

**Olga Grjasnowa**

## **GOD IS NOT SHY**

Novel. 310 pp.

Forthcoming for 2017, March

**»Here the world comes to you in a way it's  
never come to you before.« Die Welt**

When the Syrian revolution breaks out, Amal is celebrating her first success as an actor and dreaming of future renown. Two years later she finds herself drifting through the ocean, because the cargo ship that was supposed to smuggle her to Europe has sunk. She rescues a baby, and from then on calls it her own. Hammoudi has just finished his medical degree and has been offered a place at the best hospital in Paris. He travels to Damascus to sort out the formalities, unaware that he'll never see his fiancée, Claire, again. Unaware that he'll soon be huddled on a tiny dinghy with a hundred total strangers, hoping to reach Lesbos alive. In Berlin, Amal and Hammoudi will meet: two people who've lost everything and have to start afresh.

In her much longed-for third novel Olga Grjasnowa's reminds us that there are many worlds besides the one on our doorstep, and that it's worth getting to know them. Her new book is a direct, cruel and unforgettable piece of literature – and a harrowing document of our age.

**Olga Grjasnowa** was born in Baku, Azerbaijan, in 1984. She has spent many years living abroad in Poland, Russia, Israel and Turkey. Her celebrated and bestselling debut novel *All Russians Love Birch Trees* was awarded the Klaus-Michael Kühne Prize and the Anna Seghers Prize. Her most recent publication, in 2014, was *The Legal Haziness of a Marriage*. Both novels have been adapted for the stage. Olga Grjasnowa lives with her family in Berlin.





*»There are few authors writing in German as sensuously and vividly as Grjasnowa.«*  
Tobias Becker, KulturSpiegel

*»Olga Grjasnowa's sentences crack like a whip.«*  
Meike Fessmann, SZ

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English translation by Katy Derbyshire

### Part I

The first fields are already visible through the plane window, followed by an ocean of houses that disappears again, then the wing slews upwards and the window reveals nothing but sky blue. The plane rights itself again and Hammoudi sees a field scorched by the sun. The wheels hit the ground with a jolt.

Damascus's international airport has barely changed since Hammoudi's last visit. Behind the cabins with the flaking paint are the same bad-tempered border guards as ever. They scrutinize his passport dourly and point out that it expires in a few days' time.

'That's why I'm here,' says Hammoudi. The border guard in his poorly fitting uniform shoos him away.

Hammoudi likes being in Syria, with certain reservations. He's been told all his life that there's no future here and he ought to emigrate to Canada, Australia or Europe after his degree at the latest. The life he had lived in Syria confirmed those reservations.

The luggage takes a long time to arrive. Several large families lose patience; children start whining; a gentleman with salt-and-pepper hair lights a cigarette and gets ticked off by security guards; cleaning women walk to and fro with their water pails, deliberately slow and not cleaning anything. When the light above the baggage carousel finally goes on, everyone crowds around the beginning of the conveyor belt and tries to secure a strategic position, with two blond men with reddish beards speaking loud Swiss German winning in the end. As the belt starts moving at last, a murmur goes up in the crowd. The luggage is quickly retrieved. Bags, suitcases of various kinds, bundles, backpacks and boxes are heaved off, placed on luggage trolleys and pushed towards the exit with a sense of euphoria.

Behind the barrier in Arrivals stands a mass of people looking out for friends and relatives and storming towards them as soon as the door to baggage reclaim opens as much as a crack. A police officer repeatedly warns them not to get too close to the door. Faces alternate in rapid succession between joy, curiosity and dismay. Children stand around clutching balloons, babies rub their tired eyes as their fathers wave bouquets of flowers.

Hammoudi is welcomed by an equally rowdy crowd. He had actually intended to take a taxi straight to his hotel. He'd like a little peace and quiet – two nights of sleeping alone, far away from Claire and from his family waiting for him in Deir az-Zour. A brief time out, just for himself. That was why he hadn't told his friends in Damascus his arrival time. They interpreted his silence as forgetfulness and simply looked up the landing time on the net. Now they wrap him up in hugs and kiss him on the cheeks. Hammoudi is loaded into a car, complete with his heavy case full of gifts.

Although it exceeds his budget, Hammoudi has booked a room at the Four Seasons. It's only weeks ago that he completed his residency as a plastic surgeon in Paris with honours. He'd spent five years working towards that moment and when it finally came it felt like he was entitled to it. Then he applied to the city's three best hospitals and was soon invited to interviews at all three. Hammoudi was tall, slim, courteous and charming. His French was flawless. The decisive factor, though, was his perfect facial symmetry – he was just the man people trusted to have internalized established beauty norms. He quickly decided on the hospital that made him the best offer and immediately received a contract in the post. That evening, he celebrated by treating his girlfriend Claire to an expensive dinner with plenty of champagne. After that he organized a trip to Syria to renew his passport – a mere formality but his residency permit in France depended on it, so he thought he'd take the opportunity for a short vacation.

The marble floors of the Four Seasons lobby shone with cleanliness and the copious flower arrangements exuded a morbid scent. Two security men check Hammoudi, almost refusing to let him into the hotel because he's not a foreigner. His friends are coming to pick him up again in two hours; he asked them to give him time for a nap and a shower.

His room is luxurious, the bed wide and firm, the sheets bright white and freshly pressed, the minibar well stocked and the furnishings in Damascene style. A voluminous bouquet on the side

table at least smells better than the arrangements downstairs. Hammoudi runs a bath and dials Claire's number.

He goes out with his friends that evening. A noisy group in their mid-thirties, women and men, some married, others already divorced or simply single, lesbians or in the kind of relationships that don't entail commitments. They tour the centre of Damascus, heading into bars, drinking arak, ordering small dishes, more arak and more food. The laugh, scream, bitch and argue. They act more stridently than they used to, trying to re-forged the ties between them, to assure each other they haven't been forgotten, they're still good friends.

Hammoudi makes an effort to catch up on his friends' lives, to keep on top of the order of their partners, children and career stations, but his head is soon buzzing. He doesn't know that his old clique from uni days now only meets up because of him – they have drifted apart in the years of his absence.

At first they're all awkward, their interactions clumsy, but after a while they relax, not least due to the alcohol. They recall events from their younger days, juggling names of acquaintances, streets and places that Hammoudi barely remembers.

Damascus, too, is hardly recognizable to him. The city centre has gentrified over the past five years – tiny groceries forced to close and reopened as Zara or Benetton; bakeries making way for cafés serving soy milk cappuccino at European prices; shops that once sold absolutely everything, from screwdrivers to petrol canisters, replaced by cellphone stores.

As the next day breaks, Hammoudi collapses into his overpriced hotel bed and instantly falls asleep, through the window the curses of drunken night owls mingling with the muezzin's call to morning prayers.

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Amal tries to act the fear away. She has spent her whole life studying the people around her, her family, friends, lovers, complete strangers. She has memorized their facial expressions and gestures so as to reproduce them precisely on stage later on. She has learned characters, vocal pitches and emotions. Even as a tiny child who couldn't yet speak, she imitated people. And yet for a long time she had not admitted to her wish to become an actor. She thought she wasn't

talented or pretty enough for the stage. She thought her hips were too wide, her nose too long and her own voice not firm enough. Aside from that, her father always implied acting was not a profession for honourable women. Amal first graduated in English literature but the books weren't enough for her, and so one day she auditioned for the prestigious Institute of Dramatic Arts.

All that seems long ago now. Fear has settled in like a parasite building a nest inside her ribs. Amal knows exactly what might happen to her but she doesn't know when and whether it will come about, and it's that uncertainty that makes her tremble. Too many people around her have been arrested, tortured or simply *disappeared*, which amounts to the same thing.

Damascus is a noisy, messy and hectic city, overflowing with bus and taxi hooting, the yells of street vendors, the humming and dripping of the air conditioners on the outside of the houses, all mixed with the loud music streaming out of bars and car windows. In Damascus, a person can drown in history and its superlatives. Today, though, the city is submerged in uncanny silence. No traffic, no conversations, not even a whisper to be heard. The sky is decked in grey clouds.

Amal keeps looking over at the secret service men, her body registering their every motion and sound. The curtain in a window of the house opposite twitches. An old woman is trying to peer around the heavy damask drapes as inconspicuously as possible, and at that moment Amal decides she never wants to hide behind a curtain again, not today, not tomorrow and not in forty years' time; and the only way to achieve that is to stay put on this square, come what may.

The first demonstration took place two days ago. It was the first time the air had felt mild after the winter, almost warm. Amal and a few of her friends headed for the parliament building with A4 cardboard signs. Amal's scarf was pulled down low over her face. They hadn't dared to take the banners out of their bags. At the end of the demonstration they avoided eye contact and dispersed as quickly as they could. They were ashamed to be running away in secrecy after a demonstration while people in other countries were setting themselves alight.

During the early days of the revolution, the optimists thought the global media and Al Jazeera would report on their demonstrations. They thought the international community wouldn't abandon them when all they were doing was demanding of their state what the rest of the world apparently also wanted it to do. No one was really thinking of toppling the regime – they merely

wanted reforms. A few minor concessions on the part of the rulers.

People were sick and tired of it. Amal was tired of it, her brother was tired of it, her friends, her fellow students, acquaintances, strangers in the streets, the entire vulgar bohème was sick and tired. They were sick and tired of the corruption, the secret services' arbitrary decisions, their own powerlessness and permanent humiliation. They were sick and tired of all public libraries, airports, stadiums, universities, parks and even kindergartens being named after the Assads. They were sick and tired of their fathers, brothers and uncles mouldering in jails. They were sick and tired of the whole family having to chip in to buy the sons out of military service while the North American teenagers on cable TV were given cars by their parents and travelled the world. They were sick and tired of reciting 'Assad, for all eternity' every morning at school and swearing to fight all Americans, Zionists and imperialists. They were sick and tired of memorizing Assad quotes in Political Education classes and then filling in the gaps in the right order for their tests. They were sick and tired of being taught in Military Education to dismantle and reassemble a machine gun. They were sick and tired of being treated like animals. And above all they were sick and tired of not being allowed to say any of it out loud.

Amal's generation is the first to know nothing other than the Assad clan's totalitarian rule. Unlike their parents and grandparents, who well remember the endless putsches before Hafiz al-Assad seized power or the 1982 massacre of the Muslim Brothers in Hama, with which the government showed clearly that it was not to be trifled with. Since then, the Assad regime has behaved like an establishment ordained by God. More than that – Bashar al-Assad is greater than God, at least that's what's implied by his omnipresence and that of his father, brother, wife and three children, portraits in even the furthest corner of the country, like scarecrows to frighten and dispel his subjects.

Out of the corner of her eye, Amal spots the Alawi actor Fadwa Soliman, a woman she's long admired, and for a moment the sight reassures her. She breathes deeply and wraps one hand around the other to stop the trembling. No one knows what will happen next. The regime might make an example of the demonstrators, arrest them all or use violence to break up the crowd.

After a long time in which the demonstrators do nothing but stand together and watch the secret service men, a small man in an oversized leather jacket leaves the group and heads for the nearest

café. He is one of the most significant artists in Syria. Amal and around twenty others follow him like a throng of young children, relieved to have evaded danger.

Al Rawda, meaning Garden of Eden, is a traditional Damascus café serving alcohol and small dishes, frequented primarily by opposition activists, gays, lesbians, young lovers and petty criminals. The demonstrators gather in the garden, which sometimes does seem like paradise with its white and brown marble. They talk openly, albeit in extremely hypothetical form, about concessions by the regime, and they flirt more blatantly than ever. Having greeted everyone she knows, Amal goes to the toilet, runs cold water over her wrists, splashes her face and breathes deeply in and out. Her body shakes as the tension leaves her. She's astounded that the demonstration went so calmly. Amal has never felt part of a group but for the first time, the thought of doing so is not unsettling.

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Hammoudi's family celebrates his arrival with a huge party. The courtyard is full of uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews and nieces. Hammoudi had forgotten how stressful a large family can be. The girls are wearing hairbands and froufrou dresses, squealing as the boys chase them. Then they change places, the boys running away and the girls pursuing them with more squeals.

A giant table is set up in the middle of the courtyard, bending under the weight of food and drink. Hammoudi's father has had a lamb slaughtered, stuffed with rice and nuts and then slowly roasted over the fire in the yard. His mother instructed the maids to spend several days preparing salads and starters, marinating seven kilos of kebab meat and various fish, stirring yoghurt and setting out huge trays of baklava and sheibat pastries.

A crowd of children mobs Hammoudi as he distributes the gifts he brought from France, their game momentarily interrupted. Hammoudi's aunts load generous portions for all the guests onto delicate porcelain plates that Hammoudi's mother imported from Japan. His grandparents have seven daughters and not a single son, which his aunts and especially his grandfather consider a great blessing. He enabled all his daughters to go to university, and all seven of them chose medicine. Now they work in different fields but are still inseparable. Throughout his entire childhood, Hammoudi saw his aunts huddled together on the roof of their house in the summers, eating nuts and sweets as they gossiped about the neighbours.

Hammoudi's cousin pours two fingers of clear liquid into each of their glasses, adds ice cubes and dilutes the alcohol with water, turning the liquid milky white. The neighbours are there too, the parents of Mohammed, a formerly chubby boy who has since grown into a lanky teenager who dreams of building bridges.

Hammoudi watches his brother talking excitedly to a girl, and smiles to himself – Naji is always on the lookout for a wife, even though he's not exactly the youngest at thirty-three. He's the black sheep of the family.

After the meal, Hammoudi's grandmother reads the coffee grounds. A long queue forms before the fragile woman bent low from arthritis, who patiently inspects one cup after another and interprets the brown remains. She is one of few fortune tellers who don't predict bridegrooms and sons for young girls. In one of Hammoudi's female cousin's coffee cup she sees a fish, which means money. Hammoudi takes his cup to her too; she strokes his forehead but then her eyes darken and she stares at his cup for so long that Hammoudi asks her with a laugh whether his future is really that black.

'God will decide,' she says in the end. *'Min timmi ila abau' al-samah.* From my mouth to the gates of paradise.'

Later that evening, Hammoudi asks her again about his future, but his grandmother merely shakes her head and asks for a glass of water.

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