

Eman Al Yousuf

Guardian of the Sun

*Translated from the Arabic
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1

“Let me sow the seeds of the sun, until a new day is born!”

So said Hussein Mansour, who dreamed of a small piece of land in a country that didn't remember his son—even if this land were a piece of the grave. He stood amongst a line of palms, in the middle of what was once farmland, from Mosul to the whole of Iraq. *Life*. Now it was stripped bare, and his shadow clung to sand and gravel, the clay of the first creation. The light was birthing sunflowers, gold woven into a miraculous mirage, surrounded by a cluster of children his mother called for every dawn. Things were confused in her exhausted mind, and sometimes she called to his brother or one of the eight sons who'd been buried, still nameless, in the dirt.

Here, the last of the Mosuli land was filled with fragments of hope. Its womb was full of fresh possibilities, ready for the harvest—even after all the investment in nearby houses and buildings, after the land all around had suffered from overcrowding and drought and neglect.

“Mr. Hussein? In the name of the prophet Yunus, I thought you'd come today.”

“Hello, Abu Zanoun.”

“Over in the east, there were olives. Here, barley and wheat...and further down, the finest fruit.” Abu Zanoun tipped his head regretfully. “Yet this is the land as it stands now. Do you still want to buy it? Can you tell me what you're going to do with it?” Abu Zanoun spun his arm and hand in wonder.

Hussein Mansour, his shoulders hunched, walked behind Abu Zanoun's broad shoulders. Every time they'd met for a heavy lunch, Abu Zanoun would mention the land, in his simple yet sarcastic way, describing it as though he were talking about a cheap pet that could be sold for a few dinars to make him happy.

Abu Zanoun thought he knew the land well. Yet, like those who'd left or immigrated, he felt it had no value now, since the land could neither be sold nor sown. It looked like a large cemetery, full of corpses to step around as he gazed at the sky with a questioning heart and lost look. It was a land that had forgotten its clay was mixed with the spirit of a goddess.

“Praise God for his blessings, and bless the soup and prophet Yunus,” Abu Zanoun said, while using his right hand to brush the food out of his beard. As always, he asked about the goings-on in the mosque, blaming the Agha for being busy in his new position, and for forgetting their fathers' and grandfathers' sacred mission. Then he went back to the land—to handing it over for a few dinars, sentencing its soil to be suffocated under the clinging weight of bricks, which filled his silent guest with nausea.

Hussein felt humiliated and miserable. Abu Zanoun was making fun of this dream, of which he was still persuading himself. Abu Zanoun had promised to help him, in exchange for a commission.

Hussein walked one street over, to get a ride to the mosque. The road was full of dangerous holes, and heavy traffic pushed down the sandy side streets while traffic lights stood amidst the black exhaust. The drivers began to shout at him: “Mister! Mister!” and he chose one of them at random.

The driver complained. They all looked alike—the same face, the same loud voice. Even their coughing and grumbling was the same. They substituted a *kh* for the *r* as they spoke, as alike in language as in life's burdens.

Hussein's thoughts went to the amber beads between his fingers. In all his life, they'd been the most valuable gift he'd ever gotten. Since he'd received them, he'd held them between his fingers as a drowning man clutches a piece of wood, seeking safety each time a bead dropped onto his warm palm: *tick, tick*.

That sound, he'd thought, was the best medicine for giving up smoking, as he'd sworn to Alaa and Abu Ahmed. And yet it wasn't—he'd now come back to his addiction after four long years.

He wished the situation could simply change, that it could be like the sun's golden sheen grazing the frozen raindrops. As he took the cigarette box from his pocket, he felt the heaviness in his throat, which was filled with Abu Zanoun's poisonous words.

He opened the box to find one single cigarette lying quietly at the bottom. He had carefully prepared it that morning. Now he hesitated, then returned the box to his pocket after deciding he would postpone its burning for another few minutes, until he met with Alaa. He put his hand over his chest, which was burning from the smoke and from a larger fire—one that could only be burned out by a yet bigger blaze.

2

The mosque stairs sat between two brick fences, and they flew to the top like the wings of an eagle. To either side, there were stone benches and palm trees and beautiful plants, welcoming visitors as if they were at the balconies of the Sanhareb Hanging Gardens.

As always, Hussein's eyes wandered like a whirling dancer, looking around at the people who moved aimlessly around. His steps slowed as the crowd went past, leaving him behind. All these souls came to the hill driven by their burdens, their sadness or lingering wishes, climbing the one hundred and eighty steps of the Forgiveness Hill, abandoning their burdens slowly to reach the main door of the Prophet Yunus Mosque, where the sign said: "Yunus is one of the senders." One hundred and eighty times, the heart would beat and the knees would bend before a man could be cleansed of his sins.

Hussein Mansour climbed the stairs, breathing heavily. Once a week or more, his soul was washed of the sins and crimes he didn't commit by these blessed steps. After all these rituals, he thought, he was almost a saint—then he quickly removed the idea from his mind, asked forgiveness, and cleared his mind of the demon whispers.

"Where is the abaya?" an old woman asked the young woman standing behind her, turning to face her. The young woman was holding a child who rested a leg on her big belly, while another girl was holding to her dress, complaining in a soft voice, "Mama, I'm tired."

The older woman walked toward Hussein Mansour and took an abaya from a plastic bag. He looked at the belly of the young woman, who was standing two steps away from him. Behind her were a few high palm trees and some flowers and grass, and she looked back at him, full of desperate hope. She looked very heavy, and something about her made her look like a goat about to be slaughtered.

In her panic, she looked like Dijla, the time he'd brought her here, wearing one abaya, the other on her arm. She'd been shivering. He'd said the prayers, and she'd repeated after him, believing. They'd climbed the stairs to the mosque that day, and then to the highest minaret. Dijla had been shocked by the view of the city, its houses and people seeming very small, as if there they had neither burdens nor stories to tell. The houses and people had looked like dolls.

Hussein read some verses of the Qur'an and a lot of prayers, and she repeated after him. He wasn't sure that she understood what she was saying, moving her lips as her heart squeezed and her body shivered in a special connection with God. Hers had been a sad

conversation, before she'd been a mother. He pointed to her, and she threw the abaya she'd been holding. The two of them watched the black fabric as it fell. "Is that a sign of a boy?" Dijla asked anxiously, covering her mouth with her right hand.

She hugged him: *I'm going to have a boy, I'm going to have a boy.* She jumped as she repeated that, and he came closer to her and wiped her tears.

Now, he pushed a tear from the corner of his eye. Once he understood the matter, he signed to the lady, explaining what she should do. "Let your pregnant daughter-in-law drop her abaya from the mosque minaret. If it falls beside a boy or a man passing by, then she will have—God willing—a boy. If it falls beside a girl or a woman, then she will have a girl."

"A boy, God willing, and we will vow to name him Yunus," the old lady said. "This time, she'll surely have a boy, otherwise my son will divorce her."

Hussein had forgotten about Alaa, but now that he remembered, he ran quickly down the stairs. While he was walking alongside the pavement, heading toward the police station, a taxi suddenly stopped beside him.

"Haji Hussein." A man in his forties looked up and put his head out of the half-opened car window.

"Yassin, is everything okay?" he asked, as his brother's hand reached to open the car door. "Get in. Your mother is dying, and she wants to see you."

"What exactly happened?" Hussein asked anxiously as the car sped away. Yassin looked at him, his face expressionless save for a small curve of his eyebrows. His brother's lips stayed shut. *How he would know?* he wondered.

The traffic gave them a chance to talk about topics they couldn't even whisper about at his brother's house. Before and after every Friday visit, and in travels in Yassin's taxi from the mosque and back, the brothers had grown closer. The air-conditioning in the car blew better and cleaner air than the air-conditioning at home. Yet today the quiet was unsettling, like an announcer speaking from behind a deceptive mask.

Suddenly, the Quran channel interrupted the silence. Had Yassin just killed their conversation by saying what wasn't meant to be said? The car drove closer to the iron decorative door, then stopped in front of it.

A corner of the yellow-laced curtains moved in the small window, and a small shadow disappeared behind it. Najla's beautiful face appeared from behind the door. She smiled, and her eyes followed her uncle's hand searching for some sweets, like Turkish delight, before she remembered it wasn't Friday. She ran toward him and hugged him.

"Where are your bothers, Mansour and Mustafa?" Hussein asked her.

"They went to Najafi Street to buy books," she answered, running ahead of him toward her grandmother's room.

3

She saw something different in the eyes of this masked visitor she knew so well. She used to wake up at night, alone, to watch him kidnap the babies from her lap and hands without permission. He snatched a big part of her heart without a trace or sound till he snapped it all, and nothing was left but a small part that kept her alive. Each time the angel of death finished his task, the infant would stay asleep peacefully, but without his chest moving up and down. The baby would not cry again, would not feed from her breast, and his soft eyelids would be relaxed forever.

Eight times, the dawn prayers were called while she was holding her baby's body. Why was it always at dawn? Her husband would wake up to wash for prayer without looking at the shivering body beside him. She'd bend her body to keep the baby warm: "I don't want my son to get cold!" she'd cry.

Her husband would pat her on the shoulder. It was God's will, and no one could

complain about God's will.

The women consoled her over bitter coffee, telling her that she was still young, and her womb could hold others besides him. The women were jealous, because her husband was patient, even though not one of her sons lived longer than seven months.

But for her it wasn't seven months—it was a year and four months. She always wondered why they didn't count the nine months of pregnancy as well, as she'd swear the babies were alive in her womb for seven months or sometimes nine: eating and sleeping, talking to her, and listening to her prayers. She felt their breaths in her womb when their features and limbs were being developed. So how, she wondered, could the world still consider them dead?

On the day Hussein was born, she saw the same light of death in his eyes, and she saw her fear for the ninth time. She refused to breastfeed him at night, and he spent his night crying of hunger, alone, away from her lap.

Hussein survived. His mother's trick worked, but the light of death stayed in his eyes. There was something unusual in his eyes that squeezed her heart every time their gazes locked.

Now, as Hussein came close to her bed, she woke up, and they hugged. She whispered, as if asking his permission to speak, "My son, I am going to die." She rubbed her fingers over his forehead, eyebrows, cheeks, and chin. He wondered: Was she trying to memorize him? Was she afraid of forgetting how he looked, as she was forgetting everything else?

She smiled. "This time, I am going to die before my sons."

Hussein thought she was happier than he'd seen her before. The truth was that she was happy every time she felt that the Visitor was near, as she wanted him to come for her before coming for Hussein or Yassin.

She'd repeated, *Hussein, no son no luck*, till it became a definite truth. "Can someone be considered alive when he doesn't have children?" Sometimes it was hard for her unclear mind to think through all these questions; she closed her eyes and her swelling eyelids relaxed.

His mother was withdrawing from him in front of his eyes, dried and wrinkled like an autumn leaf. She looked smaller, as if she were turning to a dwarf.

Was death playing with her? Didn't it want to take her? Or couldn't it? He imagined the size of the casket that would soon hold her thin skeleton. He imagined it as small as a child's cot. Her soul would be happy then, as she would look like one of her children, who were buried in their graves before dawn.

His hands held her hennaed fingers. Loud quarrelling voices erupted behind them, as if a global crisis was unfolding outside this room.

He noticed white small fluff at the corners of the room. He knew that she, like many Mosuli elders, believed that removing spider webs and clearing the corners of the rooms brought bad luck. Hadn't the spiders saved the prophet from Quraysh at the time of Hegira, when he was in the cave?

Hussein sat on the edge of the narrow bed, watching his mother's breathing and trying to figure out whose voices were coming from the different rooms and hallways of the house. The voices came to him mixed with the smell of cleaning and washing detergents, the new sheets covered with naphthalene and stored in the wooden drawers. All of that was mixed with the smell of nearly finished cooking.

He understood now, as he understood every Friday in his brother Yassin's house, the importance of what he was missing. He saw it as clear as he saw the curses etched on Mosul's walls. He was frightened by the feeling of loneliness that overcame him whenever he stayed an additional hour among them at lunch or came earlier after the Friday prayer.

He kept telling everyone that his life at the mosque was enough for him, although it was different from the life that he'd been uprooted from, like the weeds he used to pull out

with his father. He got married at a young age and became part of the mosque early. He'd forgotten what it meant to have enough sleep: rifles sounded close to his ears, and he had the smell of corpses in his nose every night. He was haunted by the photos from the Iraq-Iran War.

He remembered that he still had the cigarette that he was supposed to smoke with Alaa at the security point. It didn't matter—cigarettes were there to be burned, to tear his inner body and set it on fire. Fire wants fire.

He walked quickly through the hallway toward the garden.

"Haji Hussein, can you please come and solve this?" Sahar's voice came from the kitchen.

"There is no power but in God, the High, the Great," Hussein said as he took out his amber beads, dropping the beads between his fingers again: *tick...tick*.

Yassin moved aside the old bedclothes that were used as a curtain across the kitchen door, and Hussein bent his head and went in, closing the door behind him.

Young Najla walked slowly toward the door and put her ear to it.

"Sahar doesn't want me to work in the taxi anymore," Yassin told his brother, ignoring Sahar as much as he could. He acted as if she wasn't in front of him, even in his choice of words.

"The taxi isn't bringing any money—we can't even buy the oxygen cylinder." Sahar's voice grew loud from her temper. She was also talking to Hussein and ignoring Yassin. Hussein looked at both of them, but didn't say anything.

"Now the old woman's oxygen cylinder is the problem?"

"What about the dialysis expenses? And the danger? Every day, you go to Baghdad on this road that's full of explosions. Why?"

"What do you think I can do for work in these circumstances? Should I be a doctor? Or you would like me to steal?"

"Even when the operation is confirmed, we don't have the money." Sahar's voice grew louder. Her face became red and sweaty.

"What, did they find a donor for the kidney?" Hussein asked in surprise. "Yes, the hospital told us yesterday. They want the first payment so they can operate," Yassin said.

Their words became tangled with each other, and with last Friday's words, and the Friday from last month, and the one before. Hussein laughed, because it would hard to untangle all this. As usual, their fight had nothing to do with the main problem. They were clinging to unimportant matters.

Hussein withdrew. His words were lost among Yassin's and Sahar's about death on Baghdad-Mosul road, his mother medicines, the oxygen cylinder, and his nieces' and nephews' smiling faces.

He was lost in a whirlpool between life and a dream. If he chose the first one, he'd lose his humanity and live like grazer. If he chose the second, he would lose his humanity, as well as the lives of the people he loved.

You, Life, are a big liar. You are selfish, and jealous of a dream. You came today with your best defense: They found the donor, while the money insists on being absent.

Hussein left, abandoning the talk that had accumulated in that suffocating room.

He went where he could breath fire: breathing it in, then breathing out cold ashes.

Hussein didn't hate anything or anyone, not even Life, but the secret in his chest was breaking him.

When he was young, his father had taught him how the sunflowers grow when the seeds are buried in the land. He thought that, if he could bury this dream in his chest, it would grow again as a beautiful yellow sunflower. But in time, the dinars he'd saved became a heavy

secret, like a betrayal, a slow poison promising him a delicious death that never came.

He tried hard not to tell Yassin and Sahar about it. He imagined that, at some point in the future, he would gift them the money, and he'd see happy tears rolling down their cheeks, and their voices would disappear, just like their problems. His smile and the land would disappear, and he would go back to being the respected person standing at the mosque door.

4

Since the last renovation at the beginning of the '90s, the Nabi Yunus mosque seemed untouched by visitors and onlookers. It was a shelter that welcomed everyone, and they'd memorized its rooms and hallways in all its small details. Even the poems of Othman Al Hayati and Abdullah Bash Al Omari, which were removed eighteen years ago by the old regime, remained on the floor of the mosque storage after being taken down.

As for the people who lived there—the guards, the muezzin, the imam, and even the maintenance and cleaning workers—they considered it a huge structure. It was another womb in this world, another whale that had swallowed them to find peace within.

Against his usual habit, Hussein Mansour took the stairs in a hurry. His shadow ran to the top of the stairs, then to the main door at the entrance.

Jaber saw him—Jaber who'd shared one womb with Dijla, and who was the morning guard of the mosque. He was the only one who didn't live in the mud houses that were adjacent to the mosque, for he had a wife and children. Jaber worked the morning shift, while Hussein worked the night shifts, which mostly came with no moonlight.

"Greetings, Haji Hussein. Good that I saw you before I left." Jaber's voice was accompanied by a strong cough.

"I told you to stop smoking," Hussein said, leaving quickly. After all these years, their relationship was still tense. It had lost its shape on that day, and had been lost forever.

"Welcome to the man who honored us in front of the foreigners," Sheikh Abu Mohammed joked with him. Hussein smiled. "What's wrong, son, where were you today?" Abu Mohammed asked, but, as usual, he didn't wait for an answer. All he wanted to know was that Hussein and the others were okay. He'd become like a father to them since he'd started working as the mosque imam, following in the footsteps of his father Sheikh Bahaa Al Deen, God bless his soul. Sheikh Abu Mohammed patted Hussein's shoulder. "Let's go for evening prayer, son." Haji Abu Amara was already in the minaret, reciting, "*Allah akbar, Allah akbar.*"

The two guards, Hussein and Jaber, as well as Haji Abu Amara, and even the maintenance and cleaning men, Rafi'a and Ihsan, were all curious about Sheikh Abu Mohammed, who knew the time of the prayer without looking and also knew what going around him, as if the place's secrets rested in his veins.

Most important of all, especially for Hussein Mansour, was the Sheikh's pride when he took him to the Internet café to watch the documentary that the BBC had shot about Mosul.

Hussein had talked to the BBC team and presenter for twenty minutes or more while they'd filmed. But after editing it had become three minutes: about the history and the construction of Nabi Yunus mosque as one of the most important features of Mosul.

Everyone looked at Hussein in a different way after that. Some even started visiting the mosque and asking for Hussein and the BBC man. Since then, he had considered Sheikh Abu Mohamed his father.

5

What did those who came to the mosque in the morning know about his night visitors? What did anyone really know about Hussein Mansour? Yes, nothing.

These questions and others like them settled into Hussein's consciousness.

Was it fair that the visitor who lost sleep and grew burdens in his chest like thorns was equal to the one who came, led by sunlight? He was almost certain that night prayers were the only ones that touched God's throne. It was only silent magic that came in the darkness without being stumbled over, holding onto wishes and turning them to reality.

Hussein Mansour resented being assigned to the night shifts, without anyone even asking his opinion. But he made a deal with the night after he mixed with its stars.

His yearning for a family, which he didn't have, was replaced by a fondness for the secrets of the darkness, and the kind warmth that he saw at others' houses was replaced by a cold breeze that came in the evening. He bent his heavy head to see the black palm trees' hands moving in the night.

The mosque looked like it was covered with yellow lights and green shiny ones, and they defined it and separated it from the hill. In the nights when the moon wasn't clear, Hussein would close his eyes on everything but this. "Is this what the darkness inside the whale was like?" "And was it forty nights, as they say?" Hussein liked how the black dominated everything. Within it, everything was equal to what was under the darkness. What darkness?

He heard footsteps coming toward him, and then he saw a shadow wearing a hat and military boots. Alaa? He smiled and stood up, leaving his plastic chair empty behind him. "You think you can run away from me?" Alaa laughed as he dragged over a nearby plastic chair to sit.

Both lit up a cigarette. It was their habit to smoke the first cigarette in silence. With the second, they usually talked. But this time, they had already reached the third and neither of them felt like talking.

Alaa sat facing the mosque door. After a while, his eyes adjusted to the darkness, but he still couldn't see the inside rooms or the hallways as he could in the morning. He closed his eyes and straightened his back until his sides hurt him. Alaa, who'd spent most of his life in his military uniform, lived like a soldier, praying for Mary and the Christ every Sunday in a military way.

He saluted in his language, putting his right arm up beside his head, his breath slowing until he felt a cold rush filling his lungs and stomach. He breathed out the memories that he didn't own anymore—the memories of Nihad, who'd stayed quiet only for the first months of their marriage, and his sons who became photos on his parents' fridge. Alaa had separated from his wife, and he has a document that confirmed it. The divorce document reminded him that he was a committed Christian who didn't believe in separation, and also a Mosuli who believed that he was only divorced on paper, but still married, and that he was alone on this earth.

"Aren't you late going home?" Hussein Mansour asked. For the first time, he didn't want to be with Alaa.

"How's the land?" Alaa asked, straightening his back. Hussein looked at him and lit up another cigarette.

"Do you still have a lot to find?" asked Alaa.

"Which is better?" Hussein replied. "Living with a hypocrite and scoundrel or with a live corpse?"

"What? I don't understand. Abo Ali, you've started talking in riddles."

"The kidney donor is ready, but there's no money to pay for it," Hussein said. "Does your family know about the money?" Alaa asked.

Hussein shook his head.

"You decided not to give them money, then?"

"And how I can live, looking at this face in the mirror each morning?"

"Okay, so you *will* give them money?"

"If I lose the land, what else is left for me?"

“I wish I could help you,” Alaa said. “You know how much you mean to me, but...”

“I know your situation, and I know you won’t hesitate to help. God bless you.”

Silence took over again, with another cigarette, and died when it finished.

Hussein Mansour stayed alone for what was left of the night, moving the amber beads between his fingers and asking himself: *Which is better—living with a hypocrite and a scoundrel or with a live corpse?*

6.

“My sadness doesn’t go away like you do, Sun. My troubles are loyal—they never leave me alone,” Hussein muttered as he moved around his small room.

Hussein’s short days started in the afternoon, just as the day was getting ready to leave, and he’d tried to finish his visits to the market, and other work that had been pending for weeks, or even months. His day started with the sunset and ended with sunrise, and he lived with the hopes and dreams that took over his head and heart until he became unaware of reality.

All his days were the same—apart from Friday. But today was different.

Jaber arrived, cutting off Hussein’s thoughts as he’d been considering his choices: either his dream or committing to his duty toward his mother and family. He felt he was on a swing like the one Yassin had made in his garden for Najla’s fifth birthday.

This was the first time in ten years Jaber had gotten up the courage to visit him in his room. The more Hussein looked at Jaber, the more he saw Dijla in front of him—the wife he hadn’t mentioned since the accident—and the one Jaber avoid mentioning, just as he’d avoided meeting Hussein till today.

Jaber chose to stand at the door, a quick visitor, as if he and Hussein were close friends. He hid the sun’s reflection with his big body so that he looked like a dark shadow. Jaber’s voice told Hussein that his daughter Marwa was getting married tomorrow, and she insisted that her uncle Hussein attend the wedding—a breeze from her aunt Dijla.

Hussein went silent. He understood that they weren’t waiting for Dijla as he was. It was easier for them. After months of searching and waiting, they quickly ended the story. They’d surrendered to her unclear fate and accepted it as death, voluntarily, even if it was a lie.

This idea wasn’t strange to them. After all, they’d seen it repeatedly during the Iran-Iraq and the Gulf wars. They knew that many graves were empty, and they were there as a last resort, so the family could cry for the people they’d lost, during Eid holidays or whenever they were missing them. Otherwise where would they put the flowers and sprinkle the rose water?

Dijla had been very attached to Marwa in her happy childhood. Did Marwa look like her now?

And now, here was Dijla coming back as a lovely ghost, sharing the room with him in the morning. She could, as she once had, help him get rid of the thoughts that lined up in his mind, capturing the ideas that confused him.

Maybe if she were here today, it would be easier for him to make a decision about the land, and it wouldn’t have to be so difficult to make a promise to Jaber.

Jaber left two invitations on the near table before he left, stepping out through the door. The silence that had been there before he came resumed, as did a storm of

thoughts in Hussein's mind. He knew that going to Marwa's wedding—the wedding of Jaber daughter—would be an attempt to bring Dijla back, as much as it was a step toward forgetting her.

Hussein continued circling his bed as minutes went by without Yassin calling him back. He grew worried, and then he forgot about it for a while. He broke the cycle by going out to the alley. The houses were empty apart from women and children, so he went back in and closed the door, and sat beside his phone waiting.

He hadn't yet recovered from Jaber's visit, so he prepared tea and added sugar, repeating to himself: "Marwa's wedding."

Dijla would be coming back to him, as he'd always thought, but not how he'd expected it. Fate had its own way. Was it true that the young girl, who was so recently jumping around and hurting herself all the time, was getting married tomorrow? How much he wished Najla were as active as her.

He opened the window and a cold breeze filled the room, as did children's loud screams. He wanted these noises to cover up the screams in his tired mind, and for the cold to numb him.

"Yassin? At last! Where are you, why weren't you answering me?" "Six calls, Haji. What's wrong, you got me worried."

"How's our mother?" Hussein was embarrassed to mention the real reason behind his call.

"Same, no change. Listen, I'm going to ask Abu Thamer for money for the surgery."

"Abu Thamer?" Hussein tried to remember him.

"The dean of the College of Mass Media. I take things to Baghdad for him, don't you remember? He asked me to bring a relative from the airport tomorrow, so I'll ask him after that."

Without sharing his silent thoughts with his brother, Hussein ended the call quickly, asking himself if it was important to remember the man. Wasn't he just a name that would solve the issue? *Let's keep Abu Thamer's name as letters and no more*, Hussein thought. He was a promise to get rid of this heavy burden, and a key that would bring back Hussein's land and money.

He would not ask his brother about the reason why he'd help Yassin with such an amount, and he wouldn't think how they were going to pay him back.

Hussein went back to the window and watched the children. His consciousness was filled with both pain and selfishness as he looked at the illusions evoked by the two wedding invitations.

7

Yassin was surprised that, until now, he hadn't been able to ask Abu Thamer for help. Yet the reasons that had stopped him before were the same reasons that finally pushed him to meet the man.

He was driving carefully around Mosul's streets as Abu Thamer sat beside him. He tossed a glance, every now and then, at Abu Thamer's nephew and his wife. It was clear that the young man hadn't been to Iraq before this evening. He hadn't smelled the air nor touched the mud that he was made of. His features reflected someone he wasn't, and his language was more English than Arabic. As for the young woman with him, she

was a brunette with dark veins visible under her skin, and it was clear that she had no roots nor connection to the Euphrates.

The young man's eyes and quick fingers got busy with his phone, while the young woman pressed her nose to the window. She looked like a young girl hugging her leather bag, which she'd insisted on keeping with her ever since they left the airport, not with the other bags that were packed in the small trunk of the car.

Abu Thamer's hand landed heavily on Yassin's shoulder as he thanked him for the third time for his efforts and added that, if it not for his bad night vision and his inability to drive, he would've spared him these long evening journeys, in particular the one that took him to Baghdad. Danger was in every corner of the Baghdad-Mosul road, and Abu Thamer joked about the dangers of these trips while Yassin spent the time reciting from the Quran and hoping that his prayers and those of his mother and wife would be heard, and that they would arrive safely.

Every time he took this trip, he said his goodbyes to his children: Mansour, Mustafa, and Najla. He woke them up, memorized their features, kissed them and hugged them for long time, then quickly left. All the way, he thought about what his corpse would look like, and how they'd tell his family about his death.

Did Abu Thamer know the precise effect of each trip on his life? Did he know every white hair that was added to his head, and every teardrop the trip has added to his time?

He'd always wondered, even until this minute—now, when Abu Thamer looked as though he were choking on his seatbelt as he turned back to joke with his nephew—if Abu Thamer's death would create the same losses as his? What did death mean to Abu Thamer? After all this time he'd had with Abu Thamer, he still didn't know him well.

He remembered his brother Hussein: unknown to him, ten years older, hardly talking and having "no luck," as their mother always said. The elder brother had to be obeyed and respected, but knowing him was not important. Yassin had been nine years old when Hussein left home to settle at the mosque. He visited them with his religious look, seeming like an angel with his shy smile. Yassin had waited for him at the garden door, and he'd come every Friday with his wife walking few steps behind him. She'd be holding his right hand and the sweets would be in his left. Yassin didn't remember Hussein's wedding, and when he tried to ask his mother about it, she didn't either, her memories having fled a long time before.

"Why we can't see anything?" Abu Thamer complained, as he felt the young woman growing uncomfortable. This was the first time he'd seen Mosul at night and through the eyes of a tourist.

"I wanted to see Mosul as Yahya described it to me," she said with disappointment.

"Mosul is beautiful—you won't find a place like it anywhere in the world. You'll see it in the morning," Abu Thamer said, before Yahya cut him off: "Malika, Mother's on the phone."

The car stopped on the street across from Abu Thamer's house. Yahya and Yassin helped with the luggage while Malika walked away, carrying the phone and her heavy leather bag toward the villa door. The main door opened, and a young man hurried up. Half a woman's head emerged from behind the door before a young child, around six, ran outside.

"Thamer, take care of Hani, don't let him go to the street," she shouted.

Thamer turned to her, gesturing with his hand and lifting the boy. She disappeared behind the door while he went to the car, welcoming Yahya and Malika.

Abu Thamer walked up to Yassin, holding money in his hands. Yassin wiped the sweat off his hand—this was his last chance to talk to Abu Thamer. While Yassin stood there, Yahya and Thamer were asking Abu Thamer to hurry up.

Yassin wiped his forehead and neck with his handkerchief and tried to force out his voice. "Abu Thamer, I need your help."

Hussein's head swiveled toward Alaa on his left and then straightened before turning to the right, toward Abu Amera, and breathing in February's cold breeze.

Jaber had set up a small shaded area in his garden, where the guests sat at long tables, and food and drinks were offered. Three young boys with baklava and tea trays moved between the scattered chairs while Jaber walked between the guests like a proud peacock.

He sat with each for few minutes before continuing his rounds, which he cut off every now and then by calling one of the boys, asking for more sweets here or strong tea there.

Haji Hussein, Abu Amera, and Alaa all wore uniforms, and their clothes gave them a special prestige that put a wall between them and the other men, so the mosque men kept the conversation between them.

Without their noticing, the green leaves were slowly covered with moisture, grew heavy, and bent like a pregnant young woman, reaching down to touch the earth. The drops of rain beneath the sun came slowly from behind the scattered cotton clouds. The lemon trees and the flowers grew wet, and even the giant almond tree and untidy grass were soaked. The flowers bent, the ceiling of the shade grew wet, and drops fell old on the guests' foreheads as the noise continued. They laughed and asked for more tea—the tea came as a warming gift.

Abu Amera cut off the noise of the singing when he came close to Hussein and Alaa, saying, "This rain is just a joke—you should've seen what happened to us in Hungary when storms came."

"Hungary?" Alaa asked in a mocking tone. "Haji Abu Amera, when did you ever travel outside of Mosul?"

This wasn't the first unusual story from Abu Amera, nor was it the first country he claimed to have visited, while, as everyone knew, he didn't even have a passport. Hussein wanted to believe these claims, some of which were lies—plus, this and Alaa's jokes were enough to keep his thoughts from every step Yassin was taking today.

The arrival of Abu Thamer's relatives was hazy to him. It was like a maze that consumed his nerves, and the image of his brother begging for money had been repeating in his mind since the morning without pause.

Abu Amera sat up straight in his chair, facing Hussein and Alaa, and continued his story, engaging them in his talk about the time he went to Hungary as part of scholarship program, thirty years before. He'd been with a group of promising young Mosulis, wandering around in the open markets and moving between the kiosks when Abu Amera saw the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen in his life.

"Yes, Abu Amera, you seem to have some stories," Alaa joked with Abu Amera, whose cheeks went red like a young girl's.

"Does Um Amera know about this story?" Alaa pushed on with his joke after seeing Abu Amera was annoyed. But Abu Amera continued the story.

He'd been standing next to one of the kiosks, and she was standing further away, beside her friend, drinking hot coffee and eating pastries. She was watching him from afar, and he started making gestures with his hand. She replied in kind. For few minutes, they conducted a silent conversation, until she left her friend and came walking toward him.

Abu Amera bent his small white head, and Hussein and Alaa sympathized with him. They understood that he didn't know English, and he was stressed by his adventure with the unknown girl. Suddenly, he said, he was shaking and walked away. She walked behind him, but he kept walking away, and as she came closer, he tried hard to move away and hide. Did she think he was playing a game with her, taking her to a private place, maybe? How could she know what trouble he'd gotten himself into?

Thanks to his good luck, a cold rainstorm came and, within a few minutes, the market and the sellers scattered, their faces disappearing, including the beautiful girl and her friend.

He stayed facing the unknown and the rain. A small cold object dropped from the sky and cut his forehead, and blood mixed with rain, covering the right side of his face so he couldn't see.

Abu Amera stopped talking, drinking his tea and eating some of the sweets, enjoying the anticipation in their eyes. Jaber came, and the three men stood to congratulate him before they sat back down. Then Abu Amera continued his story.

The storm was so strong it could've brought elephants, and he didn't have an umbrella. His wool coat was thin and of no use under this rain.

"Where to this time?" asked Jaber.

"Hungary," Alaa quickly answered.

"Ah, Al-Majar," Jaber answered.

"No, Hungary," Abu Amera answered, before Alaa could say anything.

Everyone laughed, even Abu Amera, who didn't seem to know the country's name in Arabic. Then he continued his story.

That day, he prayed to Abu Zanoun, the whale, and the miracle of coming back to one's people from death. Suddenly, a big man emerged from behind a curtain of the heavy rain.

As Abu Amera said that, Hussein imagined Yassin's face. Would Yassin save Hassan as the man in the story had saved Abu Amera?

He looked around, avoiding the house near the garden. Places had their own painful way of bringing back memories, even those buried in a well. Under these trees, Dijla had once played, as had Marwa, and soon her daughter would. In a shade like this, they'd conducted Dijla's funeral, which he hadn't attended. They needed to mourn her and say goodbye in a logical way, sprinkling rose water on her flowers and toys and books, she who had no grave.

They wanted to announce her departure from the world, they who didn't understand this departure and who couldn't make peace with it. The women wore black for forty days and announced to all that their young daughter had died at an early age. Dijla's family continued each year to give away bags of food to the poor so they would read the Fatiha verse over her soul. He was the only one who hadn't taken a role in any of these rituals, insisting that the rituals of the dead weren't meant for those people who are alive.

"Where are you going Haji, it's still early." Jaber stood and followed Hussein, who had moved away.

"Marwa looks like her, doesn't she?"

"What's wrong with him, is he crazy?" Abu Amera asked. "God be with him, Abu Amera," Jaber said. "He has problems."

"What problems?" someone else asked. "He doesn't have a wife or children."

9

The noises started with Basma's snoring, and her tossing and turning in her sleep, in the new room Malika was sharing with her. This didn't end even after the rooster's crow, the rituals of breakfast preparation, and everyone getting up to leave their rooms.

Before she'd married Yahya, Malika's soul wanted noise more than anything else: she'd search for it even more than food and sleep. She used to open curtains and windows so that the street's colors and smells would come to her as soon as she woke up, before she was hit by the coffee-and-cardamom smell on her way to wake up her dad—the coffee that sat like a queen beside the French newspaper.

Since she and Yahya had arrived to meet the family two days before, she hadn't had any time to empty her luggage or get to know the cupboards and the room's furniture. No one knew travelling bags better than Malika, as she herself had been a bag thrown between hands in her childhood. For years, she'd traveled between France and Algeria—leaving France and

her father as soon as the school finished in summer, and going to hot Algeria, then coming back again when autumn was plucking the rich fur and makeup from France and bringing out its ugly, cold face. Her parents' separation made her endure the cold in the Western world and the Arab heat.

She'd started looking for her bag of medication and some important clothes for today's trip when she heard knocks at the door. Yahya's voice was clear and soft. They weren't sure if he should enter the room she was sharing with Basma, and she looked around and found her roommate's things on every piece of the furniture, so she decided to talk to him at the door.

Yahya hid his laughter with his hand, and Malika was upset about him making fun of her, so she ran to the mirror to comb her hair. He was right: her untidiness made her look like a skinny lion. She handed him his bag from behind the door, wondering how long the bride had to be completely made up and well-dressed in front of others. She missed her jeans and her cotton shirts. When could she end her new relationship with the mirror, if even for a short while? Yahya put his fingers in her short hair to mess it up again and left laughing, saying, *skinny lion*.

Malika sat on the edge of the couch after she'd put on suitable clothes for the day and arranged her clothes outside the bag. She was glad that the living-room window was open, and she stood at it, her face covered by the lace curtain. She stood on her toes, wanting to feel that she was still a child, curious and ignorant.

Hadi said hi and walked quickly through the garden to her. She told him gently to take off his shoes, and he hurried to the kitchen, calling his mother, leaving behind a pool of scattered mud.

Malika took her ipad and walked quickly after him, but her steps slowed as she heard Basma complaining about her to Um Thamer, saying she'd slept late and hadn't helped with the chores. Malika saw Thamer coming through the hallway, and she hurried up to welcome him before she went back to the living room, where Yahya was waiting for them.

"How was my roommate's night?" Thamer joked, before asking Yahya and Malika about his sister Reem, who was staying with them. "Medicine is hard, especially in France," Yahya said, adding that she and Malika were best friends now. Malika smiled, saying gently: "I was helping her with French translations, and now you have to help us."

Malika knew she couldn't keep avoiding her responsibilities as she had been. She needed to get back to work on her Master's thesis, and she couldn't find a better place to find information than in Iraq, the place that fate—more than coincidence—had brought her.

Thamer cut short her thoughts by asking about the subject of her study. She was afraid he'd read her thoughts, so she replied quickly that it was the Islamic minaret.

Abu Thamer came in smiling, sat beside Yahya and hugged him. His hands stayed around his nephew, his shoulder pressed to his nephew's shoulder, as if this connection would prove the visit was not just a pleasant passing dream.

He'd been struggling with his tears since they'd arrived in Mosul, as he couldn't accept that his brother's family wouldn't come back to Iraq one day. He couldn't understand it, especially when he blamed all the other people who he called traitors or forsakers when he sat with his friends at the university.

A soft happiness washed over the lunch table. Abu Thamer's family hadn't met all together like this for a long time, not even during the Eid feasts, as usually one of them or another had to work.

Um Thamer laughed, saying, "I wouldn't be exaggerating if I said that we haven't met together like that since Hadi was born." Then she put her hand on the young boy's head with love, and he jumped away from her.

"Your hand's dirty!"

"My darling, you are Hadi and Shady," she replied, joking with him. Then she turned to Abu Thamer, who sat opposite her on the other side of the table. "What did Yassin

want?"

"Money," he said. "He wanted to borrow money for his mother's operation."

"Okay. And you told him we don't have it?"

He nodded yes, then turned toward Yahya. "My son, what are your plans for the land?"

10.

Even though the weather was cold, Um Hussein's forehead and neck were sweaty. Hussein couldn't help but be astonished by his mother as she nervously told tales, as though she were Shahrazad.

In the last few days, her thin sick body had recovered quickly and amazingly. Her face had lightened up, her cheeks flushed, and her memory came back to her. The doctor told them this was the "wakefulness before death" syndrome—the body would recover its health before it shut down for good.

Um Hussein was happy that everyone was around her. Her dusty almond eyes lightened, and she looked a like a child on a feast day. At last, the small family had all come together for her, for the first time in a long time. She asked Sahar to burn some alum to keep away envy and evil eyes. Her cheeks became flushed with the smells that blanketed the house and garden.

She couldn't tell truth from lies when Hussein told her that Yassin's taxi wasn't working, and that the children had a mid-term school holiday, or when he hugged her head, kissing it and saying he had the money for the surgery.

"Do you know how winter used to knock on our doors?" Um Hussein asked as she looked around at her family, one after the other, until she ended at Najla's lovely face.

She answered the question herself: "When we see the sultan's cat, which is the flower that grows in September every year, that's when the hard Mosuli winter comes. The flower looks like a cat with its white fluff tickled by the cold breezes, dancing to the sounds of breaking porcelain water pots, or as they call them, 'shagbat.'"

Um Hussein closed her wrinkled eyelids, remembering the pictures that had disappeared with her family long ago. She sighed, blessing these days and finishing her talk about Mosul. "When the winter came, people stopped sleeping on their roofs, and they threw the porcelain water pots from the roofs down to the zigzagging alley roads. The sky must've heard a great thunder from the pots breaking before its storm!"

Sahar came out to the garden with the lunch plates, listening to the end of Um Hussein's story. She sat with them around the plastic table, and then they were complete.

Um Hussein put her trembling hand on her eldest son's shoulder and said, "Everything has its time." Then she smiled. When Mustafa asked her about the food storage from those days, she started counting the items they used to keep, such as wheat, flour, fruit and vegetables, and some herbs and flowers, such as extract of rose. These weren't only because they had to face the freezing Mosul winter, which had caused the Djila River to freeze twice over, but also in case of fires, wars, and siege, as had happened in the year of starvation during Ottoman times, or before that the siege of Mosul by Nader Shah.

Mansour and Mustafa looked at each other. They understand now why there were boxes of cans in the corner of their grandmother's room, and they understood what it meant for someone to keep pepper and salt and even mint leaves, in spite of the small space. While they had spent a long time making fun of her and stealing from her, she'd lived a long life between the fear of siege and hunger.

Suddenly, she looked tired and aged. Yassin and Hussein carried her to her room, where she could sleep in peace. Yassin came back to the garden after she'd asked to stay alone with Hussein, as it seemed Shahrazad's magic had suddenly fled. Sahar left for her kitchen, the children for their studies, and the dreamy magic story ended. Everyone had played their part.

Um Hussein rested in her room while Hussein sat on the floor beside her. She was lying on the bed, her head relaxed on the pillow, looking at the ceiling fan without moving her head. She asked Hussein if he remembered how his father used to say, *The summer is the father of the poor*, and he nodded, yes, but his answer didn't stop her from slowly telling him about his father, who'd grown up in the old Mosul as a craftsman in a city full of craftsmen, a job that was put on hold in winter. This simple sunflower farmer wanted a better life for his sons. He wanted a light that never went dark and a warmth that would never leave their pockets, so, for his eldest son Hussein, he chose a respectable job that wouldn't be affected by the seasons.

Um Hussein always felt the death of her husband, which deprived his sons of knowing him well and his grandsons of seeing him. She believed he was one of the best men on earth. She saw the blame in Hussein's and Yassin's eyes, and she didn't know how to make Hussein believe that his father has chosen the perfect life for him. She couldn't make him see how lucky he was. Today, she was finding it more and more difficult to say. "Everything has its time," she repeated.

She told Hussein that she didn't want his money. She knew that her time was soon, and she felt alone after everyone she'd loved had departed. Today, Hussein was her dream, and she wanted him to know he was alive because of it. She wanted him to have land instead of a son, something he would leave behind after his death.

Hussein left the room, haunted by her words.

"Haji," Yassin told him, "I got the money from Abu Thamer, and I agreed with the doctor to have the surgery next week."

Hussein's phone rang, and after some silent minutes and nodding, he put the phone back in his pocket and got out his amber beads, a cigarette, and a lighter. He leaned on a chair close to him and went pale, his voice trembling as he tried to get out the words. "It's Abu Zanoun. He said the land is gone."

"What?"

Yassin hadn't seen Hussein's face as yellow as it was now since the disappearance of Dijla. Yassin walked up and hugged him.

"The landlord died in a bombing in Baghdad," Hussein continued, "and his heirs don't want to sell."

Hussein fought his tears. No one noticed them, but they clouded his world and blurred everything around him.
