he said, 'In prison, Hayat. Terror is a school for philosophers. It teaches you things you'd never learn from books.'

Might Aziz's comments about death have been correct? Had Salim been wrong to dismiss Aziz as crazy whenever his friend worked himself into a fury?

All she could do in their house now was stare straight ahead like a little girl, clutching her head in her hands. She had only just turned twenty, but people age fast in wartime, especially in a siege they are helpless to resist. She was alone with a child and had another one on the way, but she knew that her children gave her fresh impetus and kindled an unsuspected willpower inside her to fight for their survival. People really shouldn't bring any more children into this dirty world. For Hayat, though, children were the secret and the reason for her remaining joy in life.

'Crazy Hayat,' he used to whisper when she collected scraps of fabric and used clothing and sewed them into clothes that fitted her baby. 'Do you still



believe that hope will throw open its gates and say, Enter into your paradise? What kind of paradise are you waiting for? Take a look at the ruined buildings around you, with owls and crows nesting in them. Did you realise that even those owls and their fellow birds of prey won't stick around here much longer and will fly away at the earliest opportunity after gorging themselves on our mortal remains?'

Aziz's face haunted her. He appeared in her nightmares, beckoning to her with burnt fingers. This recurring dream puzzled Hayat. In it Aziz seemed to have sustained a shoulder wound. He looked like a ghost trying to convey a message to her without being able to speak. Again she wondered why Aziz hadn't returned. He had carried away Salim's body months ago. They had asked after him locally and been told that the area around the improvised medical post had fallen into the hands of government troops the same day. The patients had been killed and their corpses sold to allies of the regime to be used in training at their medical faculties. They had allegedly been lined up naked against a wall and riddled with bursts of gunshot. Others said that grenades had shredded them before tanks had levelled the area. She heard all kinds of stories, but she refused to believe the reports.

Did they kill you too, Aziz? Did they throw your corpse next to Salim's? Were you united in death as you were in friendship, playing late-night card games fuelled by huge quantities of tea and cigarettes? Why did death decide to take you both from me on the same day? Where will I get my energy from now? Which higher power will give me a little patience? No one up there has any patience left with us because we have lost patience with death. Even people overseas are fed up with seeing the same old pictures showing us slowly but surely bleeding to death.

She ran her tongue over the tracks of her dried tears. The women in the neighbourhood had urged her to stop weeping so that she wouldn't harm her unborn child. Aziz had once told her, 'The day will come when you shatter like a vase.'



Yes, Aziz, now I have shattered. I am like the shards of a pane of glass that has smashed into tiny splinters. Already I have that smell of death in my nostrils which you described so eloquently the day the shells hit our house, cracking the walls and breaking all the windows. I recently patched up one window and was reminded of Salim's silence when Aziz asked, 'What does a man do when someone points a gun at his head?' Salim didn't answer.

'Yes, let's escape! We've got to get out of here right now, Hayat!' It was as if she could hear Salim's voice announcing a decision he would never have been brave enough to make while he was alive. 'Isn't escaping an expression of our desire to stay alive? And what could be a greater provocation to those who rape life than our survival? Death is not our calling.'