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opening extract from

Oranges in No Man's Land

written by

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Preface

I lived in Beirut during the civil war that raged in Lebanon thirty years ago. We stayed at first in a flat in the ruined centre of the city. There was no furniture. Some of the windows had been blown in, and lines of bullet holes ran round the walls of the bare sitting room. Our six-month-old son slept in a suitcase on the floor.

Thousands of refugees, fleeing the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon, had found shelter in similar flats. They crammed in wherever they could, several families sharing each room.

Later, when we had a place of our own, we would watch the destruction of the city from our balcony, hearing the dull crump of the bombs and seeing billows of smoke rise from the buildings.

I took my son out for a daily walk. The soldiers on the checkpoints would put their guns down when they saw him and lift him up in their arms, reaching inside their camouflage fatigues for a sweet to put in his hand.

Once, when we were driving home, we realized that the streets were eerily empty. The market had been abandoned. A fruit stall had been knocked over, and bright golden oranges were still running down the street. The air crackled with the tension of the battle that was about to start.

It was these and other memories that inspired this book. When I wrote it, I didn't know that Lebanon would plunge back so soon into a nightmare. Caught up in that nightmare are children like Ayesha and Samar, whose lives political leaders so easily throw away.

Elizabeth Laird, 2006

ONE

I WAS BORN IN BEIRUT. It had been a lovely city once, or so Granny told me. The warm Mediterranean Sea rolled against its sunny beaches, while behind the city rose mountains that were capped with snow in the winter. There were peaceful squares and busy shops and hotels bustling with tourists.

My father and mother were farmers. They came from the countryside south of the city.

They'd been happy in their little village. But they lost everything when Lebanon, our country, was invaded. They had to run away to Beirut, the capital. They had three children there: me first, and then my two brothers.

My father built a little house with his own hands in the poorest part of town, where everyone was crowded together in narrow lanes. All our neighbours were like us – refugees from southern Lebanon – trying to manage on nothing, but thankful at least to be safe.

But just after I was born, all that changed. A terrible civil war tore the city of Beirut apart. I pray that those years never come again! I can never forget the horror of them.

And yet, in among all the sad things, the fear and destruction and loss, there are wonderful memories too, of kindness and courage and goodness.

I'll have to start my story, though, with the saddest thing of all.

Ours was a house of women and children, my granny, my mother and my little brothers Latif, who was seven, and Ahmed, who was still only a baby. My father was abroad most of the time, looking for work. He'd been gone for so long we were used to him being away. I'd almost begun to forget what he looked like.

When, on that terrible day, the bombs started to fall all around our house, my mother threw some clothes into a bundle and began to pack bags and cases.

'There's no time for that!' Granny screamed at her, looking out anxiously into the street. 'The gunmen are coming! They'll be here any minute. We must take the children and run!'

Mama went on packing. She pushed a big bag into my hands and a smaller one into Latif's.

Granny was already running down the street with Ahmed in her arms.

'Go on, Ayesha,' Mama said to me. 'Go with Granny. I'll be right behind you. Wait for me by the mosque on the corner.'

And so we ran, Latif and me, racing ahead of Granny, who was hobbling along behind us with Ahmed in her arms. And a shell fell on our house just as we reached the end of the street, wiping out our little shack of a house and everything in it. I never saw Mama again.

TWO

IT WAS A BRIGHT MORNING in Beirut . . . No, I can't begin there. I must think back a bit further, to the place we found to live in during those muddled, desperate weeks after Mama died. I don't want to remember the first few days, the panic and confusion and the aching, aching loss.

It was Latif who found the flat for us. Little brothers do have some uses, I suppose, although I didn't often think so then.

The four of us were sitting on a doorstep in a ruined street, feeling hungry and hopeless, after two days of wandering from place to place. All we'd thought about was how best to get away from the fighting. We had no food left and no idea where we'd spend the night. Granny looked so old and worn and beaten I could hardly bear to look at her. I think she'd given up hope. Ahmed was crying.

'There are people up there, in that window,' Latif suddenly said, pointing across the road to the first floor of the building opposite. 'Look, Granny, they're waving to us.'

That was the first kind, good thing that had happened to us since the disaster, and it was how we met Samar (who was ten years old like me) and Samar's mother, dear Mrs Zainab, the best mother in the world, after mine.

A few minutes later we'd crossed the road, pushed open the broken street door of the build-

ing, gone up the dusty steps and found ourselves in what must once have been a beautiful flat where rich people would have lived.

I can remember standing in the doorway looking round in amazement. I'd never been in such a place before. The windows had all been blown out, and there were gaping holes in the walls where shells had blasted through, but you could still see how magnificent it had been in the old days.

Even the hallway was huge. The floors were made of marble, and there were big mirrors on the walls with elaborate gold-work round them. You could see beyond the hall into amazing rooms, all light and airy with high ceilings from which ruined chandeliers hung at crazy angles.

The people who had owned this flat must have left long ago, and they'd taken their beautiful furniture and fancy clothes with them. But

the rooms weren't empty. They were full of people. Refugees. Squatters. Poor people from the bombed-out parts of town. People with nowhere to go. People like us.

I could see through the open doors that they'd made corners of the rooms their own. They'd set up little homes, with their own mattresses and cooking pots, and strung up cloths on strings to make partitions so that each family could have a bit of privacy.

Mrs Zainab came out into the hall towards us. She was comfortable-looking, with smile-wrinkles around her eyes. She wore a long tattered dress and had a scarf tied over her head.

'You poor things,' she said. 'I couldn't let you go on sitting there, with night coming on and all. Have you got somewhere to go? Are you lost?'

It was then that Granny burst into tears, and Latif and I were so shocked we huddled up

against each other, not knowing what to say. We'd never seen her cry before.

Mrs Zainab took charge at once. She had found us a corner of our own, in what had been the sitting room, I suppose. She borrowed a mattress for Granny, changed Ahmed's nappy and gave us some of her family's supper to share.

And so we bedded down that first strange night in the flat – Granny on the mattress, Latif and me curled up on a mat and Ahmed in our old suitcase, which was now his cot.

That was how we found our new home, and that was where we lived, through the freezing cold of winter and the boiling heat of summer, until the old life with Mama in our little shack had begun to seem like a distant dream.