

JASON WHITE

## THE PASSAGE

DESPITE HIS EFFORTS TO IGNORE THE SITUATION, Adar is woken by the sound of his aunt screaming.

“Where is the rest of the money?”

Her husband’s response is an indecipherable whisper.

“What are we going to do?” she yells.

Despite her anger, the stammer in her voice betrays her fear. Her desperate pleas quickly turn into a personal assault. “This is your fault,” she accuses. “You’re not a man. You go out and drink our money while your wife and children starve. You’re not even worth the dirt on the bottom of my feet.”

There is a sound of crashing pottery and a sudden, sharp yelp—then silence.

This is a scene that has played out many times before, and Adar has become numb to it. He assumes that such conflicts have become the new norm in households throughout the city.

“Fear and desperation have ignited the slow erosion of the Syrian family core—collateral damage *en masse*,” his uncle often professes.

The family lives in a one-room dwelling on the second floor of an abandoned apartment building. Five of them sleep on two mattresses near the back of the open space: himself and the seven-year-old twins Elyas and Rahaf on one, his uncle Singo and his aunt Aisha on the other.

The snoring of the twins lying next to him begs Adar to go back to sleep. Sleeping is the only thing in his world that offers any relief. As he closes his eyes, he tries to force himself back into his dream; its details are already vague, but he knows it was a better place than here.

It’s too late. The hunger cramps in his stomach won’t allow him to retreat.

One of the twins suddenly vents into a coughing fit. The force of his convulsions pops his young chest out of his tattered t-shirt. Strands of wet

hair hang across the boy's clammy, sweltering forehead. He has been sick for over a week, and in the absence of a doctor the sickness is free to ravage the child's body unchecked.

The coughing slowly stops, but the boy's breathing stays laboured.

Now fully awake, Adar thinks of waking the twins but quickly reconsiders. "What are they going to do, anyway?" There is no school or any other recreational clubs. All of the stadiums are either destroyed or occupied by some militia or another. Childhood is just an irrelevant step in their growth into adults.

Making sure not to wake them, Adar pushes back his blanket and rolls off the deadened mattress. The room stinks of musk and mould. Concrete flooring chills his feet. A long serrated gash on the side of his heel flares back to life. He stepped on a stray piece of metal while scavenging for a pair of shoes a month ago, and the resulting wound is slow in healing.

He quickly reaches under his pillow and grabs a pair of jeans and a shirt. As he slides one of his legs into the pants, he feels some dampness on his inner thigh. He looks down and sees a large dark spot on the Ghostbusters bedsheet. Elyas has wet the bed again—a nightly occurrence now.

After he is reasonably assured that he is insect-free, Adar tip-toes out through the hanging bedsheet that partitions the sleeping quarters from the rest of the apartment.

There is no privacy. All of their clothes are separated into three piles at the foot of Adar's bed. The garments are soiled and filled with holes. On the other side of the room there is a small refrigerator and an oven that no longer works. They cook their meals in an open pit that Singo made out of loose rock and the drum of an old washer.

With a lack of water for cleaning, the family shares three plates and two cups. In the corner of the space, separated by another makeshift curtain of towels and old t-shirts, is a yellow bucket. Today it is empty, but most of the time it is filled with feces and vomit.

The walls are fragile and thin. A small window notched high upon the wall is the only source of daylight. A small grey plastic tub by the front door contains their food, its contents now miserably meagre.

Once he reaches what serves as a kitchen, Adar flips the light switch and finds that the power is off.

"Another damn brown-out," he mutters to himself.

His aunt sits at an improvised table of oil drums and rotting wood.

She is quiet and blends so nicely with the shadows that Adar doesn't notice her at first. She rocks back and forth as she cradles a picture of her oldest daughter, Lilith, against her emaciated chest. She is wearing nothing but her husband's frayed sweater, which barely covers her knees. Modesty, it turns out, is dependent on hope.

As a little boy of five, Adar thought his aunt was absolutely beautiful. Whatever the occasion, she was always dressed to impress. Even in her traditional green and yellow *thob*, she looked like an angel on earth. Now her skin is a sickly yellow, and like the rest of the family she is dangerously underweight. The gleam in her eyes has been replaced by a dull darkened glimmer, and the exuberance has been sucked from her spirit. She is only twenty-five years old, but she looks much older.

"Is Singo at the shop?" Adar asks.

A soft grunt and a slight nod is the woman's only response.

Feeling another pang of hunger, Adar quietly creeps over to the small bucket that the family uses to collect rain water. Nothing more than three sips of water are collected inside. He raises the bucket to his face with weakened arms and pounds on its bottom, making sure that not a single drop is left behind.

Realizing that her solace has been disturbed, Aisha stands up. "Stay safe," she manages to mumble and then quietly joins her children to sleep her way through the day.

A sharp pain erupts in Adar's mouth. He rubs his fingers across his blackened gums and they bleed like a sieve. He has already lost two of his back teeth in the last month, and he has a feeling that the number will continue to rise.

According to the watch on his arm, which he found in a clogged sewer grate, it is 11:17 in the morning. He puts on his shoes and heads out into the city. Today will be spent like all the others—wasted away in insignificant boredom.

Even before the civil war began, Al-Myassar was considered a poor slum in Aleppo. Now it is nothing but hell on earth. The streets are littered with garbage and raw sewage. Burnt-out vehicles lie dormant, piled on top of one another like the discarded remnants of a past era.

Adar tears off a piece of his shirt and wraps it around his mouth and nose to protect against the smell, but the heat makes it impossible. As he

makes his way to the checkpoint, he steps around the carcass of a German Shepherd that is chained to a power pole and riddled with bullets—a sign that it was used for sniper practice. The sidewalks are otherwise empty, as everyone else is either hiding or dead.

“Perhaps they know something I don’t,” he muses. “Perhaps I should be hiding too.”

A faint wind blows over the buildings around him, and the resulting echo adds to his feeling of isolation. There is a traffic light to his left. It is on a different electrical circuit than his apartment building and still has power. Adar finds himself staring at the constant blinking of its amber light until a muffled explosion in the distance draws him out of his trance. He focuses his attention on a cloud of smoke rising into the air twenty kilometres or so to the east.

“It’s nothing to worry about,” he thinks, but he quickens his pace nonetheless.

There is a wide array of rebel coalition groups in the eastern part of the city, each one claiming blocks of control. At first these groups worked together for a common goal—the defeat of Bashar al-Assad’s regime—but their cohesion gradually waned and they are now led by their own self-interests. The faction in control of Adar’s neighbourhood is the Northern Storm militia, which was a brigade of the Free Syrian Army. It controls the checkpoint at the end of the block, which is the only route that leads to the adjacent neighbourhood of Al-Ferodous. Adar has no choice but to cross it.

Compared to the other checkpoints around the city, this one is small and sparsely manned. Two soldiers, who appear to be in their early twenties, sit around a makeshift fire pit constructed of an emptied-out oil drum and rocks from the crumbling buildings around them. One of the men, whom Adar recognizes, puffs long and hard on a cigarette, while his partner, whom Adar doesn’t recognize, sips from a mug of coffee or tea. They are both wearing green military uniforms. An emblem of an eagle holding a machine gun criss-crossed over a sword is sewn onto the breast pockets of their fatigues.

An abandoned pharmacy stands directly behind the encampment. At the start of the civil war a mural was painted on the side of the empty building depicting a F.S.A. fighter bleeding from a gunshot wound to his chest. Under the soldier is the following caption: “People, forgive us if we make mistakes. We, the F.S.A., are dying for you.” More telling of the people’s feelings, however, is the word “liar,” which is spray-painted across the man’s

face.

Seeing the boy approach, the soldier holding the mug throws it to the ground and turns in his direction. Adar stops dead in his tracks. He can see that the man is clearly agitated.

*“Ts’uyts tvek’ dzer demk’y!”* the guard yells.

Although Adar has a firm grasp of Arabic, his mother tongue is English and it is difficult for him to decipher the guard’s command, which he thinks is in Armenian.

The guard repeats his order. *“Ts’uyts tvek’ dzer demk’y!!!”*

Adar’s mouth goes dry and his heart begins to pound hard in his chest. He raises his hands with his palms out front, which is the normal procedure when approaching a checkpoint, but this only seems to irritate the guard, who aims his gun at the boy.

It dawns on Adar that his face is still covered, so he slowly lowers his hands and pulls off his makeshift mask. This does nothing to ease the guard’s stance, however, as his weapon is now pointed directly at Adar’s head.

The other guard finally realizes the urgency of the situation and comes to Adar’s defence, gently pushing the barrel of his compatriot’s gun toward the ground. “Calm down, man. I know this kid.”

After a sporadic conversation between the two men, again in what Adar believes to be Armenian, the offending guard sneers in Adar’s direction and saunters away.

The other guard, who Adar is quite certain just saved his life, faces the boy. “It’s okay,” he laughs. “Lower your hands and come here.”

Adar does as he is told and slowly approaches. Hassid, the guard beckoning to him, grew up in the neighbourhood and knows Adar and his family.

“Adar, my man, you’ve got to get that uncle of yours to teach you some Armenian. Sameed was about to blow your head off.”

Adar gives a brief smile. “Yes, sir.”

“Out for a stroll, are ya?” the young man quips.

“I’m just going to go see my uncle.”

Singo is the proprietor of Soles for Toes, a shoe repair shop in Al-Ferodous, although business is sparse at best. Adar believes that he only does it so that he has an excuse to get out of bed.

Hassid moves a wooden barricade to the side and lets Adar through. Tilting his head slightly, he adds, “Tell Singo he can only hide in his shop for

so long. He'll have to join the fight sooner or later. He, more than anyone, should want to sever the head of the Mukhabarat!"

"I will, sir," Adar replies.

The streets on the other side of the checkpoint are just as silent as the ones he came from. Only the brave or stupid loiter outside for too long. A block down the road, edging the street, is the Al-Ma'mun Primary School. Adar was a student there when it was newly renovated, and the school offered shelter when the war started. Elders gathered in the gymnasium, seeking knowledge and comfort, and children roamed the halls, pretending they were students. But those days are over. A bomb fell on the building one night last winter, collapsing many of the walls. A handful of children who were inside at the time, three of them under the age of five, were buried alive. Now it is nothing but a ruin waiting for gravity to take its course, and seven wooden crosses are planted outside the main entrance, each displaying the name and picture of a lost child. Blue and pink balloons still float lazily next to the makeshift memorial.

After crossing into another section of the city, Adar approaches a pile of debris, but this one is different. He takes a quick look around to make sure that he is alone before proceeding into the middle of the rubble. Under a metal sign advertising Nestle Hot Chocolate he finds what he is looking for. He hurriedly removes the placard and skirts down a well-hidden hole.

The air is dusty and dry. Stone crumbles around him as he makes his way through an improvised tunnel. The opening is barely big enough for his small body to fit through. After a few minutes of squiggling his way underground, he drops down into a bigger area. Light shoots through open gaps overhead, revealing the remains of a local convenience store. Adar found the spot by chance last year when he was fleeing from a mob of regime-friendly neighbours. He is surprised that the underground haven has not yet been found by the militia—or anyone else, for that matter.

It takes a second for his vision to adjust. There is a smell of decay coming from somewhere within the space, but thankfully Adar has never found the source. The boy then makes his way around the broken glass and opens a pantry door. The room is filled with canned food and bottles of water, and he grabs a can of peaches and a warm bottle. He beats the can open with the aid of a rock, and peach juice runs down his chin as he tips the can up to his face. The fruit itself tastes a little rancid, but he's willing to take the risk.

After slurping down half the can, he searches for a place to sit down.

As he makes his way to a small area free of debris, he stubs his toe against a concrete block. “Fuck!” he screams, but quickly puts his hand over his mouth. He is not ashamed of the word, but rather scared that someone might hear him. He remains still for over a minute, straining his ears and eyes to determine if anyone has discovered his hiding place. When he feels somewhat assured, he continues to the sitting area.

When he first found this place he brought some of the food back to his aunt and uncle, claiming that it was left in an abandoned car. He loved them, but he decided to keep the stash of food a secret, as he knew that he would lose if it ever came down to a choice between him and their real children.

He washes the rest of the fruit down with the water and crawls under an old wooden table that miraculously survived the collapse of the building. He takes out a small tin box, which is hidden under a pile of newspapers. Judging by the crumbs inside, it was once used to store cookies and other sweets. He carefully opens the box and takes out his most prized possession: a View-Master.

He didn’t know what it was when he first saw it, but he was delighted when he put his eyes into the device and saw an image of Spider-Man floating in front of his face in crisp 3-D. It only took a second or two for him to realize that the orange handle on the side was meant for flicking through the roll. He then clicked to an image of Captain America and an image of Iron Man. Out of the twenty-one superheroes on the roll, he only knew two for sure—Spider-Man and Captain America—but he was captivated nonetheless. After finishing the roll he discovered a pile of others in the tin box. There were rolls of cars, monsters, airplanes, and lots more.

He rests his head on the pile of newspapers and puts his favourite roll in the slot. When he puts his eyes into the device he sees images of planets, which pop in vivid detail. Like most children he particularly likes the rings around Saturn, the “Prince of Planets,” or so the caption reads.

He places the toy back in its hiding spot when he is finished and makes his way back out through the hole. Before emerging onto the street he recovers the entrance with the Nestle advertisement and does his best to wipe away any footprints leading to the area.

The sun has gotten hotter, and the sounds of gunfire in the distance cause him to pick up his pace. He was planning to stop by the mosque on Al Jamaa Street to use its working washroom, but he decides to head straight to Singo’s business instead.

Suddenly the earth under his feet shakes. The sound waves of a nearby explosion crash against the buildings around him. Adar instinctively falls to the ground, and his breath catches in his throat. Shaking terribly, he waits for the impact of falling concrete, but to his surprise none of the buildings collapse. Sneaking a peek, he opens his eyes and sees black smoke billowing into the sky three blocks to the south, which is the same direction as Singo's shop. Panic overrides any sense of self-preservation, and Adar runs towards the impact site.

Minutes later, he reaches his destination. A blanket of dried dirt still hangs in the air. Five of the buildings in the quarter have collapsed, but not Singo's. A handful of men are gathered in the middle of the street. The men are all covered in blood and dirt—they have escaped from the blast by the skin of their teeth—but Adar recognizes one of them as his uncle.

As he approaches, he hears a woman shrieking. The sound draws his attention to a dead child lying in the middle of the street. The little girl appears to be no older than seven. Her legs have been blown off and her face is matted with brain tissue. A woman, probably her mother, cradles the little girl, rocking her back and forth, trying to coax life back into her broken body.

Upon seeing his nephew, Singo grabs him by the shoulder. "What are you doing here?" he yells.

Adar is too shocked to reply, and Singo kneels down and embraces his nephew. "I think it's time we leave this god-forsaken city," he says. "It's time to try to make the best out of whatever miserable lives we have left."

The dumpster offers little protection against the bite of the wind. Yesterday's heat has quickly given way to an early autumn frost. Adar looks down at his young cousins as their parents struggle to provide them warmth. Singo is fervently rubbing Rahaf's arms while Elyas is being cradled into his mother's chest. Adar feels a twinge of jealousy, but quickly pushes it aside. Singo and Aisha had taken him in after his mother's death, and to ask for anything more would be beyond selfish.

Pressing his back up against one of the many stone boulders used to fortify the entrance, Adar peers out into the passage. The street, which spans a mere two blocks, will serve as either the ending of their life or the beginning of a better one.

"I can't find Sissy," Rahaf suddenly blurts out, pushing her father away. "Did you pack her, mommy?"

Aisha shoots her husband a nervous glance. In the rush to pack whatever meagre belongings they could into two backpacks, Sissy—a Barbie doll given to Rahaf for her third birthday—had to be sacrificed.

“Sissy decided to leave tomorrow,” Singo lies, “but she said that she will meet you at uncle Michael’s.”

Skeptically, Rahaf pinches her little brown eyes together. “Does she even know how to get to Damascus?”

“We left her a map, honey,” Aisha smoothly adds to the lie. “Sissy is very smart for her age, you know, just like you.”

“That’s true,” the little girl giggles. She then focuses her attention on a plastic coffee lid that lies partially embedded in the dirt near her feet.

Elyas, on the other hand, is unnaturally quiet. Still visibly sick, the boy rests his head against his mother’s chest and continues to sleep. Adar can tell by Singo’s wary glances that his son has more than a common cold. The boy’s deterioration becomes more and more apparent with every passing hour, as his complexion turns from a milky white to a dull yellow. The outlines of his bones are prominent against his shrinking skin. More worrisome, however, are the traces of blood in his stool—something Singo refuses to tell his wife.

Adar involuntarily reaches down and rubs his injured foot. The wound has gotten worse, and judging by the creeping red lines the infection is starting to spread to his ankle and leg. A mild fever has settled over his forehead, but he keeps that fact hidden. This family only has enough strength left for one sick child.

Adar focuses his attention back to the “Corridor of Death,” which is known by the locals as *ma’abar*. He slowly searches the shadows of the rooftops, looking for any sign of life, but finds none.

“Did you really think they would give away their position?” a voice teases in his mind. “Killing kids like you is their business.”

Aisha did not protest when Singo told her of his decision to flee to Damascus and stay with his younger brother Michael. “We’re nothing more than the walking dead here, anyway,” she mildly replied to her husband’s proposal. “I’d rather die quickly by the kiss of a bullet than slowly suffocate to death in these cement walls.”

They spent the night slipping through rebel-controlled streets and made their way to Bustan Al-Qasr, an area located near the middle of the city. Singo managed to broker a deal with a trafficker named Samir, who agreed

to smuggle the family out of Aleppo and into Damascus—for a hefty fee, of course—but first the family has to make it to the western side of Aleppo.

“I’m afraid my influence within the Mukhabarat has waned considerably over the last few years,” Samir said to Singo when arranging their deal. “Before, with a simple bribe, I could traverse the entire city, but now the bastards have become unreasonable. They would skin me from head to toe if the thought of crossing over to the eastern side of the city even crossed my mind.”

Not so long ago going from one side of Aleppo to the other consisted of nothing more than a thirty-five-minute bus ride, but now it involves navigating a labyrinth of side roads and as many as twenty checkpoints, where anything can go wrong—and usually does. There is another way—a more direct route—but the price for this convenience is very high. Located in the bowels of Bustan Al-Qasr is a circuitous path that spans the distance between the rebel-controlled east and the government-controlled west. The path is fortified with boulders and sandbags, and buildings on each side offer a sheltered view for both hunter and prey.

Adar has heard about the atrocities committed by the snipers on the roofs at the end of the corridor. These men decide who lives and who dies, and their decisions are often sadistic. Knowing that they cannot kill everyone who attempts to cross the passage, they choose their targets with a certain tactical philosophy in mind—the need to spread fear, hatred, and vengeance. To accomplish this goal they target not simply opposing forces, but also women, children, and the elderly. Over time the snipers have turned their professional killings into a sickening sport for personal pleasure. Bored by long hours of scouring for targets, these men play “targets of the day.” One day, for example, the objective might be to shoot boys under the age of ten through the left eye; the next day it might be elderly women through the left kneecap. One week there were rumours of pregnant women showing up at field hospitals with bullet holes through their stomachs. The prize for such accuracy is usually a pack of cigarettes.

Clearly restless, Adar keeps looking at his watch. The timing for their planned run has already been determined and must be followed precisely.

“Are you hanging in there, champ?” Singo whispers.

“I’m fine,” Adar replies.

Realizing that his daughter is paying more attention to the plastic lid at her feet than to him, Singo crawls over next to his nephew. Adar can tell by

the way he is wringing his hands that he wants to say something but is too anxious to broach the subject.

“Don’t worry, I know where we are,” he says.

“And you know what can happen?” Singo asks.

“I do.”

Singo leans over and kisses his nephew on the forehead. “You’re a very bright and brave boy, Adar. Your mother would be proud.”

Adar blushes at the compliment.

Singo’s voice abruptly takes on a more ominous tone. “Do you see that building over there—the one with the orange towel hanging from the windowsill?”

The boy peers out into the passage. It isn’t hard to pick out the building his uncle is talking about, as the orange towel is vivid against the surrounding greys and beiges.

“I do, uncle.”

“And do you see those hanging blankets?”

Adar then notices a series of blankets strategically draped on wires that run between the buildings on either side of the corridor.

“Yes.”

“Good.” Singo kneels in closer until their heads are almost touching. “When we start running, we will be heading for that building using those blankets for cover. The door to the building is unlocked, so if you get there first just open it and go in. There will be a man waiting inside.” Then Singo grabs his nephew by the shoulder to make sure he hears what he is about to say. “No matter what happens, do not turn back. Even if the rest of us...fail... you must keep running. Do you understand?”

Adar hesitates until the meaning of his uncle’s words finally sinks in. “I think so,” he answers.

“Good.”

Adar takes a deep breath, opens his mouth to say something, and then shies away.

“What is it, Adar?”

The boy examines his uncle’s withered face.

“Come on, Adar, out with it.”

“Well...ah...I was just wondering...whose side are we on?”

Singo recoils as if he has suddenly come face-to-face with a rabid dog.

Reading the shock on his uncle’s face, Adar flushes a bright red. “I’m

sorry,” he cries.

This time it is Singo who stares deeply into his nephew’s face. The man’s searching gaze makes Adar’s stomach cringe. “Don’t be sorry,” Singo finally replies, “because it is a fair question. To be perfectly honest, I have no idea whose side we are on anymore. All I know for sure is that the men who fight to keep control and the men who fight to gain control are seldom the men who deserve to have control. I know it’s not much of an answer, but it’s the only one I can give you right now.”

“It’s good enough for me,” Adar replies.

Then they hear a sound coming from behind. Singo barely has enough time to turn before the others are on top of them. Lucky for his family, their new guests are not affiliated with any side. They, too, are simply ordinary people struggling to survive.

These strangers are comprised of a rugged teenage boy, a sickly-thin woman, and an elderly man being pushed by a devoted middle-aged son. There is a slight hesitation from the man pushing the wheelchair when he sees the strangers in front of him for the first time. After a brief moment of silent thought, however, the man senses no ill will and leads his group past without a word.

As he is wheeled by, the old man whispers in Arabic, “*Ya Rab Sa’edna*” (may God help us), which Singo repeats in return.

After a brief pause at the entrance the family rushes into the “Corridor of Death.” Adar can do nothing but watch in sickening fascination as the family flees into the passage. It is obvious from the start that they don’t have a plan. They run a predictable, straight route, bypassing the shelter offered by the hanging blankets and instead remaining in the open, making themselves easy prey. But, amazingly, they are not fired upon.

“They’re almost there,” Singo boasts out loud.

Then there is a shot and the elderly man in the wheelchair is violently thrust onto the ground, his chest now caved-in mush.

Seeing the carnage, Rasaf screams and Singo rushes over to his daughter.

“It’s alright, baby,” he lies. “They’re just playing a game.”

Adar can see the blood pouring from the old man’s chest, and he watches as the son pushing the wheelchair falls to his knees next to his father’s body and waits for the bullet that will reunite them, but it never comes.

“Papa—come on!”

The sound of his son's voice is enough to stir the man from his grief, and another shout from his wife rouses him to his feet. Sobbing profusely, he rejoins his family. Without the burden of the old man they are able to move quicker, and they soon make their way to the other side of the corridor. The cost of their migration is one life.

There is no time to reflect on what has just happened, and Adar frantically checks his watch. Samir told them that they had to cross the passage at exactly 7:00 in the morning—one second too early or too soon could cost them their lives—and there are only twelve seconds left—not even enough time to cry.

Adar stops breathing and takes one more look at his family. Rahaf laughs at a whisper from her mother. The sound fills his mind and soul. “If that’s the last sound I hear,” he thinks, “it will be enough.”

Then his watch silently flashes. It’s their turn.