

BEADS OF MEMORY



Trilogy By
ABDULMAJID DABBAS

TRILOGY
BY
ABDULMAJID ABDULLAH AHMAD DABBAS

**To the legacy of Aminah, my mother,
whose very name means honest and faithful ~
a most elegant, noble, dignified, and beautiful
widow who fought fiercely and bitterly to
save us, her children - her downy, little chicks
- from both starvation of the body and mind,
and who delivered us by her patience,
devotion and determination from the
humiliation and yoke of slavery!**

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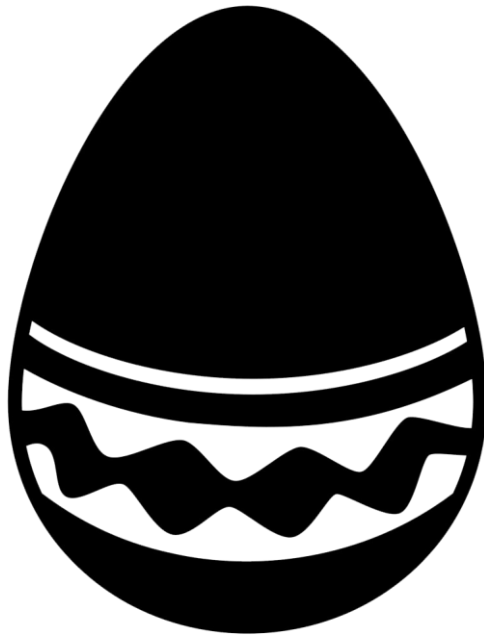
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EASTER EGG



Chapter 1

Melancholy, dejection and loneliness were my only companions as I sat slumped low in mind and spirit in an old, overstuffed armchair in my lowly room in Pasadena, California. It seemed as though there were nothing in the room but my misery. The air that hung over my head was seeded with a wrathful spirit. It hovered over my bed, incubus like, seeming to pin me down so that I dared not move. I was thinking about this day--my first Easter Sunday in America. I was extremely disheartened, tormented and dismayed by my conviction that now, after twenty-one years, a deep-rooted, cherished custom was, for me, ended . . . finished . . . gone . . . perhaps forever!

The occasional Easter hymns with their melancholy music coming from my transistor radio that lay on my oak dresser reinforced my despair and added weight to my already heavy heart! But I tried to close my mind to them. The words of the songs barely reached my consciousness; yet the melodies stirred memories within me, filling and crowding my whole being until I felt I must gasp for the next breath! There was nothing I could do to prevent myself from giving in to heartache. That first unconscious trickle of emotion gathered itself into a wind that pushed forward violently, insistently, leaving me clutching my chest and gasping for air!

A great depression weighed upon me. It had been gripping me since I had awakened to an overcast sky and to the belief that a cruel, hopeless and lonely day lay ahead of me. I gazed fiercely at the opposite wall as though to pierce the boundary of my room, as though willing myself into a more desirable, kinder, more compassionate and more understanding world, back to the land across the seas, oceans and continents from whence I came . . . the land where

customs were more familiar and faces dearer and nearer to my heart. Half an hour later I felt emotionally exhausted, but more relaxed. Instead of counting sheep I had begun to count Easters, picturing my first, second, third... and so on, adding each successive mental image to the first.

The few months I had spent in this wild, mysterious and strange land as a student seemed like an eternity to me, and my heart very frequently ached with unshed tears of loneliness punctuated by occasions of genuine fright and mental anguish! Homesickness and the yearning to see my homeland and loved ones had become a dark, terrible abyss over which I would have to stumble until my education was complete. Nevertheless, I had been grateful for the opportunity to study abroad until today, when I thought it had become too great a burden to withstand. Of course, I had had an inkling that I might suffer from loneliness.

I had chosen to live in a rooming house so that I might feel the wonderful presence of people close around me and surround myself with the familiar noises of a large family without having to give up all of my precious privacy to strangers. I had found such a place on Orange Grove Street in Pasadena. All in all, it was a very convenient setup. The house was within walking distance from the city center, and I had my own rather spacious and well-lit room. As the dining area and the kitchen lay just beyond my large sliding door, I was, in fact, close to a sea of activity--a sea, however, which had ebbed out earlier this particular morning to visit an ailing aunt and which wouldn't be back until evening. Yes, this was my first Easter in America. I was alone for the first time since the beginning of memory. I felt abandoned, forlorn and crushed by the weight of the large, silent house.

As a Muslim, I had never celebrated Easter Sunday. Yet I had awaited its arrival as anxiously and with as much excitement as my own Ramadan and pilgrimage to Mecca. This day had been given to me long ago as a joyous gift from my wonderful and dear Christian friends. I had unheedingly strung these precious gifts together, each year adding one more bead to the slender thread of my memory to take with me wherever destiny would cast me in the years to come. They were very precious and dear to my heart. My mind started gently fingering the beads as I remembered Mother counting her prayer beads, exalting Allah and making petitions to Mohammad, His messenger, the Seal of the Prophets, with the passage of each one on its path around the infinite circle of love and adoration. A great yearning came over me and clutched at my vitals as the beads of memory circled in and out of the lost days of my childhood. But my circle of beads also held in its power great joy and happiness. The nostalgic magic seemed to pick me up and carry me out of my room and beyond the reach of loneliness and self-pity. My mind returned to memories deeply engraved upon the table of my heart. Why, I don't know, but that charitable and pious woman, Eadih, our Christian neighbor in Jordan came to mind in a flash. Her son Elyas and I were best friends and classmates at the government school. That elegant and gracious woman never returned home from Sunday services empty handed. She always stopped at Mr. Kewan's store and bought us some special treat. I remember waiting for it anxiously and impatiently! I loved her dearly. In spite of the fact that Eadih and her husband, Salameh, were not wealthy, they used to slaughter a huge lamb every Christmas and divide it among their poorer neighbors. Along with the lamb, they would also purchase huge sacks of

sugar and rice and divide these to share as well. Some of their neighbors counted the days until Christmas and the blessing of the foodstuffs from this family.

This practice and other charitable deeds, I have been told, began with this couple upon their marriage more than twenty years prior. They were continuing this practice when we moved to the Capital. Six months later we received the grievous news that Elyas had become ill and suddenly died. His doctors were quite puzzled at the time, but this mysterious illness was later known to the world as cancer. Soon after Elyas' death the parents, oh grief! joined their son in the Kingdom of Heaven.

* * * * *

One day when I was five, Mother said to me as she was putting on her outdoor clothes and shoes, "Son, I want you to stay with your sisters while I pay my respects to a few of our neighbors. It's their *Eid* Easter feast today."

"Oh! Is it *Eid* today, Mommy?" I asked, alert and brimming with excitement. "Are we not celebrating too?"

"No, dear, we're not celebrating, but our Christian friends and neighbors are, and I am just popping around to see them and wish them well this Easter. It is a holy day for them," she answered as she stood up, ready to go.

"Do they pass around goodies like we do on our feast days?" I asked eagerly.

"I'm sure they do; and if I can, I'll bring some back home for all of you," she said smiling and shaking her head.

"Yesterday I saw many of the Christian girls carrying trays of *knafeh*, and *ka'k* to the bakery," said my sister Amirah,

describing the thick, sweet pastries savored only on special holy days by our Christian neighbors.

Mother's loving gaze fell warmly upon the circle of upturned faces before her. As she finished bidding us goodbye and started across the room to the door, I jumped to my feet, tossing onto the hard kitchen floor my only toy, a ball she had made me from pieces of old cloth. It made a thudding sound.

"I'll go, too! I'm clean enough!" I announced, holding both hands up for inspection as I slid between Mother and the door. Mother looked down at my beseeching face, and a thin veil of resignation covered her countenance as a small sigh escaped her lips. "*Wallah* I swear . . . your shoes are in such bad condition . . . Well, alright then, get them on quickly and wash your face. I'll wait for you. Hurry up!"

Perhaps my shoes were the reason Mother had planned to go without me! Those shoes--those shabby brown shoes--had their own story. I did not understand the quietness in Mother's voice. I was indignant at her thinking of going without me. Was I not her youngest son? Were we not inseparable? Did we not always go everywhere together? It was true, I had gone everywhere with her since my older brother, Karim, had started school. We had shared practically everything together.

In those days, our small trips outside the house were for the sole purpose of visiting relatives and friends, and, of course, going to the marketplace. It was not customary for a woman to be seen in the marketplace or in any other part of the city alone, especially a very beautiful young widow like my mother; a widow who had already received several proposals from well-to-do and distinguished men, but who had always refused them for the sake of us, her children. Mother's refusal to accept the offer of her many suitors sometimes puzzled friends and relatives, but she always

maintained that she couldn't begin to imagine an intimate relationship with another man besides our father. We also understood she was demonstrating her loyalty to us, since step children in our culture, at that period of time, were invariably treated as extra house servants thrown into the marriage bargain, rather than as family members.

I was privileged to go everywhere with her, for it was well known that parents of Eastern origin hold sons dearer than daughters. Tradition has it that when a son marries, he and his bride will stay in his parents' home to live and work by his parents' side. In a manner of speaking, sons bring them a richer harvest in their autumn years. I don't know why Mother had planned to go without me on this particular day. Perhaps she felt my clothes and shoes were too shabby. My shoes had their own painful, heartbreaking story, which remains with me so vividly, so vigorously, to this very day.

Chapter 2

At that period of time, there were no factories of any kind in the whole country of Jordan or in any of the neighboring countries. Everything had to be handmade, including clothing and household furnishings. If you needed furniture, you talked to a carpenter. If you needed dishes, you purchased them from a potter. Seamstresses designed and stitched dresses for the women and tailors fashioned the clothing for men. Shoes were made by the local cobbler and his assistants. All raw materials—from cloth, leather, and wood down to glue and nails--were imported and brought on ships from the British Empire and the Empire of Japan. One day the previous year, Mother had come to my older brother Karim and me and said, "*Yallah!* Come on, boys; let's go to *Abu Salim*, the cobbler, to buy you both a pair of new shoes." I couldn't believe my ears, and thought I was dreaming!

"Are you serious, Mother?" I asked, overflowing with happiness. Seeing the expression on her face, I immediately jumped up, kissed her on the cheeks, and prepared to go. "But we don't have any money, Mother," Karim observed directly.

A sad smile spread over our mother's face, weathered, yet still full of life and hope. She said soothingly, "We will get them on credit just as your father, may his soul rest in peace, used to do."

Karim replied, "I know that father used to buy from *Abu Salim* on credit all year long, and repay all the debts at harvest time. But now, Mother, we have no crops, not even any land! We can't go and ask him for anything!"

"Now, now . . . I have great faith in Allah," Mother said with the deepest conviction. "Don't worry; He will take care of us. I am sure He will . . . very sure!"

"But how is that possible, Mother? We can barely manage to feed ourselves. How can we pay for two pairs of shoes? It is a lot of money!"

While the verbal battle raged between Karim and Mother, I stood there quietly, praying to Allah with burning desire that my brother would agree to go. After all, we were in desperate need of new shoes. For months we had been enduring the ridicule of our playmates because our toes peered out from the tips of our shoes like members of a starving family from the window of a derelict hovel. Finally Mother had the last word and we left for the cobbler's shop together.

At the cobbler's, after a long debate and much convincing on Mother's part, *Abu Salim* agreed to sell us two pairs of shoes on credit. But that was only after Mother assured him that she would pay the bill on time, just as my father used to do. As if suddenly struck by an angelic vision of my father, remembering his integrity, and the way he made sure to pay his debts completely and on time, *Abu Salim* even offered to replace Mother's worn out shoes. She refused graciously, however, as the commitment might be too much, and she wanted to be a woman of her word.

My father used to buy all of our shoes from *Abu Salim*, often purchasing shoes for the field hands who worked for him. He always insisted on custom fitted handmade shoes of the finest quality leather and would never accept anything else. He avoided buying the shoes that were made from used tires because they got very hot as you walked on the blistering ground, causing your feet to feel like a piece of

barbecued meat, especially when socks were considered to be an unnecessary and luxurious commodity.

This day *Abu* Salim refused to give us custom fitted handmade shoes, so we were forced to select a pair of shoes that were hanging from the various nails that speckled the walls. These shoes were often made by the cobbler's assistants and offered neither the quality nor the comfortable fit of custom made shoes. My brother chose a pair with camel soles and calfskin uppers tipped with red leather. Wanting a special style that would stand out and would make an impression on my playmates, I settled for a pair just like his, but with a red heelpiece on each shoe. Mother suggested that we should wait until we had returned home and washed before we put them on. Karim agreed, but I couldn't wait and slipped them on right over my dirty feet. The world could not contain our happiness as we prepared to leave with these new treasures.

Just as we were about to depart with a new spring in our steps, an overpowering stench engulfed the workshop. We all turned in unison to see where the smell was coming from, as if beckoned by the unpleasantness of the disgusting odor. The stench was so formidable that one could not help but notice it. With each breath we inhaled, we became more curious as to what could possibly produce such an awful stink.

We focused our attention on the outside of the cobbler's shop where we saw a large man with a huge head, big hands and a very long, dirty beard. He strode into the shop exuding the powerful odor of the habitually unwashed. Trailing along behind him was a boy of Karim's age. Without even the most minimal greeting, he jerked my brother Karim's new shoes from where they lay on the cobbler's bench. Examining them carefully, he handed them to his son to try on. Karim stretched out his hand to take them from the boy, but the man

shoved him to the floor. Karim and Mother looked at each other in astonishment. I could barely control my tears. We expected *Abu Salim* to stand up for our agreement and us. Instead, his eyes avoided us as he asked the boy if the shoes were a proper fit.

"Do you like them, young man? They are good . . . very good. I think they will last you the whole year," *Abu Salim* said enthusiastically.

I looked back and forth from Karim to Mother, then ardently prayed to Allah that the shoes would not fit this boy who had so suddenly destroyed our happiness. In response to *Abu Salim's* inquiry, however, the boy nodded his head several times, and a broad smile spread over his dirty face. His father then asked the price of the shoes. At *Abu Salim's* response, the man offered him half the amount my mother had been charged.

In the course of their haggling, *Abu Salim* gradually came down in price and the man came up a little. Again, crossing my fingers, I prayed to Allah this time that no deal would be struck between the two. Unfortunately, my prayers again went unanswered. The bearded man and his boy left with my brother's shoes. I felt a great bitterness rise within me as though my heart and soul had walked out the door. I caught the expressions of pain and embarrassment on my mother's and brother's faces and perceived their suffering to be greater than mine.

Crestfallen, we searched through the rows and rows of hanging shoes for another pair in my brother's size, but to no avail. Finally *Abu Salim*, perhaps a bit embarrassed by his recent lapse in etiquette, suggested that we return after ten days or two weeks when perhaps another pair might be found among the batch currently being made, for we had no hope of finding another pair that day. For a split second, I

wished my mother had never suggested this trip to *Abu Salim's* today, for we had been very happy beforehand. I suggested to Mother that I leave my shoes until Karim could also return home with his, but Karim protested strongly, saying that it would be best for at least one of us to have a pair. I looked at Mother. She said nothing. *Abu Salim* advised me to keep them, as there was no guarantee that we would find another well-fitting pair for me upon our return. Taking his advice, we took my shoes and left.

On the way home, silence hung heavily in the air as though we were walking in a funeral procession. I watched Mother's tears cascading down her cheeks, making small hot splashes on the ground by her feet. Although her face twisted in pain, not even a murmur accompanied the silent flood of tears. The rest of the day passed without a single word from Karim in spite of the efforts put forward by the rest of the family to cheer him up. Even though I was very young, I understood that he and Mother were both suffering greatly. Later, in the dead of the night, whether before or after midnight I couldn't tell since we had no clock, I was awakened by the sounds of my brother's muffled sobs. We slept side-by-side and, though he tried to conceal his tears from me, his emotions were straining to be released as if he were an erupting volcano. I didn't utter a single word, but silently joined him crying, the hot tears flowing down my cheeks like firebrands.

The bond between us was strong and as durable as forged steel. Although the difference in age was very little, I had always greatly respected and revered Karim. I looked to him for everything from the time that we lost our father, and I sought his advice, guidance, and blessing in every undertaking. Karim treated me as if I were his own son

rather than his brother, and I looked up to him as if he were my father.

He had to grow up early and be the man of the house, Mother's advisor. He was an idealist in his thinking, a moralist in his behavior. I always looked at him as my ideal and my guide. He accepted responsibility for our family's well-being without complaint.

Many long years have passed since that day; yet I can see Karim in front of me vividly, as though in a home movie shot just yesterday. In one frame I see the brute that shoved Karim to the floor and took his new shoes from him. Over the years, I have replayed this film in my mind literally thousands of times. These images have never lost their power over me.

Chapter 3

At last Mother and I departed to visit the homes of our Christian friends. The Sulaimans welcomed us at the outer door of their home where we removed our shoes and placed them on the porch. After the formalities of handshaking and after Mother had exchanged kisses with the women folk and the profuse greetings so dear to our hearts and so eloquently expressed in our language that it would make a goat blush, we were ushered into the parlor which was strictly reserved for guests. We were invited to take a seat on the beautifully covered, thick mattresses which bordered the floor of the room. A huge, brightly colored cushion adorned the head of each mattress so that a guest, if he so chose, could seat himself sideways, thus propping himself up comfortably on one elbow if he so desired.

Hearing the incessant chatting of the adults, I was impressed by the fact that, on the surface at least, perhaps Christian holidays were really no different from Muslim *Eids*. I was neither included nor interested in this talk, so I let my mind wander. I speculated on the possibility of this good family giving money to small boys on such occasions, as I admired the beautiful red and blue flowers woven in profusion on the velvety rug under my bare feet. "How soft and luxurious!" I thought. Surely they would have a little extra, even half a *piaster*, for a good boy who so rarely had coins to hold or treasure, or even to spend on candy at Mr. Kewan's store where my older sisters often took me on shopping trips for household necessities. Whenever we went there, Mother would give us an egg or two, or a large handful of grain, barley or guinea corn to use as barter for the kerosene that fueled our lamps. We were too poor to have a cooking stove--unlike our wealthy

Christian neighbors who had their own shop--so we had to rely on wood for cooking. Rarely did we barter for the candy so temptingly displayed in glass decanters set in colorful rows on the shelves of the small grocery store. We seldom had anything left over with which to barter. The thought of this tasty array set my long-neglected sweet tooth dancing. I became obsessed with the whereabouts of the candy waiting to be passed around.

Miriam, the teenage daughter of the family we were visiting, asked me, "Have you collected many eggs and candies, Jamil?"

I jumped at the question, embarrassed and afraid that she might have read my thoughts. My gaze directed downwards, I couldn't manage a reply. I just stood there, shaking my head.

"Do you mean you haven't collected any eggs during all of the Easter holiday? That's what you are supposed to do!" she persisted, disbelief in her sweet voice.

What could she possibly mean? Oh, Allah, I know what she meant! They must offer eggs instead of goodies, expecting us to go for ourselves to Mr. Kewan's shop and use them to barter. What a disappointing and odd way to celebrate! Then all at once, the exciting possibility of it all suddenly came to me. I imagined myself standing in front of those magic containers, making my own choices, freely and unhurriedly. In a way, it seemed as if eggs, like *piasters*, had power. Boy, these Christians are mighty smart! I became excited once again.

Miriam was a tall, slim, charming girl with two deep, dancing coquettish dimples that thrilled the heart and provoked the emotions of any admirer. She did not pursue her questioning, but rose with graceful elegance from her

place beside me and left the room, giving a barely perceptible nod in the elders' direction as she passed.

This charming young lady had always captivated my boyish senses with her slender, graceful figure and beautiful long black hair, rich with the highlights of ground cinnamon, tied into two flowing braids. Her smile was sunshine itself and her cheeks glowed with the health of ripe apples. When she looked right at me, the breath would catch in my throat as I felt her laughing eyes fairly envelope me in their pure sweetness. For me she was the living symbol of girlish vitality and grace. In spite of the fact that I was just a little boy and did not know the real meaning of beauty, I nevertheless took great pleasure in looking at Miriam's charming face and lively eyes. It was as if I were admiring a work of art.

Soon she returned to the room carrying a pretty basket full of objects, familiarly egg-shaped. I glanced at them. "Oh, what is that?" I thought to myself. What an array of magical color! There were differing shades of brown, from golden tan to dark reddish tones. Some had beautiful patterns on them in leaf-like tracery; others were as smooth as velvet.

I sat, transfixed, as Miriam bent down to me, holding the basket by its long handle and waiting for me to select one, but I could not seem to reach out to take one. Mrs. Sulaiman must have seen my hesitation, for she said encouragingly, "They're colored eggs for you to eat. Haven't you seen them before? Help yourself, dear."

"Take one, son," Mother echoed reassuringly. "Aren't they pretty? He's never seen colored eggs before!" she told our hosts apologetically.

It was true; I had never seen anything like them. What a waste of life, living all this time without having colored eggs! The tawny shades were indeed beautiful. But how did they expect me to choose just one! With much deliberation, I

picked one out--a solid, dark reddish brown one just like the ornamentally decorated *gonbaz* I had long admired and dreamed so long of owning at the dressmaker's market stall. As Miriam once again left the room, she placed the basket on a shiny silver tray that rested on a small-carved table in one corner of the room.

When I heard the familiar hissing of the kerosene stove coming from the kitchen beyond, I knew instinctively that Turkish coffee was being made. I studied the egg I had chosen, cradling it gently in my hand. I felt Miriam's presence only when I saw, from under my lowered lids, her dainty feet before me. She held in her hand the handle of a basket, a twin to the first. It was piled with the sweets I had anticipated: candies, figs, raisins and small, round homemade date cookies which I readily took in handfuls and stuffed into my pockets.

Cups of steaming, thick bittersweet coffee were served to the adults next, with large chunks of toffee to accompany them. I joined in by taking out a cookie and slowly nibbling on it. It was during this lull in conversation that a brilliant idea struck me. I rose quickly to my knees, took a firm hold of Mother's chin and pulled her down toward me, whispering my idea into her surprised face. Our host, perhaps momentarily inattentive to the women's talk, noticed this bit of action and certainly could not miss Mother's confused embarrassment. He kindly asked her what was needed. "Oh, it's really nothing," my tenderhearted and precious mother promptly assured him. "He is saying how glad he is to come with me and wish you a happy *Eid*."

And I, equally sure that the moment of opportunity was rapidly escaping my grasp, blurted out, "I just asked if I could take some eggs for my two little sisters. That's all."

No sooner had these words escaped my lips than the room filled with laughter and my face became red with embarrassment. I wished the ground would open up and swallow me. Why had I opened my mouth! Everyone was staring and chuckling heartily. Oh, Allah, let me out of here! My ears grew steaming hot and my face flushed red even though I knew the laughter was friendly and good-natured, for these were very amiable people.

"You have a son to be proud of, Aminah. Not every five-year-old would be so thoughtful and conscientious!" declared the man of the house, who had no son of his own. How grateful I was to that kind, generous and understanding man! I had calmed down a bit by now, and his words made me realize I was indeed quite right to openly consider my brothers and sisters. After all, why should they miss out? Miriam had done her mother's bidding and, as we left, she presented us with a pottery bowl containing many eggs and a handful of mixed sweets. I looked up to give my own good-byes, and Mr. Sulaiman stood beside me. With a smile and a wink he placed in my hand a half *piaster*, delighting me to such heights of ecstasy that only my careful training restrained me from dancing. I raised my arm in farewell and called, "*Eid Sayeed!* Happy Easter!" The smile on my face more than matched his. I had a warm, contented feeling inside me as I left their house. I was indeed happy that I had come to visit.

Before that afternoon was over, Mother and I went to several friends' homes to wish them "Happy Easter." Twice Mother waited while I ran home to deposit in a safe place the pocketful of goodies I had been given which she would divide among us later that day. By now I felt very excited. What a wonderful, eventful day it had turned out to be! After

our evening meal, the eggs I had collected were distributed among us all.

My sisters were enchanted. Seeing what a hit the eggs had made, I asked, "Mommy, why don't we celebrate this feast day and buy colored eggs?"

"Because we are Muslims, son. This is a special day for our Christian brothers."

"Then why don't we just become Christians?" I eagerly suggested.

Mother sat down and drew me close to her knees. "My dear, things are not as simple as that. Life is not just black and white. The pretty eggs do not make the people's religion. They are merely symbols that stand for new life to the followers of Christ. Christians and Muslims believe in the same God, but we do not believe that Jesus was crucified. We believe he was taken up to heaven by Allah." And so this simple, illiterate woman explained to a little boy the difference between our beliefs in the best way she knew how. In Muslim countries at that time, we were taught from childhood by our parents and in schools that Muslims and Christians are brothers and we are all God's children worshipping the same God. It became a standing joke in our family and the neighborhood that I had interrupted her at that point by suggesting that if that were the case, then we had better change our religion.

"What's that . . . that thing Allah did to Jesus?" I asked, my head cocked to one side.

"Well, to be resurrected only means to come back to life after being dead. It's hard to understand, children, especially at your age."

"Oh, Mom, Of course I know about it!" I answered with grownup assurance. "Like when Uncle Hamdan hit his

chicken over the head and it died. After a few minutes it was resr . . . resrec . . . it came back 'cause I saw it walk away."

"No, stupid!" my younger sister, Ammoon, lisped, stamping her small foot emphatically. "It's like when Miss Fauzi tied a rope around that naughty old cat's neck and swung him rapidly against a rock several times until he died 'cause he ate her chickens. When she went inside the house, the naughty cat got up and ran away. He was surakted. Right, Mommy?"

"That mischievous cat was resurrected, all right," Karim clarified, "but not by Allah. It was Satan that gave him nine lives so he could continue to eat more baby chicks." Karim thought for a moment, then added with a scholarly air, "Allah would only bring a human back to life, right Mom?"

"But, Mom, our Prophet Mohammad died too, so why couldn't Allah bring him back to life so we could have Easter?" I asked, showing off my powers of reasoning.

"God didn't want to bring our Prophet Mohammad, peace be upon him, back to life because he was a human being, and it is natural for humans to die," Mother said.

She paused for a moment and then continued, "We Muslims believe that Jesus Christ, peace be upon him, is a messenger of God like Moses and Mohammad. We also believe that Jesus' Mother, the noble Maryam, may God bless her soul, was a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus. God sent him as a sign to mankind and to give us mercy."

I am quite sure that none of us children understood what Mother was saying or were interested in her explanation, but she kept on talking. "Because Jesus Christ is from God's Spirit, our Christian brothers believe that he is the Son of God. We Muslims disagree because we believe . . ." and she began to recite verses from the Holy Quran: "In the Name of Allah the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. Say, O,

Mohammad, 'He is Allah, the One, the Self-Sufficient Master whom all creatures need. He neither eats nor drinks. He begets not, nor was He begotten. And there is none co-equal or comparable unto Him.'"

She gently and humbly passed her opened hands over her face as a sign of respect and added, "Our Christian brothers also believe that Jesus Christ, peace be upon him, was crucified and taken up to Heaven. But we Muslims believe that he was neither killed nor crucified, but that he was taken up to Heaven alive to be with God. This, my beloved children, is the only difference between them and us. We are all children of God, and we all worship one God even if we have different viewpoints."

"Is that why, Mom, you are always encouraging me to go with my friend, Ibrahim, to his church?" asked Karim.

"Of course, son. I urge you to go with him every time you can. We Muslims consider the Church like the Mosque. Both are God's temple and both are places to worship Him."

"You know, Mom," Karim said, "every time I hear men and women reciting hymns at the church, I feel great happiness and peacefulness, exactly the same feeling that comes over me when I hear Imam reciting from the Holy Quran at the Mosque."

"Of course, son! That is why I tell you we all, Muslims and Christians, worship the same God, and the Mosque and the Church are His temples." Mother licked her dry lips and added, "I was visiting our neighbor, Eadih, three Sundays ago when Father Hanna, their Priest, came to visit them too. After she, her husband and her son kissed his hand and placed it on their foreheads, I did the same. When Father Hanna asked why he did not see me at church and learned that I am a Muslim, he placed his right hand on my head and,

raising his eyes upward said, `Our Heavenly Father, bless this meek woman.' I was very pleased."

Many years later after we had moved to the capital and bought our new house, history repeated itself. It was the third day of the Christmas celebration, and mother was paying a visit to our Christian neighbors to wish them 'Merry Christmas' as she did every Christmas and Easter. Since it is the custom in our part of the world that Muslims and Christians exchange visits on religious occasions, the neighbor's house was full of men and women from both religions.

While everybody was eating sweets and drinking tea or coffee, the hostess's priest came to wish them a 'Merry Christmas.' After the Muslim visitors were introduced to Father Salameh, Mother asked him to do us a great honor by visiting our house and blessing it. Father Salameh assured Mother that he would gladly bless her home after he returned from Rome. He was leaving for the trip in only a couple of days, but expected to return in two weeks' time. He was going to a clergymen's convention. Then he smiled and added, "I am hoping to have an audience with our Holy Father, the Pope."

The good man kept his word. Soon after his return, he came to our house on a Sunday afternoon. A young man who was with him carried a large, beautiful censer to every corner of our house, leaving the sweet smell behind. This made all of us exceedingly happy and thankful.

In spite of the fact that many years have passed and many ups and downs have taken place in my life, I still remember clearly as if it were last night, Father Salameh's radiant face and charming voice as he recited most earnestly and enthusiastically some verses from the Holy Bible. My

thoughts rounded back again to our conversation on Christians and Muslims.

It seemed that little sister Ammoon felt left out when she said angrily, "So we are Allah's chicks, Mom! Right?" Showing off my powers of reasoning again, I said, "Chicks, stupid, are children of chicks, but we are children of Mother and Father."

Mother smiled, looked at my sister and myself and said, "My dears, we must remain Muslims because we understand that we are children of Allah. However, if people are good like us or our Christian brothers, Allah doesn't mind what message we choose to believe." With an amused but understanding look she added, "We can have eggs any time you like. You need not worry, my beloved ones."

"Can we do that without being Christians, Mom?" I asked incredulously.

"Of course, sweet heart; we have plenty of eggs and onion skins. We'll boil them together any time you like," she replied.

At these words, I felt sharp disappointment that such a magical thing should come about in so ordinary a manner.

"Why, surely they come from some secret store known only to the Christians!" I thought. I ran to my mother, embraced her knees and started weeping bitterly. "You know just about everything, don't you, Mommy? You know that we want some eggs!" I glanced over my shoulder at my siblings for confirmation. They were all nodding enthusiastically.

Mother kept her word, and on a few occasions we and our Muslim friends had all the brown eggs we could hold. But it seemed there was always some excuse for not having them again. It was only after I entered high school and our brother Karim was easing the financial difficulties with his salary that I fully understood that Mother had always tried to

keep from us how very poor we had been. Those precious eggs and chickens were practically the only means of support for our family after Father's death.

After all these years filled with a wealth of education and varied experiences, I marvel that an illiterate woman who didn't know how to read or write, and who never went to school, could explain to us her children, a complicated theological concept! I always ask myself and wonder!

Chapter 4

Thinking and talking about the coming of each Easter occupied much of my time during the following years. Last Easter had endeared itself so much to my heart. It was embedded in my memory forever. Sometime at the end of winter, Mother--I suppose to still my questions--bought me a basket from a street vendor. Cheap though it no doubt was, it was to me, at least, the most beautiful one in the whole world. It was mine! When it was given to me, I was told that the following Easter I would be old enough to go by myself and that I would be given plenty of warning in advance about the date. I therefore secured my basket in a safe place and checked on its condition frequently, even tiptoeing out of bed at times so as not to awaken the others and reveal my secret. Dreams of colored eggs came often to me at night. Some were strange and remarkable. My favorite was one I dubbed my "Fairy Dream" in which I stood in front of a hillock of the tawny beauties. As I admired them, they suddenly started moving, as though heavy with life ready to emerge. Sure enough, there was a gentle tinkling sound as each egg cracked in zigzag lines across its surface, heralding the entrance into the world of the contents of each one. Moonlight lay on the scene before me. I watched spellbound as a large yellow butterfly fluttered from a shell. Soon more butterflies and birds of many colors emerged and spread their beautiful wings. The tinkling sound of cracking shells continued, and each note held until all the bell-like tones blended in a strange melody of heavenly beauty. It reminded me of the sound of ice melting from the frozen branches of winter, each crystallized drop falling melodiously upon the icy ground below.

A deep note sounded and I glanced at the lower part of the mound where a large egg rocked frantically. Soon it broke with the sound of a plucked cello string in the deepest register. As the shell fell away to the grass, a dainty gazelle, her long slender legs folded under her body, arose wobbly and uncertain. I could not turn my head fast enough to catch each new orchestral sound or to see the arrival of the fluffy chicks, the rabbits, the pure white lambs and other small creatures. Inspired with new life, they danced, cavorted and gamboled on the grass where the small mound had been a few moments before. The air and earth before me was crowded with movement of unimaginable grace, all the small wings and frolicking legs in rhythm with the music. How long I stood watching, I could not tell. Time was at a standstill. I believe it was the change in the moonlight that made me raise my eyes, for the sky had clouded over, leaving only a concentrated moonbeam slanting down in spotlight brilliance on the enchanted life below.

With fascination I watched as the butterflies began drifting upward, their colors growing in intensity as they fluttered within the boundaries of light. The birds, still singing, soared and floated, held captive by the rhythm and cadences played by the heavenly pipes. The chicks, like butterballs, rolled and tumbled in and out amongst the hopping rabbits. The lambs and velvety gazelles went leaping and bounding playfully up the magic path to heaven! I looked about me. I was alone. In my dream I stepped fully forward into the circle to join my little friends or, at least, to better see where they had gone so freely and happily, but darkness was all around me.

Now I was sitting up in bed, rubbing my eyes. What had awakened me? I heard our shepherd dog, Kattash, barking furiously in front of the house, probably at a passing cat. I

was ready to go out and kick the stupid fellow, but decided instead to ask Mother not to feed him for a few days. I fell back on the bed, trying to recapture the dream. It was the first of many times that I went through the dream, eyes wide open. It was mine, after all. It was one of the brightest beads on my string.

In our small town, rumors flew in typical mid-eastern fashion: throughout the neighborhood, from house to house, on the lips of idle men and women. Very soon, people would stop me at my play and ask about my basket and about that "wonderful dream." It is amazing how things get around.

* * * * *

The next Easter morning dawned at last. Mother, during her early morning prayers, heard me and met me at the hiding place. She persuaded me to wait for our Christian friends to enjoy their breakfast after they had returned from the church's early services. "Impatience is a trait of the devil," Mother replied with the traditional rebuke to impatient and restless children.

On hearing this, I knew I had to be just a little more patient. I had waited so long for this moment, but I wouldn't have to wait too much longer, just until after breakfast, then I could pay my more than willing respects to them. After all, it was they who had brought this very exciting day to life for me. Before our visit last year, what had I known of Easter and Easter eggs and of celebrations in the spring of the year? I was elated beyond belief to be participating in their festivities and I felt that I would burst with excitement if I didn't get there soon.

Every time I knocked at the door of a friend's family, as soon as someone opened it and his sight fell upon me, he would cry out excitedly in a loud voice as though calling

every member of the family to announce the presence of a celebrity or dignitary. "Jamil is here with his basket!" Like a flash of lightening, the members of the family would surround me, showering me with various questions about my basket; where had I bought it, how much it cost, how many eggs I had collected so far, and so on.

A truth was born in me that day as I went from door to door: the one thing which I found myself hurrying to see was the secret happiness radiating out to me from joyous faces. The simple eggs were but an added joy for me, Warm smiles were showered on me as I merrily called, "*Eid Sayeed!*" I felt a part of something large and marvelous. My Christian friends were sharing this gladness with me, a small Muslim boy. Each happy home was but one more white, shiny bead of memory.

I also learned that day that all beads cannot be pure white, nor can we exclude the dark ones from our circling string. Mother was right when she told us that life was not just black and white. These simple words became very real to me that day. I knocked at the door of a humble home and waited a long time for a response. I could hear Mrs. Sirhan inside. I was thinking of leaving when the door opened. After I greeted her happily and smiled generously, I noticed the frown of annoyance as she looked down into my face and then at the basket. Without uttering a single word, she disappeared for a moment and then returned carrying something which she carelessly tossed toward the basket and then abruptly closed the door. She had said not a single word to me. Then I saw a chunk of bread in the dirt where it had accidentally fallen.

I put down my partially filled basket and quickly picked it up and wiped it clean on my clothes. But, inside me I could only feel sadness and disappointment. Because we were

taught that bread is the staff of life, the evidence of Allah's goodness, I kissed it and placed it on my forehead. I repeated this cleansing and kissing three times as Mother had taught me. How could anyone toss bread like that! How could someone have the nerve to disgrace God like this!

Mrs. Sirhan had made me feel like a beggar. Insulted and humiliated, I ran off with amazing speed, paying little heed to my eggs, the two blocks to my house and to my mother. "Mommy! Mommy! She threw bread at me like I was a stray, mangy street dog! It fell in the dirt!" I gasped through my falling tears, smearing them away with the back of my hands. "You needn't worry, though, because I brushed it away, and I also kissed it and put it on my forehead. Mrs. Sirhan is a mean old woman! May Allah take her soul to the fire of *Jahannam*! Why, she almost made me forget all the others who were nice to me. How . . . how could she be so utterly horrible, I really don't understand!"

One of Mother's lovely smiles spread across her face like the whisper of dawn's first light, and she gently and compassionately said, "Well sweetheart! We must always think the best of others. You know she's not a happy person anymore. She is lonely and sad since her son's death." Mother put her arm around my shoulder. "In the years ahead, the smiles of the happy ones will crowd out the memory of this one woman's unhappiness. I think of it like a small cloud sailing in front of the sun which drifts past and is forgotten leaving the warmth and light to fill the sky." She stood momentarily and added as an afterthought, "You blessed the bread well, and I am proud of you."

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I carried on with this custom until I became a teenager and entered secondary school. I abandoned the basket though I continued to visit my Christian friends, who presented me with not just colored eggs, but also a small bowl into which I discarded the shells. I took the eggs with affection and tenderness for they remained to me the objects of amazement, longing and love. Strangely, they also began to offer me an accompanying glass of local brandy which initially I rejected, for I was, after all, a committed Muslim; but I eventually succumbed and sipped it in their company, delighting in the inner warmth and glow that the liquid engendered in my body, one that complemented the conviviality of the occasion perfectly.

How precious and special to me those little eggs were! I put them tenderly into my pocket, treating them as carefully as if I were handling a precious pearl or a rare work of art, or as if I were a musician holding my lyre as though it were something holy and sacred; or even like an enthralled lover with his beloved, frightened that his least touch might harm her. They reminded me of my childhood, those days emblazoned on my mind's eye in the glory of their simplicity and contentment. I put the eggs tenderly in my pocket.

My friends' parents always laughed when they remembered and reminded me of those nostalgic days when I came to their homes and both young and old surrounded me, pressing me with questions about the dream in which my eggs changed into birds, doves, pigeons, gazelles and rabbits. I laughed and they laughed with me! How I wished for those beautiful and happy days to return, but the curtains had closed on those pretty scenes and there was to be no encore, save in the vistas of my mind's eye!

* * * * *

Chapter 5

My thoughts circled wheeled and turned homeward like a flock of gulls homing toward the shore at day's end. I was still alone in my room here in Pasadena, California, on Easter day. How ironic and piteous it seemed that here in America, a country I thought to be Christian, I was not celebrating a Christian holy day as I had always done in my own Muslim world. I felt like an outcast. I felt a longing to be with someone who knew me, someone who understood the simple pleasures of this life that I had enjoyed in the sincere, unprejudiced manner that I had been encouraged to follow. For around twenty years I had practiced this custom that was dear to my heart and refreshing to my soul.

I could not remember a single Easter that had gone by without visiting my beloved Christian friends, wishing them a happy Easter and eating an egg or two with them and sometimes drinking a glass of brandy! This was the first Easter I would spend without saying those beloved words, "Happy Easter", to the people who had given me so much joy and happiness! This would be the first Easter I would spend far from my family and friends.

Who knew, I might well die in this country far from home and not see any of them again. And even if I did not die, I would experience many long years of loneliness and separation before I would see any of them again. For the first time in my whole life I felt like a stranger, forlorn and crushed, totally alone and afraid. Sorrow that overwhelmed my soul and a fear filled my heart - a sense of separation that tore me apart inside, melting my innermost being. Then I suddenly felt a fierce longing for my mother, a desire to cast myself into her lap and to smell the special scent of her

heavenly odor, so that she could pass her hands over my head rhythmically as she recited from the Holy Quran. I longed to seek help and guidance from her quiet eyes and to receive assurance and security from her shining smile. All I needed to expel this blinding sadness was to put my arms around her waist so that I could look at her beautiful, radiant face. Such things, when they came to my mind, brought me peace, calm and serenity. All at once, I sensed too, a powerful desire for my brothers and sisters, for my relatives, my friends and my neighbors, and above all, for my beloved homeland. I felt that I loved them vehemently—yes, passionately. I knew that I loved them more than I loved myself. I was gripped by a love for all of them. Before that day I did not realize the extent of my love for them. I never realized I would lose them and that their loss would tear my heart to pieces and light a blazing fire devastating my innermost being and emotions. For the first time in my life, I felt that I lived for them and in the hope of returning to be with them once again. Oh, Allah! Why had I come here? And how could I get through this life without their encouragement and support! How did I ever believe I could survive in my new life, by myself, without my family . . . my all! I felt sickened by fear. A profound sigh seeped through my body as the last traces of receding memory trickled into the darkness of the past like a quiet wave sliding off the beach and into the midnight sea. My heart cried out for consolation, for justification for my presence on Orange Street in Pasadena, California, and encountered the irrevocable knowledge of the Almighty's predestination working inscrutably in my life. I curled up in my chair and pulled my legs close up to me as if some snake or wild beast were trying to bite me. I felt that I was completely alone in this tremendously huge and

equally complex world. It was as if I were going to suffocate from my fear and loneliness. I wanted, if it were possible, to cry out from the depths of my heart and at the top of my lungs to plead for help. I felt like a small child who had lost his parents. Suddenly I felt that my huge world had begun to shrink, hemming me in and leaving me without space for my own body! It seemed it would break my bones and suffocate me. My limbs began to quiver, my eyes blurred. I turned inward I called upon God asking for His help and protection. For as long as I could remember, I had been in the habit of calling God's name and asking His blessing on everything I did. It was inevitable that I would call on God's name before beginning anything. Mother had trained me to do this since I was a child. She had said to me, "If you want God to bless you, my son, always say, 'May this please God and my parents.'" continued to do what my mother had taught me. And so I had always felt security, peace and tranquility within. It had been a habit, but now I was calling out in earnest.

At home I turned to face Mecca five times a day and prayed. Some days it was more than five times. Often I would perform extra devotions above and beyond my duty, and carry out vigils lasting through the night. My mother had trained me in this way since my seventh birthday. She had been compensated for the death of her husband by the love of her children. So I always observed what she had taught me. Alas! I had not prayed once; I had not called upon God once; and I had not fasted a single day since leaving my country to board a Greek steamer in Beirut harbor. I had forgotten God, becoming completely oblivious to Him. I had completely forgotten my Creator. I had neglected my obligations and so He had forsaken me. How wretched and

ashamed I felt now! I remembered this with great depression, despair and sadness.

In the Muslim world, the child is taught when he becomes seven years old to pray five times a day, to fast in the month of Ramadan, and to learn by heart some simple verses from the Holy Quran in Arabic in order to recite them during the prayer times. These are the Pillars of Islam. There are many others, too, that apply to all children no matter their gender or native language, whether they are literate or not.

"Glory be to God and exalted be His Name; the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful and the Most High; Who has created man from the dirt--created human beings and all that exists. He Who lifted up the highest heaven and spread out the earth and proportioned it."

That day I was the only person left in the huge lodging house. All the other lodgers had left for places in Southern California to spend time with a loved one, a relative or a friend. Even Mrs. Lewis, who had seen ninety-three summers and was semi-paralyzed and who leaned on a stick to walk, had gone out and was spending the day with her friends at a retirement home in Glendale.

I suddenly became aware of a repetitive sound that broke through the silence of the house. The telephone was ringing. I dutifully slid back my door and crossed the hall to the telephone. With shaking legs and trembling hands I picked up the receiver. In answer to my low, indifferent salutation, a voice asked, "Jamil? Are you all right? You haven't had bad news from home, have you, Jamil?" The woman's voice expressed high anxiety and deep concern.

It was as if the woman's question increased my pain and stirred up emotions buried deep within me. I wanted to cry over the telephone, but my sense of manhood and my embarrassment held me back. Despite my turmoil, I tried

with considerable difficulty to sound calm and normal. "Oh, Mrs. Sharp! Happy Easter! I'm just a little tired, that's all." I said, telling only part of the truth.

"We just got back from church. Laura called just as we were leaving. They had to go to Riverside. Her father-in-law is seriously ill and was rushed to the hospital! We decided to find something here at home for dinner. It'll just be a little late because of the change of plans, but we would love to have you join us; it'll just be the four of us."

I gladly accepted her invitation and went to prepare myself, neglecting, in the excitement of the moment, to take along a small token of my appreciation for Mrs. Sharp and her daughter. I didn't feel quite so alone now. Someone had at least remembered me. Mrs. Sharp would come for me at about three o'clock and drive me the few miles to their pleasant, warm home in Arcadia.

I was first introduced to the Sharps through my college. One morning Miss Elder, my English Instructor entered the classroom and explained that I was needed at the main office. I was met by Mrs. Hamilton, the Foreign Student Advisor, and was overjoyed. She explained to me that I had been chosen to be the dinner guest of an American couple at their home.

I had spent a number of very interesting and enjoyable Sundays and evenings with them. Their only child, their fouryear-

old daughter, Sandra, and I had quickly become good friends, and she had generously returned my affection in full measure. I had given her a small olive wooden caravan, carved in Bethlehem and she was always carrying it in her hands or dangling one of the camels from her pockets.

I had not cared for Mrs. Amy Sharp at our first meeting. In truth, I had hated and despised her. She seemed to be far too haughty. Her presence was overbearing and she always appeared overly proud of being an American. "The world nowadays is following in America's foot steps in every aspect of life! We are the absolute leaders of the world and its inspiration! The people of the world want our mercy," she said one day.

She flaunted her beauty and femininity and made no attempt at modesty when it came to her wide knowledge of different religions and civilizations. "I have read a great number of books about the various religions and civilizations of the world. I know what I am talking about when it comes to religion," she had claimed another time.

I had felt that she despised foreigners, especially those from the Third World. But it soon became clear to me that I had made a dreadful mistake, and that she was a really wonderful, compassionate and religious lady, curiously simple and humble to the highest degree; someone who wanted the best for everyone and who was sympathetic to every stranger she met. She helped everyone who needed help, whether it was help of a material or spiritual nature. She had high moral standards and many praiseworthy characteristics. Upon reflection, I suppose I felt she was too capable of judging me wrongly, for she was so knowledgeable about all races and creeds, and I preferred to be taken for who I was.

I was invited to their house for a number of delightful and enjoyable evenings, and together we enjoyed many tasty and delicious meals. I felt as if I were back home in my own country. I considered Mr. and Mrs. Sharp my brother and sister here in America. I really felt at home. Their small daughter, Sandra, reminded me of my sister's daughters back

home, children I deeply missed. Often the Sharps would take me with them on short weekend trips to the desert or to the mountains, or to see friends and relatives. Through them I got to know a number of people who were of great help to me later on.

As long as I live, I will never forget Mrs. Amy Sharp's significant and wonderful aid to me. It happened when I was in desperate need of a job. Having just arrived in America, I was job searching day and night. Leaving her daughter with a baby sitter and neglecting her home life, she spent two entire weeks with me, scouring Pasadena and the surrounding cities for a job. Every morning she would pick me up and we would go in search of work from department stores to supermarkets, submitting applications and inquiring about any possible job opportunity until we found my current job. She even insisted on lending me money which I paid back when I received my first paycheck.

After a delicious meal that Easter Sunday, Mrs. Sharp refused help with the dishes, so

Mr. Harold Sharp and I retired to the living room where I sat in my favorite chair, one which suited my tall frame. The evening had come early on this dreary day, and a damp spring chill filled the air. Mr. Sharp put a match to the waiting kindling. We spent a few minutes chatting about small, mundane matters as one does when physically comfortable and satisfied. But soon we dropped into silence. I sat dreamily watching the flames, their welcoming warmth permeating my whole being as I sat with eyes and mind half closed.

Chapter 6

I recalled how we had spent those long, frozen winter nights crowding around the fireplace like chicks huddled around a hen for warmth. Mother fed the fire with the wood gathered during the summer, carefully cached away in the cellar for just such times. Impatiently we would wait for the teakettle to boil, the official sign of the evening's birth, while my aunt would regale us with heroic tales of warriors and saints, pious acts of self-denial and heart-rending romance. Always ready with a joke or story to keep us laughing or to rivet our attention with drama and suspense, my mother's eldest sister, who was never married, had moved into the big house at the same time that Mother married Father. To my child's mind she, like the fireplace, had been part of the house and was equally essential to its architecture.

Gleefully we excavated little caves of glowing coals in the fire to roast the acorns that Mr. Naji, our ploughman and neighbor, kindly brought in from the fields at day's end. The piping hot nuts would taste especially rich and smoky when washed down with cold water and were a standard favorite. Unlike the rich who could afford chestnuts, or even *knafeh* sometimes, and for whom tea was not such a high and precious luxury, roasting the acorns and listening to my aunt's stories was the only entertainment poor people, such as we, had on those long cold nights. *Knafeh* is wonderful! It is like cheesecake. It is a mixture of shredded wheat, white cheese, butter, pine nuts and syrup cooked together.

I remember once Karim, after eating his share of the acorns and taking a large swig from the communal jug of water, smacked his lips rhythmically and delightfully and asked fervently, "Do you think chestnuts could possibly be more delicious than our acorns?" Chestnuts were things

encountered in schoolbooks and seen in produce shops, but nothing, any of us had ever actually tasted.

"Of course they are," shot back my sister Amirah in exasperation, as if pained by our brother's obvious ignorance.

"Why else would the rich pay money to eat them?!"

Mother's mild voice cut in smoothly, calming the scowl brewing on Karim's brow. "No, Amirah, my sweet; you are mistaken. Allah, to Him be glory, created both acorns and chestnuts to be delicious, just in different ways. He made chestnuts to be planted and harvested and bought in the market just for wealthy people. But He specially planted acorns in the wild forests and mountains so that even people without money could enjoy His gift and marvel at His kindness and mercy. He concerns Himself with all things, even with the well being of the ant in the wilderness."

"Indeed, Allah is great and very understanding!" said Karim in wonder and with contentment!

Mother's gracious words fitted themselves into our hearts the way the acorns had satisfied our stomachs and all in the room thanked Allah for His concern for even the humblest of His creatures. A few nights later, when everyone was pampering himself in bed keeping warm, the whole area was covered in snow, which looked like a bird's gown. But through the window, the cold air and snow created a glistening blanket of sugared-ice.

On snowy days almost all of the activities of the city-- government offices, schools and shop--ceased to function. In order to keep warm and to avoid the severe cold, most people stayed in bed throughout the day, getting up only to eat, drink or pray. On such days, our neighbor, Naji, did not go to the fields, so acorns were not brought to our home. Mother, however, surprised us one evening by giving each one of us a handful of chestnuts saying, "Now I want you children to

judge for yourselves, whether there is difference in taste between acorns and chestnuts." We all agreed that there was no difference in taste between the two!

In spite of our being very poor, Mother always tried her very best not to let any of our cravings go unsatisfied, even if it wasn't exactly what we had in mind.

* * * * *

It wasn't until many years later that we learned the extent to which Mother had sacrificed her possessions and comfort to protect us. She had sold household goods--even pots and pans--to ensure that our immediate needs were met. Most striking was her jewelry, a Middle Eastern woman's pride and mark of social standing, painfully sold off piece by piece, in order to remain financially independent of my uncles. These same three uncles, my father's brothers, had claimed ownership of our land and vineyards after Father's death, looting our livelihood as surely as any invading army. In order to reinstate the traditional family culture, and with the intention of making things "tidy," they pressured Mother to choose a new husband from among the three of them. When she refused, they found therein an excuse to loot our property. Their goal was not especially well camouflaged. Traditionally a widow's children become servants of the new husband, his other wives and children. We would have been, therefore, put to work as field laborers. Although her own life could have been much more comfortable had she gone through with a second marriage, Mother told her brothers-in-law to take our property on the condition that they leave us--her children--for her.

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Chapter 7

The only noises that stirred the air were the occasional rustling of my host's newspaper as he scanned the latest news, the crackling of the fire, and from the kitchen the sound of dishes being washed, though muffled by the closed swinging door. Louder still was the choppy, clattering noise as little Sandra hopped and slid her caravan across her makebelieve

Sahara, the tiled kitchen floor, as she kept her mother company. Nevertheless, I found it difficult to stay awake. How long I was dozing I do not know, but suddenly a gentle, angelic voice roused me, and brought me back to reality!

"Happy Easter, Uncle Jamil!" little Sandra was standing in front of me leaning against my knees. Her eyes danced as she greeted me and held out a basket filled with a spectrum of colored eggs, not just in shades of brown.

"I colored one for you," she said as she placed the basket on my knees. "This one!" She pointed to a green egg on the top. "Uncle Jamil" was written on it in a guided childish scrawl.

I was overwhelmed by the surprise and stared stupefied at the red, blue and purple eggs and at my green one on the top. I recognized that here, in America, they would be considered more beautiful than ours back home, but I did not believe anything could quite match those tawny shades or the wonderful smell of the kitchen as they cooked with the onionskins.

All the colors were starting to run together as I fought in vain to keep back the tears, which now filled my eyes and choked off all words from my throat so that I could not thank my dear little friend for her magnificent gift to me. I strongly felt she must not see my tears for she might think I did not care for her gift. She would not understand that they were

rather tears of happiness and gratitude, and that my heart had been released from suffocation and the terrible hold of sadness.

The tears were a reflection of the joy I had once seen and known on other happy faces as a small boy holding a similar basket far away--a joy I now saw repeated in this innocent, angelic beautiful face. Oh, the wonderful memories of my childhood! Once again my mother's wise words had proven correct. The distant crushed, lifeless face of Mrs. Sirhan was crowded out by the memory of the friendly smiles from happier times in my childhood.

I stood up and took the basket from Sandra's hands, put it carefully on the chair, and picked up the little girl. I held her close to me with her face turned carefully from mine and quietly walked around the silent room as the tears spent themselves.

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Later in the evening on that day of happiness, joy and new life when I had returned to the solitude of my own room, I again came to realize that the new life I had chosen for myself far from my homeland and loved ones, was full of new hope and promise. The past with its haunting memories would somehow fall into place and peace and gratitude would blend with fulfilled hopes in this Christian land. All would be well with me.

Although I had forgotten my Creator, He had not forgotten me. Though I had failed to seek Him with my whole heart, He had not failed to watch over me. Perhaps through this day with its gift of friendship and love, I would come to know His love for my life in a deeper way. As God had heard my humble, sincere prayer and words to Him that very morning, I felt ready to restart again my new life in America.

THE LOST LAMB

Chapter 1

My weary mind slowly focused on the faraway muffled jangling of the alarm clock. As I came to my senses, I automatically grabbed for the small, vibrating harbinger of bad news under the pillow. It read 5:30 a.m., but my sleepstarved body felt as if it were time to go to bed, not time to arise to the demanding duties of the day. Placing my feet silently on the floor, successfully avoiding the one squeaky board, I grabbed my robe from the chair, and poked my pajama-clad body into it.

I carefully opened the sliding door an inch or two and, thief-like, peeked out. Thank God, she was not there! Slowly and quietly I made a passage for my thin, bony body, and tiptoed stealthily down the hall to the bathroom where I quickly washed and shaved. Back in my room, I dressed with great haste and increased caution. Picking up a jacket to wear against the spring chill, and leaving my bed unmade and the room tumbled, I slipped through the door and locked it quietly behind me. Every movement seemed to take forever. My swollen, work-bruised hands were just as unresponsive as if I were experiencing a nightmare!

I barely tasted the jam I had spread on cold slices of bread that I gobbled and washed down with a glass of water. Every morning of the past week I had yearned to drink a glass of milk and enjoy toasted bread with my jam. Even if there had been milk in my section of the refrigerator, the raspy, telltale squeak of the monster would have betrayed me. I stood, listening cautiously and apprehensively. When I was sure the way was clear, I headed for the back door that promised freedom. Suddenly I froze in my tracks, blood flooding my head, as I found myself face to face with the

dreaded and terrifying figure. Panic stricken, I froze on the spot. Guilt and fear ran through my head, but I knew I must face her now. There was no way out. There was no turning back!

Mrs. Washburn's feet in brown frayed slippers were firmly planted in my path. Her angry eyes were like whips of fire burning my flesh. I recoiled with a small, helpless groan. My pale face tried to communicate a smile, but my lips dried into immobility, freezing tightly over my teeth.

"No! No, you don't! Not today, you don't!" she squeezed through teeth clenched in an ashen face. "You've been sneaking out on me this whole week. That's enough! You hear? Enough, Buster!" she shouted, digging fists into the sides of the faded robe which revealed her short, squat figure. "Today is the ninth and you haven't paid me yet. Six days ago you promised you would pay me, but every morning you trick me by sneaking out like a filthy stinking fox before I'm up and coming back after I'm asleep. How long did you think you would get away with this dirty charade?"

"I swear by Glorious Allah! By my mother's eyes," at whose mention an olive hand went tenderly to my heart, "I will pay you next week."

"Your mother's eyes! My foot! You make me want to vomit! You are really a moron!" she exploded in rage. "If your mother was a decent woman and could know what a liar you are, she'd turn in her grave!" Mrs. Washburn added vehemently.

"Oh, Mrs. Washburn! May God forbid that! My mother is alive and well, and she's a wonderful, pious woman. I swear to you she prays five times a day, and even gets up in the middle of the night to pray some more at the religious watch, *tahajjud!*" I licked my parched lips, shrugged my stiff shoulders and took one step forward.

Mrs. Washburn looked me up and down, seeming to

size me up as a clumsy, stupid oaf just off a banana boat, but before she could say a word, I continued in a naive and ingenuous manner. "Mother fasts not only during the holy month of Ramadan, but also the six days following, as well as on Thursdays, Mondays and other holy days!"

At this point, Mrs. Washburn's exasperation boiled over in maniacal anger. "If she's so all-fired righteous, how did she manage to raise a liar and a cheat?" she yelled, following her remark of disgust with a spit that reflected her level of anger. It missed the floor and hit my shoes.

At that moment I noticed that my landlady's face was puffy and wrinkled from sleep, and her hair straggled out ridiculously here and there from under the elastic edges of a faded green cap of a sort I had never seen before. "How silly she looks with that ridiculous ruffle over her head," I thought to myself; and "how vulgar and low-down for her to spit!"

Time seemed to stand still for a split second as an image of my own mother's face formed beside Mrs. Washburn's. Thoughts flashed at lightning speed as I compared them almost unwittingly. What could make a person turn so ugly and undignified? Was the average American woman unable to show concern, compassion or understanding?

My mother had endured poverty and hardship, but she was the extreme opposite of this woman. I could not even bear to think of Mrs. Washburn as a woman. Even in my wildest imagination, she did not conjure up an image of what the word *woman* means. When I think of a woman, I imagine sweet, kind, shy, soft. I suddenly returned to reality and found myself looking at her spit on my shoe! What was this all about? One month's late rent?

"Mrs. Washburn," I said in a sharp voice, "I always got up early back home to walk briskly into the hills near our home before my morning meal. I haven't been trying to avoid you, honestly." How base, cruel, and contemptible was a world that forced me to vindicate myself to this decrepit old hag. Hell . . . that is where I was at this moment!

"Do you think I believe this drivel even that much?"

she asked as she measured a hairsbreadth with thumb and forefinger. Then she cocked her head to one side, birdlike, studying my face and asked, "So how come you didn't do all this marvelous walking last month when the rent was paid?"

"Well, I . . . , I . . . I'll pay!" My tone changed. I felt ashamed that I did not possess as much as one month's rent! I felt poor and useless, as I was well aware that money in her hand would remove me from this disgraceful and humiliating situation.

"You're right! You will! Right now! Do you hear?" Mrs. Washburn raised her fist threateningly, bringing it down on the table top with a crash. Her face was apoplectic.

I was certain that her angry voice would awaken the other roomers. Minute by minute I felt more and more like a thief who had been cornered with evidence of his crime!

"Come on! Confess! Admit it, you devil! You're lying," she demanded, shaking her index finger.

My ears flared red-hot as I felt crushed by fierce and terrible humiliation for the first time in my life. Swallowing my pride, I determined to wait in silence, letting the insults spray me with their sharp, biting stings. At last I spoke. "I swear by everything in which I believe and state on my honor, that I have only two dollars and seven cents at this moment."

"Where do you keep your money then? In the bank? Just write me a check."

"It's nowhere. I haven't any," I confessed. "I will have my pay check a week from today . . . no, a week from yesterday. I'll pay you the full amount."

"A man is truly measured in this country," I realized, "by the weight of his bank book. I'm not used to this. This is not the most important quality in a man. There are many more: honesty, pride, integrity. She is making me feel as though I possess none of these qualities because of my financial status."

"I don't care! It's your problem. I can't be bothered with these cockeyed excuses of yours. I want my money NOW! How do I know you won't just take your junk and sneak out some night?" Mrs. Washburn's voice was so loud with anger and frustration that I was sure the other roomers would be awakened. Frank, who roomed on the third floor, would soon come down to the kitchen for his usual bowl of corn flakes and milk.

"No, it will not happen. That would be against my principles and upbringing. I'm an honest and truthful man, Mrs. Washburn."

"Principles? Honest? Truthful?" she all but shouted.

"You don't know the meaning of the words, you stupid idiot!"

"God forgive you," I said humbly with a sunken spirit and melancholy heart. "If you knew me well, you wouldn't say that."

"Do you think I'm running a charity house? I have no other income, no dear doting husband left to support me. I've got all kinds of debts and taxes to pay. Others never wait for me to pay them, so why should I wait for you . . . not that I haven't waited long enough!" Her temper and anger abated. I realized that Mrs. Washburn was really old and tired. This time I felt sad and truly sorry for the trouble I was causing her. I could empathize with her situation because my

own mother had been a widow for many years now, and had had a hard struggle to raise her six children.

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I recalled the times when I was very little and my own mother, humiliated, had begged for extension on the payment for her sewing machine with which she supported her family. She said, "Please be patient, *Abu Munir*. If it weren't for these young ones, I would have moved out immediately to my mother's house following their father's death."

"I feel for you, *Umm Jamil*; really I do, but what about my young ones?" *Abu Munir* replied. "Who's going to put bread on their table? Huh, *Umm Jamil*? Do you think it's likely or fair that I would take my children's dinner away from them for the sake of yours?"

"On my honor I swear by the soul of my deceased husband, God rest his soul, I would pay the entire balance this minute if I had the money," Mother supplicated with the dignity and pride befitting a woman of her stature. "Here," she continued, "take *Jamil* and have him work in your field or vineyard or even in your store this week and next week, or even for the rest of the month. I'm sure there's work needing to be done."

"Your son! Why, he's only a child! He needs someone to look after him. He is of no use to me!" he replied, sizing *Jamil* up and down.

"It's only temporary, *Abu Munir*. I'm trying to get an advance on the dresses I'm making for *Umm Ahmad* and her daughters," was mother's final plea.

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"I told my boss I needed to borrow money, and he tried to get me an advance on my next paycheck. He's really kind and generous, but he said he couldn't, because I hadn't worked there long enough," I said.

"Then why doesn't your nice generous boss loan you the money himself?" Mrs. Washburn retorted in a rising voice full of devastating sarcasm.

"Well, he said he would be glad to do so if he'd known me a little longer. He did give me ten dollars for food, though."

"Have I known you much longer? Why should I be the only sucker willing to take the risk?" Her eyes were wild and her foot beat in vehemence. "I demand the rent now, or I'll throw you and your junk out in the street. NOW! Do you hear me, idiot? NOW!"

"Oh, Mrs. Washburn, please give me a chance."

"I wouldn't give you a rope to hang yourself with."

"I have an idea." I turned before she could speak again and went into the hall and unlocked my door. She was right behind me as though guarding a convict suspected to escape at any minute.

"See!" I exclaimed, taking some garments out of an old wooden chest that looked as if it had been handed down at least three generations. "I bought these suits before I came to this country. They're hand-tailored from the finest English wool. Take them as security," I said as I handed them to her. When her hand failed to reach for them, I added,

"They cost over one hundred dollars each. My mother deprived herself of many things in order to pay for them. They were my farewell gift. I wore them only at the fittings." Once again I coaxed Mrs. Washburn to take them as security.

A lump had formed in my throat, and my tongue seemed like a piece of dry rubber as a bitter taste grew in my mouth now that I had actually offered my handsome suits, my pride and joy, to which I was so sentimentally attached. They had come to symbolize for me my mother's sacrificial love and perseverance. Every time I saw my suits, it was as though they spoke to me saying, "Someone loves you. Someone cares for you. Someone misses you terribly." Since arriving in America, I had felt deprived of the warm love that had cradled me at home! I needed that sense of security now more than ever.

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I remembered my mother's admiration. "How handsome you look, my son, in your new suit! How majestic and elegant you are! If only your good father-- may Allah bless his soul and send him to paradise-- had lived to see you now. . .such a handsome and grownup young man!" "Don't be sad, Mother," I comforted her. "I know for certain that my father's soul is here with us, with me and you here and now. You know that he has always been with us because he loved us dearly, even more than he loved his own eyes. I am sure of that, Mother!" By this time the tears were racing not only down my mother's cheeks, but also my own. "If only Allah will grant me a long enough life to see you wearing these suits at your university graduation, or better yet, on your wedding day, sitting beside that lucky girl!" my mother said as she stood, soothing out the rumpled edges of my blazer."

"I've told you many times that marriage is a very long way off for me. I have a very long road to travel to get to that," I replied. "Obtaining a degree and securing a job to free

all of us from hard labor is my immediate and only goal. It is my only hope in life."

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"I don't know. They won't pay my bills, you know. How do I know that you won't avoid me again?" queried Mrs. Washburn.

"Believe me, Mrs. Washburn; I will not avoid you any more. I swear by my honor . . . by my mother's eyes . . . by my father's grave," I said, attempting to moisten my dry lips with a dehydrated tongue.

"Don't bother wasting your breath on all that rubbish of yours. You understand?" she hissed.

Glancing at my watch, I begged, "Please, Mrs. Washburn, allow me to leave! If I'm late, I am afraid I'll be fired. I've a long way to go," I urged.

"It's too early," she snapped. "You're not due there for a long time yet. It can't take more than twenty minutes on the bus."

"But I can't afford the bus. I have no money for the bus fare. Besides, as I told you, I like to walk."

Then it occurred to me that a little improvisation never hurt anyone, and it just might wipe out the accusation of "liar." It might even help me in my present predicament. So I began, "Well, it seems that you've found me out. I'm not going to be able to hide it any longer. I admit, I have found myself a girlfriend whom I've been seeing in the evenings. We met at William's Grocery Store."

I knew I was lying, and that severely hurt my religious convictions; but being away from home and all the hardship that it entailed seemed to justify this lie. The humiliation in my humble and forlorn voice seemed to soften Mrs.

Washburn's heart so that she stood listening pensively, scratching under the elastic ruffle on her forehead. Vanquished, but by no means convinced, she agreed. "All right. I'll hold on to the suits until one week from tonight--your payday. If you don't come up with the money by then, God help you, I'll sell them!"

"Oh, Mrs. Washburn, thank you! Thank you so very much. You are a wonderful lady, kind and understanding! Truly you are! I won't let you down, I promise."

Ecstatic was an understatement for the way I felt, for I knew that my quick, creative thinking had just saved me from being thrown out of my room. I locked my door, hurried out and stood on the front porch, not the back one this time, where I filled my lungs in deep relief. It was late enough now that I would have to take the bus, paying the fare with the change I had laid aside to purchase a cheap hamburger for lunch.

In relief I looked up at the mountains and received solace, as I had so many times in the past. Only three months ago I had arrived in Pasadena. Those mountains, a crown of beauty to the north of the city, had welcomed me with waiting, protective arms that pulled me close to their comforting bosom. There had been a blue sky with large, white clouds drifting above them and shadowing them in fanciful patterns.

Those majestic, high mountains were like the walls of a city that promised its inhabitants the safety and security of a medieval citadel. How I wondered what it would take to reach those summits! How I feared what lay beyond them! Still, they promised me consolation and they so delivered. Wasn't it the Almighty Allah who had assured His creatures that if they sought Him, He would respond? These mountains seemed to be responding to me. The morning air of fall was crisper and more invigorating than ever.

Chapter 2

I arrived in America chuck-full of dreams and enthusiasm. Back home it had been planned that I would start working as soon as I arrived in America. A one hundred and fifty dollar a week salary promised me more than I could have received in two months in my country.

All the arrangements had been made for the trip to America and a new life there. I had purchased many gifts to bring to my sponsor and his wife, my only friends in this new land. I had chosen a leather-bound New Testament inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and an assortment of crosses. Because America is a Christian nation, I had felt certain my sponsor would appreciate the crosses and even the crucifixes, some of which were mother-of-pearl, others silver, and others carved from olive wood so abundant in my country. These crosses were of different sizes, shapes and usage. I had also chosen a crèche carved of olive wood, caravans of carved wooden camels, silver spoons, and a lovely black velvet jacket heavily adorned with gold braid in an intricate design.

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Upon my arrival in New York from Jordan, I telephoned Pasadena to assure my sponsors that I had arrived safely. To my surprise, the telephone had been disconnected. I decided to spend a few days enjoying the sights in New York. Before boarding the bus to head to California, I sent a telegram informing them of the exact time of my arrival, but no one was waiting for me in the bus depot in Los Angeles. The only thing left to do was to go to the address I had been given.

When I rang the doorbell, a pleasant, white-haired woman in her late sixties came to the door. Her name was Mrs. Foster, and she explained that she and her husband had moved there only recently. Then she asked, "May I be of any help, young man?" She informed him that Mr. and Mrs. Brand, his would-be sponsors, had moved out not too long ago.

She explained, "They were getting a divorce, you see, and so they each went their separate ways. I believe one went to Chicago and the other to New York. They left no forwarding addresses with us. If you'll wait just a moment, I'll look up the telephone number of Rabbi Rodenburg. He tried to help them through their difficulties. I'm sure he will know their addresses."

I stood frozen to the spot, dumbly watching the movements of Mrs. Foster's lips with wide-open, wondering, perplexed eyes. Mrs. Foster turned and started for the other room to get the information. Suddenly she turned back to me as I stood like a dumb statue in the doorway, and exclaimed, "Oh, are you the young man coming to visit from the Holy Land? I haven't read lately how things are there. How are you getting along with your Arab neighbors?"

"Fine. Just fine!" I replied in a stupor as I picked up my heavy luggage and quickly retreated down the steps of the porch and onto the sidewalk.

"Young man! Young man!" Mrs. Foster called from the bottom step. "The telephone number! You're leaving without the telephone number!"

I never looked back, but plodded down the street aimlessly, burdened down with my luggage and numb with shock and bitter disappointment. At last my legs grew so tired that I could go no further. I sat down to rest in a shady

spot on a low retaining wall in front of a pretty house, but soon moved over into the sunshine.

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Back home in Jordan, I had been Farid's colleague at work, since both of us were employed as file clerks at the same office. We enjoyed mutual respect for each other. Farid practiced his Christian beliefs with a fervent religiosity, and pursued honesty, sincerity and devotion in all his everyday dealings with an almost puritanical scrupulousness. I admired his morality greatly, because I was like-minded in my religious convictions.

I highly regarded all those who practiced strict observance to their religious beliefs. If given the opportunity, I would have encouraged them to pursue such beliefs more actively. The inherent goodness of all divine religions was a moral jewel to me, because religion provides the world with a source for warmth and happiness. Yet I was reluctant to recognize the fanaticism I saw applied in many of life's paths, a feeling not confined to religion. Farid's balanced approach appealed to me. I found a space in my heart for him although I knew I would never be able to consider him a close friend. As a missionary, Farid openly discussed and taught Christian beliefs to his work mates except me. Farid acknowledged my solid convictions for my native religion. He knew I firmly believed that all religions promote goodness and that the religion you enter at birth is satisfactory. Strengthening my original and native faith was more beneficial to me than being attracted to a foreign intrusion.

Farid was aware that I hoped to immigrate to America and that the success of this venture depended on my

obtaining sponsorship from an American citizen. As Farid was to go to America within two years, he promised to help me secure such a sponsorship. Farid's sister branch in America wanted him to come to study theology before continuing his mission in Jordan. But I was so impatient and eager to travel that I could not bear to delay my dreams any longer. I had high hopes of studying in America and earning a degree in education and was exceedingly bored with the dull routine of my job, realizing that it would soon kill my incentive and ambition.

Farid, aware of my impatience, continued to search for a faster solution. "Every time we have a service at the church, a communal prayer, or when I pray alone, I always ask the Lord to find you a sponsor," Farid told me on several occasions, and I thanked him gratefully.

One day Farid invited me to his church to listen to a guest lecturer, Father Allen Brand. The invitation was unusual, for a common understanding existed between us that Farid would compromise neither my solid convictions nor our mutual respect by inviting me to a Christian service. Such a gesture would be an offer that he knew I would turn down with much embarrassment.

Yet this day, Farid excitedly approached me, his face glowing with excitement and happiness for the good news he brought. "I believe the Lord has answered my prayers. I think Reverend Brand might hasten your sponsorship and you could be in America very soon. So why not come along?" I gratefully looked forward to the evening with eager anticipation. After the lecture, Farid introduced me to the Reverend who asked some simple questions, paying careful attention to my replies. He promised to help me, but required a little money to pay a lawyer and other fees. I gladly accepted his offer of assistance and paid him. Within two

nerve-wracking, eternally long months, the sponsorship finally arrived.

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The sudden and devastating emergence of Rabbi Rodenburg had been too much and too shocking! My confidence was so shattered that I virtually felt its glass shards scatter on the ground around me. The introduction of this new character for which he had only a name as a handle was too much for me. Who was Rabbi Rodenburg? How did he come to be in the picture? What was the relationship between Reverend Brand and the Rabbi? I never knew. Only later was I able to solve the riddle and comprehend the problem which had puzzled me through the years about my sponsors. They were a Jewish couple! That was the reason Mrs. Foster had asked if I were the young man coming to visit from the Holy Land and questioned how they were getting along with their Arab neighbors. She had thought I was a Jewish fellow coming from Israel! I also now understood that Rabbi Rodenburg was the couple's Rabbi, and that he had been trying to help them through their marital difficulties.

I collected my thoughts, feeling utterly alone and abandoned. Fear crept through my whole being and a chill ran down my spine. Where was I to go? What was I to do? At that moment I remembered the mountains I had seen when getting off the bus in Pasadena a short time ago, though it now seemed to have been an eternity.

I lifted his eyes and there they were--majestic and serene. The consolation that I had felt when I first saw them still comforted me. They stood strongly outlined, so close it seemed I could almost reach out and touch them. I sat until I

felt quite rested and had made a firm decision to make the best of things. After all I was a man, wasn't I? Hadn't my twenty-four years taught me some self-reliance? I took stock of my situation. "I have only one hundred dollars. But if I get a job soon and am careful, I can manage. I must first find a place to stay; then I will be less afraid."

Soon I had spent all of my money looking for a job. It seemed to me at the end of many days that all I had heard was, "What's your past experience?" I had no past experience except that of a file clerk for my native government which was very remote and backward. And that couldn't help me much because the system in this new country was entirely different. I had become willing to try almost anything. Three days prior to finding a simple job in a department store, I had been given a janitor's job in an office building. Because I could not wax the floors properly and did not know how to clean the toilets, I was fired. No experience!

For a while the idea of returning to my homeland as a failure occupied my mind to the point of madness. Things had all gone wrong. Was it the fault of one man who had failed to fulfill his commitment, or wasn't America really the land of promise I had thought and dreamed it to be? I became very depressed and down hearted. How could I return to my homeland? Even if I could save up the airfare, I could never face all those people back home. They expected me to become a success. Each one of my relatives and friends counted on my becoming wealthy in this land of plenty. And this, in one way or another, brightened their lives.

I had assured them over and over, "When I return home five or six years from now, I'll have two very important acquisitions: a university degree and a good amount of money." I also had told them that I was going to lead a wonderful, luxurious and intellectual life.

At last I found a job as a loader on the docks in the shipping section of a third-rate department store. Although this job was equivalent to being a porter in my home country, the most menial of jobs, I was thrilled. I needed shelter and food. I had been nearly driven to distraction with the thought that if I failed to find a job quickly, I could easily be deported. In my newfound position, I made three dollars and ten cents per hour, about one hundred dollars to take home weekly. Nearly two hundred a month had to go for the rent, but I felt his life would brighten up and take on new hope when I had paid back my debt to Edlyn, a fellow worker.

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Mrs. Washburn had been right when she accused me of sneaking and lying. I had been walking to and from the store to save fare, it was true, but it was primarily to consume the hours when she was up and roaming the house. There was no girl. From 5:30 a.m. until nearly midnight, I loitered in the lighted streets of Pasadena. I had wept more than once while leaning against telephone booths, hoping for a miracle! Cold and hungry, my appetite had never been really satisfied by the cheap hamburgers or chili beans bought at the open stands. Many of my thoughts, both day and night, were occupied with visions of heaping rice and chunks of lamb which I could almost see and smell. In many of my dreams, I was beside my mother while she prepared tasty meals of fried eggplant and green peppers to be eaten with spices or cauliflower browned in a pan of olive oil. But I always woke up to an empty heart and stomach. All I knew these days was fear, stealth, hunger, loneliness, and the ever-present severe, overwhelming homesickness.

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Chapter 3

As I approached the bus stop at the end of the block, a figure waited near the bench. When I drew nearer, the stranger gave me a charming, broad, friendly smile. I was certain that I had not met her before, as I never forgot a beautiful woman's face! Yet she appeared to be glad to see me, as though she had been waiting for me.

"Good morning, Ma'am. Do you know whether a bus will be going by soon?" I asked, my eyes focused on the opening in her dress.

"We both sure enough just missed the last one!" she replied in a good-natured, jolly voice. Checking her watch she stated, "The next one comes by in nineteen minutes, if I calculate correctly."

By then I could hardly keep my eyes off her, having never seen anyone quite like her. She was well dressed in an all-black outfit. She was wearing a tall black hat, simply decorated with a black grosgrain ribbon. Where the crown dipped stylishly to the left, a tall feather shot straight up past the top of the hat, making a graceful curve to the front where it bobbed in friendly greeting to all who passed. A somewhat smaller feather grew just beside the tall one, a more reserved, modest fellow though equally attractive. They were striking, multi-colored beauties, lending emphasis and character to the chapeau as well as to its owner. They were transformed into a kaleidoscope of brilliancy whenever she became animated. She complemented her dark clothing by wearing extremely high-heeled patent leather shoes which threw her short, plump body forward at a slightly peculiar angle. As a result, when one looked at her with the intent of taking the entire sight into one's eyes, her friendly smile seemed to reach out gregariously. Her astonishing white teeth glistened in the

bright morning sun against her dark complexion, reminding me of the heavenly stars in a pitch-black Middle Eastern night. Her satiny smooth lips, large and moist, were painted artfully in a clear, lively red.

"Where do you live, Sir?" she asked with no apparent reticence.

"There," I replied with a jerk of my hand toward the large house down the block as I gazed at her.

"Then we're neighbors. How wonderful!" she exclaimed. "I live just behind that school over there," she said, pointing down the cross street a ways. Then she added, "Which country are you from, young man?"

"Jordan. I'm from Jordan," I replied, knowing very well that my heavy accent and broken English adequately marked my foreignness.

As we spoke, I was trying hard to keep my eyes off the very low-cut neckline of her dress and the huge bobbing breasts which were barely confined.

"The Holy Land? It is the most charming name to my heart! How wonderful! Tell me, how long have you been here, young man?" Her voice was heavy with wonder and excitement.

"Three months," I replied dramatically; "ninety-three days to be exact."

"I'll bet you're sure enough getting homesick by now," she consoled sympathetically.

Suddenly I felt a great sadness as burning memories flooded my mind, and I experienced a strong desire to be comforted by this kind, sweet, understanding woman. Before I could nod she said, "When we moved from Alabama to California fifteen years ago, I became homesick. I tell you, friend, it was awful."

"Homesickness! Please don't mention that nasty, harsh, ugly word," I entreated. "It frightens and horrifies me, and provokes sadness and grief. It starts fires in my breast and inflames memories in my heart. It devastates me."

Night after night I had spent long hours crying like an infant who had been snatched away from the comforting bosom of my mother, never to stop moaning until by the mercy of heaven I fell into exhausted sleep. My last words were followed by a pause, reflecting the agonies I had undergone during the last three months.

"Is your wife here with you?" she asked.

"Oh, I'm not married. I came here alone," I affirmed.

For several moments my thoughts drifted away from her company as I recalled an event that had taken place before coming to America.

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"Wouldn't it be better if you married your cousin Heyaam before you go so you can take her with you?" my mother suggested a month or so before my departure. "She loves you very much, and she and her parents are expecting you to marry her. She'll take care of you and see that your needs are met. At least I'll feel that you're being cared for just as if you had never left home."

"Mother, do you think it is as simple as that? You are not aware of the size of the responsibilities and commitments required! Also you know very well how I feel about this particular issue," I had replied, knowing that the hotly debated subject of my proposed marriage to his cousin Heyaam would never come to an end, in my lifetime!

"I care for her dearly, and I'm sure that she has a similar feeling for me, but there's just too much uncertainty in

my life at present. I don't know what's awaiting me. How can I add to this uncertainty by taking a wife along? I just can't do that to Heyaam. It wouldn't be fair to her. She can have a better life here than the one I could provide her. Besides," I continued, "what if we had children? Huh? What then!" "What if you had children!" my mother had exclaimed with great amazement and happiness. "Why, that would be the most joyous occasion. Just think; you'd name your firstborn

son Suliman, after your father. Yes, Suliman. His name will be Suliman Jamil Suliman," asserted his mother with dignity and anticipation, and he'll be strong and brave like you and your father before you."

"Very sorry, Mother! It is out of the question! It is impossible--at least until I finish my education."

"As you wish, son; as you wish!"

"Thank you, Mother; you are very understanding, a sweetheart."

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"How brave you are to come all the way out here from the Holy Land! You must be of great enterprise! I am afraid I did not catch your name. Mr. . . . Mr. . . . " she fished.

"Jamil. Jamil Suliman, Ma'am."

"What a beautiful name. It's so nice to make your acquaintance, Mr. Suliman." She took my hand in hers and pressed it gently, placing her other hand on top. I did not know what to think of this gentle gesture of hers. All I knew was that it sent a tingling sensation throughout my body and my heart started beating hard. All this time her eyes were focusing on my face as though she were enchanted by my starry eyes.

"I'm Miss Anderson; Betty Lou Anderson." The feathers nodded and winked their own greeting. She went on reflectively, "You have seen the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, and the . . . that other famous one in Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives?" she asked in awe.

"Oh yes, many times!" I answered enthusiastically.

I felt it was time my pride was justified. It was very easy to talk to this woman and drown myself in the ocean of her beauty. In her presence, I felt my shyness slowly, slowly fading away.

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Back home in Jordan, it had been very difficult for me to talk to women outside my household. The notion had been planted in my mind in childhood that this was shameful and forbidden. I was told that it provokes desire and lust which lead to hell. These taboos had taught me to keep my distance from Shahla whom I had loved dearly for three full years. It was true that I had been only fourteen years old when we started exchanging loving glances, but I believed sincerely that I loved her vehemently!

It was Shahla whom I used to meet daily in the street going to and from school. We would pass each other, exchanging loving glances without uttering a single word, not even a whispered *marhaba* hello. Only our eyes would speak! I always thought that the language of the eyes was more effective and more expressive than the words of the tongue! One day Shahla suddenly disappeared. I was told that her father who was employed by the government had been transferred to a faraway place, and that she had gone with them. The first year of Shahla's departure was

terribly difficult and severely painful for me. I missed her greatly and felt my life had become empty and meaningless. Every time I remembered her compassionate warm looks and her charming tender smile, I felt wild fires burning inside of me. I sometimes would feel a huge iron hand on my mouth almost preventing me from breathing. I would run to the street where I used to see her and exchange love glances. Then I would roam the streets until late at night, finally returning home to bask in the sweetness of her memory. In spite of the lapse of time, I never forgot the face of Shahla in Jordan, even after seeing America's charming, fascinating girls, its wealth, its lavish lifestyle and excitements!

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"How fortunate you are! I want more than anything to visit the birthplaces of our glorious religion and to walk where our Savior Jesus walked." Betty Lou Anderson's ebony eyes rolled heavenward and her arms shot out to the sky like some great evangelist exhorting sinners to come to the Lord. Her body seemed to be trembling in ecstasy. The large and small feathers on her hat flashed their brilliantly radiant colors in a frenzied dance to the sun. I feared she might become so carried away that she would start whirling like a dancing dervish and weep and embarrass me.

"It's very easy to fulfill your wish," I spoke briskly, afraid that she might break down any minute. "All you need is a few hundred dollars. If you have the wish, you are halfway there," I said consolingly.

"That's so right!" Betty Lou gathered herself together in agreement. "And this desire is causing me to work mighty hard to save money enough." Hesitating for a moment she asked, "Are you Protestant or Catholic?"

"Neither. I'm a Muslim," I said with a challenge in my voice. By now I was used to this question, as well as to the array of likely reactions. This was another opportunity to display eminent pride.

Upon hearing my reply, the perpetual smile faded and a look of doubt and disappointment fell like a veil over her face. This complete metamorphosis left a demonic frown. Eyes glaring, she inquired. "Do you mean to tell me that you're a follower of that fella, Mohamet?" she asked, with disbelief and disgust in her burning eyes.

"Yes, Ma'am." I tried to maintain my composure and manners, in spite of feeling that I had been insulted and humiliated. Still, in an effort to correct her, I could not help but snap back with angry pride, "His name is Mohammad. He was just a messenger delivering God's message. He was neither a God nor a Savior," I said slightly vexed. Betty Lou's face relaxed as my words dissipated the tension, but she still wore an expression of troubled concern.

"Listen, Mr. Suliman! You're in desperate need of help. I feel it to be my duty to you and to the Almighty God to save your soul from eternal damnation."

There was a long moment of silence when she seemed to be thinking of the great and difficult task ahead of her, for she studied me up and down before making her suggestion.

"You come to my place after work, and we'll study the Almighty's words in the Bible. With my help and your determination, you'll soon see the Light, and His grace will penetrate your soul. I am sure of that! I already can envisage you rising from your damnation!"

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I had been heavily forewarned of prospective missionary endeavors before leaving envisage homeland. Sheik Mahmoud Mousa, the local Imam, had taken it upon himself to warn me. He had been a close friend of my grandfather and would, from time to time, offer advice to my family following the death of my father. He was also my spiritual and religious teacher.

"Be careful, my son, of those who will say that they're your faithful friends and they would rush to your aid, when in fact their true intentions will be to try to change your religion for you," had been Sheik Mahmoud's advice to me the night before my departure. "They won't rest when they discover you're a Muslim."

"Not to worry *ya seede*, my spiritual father! My faith is *ana* unshakable, and I am your faithful *terbaytak* pupil, whose belief has never weakened as you have raised me," had been my reply.

"Ah, my son. You are young, good-hearted, naïve and inexperienced, full of life and vigor. Be careful, for they will use that against you. My son, their ways can be devious and devilish. They will use all means of temptation and influence to convert you to their religion," he had insisted. "Be cautious when you discuss your faith with them, or anything else, for that matter. Forsake not your faith," were his last words to me. Afterwards he planted a mournful kiss on my forehead.

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Betty Lou Anderson balanced her foot on the bench and her tight dress retreated considerably upward to approach and touch her thighs. I stared at them--shiny, full and smooth. I fancied them beckoning me to approach and touch. It was hard, very hard, to look away. Every cell in my

body began trembling; and every drop of blood in my veins started boiling. All of my being was transformed into a bundle of starving, feverish lust. She plopped her purse down on her raised knee and fumbled in it for a pencil and paper.

"Yes, Sir, when our studies are finished in a month or two, you'll be ready to be baptized in the name of the Holy Ghost. Then your soul will rest in peace and harmony." I noticed the life that seemed to be slowly returning to her face. She sucked in her lower lip and her eyes filled with exuberance. All of a sudden, she started vibrating and her firm round body shook with some consuming emotion deep inside. Audible chuckles bubbled up from her chest and set her breasts in motion. Then the tips of her plumage began responding in quick little rhythmic jerks.

"Come to think of it," she mused, "you might even become more active in Christianity than those born to it. Think of all the souls of those other heathen Mohametans who come here to our Christian land. Why, you can save them all!" She beamed with satisfaction in anticipation of glories to come. "Here, this is my address." She handed him a scrap of paper.

I was amused by this excitable woman, and at the same time insulted. Then again, I was happy at the prospect of actually going to a nice, warm home on these cold spring evenings and of making a new friend in this indifferent land. If only I had known her before!

"Thank you very much. You are very kind and very generous." My mouth uttered the words while my eyes gazed at her ripe breasts.

"You will realize the genuineness of my kindness and generosity when I receive you in my house!" she said proudly and confidently.

I looked toward heaven and, closing my ears to her endless chattering, spoke silently to God. "Oh, Allah of Heaven, thank you from the bottom of my heart! Finally, you have sent someone to be kind to me, to give me refuge in my homesickness and loneliness."

"Are you on your way to the college?" she asked.

"No, I didn't come here for an education. I'm an immigrant." I was not quite sure what being an immigrant had meant to me up to that point in time.

"Do you like it here?" she inquired.

"Yes, very much," I lied, thinking it would encourage her hospitality and kindness. "The people are very kind here and understanding. They seem to be competing with each other in helping the needy stranger. I came here from New York by bus. I got to see for myself the great beauty and wealth of America." As he spoke, I noticed the pleasure in her face at hearing my words of gratitude.

"Is your country poor?" she questioned earnestly.

"Very," I replied, thinking the response did not require much thought.

"Well, you see," she spoke confidently, "you worship Allah, a deity of your own making, an idol living among you here on earth, while we worship the one and only God, the One up in Heaven, the Creator of everything." One huge, pink palm fluttered to her bosom while the other hand traced an inclusive area in the air. "He is all-powerful. As a reward to his grateful and faithful servants, He has given us this land of wealth and plenty."

The feathers adjusted their dance to the tempo of her increasing conviction. I was fascinated by those feathers. I speculated as to whether or not they would tickle me if they got any closer to my chin.

"Yes, we have all this, while you and your people are in bad need. No wonder! Your poor Allah has nothing to give to you."

Righteous sparks were popping from her eyes, while I felt a stirring sensation run through my body. I thought of explaining to this belligerently ignorant woman that my people worshipped the same God. In an effort to remain in her favor, I did not air a full-fledged, heroic defense. Instead I said, "For this reason I came here. I deserted the worship of our poor God to enjoy the benefits of your wealthy, generous one."

"I tell you, you were mighty wise. I promise that once you receive Him, you'll have good things showered down upon you," she said as a smile consumed her face. Only her affectionate eyes and sparkling teeth remained visible.

While we talked, I noticed many young people approaching from all directions, some carrying books and others paper bags, presumably their packed lunches. "Looks like the bus will be along soon," she surmised.

"Are you a school teacher?"

"What makes you ask?" Betty Lou Anderson inquired, happiness sparkling in her smiling eyes.

"Well, I guess because of the clear way you have of expressing yourself and the authority in your manner," I replied.

"Thank you. I consider that a kind compliment, but no, not really. I work as a governess in a well-to-do home in San Marino," she replied proudly and happily.

"I was told San Marino is very charming and is the city of the millionaires!"

"That is the reason I am working over there," she explained with several nods of her head.

"It seems to me that the family regards you highly," I said.

"I should say so. The family is very religious; they go to church every single, blessed Sunday. I teach the three darling little ones lessons from the Bible. We sure are mighty fond of each other." She leaned close to him and winked, "The salary is most rewarding!"

She must have read my thoughts, for she chuckled as she said, "You probably think I'm poor since I ride the bus, but I have a black Porsche in the garage--last year's model. I like to be with God's people like you, who are in bad need of salvation, so that I can help the Lord by saving their lost souls. I feel chosen and fortunate for having such a mission. I've saved many people of all colors and creeds." As she spoke, she gradually became more aware of the fortitude of her accomplishments and pulled her body up to its full height.

"You must work very hard for Him," I commented.

"Very! I go anywhere He asks me to go. I can always find poor lost souls who are crying out to the Lord to save them and to put their feet back on the right path."

"How grateful you must be to give such services."

"Yes, yes. I feel very fortunate." She looked at heaven with humble eyes. "Thank you, oh Lord, for giving me the privilege of helping your lost ones."

I heard the screech of brakes as the bus pulled up to the curb.

"I'll see you tonight and we'll start with the great stories of the Savior. Just come. I'll show you the way." She spoke with the authority of a high priestess.

"*Insha Allah*, God willing. I look forward to our meeting." I was aware of the irony of my statement. How could I invoke the name of my creator after telling this

ignorant, fanatic missionary, that I had forsaken my faith for the material rewards of hers?

"Don't forget to bring fifty dollars," she whispered so close to his ear that he discovered the feathers did actually tickle.

"What! Fifty dollars? Why?" I queried, surprise taking possession of my face.

"You don't expect to enter the Kingdom of Heaven for free, do you?" She flipped her hair over her shoulder as she stepped onto the bus.

I stood on the curb, greatly bewildered. Those peculiar words and the inviting looks that went with them made my body burn with lust and desire. I nearly missed the bus, grabbing the door just before it closed in my face.

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Chapter 4

"A miracle has happened," I thought happily as I walked energetically to the bus stop later that afternoon. Was it just that morning that I had felt such devastating fear and humiliation? Many things had happened that day. My body was tired and my mind weary, but I would soon be a free man again. I felt I truly was a lucky fellow. People were very nice and helpful after all. What more could I want?

"Oh, excuse me!" I apologized to the elderly man I had bumped in my eagerness to push forward to a seat on the north side of the bus. I slid into a seat close to the window and looked up. Silently I greeted my protective and faithful friends, the mountains. "You're not my only friends now," I whispered. Yes, indeed, my boss had proved to be a real friend. "How did he manage the advance for me?" I wondered.

I had to smile as I remembered my boss's admonition, "Now guard your fortune well, Ali Baba. It's not a bonus, you know. Try not to spend it all on one chick in your harem. Heh! heh!" It always amused me that whenever old Mr. George Shroeyer tried to be funny or told one of his frequent dirty jokes, he would laugh at it himself as if it were the first time he had heard it.

"Why is the bus moving so slowly?" I wondered. "This whole day has been like a race in a dream. Tonight I'll pay Mrs. Washburn at least a week early. After that, there'll be no danger of her kicking me out."

This evening I would experience the delightful freedom of a human being at peace with myself. How wonderful and pleasurable the feeling would be! My hand automatically checked the safety of the modest bulge in my pocket: one hundred dollars for Mrs. Washburn and twenty89 five for myself. After paying part of my rent, I figured I needed not to worry anymore. My suits would be safely back

in my closet and there would be no more reason to loiter aimlessly in the streets on these cold, gloomy and depressing Pasadena evenings.

I felt a sudden unrest as two questions haunted me.

"What if Betty Lou Anderson was not sincere about her invitation? What if she was not at home when I got there?"

I peered up at my sanctuary, those darkening mountains. How beautiful they were in the fading day with purple shadows standing in their hollows! How like her light, full breasts two of the familiar peaks seemed tonight, a deep, mysterious cleft between them. How would they look, free and unbound, bouncing in rhythm as she walked? Would they feel warm and soft? "Surely they would comfort a weary head just as you, my dear mountain peaks, have comforted a weary, homesick, lonesome heart," I said silently.

In all my twenty-four years I had never had intimate contact with any sort of woman; it was taboo and led the way into Hell. Now as my eyes closed, I pictured Betty Lou Anderson smiling, close to me. A faint wisp of fragrance accompanied my image of her, something light, yet captivating all the same. She would also feel nice, soft, warm and exciting.

"Oh Lord! Have mercy on me! I am deprived and crushed. All my being, flesh, heart and soul are madly hungry! I am starving to the deepest of my bones! I am about to die of starvation!" My pulse lurched and quickened. "Oh, well," I thought, "all this is something I must be content just to continue imagining."

And imagine I did! Her sparkling, happy eyes would greet me. "Yes, she will welcome me with open arms, just as you, oh my beloved and precious mountains, did the day I

first saw you." She would smile brightly at me, her full red lips so exciting, so sensual. Her eyes would twinkle with friendly warmth as she taught me, showing me the way. "She will be glad I came to her and sought her warmth and compassion, like you, my true and faithful friends," I said looking to the north. "She will welcome me with open arms. She will satisfy my starvation!"

I knew that in reality there could be no choice. The money had to go to Mrs. Washburn. That was that! And yet As I tried to visualize the shining smooth thighs, a fever of mad desire came over me making my blood boil.

"I must get my beautiful suits back," I told myself.

"They were brought as dowry to the girls of America. How they will all turn and look at me in admiration as I pass in my finery, strutting past as a male bird in rare plumage! I must keep my word to Mrs. Washburn. I am a man of honor! I have caused her enough worry and myself more than enough agony. I must do the right thing and find peace and freedom." I rubbed my nose with the back of my hand, lost in confusion. I could not help remembering the warm, tickling sensation of the soft bright feathers as Betty Lou Anderson had drawn herself close to me in whispered intimacy. I suddenly panicked.

"No! No! I must do my duty. I must keep in mind the happy smile that will come to Mrs. Washburn's sallow face. It will be worth giving up every thing to see." I determined to do the right thing. "The freedom, oh, the freedom of doing one's duty!"

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The bus pulled to the curb and dropped off a few passengers. It was my stop. I was the very last to get off, just

squeezing through the door as it started to close. Shall I go straight home and pay Mrs. Washburn? Or shall I visit Betty Lou Anderson? The answer seemed to have been decided long ago, just as on the day I was forbidden to talk to Shahla. Why had I suddenly remembered her? Maybe I yearned for the days of my naive and pure love. "Shahla! Oh sweet memory of the past; symbol of purity and innocence! Where are you now and what has become of you? No doubt you are married and have children. Was that not the ambition of every girl in my homeland?"

Shahla's image had never left my mind throughout all those long years. I felt as though she were with me in every place I went, eyes watching over me. Loneliness and depression drew her memories closer to my heart and mind. It was the flaming torch which illuminated my dark path in those cold and lonely nights.

However, my frantic body gave me no choice. I ran, searching in my pocket for the scrap of paper with Betty Lou Anderson's address on it. It led me down the street and up the steps of a large green building just south of the school where I hurriedly rang the bell.

While I was impatiently waiting, I felt my heart jump from its place and block my throat, choking me, while the devastating beating of my ear drums nearly exploded my head into shatters.

"Will she know this is my first time to experience intimacy? Will she like me or despise me because of it? Well, it doesn't matter. She will know and lead the way," I thought. How could a person find comfort and peace in religion, and dream of heaven and the favors and rewards of God with a body turned into a torch! Like the Greek runners, I too had a flame I must pass on to waiting hands.

"Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" Miss Anderson cried gaily as she swung the door wide open.

I had been imagining how her desirable, delightful body would look. Now I could see quite clearly through the soft, red, filmy garment held loosely about her like a tempting dancer's veil! Yes, she was smiling as I had expected, only there was a soft, youthful glow to her mouth and eyes as the warm pink light came in through the painted shutters.

"Do you know that the Lord spoke to me this afternoon as the children and I knelt in prayer? He told me that you would come," she stated victoriously, while my eyes devoured her body. "He always knows our greatest needs. He furnishes us with the strength and the courage to find the ways and the means to supply them."

She gestured toward the couch and I sat down and took out from my pocket two twenties and one ten dollar bill. I handed them to her and returned the remaining money to my pocket. She placed the money casually on a small end table with the expertise of one who had done so many times.

"Yes, dear man, I knew. I knew the Good Lord, our Great Shepherd, would bring His stray lamb to the fold. He in his high Heaven would not see his beloved children being lost and tormented without rushing to their aid."

Her face beamed with ecstasy, and her words were like a deep, throbbing love-call, musical and provocative. She pulled me up to her impatient lips. Her arms circled my neck while my hands found the opening in her negligee and my arms encompassed her naked body, drawing the enchanting warm promise against my own. Her moist mouth pressed against mine in desperate search for a matching promise, thus hastening her lost lamb on his first journey down the glorious road.

All I could think of as Betty Lou Anderson led me to my first lesson, was that my soul might not find its freedom nor enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but the gates of life were swinging open for my tortured body to enter, and my manhood was set free from a long, long life of starvation and frustration.

"Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" the shepherdess whispered lustfully as she looked up to heaven. "Another stray lamb is coming home to the fold." "Lamb . . . lamb . . . a lamb to the slaughter," went through my mind. I recalled the herds of sheep that grazed my grandfather's pastures and how I used to stand watching them grazing under the rain and delivering their babies. Lambs and sheep suddenly symbolized for me the innocence and purity of my land, that truly precious Holy Land.

That was all it took for me to lose interest and deliver myself from this great sin. I could not be tempted when I thought of myself disgracing the sanctity of that land whose offerings had given me life itself, and whose history endowed me with heritage, pride and a profound dignity.

"Lamb!" If only she had used another expression, I might not have spotted her tawdriness and sleaziness. I could not let this devil of a woman lead me astray, to make me lose my purity and chastity. I would never allow myself to be sacrificed at the altar of her lord, which her lunatic thinking had created and her fanatical behavior nourished. All I could feel for a hussy like her was revulsion, disgust and detestation!

After all, if *Abuna* Ibrahim, the father of the prophets, had sacrificed Ishmael, what would have become of mankind? All it took was a lamb. . . a lamb to save mankind. Why, I wondered, did Allah order him to sacrifice Ishmael, his son by his wife Hagar who later became the father of the

Arabs instead of Isaac, his son by his wife Sarah who later became the father of the Jews? Why had He decided that the slaughter would take place in Mecca in Al-Hijaz, a droughty burning desert and not in Palestine or Egypt where the land was fertile and green? Why had He chosen a lamb and not a sheep, goat or calf?

Why was it acceptable for our father Ibrahim to kill a fattened calf instead of a lamb for the angels who came to his house disguised in human form on their way to the villages of Sodom and Gomorrah to warn *Sayyidna* Lot to leave quickly with the Believers before they destroyed those villages at dawn because their people were deeply in sin. The same angels had given *Sittana* Sarah the glad tidings that she would bear a son Isaac and after him Jacob, but she laughed, smote her forehead and wondered how she could give birth to sons while she was a barren old woman and her husband had grown quite decrepit from old age!

“Young man! Young man! Wait! Wait! Where are you going? Why are you running? What happened to you! You are leaving without receiving your first instructions for entering the Kingdom of Heaven!” Miss Anderson’s voice reached my ears as I dashed swiftly downstairs heading to the main gate, holding my shoes in my left hand while trying to tie my belt with my right one.

All it took that day to save this pure, naive and crushed young man was the word *lamb*. I heard my heart sing *WaHidouh! WaHidouh!*, Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

IN A LONELY PLACE

Chapter 1

The atmosphere at the upscale Bullock's Department Store was charged with electricity. It was the day before Christmas, and a gathering storm of anticipation fevered both workers and customers alike. It was my first Christmas in America, and my heart beat a quick tempo as I was swept up in this heretofore unknown contagious delirium.

I received orders from almost all of the departments in the store. Even by running, going without lunch, and skipping my coffee break, I could not keep up. Mr. George Shroeyer, my boss and head of the wrapping and shipping department, was snapping orders faster than they could be filled by his skeleton crew.

"Take this parcel to the customer desk; a woman is waiting there. Hurry, hurry, hurry!" he yelled, clapping his hands and swinging his head. "Also Miss Collins from the confectionery department just telephoned to say that none of you boys have stopped by there for the last hour, and that there are over thirty boxes with the number increasing every minute!

"Move it! Get going! Go to second level lingerie and bring down their boxes. Hurry!" he hollered, still clapping his hands nervously. Orders continued to be yelled to me in quick succession.

"Jamil! In the furniture department a lady is waiting near the fountain to be helped to her car with a magazine stand."

"Jamil! Mr. Green says suits are still lying around in the men's department. Also, Mrs. Patterson just telephoned for the third time to complain that women's dresses are piling up badly. You'll have to get a move on!"

"Jamil!" called Monty, a co-worker. "Help me push this hamper. Mason is on the dock waiting to finish loading the

delivery truck. I'm afraid that if he waits two minutes longer he'll come after me like an angry bee! Come on! Give me a hand!"

Late that afternoon Mr. Shroeyer asked me to hurry off to the perfume department to pick up a gift-wrapped package. Because I was so busy, I asked whether Melvin could be sent instead. "I'm sorry, but he can't go. He asked permission to go buy his mother a present and hasn't returned yet." The mere mention of the word *mother* anguished my heart, making me feverishly homesick. The old man paused for a while and added, "Oh, boy!" I really envy you, Jamil! Aren't you lucky to be far away from your family and friends! You don't have to buy presents and worry about these stupid and ridiculous formalities!"

These ungodly, thoughtless, cruel, insensitive and inconsiderate words cut me deeply. As I hurried off to my tasks, my mind could no longer be contained by this store in Pasadena. In the month and a half since I had started working here, never had the duties been so numerous and demanding, never the pressures so tense and nerve-wrecking. Yet they had told me Christmas was fun and easy going!

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The previous afternoon at five o'clock I had observed Mr. Shroeyer carrying a carton of sealed Manila envelopes. The majority of the wrapping and shipping staff, both men and women, flocked around his desk. As he called each name, an employee stepped forward, signed his name, and was handed a pay envelope. Mr. Shroeyer shook hands and exclaimed, "It was a pleasure knowing you. Glad to have you on our Christmas crew. Hope you'll join us again next year.

Merry Christmas!" The process continued until over twentyfour people had been dismissed.

I was a little dismayed. "How will we manage tomorrow with so few crew members?" I wondered as I stood watching my boss put the empty boxes away.

"Who will help with the work tomorrow, Mr. Shroeyer?"

I queried in earnest wonder.

In reply I received an indulgent smile and a wink from the older man. "Tomorrow is the day before Christmas. The activity will be light, and the fever of buying will calm down since people will have done the bulk of their shopping. You boys have earned a little rest. You, Monty, Frank, and Melvin can coast tomorrow. That is a promise."

"How do you know?" I asked earnestly.

"How do I know?" Mr. Shroeyer replied with a defensive attitude. "Well, boy, I'll tell you. After eleven years in this business, you learn a whole lot. Our shelves are practically empty." He pointed to them with a jerk of his head. "By ten o'clock tonight there won't be a single box waiting to be wrapped!"

When I left work at midnight, sure enough, the shelves were completely empty. The following morning the wrapping and shipping department was in frenzy from the moment the doors of the store opened. Everyone was feverishly running. Even Mr. Shroeyer found himself compelled to run to various sections of the store more than once in order to pick up one or two gift wrapped packages! Carrying parcels to a car, I looked at Mr. Shroeyer and gasped, "You should have said we would be racing again today--not coasting!"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Jamil! Really, I can't understand what happened. I've never seen it like this before," the older man

said by way of apology.

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"Boy! I'll sure be glad when it's all over. You'd think a person would learn. Yet every year I wait until the last moment to buy Thelma's present," the customer exclaimed, snapping shut his lighter and blowing out the smoke. "She's my wife," he explained with a smile. I placed the large, heavy box in the trunk of the man's car, and wished him a Merry Christmas!

"Well, it's true," another customer was saying, "Christmas does flatten the pocketbook, but I get a kick out of surprising my wife and the children. The looks on their faces tomorrow morning will make me feel like the happiest human being on earth! Wow! There's nothing in the world equivalent to giving and receiving," he said as he and I walked to the store parking lot, our arms loaded with gift-wrapped packages. Everyone was talking with eager enthusiasm about the "Greatest Tomorrow" as if it were the Day of Salvation. . . about plans . . . about gifts still to be bought, or those long hidden away and ready . . . about friends and loved ones. It was all happy, thrilling, excited talk.

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Ever since I had started working at Bullock's Department Store as a Christmas helper, I had heard constant talk bearing one way or another on the coming season--Christmas this, Christmas that! I listened to discussions of how merchandise would be displayed, how the store would be decorated, what items could be expected to sell the best, which departments would have the highest turnovers, and so on.

It had never bothered me, for it had so little to do with the way I had always known Christmas. I had always thought it was a religious day honoring the Baby Jesus. Having never celebrated it like this, I was a little taken back at the way everyone spent money on lavish and expensive presents for their loved ones. It had never occurred to me that everybody shopped with madly excited abandonment!

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In my town, Salt, people generally did not give gifts at this time. Instead, they visited one another, bearing only greetings and warm affection. They shared Turkish coffee, tea, pieces of toffee candy, cigarettes, good conversation and plenty of good wishes. Children received raisins, dry figs and mixed candies to carry home in their pockets. In exceptional circumstances they might be given half a *ta'reefeh* piaster! I had been poor, it was true, but even the wealthy Christians did not exchange expensive and fancy gifts. They gave money, rice, sugar, tea, coffee or some clothes to their needy relatives. How lavish and loud Christmas in America seemed in comparison to Christmas back home in the East!

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Now that Christmas was almost here, each word seemed to reopen a deep wound, exposing buried memories causing me the most acute pain. Christmas Eve and "Tomorrow" had always been a very precious time to me and a sacred occasion to my heart; and I liked it to be a time of deep love and friendship.

As the day progressed, so did my loneliness and nostalgia. I feared the approach of evening and wanted to

stop imagining how unbearable and tormenting it would be! Change was difficult. Right now I grievously longed to be at home with my family and beloved friends in the East! How about tonight when I would be truly alone! The mere idea horrified me . . . made me tremble . . . filled my heart and soul with misery and defeat! All this hustle and bustle made me feel scared, alone and distant from all I knew and understood. In spite of the crowds, the swiftness of activity, the excitement, and even the exhaustion, memories were welling up in me dangerously. If only I could keep on running and running until I was in Jordan in my mother's warm comforting arms.

"Oh, Mother! How beautiful and great you seem to me, especially now!" I thought miserably! Oh, to be able to close my eyes and suddenly open them in Salt, my little home town! But there were countries, kingdoms, seas and oceans between Pasadena, California, and Salt, Jordan, hopeless miles and miles. Oh, God! Stand by me now. Please! Please! I feel so alone . . . so frightened in the huge crowds!"

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"Jordan! Oh beloved and adorable sweetheart of mine! How elegant, serene, lofty, majestic and beautiful you are! A handful of earth from your meadows, a grain of sand from your desert, a bouquet of wild tulips from your mountains--any of these is dearer to my heart and soul than the whole world with its wealth, glory, and splendor. Oh for the fragrance of your wild mint, oregano and oleander! It is more aromatic and more sensational than the finest Parisian perfumes.

A loaf of homemade bread baked in your countryside bakeries is more delicious, succulent and tasty than bread

made in the finest bakeries elsewhere in the world! I long for a taste of it; for a sip of your water; for a smile from your charming daughters. You are the apple of my eye, the light of my heart. I adore you, cherish you and love you dearly. Oh, Jordan, you are my first and only love. I worship you. I prostrate myself and kiss the divine ground which is you. My heart is truly broken without you!"

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Chapter 2

My father, Suleiman, was not originally from Jordan. He had come from beyond the Jordan River with his grandfather Youssef and grandmother Kurmah when he was just three and a half years old. Youssef's son, Ibrahim, who was Suleiman's father, was killed by British soldiers before he was twenty-five years old--gone but not forgotten!

In 1919 the Palestinians had revolted against the British mandate, demanding independence and the withdrawal of British troops from Palestine. The British refused, and a wild, fierce underground resistance movement was formed. My grandfather, Ibrahim, joined and subsequently played a distinguished role in the revolt. British intelligence penetrated the rebel movement and paid good money for information leading to the capture of the ringleaders of the dissidents, alive or dead. They kept their eyes wide open, and their agents infiltrated every corner of the country.

One dark rainy night Ibrahim disguised himself in women's clothes and came down secretly to his house from his mountain hideout. British soldiers were waiting for him. He had just finished leaning his rifle against the wall and started to untie his shoelaces when he heard a loud, hoarse voice.

"We know you are inside!" a British officer shouted at him in heavily accented, broken Arabic. "Put your hands over your head and come out! We have surrounded the house. It is better for you to surrender and live!"

"Shame upon you, you villainous coward!" Ibrahim shouted back at him, raging with anger. "You parasites and cockroaches! Get the hell out of our country and leave us in peace!" Then he rushed to his rifle and from an opening in the wall showered the surrounding police with bullets. A short

exchange of fire, and the courageous man was dead. His wife perished with him, trying to protect her husband.

Oh! If only people in this world knew how much heartache this caused the family of this noble man and woman! But who outside their village would weep for the fallen? Who heard of their tragedy? Who even cared!

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Suleiman's grandfather, Youssef, decided to flee Palestine with his grandson before he, too, was killed. He was anxious to save Suleiman, the son of his only child. As the Palestinian revolt engulfed the whole country, Youssef fled across the Jordan River to the safety of the East Bank. Trans-Jordan was also under a British mandate, but there was no rebellion there.

Youssef busied himself in his new life in Salt, trying to reconcile himself to the loss of his son as he and Kurmah devoted themselves to their grandson's happiness. They bought a house on a small piece of land and Youssef took up his former trade as a butcher. People admired and respected him highly for his honesty and decency, and they also sympathized with his tragedy.

Youssef could not know, as he was saying farewell to the land of his fathers and grandfathers, that waves and waves of people were mobilized. Their hearts and minds were filled with biblical myths and deep, black hatred. Men and women came from every corner of the globe with nothing in their minds and hearts except the idea of massacring the inhabitants of Palestine or forcing them to flee and leave their homes, property, villages and cities so they could confiscate them and claim them as their own!

Twenty-five years later fate would ordain that thousands of the remaining original inhabitants--men, women, and children--would be slaughtered in cold blood. Hundreds of thousands would be compelled to leave their ancestral lands and communities under threat of arms, exiling themselves across the East Bank of the Jordan River. A quarter of a century later, multiplied numbers would be shamelessly slaughtered and compelled to flee, just because they were Palestinians!

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Suleiman's grandfather Youssef died a few years after his flight; his wife, Kurmah, died a year later. Suleiman himself was only sixteen years old and had worked in his grandfather's butchery for some time and was being groomed to take over the business. However, that type of work satisfied neither his ambitions nor his overweening ego. Therefore, he joined the Jordanian Army.

Suleiman's regiment was stationed in Jerusalem. During the War of 1967, he was killed along with many colleagues. He died at the hands of Zionists, just as his father before him had perished at the hands of British gunman as he sought to preserve not only his own land and that of his ancestors but also the land of every Palestinian. I was only five months in my mother's womb at the time of my overweening father's death. My father never knew me. My only links to my father were the stories my mother told me.

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At my father's passing away, a great sadness entered our home! Aminah, my mother, devoted herself to molding me in

my father's image. Mr. Suleiman had left us the small house in which we lived, where my mother planned to remain forever, and a small piece of land which we rented in return for a part of its crop. Aminah also owned a small manual Singer sewing machine which had been a part of her dowry and from which she realized a meager, but adequate living for herself and her family. In fact, through her sewing she actually provided a better living than many of the men in the small town.

I helped during summer vacations by working in the small, humble shop of one of my father's friends. I swept, delivered groceries, brought water in cans from the public faucet for my boss's home, and sprinkled the dirt road in front of the store in an attempt to tame the relentless and irritating dust.

Though she was illiterate, my mother knew very well the importance of learning and was quite concerned that I obtain a good education. In this way, I might have an opportunity to obtain a high position in the government and put an end to the suffering, humiliation and poverty which the family endured. Often she would sit up late, though her eyes were tired and her body fatigued from the day's sewing, simply to keep me company and encourage me, while I did my homework. She even promised that, if I were a good student and applied myself, she would somehow send me abroad to Europe or even America, when I finished secondary school.

Chapter 3

Our family always lived next door to Mona and her mother, who like my mother, had never gone to school. Mona's father, Zaidan, had died while performing his duties as a tax collector in the service of the government's mounted police.

The only revenue the government of Trans Jordan had at that time was the taxes levied on livestock, namely sheep and goats, and crops including fruits and vegetables. This revenue was the only means of survival for the government. Because the people would conceal from the government the actual number of their animals and the full amount of their crops, the government would send tax collectors escorted by mounted soldiers to enforce the law and to protect the tax collectors from the people who would not allow them to collect the government's due.

The tax agents were usually sent unexpectedly in order to surprise the herdsmen and the crop owners. These visits took place during the summer months because people left their homes to live in black tents on their land beside their grazing animals. The taxes were paid at the end of the summer after the landowners and livestock owners had sold their crops and products. Estimating the value of the crops was not a problem because every thing could be seen. The problem was the livestock because owners could show the government agents part of the herd and hide the rest!

Mona's father, Zaidan, was one of the mounted policemen who escorted the tax collectors. One day he and Mahmoud, the tax collector, were hiding behind a huge pile of stones late in the afternoon, watching from their hiding place and waiting anxiously for a particular shepherd passing along this rarely used road as he returned home with his

herd. No sooner had the sheep entered the fold than the two government agents were standing at the gate counting the herd.

The two agents demanded their host to provide them with a sleeping place, food and drink as their due right as representatives of the government, thinking that the weight of tradition might not be sufficient in this case.

"I strongly believe that the government has no right--nor is it fair--to tax us on what we have earned with hard labor and sweat for an entire year!" said the Nemer, the host, bitterly to his two guests after dinner.

"The government does not take taxes to line its own pocket. It uses them to pay the salaries of those who safe guard you, your family, your property, and your country." The tax collector spoke calmly and quietly, and tried to be convincing. He paused for a moment to watch the effect of his speech on his host and then added, "It is also spent on teaching our children history and mathematics and especially to read and recite the Holy Quran."

"My children don't believe in such nonsense. They have no time to go to school; they help me in the field. Also, I do not want the government to protect us. With my rifle I can protect my own family! No one would dare to threaten us or our property!" he said arrogantly while jerking his head toward his rifle which was hung on the post supporting the black tent.

"You say this because you are an ignorant and pig headed moron!" retorted Zaidan, Mona's father, provoked and angry!

"You insult me in my own home. Your stomach has not yet digested the meat of the lamb I had killed for you, you big donkey!" the host said and rushed like a storm to his rifle.

Before Mahmoud could stop him, he fired at Zaidan's heart and killed him on the spot!

The life sentence to which Nemer was sentenced did not help Mona and her mother bring back the man they loved and cherished, nor did it diminish their agony and their nights of suffocating solitude and sufferings! Mona had been only a toddler when her father was killed. Since that time she and her mother had lived on a small monthly compensation.

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One afternoon when I returned home from school, my mother told me that we had been invited the next day to the neighbor's house to help celebrate the Holy day *Eid Al - Meelad* . . . Christmas!

"Although I am not Mona's closest friend, she has selected us to be her guests of honor!" my mother said with joyful pride.

"Isn't she the one who sent us a large plate of stuffed cabbage and marrow last week, Mother?"

"Yes, son, she is! And the week before that, she sent us a large bag of oranges and lemons. Do you remember? She said one of her distant relatives owns an orchard and sent her a box full of them!"

"Have you ever sent her anything in return, Mother?" I queried.

"Of course I have, dear!" She felt slightly insulted. "Do you think your mother is cheap and has so little pride and dignity that she would accept gifts from strangers but not give anything in return? I filled the same plate with raisins and sent it back to her. When she sent us oranges and lemons, I sent her a good amount of sugar!"

"Allah bless you, Mother! I am proud of you! You are a wonderful woman and sweetheart! I love you very, very much!"

"You too, dear! You are the love and hope which have sustained me since your father's death. If it were not for you, I would not have known what to do with myself and could not have survived my grief!"

I was moved by my mother's words. I drew close to her, wrapping my arms around her waist and resting my head on her breast. She took my shoulders into her hands, looked into my face and pensively said, "You look exactly like your father with your slim body, curly hair and intelligent eyes. You are also thoughtful just as he was. May Allah rest his soul in peace."

Suddenly I drew back from her admiring her radiant face. "Do you think, Mother, that Mona's mother likes us because you and she are widows, and Mona and I are fatherless?"

Aminah was shaken by her son's acute and penetrating question. Initially she did not know what to say. In a few moments she replied; "I really never thought of it that way, dear!" Pausing to wet her dry lips and collect her thoughts, she added, "I always thought that the real reasons were that I never revealed or repeated conversations the way most of the women in the neighborhood do! I do not interfere in anyone's affairs. I keep my mouth shut, always mind my own business, and never criticize nor talk badly about any one. Whatever evil I see or hear, I keep to myself. I have never repeated any slander about anyone. "Because of all this, people love and respect us!"

Aminah delivered this long speech because she noticed that her son was listening to her carefully and attentively. It was a perfect opportunity to teach her son a lesson in ethics,

good behavior and how to deal with people in order to gain their love and respect! She was happy . . . very happy! She felt

proud of herself as a mother, as a woman, and as a widow who had kept her honor and her husband's sacred memory. I said nothing but raised my face to my mother's and kissed her warmly on her cheeks and forehead!

* * * * *

I was a friend or playmate with all of the boys who lived in my neighborhood and knew the names of most of the girls. Although I had lived all of my eight years as a neighbor to Mona, I do not remember that I had ever spoken to her before that evening! I had often seen her and her girl friends as they passed my house on their way to school or played in the dusty streets, shrieking at each other, accusing one or another of cheating at games.

But the night when Mona and her mother gave my mother and me an affectionate welcome into their home, shaking our hands and smiling in warm friendship, I began to sense very strong brotherly feelings toward my little neighbor. I sincerely wished that she had been my sister or that I had been privileged to have a sister like her!

I did not fully understand my feelings, nor did I try to do so. I was too busy thinking about the rich dinner I was going to eat followed by dessert, a treat we rarely could expect at home. If their meal celebrating Christmas were anything like our *Eid Al-Fitrr* or *Eid Al-Hajj*, there would be plenty of meat; and, oh, was I ever fond of meat! I could have eaten a whole lamb if I had been offered one! I knew I would also be given raisins, figs and candy and would play with Mona until bedtime. Now that was something to which to look forward!

That evening a custom was established between our two households that was to last for many years to come. Mona and I grew up side-by-side, playing together and studying together. I, being older, helped her with her homework problems such as the pronunciation of difficult English words, advanced arithmetic exercises and many other assignments. She went to an all girls' school and I went to an all boys' school. Since the two schools were not far apart, I waited for Mona on most days. She was like a sister to me. I was the brother she desired and needed for affection, help and protection. Each of us, in effect, had two mothers. We shared everything, including each other's religious Holy Days. We considered ourselves especially lucky and extra-fortunate for having four *Eids*: Ramadan, the Pilgrimage, Easter, and Christmas. Four times a year we ate to bursting; four times a year we had all the meat and sweets that we could possibly devour! Very often I deeply wished that those four magic and immortal days would repeat themselves again and again during the slack days of the year!

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I shall never forget another outstanding Christmas of my childhood. Christmas Eve arrived and Mona and her mother came over for dinner and a pleasant evening. My mother had cooked many wonderful dishes that filled the small house with their marvelous aroma. Later that night, Mona suddenly reached toward me, offering something wrapped in a page of old homework, its red-marked corrections still evident.

"Happy Ramadan, *Eid Saeed!*" she said, her eyes never leaving my face. I stood looking wonderingly at the object in her outstretched hand.

"Take it and open it. It's a gift for you," she urged.

I took the offered gift and did as she had asked, uncovering a beautiful pair of green socks. I was so confused and embarrassed that I failed to find the words to thank her. My bewildered amazement stemmed from the fact that never before had I received a present from anyone except my mother. Moreover, socks were considered an unnecessary luxury.

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Parents usually bought their children clothes only on these special occasions. That year my mother had bought me some inexpensive striped material made of hemp. From this she had made me a suit with short pants and a brown shirt made of matching soft cotton. I could also remember receiving new brown shoes and a new *kaffiyah*, headdress with its accompanying *egal* to hold it in place.

As long as I live, I will never forget strutting pretentiously along the bumpy, pot-holed roads of the little town with its dirt-filled alleys and humble homes, wearing my new suit of very inexpensive material. I flaunted my adornments like a peacock in front of my companions and acquaintances, especially the girls who were near my age, as if to say to one and all, "Feast your eyes and indulge your senses! I am Mr. Jamil, Mr. Wonderful himself!"

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This sweet little gesture of Mona's began a practice between our two families of gift giving on respective holy days. As we grew, our brotherly and sisterly love and the corresponding gift exchanging blossomed. The peak of my happiness came some years later when on the eve of Easter my mother bought a beautiful, red silk material and made Mona a lovely dress as a special gift. This inspired even greater love and respect between the two families and made Mona and her mother exceedingly happy and very grateful.

Chapter 4

On the eve of my departure for America after the friends and neighbors who had wished me good luck and a bright future had left the house, I entered the kitchen where my mother and Mona and her mother were sitting. I noticed that my mother had carefully tried to conceal her abundant falling tears. I also noticed that the other women's eyes were red from crying, and that they, too, tried to hide their tears. Barely able to speak through her tears and grievous weeping, my mother said, "I shall miss you very much. I am drowning in the knowledge that you will be so far away. I feel that I am smothering and losing my mind. I miss you even before you leave. I cannot live without you." Then she burst into hysterical sobbing.

"Please don't speak like that, Mother. I am going to miss you too--even more than you can possibly know!"

After licking my dry lips, I added, "You will be with *Khalti* Aunt Aminah and Mona keeping each other company and supporting each other . . . but me! Who is going to cheer me up in a strange land? I am not going to know anybody there. God only knows how much suffering and grief I am going to have to endure! "

"So take me with you, Jamil. Please, please! I also cannot imagine staying here without you! Who will help me with my difficult lessons, and give me true brotherly advice when I badly need it?" asked Mona, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. Between her tears, she added, "Who will stop the naughty boys from harassing me with their rude words? I was so thankful to God that he sent me a compassionate and protective brother to care for and help me; and now you are going to disappear and leave me to struggle alone!"

Mona's words saddened me enormously, and left a deep ache in the pit of my heart! It was very true that Mona was exceptionally beautiful, and appealing to the boys! Many, many times I had been forced to fight or argue with some rude, vulgar, wicked and ill-bred boys who had waited for her to pass by, and then bothered her by telling her how sexy and provoking, how thrilling she was, and how they wished to make love to her! Their impudent and offensive words used to make Mona cry and become depressed, due to her hypersensitivity and strict religious upbringing.

"The naughty boys tease and flirt only with the beautiful and charming girls like my dear sister! Isn't that true *Khalt*, Aunt Zainab!"

When I realized that my joking remark had not cheered up the women nor brought smiles to their faces, I added, "You are a big girl now, sister, and can take care of yourself. I am sure of that! I have great faith in you!"

After a pause in which I hoped to observe the impact of my words on her, I added, "Who is going to write mother's letters to me? And who is going to read mine to her? Who is going to be with our mothers to comfort them in their loneliness?"

"Yes, dear," his mother replied. "Who is going to read Jamil's letters to us and write ours to him?"

"But you know, Jamil, we females are borne with broken wings and are members of an inferior class in this cruel society. People always take advantage of us! We have no male to protect us!" said Mona.

"What is this nonsense? Where did you hear those big empty words-- inferior and superior?" Fiery sparks of anger flew from my eyes. I was provoked by her sad and depressing words! Perhaps I was not so much angry at

Mona's thoughts as furious at the fate and circumstances which found all four of us with practically no relatives!

"Nowadays there is no difference between men and women except by virtue of education and diligence! I am very sure that as soon as you finish secondary school, many young men will be thrilled to death to ask your hand in marriage."

When I saw Mona's lowly manner and sorrowful look, I realized that she regretted what she had said! Receiving no comment, I continued, "You know our mothers are living only for our sakes and in the hope of seeing us grown up and established in life, standing on our own two feet."

"I know that! I am sure of it," the unhappy girl said sighing. "But it is awful, too awful. It is very difficult for us to accept the idea of being without you! We can't face it!"

"You must, Mona. We should not be selfish. We must think of those who have sacrificed their lives and happiness for us; we must. This was always my mother's plan. She wanted me to have something more in my life than I could achieve by staying here. Don't you think she is sacrificing something too?"

"I am to blame! I planted the idea in his mind! I wish I hadn't! It started as a joke. It is very painful!" my mother said, her eyes full of tears.

"I accepted the idea because of the encouragement all three of you gave me. However, I am willing--very willing--to either cancel my plans or postpone them," I said sincerely.

"Of course not, dear!" Mona's mother said angrily, looking blamefully at the other two women. "You are unfair women! Silly emotions and stupid talks will not lead anywhere! You are both making it very difficult for the poor boy!" At this point my mother and Mona burst out crying and sobbing hysterically.

I allowed them to release their inner turmoil. Their words cut me apart like a knife. Finally I said, "Oh beloved ones! I want the three of you to be proud of your son and brother; and I want to always remember and value how much moral and emotional support I received from my two mothers and sister!"

My mother opened her mouth to speak, but I continued, "The time will pass like a dream. I will study very hard in order to finish my education in the shortest time possible. I want to come back quickly to my four beautiful sweethearts. I know they will be waiting for me impatiently."

The three women were startled and looked at each other with stunned expressions. Their faces turned pale and their hearts quickened. They gazed penetratingly into my face, trying to discover who the fourth sweetheart could be! I had never mentioned anything about being in love with a girl or even interested in one. Their hearts flamed with happiness that the youth who was dear to their hearts and souls was in love, but they felt sad and disappointed that he had hidden it from them all that time! "How clever and farsighted," they thought.

I paused a little, wanting them to wonder. Then I smiled and said as if delivering a romantic rhetorical speech, "The fourth sweetheart is Jordan. The mere mention of it inflames my heart. To me it's the most charming and invigorating place on earth, and it offers me the hope and happiness that no other place could possibly match. Even my ears are enchanted at the sound of her name . . . Jordan! It is the place for which my soul sings! But that is nothing compared to the way I feel about you--my three beautiful, precious, elegant and marvelous sweethearts!"

Mona interrupted my thoughts, looking at her mother as if she were asking her permission, but addressing all of them.

"I have been thinking . . . I will finish secondary school in two years. Could I join you in America then? We would both get good educations and come back to serve our beloved country!" she said enthusiastically, hoping to convince them.

"Mona! What has happened to your mind! Have you lost your senses? Have you forgotten that is impossible?" her mother shrieked at her furiously. "Even if I agreed, which is impossible, what would our friends and neighbors say, and what would they think of us?"

"We always worry about what other people say and think of us, as if we are just living to please and satisfy them!"

"Of course, dear!" said Mrs. Zainab filled with zealous enthusiasm. "We are part of these people, and what they say and think of us is very important and essential in our lives!"

"But these people would not care at all if we had nothing to eat! They wouldn't even say, 'May their souls rest in peace' if we died of starvation! They would mark us with their nasty remarks if we had done things which weren't in their interest, and would tell us what we should and what we shouldn't do!"

"This is human nature, dear!" Mrs. Aminah said trying to ease Mona's anger.

"How angry and frustrated I am! I hate these people and wish I didn't live among them!" Mona ejaculated.

"You're a girl, my beloved sister, and I know your mother, as a good conservative Christian would never allow you to go to school outside of Jordan without her going along with you. Girls stay home and study at local universities. Isn't that true, *Khalti* Aunt Zainab?" I asked.

"She would allow me if she knew I was with you," Mona replied confidently.

"No, I would not! You are very mistaken, dear!" her mother retorted angrily. Mona started sobbing passionately.

"A degree for a girl is her marriage . . . being a wife! Her treasures are the children she births. The right and normal place for a *bint* is in her husband's house cooking, washing and raising children!" She paused for a second as if to watch the impact of this sermon on her daughter, and then continued. "My only hope in life is to see you happy in your husband's house! Believe me, my beloved ones; every time I offer my prayers and every night before I go to bed, I pray to Allah with deep sincerity to grant you a pious, honest and loving husband to love and cherish you!"

"We are very sure of that my sister, Zainab!" my mother responded. "You live only for Mona, and I live only for Jamil. Their comfort, happiness and future are our most cherished wish!"

"We know that! We are sure of it!" Mona said. "But remember, Mother, that during yours and *Khalti* Aunt Aminah's time and even before that, women didn't need to go to school because even most men never went to school. Education was a luxury even for wealthy people; but nowadays it is a must, yes, it is a must for boys and girls alike! Believe me, Mother!"

"I do sweetheart, I do; but I still believe whatever university degree a woman gets, and whatever position in life she may reach, her right place is her home with her husband and her children!"

"You still have two years ahead of you before you finish secondary school," I interjected. "Why don't we all wait until then to decide? If you still think you should get a higher education, then you can go to a local university and still live at home with your mother."

"That is an excellent suggestion," my mother said, feeling happy that someone had found a solution for the

complicated, obstinate problem! "Thank you very much, *habibi!* You always have a masterly compromise. After a few minutes of repugnant and burdensome quietness had passed, Mona broke the silence. "Jamil, do you think you will be able to come to see us next year, as many students do during summer vacation?"

I almost called attention to the fact that my going to America was a great expense to my mother. In fact, she had been forced to borrow most of the money. My plan was to work part time during the school year and over the holidays to repay the debt. But rather than destroying Mona's utopian dreams, by wounding her delicate and sensitive feelings and blasting her hopes by shocking her with severe reality, I bribed her with a falsely assuring smile.

Mona bent her head forward, pressing it into my chest, as had been her habit when she felt petulant and wanted something of me. I answered, "Maybe so. Give me these few months to study the situation in America." The thought crossed my mind that it was dishonest to give this lovely girl any false hopes, but the only way I could think of protecting her from the fierce reality of the situation was to delay answering her immediately.

"Jamil?" Mona had a shy question in her voice and her head came up so her eyes could search his. "Do you suppose all the girls there are as beautiful as I have read and heard? Do you think they all are tall blondes with blue eyes? I'm afraid you won't ever think of us here at home--not even of your mother who loves you so dearly." Wounded misery filled her eyes,

"You are asking many peculiar and painful questions, dear! You are making it very difficult for the poor boy!" her mother said reproachfully.

"Please, Sister Zainab!" Aminah said. "Let her ask her brother what she wants."

I felt terribly saddened. My feelings were hurt and my pride and devotion for the three women were diminished. After a few minutes of silence I replied, "No power on earth . . . you understand . . . no power can make me forget my adorable and beautiful two mothers and sister." He placed his two hands on Mona's shoulders, patting her as he had done throughout their growing up years when she had needed assurance and security!

"Remember, I need your help and your mother's courage and patience desperately," I said in a tone that conveyed both sincerity and kindness. "Who else can write mother's letters to me and read mine to her? And who else will cheer up my mother, keep up her hopes, and provide her with companionship during these during the lonely and dreadfully long days? Without your help it will be impossible for me to go. If it weren't for the two of you, I would not have left Mother alone!"

I held Mona's tired face with gentle hands, kissed her forehead and holding her at arm's length said, "I love you very much--as much as one could love his sister! You are, and always have been, my precious friend and sister. No one in the entire world can ever fill or take your place in my heart or my life." My eyes flooded with burning tears, which I struggled to conceal.

"We know it, sweetheart! We are sure of it!" both of our mothers said together.

After Mona and her mother had said their final goodbyes and gone to their home, I stood for some time gazing at the wall with a heavy heart and depressed spirit. I excused myself from the house for few minutes in order to breathe some fresh air, but spent much of my last night wandering in

the silent, dusty streets and roaming the dark alleys before I could go home to my own dear mother to comfort and to be comforted by her. Although my last evening with her was unbearable and agonizing, I hoped to gain enough comfort to last through the painful years of separation.

Chapter 5

I arrived at the port of New York one day before my college classes were to start. I was scheduled to take the plane to Los Angeles and then to go to Pasadena, California, where I had been accepted at the community college. I was impressed by the magnificent public parks, the skyline of the great city of New York and the wide, clean tree-lined streets. I could scarcely take in the fabulous and luxurious department stores and endless streams of cars and subways. All the exciting activities and wild mad rush of life made a striking contrast to my small town with its narrow, dusty, dirt roads, houses that appeared to be mere sheds in comparison with those I saw before me, and simple people with their slow, easy-going, humdrum lives. My mind was completely captured and I ended up staying five extra days in this amazingly enchanting and exotic world called New York! Oh! New York! What a wonderful and charming city!

As for the city's cosmopolitan women, I was intrigued by their swanlike necks set on firm, slender, shapely bodies and their prominent bosoms on display, provocative and challenging. Their long hair rippled down their shoulders and long slim legs drew the eye up to seductive thighs. Woe to the sensitive and tenderhearted, to the victims of pent-up emotions susceptible to beauty and enthralled by the charms of these gorgeous creatures! Woe to him who responded to the fragrance of their perfumes, to the appealing femininity, soft skin and seductive voices!

For me, the streets of the city were like rivers of perfume. Whenever I passed a woman, her fragrance wafted enticingly to my nostrils a fragrance that intoxicated my entire being. I longed to give way to passion and fling myself on the breast of every woman I met. Deposited by a bus on a broad street

in the heart of the throbbing, even rabidly seething city, I felt that I had landed in one of the fables of the Arabian Nights in which women had nothing better to do than adorn themselves, groom and perfume their beautiful bodies, and wait with feverish lust for their dominant lovers to join them in games of self-indulgence, love and gaiety!

I had entered the Paradise described in the Holy Books, fulfilling my highest hopes and imaginings by meeting the nymphs of Paradise face to face. At the same time, my straitlaced religious upbringing told me that these fancies, desires and imaginings were sinful. I was lacerated by a deep sense of guilt and a fear of wrongdoing! So I cursed the devil and sought refuge in the Lord, asking for pardon and the atonement of Almighty God for the evil of the accursed Satan, who stealthily whispers temptation into the hearts of mankind and was especially tempting me this day.

In the beginning, I saw the women of New York as perfume soaked pillars of ivory or light. As they strolled through the streets, it seemed that their soft and graceful bodies were dancing, scarcely touching the pavement. When they targeted their eyes at a man, it was as though they shot arrows at the heart of the beholder who became the victim of their feminine charms! And when they bestowed a smile on me, they cast a spell on my mind that set my heart on fire and fanned the emotions in my breast to a white heat.

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I wished I could stay in New York forever, wandering the exotic streets, feasting my eyes and senses on the elegancy

and charm of fascinating women, and devouring the sight of huge buildings and fancy department stores, the likes of which my little town never dreamed of having!

I decided to travel by bus across country so as to see this enchanting new land. This doubled my pleasure but delayed my schedule. When I finally arrived in Pasadena and went to the college to enroll, I was more than two weeks late. After much discussion, it was decided that I had better wait for the spring semester. In the meantime, I would take a non-credit course in English for foreigners at a night school and try to obtain a driver's license with the help of the Turners, my new landlords.

Upon my arrival in Pasadena, I was given temporary hospitality by Elias, a student from my hometown who was the son of a distant acquaintance of Mona. Elias was a fulltime student of computer science. He also worked in a gas station full-time, so I saw very little of him. His accommodations were modest, and I slept with my legs tucked up underneath me on a couch that was too small. My host could not spare any time to help me find my own place, but showed me how to use the daily newspaper to look for vacant rooms. I suggested that both of them might move to a larger place and share the rent, but Elias refused. He did not pay for his room in cash but in kind, tending the lawn and watering the garden. I thought that such an arrangement would be ideal for me as well, but Elias was not optimistic I would be able to find such a situation, for it was uncommon.

Every morning I would rise early and get the newspaper to check the advertisements for a furnished room at a rent I could afford. Then I would go to the public telephone at the corner of the street since there was no telephone in Elias's place. I had to overcome two mountainous obstacles: the high rents, too high for my modest budget; and the necessity of locating housing near public transportation. In most cases, a car would have been needed to get from the room to the

college or wherever he wanted to go. A week and a half passed before I found a place that met my needs.

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One morning, I woke up feeling ill at ease and dispirited, a gnawing emptiness gripping my soul. I was occupied by deep feelings of nihilism and nullification. In spite of the fact that I had a strong intuition that I had a good chance with the first number on the list, I dialed it reluctantly.

"Good morning. This is the Turner residence." A female voice answered the telephone. It sounded like the voice I had heard in my mind as a ten year old child when I was reading the fables of the Arabian Nights! I would drift among the velvet clouds of my imagination atop the peaks of pristine magical mountains where I dwelt with charming consorts. Or I sat on an old boulder outside the city conversing with the moon, revealing to it my worries and his afflictions!

Returning to reality, I explained why he was calling, and asked if the room was still vacant.

"Yes it is, and you are the first one to inquire."

I asked about the location, but the woman responded with a question. "What do you do, Sir, if I may ask?"

I told her that I was a student from abroad and had been attending an evening course in English for non-native speakers and would start classes at Pasadena Community College the coming spring.

"The room is modest, but probably ideal for a student because it is on the bus route that passes your college--just two blocks from the bus-stop."

When I told her that I was from Jordan, I sensed that the voice of the woman softened and became even sweeter and more charming.

"Do you know where Jordan is?" I asked.

"Of course I do!" the woman said with a catch in her voice. "Who does not know the homeland of our Savior . . . our God . . . Jesus Christ!"

"*Astaghfir Allah al-atheem!* (May God forgive us!)" I said reluctantly.

"Pardon me? I didn't understand!" The woman's voice was loaded with charm and gentleness.

"I am saying the room sounds very nice!"

"I am sure that the room will be to your expectation and you will be very happy here. It is also near a shopping center and a huge supermarket," she added with a happy tone.

"May I ask how much the rent is?"

Her reply surprised me! Unlike all his other prospects, she did not name the figure desired, but asked him first to come and see the room and then offer what he thought it was worth, or what he thought he could afford.

"If the room is missing anything I will acquire it for you."

I was speechless; burning tears jumped from my eyes like showers of rain! The woman's kindness and generosity, the sweetness of her words and the charm of her voice inflamed my emotions!

"My husband and I are Sunday school teachers and we will soon be leaving for church with our two children. Otherwise, I would come and pick you up in my car. We would like you to have lunch with us!"

She asked where I was calling from, and I told her I was at the corner of Lake Avenue and Colorado Street.

"The house is easy to find. Continue north on Lake towards the mountains until you reach Orange Grove Avenue. Turn left and walk five blocks. The house will be in the middle of the sixth block. It is less than twenty minutes on foot."

"It sounds easy to find! Thank you very much! You are very kind!" I said with burning emotion and falling tears! "We'll expect you for lunch then," she said. Before I could respond, she had hung up.

I put down the receiver slowly, transforming into a mass of brokenhearted, feverishly intense homesickness and loneliness. I was unable to hide my tears and began to sob frantically like a small boy who had lost his mother and his security.

It was the first time since coming to America that anyone had taken any time or thought for me. It brought back the feelings I had experienced back home where my mother, friends and neighbors cared deeply for me! It just took a minute of true consideration for me and my situation for my emotions of homesickness to erupt.

Time passed—I do not know how long--until a continuous rapping on the telephone booth brought me back to my senses. A woman outside wanted to use the telephone. I left the booth, apologized to the woman, and wiped away my tears with the back of my hand. I wandered away, directionless, with bleeding heart and suffocating soul! Over the past two days, violent feelings of loneliness and homesickness had possessed me as I yearned for my mother, Mona and her mother and my homeland. Familiar faces, places and happenings had haunted my memory. Now I felt as though I had metamorphosed into an ethereal mist and was waiting for a draft to carry me away!

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As soon as I entered the Turners' house, the four of them greeted me warmly. They showered me with very polite and intelligent questions. They asked about my family, my

homeland, my schooling, my hobbies, and why I had chosen California in particular, how I found America, and if it was as I had expected. I believed them to be genuine people and felt as if I were a very close relative or friend returning from a long trip! They were warm-hearted, extremely friendly, simple and humble people in spite of their wealth. Their concern pleased me tremendously, lessened my sense of solitude and expatriation, and made me feel, for now, secure and peaceful.

From the first moment, I was captivated by Mrs. Turner. It was more than her beauty, for she was graceful and delicate with a honeyed voice and radiated a calm spirituality and depth. She was indeed the tender-voiced angel of my childhood dreams when I used to sit at night in the darkness, sometimes in cold winter nights, on a big rock, overlooking the deep and wide valley outside the city and have a secret, emotional conversation with the stars.

She looked to be in her early thirties; her husband was fifteen or so years older. As I understood later, they both had worked for a local real estate company, where she had been his secretary before they got married. It was a first marriage for both of them. After their wedding they had left the company and set up in business together. From the exclusiveness of their house and its furniture, the luxurious cars they owned and the clothes they wore, I realized that they were very well off.

To my surprise, the room rent was only \$50 a month. It is true that the room was small, but the furniture was not at all bad. I had checked out many other rooms far less comfortable than this and the asking prices had been much higher--\$100 to \$150. I was touched when they told me they would take no money until I had found a job; and through their church

connections, for they were both very active in their local church, they would try to find some part-time work for me. "We would like to ask of you one simple favor," the wife said timidly. "If you have no objection, we would appreciate very much if you could babysit our children one night a week while we are at a church meeting." I accepted with alacrity and happiness. I believed that my mother's prayers had been answered and that these lovely, generous and hospitable folks had been sent to look after me through divine intercession.

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A deep friendship sprang up between the Turners and me. They found me work and often invited me to dinner or took me with them to church functions or on picnics. More than once they took me to the beach and to mountain and desert resorts to spend a night or two. Mrs. Turner even did my laundry and ironing, cleaned my room many times, made my bed and changed the bedding. Their two sons, Chris, aged eight, and John, five, were very kind and considerate. They became fond of me and I became as fond of them as if I were their older brother. I told them that from childhood I had wished earnestly that I had a younger brother and used to envy my friends who had more than one brother. Now my wish had come true and I had two younger brothers instead of one! Often I sat with them and spun tales of my childhood and family in my homeland, told them stories I had read, and shared with them my dreams and ambitions. They listened attentively. The time we spent together was wonderful and made me forget my painful loneliness and sense of isolation.

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The staff in the wrapping and shipping department of Bullock's Department Store started working at 8:00 a.m. and never stopped before 10:00 p.m. Many times they continued working until midnight. I learned that, due to the Christmas rush, the department staff had been working these irregular and long hours for two weeks previous to my being hired. Tonight the store would close its doors at 6:00 o'clock because it was Christmas Eve!

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Finally the store doors were closed and locked and the frantic hubbub of activity came to a startling halt. In the wrapping and shipping department, every employee carried what he or she had purchased as gifts that day and filed out, hurrying homeward. I heard them gaily calling, "Good Night!" and "Merry Christmas!" or "Have a nice Holiday!" to each other.

Their exhaustion, sweat and lack of sleep seemed forgotten in the happy anticipation of things to come. Some returned the greetings and some did not. Each, like a soul on Judgment Day, was really concerned only with himself and his activities as he hurried to get gifts home and in their places under the Christmas tree or delivered to another tree in the home of a friend or loved one. Each seemed pressured by duties still to be carried out in that other world away from the store--meals to prepare, parties to attend, or people to visit!

It happened this year that the Christian Christmas and the Muslim's *Hajj* Pilgrimage came a few days apart.

Chapter 6

Jimmy Sanders, who was in charge of Parcel Post and the assistant to Mr. Shroeyer, took the time to go to each person to shake hands and give them warm, personal, sincere wishes.

"Jamil, I hope your first Christmas here will be very enjoyable!" he said, taking my hand in his own two. "We all will enjoy the day of rest after these past few hectic days. Goodnight and God bless you and make life's hardships easy on you! I'll see you Thursday."

His kind and sentimental condolences stirred up my deep hidden emotions. I smiled at my friend, thanked him warmly and wished him the same! Sometimes I envied Sanders, as his friends called him, and the kind of life he must lead. He always seemed happy and was always smiling and friendly, joking with the others. Such a carefree human being must have no problems to burden him.

I had also noticed that Sanders was a conscientious employee--active, industrious and full of vigor. He was always sharp and well dressed, clean-shaven, charitable and polite in his manner. He was never one to use profane language. Most of all, he was generous and humane. I figured that Sanders must be in his early thirties. He was tall, very thin and wiry, giving the impression of perpetual motion and boundless energy. He was moderately handsome, with blonde, wavy hair and intense brown eyes. Apparently many girls thought so too, for when I was with Jim in the cafeteria, the girls looked at him flirtatiously. This had at first shocked me due to my strict cultural background. I admired Sanders when I saw him ignoring them except for a friendly hello. There was a gold band on his left hand. A number of times Sanders had, for some reason, insisted on

treating me to refreshments. He would not take no for an answer. It could only be assumed that Sanders had plenty of money and no other obligations in life except his wife.

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I stood, washing my hands at the basin in the corner of the wrapping and shipping department, absent-mindedly rubbing them with soap and preoccupied with my own thoughts. I kept my face to the wall so my thoughts would not be legible to anyone still in the room. Finally I was alone in the room with my boss, Mr. Shroeyer, who was removing his work shoes and putting them in a drawer, a part of his nightly routine. He tossed the shoehorn to the back of the drawer, making a loud noise which startled me back to reality!

The scene was the same tonight as on any ordinary night. It was part of my job to stay behind each evening to turn off the lights and close up this section of the store. Usually we chatted briefly during these last few minutes of each day. Tonight, Mr. Shroeyer saw only my back.

"I'm so glad this confusion is all over! Whew, I've been under terrific pressure the past two months! You know by now, Jamil, that our department is the most important section in this store--you might even say the center, the backbone of the whole store. If we cease to function, the whole place will go to ruin.

"Take the salespeople . . . they show the merchandise, receive the money, write a receipt and their job is finished. The receiving section opens the boxes and counts the contents as merchandise comes into the store, and they mark them with our store price tag and send them to the proper section.

"My department must bring the sold goods to the

center, check them with the sales slip, often wrap them appropriately for various occasions, and then take them in hampers to the shipping dock to be picked up by United Parcel Service trucks to be delivered. Sometimes we carry them ourselves to the customers' cars or take them to their homes! What could be more important?"

I tuned out the familiar story at the start. Mr. Shroeyer finished brushing his suit, threw the brush into its drawer with a clatter, and locked it. From the sound, I figured the old man was gathering the packages from the locker.

"Before I became head of this section, there were always many mistakes made, parcels lost, goods damaged, and wrapping paper stolen, but since my coming we have had no further slip-ups."

Mr. Shroeyer's footsteps faded away at last, pausing by the door as he called back his routine reminder, "Don't forget the lights in the storage room. Good night, Jamil!" A few steps sounded only to halt again. "Merry Christmas! Be sure to have a nice day." The steps retreated until no more sounds came from the room or echoed down the long hall.

I felt the silence tonight so strongly that its intensity seemed filled with overpowering loneliness. The large vacated room, so recently alive with activity, was reduced to the size of a cell pressing in on me, bewildering and frightening me. Loneliness was particularly hard to bear tonight when everyone else was headed toward friends or loved ones. I was alone in a strange land where there were few, if any, close friends with whom to spend this momentous night.

Suddenly I heard steps coming from the hall and recognized Mr. Shroeyer's limp. His voice reached me, preceding his entrance into the room. Maybe, just maybe. . . . Oh, Lord, please fulfill my humble wish! . . . he had come

back to extend an invitation for the evening! I turned and faced him.

"Jamil, I must be getting absent-minded. I was outside visiting with Miss Pinkerton when I remembered I hadn't told you what I bought my wife, my daughter, and her son on my shopping spree today. I'm a bit late so I'll just say the two women are to have the best French perfume, and the boy a beautiful teddy bear! Of course, my wife bought a lot of things for the four of us."

Mr. Shroeyer was well pleased with his ego, and needed to feel important. "Was he boasting about himself or was he expecting more of me?" I asked myself.

"Well, good luck. I didn't mean to detain you. Oh, by the way, it isn't wise to go out tonight and drink too much. Too many people are already full of that old Christmas cheer from a bottle!" He chuckled as he waved over his shoulder.

I was alone with the last of my hopes shattered. I wished I could cry and release the deep emotions of my heart. I snapped off the lights and closed the door. When I walked the curved path to the street past the charmingly exquisite white Christmas tree with gold ornaments of all sizes on its huge branches and a blue light flooding it, its cool beauty gave me a measure of comfort. The brisk December air and the beautiful heavens sparkling with stars like diamonds refreshed my spirits and I felt like taking a good walk.

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From the first meeting of Mr. Shroeyer and me, the seeds of what would become a profound friendship were sown. When the clerk from the personnel office introduced me to Mr. Shroeyer and presented my time card, the Irishman knew from my dark complexion and curly hair, my unusual name,

and my polite and clumsy manner that his new Christmas help was an Arab.

My English was heavily accented and tended to formality. I was unfamiliar with everyday idioms and would use florid and grandiloquent words, forswearing simplicity. Mr. Shroeyer used to say in good-humored explanation, "He's just arrived from the old country," as if he were unconsciously apologizing to others for my heavy accent and rough mannerisms!

At first I thought that the older man was attracted to me because he thought, as many people did, that I was from the Holy Land. He had only to mention to people that I was from the land of Christ's birth and they would instantly look up. But as time passed, I wondered. Mr. Shroeyer was nominally Catholic and proud to be from Northern Ireland. But the derisive and scornful comments he made about church goers, calling them "Those shallow, ignorant fools who use their mouths instead of their brains" led me to suspect that my friend was agnostic or perhaps even an atheist.

Mr. Shroeyer had immediately perceived my simplicity and good nature. He was impressed by my energy and industriousness and my respect for my elders. We discovered two common interests: one the masterpieces of world literature, which I had been reading in translation since I was nine years old; the other the politics of the Middle East. Long conversations took place between us about the intricacies and difficulties of the region.

It was not long before Mr. Shroeyer and I were inseparable. Our discussions went on ceaselessly through mealtimes, morning and evening breaks, and in and out of the workplace. Sometimes Mr. Shroeyer's British wife, Thelma, who worked in the customer service office, would

join us. She did participate in the conversations, preferring to work on a piece of knitting or embroidery.

The Shroeyers had no children of their own, but had adopted Mr. Shroeyer's niece who had been orphaned in Ireland. Her parents were killed accidentally during an exchange of shots between the Irish Republican Army and the British troopers when they were passing through one of the streets of Dublin. She was now twenty-eight, married to a U.S. marine and had a four-year-old daughter.

I confessed that I was indebted to the old man from whom I had learned so many interesting and wonderful things about life and the world in general. The man was indeed an ocean of information, an encyclopedia of knowledge! In my mind, my friend had only one shortcoming, something that diminished him in my eyes—something which I wished from the bottom of my heart he would change. This was his obsessive love for Great Britain and all things British. I believed that an obsessive love of one's country was an individual's right, but could not extend my approval to embrace expansionism or superiority of any one country to the detriment of others.

Mr. Shroeyer maintained that Britain had bequeathed to the *world*--not only to her former colonies in Africa and Asia but also to Europe and the United States--all the achievements of mankind. He affirmed that all enlightened political traditions had sprung solely and directly from the Magna Carta. "If it were not for the Magna Carta, the whole world would still be drowning in an ocean of darkness and ignorance!" he exclaimed zealously. "It is the bible of civilization . . . enlightenment . . . democracy . . . freedom . . . liberty . . . equality . . . fraternity . . . and more. Name it and you have it!"

To my astonishment, Mrs. Shroeyer completely agreed with everything her husband said, not only about this matter, but also about all other matters, big and small! Sometimes she helped to explain his ideas and clarify his thoughts if she felt that the listener hadn't understood what her husband had meant! "If it were not for Great Britain," claimed Mr. Shroeyer, "the world would still be living in barbaric and cannibalistic darkness."

By contrast, he found American culture superficial and the American people to be lazy and arrogant. "If it were not for the wealth of their country, they would be just a bunch of hogs and bums!" I wondered whether Mr. Shroeyer would reveal his beliefs to his American friends, or express them only to me.

On the other hand, I believed that the Arabs had suffered drastically from British, French, Italian and American imperialism. Once I got up my nerve and commented angrily; "Your Empire is largely responsible for the terrible happenings that have befallen my people and my country!" But the old man smiled and took it in good spirit.

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One day the old man told Jamil something that saddened and shocked him. Mr. Shroeyer, a Catholic who had lived in Northern Ireland, was opposed to the independence of Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom. This had cast him at best as a traitor to the Irish Republican cause and at worst as a British agent. Because of his views, the Irish Republican Army had ambushed him one night and left him for dead with six bullets in his legs. Miraculously, he survived but lost his left leg. As a result he had to use a wooden prosthesis and could not father children.

After his recovery, he angrily moved to America, because he did not want to live with the kind of stupid people who "did not know their asses from their mouths!" He was afraid for his life in Ireland because he was a man who could not live without freedom of speech, and he was by no means a quiet man! He loved to give his opinion, and he always thought he was right!

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I had been hired only for the period before Christmas; but when Mr. Shroeyer learned that I was a university student, he offered me part-time work: evenings, weekends, and school holidays. "But I advise you strongly to change your major from literature to a practical scientific subject. Underdeveloped countries cannot use literature graduates as they are mere dreamers!" Mr. Shroeyer said.

I politely apologized, but would not change. "I have no head for science. I am a man of dreams, illusions, fictions and fantasies. If I were to be deprived of those dreams and illusions, I would feel my life had no real meaning!"

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Lake Avenue was crowded with people who, like me, were either leaving their work at one of the many pretty shops along the streets or were customers loaded with last minute purchases. They were all hurrying home to dinner, to a tree and to the same warm happiness I had known back home on Christmas Eve. I could not help overhearing their conversations as I passed them on the sidewalk. The women spoke of the food yet to be prepared, last minute wrapping to

be done after the children were safely tucked in bed and relatives and friends expected.

Cars were moving slowly along the side street under the shimmering fairyland tinsel high above them. When I reached Colorado Street, I saw the same anxious faces of people with different names going different places, all in the same frenzied rush. I sensed an undertone of impatience in their briskness, perhaps because they were tired. The hour was late and some would surely be caught unprepared. The distance to my room from the store was about three miles. It was my custom to ride the bus, but I decided that on this evening I would rather walk as I had no reason to rush. No Christmas tree or family or excitement awaited me. I was doomed to suffer a serious bout of homesickness, loneliness, and sorrow. It was better to walk and watch the others who were around me as somehow it made me feel as though I were part of them; but in a corner of my mind I remained lonely. If only I had someone with whom to share this evening! How I longed to see a familiar face, a friend, someone from home, anyone!

The place was full of people and yet one could feel so alone. I felt emptiness at the pit of my stomach and my whole body ached. The buses that passed were overcrowded and many more people at each stop were waiting for a ride homeward. I was in no hurry. The whole evening lay in front of me with no one waiting to share whatever it might bring. When I reached Fair Oaks Avenue, I turned north and suddenly became aware of the quiet, almost empty street. The large iron gates in front of the dark surplus and secondhand stores had a gloomy, abandoned look. Shadowy objects of all sizes and shapes reflected various degrees of light, giving them a sinister appearance. I almost felt scared. The street appeared as dark and lonely as my heart. I wanted to run.

Instead, I turned my mind to my dear mother and to Mona and her mother. I smiled to myself as I remembered the gift Mona had always tried to hide from my sight so that I could not see the way she had wrapped it--always making it better each year as she grew in years and cleverness. She would place it quietly on the table in front of the pine bough they had gone to the surrounding hills to collect.

At the sides of the greenery there were always white candles to make the sitting room more festive. At the back of the table there was the Nativity scene that to this woman and her daughter represented the whole reason for Christmas! Oh, what a joy Christmas was for them! I wondered how they felt tonight. Would they think about me? Would they miss me as much as I missed them?

They always received many visitors, both Christians and Moslems. The aroma of food cooking would fill their small house. The stuffed cabbage would be ready, holding the heat until it was time to eat. The pieces of lamb would certainly be shimmering in a buttery broth wine with tomato paste, onions, potatoes and spices. The rice would be steaming and ready for butter. The wonderful smell and sound of chicken frying in butter on the hissing kerosene stove would be irresistible. The smell alone would make one hungry.

I remembered trying to decide which dish was my favorite. I always impatiently hung around the kitchen, laughing and joking. I remembered that every year it seemed my mother was not hurrying fast enough. When I was very young, she had an awful time keeping my hands out from under the cover of their dessert, the *kanafeh*!

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As I walked along, I suddenly realized my immediate hunger. For lunch I had eaten a bowl of chili beans with crackers in the store cafeteria. I had gobbled it down hurriedly and with considerable disinterest. Now I realized with distaste that I had only canned food in my cupboard. I would pass the grocery store in a matter of seconds. But, somehow, I could not bear just now to see any more people with happy faces going to secret places and having no interest or concern for my loneliness.

I again busied my mind with images of the table, set for only three for the first time in so many years. Thank Allah that Mother would not be alone in her grief. I could trust Mona to talk cheerfully to help keep all their thoughts off the empty place at the table.

After dinner was done and dishes were washed, the three would sit around the crèche. In the candlelight, they would recall familiar Bible stories starting with the Birth of Eesa Jesus in Bethlehem and continuing to his childhood in Nazareth followed by His ministry and miracles. Mona and her mother, both good Christians, would join my mother and tell her those old stories they loved so much.

How very odd and lonely it made me feel to think that I was in a Christian land, so I always had been told, and was roaming the streets like a stray dog, dreading and therefore delaying the return to my lonely, cold and dreary room. My steps had grown shorter and my pace had slackened. If only Jack, one of my colleagues at work, had not gone to Bakersfield at the last minute to be with his family! If only the Turners had not gone away! Of course, I was really happy for my friends . . . happy that they, at least, had someone who wanted to be with them tonight and tomorrow. But I couldn't help feeling abandoned and insignificant. I climbed the stairs,

pushed open the unlocked kitchen door, and turned on the lights.

I looked at the table. No mail! My disappointment was as keen as a blade, for, without really knowing it, I had expected at least a few words from home. There had been a letter from my mother, in Mona's hand of course, only a week ago, telling me how much she would be thinking of me and how she hoped I would have a friend with whom to spend this first Christmas away from home.

Mona had, as usual, written her own message to me, but those letters of last week did not help me tonight. "Ever since you left, I have been thinking of a gift to send you this *Eid Al-Hajj* Pilgrimage Festival, but every time I had an idea I found it a mere trifle and would say to myself, 'What could I send from our poor little town to Jamil, far away in the surreal, fairytale, out-of-this-world land that he has described to us?' I'll send what I finally decided you couldn't buy in the fancy store where you work and I can only hope that you will like it. I don't believe there is anything more you could possibly need from us."

I remembered these words and a knot of pain and overwhelming frustration began eating away at my insides. Oh, if only they knew! I put the key in the latch and entered my dark bedroom. It was every bit as cold and drearily desolate as he had imagined. Without turning on a light, I closed the door on the undisturbed darkness with a bitterly cold shudder and returned to the kitchen to prepare a bite to eat. I opened a can of spaghetti and put it on the stove, then put some water in a small pan and put it on to boil. Later I would add a half box of frozen peas. With a piece of toast and a glass of milk, this would make my meal. I managed to eat a few bites and to wash them down with milk but found that even swallowing the liquid required almost too much effort.

The room suddenly felt stifling. It seemed as if a cruel beast with an enormous, cold iron hand had grasped my mouth ferociously causing me to gasp for air until I felt I could no longer breathe. I grabbed my jacket from the back of the chair. Leaving the food on the table and the lights on, I ran down the stairs, two at a time. I kept running until the streets swallowed me in the lonely, mesmerizing secrets of their horrifying darkness. I soon slowed to a walk, but pushed my weary body aimlessly until I was jarred from my thoughts by a voice calling my name.

There on my left was a shabby old car slowly pulling up to the curb and stopping. I went to it and bent down, instantly recognizing a friend from night school, a Korean named Lee. Sitting beside him were two foreign fellows I did not know. My friend made no effort at proper introductions so we simply greeted each other and let it go at that.

"It seems you have nothing to do tonight, Jamil. Why don't you come with us?" Lee paused for a second as if to see my reaction.

I thanked Allah that someone had come to liberate me from my self-destructive loneliness. I reached for the back door, grateful that someone had come to share this sacred evening, this night that had almost crushed him. I felt like one of those lost and burdened people who raise their hands to heaven petitioning God for release, guidance, and mercy. Just as I started to turn the handle, for some unknown reason I asked, "Where?"

"To Los Angeles to see a Burlesque Show," answered one of the two nameless passengers. "There are some good ones down on Main Street."

"It is hot and sensational," volunteered one of the men.

"You will never forget it," he said with a laugh like cackle.

"What is it?" I asked uneasily. "I mean the thing you call 'bar lisk'!"

"Oh, Jamil! You've been here long enough to know about such things, surely." All three were chuckling horribly. "It's a show with naked women dancing. Boy! It's good! It makes your blood boil, your body tremble and your juices flow." I felt as if I had been hit severely! Disgust and revolt filled me while nausea threatened to overtake me. I trembled, feeling that my religious beliefs had been walked over, dragged into the dirt and thrown into the gutter. My eyes clouded and then flooded with burning tears.

"Tonight?" I asked feebly, meaning, "Surely not on this sacred night!"

My friend Lee looked at his watch. "Sure! It's still early. It isn't even nine o'clock yet."

"Thank you, but not tonight anyway. Maybe another time," I said dispiritedly and stepped back onto the sidewalk. I never looked back. I pulled the collar of my jacket up against the sudden chill that had filled the night, drowned my soul, and overtaken my heart. As tears flooded my cheeks, I could barely see my way! Oh God! Your mercy and your forgiveness! I am sad to the very bones!

Chapter 7

Crushed and lonely, I did not know how long I had been walking when I actually bumped into a man.

"Oh, I am sorry! Very sorry! I" Suddenly I recognized the voice that cut me short.

"Look who's roaming the streets on such a lovely night!" Sanders said as lighthearted as always. "No doubt the sheik of the tribe is out making sure that his harem is safe and pampered."

"Oh! Hi, Mr. Sanders! It is very nice seeing you again!" Hearing my sad tone of voice, Mr. Sanders said brightly, "It's really a wonderful night for a walk--just brisk enough and with a blanket of stars twinkling down to warm our hearts this very special night."

"Yes, it is. I walk quite often here, just as I used to at home in Jordan." I managed to sound just a bit glad and enthusiastic.

"Listen, my good friend!" Mr. Sanders' face lit up as he continued. "We have wanted you to come to visit us for a long time. Come with me now, if you can spare the time, and make our night extra-special. I've told my wife and children so much about you, and the little ones want to see you, you know--that handsome Arab who rides around on a camel surrounded by a group of veiled girls, and wears what they insist on calling a tablecloth around his head. What better night for them to see you and hear about the Holy Land!"

"Do they really think that?"

"Come on!" Sanders took my arm gently. "If you don't mind, I need to buy some extra bulbs for the tree at the drug and sundry store on the corner; then we'll go home, and they will be very happy to see you. Please don't say no!"

While he was waiting, I, lifted my eyes to heaven with trembling body, Opening my quaking hands in front of me in Arab fashion, I prayed with earnestly:

"Our Almighty God, who is present throughout the universe,

And he who knows the movement of every ant.

Hallowed be thy name.

Sanctified be Thy Beloved Mohammad,

From the bottom of my heart and with all my being,

I thank Thee for sending me someone

to assuage my loneliness and ease my alienation."

* * * * *

While I leaned against the wall next to the huge glass window of one of the nation's largest drug and sundry stores waiting for Mr. Sanders, I watched the changing colors of the Christmas lights in the opposite store windows, and observed the few cars passing on the wide lanes of Colorado Street with its elaborate and luxurious Christmas decorations and fancy store window displays.

I recalled my mother's warm, simple and naive prayers on the eve of my departure! Although they were very plain and primitive, I had felt their pious sincerity as she poured out a prayer in the midst of her grief and worry at our coming separation. She had looked up toward heaven with eyes full of tears, and in a very humble tone of voice had said, "I pray from the bottom of my heart and with all my being to the Almighty Allah to send you an honest and faithful friend, who will be able and willing to help you when you are in distress and in desperate need of help--you Jamil, son of Aminah, daughter of Falha, the humble servant of God, who seeks only His graciousness and His mercy."

I strongly and faithfully believed that my mother's prayers and the blessings she invoked upon me were always answered! Even when things didn't go the way I desired and I was saddened and maybe downhearted because of happenings in my life, I knew they were only temporary. I was destined to pass through them, and they would always be in my best interest and for my protection.

I was abruptly shaken from my trance when I saw her . . .

"Oh! My God! Oh Allah in high heavens! Have mercy on me! Please! Please!

"Kath-er-ine! Kath-er-ine!!" I bellowed at the top of my voice without any thought of the passers by. As the car passed in a hurry, I ran into the street and chased it for a short distance. But it quickly disappeared from sight and my voice was lost in the asphalt street. This was not my imagination playing tricks on me. No! No! I could swear by the Almighty God, that I had seen Katherine Fredrickson, the Norwegian girl, sitting beside George Gonzales in the car and both were laughing happily!

I recalled that my friendship and conversations with Katherine, a Norwegian classmate, had followed much the same pattern. She was a girl of striking beauty, tall and slender, her blonde hair falling gracefully to her shoulders. Her fiery, charming and bewitching eyes would inflame a monk's emotions, and her honey sweet lips would provoke the silence of a hermit in his hermitage. Her lilting accent and melodious voice were as sweet as wild honey and her words fell on my ears as the song of the nightingale.

We were the same age. Whenever I talked to her, I could not look her in the eye or in the face. Instead I had always looked at the ground or in the opposite direction! As she looked at my averted face, I felt my cheeks and ears glowing and my neck and forehead damp with sweat! I was very fond

of this sweet, beautiful, coquettish young lady in my evening English class and felt that my feelings were reciprocated. Teasingly, she asked me once whether she were so ugly that I could not bear to look her in the eye or talk to her face to face. Thrown into confusion, I was at a loss for an answer. How could I explain to this existentialist young lady the taboos planted in my mind--in the fabric of my being--since my childhood days back home? How often I had been told, "Never look at a woman's face or at any part of her body! It is taboo . . . sinful. It leads into damnation. Whenever a man looks at a woman's body, he desires her . . . covets her . . . wants to sleep with her!" I had heard those words over and over and over from my mother, friends, the neighbors, my teachers and the clergymen!

Two hot tears of anger and frustration fell on my burning cheeks. All at once inspiration struck me. With a dry, cold smile and trying to sound gallant, I gathered enough courage to ask, "Isn't it the other way around? The magic of your eyes and your wild gypsy beauty prevent me from looking at you for fear of being struck down by a bolt of lightning!"

I knew in my heart of hearts that I was avoiding the embarrassment and difficulty of explaining to Katherine the customs and taboos of my culture. How I had composed such a sentence, and how my tongue had uttered it I never knew! The enchantress burst out laughing and was so overcome that I saw her from the corner of my eye wiping her tears with a paper handkerchief.

On regaining her voice, she said; "Never in my life have I heard anything to match this kind of eulogy. Indeed you are a great lyricist."

I was exceedingly happy to hear her praise, but could not continue the conversation because I was trembling again as if haunted by a demon! In extreme frustration I cursed my past,

loathing and despising the Puritanism of my culture and the rigidity of my upbringing!

* * * * *

More than three months of the new term had passed. Katherine and I attended classes twice a week for three hours. The lectures started at seven in the evening and ended at ten. There was a break of half an hour in the middle of each session during which the students socialized in the cafeteria, getting cold drinks, coffee, tea and sweets from the vending machines dotted around the hall:.

The daytime students used this place as a cafeteria. The evening students sat alone or in groups at the tables which filled the hall. Katherine and I usually sat alone at a table in the corner, although students from our class occasionally joined us. I chatted to her about my love for the land of my birth, my family and friends, and expressed how much I missed them all! Katherine also spoke of her country, friends and family but I noticed that her feelings for them were not as deeply intense as mine. I supposed this was due to differences between our cultures.

Occasionally a Spanish student joined us. I noticed that he was very attracted to Katherine. This filled me with a wild jealousy that left me tossing and turning in sleepless frustration at nights. I also noticed that Katherine did not appear to respond to the Spanish student's advances. She let me know indirectly that other fellows had showed interest in her, but she had always refused them politely. "Almost every day, I am invited by men at work for lunch or dinner. Sometimes they ask me to go to a movie, to a play or to participate in other activities," she told me one evening. "Why don't you accept? Have you never gone?"

"No, I haven't yet. I have not liked anyone well enough to accept his invitation!"

"Do you mean you haven't yet met the man you really like?" I asked while gazing at the cup of coffee in front of me. "I have found him and am waiting for him to be kind enough to invite me out." Katherine smiled and looked at my face, but my eyes avoided hers.

"Where do you work?" I asked to change the subject.

"At J.C. Penney Department Store as an assistant in the children's section."

"I think the break time is over. We have to go back to class," I said while pushing back from the table.

There was no doubt that Katherine wanted to stir up my jealousy. It was as if she were saying indirectly to me that she really wanted to go out with me and was waiting for me to take the initiative. I should hurry up before the time came when I would ask her out, but she would no longer be available. No doubt she often asked herself what it was that held me back from asking her out.

"May I ask you, Jamil, to describe your girlfriend back home? She must be very beautiful—tall with curly hair and black eyes," Katherine said one evening.

I responded that I had not made any promises to anyone back home.

She dropped hints more than once that she would pay her share of dinner or a visit to the cinema if she liked the fellow with whom she was going out. She also said that she did not mind using buses, and that it was not important if the boy she was with did not have a car. I was certain that she had made all those suggestions in order to eliminate any doubts in my mind, but alas . . . to no avail!

She was also demonstrative with me and did her utmost to shower me with affection. "I very much like your black

curly hair and your white healthy teeth! They are attractive!" she told me once while they were having coffee together during break.

I blushed and began to sweat and tremble, my ears and cheeks burning with embarrassment! My heart was leaping so high I was afraid it might escape through my throat! I did not have the courage to utter a single word, much less to thank her! Inwardly I damned my culture and spat on my background!

I deeply longed to tell her how much I loved her. I could sit and talk freely with her until I wished to turn the conversation to matters of love. Then my words would dry up completely, I would become tongue tied and start trembling. My heart would beat so violently that I felt my eardrums would explode. I felt like a struggling, wounded bird. The words would die on my lips and my mind would go blank. I could not recover until I decided not to talk about my love there and then but to open my heart to her at our next meeting. The process repeated itself for the next three months. How I wished for the courage that I had at the time when I had told her in all boldness that I could not look her in the face because I did not have the power to resist her charm—that ravishing woman!

* * * * *

Each night I reclined on my bed and turned off the light so my room was pitch black. At such times I felt supernatural courage and an unimaginable boldness as if the darkness were giving me the energy of a superman and banishing my hesitation. I mentally rehearsed the words I would say to Katherine. I would tell her of my passionate love and devotion. I would confess that I spent all my time thinking

about her and worshipping at the altar of her love. I reviewed my words time and again as if I were learning poetry for a recital while imagining that she was listening intently, rapturous at my words.

My supernatural courage always departed with the shadows of the night, leaving my days filled with weakness and indecision. Finally I decided to bind myself with a solemn oath as I had often done at times when I needed the courage to pursue a genuine desire! Following my usual custom when preparing to take such an oath, I bathed, put on clean clothes, crossed my legs, placed the Holy Quran in my lap and swore on it, with vehemence and ardent passion in the name of God, that I would fulfill my promise and not go back on it under any circumstances. Then I knelt in front of my bed, prostrated in worship and adoration, for a long, long time! Afterwards I was as totally relaxed as one who had been given a drug. My body felt numb and I dropped into a deep sleep.

* * * * *

It was my habit to get to class before any of the other students. I sat and waited in my place at the back of the class. Katherine usually arrived shortly afterwards. She always sat near the front next to a Brazilian girl who was just the opposite of her in appearance, deportment, and attractiveness of voice. Katherine always greeted me with a smile before taking her seat. When the teacher announced the break, she normally waited to leave the class with me. We put our coins into the coffee machine and sat in the hall sipping our hot beverages. She always drank black coffee, but I liked mine with milk and plenty of sugar.

This class was for English improvement, and all the students were foreigners. Although we received no credit for taking the class, there was minimal absenteeism because the teacher was excellent and able to keep the attention and interest of the students. She was young, beautiful, humorous and full of life and energy!

I was a diligent student and never missed a single class. Neither did Katherine. Half an hour before the beginning of the lecture, I was sitting tensely in the classroom, physically and emotionally exhausted from the turmoil in my heart and the trembling of my body. I was as scared, as if I were about to commit a crime!

Tonight I would tell Katherine. I could not avoid it because I had taken a solemn oath. I could not go back on it. I believed that God would punish me severely if I did, and I would go to hell for eternity. I strongly regretted taking this oath, but it was too late now! I was afraid . . . so afraid! I was like a cowardly soldier entering the battlefield for the first time!

* * * * *

Students started to come into the class individually and in groups, and the room filled. Then the teacher came and the class began. But Katherine and the Spanish student were nowhere to be seen. Suddenly I felt a burning fire in my heart. In my mind's eye I saw Katherine and George hugging and kissing in a corner of the hall outside. The more I thought of this, the more jealousy devoured my soul. I felt I would choke, causing my severely damaged soul to leave my body. Two minutes before seven-thirty there was a knock on the classroom door. When the teacher opened it, Katherine entered followed by George. Her countenance was downcast

and crestfallen, quite unlike her usual self. George's face was the opposite. It was lit up with a broad smile. He approached the teacher and whispered in her ear something that made her face light up also. She looked at the class and addressed them.

"Class! May I have your attention, please! Your colleague, Mr. Gonzales, would like to announce something to you that will make you as happy as it has made me!"

At this moment Mr. Gonzales came forward, bent his head a little, greeted the students and said with his heavily broken English, "Miss Fredrickson and myself are very happy . . . that . . . to tell the news of . . . our engagement. At the end of this course, we go to Spain to introduce her to my family . . ."

I did not hear the rest of what George said, nor see how the class reacted. I felt as if a skyscraper had fallen on top of me and lost all sense of my surroundings.

* * * * *

The following morning I was awakened by a continuous knocking on the door of my room, and someone calling me by name. I found myself lying on my bed fully clothed. Even my shoes were still on my feet! Edward, a colleague of mine, had turned up, as was his custom every morning, to take me with him to work. He drove his car, and I filled his gas tank once a week. I always waited for Edward in front of the house each morning; so when Edward did not find me in my usual spot, he was very surprised.

All that had happened the previous evening began coming back to me. I remembered carrying my books out during break and walking all the way to the house. As I walked, I wept quietly to myself, my heart torn apart while

tears poured down on the inside, and a few escaped to the outside! My inner being was so melted that for three days nothing passed my lips except a little coffee and some fruit juice, as if I were punishing myself! I suffered from severe depression, melancholy and despair! I hated life and longed for death to free me from my agony.

As much as possible, I avoided talking to the Turners and my fellow workers, and both groups respected my wish for silence, although it did not stop them from wondering and worrying about my miserable and sad condition! That night at school was the last time I had laid eyes on Katherine. It was also the night when my dreams vanished and my hopes scattered.

Katherine's image never left my mind after that memorable and unforgettable night. Her warm looks . . . her charming smiles . . . her compassionate talk . . . her teasing words . . . her witty jokes . . . her flirtatious and affectionate hints . . . all of those continued to live with me, moment after moment.

Many, many nights I missed her terribly! Sometimes I felt as though I could not breathe and was about to smother! Then I would leave my room and roam the streets of Pasadena until a very late hour. When I became physically and emotionally exhausted, I would return to my room! Other nights I stayed in my room and wept like an insecure child for one, two or three hours until the mercy of heaven reached me and I fell asleep!

My condition greatly worried my landlady. When she asked me what was wrong, I went to pieces and burst into loud weeping. When the Turners left the room, their son, John, asked his parents in all innocence, "What is the reason for Jamil's illness?"

His mother answered in equal innocence; "He is doubtless homesick . . . painfully homesick, son! The poor boy misses his mother and folks terribly!" Her voice trembled and she tried to hide her tears by wiping them on the back of her hand.

"I never thought homesickness could make a person so miserable!" the husband said.

"Yes, it does, honey!" the wife said. "Some people can not bear it, and return to their country!"

"I hope he doesn't do that!" the husband said. "We will never find a good brother to our children like he is."

"I love him very much!" the two children said together interrupting one another!

"We know that children; we do!" the mother said in a low spirit.

Chapter 8

"Guess who I brought back with me folks!" Mr. Sanders called out from the doorstep, in his proud but humble manner. His voice expressed enthusiasm, love, warmth, and compassion and as much pride as if he were introducing an important guest at a reception, or were reuniting with his sweetheart after an agonizing separation. As soon as Jamil and Mr. Sanders entered, three young children ran forward like three little white, fondled lambs and started gazing at the strange creature their father had brought home.

"Jamil, I would like you to meet Linda, our eight year old sweetheart; and her mother's right hand; and Dan, our four year old whirlwind; and this is Jack, our middle man.

Everyone, this is my dear friend, the sheik of Arabia, Jamil Suleiman. He left his camel, with four of his wives on its back, in their palanquin, parked in the driveway!"

Both boys hurried for the window, but their father scooped them up. "I mean in his driveway, not ours!" he chuckled.

Little Dan quietly walked up, took Jamil's hand, and led him toward the far corner of the room where the Christmas tree stood glowing. He reached to a low branch and touched a red teardrop ornament and said, "Isn't this a pretty one? I put it on the tree all by myself."

"You are a hero, my friend! I am proud of you!" I told him in Arab fashion.

Dan pulled Jamil down and whispered in his ear as he pointed to a small package, "This is for my Mom. I made it for her. Santa is going to bring me a red tricycle for my very own and I bet he'll bring the electric train Jack wants too. We went to the store where Dad works, and we sat on Santa's lap and told him about things, 'cept Linda wouldn't talk to him 'cause

she thinks she's too big. Now she won't get what she wants, I bet!" He shook his head several times!

"Danny, are we going to keep Mommy waiting all night? She would like to meet Jamil, too," Mr. Sanders said.

When I entered the room, I had noticed a young woman sitting in an armchair not far from the tree. She had stood soon after her husband had mentioned her, but she did not come forward. She seemed to be letting the children enjoy their guest first.

"Dear, I want you to meet Jamil. I found him in front of the drug and sundry store, and I told him how much you all have wanted to meet him. He was good enough to come and share this special evening with us."

"I am the one to thank you for being so kind and generous to invite me," I replied politely in my humble and courteous Arab manner.

"Jamil, this is Helen, my Madonna and my trophy. I found her some years ago in a gift shop filled with precious treasures. I obtained the most precious one!"

I averted my gaze, keeping my eyes downcast and looking into the distance according to Arab custom. Because I had been taught from childhood that it was shameful for a man to look at a strange woman, I avoided sin by averting my gaze from a woman's face, whatever her age might be. Looking at a woman kindled desire that turned to lust. Such depravity would be punished by God Almighty causing the transgressor to pay for his insubordination by suffering eternal torments in hell.

But, oh! How I loathed and detested the heavy and unbearable social and religious bondage which burdened me to the breaking point. Time after time I tried to release myself, but to no avail. These customs were in the very blood running through my veins. I was trapped by the heavy

responsibility of it all. Even though I wished I could throw this responsibility to the wind, I was engulfed by guilt at even the thought of such a thing, and so remained the proverbial stick in the mud while I adhered to the straight road of my beliefs.

"How do you do, Mrs. Sanders?" I shook the soft hand proffered, keeping my eyes to the floor. It was firm and warm.

"We are all so glad that you consented to come. Won't you be seated, please?" Mrs. Sanders said as she sat back down.

"We spoke of having you with us tonight, but my sister Margaret and her family were expected; and, as you can see, our house is small. They called this afternoon to say that little Debbie is down with the flu, just a mild case, fortunately, since she's so small." She paused to push back a lock of fallen hair from her forehead, I noticed from the corner of my left eye. "I know that the children would like to ask you questions. We all would!"

"Daddy told us a lot about you," Linda said, "We are all very excited to meet you!"

"I am excited to meet you too! I did not know that Mr. Sanders had such a lovely family!" I replied.

"I wish you had brought your camel with you! I am so anxious to see one!" Dan said with disappointment in his voice and on his face!

I smiled but said nothing.

"Oh, wait!" Helen interrupted, turning her head in the direction of a closed doorway and calling, "Mother, would you come here a moment, dear?"

A petite woman in her sixties entered the room, drying her fingers on the edge of a terry cloth apron with *Happy Holidays* printed across it in gold and with poinsettias in red

and green here and there. She had beautiful gray hair and appeared as though she had just stepped out of a beauty salon. I noticed that her smile lit up her eyes and a heavenly glow emanated from her beautiful face. She walked in a timid, reluctant way, as if she needed extra encouragement. "Yes, Helen, the refreshments are just about ready. The cider is spiced and heating slowly. Oh, well, I . . . "

She had seen Jamil. Mr. Sanders introduced his mother-in-law and asked her to sit down until she needed to run away to the kitchen again.

For the next half hour or so, I was literally showered with questions about my homeland and my family, our way of celebrating Christmas, and about the small town on the hills over which a star once had twinkled its secret message to a waiting world. I enjoyed their interest and answered as amusingly as possible, relaxing in the cheerful Christmas mood of this happy home. I felt myself to be valued as a person once again as I gratefully accepted their friendship and love and shared in the cherished traditions observed by this precious family. Everything from the past--my depression, Katherine, George--faded into insignificance! I found that I enjoyed this kind of attention. Very few people in America had bothered to even be polite, much less to ask me about my homeland or my culture. One little woman at the store, a sweet older saleslady, had jokingly asked about my harem and how many wives I had waiting for my return. My answer was always the same. With a devilish twinkle, I would say that I was seriously considering taking her back home with me as my tenth wife. I enjoyed this harmless flirting in her department.

Grandma stood, and, reaching for Linda's hand, lifted her gently from the floor. "Come, dear! Jamil needs to get his second wind, so let's take care of the food and drinks."

"What a strange expression!" I thought.

The girl soon returned from the kitchen with a shiny silver tray with paper plates decorated with sprigs of holly berries, each holding a good-sized piece of cake. She went directly to her mother and bent down, offering the tray.

"Jamil," Helen said with warm enthusiasm, "I do hope you will like the cakes. Mother cooks such good things for us, especially this time of year. She makes two kinds. You must try them both. The light-colored one is made with apple cider and is loaded with nuts; the darker one is traditional fruitcake. Both are excellent, but, since I don't like citron too well, my-favorite is the other."

Then she asked her daughter, "Which is mine, dear?" At that moment Sanders stepped in front of his wife, choosing a plate from the tray and very carefully placing it in her hands. "Thank you, dear," she said looking up.

At that moment, I could not help staring fiercely at Mrs. Sander's face. She was majestic, heavenly, elegant and radiantly loving. I was felt ashamed and guilty for breaking with Arab custom, but could not avert my eyes. "Such a wholesome, radiant, beautiful face!" I thought.

My emotions were in tumult; I shed tears, yet my mind and soul remained frozen in shock as it struck me: Helen was blind! I saw it in the lifeless, lackluster stare in her eyes. I was stricken, stunned, and stupefied!

"Oh God, the Almighty!" I exclaimed to myself, "I seek your mercy and beg your forgiveness. Keep us from the unexpected and deliver us from heavenly and earthly calamities."

I realized that Helen had not seen Sander's loving face looking down into hers with compassion and admiration. She had only known it would be so. She was secure for she felt

the love given her. The love and happiness in that charming noble face came from her heavenly smile and not her eyes. I had not been aware that Linda had offered me the tray and, failing to get my attention, had placed a plate on the small table by the sofa. By its side sat a cup of hot mulled cider. Still I sat motionless, held hopelessly in a grip of sorrow and depression.

Mr. Sanders must have seen the perplexed and heartbroken look for he said, in a deep and serene tone, "Helen had an accident and lost her sight because of it. We are all very fortunate and grateful to have her still with us; always making us happy and in good spirits by lavishing her affection and concern on us!"

"Oh," Helen said in a bantering tone, "I'll just bet there are times when you don't think any such thing."

"Oh, honey, don't say that! God only knows how much we all love you. Our love grows stronger and deeper every day," her mother spoke with a hint of sadness in her choked voice.

"I'm certain of that, Mom," the charmingly elegant daughter replied with a smile. "Faith in God and your love are the only two things that keep me going."

"Not only you, Mrs. Sanders; faith in God and love keep me going on too!" I whispered to myself. "If it were not for Mother's, Mona's and her mother's love, only Allah knows what would happen to me in this dreadful and cruel time!" When she received a soft chuckle as an answer from her husband, Helen said in a serious voice, "Yes, Jamil, the accident was two years ago today. Jim had, at my insistence, flown to San Francisco the day before to be with his invalid uncle and his wife who were living in the Berkeley Hills. He was to join us at my aunt's house in Santa Barbara for Christmas Eve."

Mr. Sanders excused himself for interrupting his wife and said, "Mother asked me before her death to visit her brother and his wife every Christmas and to spend the day with them. I promised her and have, so far, kept that promise."

"For as long as I can remember, we would spend Christmas at my aunt's house in Santa Barbara one year; and the next year, she and her family would spend it in our house in Laguna Beach. That year it was our turn to go to her. Mother had joined her sister two days earlier," the wife said. "We have kept this custom ever since our marriage. One Christmas we'd stay with my mother-in-law and the next we'd join Helen's aunt," Mr. Sanders explained.

"Jim would never have let me start out alone with four children if he had known it was raining. Even though it was only a good sprinkle, he would have wanted us to delay our trip. We had baby Mark then; he was only seven months old."

"Of course I would never have let you!" Mr. Sanders exclaimed.

"We were in high spirits that morning. The car was loaded with all of us and our things, and we were really looking forward to a wonderful Christmas. The rain increased, a bit and I found I was relieved when the pressure of the freeway was behind me. I knew the road so very well and had always loved the hills and the open highway through them."

She looked directly at Jamil who was in his turn wondering if she could see him in her heart instead of her eyes! She continued, "Every time I drove through those enchanting hills, I pictured them as if they were meadows of green grasses . . . bouquets of flowers . . . a necklace of pearls."

What a genuine master piece of painting, created by an ingenious artist . . . our Lord!"

I was fascinated by her eloquence and elegant descriptions! I wondered whether they were results of her advanced education, or whether she had developed her skillfulness in speech and artistry of words as a result of her blindness!

She continued, "When we reached Thousand Oaks, I became alarmed, for it had started to pour, and visibility was all but nil. I began to panic. Mark was awakened by the din on the hard top and began crying from fear and annoyance." Mrs. Sanders paused for a long time as though she could hear the echoes of her baby's cry two years earlier.

"The other three children were so good; they were excited, yet happy and contented as though the rain outside made a cozy little world for us inside. I . . . I went on . . . I . . ."

Silence . . . The only noise in the room came from the light clicking of little Danny's spoon against his plate as he cleaned the last bite from it. My chest tightened and I began to feel suffocated by the slow build-up of dread and fear in her delicate and charming voice. I almost wished she would not go on!

"I should have known better. I should have stopped and not gone on. I would have my baby by me tonight; and I could watch the marvelous change in my little loves as they grow and grow; and Jim . . . you dear, wouldn't have to work so hard and so long to pay for the doctors' bills. I could also have stood beside you, supporting and helping you, morally and financially, to raise the children, instead of both them and me being a heavy burden on you! But, you see, all our loved ones were there at the end of that road, waiting. You never think it will really happen!"

"Sweetheart! What are you talking about! You make me feel terribly sad, knowing that you feel this way!" The husband got up from his chair, kissed his wife on her forehead, and put his right arm around her shoulders. "Believe me, Love . . . I never felt complete satisfaction, fulfillment and accomplishment of my mission in life until after you had that accident."

He paused for a moment, licked his dry lips then added; "It is true that at the beginning I was terribly scared, especially when I realized that I was going to face the responsibilities of the family alone; but soon I got over it, having you and your love, I started feeling relaxed about it, knowing how wrong I was!"

I was deeply moved by the incredible love this family generated between one another. It seemed almost impossible, but I saw it, felt it and shared it. I felt like crying; and there was nothing here, in this sacred sanctuary of a home, to shame me if I did not hold back my tears.

I wondered how beautiful affection could be found in such a cold and material society . . . in such a gun-barreled world where money and power are gods whose worshippers devour one another! I contrasted the Sanders' family with those worshippers of greed whom I had known throughout my life in both the new and the old countries.

Mrs. Sanders continued her story. "I went ahead slowly. The Canejo grade lay ahead and was the last major concern I felt about the road. I was going around a curve. Once around it, I could see a grader on my right on the shoulder, no doubt abandoned for the holiday. It was of little concern to me and would present no problem. Suddenly, I could see just in front of me a ribbon of mud slowly flowing over the right-hand lane, and I could not avoid it. Apparently the rain had washed a large amount of dirt from a small construction site.

The car went into a slide. Jim had told me what to do in such a situation, and even in my panic I remembered. I believe I did everything possible. The grader seemed to get larger and larger, a great blob of yellow looming ahead. I managed to miss the edge of it; but by then, the unprotected edge of the road was almost under us and a sheet of rain covered the empty void seen from the window--the last scene I was ever to see."

As she talked, I could feel my heart falling with the car and its occupants. I felt a compelling need to comfort and console Mrs. Sanders, but before I could say a word she apologized. "I am so sorry! I have no idea why I got into that story tonight. Jamil, you can see why we feel we have so much for which to be thankful. God, in His goodness, has blessed us with an extra measure of love, peace and contentment."

I arose from the sofa, feeling numb, dizzy and disoriented. My heart was bleeding, my soul choking, and pain squeezed my being so that I could scarcely breathe! I asked to be excused, almost apologizing for being a trespasser in their lives, especially on such a blessed night! "I must go now. I am sure it is late for the children since Santa comes to bring their gifts tonight. You don't know how much I have enjoyed being here with you this evening. It meant a great deal to me. Thank you so very much.

"But, Daddy, we didn't have our music!" Jack, the quiet one, was tugging at his father's sleeve. "Can't we hear our record?"

"Well, now, we didn't listen to the record, did we?" Mr. Sanders looked at Jamil and asked, "Would you mind staying just a little longer? We have this tradition of listening to our Christmas record, and singing along on Silent Night and Jingle Bells. Of course, I'll drive you home afterwards."

"Sure! I would love to stay!" I replied earnestly. Mr. Sanders put on the record, and organ music immediately filled the room. All eyes seemed to turn toward the tree, now the only source of light in the room. The twinkling lights played upon the shiny colored ornaments-- the balls, birds, and Danny's beautiful seed teardrop-- and lastly, on the pure white angel crowning the top. I sat unobserved and the room came more sharply into focus. Mrs. Sanders was right. It was a very small house. Where could all six of them sleep? Where could any of them find any portion of privacy? Fortunately, the house was not cluttered with furniture, and what was there was comfortable and seemed to be in good taste. I wondered whether the Sanders owned this home. Yes, this was a home in the true sense of the word. It had the same wonderful things as my home in Jordan--comfort, harmony, peace, warmth and love. Lots and lots of love! It had laughter and joy and giving and sharing.

My eyes returned to the treetop and observed the quiet, serene expression on the angel's face. There was the faintest smile on the lips; the eyes were closed as though in deep meditation. The hair was the faintest shade of red with a tiny tinsel halo gleaming and dancing among the strands. Christmas music surrounded me as different voices swelled in a song about bells jingling. I could not catch all the words and some I did not know, but I could understand the happiness in the voices of the singers and the quickening beat as the children's voices savored the notes and followed the strong deep voice of their devoted father.

Next I heard a carol sung by many women's voices about the little town on the hills where the Baby Jesus was born. Several tunes followed which were familiar to me, after having heard them every day, many times, for the last six

weeks at the store. But now I could hear more clearly the lovely words without other noises to obscure them.

The sight of the children and their mother put me in touch with the intimate emotions so precious I had never dreamed I would experience them here in America! Just for a second I tried to imagine what it would be like being blind, but found I was afraid to do that!

"Get ready, Mother," said Linda excitedly. "You must lead your song."

The gentle tones of Silent Night came forth softly, slowly and clearly. The grandmother, the children and Mr. Sanders all looked up at Helen as they sang at her feet. She was leading clearly with the tender notes. Their voices were soft, a gentle support to her wonderful, sweetly fragile one.

My emotions clashed and boiled as I pictured all of them as if they were a group of hermits or monks in their white oriental outer open robes--pure, pious and worshiping in a hermitage at a temple of love with a hymn of praise and exaltation of the unity of Allah, the Almighty! I saw Helen's skin luminous with a radiant light as she too 'looked' with her sightless eyes toward the angel. Once again my eyes returned to the angel on the treetop.

"Hallelujah!" I shouted in the depths of my being, but only my inward consciousness heard my exclamation. Yes, there was a resemblance, a great resemblance between Helen and the angel. Both possessed a shiny, heavenly and luminous radiance. Helen's eyes were closed softly and her long lashes rested on her cheeks. Her hair, a more vivid, lively red than the angel's, framed her pale face. I could not help wondering what she saw in her mind's eye. What had she brought with her into the sudden world of perpetual darkness to "see" and to treasure all through her remaining days?

When the record was finished, no one moved for a long, long moment. Mr. Sanders looked at me and, once again, saw me absorbed in Helen's face and its gleaming counterpart. He stepped over beside his guest and let his eyes make the same comparison. "They're lovely, aren't they? I found them both in that same little gift shop ten years ago. I took them both home with me to bring beauty and life to my drab rooms and lonely life." Then he placed an arm around his three children who were getting up from the floor.

"We all love and cherish our angels, Jamil, and we try very hard to give back some of the light and warmth they radiate out to us, brightening the corners of existence where darkness would be without them.

"Yes, Daddy," Linda commented, "our one angel is only a Christmas angel and comes out of her wrapping only to guard our tree once a year." She paused and then added in a very grown up tone, "Really, she has no light of her own unless we put her where the tree lights will shimmer on her hair." Jamil, startled, was overwhelmed and astonished by the little girl's intelligent remark.

Mrs. Sanders had quietly stood and faced her family. "We two are more alike than any of you dear ones can know and may sense. You see, I too, only reflect what I am given by those who care for me. I only give back the love and the affection that come to me from all of you to warm me and put life and joy into my existence!"

Happy tears stood ready to cascade from my eyes. I would never be able to forget this lady's words to her family. "If someone said such a thing to me, indeed I would regard it as a wonderful present on this special Christmas night," I thought. What a difference these words meant to me in my loneliness! When I considered it, I had reflected love, warmth and caring when I was with my mother and Mona and her

mother, because that was what they gave to me; but nobody so far had given me much love or thought here in America. Yes, there were the Turners and Katherine, but I never had experienced intermingling and interweaving emotions with them! This was probably the reason why I didn't reflect much to them either. Now I understood why I could not get close to people here.

Thank you so much, Mrs. Sanders, for this explanation," I thought. You moved me deeply. I will never forget you and your family. Your presence dispelled much of my loneliness and despair! You truly made me feel at home . . . not only in your house but also in America itself!

Chapter 9

The shops were closed and the flashing Christmas lights, like scattered necklaces, decorated their front doors and windows, flashing on and off spontaneously. The streets were empty except for a lone pedestrian whom I imagined must be consumed and crushed with loneliness and had no way to dispel his feelings except by wandering through the streets, as I had done earlier this evening.

Oh, God, Help that poor miserable lost man, straying on the streets with no one to love and without a family with whom to spend the holiday! The man went forward in the freezing cold December with his hands chilled, progressing like a drunkard—slipping, falling and getting up, then falling again. He continued aimlessly like a lost abandoned dog. It was a wearisome night. A harsh wind that froze a person's uncovered parts was blustering from the towering range of snow-clad mountains which loomed like sentinels above the city of Pasadena and many other cities, observing every movement of their inhabitants.

Warm Christmas music drifted softly and dreamily from the car radio. Mr. Sanders drove his old Japanese car very slowly as if he wanted to be kind to it so as not to wear it out or, perhaps, to lengthen the journey to my residence. There was no doubt that he was enjoying the music and the story he was telling me in his lazy drawling voice.

I relaxed in the passenger seat beside him, not uttering a word. Deep down, I was wishing the journey to prolong itself and Mr. Sanders to continue his narrative with the music uninterrupted for a long, long time--at least until early morning!

"I was spending a quiet Sunday in Laguna Beach, a town the very mention of which brings calm, release, and peace to

my spirit and makes joy and hope spring up in my heart. I was alone there for the first time in many years after Claudia had left me, may God forgive her. She was the girl who had always been there with me, and with whom I had spent enjoyable and happy days.

Because you are a new arrival here, Jamil, perhaps you don't know this beach city, or maybe you have not even heard of it. It's very beautiful, peaceful and magical. People from all over Southern California come there to spend their weekends for rest and relaxation. They come to enjoy the warm sun and the clean water and to delight in the views of its charming beaches and magical views. They come to visit its fine restaurants, indulging themselves in outstanding foods of many kinds and flavors. They also visit its curio shops with their unusual, strange and rare goods for sale both summer and winter.

It is a town with a huge number of artists in it-- existentialists, Bohemians, freethinkers, expressionists, and surrealistic painters. They live their lives there, exhibiting their paintings and drawings, mounting their exhibitions and spreading their philosophies.

"I was sad and angry at the same time. I wanted, if it were possible, to cry out from the deepest part of my soul to give vent to my feelings of frustration, and of being beaten and thwarted. I wandered along the beach and the streets of the city aimlessly, like a wounded wolf. I had been pierced in the depths of my pride, manhood and honor. Anger blinded my eyes, and I could not see what was in front of me!

"One day previously, Claudia, my girlfriend, had telephoned me and frankly told me that she was dissipating her life, wasting her time and spending life to no purpose by staying with me! I was not the kind of man whose friendship she could enjoy! I was not the one she would like to marry;

my ambitions were small; my aspirations limited! My education was not advanced--only two years at a university. I did not have wealth or social position!"

I noticed Jim's tone changing as he hesitated to complete his sentence; "To her, I was nothing . . . less than nothing. In brief, we were not compatible, according to her. I was not good enough to go out with as a friend. She could not be intimate with me, much less consider the possibility of having me for a husband! She asked me to forget her and not to try to get in touch with her. She bade me farewell and wished me luck. She now thought she had found herself a suitable man." I found myself saying, "I am very sorry to hear that my friend! Your story makes me awfully sad!"

"I asked her, 'What about our great love for each other and the years we have spent together fashioning our dreams and building our hopes?' She said those years had been a waste of time. The dreams were nothing more than adolescent castles built on sand and vanishing like the clouds or the foam of the tide sinking into the sand."

Mr. Sanders relapsed into silence as if he were trying to collect his scattered thoughts. "Jamil, all that I have said in an attempt to accurately describe to you my anguished state of mind can not describe to you the shock and torture I went through. Of course, I called many times to reason with her; but she slammed down the receiver of the telephone as soon as she heard my voice. I went to see her at her apartment, but she refused to even open the door. I tried to break down the door and she called the police. They wanted to prosecute me, but she would not press charges and I was released.

"I tried using mutual friends as mediators but without success. I spent more than a week shut in my room refusing food and not talking to anybody. Truly I wanted death. My mother, who lived with me, tried to cheer me up and to

convince me that no girl under the sun was worth a man dying to get. Finally, God guided me by illuminating my heart and showing me the light. I decided to forget her as one who was superficial and frivolous."

There was a period of silence, which seemed to last for hours though it could not have been more than a few minutes before Mr. Sanders went back to his narrative.

"Anyway, on this quiet Sunday when I was roaming the beach cities and the streets of Laguna Beach aimlessly, I remembered that the following Friday was my mother's eighty-sixth birthday, and that I must buy her a present. I remembered that the best place for meeting her request was this very city, since there are many shops displaying rare and unusual gifts.

"My mother had a strange and peculiar hobby. She was absolutely crazy about collecting teapots with decorated porcelain cups from China, Japan and India. She had a very large collection of rare pots and cups. The most precious gift a person could give her was a teapot with its accompanying cups--so much so that our apartment was full of them, exactly like a gift shop! In every spot in our flat you would find teapots on display with the cups. Even in the bathroom on the top of the towel cabinet there was a Chinese set. At the beginning of their married life together, my father liked this hobby of my mother's and encouraged her, but in the last ten years of my father's life, this expensive hobby became a source of argument and quarrels between them."

Mr. Sanders stopped suddenly. We had reached some stoplights. I noticed that the number of cars going along with us or coming towards us on the other side of the road could be numbered on the fingers of my hands. I also didn't observe any people walking the streets now.

"I would not be exaggerating if I told you that I entered every gift shop in the town. I knew the streets and shops like the back of my hand from all the times I had been there to visit Claudia. I had almost given up finding a suitable gift for my mother that matched my budget. Many times in the past, Claudia had helped me pick out a gift for Mother from the shops in Laguna Beach or from Chinatown in Los Angeles.

"I was as pleased as if I had found hidden treasure when I remembered that there were more gift shops in a special quarter along the road toward San Diego in another part of town. The shops in this city do not close on holidays or weekends since they make their living from visitors and tourists.

"There I entered a small, out of the way shop, but it was a very attractive place with everything well arranged as a real gift shop should be. As soon as I entered, a strange sensation possessed me. I felt that I had found a place close to my heart.

It was as though I had known the place for some time and felt happiness there for reasons I did not understand! As I entered, the owner greeted me with the most attractive and charming smile I had ever seen! I felt as if I had known her all my life.

"I described to her what I needed. Without saying a word, she went inside an adjoining room and returned carrying a box. She opened it and took out a teapot, placing it on the table with the cups surrounding it. I gasped with joy for its beauty, and because I could never have imagined finding such a lovely gift. Without asking the price, I asked her to gift-wrap it. She passed it to a woman standing nearby who was watching us, and asked her to please wrap it. I knew from the strong resemblance between them and from the glint in her eyes as well as her smile that it must be her mother.

"We talked together for more than half an hour, though it seemed like seconds because of her beauty and sweetness and the joy I felt. We spoke of the city and its charm, of gift shops and Christmas presents, and of those who had strange hobbies--like my mother! Helen, for that was her name, told me that there were many like my mother who spent a tremendous amount of money on this hobby; and that there are even people who spend their savings on it.

"She also told me that she lived with her divorced mother, that she was an only child, that they got their living from their shop, and that their home was within walking distance! I invited her to dinner the following Saturday, but she invited me to supper at their home that very evening.

"It was a wonderful dinner and an excellent evening. I felt as if I had known the two women since the day of my birth! I left their house, but in my heart was a strong desire not to leave it! I sensed warmth, affection and a love I had not known the likes of before. Our views were complementary and our thoughts alike. When she spoke, she expressed what I felt inside as perfectly as if I myself were speaking! I left as if I was walking on air or flying among the clouds!"

I wanted to comment, but he found himself speechless!

"The following Saturday while Helen and I were concerning ourselves with leaving the house to go to supper together, and her mother was standing at the door saying good-bye to us and wishing us a good time, I felt a wrenching pain in my soul because I was leaving the mother on her own and not taking her with us. I suggested that the three of us go together, but they laughed and were against the idea, saying she would look like a chaperone. The mother wanted us to be alone and to have a good time. I insisted and they refused for a time, but finally acquiesced. It was a magical evening that I will never forget!

"Believe me, my friend, from the moment I set eyes on Helen, I did not think of any other woman and never went out with another one. Love, respect, and appreciation of her have grown with the passing of time. Perhaps she doesn't realize it, but I love her more now than the day when she charmed the eyes-- my eyes, that is--that looked on her." I was well aware of the sacredness of Mr. Sander's narrative, and did not wish to interrupt his thread of thoughts; but I felt that I should say something to let the man know that I was fully aware of what he was relating!

"There is a saying in our language that nothing in life makes us nearly as great as greater pain! When Father died, Mother thought she would never survive after him; but with courage, determination and faith, she pulled out of it, much stronger and more capable!" I finally said.

"I do not want to go on so long as to bore you, Jamil; but I will say that the story of my meeting Helen is the most thrilling one that I know, and it is the one story that I never tire of telling! Every time I tell it, I feel as if I am starting a new life!" Mr. Sanders ceased talking for a long time. Jamil turned his head to the left and saw a big, bright smile on the face of his friend.

"I sold my mother's collection for a fortune. We put an advertisement in the paper, and I was astounded at the huge number of people who had the same hobby and were willing to spend great sums of money on teapots." He laughed and added, "If I had listened to the advice of Helen and her mother, I could easily have gotten twice as much from the sale."

"The plan was for me and Helen to live after our marriage with my mother, in spite of her being strong enough to do things for herself; but I felt she needed someone to look after her. Mother suggested that she live in a retirement

home, and Helen and I live alone; but I refused outright for I could not imagine myself far away from her.

"We were planning to get married on the anniversary of the day we had first met; but due to my mother's death, I was unable to live on my own, so we got married three months after her death--only five months after we had first met. The time had passed as a moment because of the depth of our happiness. We then spent two weeks in Mexico, and I really felt as though I was in the heaven that religious books talk about, a heaven on earth.

"We decided to sell the house we had inherited from my mother and to live with my mother-in-law in Laguna Beach because of the great love I had for that town. I would try to find work and Helen's mother would keep her gift shop."

Mr. Sanders chuckled and shook his head several times.

"Sometimes, Jamil, Destiny has plans for us that are different from our own. I got a job at Bullock's Department Store. One day I took Helen to the perfume department to buy her a present. As you know, they have the rarest and best perfumes from Paris. Because I was an employee, we would benefit from a discount.

"Helen was a perfume connoisseur. Before making her selection, she and the department manager discussed at length the composition of the various perfumes and how the fragrances create individual scents depending on body chemistry and PH balance. The manager realized that Helen had extensive knowledge, good taste and the potential to become an outstanding sales assistant because of her warm personality, good character and courteous manner. She offered her a sales position, fully confident that in a short time Helen would be qualified to step into the manager's position while she herself traveled to Europe to purchase perfumes. Later Helen might join her on these trips

to learn the skills of purchasing and the secrets of where skilled perfumers can be found. Eventually she might even become the one responsible for purchasing all the perfumes for Bullock's Department Store.

"The salary she offered was more money than Helen and her mother made together from their gift shop. We accepted the offer, of course. My mother-in-law decided to keep her shop in Laguna Beach because she liked the city and enjoyed her business immensely. We spent every weekend with her. After God blessed us with our third child, we tried to persuade my mother-in-law to sell her shop and undertake bringing up the children. She was reluctant; but after Helen's accident, she accepted that there was nothing else to do. If not, we would have faced problems we could not have solved."

Mr. Sanders turned into the driveway at the Turner home. I thanked him for his generous hospitality and for the wonderful evening I had spent with his family. "I shall never forget this precious occasion! You have opened my mind and heart to things I previously could not understand," I said sincerely.

"It was a rare night that I will never forget as long as I live. Believe me Jamil, we all are exceedingly happy you spent the evening with us," Mr. Sanders said putting his right hand on my shoulder. "It was really a treat for us! What is more enjoyable and exiting than spending Christmas Eve with a dear friend from the Holy Land? We all would like you to come very often, and the children would love to ask about your camel and your harems!"

"*Insha Allah!* If God is willing! I would love very much to see them too! They are such lovely children!" I smiled and shook Mr. Sander's hand.

Chapter 10

Much cheered by the warm friendship I had enjoyed, but still deeply missing my family and dear friends in Jordan, I entered the big, silent, empty house, my eyes swimming in the darkness. I threw myself into the huge leather sofa in the sitting room outside my bedroom and drifted into thought. I was still affected by the tragedy of Mrs. Sanders' blindness and the softness of the young children with their downy skin. This patient and struggling family had created happiness from a situation of despair.

I wondered how it could be possible that a world that possesses such greatness and power could also spawn so much evil and brutality. How could the womb that had nourished and born such warm-hearted people as the Sharps, the Sanders and the Turners also have born criminal rulers and predators that hunt the hearts and souls of weaker beings?

How could the same world produce those who endure great difficulties and exhibit endless virtues such as love, generosity, self-denial, faithfulness, devotion and compassion for others also produce those whose black hearts are filled with hatred, maliciousness, contemptuousness, prejudice and arrogance?

How could leaders who control vast amounts of inexhaustible natural resources, advanced technology and great productivity producing monstrous amounts of wealth choose to use their power and supremacy to subjugate weaker beings, preferring bloodshed over peace?

* * * * *

Relaxed, I entered my own room a little after midnight. I found it too cold and lit the heater. I did not feel lonely, despairing, and melancholy now. Those emotions had been lifted from my heart and soul. I sat on the shabby old sofa and started opening a box wrapped in pretty paper--red with gold candles glowing--that Linda had given me at the door as I was saying good-bye. I remembered a brief moment of whispering between her and Mrs. Sanders just as I was about to leave. The little girl had given me a gift in the name of friendship, fraternity, and love. This gesture by the small child made me feel quite special. My heart was lifted to see the small child being taught the gift of giving and sharing, knowing as I did that the habits of life and development of character begin when you are young!

I rose from my seat to put the Sanders' gift on the shelf. I was filled with happiness and a sense of contentment. Just then my eyes fell on a large sheet of colorful paper on the bed. It was hiding something. I picked it up and noticed two small packages under it and a note that had been written on a used envelope.

"I hope you don't mind my going into your bedroom. I didn't put your mail in the kitchen today for I was afraid you might eat out, or come home late and not see your package from home and our small remembrance. Paul, the boys and I all wish you a very merry first Christmas in our country. Once again, we are all so sorry that things did not work out as planned. We missed the pleasure of having dinner with you, Jamil.

Sincerely yours,
Mrs. Turner."

Sure enough, there was the package from them and next to it the one postmarked from home with Mona's familiar handwriting. My mind however, was on another gift I had received this night. Like the shepherds of long ago, I had been fortunate enough to enter a small, humble abode where I had discovered the greatest gifts for which the whole of mankind is searching: love, harmony, and everlasting friendship. There my faith had been restored, for I had glimpsed the face of God! Tonight—this very special night-- I was not just celebrating Christmas but the new life I had found!

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The author was born and reared in the ancient Jordanian city of Salt, where he graduated from the local high school. This school was once the highest institution of learning in the whole of Jordan and consisted only of male students. At that time, the government was the only employer in Jordan. Any young man who aspired to hold a prominent government position had to complete his secondary education at the school in Salt before going abroad to take advanced studies in one of the universities in a neighboring Arab country or in Europe. Prime ministers, judges, cabinet members, school teachers, chiefs of police and other high ranking government officials received their secondary education at this school. This was the case until the year of the Palestinian *Nakbah* calamity in 1948 which shook the Arab and Islamic worlds and awakened them from their rosy dreams and deep slumber.

The author lost his father when he was five years old. His mother, who was not yet thirty, was two and a half months pregnant with his little sister at the time. His father had owned multiple farms throughout the country where he grew field crops such as wheat, garbanzo beans, lentils, barley, corn and garden produce such as tomatoes, cucumbers, *fuggoose*, watermelons and cantaloupes. He owned vineyards and olive groves and raised cattle and other kinds of livestock. Each farm had its own staff and laborers. In addition to these responsibilities, he had been the *Mokhtar*, 188 or local head, of his family tribe which numbered more than 1000 people.

The author's mother and her children could have enjoyed a comfortable life had it not been for the three brothers of her deceased husband. They schemed to take the property, possessions, and family of their dead brother. They informed his widow that she must choose one of them to marry and thus become the brother-in-law's second wife. Her husband's

estate would then go to the chosen brother, and her children would be required to work for free in the fields. However, this would also mean that the children would not be allowed to attend school. This did not bother the brothers-in law, whose own children had not attended school for even one single day.

This proposal insulted and infuriated the young widow. She adamantly refused to enter into such an agreement. She sharply informed them that under no circumstances would she accept a marriage proposal from them or an outsider. Her only goal was to raise and care for her children. For two long years, not a week went by without a visit from one of the brothers-in-law, demanding that she leave the children and return to her parents. Usually these visits ended in a fight where one of them would repeatedly insult her and beat the children.

When she approached tribal leaders for help, they stood by the brothers-in-law who were more influential than a young widow. Due to the great authority that the culture afforded to the tribal leaders, the local court was unable to do anything to stop the abuse. The circumstances eventually became so unbearable that the mother forfeited her rights to the most of the estate provided that her children could remain with her.

When he was in his mid-twenties, the author left Jordan to study in America. Though his purpose was to further his education, he came on an immigrant visa because student visas at that time required financial backing and sponsorship. The only communication he was able to have with the people he had left behind was through letters which were delivered via sea mail or air mail. He was unable to speak to them by telephone for twelve years because of the lack of technology. Today it is possible to telephone his family and friends in Jordan a dozen times a day.

He received a BA in English Literature from California State University and his Masters in Middle Eastern languages and literatures from the University of California (UCLA). Following his graduation, he taught the Arabic language and Islamic studies at UCLA and in community colleges located in Pasadena, Los Angeles, Covina and Hollywood.

After returning to his native Middle East, he taught English at the Teacher's Training College, United Nations, Jordan and then at King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. At the time of writing his two novels in English, *Beads of Memory* and *August Rain*, the author was a faculty member at the University of Jordan. The author is now a member of the California Writers Club.

Abdulmajid Dabbas

majidabujohar@yahoo.com.

BY THE AUTHOR

IN ENGLISH

I. Beads of Memory – Trilogy

II. August Rain – Novel

III. Elizabeth - Novel

IN ARABIC

I. Fee Bilad Assamni Walassal (In The Country of Milk and Honey) - Novel

II. Teeh Professor Dahshan (Professor Dahshan's Diaspora) - Novel

III. Fabakat Wa Bakait (She Wept and I Wept too) - Novel

IV. Ana Al-Maloon (I Am the Accursed) - Novel