

**A SHORT HISTORY OF
DARKNESS**

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Pound Street Press

For my daughter, Miriam

كل طنجرة بتلاقي غطاتها

Every jar finds its own lid
(Palestinian folk saying)

Prologue

Haifa April 1948.

The ceiling fan beats a steady *cha-cha-cha* rhythm as Danaher lies there blowing a ring of blue cigarette smoke into the warm air. The dusty light of early afternoon, streams through the grimy shutters, falling on their tired, sweated bodies. Outside, catcalls career about the narrow alleyways and lanes of Wadi Nisnas. A woman's sharp voice calls out after a child. '*Taa! Taa!* Come here! Come here!'

He runs a finger along the olive skin of the young man beside him.

'*Adaysh a saa*'?

'Just after one, my old china.'

'*Laila aw nahar*'?

'Day or night? Are you bloody serious? Can't you see the sun shining in?'

Danaher rises slowly from the bed, the pungent, soursweet smell of man coupling still sousing his body. In front of the little porcelain handbasin in the corner, he scours himself with a flannel towel, running his hand along his taut stomach.

He pulls on the crumpled cavalry twill trousers and peeps out through the shutters. Arab faces. There isn't a Jewish face in sight here. It's all starting up now. The intelligence reports were right on the button: slowly and steadily the Jewish forces are squeezing the Arabs out of the city. A little machine-gun fire into a crowd or a barrel

laden with explosives rolled down the hill into a crowd street. But he will be out of here by the time it all goes up, thank Christ. He asks himself, for the thousandth time, why he wants to make the trip at all. What is a bad conscience anyway but the handmaiden of guilt? Charlie Brent, the tub – of – guts Scottish CID go-between had put it just that way. The hairy hand tapping the stem of his ancient briar on the green baize of the desk in the Haifa base.

‘You’re mad, you are, my son.’

‘I want to clear my name.’

‘With the Druze? They’re just bloody Arabs too, my friend. Just like the rest of them. Even the Jews are Arabs here, if you ask me.’

‘I have to live with myself, you know.’

‘Die with yourself is more like it, sunshine.’

He pulls the door to behind him. Ahmad or Mahmoud or whatever his real name can sort himself out. The young man’s voice comes to him through the door. ‘*Wayn raih?* Where are you off to?’

Danaher carries on swiftly into the street in the direction of the port and the railway station. Nervous eyes track him as he makes his way along the crowded streets of the Hadar. The pistol concealed in his satchel won’t be much use against a mob. And everyone is antsy now. The Jews, the Arabs and the British themselves.

He hears Charlie Brent’s tobacco-flavoured voice is in his ear again. ‘Let the buggers at it, I say. The Ab-Dabs and the Jewboys. Two bald men fighting over a comb. As bad as the bloody Irish, if you don’t mind my saying so.’

Haifa station is swamped with soldiers but he passes through easily enough with the CID warrant card. None of them need to know he is really one of them, ceded from military intelligence into the no-man's land of MO4. The train takes its time pulling out of the station. There have been a couple of bombs on the coastal line a while before. A lot of dead soldiers. But the line from Haifa and the coast, eastwards to Baisan, in the Jordan Valley, is usually safe enough. There are lots of Arab faces on the train. He has a strange sense that half of Haifa is on the move. People getting out before the axe falls.

A middle - aged Arab in a fawn -coloured business suit sitting opposite him, eyes him curiously. Better speak in English if a conversation starts up. He can't resist the temptation and, a few minutes into the journey he looks into the nut brown eyes.

'Have you got a light?'

The stranger's eyes narrow a moment then a cigarette lighter is produced. They settle down to chatting. He feels himself slip into yet another pose: the discomfited British businessman ready to pull out and head back home. The Arab nods towards the grimy window.

'*Fawdah!* Chaos!'

The train moves slowly across the broad breach of the plain of Marj 'Ibn 'Amr. Past Jewish settlements with searchlights and watchtowers and sleepy Arab villages. Every now and then the train stops unexpectedly. This is a new protocol, he knows. A signal to the plainclothes people on board that everything is alright. It is late afternoon by the time he reaches Beisan to catch the train north to Samakh, on the southern tip of the Sea of Galilee. A sea that is really little more than a lake that wouldn't look out of place in, say, Killarney, only the Arabs and Jews have to make a big biblical deal out of it here,

of course. The Arab businessman has left his company but a sense of the man's presence lingers on. He feels uneasy in himself now. A feeling that his cover hasn't convinced this time. That his game is slipping badly. It is time to go alright. But first he has to clear things up. A *Sulha*, maybe. Some sort of truce ceremony to show the Druze they have got things wrong. That he is innocent of wrongdoing.

He wonders now about the woman he has left back in London. That first night of love, back in Paddington - could it be? She wouldn't be the first woman shot down in flames during the first round. Brood mares, back on the farm in Cork, the fresher ones anyway, often took the first day they were covered. Maybe this is what she really wanted? Setting his seed before he returned for the last stint? *Ar eagla na h-eagla*. From the fear of fears. The hackneyed old gaelic school phrase makes him smile. You never knew what is in women's minds, of course. Maybe something is there, growing inside her. Life waiting to emerge, squealing and squawking, between bloodied thighs. Fatherhood. Jesus Christ almighty!

The light of the late afternoon stings his eyes as he makes his way through the gate at the dusty little railway station in Samakh. The Arab porters lounging about ignore him. When the bracing Galilee breeze from the lake comes to him though, he feels sure now. When they were back in London, after coming back from Cork and his father's funeral. That time. The time he laid his hand on her breast. Could he have known it without her knowing it herself? Another couple of weeks and he will be home anyway.

There is trouble up along the western side of the lake, in the town of Tiberias. Arab and Jewish young men having at one another again, night after night. A truce has been arranged between the sides, between the Haganna and the Arab notables in Tiberias,

with a little help from the British. But it is all nonsense, of course because both sides are just waiting for the starting pistol to really launch into one another. As soon as the British army quits the bases and heads back to old blighty. And he knows who his money is on: the Jews. Disciplined and with a sense of direction, they have been planning all this since the Arab revolt, ten years earlier, when they were on the back foot. There is that look in the eyes of the young Jewish men that says: we have only one choice here: the sea or fight. The Arab irregulars attacking the settlements in the Galilee and further south are no match for them. He has sat in on army interrogations, as a translator. Most of the Arabs captured are just *shabbab*, young men from the villages, easily led and said by their elders and betters. But isn't that the way of all revolutions? The muck do the fighting and the quality give the orders. But maybe having no choice can be a good thing sometimes. London. A woman. A child. A home.

He decides to take the ferry from Samakh up the lake to Tiberias, just in case there are any roadblocks south of the town. You wouldn't know who you might run in to. A masked face in the middle of a road won't take too kindly to an armed civilian with a set of dodgy passes. As the little boat chugs away from the pier, and the sickening smell of the donkey engine catches his nose, he thinks: soon I will be away from all this. He considers, once more, the young Arab man back in the room in Wadi Nisnas. How can you run with two sides? Hasn't he often asked himself that in connection with the situation here too?

A soft, warm breeze caresses his face as he looks out across the still surface of the lake, towards the Golan. The winter has been a hard one. The snows are only just gone from the Hermon, the Jebel al-Sheikh, the mountain of the old man. But spring is here

now. A Galilee spring. Irises and anemones and what not. The scent of life beginning anew. His companions on the boat are Arabs, elderly men in long, gown - like *galibiyahs* who watched him more with disdain than suspicion. Better not to mix it. Keep to himself. As they draw up by the jetty, the signs of imminent chaos are here too. Jumpy squaddies patrolling the foreshore with eyes peeled for anything odd. You can see the same thing in their eyes too now: let them at it - the Ab-Dabs and the Jewboys.

He gets away from the jetty as quickly as he can, making his way up past the old mosque for the Arab quarter near the graveyard. It is dusk now, nerves are on edge again. Jews and Arabs waiting for the next move in the chess game. Tiberias will fall, of that he was sure. He had a hand in drafting the Eyes Only report on Haifa, a few weeks earlier. Based on observations and conversations, the sort of go-between exercise that, if you get it wrong, can get you killed by either side. *Johnny two sides*. That was what he was. Never happy in one bed. Man or woman, Arab or Jew. No wonder he loves London with its sense of everywhere and nowhere. And what if he does marry Ann and it all starts up again, south of the equator, so to speak? His little difficulty...

He turns in for the street behind the shuttered market. His hand raps on the green metal door and he calls out in the fading light, to warn the women inside of his approach.

‘Hello? Hello?’

‘*Tafaddul! Tafaddul!* Mr. Danaher...’ He enters and is brought through the house, past the women’s all-seeing eyes, into the courtyard. The big black Morris 10 is there, sitting under canvas sacking. It has been resting there for a couple of weeks, on the pretext of waiting for a service which he could do himself anyway. The Arab calls his son to pull of the tarpaulin and starts up the car. He sits inside as he watches the young man

turn the starting handle. It starts first go. He lets the engine idle a while before reversing out of the little courtyard. Then he pulls out onto the street and drives down through the town before turning northwards along the lake.

Beyond the great dark shoulder of Mount Arbel, he turns left up into the hills, skirting the Muslim town of Hittin, where Saladdin, the Kurd, vanquished the Christian forces. He knows the back roads and dirt roads by heart. The composition too, of each town and village, Christian, Muslim, Druze, Circassian and Bedouin. And where the isolated Jewish settlements lay. The landscape is embossed on his mind like a living, breathing thing. Like the map of the woman's body, back in London. Contours, crevices, hills, valleys, dales. Is it possible, after all, that you can cross between one side and the other? Can willpower do it for you? Or even love? Her face is before his eyes again.

'Jesus Christ!' He slams on the brakes and the car slides to a halt.

The jackal is fixed in the stinging rays of the Morris 10's beady carbon headlamps. A wild creature, grey and white, native to the Galilee and its rugged, relentless hills. He puts the car into neutral and opens the door slowly. It is a dangerous thing to do, not so much because the *wáwí* – the local onomatopoeic Arabic name for the creature – might set on him, but because the war is now up in the hills. Little groups of Arab irregulars are crawling about everywhere. He might be taken for a Jewish settler. Or one of the wilder Jewish groups might stumble on him. Against all reason, he beeps the car horn. The animal fixes his gaze on him for a moment, then bolts into the scrub on the far side of the dark road.

He realises, all of a sudden, just where he is. It is as though the jackal wanted him to stop there so that he wouldn't erase the name from his mind: *Mansura*. Mansura is out

there, a couple of miles across the scrub. Surrounded by olive trees and prickly pear with a couple of sugar sweet carob trees standing guard by the mukhtar's house, at the entrance to the village. He thinks of the dead lying in the ditches before the village now. Men lying face down in the fields, clutching ancient *hartouches*, French hunting rifles that wouldn't be out of place in the Prussian war. Dead Druze fighters, their long moustaches and head-dresses soaked in congealed blood. All because of him. Out there, in the darkness of memory, lies Mansura. Maybe the jackal itself is the soul of some dead Druze left wandering the battlefield.

He slams the car door shut. The car grunts forward into the nameless night. Just outside the Druze and Christian town of Maghar, he pulls over to the roadside, by an ancient shrine to a Druze holy man. He turns off the engine and douses the headlamps. The engine is warm enough. There will be no problem getting it started again. He steps out of the car and makes his way in behind the shrine where he relieves himself in the gloom. There is a fickle moon in the sky, half – covered in cloud. It is just bright enough to catch someone approaching from the village side. He is standing there almost an hour before a whistling sound comes to his ear. A long shrieking sound that cuts the night like a jackal's baby mewling. He lets the two young Druze men reach the car before stepping out to greet them. The Druze are used to the dark.

There are handshakes and hugs. He jukes at the warm, cloying scent of the younger man, feeling the old feeling steal over him as he looks at the soft face in the light of the flashlamp. They get into the car. The younger man sits in beside him. The car pulls out onto the road. Danaher looks over his shoulder at the older man. 'Al-Birkeh?'

'Aywa. *Al-Birkeh*. The back road. You know the way?'

‘By the old fort?’

‘That’s it...’

The car jerks forward as it took the hill.

The dirt road to Al-Birkeh winds its way around hills and down into wadis. Past a couple of isolated Jewish settlements with spindly metal watchtowers. When they cross the *Wadi al-Asad*, the road rises slowly again, bringing them past groves of olive trees. This is *musha*’ – the communal property of the village of Al-Birkeh, he knows. The first light in the village is in the home of the mukhtar, the village leader, Selim Beq. The Morris slows down as it approaches the house. The younger man gets out and walks slowly up to the door. A burly Druze guard is sitting on a long bench in front of the doorway with a shotgun laid across his knees. There are a few words. The Druze guard in his black baggy trousers and cummerbund nods in the general direction of the village.

The younger man sits back into the car beside him. ‘He says to park the car under the trees there. They will think it’s a visitor to Selim Beq and no-one will interfere with it.’

They make their way up through the village, past the lower well. There isn’t a sinner on the street. Here and there, a Tilly lamp shines through a window. Somewhere down in the wadi, a diesel engine roars in the dark night. A half – hearted British patrol maybe. A couple of young men with suspicious eyes are standing over by the big well in the square but they ignore them and carry on up in the directions of the *khilweh*, the holy house, where the Druze had their Thursday night prayers.

‘It’s the laneway after the *khilweh*. The first door on the right.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘That’s what the guard said.’

‘And Selim Beq knows all about this?’

‘*Ma’alum!* He arranged it all.’

He takes a deep breath, digging his hand deeper into the satchel and slipping his fingers around the revolver. They turn into the laneway. The younger Druze knocks the big oak door. A young boy of about ten opens the door and they are ushered into what looks like a *diwan*, a sort of reception room. They are left there for a few minutes. He glances around him at his two Druze companions. They seem a little unhappy with things too. The young boy re-appears and points into the next room.

‘*Fút! Fút!* Go in! Go in!’

The blows come just when the last of them enters the darkened room. Blows from what seems like clubs. There are cries of pain from his companions. He can feel blood spurt from his cheek and every bone in his body seems to be broken.

When he wakes, an age later, Danaher is lying on his side. He gazes across the floor at his companions. Their hands are bound too but the way they are lying seems unnatural to him. Are they dead? He raises his head slowly, conscious that eyes are watching him from behind, ready to deal another blow, when necessary.

‘*Kus umak!* Cunt of your mother!’

The voice comes from behind him. He is grabbed by the hair and jerked upright. His eyes clear now. He can see why his two companions are lying so awkwardly in front of the

marble fireplace. Their heads have been completely severed from their bodies and thrown to one side, like mannequin heads in one of the fancier shops on Oxford Street.

‘*Shuf! Shuf, ya kalb ibn kalb!* Look! Look, you son of a dog!’

There are more shouts. An argument seems to be going on now. They are probably deciding whether it is really a good idea to kill a foreigner. He is suddenly released and slumps to the floor, cracking his head off the flagstone hearth. It is dawn when he wakes again. He knows by the sound of the cock crowing in the distance and the early morning braying of a couple of donkeys. He understands that it will soon be over now. They have stripped him while he was unconscious, to add to the humiliation.

‘*Issa, ya luti maloon!* Now, you fucking queer!’ It will soon be over because dark deeds are better done under cover of darkness. This much he knows now: he won’t see another dawn. Won’t ever see the child that might be lying in the woman’s belly in London. Annie...

He is scarcely aware of the hands lifting him up and resting him over a great wooden chair. There are more words now and the heavy grunts of men labouring to slaughter a bound animal. No, he will not see dawn again now. Or night, for that matter. Or life emerging from bloodied thighs in London. It is all blood, life, in a way. In the coming and in the going. His mind starts to wander then, like the stage before sleep, flitting between sense and fancy. That thing that old Druze sheikh said to him one day, when he asked him why he wasn’t married and he said he didn’t want children. *Ili khalaf ma mat. Whoever fathers children never dies.* Seed left behind on the earth. London.

Paddington. Praed Street morning. Her smile. He hears himself mumbling even as the hand grabs his hair and draws back his head for the blade.

'Ili khalaf ma mat... Ili khalaf ma mat...'

'Uskut! Uskut, ya kalb! Shut up, you dog!'

The steel feels cold against his skin. He hears the executioner settle himself behind him, like a man readying himself for the act of love. A rough voice shouts. *'Issa! Issa! Now! Now!'* The last thing that crowds the corridors of his frantic mind as the sweet blade slices through his windpipe, drawing air through his gashed throat, is a rooster crowing in the distance like a sarcastic reproach to his whole life. There is a rush of blood from his body as the light dies and the dawn comes. He doesn't live long enough to hear the voice of the executioner though, as he stands up from the jerking, lifeless body.

'Khalas, ya habibi! Khalas! It's over, my friend. Over...'

Or the sound of the donkey and cart backing up the little laneway to receive his dead body and that of his two companions.

Or see the flash of the camera bulb as the gentleman in the heavy coat leans over them.

CHAPTER 1

Autumn fell early that year. Like a thief in the night, summer stole away from us and the days grew cold and grey and sad. Then the winds came in from the faraway Atlantic and almost tumbled the house and left the big field at the back studded with green apples and little yellow plums for the rats to find. Out in the big dog cage, under the spruce trees Jack Daly had planted in the spring, the Labrador pups were whimpering for their grub. I took a sip of lukewarm coffee and turned up the music to drown them out. You have to let babies and pups cry a little, before you pick them up. At least that's what Margaret used to say. And, God knows, poor Margaret was a good hand at letting other creatures cry.

I opened the lid of the shiny metal box and took out the letter lying on top of the pile. I could almost recite the dusty words by heart.

February 6th 1948

Dear Annie,

I have been based in the centre of the country, for the past few weeks.

I can't say any more, of course. Spring is here. And spring is something special in Palestine. But don't ask me about the names of

flowers, my love! Let's say there are just lots of colours-yellow, reds and purples. And the fellahin are back out in the fields. ~~I have gotten to know some more of the Druze villagers I mentioned on my leave.~~ We move around the country a lot, from our base of course. There are some new manoeuvres I have been involved in, though I can't say anything more of course. An incident can flare up between the Jews and the Arabs, at a moment's notice. This explains why my letters are not as regular as a few months ago. ~~I thought of you a lot, when I was in Jerusalem the other week.~~ I got to walk part of the Via Dolorosa, in civvies, even though tensions were still quite high. I went to the Wailing Wall and saw all the religious Jews praying, under protection. I will be glad to get back to London though. I have had enough of service. London is really on the up now, isn't it? This place will be in tatters for years to come though, especially when we pull out.

I cannot wait to see you again, Annie. Soon, all this will be over and we will be together again.

Love you, as always,

Timmy

My eye caught the old photograph on the wall again. The dapper, dark-haired smiling squaddie was standing in front of a field latrine. Tim Danaher's arms were folded across his chest in a come-with-me-to-the-casbah attitude. In the heat haze, a watchtower

and a row of scraggly olive trees stood mute under the crucifixion of a Palestinian sky. I crossed over to the wall and brushed a speck of dust from the glass, keeping my voice low enough so the woman upstairs wouldn't hear me.

'I will find out who killed you, dear Mr Danaher. And why. On my mother's grave.' I slipped the envelope back into the metal box and shoved it under the lowest bookshelf.

A clatter of greasy, green-grey starlings scattered as I approached the cage. The bitch bounced forward, wagging her tail. I knelt down and patted her soft head. The pups scampered around the shiny aluminium bowls. I turned to see Maura leaning against the back door, smoking a cigarette. Her dark hair and sleep-stained eyes brought me back to myself. She nodded towards the dog cage.

"When are you selling them on, J?"

I brushed the feed dust from my jeans.

"Soon. When they get too big, no-one wants them."

Maura drew on her cigarette and took a slug of coffee from the chipped red mug in her hand that said

Best Dad in the World

She pulled her red teddy bear pyjamas tightly around her. I kissed her lightly on the cheek and ran my hand through her dark hair. I dragged in a pile of blocks and fired up the old Rayburn. We drank more coffee and chatted aimlessly. It was the usual mumbled coda to the night before. Maura drove in to town on Saturdays. Sometimes we went to a film in Kilkenny or went for a meal. More often than not though, we just sat in and watched a

movie or listened to music before taking to bed and the quiet comfort of late love. It was an easy, good-natured arrangement. There was no silly talk of the future and none at all of the past. An hour later, when Maura retreated to her big house out in the bog, I turned back to the London lecture notes in the downstairs study.

The Druze of the Western Galilee: An Enigma Wrapped in a Puzzle

I could slip the recording of Abu Kamal's oral testimony from the seventies into the lecture the following week. I would get a kick out of hearing the old man's words filling the little lecture room off Russell Square.

The scattered villages of the Western Galilee suddenly rose up before my eyes as I sat there. I saw the little Druze village of Al-Birkeh with its holy well and the shops and cafes around the square. I pictured the old, leather-faced Druze sheikhs, with their long black cloaks and white headdress, on their way home from the *Khilweh*, the Druze holy house. I loved the odd, eastern symmetry of Al-Birkeh. The ancient shops and cafés around the well. Alif's little huckster's shop and the square restaurant, where I spent many hours just watching the passing parade.

Ziyyad and Amal

Shwarma and Hummous. Druze Specialities

I put out of my mind, for the umpteenth time, all thoughts of poor Tim Danaher. But I knew well that truth, like a boil on the backside or a bitter word, can't be ignored forever. It was the sort of fortune cookie philosophy that had the simple sting of truth about it.

In the late afternoon I took a stroll down the town. A hearse with its little caravan of cars passed me in the square carrying the mortal remains of Pat Drennan's spindly little widow, late of the Commons. I thought, for a moment, of my own son and daughter

and of Margaret and all that long litany of sadnesses as her health declined. Then the old wound closed almost as suddenly as it had opened, cauterised by time and space. When the cortege had passed, I crossed the square to Kavanagh's for a quick one. The pubs didn't even bother closing for funerals anymore. All was Sky. All was instant. Was that why I had really moved back here-to escape the 'now'? Behind the long counter, Chippy Kavanagh wiped a beer glass and smiled at me.

"The dead arose and appeared to many..."

Dinny Rice left down his paper and looked out under his heavy eyelids. A scruffy tartan cap, sat slantways on his head, hid a thick shock of greasy black hair.

"I believe you're off across the water again, doc..."

"Once a week just."

"Have they not axed you back to the States then?"

"That was only for a semester."

"Wouldn't min an 'oul semester or two above in America myself, now.'

I took a few sips of the sweet stout and scanned the headlines, glancing sideways at my companion: a child every year and beats six kinds of shite out of his dear lady wife, pregnant or not. That time someone tried to stop him beating the wife in the back garden and he shouted back: no bother! I know how much she can handle. Thing I never did. With all the aggravation from Margaret. They could nail that to my tombstone, up in the graveyard in Geatagorm.

Here Lies John O'Donnell

Second-Rate Scholar

Who Never Beat His Wife

It had a nice ring to it, like Master Bespoke Tailor.

As I shuffled off home, I had a warm, confused feeling inside that it suited me to think was happiness. Or even the backwash of love, at a pinch. I took a little nap back in the house and woke just as darkness was falling, alone. I resisted the temptation, yet again, to go back into the study and stare into the all-seeing eyes in the photograph.

I worked away at the book for a few hours and cooked a late dinner. Around nine or so, I clicked on the big motorised satellite dish to catch the late news on Arabic *al-Jazeera*. There had been a fresh brace of suicide bombings in Riyadh. A nervy little *al-Jazeera* suit was interviewing a Saudi minister with a goatee. I caught the Egyptian accent of the interviewer with its thick ‘g’s and heavy ‘qofs’. Wait till the Kingdom falls, I thought to myself, then I’ll be really glad I took early retirement from the department and settled back in the armpit of Ireland. I’ll burn turf from Cleary’s bog in the old red Rayburn while all the idiots kills themselves with overpriced petrol and gas in the cities. Saudi can sink back into the sands and I’ll sink back into the bog, like my fathers before me.

I threw back the Black Bush and headed to bed. I was just about to hit the pillow, when I noticed the missed call on the mobile. There was a voice message. A soft voice said

“Jack? *Inta mawjud? Waynak?* Are you there?”

I sat up in the bed. Yasmin’s kohl-black eyes were looking out at me now, in Umm Marwan’s little house, with the tiled floors and the marble staircase, back in Al-Birkeh, in among the hills of the Western Galilee. Her brooding brother, Marwan, was sitting across from me, watching us both like a hawk, wiping his oily hands in a towel.

The warning in his dark Druze eyes was very clear: don't even think about it, *hawaja!* A grainy newspaper image came to mind: a young Druze woman suspended from the branches of an olive tree in a nearby village. An honour killing. It wouldn't be the first time it had happened either. This wasn't an Irish or an English town, where you could fall in love, drop a baby with someone, fall out of love and no-one would give a toss except social welfare. I sent a text message to Yasmin, imagining it flying to heaven and back to earth again, courtesy of a military/civilian satellite. Automatically tagged and traced for all eternity like all Middle East com traffic. Like Tim Danaher's love letters, sixty years earlier, written on British army regulation notepaper, before mobile phones, satellites and computers.

“Next week, Yasmin., *Kathir b'hibak* I love you very much!.”

Yasmin was in my dreams when I finally fell back to sleep. Her voice called my name out, over and over again. When I scoured my memory later for some token of our meeting, I saw the little olive grove down in the wadi below the village. The same olive grove her grandfather had tended, in the time of the Turks. Yes, Yasmin was there, in among the hard-hearted olive trees, calling me on. I remember wandering through the maze of gnarled old trees, calling her name out, over and over again. Yasmin! Yasmin! But there was nothing after that and I was left unsure of whether or not I had found her.

When I finally woke, at six, for the drive to Dublin and the plane for Heathrow, I was groggy from half-sleep. I threw my travelling bag in the back and pulled out onto the slip road. From the MP3 player on the dashboard. Abu Ziyad's husky, eighty year old voice boomed out at me.

It was a spring morning, Sir. The smell of *zaatar* bread was in the air. I had just come back from the olive groves. I was walking up the hill to the town with Abu Wasim's old donkey when I saw them. They were three men on horses...the Druze leader from you know where, another Druze man from Al-Birkeh itself...and an officer of the Jewish forces, with bright steel glasses.

They stopped in the square, by the well then they let the horses drink a little. They carried on to the far end of the town, past the Khilwe, to Selim Bek's big house. Who was Selim Bek, you say? Well, he wasn't exactly a *mukhtar*. He was a man of importance, however...of influence. The Jews knew that there would be no deal without him. The deal was done that very day, I believe. The deal to keep the town and all the Druze in it out of the war. The real fighting started a few months later, at the end of 1947. My father, God rest him, always said, the British brought us electricity and roads and the Jews brought us jobs...*walala?*

Soon I would be back in Umm Marwan's house, in the parched valley below Al-Birkeh. I tried to convince myself, over and over again, as I ploughed through the early morning mist, that it was love that was dragging me back to the little Druze village on the mountainside and not poor Tim Danaher's dusty bones. But when it came to love and

death, I had stopped trusting myself a long, long time ago and I wasn't sure I could ever trust myself again.

When the wheels of the car met the motorway, half an hour later, I whispered, my love again, secreto, *kathir b'hibak*. Yasmin, I love you so much! But when I fell to sleep in North London, later that night, with the cars scuttling up and down Islington High Road, it was the image of the jaunty British soldier in the grainy photograph would lie in wait in my eyelids. One thing I knew now for sure, even at that point: the dead wouldn't bury the dead, whatever it said in the scriptures. I would have to do it for them. As I reached cruising altitude in the crusty old Audi estate, the hoar frost on the flat midland fields pulled me back, without warning, to forty years earlier and the terrible night. The night all innocence ended and love became just another crooked codeword for death.

About the Author

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John Maher was born in Dublin. A former teacher, he has lectured in Near Eastern Languages at UCD and has been guest lecturer and Visiting Research Fellow in the Dept. of Middle East and Mediterranean Studies at King's College, London.

His other books include:

The Luck Penny (Novel, 2007)

Miss Katie Regrets (Novel, 2006)

The Coast of Malabar (Short Stories, 1988)

His doctoral thesis, '[Slouching Towards Jerusalem: Reactive Nationalism in the Irish, Israeli and Palestinian Novel](#)' (SOAS, 2009), was published in 2012. His literary and academic awards include:

Arts Council of Ireland Bursary in Literature

Shortlist for Debut Novel, BBC, Radio 5

Lar Cassidy Memorial Award, Arts Council of Ireland

Academic Travel Bursary to Egypt (UCD)

Francis MacManus Short Story Award (RTE)

PJ O'Connor Radio Play Award (RTE)

Summer Study Bursary, Hebrew University, Jerusalem

Ireland-USA Exchange Fellowship, [Virginia Center for the Creative Arts/Tyrone Guthrie Centre](#),

Annaghmakerrig

Marianne Pallotti Fellowship, [Djerassi Resident Arts Program](#), California, USA

Fellowship, [The MacDowell Colony](#), New Hampshire, USA