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# Foreword

The Syrian people have a tradition of providing a refuge to those in need: the Circassians in 1870, the Armenians in 1915, the Palestinians in 1948, and the Iraqis in 2003.

Now the Syrian people need our help. In five years of civil war, hundreds of thousands have been killed or injured, and many more have been forced to flee their homes. They need us to put pressure on governments and world leaders to bring about a lasting peace; and to provide aid and support to those who have been displaced by fighting.

And for our own sakes, as well as theirs, we must challenge the poisonous idea that refugees do not deserve our aid and our compassion, or that they pose some kind of threat to us.

As we approach another winter, with so many Syrians living in makeshift camps, the need for practical aid, raising funds for food, medicines and shelter, is paramount. But aid alone is not enough, if we allow prejudice to gain a hold.

This makes *From Syria with Love* so timely. The money it raises will go straight to help the children who are featured in its pages. But more than that, by seeing the world through these children's eyes, and hearing their voices, we are reaffirming our common humanity.

**Caroline Lucas**



# Introduction

The idea behind the charity From Syria with Love is a simple one: to be a link between Syrian refugees and the world, primarily through taking pictures drawn by children living in a refugee camp in Lebanon and exhibiting them in Britain, to show the reality of their lives, and to raise funds to help improve their conditions and future prospects.

The exhibitions staged have shown the power of this idea. People around the country have responded with huge generosity. The exhibitions have opened people's eyes to the human consequences of the civil war in Syria.

This was my own experience. Before hearing about From Syria With Love, I felt so distanced from the Syrian crisis. I was passionate that something should be done; but helpless about what I personally could do. I didn't have a lot of money to spare as a first year university student, but I did have time. I saw an advert for the charity's exhibition in Brighton. There I absorbed the beautiful and tragic paintings, and through the stories they told, or hinted at, I learned more and more of the scale and effect of this crisis. I listened to a presentation by Baraa Ehssan Kouja, the charity's founder, absorbing more about Syria's rich and harmonious past, and about its destruction. I was intrigued as to how they were operating here in the UK, yet able to make such a difference all the way across the world in Lebanon. Despite the ominous tone of sadness in the air, I could finally feel a sense of hope. I decided to buy a painting as a unique memoir of the experience and selected the

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butterfly picture by Emad, who is six years old. When I saw it on the wall, my heart almost stopped. It was as if I was looking at my own framed painting from when I was the same age. I used to draw my butterflies in just the same way: big round wings with patterns dancing in the middle, and even bigger googly eyes. I remember my own eyes welling at the similarity: I'd never felt closer.

This led me to volunteer with the charity, and to propose a book to take the work of the charity to new audiences.

I didn't, at first, appreciate the challenges. Travel to the Al Abrar camp is impractical, so the work of collecting the stories of children, to go alongside their pictures, has been done by video recordings and emails. Helping the children to tell their stories has needed a lot of care, particularly given the traumatic experiences that many have passed through. And there is also the challenge of translation: not only from Arabic to English, but also helping to shape the stories of the children, to help readers unfamiliar with the Arab world to engage more fully.

In the latter, I have been helped enormously by having creative voices who have lent their own talents to interpret, or be inspired by, the pictures and stories of the children of the Al Abrar camp. The enthusiasm with which the children have contributed to this book shows how important it is to them to know that, thousands of miles away, there are people who want to know about their lives – and who want to help.

Towards the start of the book, I have included one of the transcripts of the interviews we conducted; and towards the end, I have described as best I can one of

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the videos showing life in the camp. You will find more of these on the charity's website and on YouTube. Along with stories, poems, diaries, personal messages and even an exchange of letters between two pen pals – Poppy and Ghaithaa – brought together by the exhibition, this book tries to capture something of the lives of the children in Al Abrar – their dreams, their memories, and their hope that, one day soon, they will be able to return to the country they love so much.

Above all, in their pictures and words, we have a unique window on their world; one that is an essential complement to the images of war and destruction that we see each day in the news; one which, I hope in time will prevail.

**Molly Masters**

*From Syria with Love*



*The children of the Al Abrar refugee camp.*



# Listen to the Children

Half the world's refugees are children - around eight million of them.

The number is so shocking that we can't help longing for a single, huge answer to the situation. And it's right that we should do that. It's important to confront and tackle the huge global issues that drive millions of children from their homes every year.

But looking for huge solutions isn't enough. If that's all we do, we're in danger of seeing the refugees themselves as 'problems'. And that's not true. The problems are wars and famines and disasters.

The refugees are people.

That's why it's important to keep remembering that each of those children - every single one - is an individual, with different likes and dislikes, different fears and failings and a unique set of abilities. Given the chance, they can enrich the world in millions of different ways.

It's not easy to grasp that when the numbers are so huge. But there is one very simple thing we can do to keep it in our minds.

We can listen to the children themselves.

**Gillian Cross**

## **‘When I Think of Syria...’**

I think it was very happy, but now...

I can feel it calling me. I used to feel like we had to stay in it, then we fled, but now we have to go back.

When I hear its beautiful name. I used to think it was beautiful before the war.

...I think of when my grandparents used to talk to me, and tell me that: ‘Syria is fine, the route to Syria is opened again’ – and I used to be so happy.

...I feel that Syria is calling us to stand beside it. Now it is waiting for us to return.

...I think of when the siege happened, and we saw it calling us, it wanted us, but we didn’t reply, we wanted to reply.

When I think of Syria, now, I know its name belongs in the past, because Syria is gone now, and we have no chance to return.

...I feel it telling each Syrian ‘may God never forgive you’.

When I think of Syria, I think of how I never used to think of Syria when I was in it. I never thought I will miss it, but now, most of my misses are for Syria.

## **An Interview**

**Q:** Who would like to answer the first question?

**Kawthar:** Me.

**Q:** How was your life before the war, Kawthar?

**Kawthar:** It was beautiful, so much more than now.

**Q:** Shall we go by turns or go to Majd?

**All:** Majd.

**Majd:** We were living in houses, and now we are living in camps.

**Tasneem:** It was so much more beautiful, now we are in camps, before we were in palaces.

**Douha:** No, for me now is more beautiful, because I started to achieve what I want, and the ones who says before it was more beautiful, it's because they don't want to run after their ideas and dreams.

**Nada:** Come back to me later.

**Nour:** It was more beautiful before because we were living in houses, and in our country, but here we are displaced, and no longer like one family, each one is living by themselves.

**Abdo:** Here we are not happy, but in Syria it was better.

**Mousa:** We were all happy and together and now each one is apart.

**Emad:** No comment.

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**Nada:** We were living in palaces, now in camps our life is not beautiful, as Douha said we came here to run after our ideas, but we still want to go back to our country.

**Nour:** It was beautiful, we used to give examples of people living in tents for the not happy life.

**Q:** How was your life before the war?

**Kawthar:** It was so good, now I started to chase my dream, I have registered in photography workshop.

**Q:** What is the best memory in your life:

**Kawthar:** Later.

**Tasneem:** Later.

**Douha:** Best memory in my life will be after the war ends in Syria, that I have met my friends here, especially Aya and Tasneem.

**Nour:** The memory is not now, is later when I become proud of my self after being Arabic teacher.

**Bayan:** Best memory was when I used to play with my friends at school (laughter) but now my friend is gone.

**Tasneem:** When dad was here, and we used to gather all of us, we have never thought we will be separated one day, but now it happened and we are.

**Kawthar:** Best memory in my life the month of Ramadan before the Syrian crisis, that was my best memory.

**Q:** How do you spend your day in the camp, what is life to you?

**Kawthar:** I don't spend too much time in the camp, living

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in the camp doesn't change my life if I live in a tent or not, I go to workshops, go out and take pictures outside, and play here with the children.

**Tasneem:** I spend my day with Douha, we play together, draw together, study together, we spend most of our times together, we don't like to separate from each other.

**Douha:** I spend all my day with Aya and Tasneem.

**Nour:** I spend all day with my friend Sally from school, sometimes we fight with each other, but we talk with each other again after.



*The children performing at a camp event.*

# نار

صبوا علينا نار  
مات الزعر, خطي معتر,  
وتغطى صابون الغار  
جار الزمن علينا يا جار  
والموت غلبنا  
الهاشتاق صار رسمالك يا حلبنا  
ما تزيد وتعيد وتقلي بكرا بتعمر الدار  
ما ينسى والله الي يدمر  
كبر بالله وزيف دينك وحوور  
غير اسلامك ليصير الحال  
حدا على قلعة على نخلة بكي حداد  
على صغير ياما شجع الاتحاد  
ولاد ربيو اخوة  
كبروا باسم النخوة قتلوا بعض  
طاب تراب الوطن عن الدفن  
وتاجر البلد والتراب مات طعن  
انا ما عم اقصد حدا

They poured us with fire. Thyme and soap are so dusty,  
The time passed, and death defeated us. They supported  
Aleppo with a hash tag, and told us they would rebuild it  
again. Don't say you will build it while you destroy it and  
change its religion. Children were friends, then became  
enemies. And the soil of our country was sold pricelessly.  
I don't mean anybody, I mean everybody. When a person  
cries in Aleppo, the sound is heard in Damascus. You, O  
Senator, who walks proudly and mocks the dead bodies.

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انا عم اقصد كل حدا  
والصوت لما يأن بحلب  
تسمع بالشام الصدى  
يا شيخ ياللي بمجلس الشعب تمختر  
وعلى جنتك يا شعب يا درويش تمسخر  
يا شيخ ياللي سما الاطفال كيب ومشاوي  
يا حيوان لولا حلب الشهباء شو ايدك بتساوي  
ويللي ناوي بمجلس الامن يتدخل  
ويفك النعش  
مثل الي غاوي تنفك هلارض  
انسى  
لك يا عمي انسى الكل عم ينسى  
انسى نشوة عسكري للمستقبل بالتسريح  
انسى نشوة مغترب اخده الموج والريح  
انسى نشوة مواطن ضايح بين التكفير والتشبيح  
انسى يا خاين, انسى الغرب والعرب  
واحضن قديفتك وارقص على رصاصتك والضرب  
ما تصدق انو الحب مثل الحرب  
وانو بدا زلم  
الحب مثل حلب شيعان ظلم

For those who say the Security Council would interfere in Syria, how could the case be solved by the Monster. Don't forget how the soldiers hope to finish their military service and get back home. Never think that love is similar to war. Love is as Aleppo. Both are full of iniquity.

*This poem was written by Douha and performed at the Al Abrar camp's Eid celebration.*

## **Kawthar**

My name is Kawthar. I am 17 years old.

I am a Syrian refugee living in Lebanon camp, and I escaped from Homs with my family two and a half years ago. Our living conditions are so hard. I live in a tent with my mother and my six sisters.

When I came from Syria my life stopped, everything has changed; no education, no friends, no income since my father left us and remarried in Homs. Because of these conditions, we had to make something to live or to survive.

My mother was working until she was completely exhausted, and since I am the biggest sister I felt that maybe I can make something.

In our society, when a man wants to marry, it is the parent's responsibility to find the girl for their son, so this exactly what happened. Two years ago, a woman and her daughter in our camp came to our tent and saw me, and then they said: 'we want you for our son'. It is very common to hear that. I didn't know the man before, but I was thinking 'They said he is 25 years old and he will give my family money', so I said yes I will marry him.

After that I got engaged for several months and I saw him just one time, the next time was in the wedding. I discovered that he is 28 years old. He does not know how to read and write. To be honest, I didn't like him at all, I didn't feel those feelings about love, passion, or even know him at all, but I couldn't stop or say anything while the time was passing, and I just I saw myself in the wedding dress with very bad feelings.



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After the wedding we went to his tent, but I couldn't let him approach me, I don't know why but I was scared. At that time, he began to beat me severely and then went to sleep.

We continued in this situation for three days, and after that all his family started to beat me very badly.

I wanted to go to my family or escape, but they didn't let me until I had to lie and said 'I was raped before, please leave me alone', but they didn't believe me and they took me to a doctor who examined me and said I was a virgin.

We came back to his tent and before entering his sister attacked me and tore all my clothes, she pulled me inside and grabbed me tightly so my husband raped me.

After this I was crying all the time and I tried to kill myself several times. In the end, they took me to my family. My uncle was against me and he beat me two times, but my mother supported me and then we asked for a divorce.

After one month I got divorced, and I can tell you at that moment I was the happiest girl on this earth.

Now I don't think about any relationship any more, I think it is enough for me. But on the other hand, recently I saw a psychiatrist, and she is helping me to get through this and also I am taking a photography course, and I will make a gallery.

You know I couldn't see this before; there are many ways to live. You can study, work, and get money comfortably. Maybe this experiment was necessary to improve my life. Now I am planning to travel and take photos around the world. It was not the end; it was just a start, a real start.

## **Douha's Diary I**

My name is Douha.

I will write what I used to do everyday. In general, I am in love with sleeping. In summer time I didn't used to wake up unless someone else has started to scream beside me.

I also used to do a drawing course, and on the course days I'd wake up at eight o'clock in the morning, and call my friend Aya, and then we would start to make some plans about how we would play some pranks. My other friend Tasneem used to come round with Aya and then we would go to the course. At two o'clock in the afternoon, we would finish and go back home, and I would show my paintings to my mum and then I'd have my lunch whilst I was watching an Indian movie. I really like them.

Sometimes me, Aya, Tasneem and Bayan would practice a Zumba dance, which is a Brazilian dance I know. Other times, I used to draw our bird. It was a very lovely bird and I cared about it a lot. I didn't like doing housework, like doing the dishes, and I always tried to escape from it or instead go and buy groceries that we needed to get out of it. At night, I used to be very quiet so that I could sleep. Me and sleeping are a love story, and my mum would destroy our love every morning.

This was my normal life.

## **The Pond**

I don't spend too much time in the camp. Living in the camp doesn't change my life, if I live in a tent or not, I go to workshops, go out and take pictures outside, and play here with the children.

People probably think that living in this camp leaves us all stagnant, like weeds floating on top of a pond. For some, yes, this camp is a stagnant pond, a no-place, no-where, no-hope kind of pond. It's very easy to open the tarpaulin front of the tent in the morning, to look out on to the rubble and dust below one's feet and the darkening clouds in the sky and feel empty. You feel lifeless sometimes. But for some, like me, although it's not ideal, it's not what I wanted, this place is a place of opportunity. The stagnant pond isn't so stagnant all the time. There are children flitting around like little tadpoles, screaming and playing and learning and growing right before your eyes. There are families, collecting like lily pads, sticking together. There are teachers here, watching over us like tall, swaying grass, and food distributors swimming the surface like water striders. For me, living in the camp doesn't change or affect my life, whether I live in a tent or not. I am blessed to wake up every morning with my mother and sisters surrounding me, supporting me, and encouraging me. My mother, she is my strength, as she is to everyone in the camp. She is everyone's 'Auntie Rodeh' and I've never minded sharing her with all the other children. She walks outside of the tent and everyone adores her, she is like the sun gleaming over our pond, and everyone

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is basking in her glorious words and thriving in her loving embrace.

I can step outside the tent and see past the dust and clouds. I can breathe deeply, with widened nostrils, and smell something sweeter in the air. I feel privileged to be able to do this. It's as though I have a secret looking glass that no one else has, and I can see the future in the reflection of our pond, or I can see what is going to happen to us. When I think about it all, I know that God is looking after us, and that the future is brighter for us. My mother tells me, and all the children, the same. We are united in our knowledge of this.

I can step outside the tent fully, close the door behind me as not to disturb my sisters, and begin another day of opportunity. People probably assume there is no opportunity here, that we just await our aid and food and that is it, like a stagnant pond again. In my eyes, there is boundless opportunity here. If you have been here as long as me, and the other children, you will see that our eyes now glitter with the enthusiasm and thirst for opportunity. Your eyes have to glitter; otherwise you risk losing your spark. So, every day I do three things: I go to my workshops, I go and take pictures in the camp, and I play with the children. Taking pictures gives me a new sense of life, it allows me to use my looking glass eye and see myself being a photographer or a filmmaker in the future. I walk across the camp, past the same families and tents I have passed for many years; past the mothers feeding young children at the openings of their tents, inhaling the fresher air, past the fathers teaching trades to sons, past children teaching children. I smile politely at them all; we are all bonded as a family here.

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My workshops take place in a small-bricked building with a tarpaulin roof. It is the living image of the word 'makeshift'. I duck my head to come in, and sit at one of the desks as the teacher discusses something with a child at the front. The children's eager voices always have and always will echo and bounce through the room, an excited energy that is completely contagious. The teacher begins to talk and a silence falls, it always does. Her words are all we have. We learn without books, and much of the time without pens and paper to ourselves. We share everything, especially our knowledge. When lessons are taught here, it's like skimming a stone across water. You can see those lessons ricocheting and vibrating through the children of the camp as one teaches another, one explains to the other, and they learn together. It's a ripple effect on the surface of our pond, it skims across everyone and enhances the future for us all.

The children have to be encouraged out of the school tent. Their feet move slowly and kick up dust on their way out. We thank our teacher in a chorus and make our way back to the hubbub of the camp. I run to catch up with our teacher, who leaves with a small bundle of papers under her arm.

'Can I use the camera today?' I ask, tapping her on the arm, as I do most days.

She turns and smiles as her eyes meet mine.

'Of course, Kawthar,' she takes it out of her satchel as she speaks, 'but please do bring it back in about an hour, in time for the photography workshop.'

'I will do, I promise!' I nod, my eyes fixated on the camera she extends towards me. This is my real looking

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glass. She taps me on the arm as I did for her, and continues on her way.

Looking through the lens, I can see the camp how I want to see it. I can take pictures of happiness, hope, and determination. I can take pictures of children playing with their friends amongst the grass, the bright colours reflecting the vibrancy of their expressions. I can take pictures of the aid being delivered, the children teaching each other, capturing the joy involved in our learning and sharing. I can take pictures of the faces of my friends as they learn new things in our classroom home. I can capture the camp as I see it, not as the world sees it. It's true, no one that is here wants to be here forever. But I am certain that a positive and hopeful attitude will reap positive results, and the more we can make the best of our situation here, through learning, sharing and acting, we can make progress for our own sake and the sake of Syria's future.

After returning my looking glass camera to the teacher, I take the walk back to my family's tents, stopping to see my friends and the other children as I pass. They are playing with rubber balls and small toys in an open square space of the camp. Some play catch, shouting and cheering and whooping at each other with every pass and catch. Some sing together. I know they have recently formed a band, the four of them, and they are sat in a huddle singing and harmonising. Others chase and tag, making whirlpools of rocks and dust as they skid and run. As the oldest child in the camp, I often feel too old for these games. It's all too easy to feel distanced from children as you grow, and start to focus more on what's ahead than what's happening now. So most days

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I like to join in; to laugh like them, to play like them, and to feel like them. I sometimes feel like I am five years old, due to how much these past five years of the conflict have taught me. So many days I feel completely on their level, a level at which it must be so hard to comprehend and keep up with what is happening. Through all of my thoughts and onlooking, they continue to kick up dust and sing their songs. And so I join in.

People are too quick to assume that because we have nothing, we are nothing. But as long as we have our active minds, loving souls, and united spirits, we will always be stronger than the forces that oppose us. Life in our pond is forever stronger than the algae and winds of circumstance that may threaten it.

**Kawthar Khalil with Molly Masters**

# Syria's Children

Five years ago, Syria's children were safe, well fed, healthy, in education and living with their families. A child born since then has known almost nothing but war, insecurity, want and fear. Some 100 to 150,000 Syrian children have died. 2.6 million are out of school. Over 2 million are refugees, most of them in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Egypt.

Eight thousand have travelled, unaccompanied, in search of safety. Many of those trapped inside Syria live in makeshift shelters, without warm clothing or enough food. As of now, the UK and other developed countries have resettled less than 2 percent of Syrians in need. Pledges to take more are not being honoured.

These facts shame us all.

**Caroline Moorehead**



## **Fond Memories**

*The following quotations are from the parents living in the Al Abrar camp in Lebanon.*

'I have been here in Lebanon since 2013. I had three children, but after I met Douha, Aya, and Majd, they became six children. I want to say to the coming generations: be strong, be helpful like the children in the camp, the hope has just started, trust in yourself and you will be successful. I wish all the luck to you.'

'My son Emad's first word was 'mum', and the happiest memory I hold is when he started to walk. My son Emad always remembers his grandma and their picnics. He misses the family and safety.'

'My daughter Aisha's first word was 'mum' and the best memory I hold is when her brother Wael came. She misses home; life is in a house, not a tent.'

'My daughter Kawthar, she was a very cute girl. She used to laugh loudly. Her first word was 'bye'. The best memory I hold with her is when she went to the beach. Her sister Douha's first word was 'grandma'. She was a very smart girl; I remember our best memory was when she stashed her cousin between the blankets to stay together. The best memory for me with my children was every time we went to my parent's home and sat together. Douha always says: 'I miss my life in Syria, just in Syria'. Kawthar says it is enough that we once lived

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in Homs. And for me, it is enough that we learned what emigration means.'

'My son Mohammed's first word was 'father'. The best memory I hold was when he started to go to school and he was always singing. We were good before the war.'

## **'What have your parents taught you?'**

To help the needy, and look after children and orphans.

To be strong when I encounter anything. They helped me with many things, they put me in school, and now I can read and write.

To be strong and tough, to not be scared of the bombings.

To help people sort out misunderstandings, and they gave me an education in school.

They taught me and helped with school work.

They taught me to help when I see someone in need, like an old lady who can't walk or needs help with a task. They are teaching me English so I can build my future.

## **'What will you teach your children?'**

To endure, and to read the Quran.

To help people like themselves.

To love people and help them.

To endure, and to count on themselves.

To be like Auntie Rodeh.

To pray and read the Quran.

To draw.

