A Son of Baghdad by Dena K. Mohammad

**A NOVEL EXCERPT**

**MY PARENTS** were married for six years before my father decided to take a second wife. It was my fault. I had taken too long in coming.

Baba considered it an act of charity commendable by God Himself. The second wife was an orphan, a young woman whose mother had died a long time before and whose father, a merchant friend of Baba’s at Shorjeh’s spice souk, had passed away after a dragging struggle with lung cancer. But anyone who glanced at the framed wedding photograph of my father and his second wife—Baba insisted on keeping it in our living room, right next to the wedding picture with my mother—immediately saw that neither chivalry nor charity drove him to marry Selweh. God and kindness had nothing to do with anything. Lust, pure and simple.

After he married Selweh, Baba’s only kind gesture to my mother was to keep his women in two separate homes. But I suspect even this was not for the benefit of his wives; it was his own peace of mind he wanted to keep.

Whenever a storm erupted over Selweh between Baba and my mother, his customary line of defense was to invoke his loyalty to his deceased friend. He wanted to convince my mother that infatuation with Selweh had nothing to do with marrying her. “It was her *father’s* will,” Baba insisted, although not an official, written will, but more of a promise to a dear friend, a word of honor between men. They shook on it.

When he saw that my mother was smarter than that, Baba took up his second line of defense. He wanted a son, he told her. Most other men would have married again within the first year, but he was kind and gracious and patient to wait for six. He merely took advantage of what God Himself sanctioned. Who was she to forbid what God Himself allowed, made perfectly legitimate, perfectly halal? Allah Himself said that polygamy was fine; who was Mama, a mere mortal, to say it wasn’t? It was when I heard those words for the first time that I concluded, not without an avalanche of guilt of course, that God was not always fair, not always right in the mind. If God saw how my parents tore each other apart because of Selweh and how my mother suffered for it, I think He would have changed His mind.

Exactly nine months after they were married, Selweh gave Baba the son he’d always wanted. Baba named his firstborn Sajid—*he who worships God by prostrating himself with his forehead to the ground.* He was a miracle, a marvel.

But for me, Selweh was the real magic. She was nothing like my mother. None of my teachers looked like her. She was unlike any of our relatives or neighbors. To look into her big, grayish-black eyes was like being sucked into outer space, and once there, you sat on the edge of an amorphous rock and gawked at the twinkling stars orbiting the universe of her pupils while Apollo strung his lyre nearby. Her hair was like a shimmering veil of reddish-brown silk, long and voluminous. She stood tall, like a peasant with a naturally regal posture. Her expression as she sat next to my father for their wedding picture blended resignation with pride, as if she were thinking, “Although I have agreed to this, I am perfectly aware that I am too good to be with this man!” She was eighteen years old; my father was thirty-five.

As fate would have it, my mother became pregnant with me some fifteen months after Selweh gave birth to Sajid. And though Baba was elated to be a father of two sons instead of one, and my mother could finally claim herself Selweh’s equal in fertility if not in beauty, the rift between my parents had pushed them too far apart, and they never forgave me my delay.

Whenever Mama twirled like a tornado at the mention of Selweh’s name in our house and my father’s usual defenses failed to appease her, Baba flailed about as if he wrestled with unseen monsters. His jaw quivered, his face turned crimson and beaded with sweat. He hurled whatever he got his hands on at my mother. Mugs, ashtrays, jars of pickles. And if those were not around, he unfastened his belt or took off his thick-soled sandals and shot them at her with the precision of a seasoned sniper. But none was as effective as his fleshy, calloused hands. They silenced her.

Whenever Mama was “disciplined” by my father, she picked up the most primitive of female weapons, silence—the weapon of the helpless and the most powerful. For days she locked herself up in her room until her scars faded, and she geared up for the next battle. Early in the morning, after Baba went to his shop, she came out to fix the three meals of the day, covered the food with foil wraps, left it on the stove or inside the oven, and returned to her self-imposed exile within the four walls of her room. From the swiftness with which she finished those morning chores I sensed that she not only feared that a neighbor or a street peddler might see her in that condition—her face swollen and greenish purple, streaked with gleaming streams of tears—but was too proud to let Sajid, the son of her nemesis, rejoice in his mother’s victory over her.

After she went into her room I often pressed my ears to the door and heard her small, anguished sobs, low and rickety like the squeaks of hungry mice. If she ever stopped crying it was only to blow her nose and take a deep, long breath in preparation for the recital of antidistress suras from the Koran. Sometimes I’d venture inside. I’d find her sitting in the middle of the bed hemmed in by a spread of time-yellowed photographs depicting idyllic scenes of young love. Picnics for two, riverside walks, dreamy gazes into distant horizons, the languid air of domestic harmony, remnants of her past happiness with my father.

It would take her a long time to notice that I came into the room, and when she finally looked up and saw me sitting at the edge of her bed, she looked at me as if I were an unreliable salvation. She fixed her eyes on me as if she wished she could transform me into something I could never be. Something worthier, something worth suffering for. Her eyes probed me, sized me up, interrogated me. She seemed to wonder why in the world she took beatings and insults over someone so disappointing as I was, someone who did not even have the nerve to defend his own mother. Then, like someone stabbed by the discovery of her wishful thinking, she started to cry again, more bitterly than before.

One afternoon, when I felt I could no longer bear to remain in the room, I got up to leave, but that’s exactly when she decided to say something. She leafed through her spread of pictures and muttered jumbled sentences, as if she were improvising captions for them, summaries of what life once was, life before Selweh and before me. She was fond of reminding me of how her pregnancy was difficult, the labor long and excruciating, her gallons of blood lost, the doctors saying she’d never survive.

She regarded me with a scalding expression, a warning not to turn into my father. For six years, she told me, Baba assured her that he was happy with things as God willed them. To be childless was not the worst fate. Baba knew men whose misfortunes were far worse. “You’re thinking way too much about this, Amneh,” Mama said, grotesquely imitating Baba’s voice and mimicking his sham sincerity. “I don’t want a child as much as you think I do.”

Baba also insisted that he was not the kind of man who questioned God’s will or even complained about it under his breath. God hates grumblers and complainers. He rarely hesitates about throwing them into hell. Since Allah always had larger, better reasons for the fates He dealt us, complaining was to deny Him this wisdom. If Allah willed that Baba should live and die childless, so be it. He told my mother that it was blasphemous, really haram, to defy God’s will at the same time he told her it was halal to marry Selweh.

I often wondered if my mother had once been anything but glum and woeful. In the pictures she wept over, she had the sunniest smile on her face. In those days Baba was young, handsome, and self-made. Before Selweh, Baba had the most scathing opinions of those men who teetered and toppled in front of beautiful women and made complete fools of themselves; after Selweh he became their commander in chief.

I too teetered in front of Selweh—not only because she was beautiful and different, but also because I was tired of my mother’s hope for me. Once she’d decided that Baba was a lost cause, my mother refocused all her energies on me. She wanted me to be her savior. She wanted Baba to take greater pride in me than he did in Sajid. She wanted me to consecrate myself to her. But I was already in Selweh’s clutches.

**It started when** I began to spend time at Selweh’s place, Baba’s “second home,” during my third year at Ba’ath Elementary. I was six years old.

My father, for all his street smarts and commercial acumen, did not know the first thing about women. He believed that, with time and effort, my mother and Selweh would accept and like each other. He believed that they would ask him to bring them together in one house. In his view they had nothing to complain about. Each had her own home, her own boy, was well provided for, and he fairly divided his days between the two, leaving behind the same number of hairs on each of his pillows, as it were.

To expedite cordiality between his wives Baba brought them together as often as possible, on my or Sajid’s birthday, on religious holidays, at the wedding of a relative. On many occasions, Mama and Selweh came to blows, and the happy family union turned into a local scandal featuring frenzied little women, bemused little boys, and a pathetic little man.

Despairing of bringing his women together, Baba tried his luck with us boys. Sajid and I were brothers, after all, and we should not, as he put it, get dunked into the dross of adult meltdowns. If he could not force his wives to like each other, he would force them to love each other’s sons. So Sajid and I were to divide our time between the two homes just as Baba divided his. And that was how I came to spend much of my time at Baba’s second home and fall head over heels for Selweh.

Like an infatuated teenager suffering from a consuming crush on an older, dismissive woman, I kept my eyes on Selweh. She did her household chores in a leisurely way, not with the fretful glumness of my mother. As Selweh mopped floors and washed dishes, she asked me about school, teachers, friends, and even my mother but would withdraw into other rooms just as I was about to tell the best part of my story. Her sham curiosity hurt my pride. I wanted us to sit down and talk, eye-to-eye, like two serious adults wholly devoted to each other. I sensed I really bored her. Sometimes she’d walk over to the niche where the radio was and turn on a program of Egyptian songs about unrequited loves, moonlit nights, and anguished lovers. She crooned with the mournful singers, swaying her hips like a drunken odalisque.

I stared through her nightgowns and wondered if my mother hid a similar pair of legs under the layers of fabric that covered them. Selweh owned hundreds of thin gowns with slits skirts to show her lovely legs. But she did not wear those gowns when Baba was there. As soon as he left for his shop, Selweh changed into one of her negligees and sat by the living room window to file her nails or rub her feet with cream. She occasionally looked out the window to smile at a winking passerby. If the phone rang, Selweh would disappear into her bedroom. It all made me furious with jealousy.

At mealtimes, when she placed a tray in front of me, my eyes darted to her narrow, plunging cleavage and her nipples pushing the silk of her gown. Overcome by shame and her perfume, I lowered my gaze. She responded with a small, sympathetic chuckle, cupped my chin, and raised my tingling, scarlet face to hers. She understood everything. She ruffled my hair and smacked a short, insufferable mwah on my forehead.

One afternoon, as I lay spread on the floor of the living room switching from homework to cartoons to board games, Selweh asked me to run to the corner market to buy some cigarettes. For my father, I assumed. When I returned, she took the pack, ruffled my hair, and went to sit by living room window with the street view. She lit a cigarette without a glance in my direction. She inhaled and puffed as expertly as Baba. In our world no good and honest woman ever smoked. The prohibition was an absolute moral standard no virtuous woman would violate.

I had refused to believe my mother when she called Selweh *barbooq, saktah,* and *ghahba,* because my mother hated Selweh for having stolen my father. But was Mama right? Was Selweh really a whore?

The right thing to do was to take my discovery to my father. There was his wife, wearing a flimsy negligee, sitting by the window, blowing smoke and smiles at people. Men stopped and retuned her smiles with winks and whistles.

Halfway through with her second cigarette, Selweh turned to look at me with a disarming smile. “Come here, sweetheart.”

Any other day, I would have sprung to her side, and if she had insisted in the same sulking, autocratic manner of my parents, I would have prevailed over her. I would have stayed put. Instead, she smiled sympathetically. “You don’t want to come over here?” Her voice was tinged with a dare. I went and stood before her but did not look into her eyes.

“Nobody knows about this,” she said, holding the butt of her cigarette between us, “not even Baba and Sajid. But now *you* do,” she said with a fresh dose of excitement.

When she saw that I still refused to look at her, Selweh began to tell stories about her father, a heavy smoker whose habit killed him. He kept cigarettes all over the house. Once, after a bad day at school, she tried one, and the habit stuck. “People are so curious when they’re kids,” Selweh said. “They want to try everything that people tell them is wrong and dangerous. Don’t you feel like that sometimes?”

That night, after Baba picked me up from Selweh’s and took me home, I did not sleep a wink. I had believed that Baba was like God and the President, a man impossible to deceive or slip by. But now he was a man who did not know the first thing about his own wife! The images of Selweh smoking dislodged my heart and dropped it into my stomach as if it were a massive, free-falling rock. When I tried to imagine what my father would do if he found out, the sequence of horrible punishments, I determined to keep Selweh’s secret.

**One day,** about a year later, Baba came home looking like a boy who’d been beaten by the school’s most vicious bullies. He teetered. The generous ringlets of his jet-black hair were loosened in a wavy mess; his face glistened with beads of sweat. His shirttails drooped over his belt.

My mother didn’t say a word, not even the obligatory “What happened?” and “Are you all right?” She quietly spread two old newspapers on the living room floor and covered them with the plates of our lunch. It was Sajid’s turn to be at our place that day, and as soon as we sat down, Sajid looked at Baba and said, “When do I go home?”

Baba fixed Sajid with a terrible look. “Don’t ever ask me that again,” Baba said. “From now on, you might as well forget you have a mother. You live here now, understood?”

For me, spending time at Baba’s second home, with Selweh, was a vacation in paradise. For Sajid, our house was a dingy prison cell and my mother a bullying guard. She never called him by his name. He was always Ibn Selweh, Selweh’s son, words infused with hostility and disgust. It made her look like she was retching. She tormented him by making lewd references to his mother. My mother bullied him, and he took to the streets bullying others. That my mother was so small-minded, so pathetically incapable of settling her adult business with the adults, diminished my sympathy for her.

Sajid did not touch his food. He shifted his eyes from Baba to my mother and back again. “Why can’t I go home?” he kept asking, and when Baba didn’t answer, Sajid pelted his fist into Baba’s arm and shoulder.

Finally Baba let out a terrible grunt and shoved Sajid away. “Why? Why? Because she’s a whore.”

Sajid sprang up and smashed his plate of rice on the tiled floor. Baba leapt up and clutched Sajid by the shoulders. In Baba’s grip Sajid flailed like a fish. Baba’s trembling hands couldn’t hold him in place, and Sajid easily slipped away. He ran upstairs to the room he and I shared, and behind the closed door he screamed threats and obscenities.

Baba ordered me and Mama to sit down and finish our lunch. He went over to the couch, sat down, and lit a cigarette, a mockery of reaffirming his authority. A little later, Mama cleared the plates and crumpled the newspapers, keeping her eyes on Baba. Fearing a storm, I went upstairs.

I sat cross-legged on my bed with an open book in front of me. My bed stood parallel to Sajid’s, and I snuck sideways glances at him. A tear fluttered through his long lashes. His proud, angular face wore a stern, calculating expression. There was nothing of Baba in Sajid; he was Selweh’s beautiful male duplicate.

That Sajid was spoiled was a fact. He was denied nothing. Selweh fed him apples, bananas, tangerines, KitKats, Snickers, imported Pepsi, and purified bottled water. All this in time of war, austerity, and bloodshed. No other kid in my school had a lunch box like his. But the quicker Sajid’s demands were granted, the swifter he fell into bored tantrums, kicking and screaming and breaking the object he clamored for. He often asked for expensive fruits and chocolates without being hungry, peeling a banana or unwrapping a candy bar, only to toss it away after one bite. People said that all this boded ill, but I didn’t care. I only wanted Sajid to be at my side. After all, we were both losing Selweh. We sat in our room solemnly ignoring each other while my parents’ bickering grew louder.

“Do you think you’ll really stay with us?” I said.

“I’ll be dead before I let that happen,” Sajid said.

Downstairs my father barked for my mother to shut up. *“Bes!”* he bellowed.

I don’t know how I got myself to open the door. Halfway down the stairs I pushed my face against the balusters and listened.

“I don’t want Sajid in my house,” Mama said. “That boy is a pain, and I don’t want to have to deal with him all the time, or have him influence Ahmed at all.”

“At what point exactly did I imply that it was suggestion?”

“Where is his mother?” Mama yelled. “Why can’t he be with his mother?”

“If I knew where his mother is I’d wring her neck with these two hands. I kicked her out, and I don’t know where the hell she went, but I sure hope she went to hell.”

“Well, I’m sure she’ll want her son with her wherever she is, hell or not. Let her have him.”

“Over my dead body!”

“I knew it,” Mama said. “I knew she’d do that to you someday. I knew she’d bring you nothing but shame.”

“I need you to shut your mouth for your own benefit, Amneh,” Baba said. His tone was calm but foreboding. I was used to witnessing the gradual decomposition of his restraint whenever he suffered through one of my mother’s diatribes on his defunct masculine honor. His patience had grown thin. My mother, however, insisted on whipping him where he was already bruised.

“What did you ever know about her,” Mama said, “other than what her father told you? I’m sure he passed her off as an angel. Of course she disgraced you. It’s only to be expected. Young, pretty, spoiled. With a sprawling mansion to call her own. What else can one expect?”

“Amneh, I’m warning you just one last time.”

“God is great,” Mama cheered. “Long years I prayed that someday God will have my revenge on her, on you. I knew my prayers would not go unanswered. You see what God does to a man who sells his good sense to buy cheap pleasures? Do you see now?”

“Amneh!” Baba bellowed. “I’ve been seeing red all day long today. For God’s sake shut up.”

“Well, it’s about time you start seeing red!” Mama said, slapping her palms so loudly against her thighs that I winced and hit my cheeks against the banister. “You should’ve been seeing red a long time ago, before, not after, you surrendered your head, your money, and your dignity. He sees red! How funny!” Mama chuckled. “If only you knew what people say behind your back. If only you knew. And why wouldn’t they? After the way she turned your head and wore you like a ring on her finger.”

My mother’s hint that Baba’s tarnished honor was a public affair fell like a thunderbolt over his head. I heard our couch creak as if giving a sigh of relief to be rid of Baba’s weight. My father was ready to mobilize his forces against my mother. “Who said anything about me?”

“They say she’s been taking you in the whole time, from the first day you married her. They say there’s not one man around Shorjeh who has not stepped into her house. *Your* house. And you always looked the other way. You’re alwa—”

“What are you talking about?”

Baba, now sufficiently goaded, threw something at my mother, and she screamed. I ran back to my room and shut the door.

Sajid sat huddled on his bed, surrounded by a spread of board games, marbles, and playing cards, looking as calm as a caliph.

“What should we do?” I said, pressing my back against the door.

“About what?”

“About what’s going on, what should we do?”

Sajid shrugged. “There’s nothing to be done. She brought it on herself, your mother. She *did.* You know that.”

Despairing of Sajid’s cooperation, I trudged to my bed, lay down, did what Mama herself would have advised: pray. I prayed that Mama would not perish by Baba’s hand that afternoon; that the din of battle downstairs would soon die out; that whatever sin Selweh had committed would not be so irredeemable that Baba would not consider keeping her in our lives; and that Baba would not give in to Mama’s demand to send Sajid away. In short, I prayed for all the things that my mother spent a lifetime praying against.

Downstairs the pitch of my mother’s wailing screams grew ever higher and more harrowing. As Baba rained blows on her, his grunts reached us with the sounds of shattering glass and colliding objects. And who was responsible for all of this? Who else but me?

**In those days** all I ever wished for was to run away. To grow up and run away. I felt like an innocent convict who had made peace with the injustice and decided to bide his time in silence and resignation until his sentence was up. I told myself that I was living out a state of emergency. I made up a frightening, totalitarian figure, more frightening than the President, who forced people to cram together in small, windowless rooms, and I convinced myself that my parents and Sajid were strangers with whom I was accidentally matched until the state of emergency was declared over. I assumed my childhood was a mandatory sojourn in a place all children were made to live until they were no longer children. I persuaded myself that there were thousands of others like me who were forced into the same circumstances and could do nothing but wait them out.

The closest I ever came to getting away was my friend Naji’s house. There I felt that life did not have to be what I’d always known it to be, that things could be better, that people could be gentle, perceptive, and quiet. The walls of houses did not have to be dented by thrown objects or echo with screaming matches and pleas for mercy. Love, I learned, did not have to be maternal, paternal, or brotherly in order to be true. Labels made it legal, ancestral, obligatory, but never true. To be true, love had to be a friendship. A profound, compassionate friendship. This lesson, which came to be the supreme principle underlying all my later relationships in life, I learned when I became a fifth grader at Ba’ath Elementary and Sitt Iman, Naji’s mother, became my teacher.

Becoming a fifth grader is a major scholastic transition in the life of every Iraqi child. The week before classes started, when I went to pick up my textbooks from the office of the assistant headmistress, there was among them a textbook written in figures I did not recognize, although scattered throughout were the Arabic words I had mastered by then. Fifth grade was every Iraqi child’s first encounter with the often-dreaded subject of *Ingheleezy.*

In our neighborhood, Sitt Iman was something of a mythical creature. Layers and layers of tall tales wrapped her in a dense fog of mystery, and she had become a local legend.

All because she was beautiful and she lived alone.

In our world, a woman living by herself grabbed attention the same way birth defects caught the eyes of passersby in a crowd, though Sitt Iman was widowed, so not exactly unmarried, and lived with her son, so not exactly alone.

I’d known many of the myths about the house and its inhabitants long before Sitt Iman became my teacher. The story of the death of her husband sparked the first in a series of never-ending legends. Her husband, so the story went, was a brilliant classical pianist and one of the first academics who helped make music a legitimate discipline at the University of Baghdad. He was a very distinguished man, charming in a quiet, aristocratic way, but not immune to fits of gloom and inexplicable depression, which were quite severe and quite public at times. On his more cheerful days, he read Shakespeare and Schiller, invited fellow professors for meals and conversation, or sat reminiscing with his wife about sunny days in Crete and Bulgaria, affordable vacation spots for relatively well-off Iraqis in the ’50s and ’60s. Everybody believed that he was an active member of the Iraqi Communist Party; that he was often arrested and tortured by the Ba’athists; and that his nervous outbursts were the consequences of what he suffered in those underground cells run by the President and his secret police, the dreaded *mukhabarat.*

The story went that after a dragging period of his worst depression, no doubt worsened by the conditions of the war with Iran and the “mysterious” disappearance of his comrades, he had gone up to the roof of the house in the middle of the night and put a bullet into his head. No one made much of the sound of a bullet in a time when rockets boomed and missiles rumbled. In the morning, when his wife saw that her husband was missing, she took to the streets, dodging the downpour of grenades and darting shrapnel, searching for him. I remember her knocking at our door asking my parents if they had seen him. She said he was on many strong prescription drugs and that he had walked out of the house. Only later that day, after she had knocked on every door and stopped every passerby in the neighborhood, did it occur to Sitt Iman to go up to the roof of her own house. She was the one who discovered him there lying in a pool of drying, brown blood.

**When Sitt Iman** entered the classroom, we acknowledged her with the usual gesture of respect we paid all teachers, though the homage was neither for her nor for any other teacher but for the Supreme Spirit ruling over our lives. We stood up and chanted in drawling, dissonant voices, “Long live the leader, Saddam,” at which point we were given permission to be seated; as we sat back into our chairs we sang the refrain, just as dissonantly, “and long live our party.”

Sitt Iman did not appear threatening, and that was precisely the problem. We couldn’t decide to what extent she should be feared. She stirred no definite emotion. She inspired respect, to be sure, but not as much as she stimulated curiosity. We were not used to ambivalent teachers. They were either consummate brutes or complete pushovers.

One thing we could all agree on was that Sitt Iman was incredibly, ridiculously beautiful. She had the body of a woman who could run a marathon during the day and dance the tango at night. She was tall and well built in a very ladylike way, with hints of curves to tone down the muscles. She wore full makeup, colorful dresses, and high-heeled pumps—things that everyone said no recent widow should wear.

She stood in front of the blackboard and surveyed the room from left to right, taking in the three rows of rickety wooden desks that trisected the room in equal lines. She threw unimpressed glances at the posters covering the walls in asymmetrical locations. We made those posters as homework for classes in civic education. The gist of our handiwork was political propaganda at its most delirious and its most chauvinistic, championing Iraq and reviling all who spoke foreign languages and were not Muslims. I was too young to appreciate how all this glorifying of the man who tortured her husband must have affected Sitt Iman. It must have torn her inside.

As “teacher’s pet,” I became the elementary school version of a teaching assistant to Sitt Iman. Some kids and their parents said that there was covert nepotism behind our warm, obliging connection; others spread the more vulgar rumor that there was something downright suspicious about such clandestine affection between a single, lonely woman and a doting child. That Sitt Iman was already too steeped in legend did not help either, nor did the fact that I was not only her favorite student at Ba’ath Elementary but also a regular guest at her house, thanks to my friendship with her son. My classmates envied my facility with English, my pronunciation, and my ability to write perfect cursive without ever straying from the lines. My dictation and composition books were teeming with Sitt Iman’s laudatory comments and smiling doodles around the margins. Not once did she have to ask me to repeat a word to hear a better pronunciation of it. I was also the only student who raised no objections to those impromptu quizzes with which she wanted to test our memory of previous lessons.

Before I had set foot in Naji’s house, I lived life as if everything that I went through at home—the beating, the belting, Baba’s habit of snuffing out cigarettes on my skin—were normal facts of life. Like biology. Like the alternating of day and night. Whatever intimation I had of right and wrong, good and evil, true and false, I carried in me undetected, something like chromosomes and blood cells. It all changed, toppled, on that afternoon when I walked with Naji to his house for the first time.

On our way to the kitchen door at the back of the house I stopped to admire the small garden beside the entryway. A square expanse of neatly trimmed mint-green grass was dominated by a dense orange tree at one corner and hedged in by flower beds and neat rows of potted plants. Now and then, pairs of tiny sparrows perched on the edges of the pots. They shook their little heads in gratitude and made a couple of adorable, happy squeaks before they flew off again. The air smelled as if it were sprayed with orange juice. As I gazed dreamily at the garden it struck me how much better I could bear my life at home if we had a space like this. It was such a simple idea, but it dominated me like an obsession. If after I received my daily dose of hell I could spread myself on a thick carpet of lush, clean grass, smell roses, and look up at the blue heavens above and just enjoy them without having to remind myself that there was a ninety-nine-named someone behind them, or that I must pray to this someone if I wanted Him to spare me the horrors of the coming evening—if I had any of this, how different my life would be.

Naji stood nearby, clutching both straps of his backpack and observing me with a strange blend of curiosity and concern. “You’re ready?”

When Naji walked into the kitchen, his mother looked at him as if she had not seen him in ages. She spread her arms and kneeled down to give him a hug. *Darling. How was school? Are you hungry?*Hugs. Kisses. It was all too strange, too original, too devastating. So this is how most other children lived? I had no idea. There were no such rituals in my house; even if there were, they would have looked not marvelous but ridiculous. The only time my mother would envelop me like that was to retrieve me from my father during their fights. I was the contested trophy that symbolized who conquered the other.

Whenever I watched Naji with his mother, my sense of loneliness all but finished me. I felt as if the whole world had burned to the ground and everyone was dead and gone and I was the only one left behind. But everything changed one day when Sitt Iman called me *habibi,* a word normally reserved for Naji.

“There you go *habibi,*” Sitt Iman said, placing a small plate with cake in front of me.

Sweetheart. *Habibi.*

Sitt Iman saw the effect it had on me. When the first tear streamed down my face, she asked Naji whether something had happened at school. He shrugged as if to say, “He’s always weird.” She turned to me, put her hand on my head, and said, “It’s all right,*habibi.* You could’ve told me you didn’t like cake.”

She reached for the plate across the table, and I sprang up to snatch it away from her. “I like cake!” I said.

“What is it, then? Why are you crying?”

I kept my eyes firmly on my plate and tore the slice of cake into small bites, raising each methodically to my mouth; but swallowing even the smallest morsels hurt like jagged stones. In the mist of my tears everything looked smudged and out of shape. She kept asking me why I cried, but I didn’t dare even look at her. I wondered if she knew anything about the “house with the crazy man and the poor woman” and whether she could all by herself, without my saying anything, string the misshapen beads of my life into a neat and sparkling necklace.

I was about to take another bite when she grabbed my wrist and lowered my arm to the table.

She undid the button of my sleeve and moved it up my arm, just a little above the wrist. She inspected the most recent cigarette scar, brown and taut and scabrous, and the many more that surrounded them like faded planets. She looked at Naji as if she wished him out of the room, and he stared at the two of us as if I’d infected him with my loneliness and all the miseries of my life. She knew everything now, but the words lodged in her throat and mine.

From that day on I became a regular at their house. Naji and I helped his mother carry grocery bags into the kitchen and pails of water into the garden, or we simply sat opposite her at the kitchen table and watched her roll cookie dough and stuff the cookies with pitted dates and ground nuts while telling stories about Naji’s father and their travels before Naji was born. And when we were done with homework, Naji and I spread out on the floor of the living room to build Lego mansions, draw pictures, or play a game of Snakes and Ladders. Those afternoons were like continuous, happy, waking dreams. Sunlight seeped through the two sets of tall windows shuttered with cream-colored curtains painted with tiny, pistachio-green leaves. The light made the room warm and dazzling. In one corner of the room stood the grand piano that belonged to Naji’s father, its lid raised. The harsh, polished blackness of its wood felt like an imposition, a disturbance in the perfectly calm atmosphere, unnatural, like a television in a Versailles chamber. On the wall above the piano hung the framed black-and-white picture of a noble-featured man, the musician himself, an oval face of delicate, blurred features, doleful gray eyes, glancing a little to the side, reluctant to meet the gaze of the viewer, and fleshy lips faintly hinting at a smile. I could see that Naji had so much of his father in him. The tiny piece of black cloth wedged in the bottom left corner of the frame reminded viewers that the man had passed away.

Sitt Iman regularly inspected my arms for fresh bruises and cigarette burns. “What’s that new bruise from?” she’d ask, her voice tinged with labored playfulness meant to encourage me to confess. “You fought someone at school? Didn’t we say no more heroics?” I bowed my head. Silence fell between us. She’d examine my scars with an expression of alarm mingled with annoyance. With my arms in her hands she looked at me as if she wanted to name a name, to validate her suspicions. I returned her gazes with an imploring look to let me enjoy my time with her without having to explain anything. If I could not cure the disease, I was more than happy to dull the pain. Just to be there and watch her care for her roses and potted plants or sit hemmed in among the leaning towers of her husband’s books. I felt happy, calm. But soon I’d look up and see the sky darkening outside, my curfew coming. At home, as soon as I stepped into my room, my father would follow with his belt coiled around his hand. He’d blow the last whiff of smoke from his cigarette, smother it on my wrist, and show Selweh, deceitful, absent Selweh, how much he loved her.