

THE ANSWER

by Kassem El Hawli 10C

It is the dead of night in Damascus. Bushra pulls her lean, tanned body out of bed quietly, without Mustafa waking.

She tip-toes through the bedroom, across the hallway to her children's room, each step silently placed on the cold, white marble floor. She finds five year-old Halima and four year-old Youssef sleeping soundly, each one in their own bed. She bends toward Halima and gently strokes her hair with her olive-skinned, worn out hands, saying in her heart, 'May God protect you always.'

She moves her tired body towards Youssef and kisses him gently on the forehead, thankful for the blessing God has given her family.

She thinks to herself how fortunate her family is to be safe from the gunfire on the street the previous two days. A week ago The Freedom Army entered Damascus and tried to recruit local men to its cause. Mustafa refused and was threatened with death. Bushra reflects on how proud she is of her husband, but also how they live in danger. Bushra turns around, walks quietly to the door of the bedroom, when she hears a loud siren. She knows instantly that danger is imminent, but what should she do? She turns back around to huddle her children at the corner of the room. As her children woke from the commotion, she heard her husband call out her name. In that moment a rocket blasted through Mustafa's bedroom, exploding into the wall. The few seconds seem to pass in slow motion, an eternity for Bushra.

'No!' she screams, barely hearing her own voice. 'Mustafa!' she commands.

'Mustafa, my life, where are you?'

She runs to the hallway, her crying children following her, clinging to her robe.

'Mama,' they sob.

She cannot hear them. Dust and rubble are at the end of the hallway. The entrance to the bedroom is blocked. Thick smoke chokes her. She climbs the remains of the wall to peer into the bedroom, only to find Mustafa lying across the floor, bloodied and motionless.

'Please be alive,' she thinks. 'Please, God, let him be alive.'

She struggles to move the rubble to get to Mustafa. She tries with all her strength but the concrete is too heavy to move. Frantic, she opens the front door and screams, 'Help me!'

Men, young and old, come to her aid. She describes to them what has happened. They work to move the rubble, to get to Mustafa, but there are no signs of life. They do not know how to console Bushra. She knows by their demeanour that her poor husband has perished. She cannot hear her own shrill cries as she collapses to the floor. The men gather around her to pick her up and seat her down and cry with her.

Halima and Youssef understand that something terrible has happened. They do not comprehend death. They do not understand what has happened but know the desperate clutches of their mother mean terrible distress.

The neighbours rally together to come up with a plan of escape. Bushra is too tired and zoned out to listen or understand them. They gently coerce her to stay with the neighbours in the same building. Bushra senses motion in her body but cannot seem to control the direction. Aided, she and her children make their way to safety.

In the early hours of the morning, Bushra and her children are hurried into a minivan with other women and children from her building. The children cry as they see the distress in their mothers, not knowing what they are doing or where they are going. The driver consoles the group, saying, 'We will be going to Lebanon and we will all be safe.'

Each checkpoint is more terrifying than the next.

Bushra remembers what they said to her husband. She cries warm tears, forging a running path down her withdrawn cheeks. What will she do without him? What will the children do without him?

For the hours ahead, she can only think of him. She can not bury him. Her neighbours have promised to do that. She believes she has let him down. Even the beauty of the mountains cannot console her.

She knows that she will need to start a new life. But how will she find the strength to go on? She then looks at her children sitting on her lap and finds the answer.