

'A Balzacian  
tale full of romance  
and murder that ranges  
from Afghanistan to  
Yemen to Syria'  
*New York Times*

**IN  
PRAISE OF  
HATRED  
KHALED  
KHALIFA**

**CENSORED BY THE STATE:  
THE NOTORIOUS NOVEL  
THAT WAS BANNED  
IN SYRIA**

## ABOUT THE BOOK

**A young Muslim girl turns to extremism under a brutal dictatorship.**

1980s Syria, our young narrator is living a secluded life behind the veil in the vast and perfumed house of her grandparents in Aleppo. Her three aunts - Maryam the pious one; Safaa, the liberal; and the free-spirited Marwa - bring her up with the aid of their ever-devoted blind servant.

Soon the high walls of the family home are unable to protect her from the social and political upheavals outside. Witnessing the bloody crackdown of the ruling dictatorship against the Muslim Brotherhood, she is filled with hatred for the regime, and becomes increasingly radical. In the footsteps of her beloved uncle Bakr, she launches herself into a fight for her religion, her country and, ultimately, her own future.

Against the backdrop of real-life events that occurred during the Syrian regime's ruthless suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s, *In Praise of Hatred* is a stirring, sensual novel. This traditionally composed, layered story is a powerful echo of the violence now taking place in the Middle East.

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# IN PRAISE OF HATRED

KHALED KHALIFA

*Translated from the Arabic by Leri Price*

For Amina Muhammad Ali

## FOREWORD

This novel's main locus is Aleppo, a city surrounded by olive orchards and pistachio fields, ancient enough to vie with Damascus for the title of the oldest continuously inhabited city on Earth. The wider setting is the urban Levant, with its markets, mosques, caravanserais and luxury consumer goods, and the social networks and carefully guarded reputations of the traditional bourgeoisie.

Our nameless narrator is the youngest of a house of women who live suspended - like embalmed butterflies, to use one of the novel's recurring motifs - waiting for men to act, and often suffering from their actions. Hers is an emotional, conflicted, self-contradicting voice, at once passionate, sensuous and austere. She is 'the shy girl who used to stand on the doorsill afraid of loneliness and orphanhood'. She is also, by force of her context, capable of formulas like this: 'We need hatred to give our lives meaning.'

Part of the problem is self-loathing and sexual repression. As she grows, the increasing weight of her breasts causes the narrator to talk less. She wears cruel bras. Her school friend Dalal tells her that women are 'animated dirt'. And the narrator is trapped in this dirt: 'I felt my body to be a dark vault, damp and crawling with spiders.'

*In Praise of Hatred* is full of images of vaults, cloisters, enclosures. This is because imprisonment – by ideology, by history, by hatred – is the novel’s most persistent theme.

The values in the narrator’s home are sometimes harsh and unforgiving, but they are real and true nevertheless. Wrapped up with them are perfumes and carpets, music and plays, a rich Islamic and poetic heritage, precious mystical experiences.

But beyond the walls there’s a non-conservative Aleppo, too: the dominant secular world. At school the uncovered girls call the veiled girls ‘the Penguin Club’. The *mukhabarat* (secret police) sympathizers write reports on the indiscretions of their peers. These students, like Mao’s cultural revolutionaries, are able to terrorize their teachers and trample on the moral code. A girl called Nada, in her ‘suits of commando camouflage’, is kept by a much older lover who works for ‘the death squad’. Political and sexual transgression are closely associated in the narrator’s mind, and she is outraged when her friend Ghada gives up modest dress to enjoy an affair with a regime figure. ‘Hatred bewildered me,’ she confides, ‘just as powerful love bewilders a lover.’

She praises hatred because she perceives it to be, like the struggle for sterile purity, a means to power. She calls on it to save her from the ‘absurd compassion that threatened my inner strength’. She calls on hatred religiously; indeed there is a suggestion here that hatred is the common religious impulse linking up Syrian society. The regime, too, conflates compassion with weakness and violence with strength, as does the Islamist organization the narrator approaches first through women’s study circles. Her guide urges the girls ‘to hate all the other Islamic sects’.

The dictatorship in Syria gave secularism a bad name, because it was a forced and sectarian secularism, to fit with

the general Middle Eastern postcolonial dispensation, in which minority groups ruled over majorities. The French had established an 'army of minorities' which took control of the state shortly after independence. In 1963 the military wing of the Ba'ath Party reached top position, and by 1970 Hafez al-Assad and his generals - from the Alawi community, an esoteric Shia offshoot - had reduced the Party to an instrument of absolute power.

At first the Assad regime was perceived as a popular nationalist, modernizing alliance between Alawi and Sunni peasants against the urban Sunni bourgeoisie. By the late seventies, however, unrest was bubbling in a population outraged by over-representation of Alawis in the security services, a corruption-crippled economy and, most of all, the regime's 1976 intervention in Lebanon to aid Phalangist forces against the Palestinian-Muslim-Leftist alliance.

Syrian leftists and Islamists organized against the regime, which responded with savage repression. Soon opposition activity degenerated into an assassination campaign run by the Muslim Brotherhood's armed wing. At the June 1979 Artillery School massacre, Alawi cadets - 'the ones', in Khalifa's words, 'who had descended from the mountains with limitless ambition and vitality' - were separated from their Sunni fellows and shot in cold blood. The regime's savagery culminated in the February 1982 massacre at Hama, where tens of thousands were killed, and in the slaughter of hundreds at Tadmor prison.

The poet Hassan al-Khayyer, an Alawi from the president's village, summed up the tragedy:

*There are two gangs: one is ruling in the name of  
patriotism but has none of it.  
Another gang claims good faith; and religion forbids  
their sayings and acts.*

*Two gangs. My people, be aware of both! Both drink from the same evil waters.*

The regime murdered al-Khayyer in prison.

From the eighties until 2011, Syrian society was effectively depoliticized. It became a state of fear, a kingdom of silence. Discussion of the '*ahdath*' ('events') publicly was taboo. Stories were transported by whisper, in private.

So how brave and necessary it was to write a fiction of these 'events'. In our narrator's harsh euphemism, Alawis are 'the other sect' and the Ba'ath Party is 'the atheist party', but the historical references are unmistakable. Khalifa plays one of the noblest roles available to a writer: he breaks a taboo in order to hold a mirror to a traumatized society, to force exploration of the trauma and therefore, perhaps, to promote acceptance and learning. He offers a way to digest the tragedy, or at least to chew on its cud. In this respect he stands in the company of such contemporary chroniclers of political transformation and social breakdown as Günter Grass and J. M. Coetzee.

The regime, which we now know hasn't changed mentality since the eighties, didn't recognize Khalifa's achievement. *In Praise of Hatred* was published secretly in Damascus, where it remained available for forty days until the regime discovered its existence. Next it was published in Lebanon by Dar al-Adab, and was shortlisted for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, otherwise known as the Arab Booker, in 2008.

In purely literary terms as well as politically, the novel rises to a daunting challenge: how to represent recent Syrian history, which has often been stranger and more terrible than fiction.

For a start, it's a perceptive study of radicalization understood in human rather than academic terms. It

accurately portrays violent Islamism as a modernist phenomenon, a response to physical and cultural aggression which draws upon Trotsky, Che and Régis Debray as much as the Quran, and contrasts it with the more representative Sufism of Syrian Sunnis.

Next, it examines the dramatic transformations of character undergone by people living under such strain: the bucklings and reformations, the varieties of madness. The characters here are fully realized and entirely flexible – even our bitter narrator – and their stories are told in a powerful prose which is elegant, complex, and rich in image and emotion. There is musicality too in the rhythm of the episodes, the subtle unfolding of the plot.

If readers are imprisoned by the narrator's perspective, they can escape into the many lesser stories within the frame. The detailed backgrounds and narratives of the characters met weave a realist fabric dense enough to rival that of Naguib Mahfouz. The range is broad: Turkish inn-keepers, English archaeologists, a Yemeni ex-Communist and a CIA officer who together enthuse over a future Islamic State, and a Saudi prince who wants a palace 'that looks like his mother's womb'. During the 'events' we meet death-squad members with skulls tattooed on their chests, kicking volumes of Shakespeare, and fugitives who evaporate into the night sky, and death becomes 'as commonplace as a crate of rotten peaches flung out on to the pavement'.

Just a few days before sitting down to write this, I was lucky enough to meet Khaled Khalifa in Beirut. He was calm and effortlessly cheery, despite the fact that his arm was still in a sling, broken five weeks earlier when regime thugs attacked a funeral procession for the murdered musician Rabi Ghazzy.

Glancing from Khalifa's novel to internet updates, it seems that nothing has changed since the eighties; the same massacres, tortures and battles unfold. It's as if Syria

is locked in a recurrent curse. But this twenty-first-century uprising is a popular revolution on a far greater scale than the one in the eighties; its revolutionaries arise from a far broader social spectrum. Instead of assassins and secret cells, there are grassroots organizers and defected soldiers. In the early months at least, the slogans on the streets focussed on freedom, dignity and national unity. Yet violence and the regime's instrumentalization of sectarianism has reopened deep and rarely examined wounds. Khalifa's plea for 'absurd compassion' is more necessary now than ever.

So this is a work of immediate importance, but Khalifa is keen to escape stereotypes. 'I don't want people to read my book because I'm an "oppressed writer" or a "writer who lives under dictatorship",' he told me. 'I want them to read it because they're interested in the story, and because they enjoy it.'

Both for its style (translated here beautifully) and for its human truth, *In Praise of Hatred* is a supremely enjoyable book.

Robin Yassin-Kassab  
July 2012

## THE MAIN CHARACTERS

he nameless narrator, a teenage girl and member of an old Sunni family in Aleppo

her mother and father, a fish trader

her brothers: Hossam and Humam

her three maternal aunts: Maryam, Safaa and Marwa

her maternal grandmother and grandfather, a carpet trader

her three maternal uncles: Selim, Bakr and Omar

adwan, an old blind family retainer

halil, the grandfather's driver

Hajja Radia and Hajja Souad, leaders of local prayer circles

he narrator's classmates at middle school:

Fatima

Dalal

1 Nazdaly, Turkey: Esmat Ajqabash, the owner of a khan in a remote part of the country

Wasal, his wife

ahra, the daughter of Khalil and Wasal, later Bakr's wife

Wasal's lovers in Mosul, Iraq: Khalil, the grandfather's driver; Mister John, an English expat; in London, a Pakistani cab driver; Abdel Ghany Bilany, a Syrian trader; a Spanish sailor

he narrator's fellow students at secondary school:

Hala

Nada, who has a lover, Abu Ramy, in the death squad

Ghada, who has a middle-aged lover, an officer in the

Mukhabarat

Layla

Hana, a member of the same religious circle

Hiba

ima, Omar's wife

Abdullah, a Yemeni man, Bakr's friend and associate, later to marry Safaa as his second wife

Zeina, Abdullah's first wife

Prince Shebab El Din, a Saudi prince, schoolfriend of

Abdullah, and later a close associate of Abdullah and Bakr

Yasmin, a member of the religious organization and mentor of the narrator

Imad Mansoury, a death squad officer who later marries

Marwa

Imad, Selim's son

Philip Anderson, a CIA operative Saleh, a former Communist protégé of Abdullah

Im Jalal, Selim's wife

he narrator's cellmates in the desert prison, including:

Sulafa

Suhayr

Rasha

Sheikh Nadim Al Salaty, an associate of Abdullah's in driving the Soviets out of Afghanistan

# ONE

## Women Led by the Blind

THE SMELL OF the ancient cupboard made me a woman obsessed with bolting doors and exploring drawers, looking for the old photographs I had carefully placed there myself one day. A picture of my mother shaking the single lemon tree in the courtyard, with me standing beside her with shining eyes; of my father in military dress, smooth-chinned and sharp-eyed; of my brother Hossam wearing his school uniform and laughing, holding our younger brother Humam who was swathed in a blue blanket; of me in my long black clothes, my face circular in the middle of the black sheet and my body completely concealed, in front of a faded picture of hunters and their dogs in pursuit of a fleeing gazelle.

The picture had been placed there by the photographer to whose studio my father had accompanied me. The photographer took me by the hand and sat me down on a cold wooden chair, cajoling me kindly, and directed me to look towards his thumb near the camera shutter. 'Laugh,' he said to me. I didn't know how. I looked at my father, seeking permission, then back to the thumb of the photographer; I grimaced as if I really was laughing. I can still remember the click of the camera and the solemnity of that moment with total clarity, as if I had only just left the studio that smelled heavily of mothballs and on whose clothes hooks were hung faded outfits of army officers and peasants, Mexican hats and cowboy costumes, like the one Terence Hill wore in *Trinity is Still My Name*. My small hand was weak in my father's palm which clutched mine in fear of losing me amongst the crowds on Telal Street.

I am still searching for the smell of that ancient cupboard, placed in the room that the eldest of my aunts,

Maryam, had designated for me after she sat facing my father and convinced him to let her take me to live with her and Safaa, my middle aunt. She told him that they were lonely after the death of my grandparents and the marriage of my youngest aunt, Marwa. My father nodded his head in agreement and then laid down some conditions which I didn't hear. After Maryam agreed to them, she and my mother began to gather up my clothes, my books and my other personal belongings. They were strewn all over the small room my father had built for me in the open space close to the kitchen after two small, firm mounds rose on my chest, their increasing weight causing me to speak less and less.

In my grandfather's house I was very pleased with my high-ceilinged room, the strictly observed mealtimes, and the regular visits to the hammam every Thursday, and to Hajja Radia's house every Friday evening, like rituals whose necessity I didn't understand. The first thing that worried me was the cacophonous chanting of the women behind Hajja Radia. They made me nervous - I almost suffocated in the crowded room, but I didn't dare flee. But on later visits the smell of sweat mixed with women's perfume began to relax me, like a woman whose desires are inflamed by chanting.

During the first year I lived in the large house I found the enormous spaces bewildering. I was half lost among stairs of stone and banisters of iron, the wide rooms, the high, decorated ceilings delicately coloured by a Samarkandi artist. My grandfather had brought him back from Samarkand after one of his journeys there to look for Persian carpets, and my grandmother assigned him the best quarters during his six-month stay in their house. Every morning, he would wake up at five o'clock, perform the ritual ablutions with my grandfather, and then both of them would go to Aleppo's Umayyad Mosque, after eating

the breakfast my grandmother had already prepared and laid out for them on the low table close to the large pool.

The Samarkandi wasn't known to have a name. He used to return from the mosque and enter his small room to mix his colours and clean his brushes, and then he would close his eyes and withdraw into an ecstasy of painting like a devout worshipper. He transformed the ceilings of the three large rooms into everlasting masterpieces. His fame spread among the rich families who vied with each other in the decoration of their homes, but the Samarkandi continued to live in the house in silence, with the exception of a few words to my grandfather, until he left for Paris with his Aleppan wife and child. He left with a French officer who had been bewitched by the hands of this Samarkandi who 'created masterpieces out of thin air'. His ceilings bore perpetual witness that he had, at one time, lived in the city of Aleppo. His leaving was like a death for my grandfather, who had discovered the Samarkandi's talents and interceded on his behalf in his marriage to Bint Aboud Samadi.

Before his departure, the Samarkandi had come to the house in clean clothes, his small eyes laughing. My grandfather embraced him warmly and kissed him goodbye; the artist said, 'You are my father.' Afterwards, he sent a letter with his address in Paris and a photograph, an unheard-of miracle, showing himself, his wife and his child standing in a park. His wife was wearing brightly coloured clothes; her large white breasts were on display and she wore a stylish beret instead of a proper head covering. My grandfather laughed and gave the picture to my grandmother, who sneered at the unveiled face and threw it into the fireplace. She never again mentioned the bare face of Bint Aboud Samadi, even when she came to visit twenty years later together with her son. He wore a suit which was overpowering in its elegance, and there wafted from him a strong fragrance which disconcerted Maryam.

The Samarkandi's son was astonished by our spacious house, by its stone arches and its vaulted doorway, and by the two pillars decorated in Corinthian style and added by my grandfather, thereby turning what was supposed to be an entrance hall into his own room. The son scrutinized the house, then took out his camera to meticulously record every detail of the house's angles and his father's ceilings, while his mother (a true Parisienne) sipped coffee quietly and composedly with my grandfather. He was expansive, beaming with joy at hearing news of his Samarkandi son, who still recalled him as the saviour who had lifted him from a corner of the ancient souk into the welcoming space of the world, and he repeated as much to his visitors, students and teachers of decorative art. My grandfather was delighted with this Aleppan woman who had removed her black clothes and consistently demonstrated astonishing adaptability, having swiftly learned French to be of assistance to her husband, who declared her to be his world. Husband and wife worked as determined as tortoises climbing rugged mountains.

Maryam remained alone, struck with confusion by the perfume which embedded itself deep within her pores, and then within her heart. She stole glances at the Samarkandi's son and examined him furtively, frightened that someone would notice her ever-longer, stupefied stares as he leaned over to focus the camera on a corner and record in minute detail the care taken in the harmonious composition of stone, walnut and coloured lines; much of it remained a riddle whose meaning no one could understand. After they left, my grandmother, without looking into my grandfather's eyes, said that he had been too indulgent towards Bint Aboud Samadi. Maryam was distraught that the son had gone, and she reflected on her sin. She was unaware, even then, of how it had happened.

Like all the women of my grandfather's family, of whom my mother was one, Maryam had a round face with a high forehead and clear green eyes; her fingers were long and soft like those of all women in old aristocratic Syrian families; her figure was tall and sensual, but her unexceptional chest was formed by two unappetizing breasts, above which was a neck of average length. This all created an impression of ugliness which green eyes could not hide.

Meanwhile, in the large house, I would lose myself in the galleries and the three generously proportioned rooms. I was captivated by a large mirror hanging at the back of Maryam's room that had a wide walnut frame carved with creepers and damask roses. I took advantage of any of her absences to enter her room and stand in front of the mirror, engrossed in the details of my face and body whose weight I would palpate. I remained sleepless without knowing that I had begun to change and enter through the gates of young womanhood. Safaa noticed my transformation, treated me kindly and alluded to certain matters, in contrast to Maryam, who I knew was worried that I stood so often in front of a mirror, inspecting my figure and my chest and indifferent to other exciting things in her room. She wrote down a charm for me, observed me cruelly and closely, hung a hijab on me, and ordered me never to take it off because Satan was lurking in my body. My sternness increased and my silences lengthened.

The only man who was not related to us and who was still allowed to enter the courtyard and wander throughout was Blind Radwan, who lived in a small room in one of its corners. Blind Radwan was tall and gaunt, clean-clothed, and his hands always smelled of the perfumes he traded in. He mixed them in large glasses whose capacity he was familiar with, then decanted them into small medicine bottles, sealed them tightly, and sold them to private

customers who were drawn chiefly from the women of the district of Jalloum and visitors to the Umayyad Mosque. He promoted his small trade using pleasant songs, overlaid with *dhikr* and verses from the Quran. He claimed that his brand, under the name of 'Blind Radwan', was known in every corner of the Arab world, and boasted that foreign traders had tried various means of obtaining the secret of a certain mixture which made women compliant, amorous and delicious in bed. Another blend made men overflow with charm and virility that no woman could resist. In front of Maryam, he claimed that this particular scent was the one with which the Prophet had perfumed his Companions and forged them into rare flowers which he planted in the Levant, never to be uprooted.

Radwan had been used to sleep, eat and drink with his blind companions from the mosque, who would disperse around the area of Sayyidna Zakaria to read *mawalid* and infiltrate various houses of Aleppo in the evenings. No one had known about Radwan other than those in the mosque, as if he had been born, lived, and would die there, silently; his eyes, with their lost sight, would trace circles in their sockets, sniffing the colours and richness of the clothes of the worshippers.

My grandfather brought Radwan to the house and gave him the room which had at one time belonged to my great-grandfather's groom and carriage driver. Maryam cleaned it out and my oldest uncle, Selim, moved in a squeaky iron bedstead which had long been overlooked in the cellar, along with a woollen mattress. My grandfather refused to listen to protests from my grandmother who considered this to be a violation of the sanctity of the house, although she worked to make up the deficiencies of an unmarried man's room.

Blind Radwan lived happily like a servant with special privileges, entering into the fabric of the family to become one of its permanent features. I couldn't imagine the house

without Radwan; when I was much younger he used to sit me on his knee and take out sweets and cloth toys from his small closet. He would sing to me in his sweet voice and I would paw his chest sleepily. When I moved into the house permanently, I avoided him and treated him the way a lady would a servant. He neither protested nor overstepped the boundaries - he would eat at the kitchen table and move on. Maryam never forgot his meal times, and he was never far away from her. He accompanied us to the hammam every Thursday carrying a large bag, waited for us by the door until we had finished, and accompanied us back the same way, his crudely made cane never misleading him. He would walk in front of us, head raised, with stable and evenly spaced steps. For Jalloum, this scene became a symbol of the little that remained to my aunts of the bygone glory of their forefathers, which they had created out of their permanence, and their refusal to submit to the transformations which the city and its families had not escaped.

Every Thursday I went to my parents' house after school to eat with them and my two younger brothers, Hossam and Humam. They were like strangers, and greeted me politely like an unexpected guest. My mother would kiss me without warmth, and as I helped her to prepare the food she would ask coldly about my news and about my aunts without waiting for a reply - she was confident that nothing would change in her old family home. She had left it as a young girl twenty-five years earlier after my father's return from Alexandria, where he had gone to work as a fish vendor directly after the 1958 union with Egypt. Many people doubted the truth of this tale, and declared that my father was an agent of Abdel Hamid Sarraj. Two years after Syria's secession from the United Arab Republic, my father returned to Aleppo and, without any preamble, asked my grandfather for my mother's hand. My mother had vague

memories of him back then as a young man with a big head, who walked haughtily and unhurriedly buckled down to work, never deviating from his chosen course.

My mother stayed in her father's house after the wedding, while my father embarked on his compulsory military service, which lasted three and a half years, and it was during this time that I was born. They didn't rejoice at my arrival; a leaden atmosphere was hanging over the large house as my grandmother was gravely ill, as if she were insisting on catching up with my grandfather who had died a couple of years earlier, in the tragic manner of men who choose their lives and the manner of their death. These men would not brook anyone's mockery, despite the infirmity of their old age, which my grandfather described as the other face of God's love.

My grandfather resigned from his three businesses and gathered my three uncles in the house's reception room. Maryam and my grandmother sat beside them as my grandfather briefly explained that he was no longer capable of overseeing his business affairs, and turned their management over to his sons. To mitigate against any unforeseen difficulties, he bequeathed his wealth according to Islamic law and the house was to become the property of his daughters, who would retain the right to make use of it until the end of their lives. Uncle Selim protested against this defeatist tone, trying to dissuade his father from his resolution. My grandfather laughed and leaned on his cane; he ordered my grandmother and Maryam to prepare the table in the dining room reserved for guests, and to take out the best silver dinner service.

My uncles didn't understand their father's intentions until a week had passed, during which my grandfather exerted all his efforts to retain the ability to stand and walk like a military leader inspecting his troops. He accepted only Blind Radwan's help, leaning on him like a crutch when going to the mosque on Friday or when relieving

himself. He wouldn't allow my grandmother to treat him like an old man; he used to say to Maryam, as he leaned on Radwan, 'A woman must not see how low her man sinks in old age, so she can remember him with love.' For four years, Radwan left him only at night. Sometimes he would even sleep nearby on a mattress prepared especially for him in the corner. One evening, my grandfather asked my uncles to come the following morning, as he wanted to visit the Citadel. They debated the matter between themselves, but not one of them dared to venture an opinion.

At nine the next morning the three men were confounded. My grandfather had asked them to help him up but when they rushed over to carry him, he stopped them with a gesture. Confusion reigned over everyone as he directed them outside, and asked for Radwan to accompany him. The folk of Jalloum couldn't believe the scene: my grandfather in the lead with Radwan beside him, smiling as if he were the only one to have understood what had happened. Leaning on his companion's arm, my grandfather stood in front of the gate to the Citadel, contemplating the high walls and sniffing the stones as if he were settling his debt with time. He descended to the gate of the covered market and plunged into its crowds, savouring the smell of clothing, textiles and sackcloth; of gold; of the crowding of women's bodies; of the souk, blazing with lights; of abayas embroidered with silver and gold and spread out over shop fronts; of strips of rugs and dappled carpets. He entered the customs house and stood in the entrance to his shop where Khalil got to his feet smiling, and kissed him before returning to his place. My grandfather looked for a long while at the pile of carpets in the shop. He said, in a voice barely audible to my uncles and looking at Radwan, 'This blind man has an equal share in all your wealth. If he comes to be in need one day, you will all be held responsible before God ...'

Selim murmured and Radwan raised his head, smiling. He pressed my grandfather's palm whose face lit up like the dawn in delight at meeting the other traders and his former clients. He opened his pores to the breezes and sounds to chase away the ignominy of previous years. My grandfather directed his footsteps home after praying in the mosque with my uncles. Radwan bore the sarcasm of his blind associates who, in a salute to their smiling friend, chanted a *mawlid* without taking a penny.

That afternoon, my grandfather returned to his house in state. He briefly teased my grandmother and lavished praise on my aunts for the delicious food which had been laid out on a table near the fountain. Everyone sat down and savoured the overlapping conversations while a chaos of interweaving hands stretched out towards the lamb stuffed with almonds and laid on a mound of *freekeh* fried in butter. My uncles had brought their children who were longing to see their grandfather, and their wives who disbelieved the marvel which was embellished with every retelling. After washing his hands, my grandfather got up, entered his room, took off his woollen robe, lay down on the bed, and died.

That evening, my uncles recalled that my grandfather had hobbled to the family tomb, contemplated the gravestones for a while, then pointed with his cane and said, 'Bury me here.' He had sketched out a rectangle, adding, 'Here I'll be close to my ancestors and friends.'

Radwan disappeared for four days, during which no one laid eyes on him. It was understood that my grandfather had chosen the manner of his death, and with Radwan's help he was able to determine precisely when would be his last moment.

Within this house, incomplete tales of men, women and miracles were narrated, and they fascinated me. They made me a captive of the light reflected off the water in the

stone pool, the focus of the circle we formed when we gathered around it. In summer we clung to its moisture and moved all our everyday effects into the courtyard: the dinner table, the comfortable cane chairs, and the radio from which Safaa was never parted. During summer days she was a victim of bouts of deep depression, and sometimes even of a gaiety whose secret no one knew. She wore diaphanous clothes cut above the knee and hurled water over the plants and stones, which would release a fresh scent thanks to the invigorating moisture. She would bring coffee and sit on the edge of the pool, slowly and deliberately drinking from her cup in the early afternoon breezes. Maryam objected to her nakedness, her voice becoming increasingly strident with an accent of stern rebuke. The affable Safaa made no reply, other than to refute Maryam's argument that Radwan would soon be back by saying, 'He's blind. He can't see.' When Maryam retorted that God in Heaven could see us, Safaa replied that God saw us naked, and in all forms and situations. The argument always ended when Maryam stood up from behind her Singer sewing machine and sat by the pool, quietly drinking coffee and rereading Sura Yusuf. I noticed the premature wrinkles on her forehead and the harshness in her eyes. She tried to hide her tenderness, which was noticeable only when it exploded all at once and drowned me. She had tried to kill something with her black clothes and her severity, but she couldn't. She never spoke of her softer, affectionate side to anyone; she never allowed any trace of its existence or even attempted to make it appear, but hid it in a deep and abandoned well. I tried to question her, and gathered up my strength and the words necessary for marshalling a sentence, but I stuttered, and the words fled. She raised her eyes and fixed them on mine, waiting for me to speak; I kept quiet and looked elsewhere, wary of meeting her gaze again.

The Samarkandi's son returned with his mother so he could bid my grandfather goodbye before their return to Paris, and my grandfather welcomed them as honoured guests. Maryam was afraid, foggy with the scent that had lingered since the Samarkandi's son's first visit. He asked everyone to pose for a souvenir picture which would make his father happy, and my grandfather agreed. Everyone gazed perplexedly at the camera shutter, holding their breath; Uncle Omar looked afraid, Maryam lost. The son of the Samarkandi took another picture of my grandfather standing alone near the lemon tree, and another of him sitting on a cane chair next to the pool, then yet another of everyone with Bint Aboud Samadi. A festive atmosphere animated everyone apart from Maryam; she was numb, and couldn't shake off her torpor. Before mother and son left, my grandfather went into his room and came out carrying a skilfully decorated carpet, a portrait of Omar Khayyam surrounded by cupbearers and Persian phrases. The Samarkandi's son was taken aback by this treasure, which my grandfather said was one of the original carpets he had bought from the auctions in Istanbul, and which befitted the success of his own Samarkandi son. Bursting with happiness, my grandfather led his guests to the door. When the Samarkandi's son stood in front of Maryam and put out a hand to bid her goodbye, she had reached the end of her trance. Her lips murmured almost inaudibly, 'You have slaughtered me ...' No one noticed the alteration in her except my grandmother, who knew that her daughter was wretched, the prisoner of a concealed adoration she could never express. There was no need to guess who the person might be; since coming of age, Maryam had seen no other eligible man's face. My grandmother tried to get closer to her daughter to have this acknowledged, but Maryam's silence hardened. Her secret remained confined to her sisters, who tried every means of convincing her to relinquish this hollow pride.

Two months after this visit, a letter came from Paris bearing the signature of the Samarkandi, who called my grandfather 'my dear father'. He thanked him for his warm hospitality to his wife and son and conveyed his inability to thank him adequately for the carpet, the significance of which he cherished. He had enclosed four cards from his son: for my grandfather, a representation of Notre-Dame; for Maryam, a view of green lawns, water fountains, and red, yellow and lilac flowers; a third for my uncles Omar and Bakr. The final card was for Radwan, who had convinced him that he was the most important purveyor of perfumes in Aleppo. To him, the Samarkandi's son sent a general view of Paris and the addresses of several important *parfumeries* so that Radwan could get in touch with them. In addition to the cards, he sent the photographs he had taken, printed on postcards, which everyone passed around. Radwan touched the pictures and said that he would write to the French manufacturers to offer them his inventions and his secret blends. He searched for someone to write his letters and who wouldn't betray his secrets. The pictures eventually came round to Maryam and everyone soon forgot about them. They never appeared again until after my grandfather had died.

After his death, Maryam appropriated my grandfather's room and rearranged it. She embroidered a new bedcover with a brightly coloured peacock in the centre, restoring happiness to the wool, and spread out new azure, flower-strewn sheets. She left other things where they were, such as the cane chair, the bedside table and the large mirror (after wiping the dust off it). She brought out the photograph in which my grandfather, mother, aunts and uncles were gathered, and placed it on a small table in front of her so she would see it every morning. Next to the picture she placed the postcard from the Samarkandi's son. At Maryam's insistence, Radwan had taken both the

photograph and the card to a carpenter far away from Jalloum who made frames for them out of dark brown wood. I used to see Maryam dusting them carefully; Maryam who never woke up from her stupor. She exploited Radwan's need for someone to write to the French perfume companies. Sworn to total secrecy, they conspired together without reaching any agreement. Maryam wrote a letter for him in Arabic and read it out to him while he remained silent, raising his face to the sky and shaking his head in dissatisfaction, adding a sentence here and cutting a sentence there. Then he would dictate a letter to Maryam, who wrote it down with fierce enthusiasm. Anyone watching them sitting together, arguing and raising their voices, would not have believed that this woman was Maryam and this man Radwan who shouted that this was his international career, that it was impossible to treat the letter lightly, and concluded by saying the French loved refinement in all things. Maryam tore up the paper and waited expectantly for Radwan's next words. He calmed down, after remembering that he was the servant. He apologized and brooded for a while, then began to recite a poem from one of the *mawalid* still lodged in his mind; she reminded him that that wasn't a letter to the French company. Radwan laughed and told her a story about the French man he had accompanied home in order to recite poetry to French women, as they sat half-naked on walnut sofas carved with the ninety-nine names of God. The man was open-handed and generous before returning Radwan to his bed in the Umayyad Mosque, with more than the requisite respect.

Radwan resumed his consideration of the letter, and formulated the perfume Maryam requested of him in return. They swore an oath that his letter and her perfume would remain their greatest secret. They called on God to witness their agreement and even named it the Maryam-Radwan Accord, which Radwan shortened to the Man

Accord. Maryam disliked this abbreviation, which drew attention to phrases she dreaded thinking about or referring to. She always insisted to me that the body was filthy and rebellious, and these words embedded themselves in me like an irrefutable truth. I began to guard myself against this rebellion named 'body'; I obdurately hated my incipient breasts, their two brown nipples beginning to blossom. I hid them beneath cruel bras made for me by Maryam out of satin box-linings. Whenever my breasts broke free, I would touch them and feel their strange delectability.

When I saw uninhibited girls undoing their bras and showing off their cleavage to the breeze and the sun in the small square, or for the titillation of the young men crowding around the entrances of the girls' schools, I felt rage at their filth. I avoided looking at their gestures or listening to their conversations describing sexual positions both for men and women; girls would relate these tales with ardent enthusiasm, sometimes explicitly naming the body parts. Fatima was the boldest of these girls. She tried to be nice to me, but I shunned her obscene conversations and the smell of sweat emanating from her pores. I turned to the group surrounding another girl named Dalal and exchanged books with them.

Dalal was sober and grave; she seemed, in her black clothes, to be our leader. Her orders were final, and delivered tersely and in a coarse voice. She dominated us, and we were happy to have a leader who wouldn't hesitate to pull the hair of any girl who ridiculed our silence and our black clothes. Dalal said that women were animated dirt. Her own thoughts never came to her briefly or concisely, so she gabbled incoherently instead. I would nod, agreeing with everything in order to reach Paradise.

I arranged the room Maryam gave me in a style I will always try to recreate: the iron bedstead in the Mamluk

style and the woollen mattress; the perfumed, snowy-white sheets; the small, ancient wooden table on which I placed an embroidered cloth to hide its battered scars; the chair carved with snakes and butterflies (I don't know why its maker decided on such a combination). I would sit on the comfortable chair, lost in thought for hours at a time, alongside a wardrobe and a small shelf for my books. The most valuable of the furnishings was a small Persian carpet from my great-great-grandmother's trousseau: it was my share of the valuable carpets that belonged to the women of the family. I loved the patterns on the carpet; I was so afraid of dragging my feet through it that I stretched it out and hung it on the wall. Maryam was pleased when she saw it hanging there. My room opened directly on to the courtyard and from the window I could see the radiant silver moonlight on the surface of the pool as I felt a chill seize me. I was powerfully drawn to this scene, and clung to every detail; it became my little world. I decorated the walls with the paintings I made during my period of silence, which continued until I lost any desire to speak at all.

After we returned from the hammam, my aunt Safaa would enter her room and bring out a bottle of perfume wrapped up in a gauzy nightshirt. She would take off her clothes, smear flowery cream all over her body and sprinkle it with perfume, before putting on the nightshirt and a Moroccan abaya over that to cover all traces of her charms, and returning to the living room. She didn't help Maryam with dinner on Thursdays. We sat at the table in silence as Safaa got up and entered her room, not to emerge until morning. Maryam would open the Quran at Sura Yusuf and continue with her daily recitation until she rose with strict punctuality at ten o'clock and crept into bed. I never understood Safaa's withdrawal every Thursday night until some years later, when we began to speak unreservedly