

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Attack

Yasmina Khadra

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About the Author

Yasmina Khadra is the nom de plume of the former Algerian army officer, Mohammed Moulessehoul. He is the author of three other novels published in English, *In the Name of God*, *Wolf Dreams* and the acclaimed *The Swallows of Kabul*, shortlisted for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. *The Attack* was short-listed for the Prix Goncourt, the Prix Fémina and the Prix Renaudot and won the Prix des Libraires.

Yasmina Khadra lives in France.

ALSO BY YASMINA KHADRA

Published in English

In the Name of God
Wolf Dreams
The Swallows of Kabul

Yasmina Khadra

THE ATTACK

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY JOHN
CULLEN



V I N T A G E



I don't remember hearing an explosion. A hissing sound, maybe, like tearing fabric, but I'm not certain. My attention was distracted by that quasi-divinity and the host of devoted followers surrounding him as his bodyguards tried to clear a passage to his waiting automobile. "Let us pass, please. Please move out of the way." The faithful elbowed one another, hoping to get a better look at the sheikh or touch a part of his *kamis*. From time to time, the revered old man turned to greet an acquaintance or thank a disciple. The eyes in his ascetic's face glinted like the blade of a scimitar. I was being crushed by the enraptured throng and tried in vain to break free. The sheikh plunged into his vehicle, waving with one hand from behind the bulletproof glass while his two bodyguards took their places on either side of him. And then . . . but there's nothing more. Something resembling a lightning bolt streaks across the sky and bursts like a giant flare in the middle of the roadway; the shock wave strikes me full force; the crowd whose frenzy held me captive disintegrates. In a fraction of a second, the sky collapses, and the street, fraught with the fervor of the multitude a moment ago, turns upside down. The body of a man, or perhaps a boy, hurtles across my vertiginous sight like a dark flash. What's going on? A surge of dust and fire envelops me, flinging me into the air with a thousand other projectiles. I have a vague sensation of being reduced to shreds, of dissolving in the blast's hot breath. . . . A few yards—or light-years—away, the sheikh's automobile is ablaze. Hungry tentacles enclose it, spreading abroad a dreadful odor of cremation. The roar of the flames must be terrifying; I can't hear it. I've been struck deaf, ravished away from the noises of the town. I hear nothing, I feel nothing; I hover, I only hover. I hover for an eternity before plunging back to earth, stunned, undone, but

curiously lucid, my eyes wide open on the horror that has just descended on the town from out of the sky. In the instant when I touch the ground, everything freezes: the flames rising above the destroyed vehicle, the flying projectiles, the smoke, the chaos, the smells, time. . . . Only a heavenly voice, floating over the fathomless silence of death, is singing *One of these days, we'll go back home*. It's not exactly a voice; it's more like a rustling, a filigree of sound. . . . My head bounces off something. . . . A child cries: *Mama!* The call is weak, but distinct and pure. It comes from far away, from some calm elsewhere. . . . The flames devouring the sheikh's car refuse to budge; the projectiles won't fall. . . . My hand gropes among the gravel. I believe I've been hurt. I try to move my legs, to lift my head; not one of my muscles obeys me. . . . *Mama*, the child cries. . . . *I'm over here, Amin.* . . . And there she is, Mama, emerging from behind a curtain of smoke. She advances through the suspended debris, amid petrified gestures, past mouths opened upon the abyss. For a moment, because of her milk white veil and her tormented look, I take her for the Virgin. My mother was always like this, radiant and sad at the same time, like a candle. When she placed her hand on my burning forehead, she took away all my fever and all my cares. . . . And now *she's here*; her magic powers are still intact. A shudder runs through me from my feet to my head, setting everything free and unleashing delirium. The flames start their macabre movement again, the exploded fragments resume their trajectories, and panic comes flooding back in. . . . A man in rags, with blackened face and arms, tries to approach the blazing automobile. Although he's gravely wounded, some reserve of stubbornness moves him to try to help the sheikh, no matter what the cost. Every time he puts his hand on the door of the car, a jet of flames drives him back. Inside the blasted vehicle, the trapped bodies are burning. Two blood-covered specters approach from the other side and try to force open the rear door. I see

them screaming orders or crying out in pain, but I don't hear them. Not far from where I'm lying, an old man stares at me stupidly; he doesn't seem to realize his guts are exposed to the air and his blood is streaming toward the crater in the street. A wounded man with an enormous smoking stain on his back is crawling across the rubble. He passes quite close to me, groaning and panic-stricken, and gives up the ghost a little farther on, his eyes wide open, as if he's still denying that such a thing could happen to him, to *him*. The two specters finally break the windshield and dive into the automobile. Other survivors come to their aid. With their bare hands, they pull apart the flaming vehicle, break the windows, tear off the doors, and succeed in extracting the sheikh's body. A dozen arms lift him up, carry him away from the inferno, and lay him down on the sidewalk, while a flurry of other hands strives to beat the fire out of his clothes. A deep, intense tingling makes its presence felt in my hip. My trousers have almost disappeared; only a few strips of scorched cloth cover me here and there. Against my side, grotesque and horrible, my leg is lying, still connected to my thigh by a thin ribbon of flesh. Suddenly, all my strength deserts me. I have the sensation that my fibers are separating from one another, already decomposing. . . . At last, I hear something, the wailing of an ambulance, and little by little, the noises of the street return, break over me like waves, stun me. Someone bends over my body, gives it a summary examination with his stethoscope, and goes away. I see him stoop before a heap of charred flesh, take its pulse, and then make a sign to some stretcher-bearers. A man comes to me, picks up my wrist, and lets it fall again. . . . "This one's a goner. We can't do anything for him." I'd like to hold him back and force him to reconsider his assessment, but my arm mutinies, refusing to obey me. The child starts crying out again: *Mama* . . . I look for my mother amid the chaos . . . and discover only orchards, stretching as far as I can see . . . Grandfather's

orchards . . . the orchards of the patriarch . . . a land of orange trees, where every day was summer . . . and a dreaming boy on the crest of a hill. The sky is a limpid blue. Everywhere, the orange trees are holding out their arms to one another. The child is twelve years old, with a porcelain heart. At his age, there's so much to love at first sight, and simply because his trust runs as deep as his joy, he thinks of devouring the moon like a fruit, convinced that he need only reach out his hand to gather up the happiness of all the world. . . . And there, before my eyes, despite the tragedy that has just ruined forever my memory of that distant day, despite the bodies of the dying scattered in the street and the flames that have now completely overwhelmed the sheikh's automobile, the boy bounds to his feet, his arms spread like a kestrel's wings, and goes running across the fields, where every tree is enchanted. . . . Tears furrow my cheeks. . . . "Whoever told you a man mustn't cry doesn't know what it means to be a man," my father declared when he came upon me, weeping and distraught, in the patriarch's funeral chamber. "There's no shame in crying, my boy. Tears are the noblest things we have." Since I refused to release Grandfather's hand, my father knelt before me and took me in his arms. "There's no use staying here," he said. "The dead are dead, they're over, they've served their time. As for the living, they're ghosts, too; they're just early for their appointment. . . ." Two bearers pick me up and put me on a stretcher. An ambulance backs up to us, its rear doors wide open. Arms pull me inside and practically throw me among some other corpses. In my final throes, I hear myself sob. . . . "God, if this is some horrible nightmare, let me wake up, and soon. . . ."

1.

After the operation, Ezra Benhaim, our hospital director, comes to see me in my office. He's an alert, lively gentleman, despite his sixty-odd years and his increasing corpulence. Around the hospital, he's known as "the Sergeant," because he's an outrageous despot with a sense of humor that always seems to show up a little late. But when the going gets tough, he's the first to roll up his sleeves and the last to leave the shop.

Before I became a naturalized Israeli citizen, back when I was a young surgeon moving heaven and earth to get licensed, he was there. Even though he was still just a modest chief of service at the time, he used the little influence his position afforded him to keep my detractors at bay. In those days, it was hard for a son of Bedouins to join the brotherhood of the highly educated elite without provoking a sort of reflexive disgust. The other medical school graduates in my class were wealthy young Jews who wore gold chain bracelets and parked their convertibles in the hospital lot. They looked down their noses at me and perceived each of my successes as a threat to their social standing. And so, whenever one of them pushed me too far, Ezra wouldn't even want to know who started first; he took my side as a matter of course.

He pushes the door open without knocking, comes in, and looks at me with his head tilted to one side and the hint of a smile on his lips. This is his way of communicating his satisfaction. Then, after I pivot my armchair to face him, he takes off his glasses, wipes them on the front of his lab coat,

and says, "It looks like you had to go all the way to the next world to bring your patient back."

"Let's not exaggerate."

He puts his glasses back on his nose, flares his unattractive nostrils, nods his head; then, after a brief meditation, his face regains its austerity. "Are you coming to the club this evening?"

"Not possible. My wife's due home tonight."

"What about our return match?"

"Which one? You haven't won a single game against me."

"You're not fair, Amin. You always take advantage of my bad days and score lots of points. But today, when I feel great, you back out."

I lean far back in my chair so I can stare at him properly. "You know what it is, my poor old Ezra? You don't have as much punch as you used to, and I hate myself for taking advantage of you."

"Don't bury me quite yet. Sooner or later, I'm going to shut you up once and for all."

"You don't need a racket for that. A simple suspension would do the trick."

He promises to think about it, brings a finger to his temple in a casual salute, and goes back to badgering the nurses in the corridors.

Once I'm alone, I try to go back to where I was before Ezra's intrusion and remember that I was about to call my wife. I pick up the phone, dial our number, and hang up again at the end of the seventh ring. My watch reads 1:12 P.M. If Sihem took the nine o'clock bus, she should have arrived home some time ago.

"You worry too much!" cries Dr. Kim Yehuda, surprising me by bursting into my cubbyhole. Continuing without pause, she says, "I knocked before I came in. You were lost in space. . . ."

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear you."

She dismisses my apology with a haughty hand, observes my furrowing brow, and asks, “Were you calling your house?”

“I can hide nothing from you.”

“And, obviously, Sihem hasn’t come home yet?”

Her insight irritates me, but I’ve learned to live with it. We’ve known each other since we were at the university together. We weren’t in the same class—I was about three years ahead of her—but we hit it off right away. She was beautiful and spontaneous and far more open-minded than the other students, who had to bite their tongues a few times before they’d ask an Arab for a light, even if he was a brilliant student and a handsome lad to boot. Kim had an easy laugh and a generous heart. Our romance was brief and disconcertingly naïve. I suffered enormously when a young Russian god, freshly arrived from his Komsomol, came and stole her away from me. Good sport that I was, I didn’t put up any fight. Later, I married Sihem, and then, without warning, very shortly after the Soviet empire fell apart, the Russian went back home; but we’ve remained excellent friends, Kim and I, and our close collaboration has forged a powerful bond between us.

“It’s the end of the holiday today,” she reminds me. “The roads are jammed. Have you tried to reach her at her grandmother’s?”

“There’s no telephone at the farm.”

“Call her on her mobile phone.”

“She forgot it at home again.”

She spreads out her arms in resignation: “That’s bad luck.”

“For whom?”

She raises one magnificent eyebrow and shakes a warning finger at me. “The tragedy of certain well-intentioned people,” she declares, “is that they don’t have the courage of their commitments, and they fail to follow their ideas to their logical conclusion.”

“The time is right,” I say, rising from my chair. “The operation was very stressful, and we need to regain our strength. . . .”

Grabbing her by the elbow, I push her into the corridor. “Walk on ahead, my lovely. I want to see all the wonders you’re pulling behind you.”

“Would you dare repeat that in front of Sihem?”

“Only imbeciles never change their minds.”

Kim’s laughter lights up the hospital corridor like a garland of bright flowers in a home for the dying.

In the canteen, Ilan Ros joins us just as we’re finishing our lunch. He sets his overloaded tray on the table and places himself on my right so that he’s facing Kim. His jowls are scarlet, and he’s wearing a loose apron over his Pantagruelian belly. He begins by gobbling up three slices of cold meat in quick succession and then wipes his mouth on a paper napkin. “Are you still looking for a second house?” he asks me amid a lot of voracious smacking.

“That depends on where it is.”

“I think I’ve come up with something for you. Not far from Ashkelon. A pretty little villa with just what you need to tune out completely.”

My wife and I have been looking for a small house on the seashore for more than a year. Sihem loves the sea. Every other weekend, my hospital duties permitting, we get into our car and head for the beach. We walk on the sand for a long time, and then we climb a dune and stare at the horizon until late in the night. Sunsets exercise a degree of fascination on Sihem that I’ve never been able to get to the bottom of.

“You think I can afford it?” I ask.

Ilan Ros utters a brief laugh, and his crimson neck shakes like gelatin. “Amin, you haven’t put your hand in your pocket for so long that I figure you must have plenty socked away. Surely enough to make at least half of your dreams come true . . .”

Suddenly, a tremendous explosion shakes the walls of the canteen and sets the glasses tinkling. Everyone in the place looks at one another, puzzled, and then those close to the picture windows get up from their tables and peer out. Kim and I rush to the nearest window. Outside, the people at work in the hospital courtyard are standing still, with their faces turned toward the north. The facades of the buildings across the way prevent us from seeing farther.

“That’s got to be a terrorist attack,” someone says.

Kim and I run out into the corridor. A group of nurses is already coming up from the basement and racing toward the lobby. Judging from the force of the shock wave, I’d say the explosion couldn’t have gone off very far away. A security guard switches on his transceiver to inquire about the situation. The person he’s talking to doesn’t know any more than he does. We storm the elevator, get out on the top floor, and hurry to the terrace overlooking the south wing of the building. A few curious people are already there, gazing out, with their hands shading their eyes. They’re looking in the direction of a cloud of smoke rising about a dozen blocks from the hospital.

A security guard speaks into his radio: “It’s coming from the direction of Hakirya,” he says. “A bomb, maybe a suicide bomber. Or a booby-trapped vehicle. I have no information. All I can see is smoke coming from whatever the target was.”

“We have to go back down,” Kim tells me.

“You’re right. We have to get ready to receive the first evacuees.”

Ten minutes later, bits of information combine to evoke a veritable carnage. Some people say a bus was blown up;

others say it was a restaurant. The hospital switchboard is practically smoking. We've got a red alert.

Ezra Benhaim orders the crisis-management team to stand by. Nurses and surgeons go to the emergency room, where stretchers and gurneys are arranged in a frenetic but orderly carousel. This isn't the first time that Tel Aviv's been shaken by a bomb, and after each experience our responders operate with increased efficiency. But an attack remains an attack. It wears you down. You manage it technically, not humanely. Turmoil and terror aren't compatible with sangfroid. When horror strikes, the heart is always its first target.

I reach the emergency room in my turn. Ezra's in command there, his face pallid, his mobile phone glued to his ear. With one hand, he tries to direct the preparations for surgical interventions.

"A suicide bomber blew himself up in a restaurant," he announces. "There are many dead and many more wounded. Evacuate wards three and four, and prepare to receive the first victims. The ambulances are on the way."

Kim, who's been in her office doing her own telephoning, catches up with me in ward five. This is where the most gravely wounded will be sent. Sometimes the operating room's too crowded, and surgery is performed on the spot. Three other surgeons and I check the various pieces of equipment. Nurses are busy around the operating tables, making nimble, precise movements.

Kim proceeds to turn on the machines. As she does so, she informs me that there are at least eleven people dead.

Sirens are wailing outside. The first ambulances invade the hospital courtyard. I leave Kim with the machines and rejoin Ezra in the lobby. The cries of the wounded echo through the wards. A nearly naked woman, as enormous as her fright, twists around on a stretcher. The stretcher-bearers carrying her are having a hard time calming her down. She passes in front of me, with her hair standing up

and her eyes bulging. Immediately behind her, a young boy arrives, covered with blood but still breathing. His face and arms are black, as though he's just come up out of a coal mine. I take hold of his gurney and wheel him to one side to keep the passage free. A nurse comes to help me.

"His hand is gone!" she cries.

"This is no time to lose your nerve," I tell her. "Put a tourniquet on him and take him to the operating room immediately. There's not a minute to spare."

"Very well, Doctor."

"Are you sure you'll be all right?"

"Don't worry about me, Doctor. I'll manage."

In the course of fifteen minutes, the lobby of the emergency room is transformed into a battlefield. No fewer than a hundred wounded people are packed into this space, the majority of them lying on the floor. All the gurneys are loaded with broken bodies, many horribly riddled with splinters and shards, some suffering from severe burns in several places. The whole hospital echoes with wailing and screaming. From time to time, a single cry pierces the din, underlining the death of a victim. One of them dies in my hands without giving me time to examine him. Kim informs me that the operating room is now completely full and that we have to start channeling the most serious cases to ward five. A wounded man demands to be treated immediately. His back is flayed from one end to the other, and part of one bare shoulder blade is showing. When he sees that no one is coming to his aid, he grabs a nurse by the hair. It takes three strapping young men to make him let go. A little farther on, another injured man, his body covered with cuts, screams and thrashes about madly, lunging so hard that he falls off his stretcher, which is wedged between two gurneys. He lies on the floor and slashes with his fists at the empty air. The nurse who's trying to care for him looks overwhelmed. Her eyes light up when she notices me.

"Oh, Dr. Amin. Hurry, hurry. . . ."

Suddenly, the injured man stiffens; his groans, his convulsions, his flailing all cease at once, his body grows still, and his arms fall across his chest, like a puppet whose strings have just been cut. In a split second, the expression of pain on his flushed features changes to a look of dementia, a mixture of cold rage and disgust. When I bend over him, he glowers at me menacingly, his teeth bared in a ferocious grimace. He pushes me away with a fierce thrust of his hand and mutters, "I don't want any Arab touching me. I'd rather croak."

I seize his wrist and force his arm down to his side. "Hold him tight," I tell the nurse. "I'm going to examine him."

"Don't touch me," the injured man says, trying to rise. "I forbid you to lay a hand on me."

He spits at me, but he's breathless, and his saliva lands on his chin, viscid and shimmering. Furious tears start spilling over his eyelids. I remove his jacket. His stomach is a spongy mass of pulped flesh that contracts whenever he makes an effort. He's lost a great deal of blood, and his cries only serve to intensify his hemorrhaging.

"He has to be operated on right away."

I signal to a male nurse to help me put the injured man back on his stretcher. Then, pushing aside the gurneys blocking our path, I make for the operating room. The patient stares at me, his hate-filled eyes on the point of rolling back into his head. He tries to protest, but his contortions have worn him out. Prostrate and helpless, he turns his head away so he won't have to look at me and surrenders to the drowsiness he can no longer resist.

2.

I leave the surgical unit around ten o'clock, long after dark.

I don't know how many people wound up on my operating table. Whenever I was finishing with one patient, another gurney would come through the swinging doors of the operating room. Some operations didn't require much time; others literally wore me out. I've got cramps everywhere and a tingling sensation in my joints. Every now and then, as I worked, my vision blurred and I had a spell of vertigo, but it wasn't until a kid nearly died on me that I decided to be reasonable and yield my place to a colleague. Kim, for her part, lost three patients, one after the other, as though she were under some evil spell that turned her efforts into dust. She was cursing herself as she left ward five. I think she went up to her office and cried her eyes out.

According to Ezra Benhaim, the tally of the dead has been revised upward and now stands at nineteen, among them eleven schoolchildren who were celebrating the birthday of one of their classmates in the fast-food restaurant where the bomb went off. We've performed four amputations, and thirty-three people have been admitted in critical condition. After receiving emergency treatment, about forty of the less seriously injured were picked up by relatives at the hospital; others went home under their own power.

In the hospital lobby, the relatives of patients still in our care bite their fingernails and pace around like sleepwalkers. Most of them don't seem to realize completely the enormity of the catastrophe that has just struck them. A frantic mother clings to my arm and pierces me with her eyes. "Doctor, how's my little girl? Is she going to make it?" A

father turns up; his son's in intensive care. The father wants to know why the operation's lasting so long. "He's been in there for hours. What are you doing to him?" The nurses are being harassed in the same way. They defend themselves as best they can, calming people down and promising to get them the information they want. As I'm in the act of comforting an old man, an entire family spots me and presses in on me. I'm forced to beat a retreat to the outer courtyard and walk around the whole building in order to get back to my office.

Kim's not in hers. I go and ask Ilan Ros if he's seen her, but he hasn't. Nor have the nurses.

I change my clothes; I'm ready to go home.

In the parking lot, policemen are coming and going in a sort of hushed frenzy. The silence is filled with the crackling static of their radios. An officer gives instructions from inside a 4x4 with a light machine gun mounted on its dashboard.

Exhilarated by the evening breeze, I reach my car. Kim's Nissan is parked where it was when I arrived this morning, its front windows rolled halfway down because of the heat.

When I leave the hospital grounds, the city seems calm. The tragedy that has just shaken it can't make a dent in its habits. Endless lines of vehicles are streaming toward the Petach-Tikva expressway. The cafés and restaurants are packed. Night people crowd the sidewalks. I take Gevirol to Beit Sokolov, where a police checkpoint has been set up since the attack. Drivers on this road are obliged to make a detour around Hakiryá, which draconian security measures have now isolated from the rest of the city. I manage to make my way to Hasmonaim Street, which is sunk in an ethereal silence. From a distance, I can see the fast-food restaurant the suicide bomber blew up. Officers from the forensic police unit are combing the area, looking for clues and taking samples. The front of the restaurant is completely destroyed; the roof of the whole south wing of

the building has fallen in. Blackish streaks bar the sidewalk. An uprooted streetlight is lying across the roadway, which is littered with all sorts of debris. The violence of the blast must have been unimaginable; the windows in the surrounding buildings have been blown in, and the facades of some of them are heavily damaged.

A cop comes from out of nowhere. "You can't stay there," he tells me in a commanding voice.

He sweeps my car with his flashlight, lets it linger for a while on my license plate, and then turns it on me. Instinctively, he takes a small step backward and puts his free hand on his pistol.

"Don't make any sudden moves," he warns me. "I want to see your hands on the steering wheel. What are you doing here? Can't you see this area's been sealed off?"

"I'm on my way home."

A second officer comes to the rescue. "How'd this guy get through?" he asks.

"Damned if I know," the first policeman says.

The second cop shines his own light on me, examining me with baleful, mistrustful eyes. "Your papers!"

I hand them to him. He checks them and points his light at my face again. My Arab name disturbs him. It's always like this after an attack. The cops are nervous, and suspicious faces exacerbate their predispositions.

"Get out and face the car," the first officer orders me.

I do what he says. He pushes me roughly against the roof of my vehicle, kicks my legs apart, and subjects me to a methodical search.

The other cop goes to have a look at what's inside my trunk.

"Where are you coming from?"

"From Ichilov Hospital. I'm Dr. Amin Jaafari. I'm a surgeon at Ichilov. I've just left the operating room. I'm exhausted, and I want to go home."