

# Before the Blackout in Tripoli

Kólá Túbòsún  
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## ***PRELUDE***

I remembered asking a parent of my year-two student, “How is Mohammed? He was absent yesterday and I was worried about him when I heard about the bombing in Bab Al Aziziya.”

“They hit our neighbor’s house, Miss Noeme. It was three houses away from us. We had to run and stay with my relatives for the meantime. But hamdullilah, we are all okay.”

“This situation is no longer safe for the children.”

“No, Miss Noeme. Don’t worry. This is nothing. Shooting is normal. Just tell the kids to duck for cover if you hear bombs. The war during Libyan revolt against Ghadaffi was worse than this.”

It’s no wonder why my students would laugh at me every time I jump at the sound of a gun.

“That’s a klashenkov, Miss Noeme,” Ziad would proudly describe the sound we just heard.

“Would you like some klashenkov bullets, Miss? I have lots at home,” said Malek.

This is their normal. Shooting is nothing.

“Inshallah, they will stop fighting soon,” Miss Sana, our senior teacher would assure us as if the militias are little boys playing soldiers, with toy guns in the streets.

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It was the last day of school but not the last day of work. I posted photos of my year-two class and offered a silent prayer for the safety of these “children of mine” and their families. I remembered Obedi who moved to another school. His father, a doctor, was killed by a stray bullet that passed through an open window. He was just drinking water in their kitchen when he was hit. Obedi’s mom was eight months pregnant at that time. Obedi was seven.

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It was the month of May in 2014, a month after spring break, when the signs of war began to show. I fought to remain emotionally steady and positive. Writing in my diary served as temporary relief.

*Go to each and every voice inside to silence all one hundred of them so I can hear my loneliness and weep my vessel empty... until you hear echoes of my pounding heart. Let it vibrate and shake my soul, until light surrenders and enters my cell...until all the hundred voices blend and break into a rhapsody of joy.*

I sing Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody”: *Is this the real life? Or is this just fantasy? Caught in a landslide, escape from reality...So you think you can stone me and spit in my eye? So you think you can love me and leave me to die? Oh baby, can’t do this to me baby...nothing really matters to me.*

*If not simple, God’s ways are sometimes strange in order to reveal the Wonderful. By strange, it could be being stuck in a rut, or caught between crossfires, or thrown into a lion’s den or a whale’s belly, or trapped in a world that unceasingly echoes so loud the voices of The Croods. Nevertheless, this is anything but tragic or hopeless or pathetic. And by Wonderful, for me it means discovering the door hiding in the rut that leads to a new world, or finding the hero in me utilize all forms of weaponry to ceasefire, or watching myself transform in the dark so I can fulfill my calling, or simply waiting for The Croods to ride the sun into Tomorrow.*

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After shower we said a little prayer for Libya and my husband Tarek was safely tucked away at work. We were quietly watching a movie and enjoying Mama’s improvised *ube halaya* using sweet potato and yam flavoring. Classes were already cancelled until further notice due to the conflict, mainly between Misurata tribe and the Zintanis. I now understand why Ziad, a Misurata and Malek, who is from Zintan, always get into a big fight in the classroom. They are only eight year olds.

I can hear the distant sound of bombs and gunfires from here. I pray for ceasefire in Trig Matar.

## **I. KALI**

The first day of July was the third day of Ramadan. It was a holy month of fasting, but the fighting—at least, the fighters’ definition of Jihad—had been anything but holy. The fire in Brega Oil where Tarek worked as a security officer has been burning like a giant fireplace unwelcomed by the summer sky. He was still working when the fire broke by the third week of July, after the militias took over the company. Power cuts had been happening daily, lasting from 8 to 16 hours. Shops and bakeries closed down, and the women baked their own *kobsa* at home

Khalifa Alforghani’s family, my in-laws, was blessed to have a grocery store on the first floor of the “family house” managed by the eldest, Salem. My father-in-law also happened to secure a generator for the four-storey house a decade earlier. He said, “It is wise to be ready”. Tarek was raised by a family of scouts—wise men, strong women but surrendered to fate or should I say, unquestioning

faith. But they were also always ready, knowing when to let things be. Oftentimes, an aunt would say, “*Kali, kali.*” Leave it or leave them alone. She would then wave a hand at me to leave the kids alone to play. I feared the toddler might hurt themselves or fall while playing in the stairs but they’d say, “Let them be kids.” Filipino friends in Libya who worked in the trauma unit of the emergency room told me that there is not a single day without a child getting injured by their own carelessness, or their parent’s. There were burned arms, a finger cut, broken bones from a fall, all these happening while the parents were lovemaking.

The word *kali* became my most hated word in this country.

My mind although, reshaped by the culture, had a snap button. I may have slowly turned into one of the women, in how I furiously clean the kitchen and bathroom with *warakina* and cook; sit with the women and talk over tea and five bars of *baklava*; make *koosban* from cleaning the sheep’s intestines down to stuffing it with richly-spiced meat; bake *kobsa* and pizza. But my core material remained. I would never say “*Kali*” to this situation and let my children survive the war when I had the opportunity to take them to safety.

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My friend Friar visited us for the weekend. He cooked some special dish with Tito, my Mama’s younger brother, and I had time to relax with the kids. He stayed for the night, had barbeque in the balcony. He talked about kidnappings of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) here, delayed salaries, and the repatriation process going on in the Philippine embassy. Future is stark in this country.

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Libya in The Guardian headline again—clashes, oil shortage, power cuts, etcetera.

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We took the kids to the local carnival. My in-laws criticized us for going out since the streets were not safe. Tarek told them that we die when it’s our time. “These crazy people fighting should not keep us from enjoying life,” he said. We don’t let the war imprison us. If some Libyans can have their *haflas* during these grim times, then we too can have our carnivals.

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Another long day without electricity. I stayed in peace and played with the kids.

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I am awakened by sounds of bombs and shelling at around 8 this morning.

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The Eid’l Fitr in 2014 was my fourth child Zaki’s first Eid. He was nine months old then and none was in a celebratory mood. No one seems to be wearing new clothes, except for the children, as we gathered in my mother-in-law’s sala. We only had the traditional Fatira, a soft version of burrito, like a shawarma wrapper but thinner and *shai* tea while we listened to the unusual silence outside. Ironically, the shooting had stopped but only for the three-day celebration, although there would have been expected sound of fireworks and gunshots to celebrate Eid. They were to resume fighting after the feasting was over. Aunts, uncles, and cousins came to visit, one family after another arrived in intervals. People getting killed or kidnapped, houses damaged or bombed or invaded or

ransacked, streets burned, were topics during visits. I was amazed at how the women looked so serene and peaceful despite what's been going on. I surmised the Libyan revolution must have influenced this kind of courage, or a calm resignation towards whatever fate that awaits them.

There was one time while I was packing our things to return to Zliten and talking to Mama on Viber when there was an explosion a lot louder than usual that shook the house. Tarek came running, telling me to go down as he hoisted my daughter Hannah to his waist. I had to cut my already panicky mother on the phone since there is no internet connection downstairs. All the women—my mother-in-law Zohra; Hamida (wife of Khalid, second child) with her three boys, same age as my kids and her one month old Abdullah; Intisam (wife of Salem, firstborn) and her three kids, each a year older than none, except for the girl, Arwa who's over a year younger than Hannah—have already gathered in the sala.

A large missile of God-knows-what kind of weapon hit our street that sent my 6'2 robust, gentle-giant brother-in-law Salem running into the house. Thankfully, no house was damaged and no one was hurt, leaving only a large hole in the street at the right side corner of our store. All nine kids were running around the sala, while Hamida nursed Abdullah and I kept on plopping Zaki back next to me as he kept on crawling towards the older kids. The women were quiet, I could sense a prayer was being said while one would occasionally yell at a child climbing the windows as shots were being fired outside. That moment I realized I have so much self-control. The festive screams of the children as if cheering on the fighters would have normally shattered my sanity but as I looked at Zohra, Hamida, and Intisam, I began to desire their kind of strength, of faith, of serenity. I then surrendered myself to fate.

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*We die when we die. I cannot fight what I cannot control. I must let it go and breathe.*

In my native tongue, "Bahala na."

In Arabic, "InshaAllah."

## II. WAR

While taking temporary shelter in my sister-in-law Najiya's house in Zliten, I made an effort to find beauty or something interesting in the provincial life despite the culture of segregation, barely seeing my husband the whole day. I met the 16-year old bride of Houedi, my husband's cousin. She was dainty and sweet, happily showing me her dream come true: a house she has decorated with red, black, orange, and gold. She was excited to get pregnant soon. I also found a rich history and culture, as well as a land of palms, dates, olives, and grapes. An aunt had a garden of all kinds of fruits and vegetables. How cool was that! I allowed my children to be wild, as if I had a choice. But the night Tito Dan texted that he's going to be shipped by his company out of Libya, I wrote:

*We are staying in these dark times, uncertain when light returns and when the gates will be opened for us again. For now, I remain separated from my husband from sunrise to bedtime. We slept on the living room floor, our luggage settled comfortably in the bedroom. But it is cooler here. At least, the summer wind blows through this part of the house. It is modern in Libyan standard, enthroned in the middle of hectares of palm trees. We noticed an ancient well sitting near the backyard of the house as we roamed around the land of my husband's ancestors, "Alforghani's Estate."*

*I jokingly call it while we pick grapes (or tug them off its vine) hanging just above our head when my husband told me about the well and his great grandmother's house that is over a hundred years old. We went to see it. I felt like "The Woman at the Well" complete with my ancient fashion of long dress*

*and hijab. It felt like a vacation Under the Zliten Sun. I imagined myself as Frances in Under The Tuscan Sun, a book written by Frances Mayes, played by Diane Lane in its movie adaptation. Maybe we could settle here and I could write. While I nurse Zaki, I could place him on my lap, next to my Vaio and write. I can homeschool the kids here.*

*Maybe this is a sign from God to stay. Or maybe I am really losing my mind.*

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We were housed by Manang Grace in Misurata who was my hospital companion when I gave birth to Hannah back in 2009. While Libyan women in the wards were surrounded by flowers, sisters, aunts, mothers and mothers-in-laws, I had 'Nang Grace.

While we were busy chatting in her receiving room that faced the main street in Misurata, there was a sudden shelling just below us. Tarek who was standing by the window, carrying Zaki, dove to the floor while Nang Grace and I crawled towards the door. Tarek said we must have been talking too loud, that's why. Nang Grace laughed as if what happened was a practical joke played on us.

*"Sus, wa-ay wa-ay ni ya, Day Pink sa giyera sang una, ah."*

She said it was nothing compared to the war during Ghadaffi's time. She told me that she would weep in the restroom after a long day in the ER for so much waste of human life. She was a clinical instructor at a University in Misurata who decided to stay and work with the Red Crescent. I remembered seeing her and Noel in BBC News in 2011 as they were hailed the "adopted sons and daughters of Libya." She had a first-hand experience of the real horror of war as grounds would shake, and her flat mates would all cower under a table while buildings were being bombed outside. Soldiers and paramedics would rush the injured bodies into the ER like packages delivered through freight service.

Once, she ran to a bloodied, unconscious victim, a boy of around 18 and one of the doctors yelled at her "Kali! Kalas!" (*Leave that! Enough!*) signaling that the patient is "finished" or will be dead anytime soon and it is better that she attend to the conscious injured, leaving the fate of the unconscious and dying many to Allah. They revive those who show signs of hope, but those who looked barely alive, they leave to the hands of God. There was one boy, around 14 who lost a leg, and she asked why he joined the war. He said, "We promised our mother that we shall seek vengeance for our brother who was killed by Ghaddafi's army. Our father instructed us not to return home until Ghadaffi is dead."

That happened in June of 2011, four months after the start of the Arab Spring. Two months later, Muamar Ghadaffi was killed by the Misurata army as they claimed. It was the shortest war so far during the Arab Spring, killing their dictator within six months of the Libyan revolt against the regime. That time, none of the three countries of the Arab Spring—Egypt to the east of Libya, Tunisia, the north, and Syria also the east—had assassinated their leader and claimed grand victory in the revolt. Sadly, Syria's war has worsened while Libya, in just a year of celebration of freedom, has awakened its internal conflicts with its resistance to any form of leadership, or perhaps, its hunger for control after decades of repression. One cannot fully understand war despite dissections of its elements. But maybe it is the battles that people face each day that coalesce into society's monster—with the image of a need, or a demand, or a hunger or fear—forming into one critical mass and exploding into a chaos.

Then they'd say, "War broke out."

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