

### Jute Leaf Soup

It was just two nights until Mohamed's thirteenth birthday. He and his friends kicked a mangled old soccer ball under the scorching Syrian heat, in the alleyway behind their flat. Mohamed could hear distant blasts coming from behind the vast mountains which framed the outskirts of his village. Behind the mountains and beyond the nearby plains sat Aleppo, Syria's second-largest city. Mohamed and his family used to live in Aleppo but relocated a few years back to live with relatives after his father died in the conflict. Mohamed's father only appeared in his imagination, as a blurry figure, large and shadowy and kind.

The sounds of the blasts got closer and closer until Mohamed could feel the ground vibrating. "Get inside!" shouted his mother. He and his friends parted, and he went back inside. He entered a typical evening scene in the household. Zahra, his difficult younger sister who had just turned seven, was wailing and crying while his mother was trying to comfort her. His other sister, Rania, who was almost ten, was reading in the corner of the room. Once Mohamed had found Zahra's teddy bear, she stopped crying and their mother began to cook dinner - brown lentils and bulgur wheat. The aroma of spices engulfed the small room. It was time to eat and Mohamed quickly devoured his serving. Even though war and violence were raging so close to home, Mohamed felt safe and warm surrounded by his family. Cheeky Zahra giggled and played with her food while her mother nagged her to eat.

After they had all finished their meals, Mohamed's mother cleaned the plates as Rania and Zahra got ready for bed and Mohamed worked on his maths homework. Mathematics was Mohamed's favourite subject and he loved how simple it was and how there was just one answer that could be achieved after enough hard work. He wished that life could be like a maths equation. He wished life was simpler and there could be peace and an end to pointless fighting. At least he was turning thirteen the next day. He desperately wanted to be older, so his voice could be heard, and he could be bigger and stronger and make a difference. Maybe one day he could stop the war or fight to protect his country – just like his father had. He went to bed that night with his mind racing, as fast as a sports car, dreaming of how much better life could be once he was thirteen.

Mohamed woke up before the break of dawn, careful not to wake his mother or sisters. He was teeming with excitement to celebrate his birthday the next day. Mohamed paced up the alleyway tracing his fingers along the decaying wall of the flats, the scent of gunpowder pungent in the morning air. A glimmer of warmth stretched beyond the horizon giving way to a new day. The golden rays of the sun gave a bright colour to the clouds and meadows, mountains, and valleys. The sunrise chased Mohamed as he wandered through the streets of his village, busily thinking. He was off to collect bread from the baker the way he did every morning. Even though he was now thirteen, he still felt twelve, like nothing had changed.

He returned home with a loaf of bread to his mother who was anxiously awaiting his return. "I'm heading to Aleppo to get you a cake for tomorrow. Take good care of Zahra and Rania." He would rather be playing soccer with his friends but if it meant that he could have a birthday cake, he was happy to help! Aleppo was around an hour away on the bus from Mohamed's village. His mother

often travelled there to buy food and supplies for the family. Mohamed walked with his sisters to school, running ahead eager to meet his friends at the school gate.

When he returned home from school that evening with his younger sisters trailing behind him his mother was still not home. She would be home soon with his cake. He was certain. He waited. The day's light faded, and darkness settled. Where was his mother? Fear and panic crept up on Mohamed. Zahra pulled at his jacket sleeve. The little ones were hungry. "Where is mama? Where is the cake?" Zahra cried. Rania began to worry too. "Mama should be home by now, where is she, Mohamed?" she questioned as her voice trembled. He was at a loss. Mohamed felt very small for a moment. He wished he was just a little boy in his mother's arms. He wiped a tear from his eye. "Mama should be home soon". Mohamed tried to reassure his younger sisters. He wanted to believe it too, that everything would be okay, but he wasn't so sure, and his sisters were tired and hungry.

Mohamed reached for the saucepan. He gathered dried jute leaves, some coriander, and a garlic clove. He ground the jute leaves by rubbing them together until they were very fine, just as his mother did. He gently removed the woody stalks. Next, he added the ground jute leaves, water and salt. This is the soup his mother had made him countless times before, when he was hungry, tired, and sick. Until that moment he didn't even realise that he knew how to make it but somehow, he did. The birthday cake didn't seem so important to Mohamed anymore.