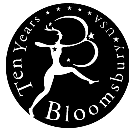
Mornings in Jenin

A NOVEL

Susan Abulhawa



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Prelude
Jenin
2002

Amal wanted a closer look into the soldier's eyes, but the muzzle of his automatic rifle, pressed against her forehead, would not allow it. Still, she was close enough to see that he wore contacts. She imagined the soldier leaning into a mirror to insert the lenses in his eyes before getting dressed to kill. *Strange,* she thought, *the things you think about in the district between life and death.*

She wondered if officials might express regret for the "accidental" killing of her, an American citizen. Or if her life would merely culminate in the dander of "collateral damage."

A lone bead of sweat traveled from the soldier's brow down the side of his face. He blinked hard. Her stare made him uneasy. He had killed before, but never while looking his victim in the eyes. Amal saw that, and she felt his troubled soul amid the carnage around them.

Strange, again, *I am unafraid of death.* Perhaps because she knew, from the soldier's blink, that she would live.

She closed her eyes, reborn, the cold steel still pushing against her forehead. The petitions of memory pulled her back, and still back, to a home she had never known.

I.

El Nakba
(the catastrophe)

ONE
The Harvest
1941

In a distant time, before history marched over the hills and shattered present and future, before wind grabbed the land at one corner and shook it of its name and character, before Amal was born, a small village east of Haifa lived quietly on figs and olives, open frontiers and sunshine.

It was still dark, only the babies sleeping, when the villagers of Ein Hod prepared to perform the morning salat, the first of five daily prayers. The moon hung low, like a buckle fastening earth and sky, just a sliver of promise shy of being full. Waking limbs stretched, water splashed away sleep, hopeful eyes widened. Wudu, the ritual cleansing before salat, sent murmurs of the shehadeh into the morning fog, as hundreds of whispers proclaimed the oneness of Allah and service to his prophet Mohammad. Today they prayed outdoors and with particular reverence because it was the start of the olive harvest. Best to climb the rocky hills with a clean conscience on such an important occasion.

Thus and so, by the predawn orchestra of small lives, crickets and stirring birds—and soon, roosters—the villagers cast moon shadows from their prayer rugs. Most simply asked for forgiveness of their sins, some prayed an extra rukaa. In one way or another, each said, "My Lord Allah, let Your will be done on this day. My submission and gratitude is Yours," before setting off westward toward the groves, stepping high to avoid the snags of cactus.

Every November, the harvest week brought renewed vigor to Ein Hod, and Yehya, Abu Hasan, could feel it in his bones. He left the house early with his boys, coaxing them with his annual

hope of getting a head start on the neighbors. But the neighbors had similar ideas and the harvest always began around five A.M.

Yehya turned sheepishly to his wife, Basima, who balanced the basket of tarps and blankets on her head, and whispered, "Um Hasan, next year, let's get up before them. I just want to get an hour start over Salem, that toothless old bugger. Just one hour."

Basima rolled her eyes. Her husband revived that brilliant idea every year.

As the dark sky gave way to light, the sounds of reaping that noble fruit rose from the sun-bleached hills of Palestine. The thumps of farmers' sticks striking branches, the shuddering of the leaves, the plop of fruit falling onto the old tarps and blankets that had been laid beneath the trees. As they toiled, women sang the ballads of centuries past and small children played and were chided by their mothers when they got in the way.

Yehya paused to massage a crick in his neck. *It's nearly noon,* he thought, noting the sun's approach to zenith. Sweat-drenched, Yehya stood on his land, a sturdy man with a black and white kaffiyeh swathing his head, the hem of his robe tucked in his waist sash in the way of the fellaheen. He surveyed the splendor around him. Mossy green grass cascaded down those hills, over the rocks, around and up the trees. The sanasil barriers, some of which he had helped his grandfather repair, spiraled up the hills. Yehya turned to watch Hasan and Darweesh, their chest muscles heaving beneath their robes with every swing of their sticks to knock the olives loose. *My boys!* Pride swelled Yehya's heart. *Hasan is growing strong despite his difficult lungs. Thanks be to Allah.*

The sons worked on opposite sides of each tree as their mother trailed them, hauling away blankets of fresh olives to be pressed

later that day. Yehya could see Salem harvesting his yield in the adjacent grove. *Toothless old bugger.* Yehya smiled, though Salem was younger than he. In truth, his neighbor had always a quality of wisdom and a grandfatherly patience that gave of itself from a face mapped by many years of carving olive wood outdoors. He had become Haj Salem after his pilgrimage to Mecca, and the new title bestowed him with age beyond that of Yehya. By evening, the two friends would be smoking hookahs together, arguing over who had worked hardest and whose sons were strongest. "You're going to hell for lying like that, old man," Yehya would say, bringing the pipe to his lips.

"Old man? You're older than me, you geezer," Salem would say.

"At least I still have all my teeth."

"Okay. Get out the board so I can prove once again who's better."

"You're on, you lyin', toothless, feeble son of your father."

Games of backgammon over bubbling hookahs would settle this annual argument and they would stubbornly play until their wives had sent for them several times.

Satisfied by the morning's pace, Yehya performed the thohr salat and sat on the blanket where Basima had arranged the lentils and makloobeh with lamb and yogurt sauce. Nearby, she set another meal for the migrant helpers, who gratefully accepted the offering.

"Lunch!" she called to Hasan and Darweesh, who had just completed their second salat of the day.

Seated around the steaming tray of rice and smaller plates of sauces and pickles, the family waited for Yehya to break the bread in the name of Allah. "Bismillah arrahman arraheem," he began, and the boys followed, hungrily reaching for the rice to ball it into bites with yogurt.

"Yumma, nobody is as good a cook as you!" Darweesh the flatterer knew how to assure Basima's favor.

"Allah bless you, son." She grinned and moved a tender piece of meat to his side of the rice tray.

"What about me?" Hasan protested.

Darweesh leaned to his older brother's ear, teasing, "You aren't as good with the ladies."

"Here you are, darling." Basima tore off another piece of good meat for Hasan.

The meal was over quickly without the usual lingering over halaw and coffee. There was more work to be done. Basima had been filling her large baskets, which the helpers would carry to the olive press. Each of her boys had to press his share of olives the day of their harvest or else the oil might have a rancid taste.

But before heading back, a prayer was offered.

"First, let us give thanks for Allah's bounty." Yehya issued his command, pulling an old Quran from the pocket of his dishdashe. The holy Book had belonged to his grandfather, who had nurtured these groves before him. Although Yehya could not read, he liked to look at the pretty calligraphy while he recited surahs from memory. The boys bowed, impatiently listening to their father sing Quranic verses, then raced down the hill when granted their father's permission to head for the press.

Basima hoisted a basket of olives onto her head, lifted in each hand a woven bag full of dishes and leftover food, and proceeded down the hill with other women who balanced urns and belongings on their heads in plumb uprightness. "Allah be with you, Um Hasan," Yehya called to his wife.

"And you, Abu Hasan," she called back. "Don't be long."

Alone now, Yehya leaned into the breeze, blew gently into the mouthpiece of his nye, and felt the music emerge from the tiny holes beneath his fingertips. His grandfather had taught him to play that ancient flute and its melodies gave Yehya a

sense of his ancestors, the countless harvests, the land, the sun, time, love, and all that was good. As always, at the first note, Yehya raised his brows over closed eyelids, as if perpetually surprised by what majesty his simple hand-carved nye could make from his breath.

Several weeks after the harvest, Yehya's old truck was loaded. There was some oil, but mostly almonds, figs, a variety of citrus, and vegetables. Hasan put the grapes on top so they would not be crushed.

"You know I'd rather you not go all the way to Jerusalem," Yehya said to Hasan. "Tulkarem is only a few kilometers away and gasoline is expensive. Even Haifa is closer, and their markets are just as good. And you never know what son-of-a-dog Zionist is hiding in the bushes or what British bastard is going to stop you. Why make the trip?" But the father already knew why. "You taking this long ride to meet up with Ari?"

"Yaba, I gave him my word that I was coming," Hasan answered his father, somewhat pleadingly.

"Well, you're a man now. Watch yourself on the road. Be sure to give your aunt whatever she needs from your cart and tell her we want her to visit soon," Yehya said, then called to the driver, who was well known to everyone and whose features asserted their common lineage. "Drive in the protection of Allah, son."

"Allah give you long life, Ammo Yehya."

Hasan kissed his father's hand, then his forehead, reverent gestures that filled Yehya with love and pride.

"Allah smile on you and protect you for all your days, son," he said as Hasan clambered into the back of the truck.

As they drove away, Darweesh cantered alongside on Ganoosh, his beloved Arabian steed. "Let's race. I'll give you an hour head start since the truck is weighed down," he challenged Hasan.

"Go race the wind, Darweesh. That's more up to your speed than this old clunker. Go on, I'll meet you in Jerusalem at Amto Salma's house."

Hasan watched his younger brother fly away bareback, the hatta tight around his head, its loose ends grabbing at the wind behind him. Darweesh was the best rider for miles around, maybe the best in the country, and Ganoosh was the fastest horse Hasan had ever seen.

Along the dusty road, the land rose in sylvan silence, charmed with the scents of citrus blooms and wild camphires. Hasan opened the pouch that his mother filled each day, pinched off a glob of her sticky concoction, and raised it to his nose. He breathed it in as deeply as his asthmatic lungs would allow. Oxygen diffused through his veins as he opened one of the secret books Mrs. Perlstein, Ari's mother, had instructed him to study.

TWO
Ari Perlstein
1941

Ari was waiting by the Damascus Gate, where the boys had first met four years earlier. He was the son of a German professor who had fled Nazism early and settled in Jerusalem, where his family rented a small home from a prominent Palestinian.

The two boys had become friends in 1937 behind the pushcarts of fresh fruits, vegetables, and dented cans of oil in Babel Amond market, where Hasan had sat reading a book of Arabic poems. The small Jewish boy with large eyes and an unsure smile had started toward Hasan. He moved with a limp, the legacy of a badly healed leg and the Brown Shirt who

had broken it. He had bought a large red tomato, pulled out a pocketknife, and cut it, keeping half and offering the rest to Hasan.

"Ana ismi Ari. Ari Perlstein," the boy had said.

Intrigued, Hasan had taken the tomato.

"Goo day sa! Shalom!" Hasan had tried the only non-Arabic words he knew and motioned for the boy to sit.

Though Ari could improvise some Arabic, neither spoke the other's language. But they quickly found commonality in their mutual sense of inadequacy.

"Ana ismi Hasan. Hasan Yehya Abulheja."

"Salam alaykom," Ari had replied. "What book are you reading?" he had asked in German, pointing.

"Book." *English.* "Dis, book."

"Yes." *English.* "Kitab." *Book, Arabic.* "Yes." They had laughed and eaten more tomato.

Thus a friendship had been born in the shadow of Nazism in Europe and in the growing divide between Arab and Jew at home, and it had been consolidated in the innocence of their twelve years, the poetic solitude of books, and their disinterest in politics.

Decades after war had divided the two friends, Hasan told his youngest child, a little girl named Amal, about his boyhood friend. "He was like a brother," Hasan said, closing a book that had been given to him by Ari in the autumn of their boyhood.

Though Hasan would experience a colossal physical growth, at twelve he was a sickly boy whose lungs hissed with every breath. The labor of his breathing pushed him to the sidelines of the strict confederacies of boys and their rough play. Likewise, Ari's limp invited the relentless mockery of his classmates. Both possessed an air of recoil that recognized itself in the other, and each, at a young age and in his own world and language, had found refuge in the pages of poets, essayists, and philosophers.

What had been a bothersome occasional travel to Jerusalem became a welcome weekly trip, for Hasan would find Ari waiting there and they would pass the hours teaching each other the words in Arabic, German, and English for "apple," "orange," "olive." "The onions are one piaster the pound, ma'am," they practiced. From behind the cart's rows of fruit and vegetables, they privately poked fun at the Arab city boys, with their affected speech and fancy clothes that were little more than displays of servile admiration for the British.

Ari even began to wear traditional Arab garb on weekends and often returned to Ein Hod with Hasan. Immersed in the melodies of Arabic speech and song and the flavors of Arabic food and drink, Ari gained a respectable command of his friend's language and culture, which in no small measure would contribute to his tenured professorship at Hebrew University decades later. Similarly, Hasan learned to speak German, to read haltingly some of the English volumes in Dr. Perlstein's library, and to appreciate the traditions of Judaism.

Mrs. Perlstein loved Hasan and was grateful for his friendship with her son, and Basima received Ari with similar motherly enthusiasm. Although they never met face-to-face, the two women came to know one another through their sons and each would send the other's boy home loaded with food and special treats, a ritual that Hasan and Ari grudgingly endured.

At thirteen, a year before Hasan's formal schooling was to end, he asked his father's permission to study with Ari in Jerusalem. Fearful that further education would take his son away from the land he was destined to inherit and farm, Yehya forbade it.

"Books will do nothing but come between you and the land. There will be no school with Ari and that is all I will say on the matter." Yehya was certain he made the right decision. But years later, Yehya would reproach himself with deep consternation and regret for denying what Hasan had dearly wanted. For

this decision, one day Yehya would beg his son's forgiveness as they all camped at the mercy of the weather, not far from the home to which they could never return. Yehya, a withering refugee in the unfamiliar dilapidation of exile, would weep on Hasan's forgiving shoulders. "Forgive me, son. I cannot forgive myself," Yehya would cry. And it was for the same decision and subsequent regret and heartbreak that Hasan would resolve, with determined hard labor and its pittance pay, that his children would receive an education. For this decision, Hasan would tell his little girl, Amal, many years later, "Habibti, we have nothing but education now. Promise me you'll take it with all the force you have." And his little girl would promise the father she adored.

Although Hasan was denied the privilege of formal schooling beyond eighth grade, he received superior tutoring from Mrs. Perlstein, who sent her eager young student home every week loaded with books, lessons, and homework. The private lessons started as a scheme between Basima and Mrs. Perlstein to lift Hasan from his dejection in the months after Yehya issued his final word on the matter of education.

"Hey, brother!" The young men embraced, locked hands, and kissed each other on each cheek, the Arab way. They unloaded the truck, setting the driver up with other street vendors. Weaving through narrow cobblestone paths of the Old City, the friends headed for their usual treat before walking to Ari's house. From Babel Amoud, they walked toward el Qiyameh. The aromas of earthen jars, molasses, and assorted oils drifted from shops as sidewalk vendors called to passersby to stop and sample. They turned on Khan el Zeit, their heads brushing against leathers and silks hanging from store walls. A few more steps and they entered el Mahfouz café.

"Two heads of honey apple," Hasan called to the attendant.

"This can't be good for your lungs, Hasan," Ari warned him. "Does Uncle Yehya know you smoke?"

"Of course not!"

At the Perlsteins', Hasan delivered the two trays of halaw and knafe.

"The usual from Mother," he said in German.

"Thank you," Mrs. Perlstein said, taking the sweets.

She was a reserved, long-limbed woman and Hasan thought her appearance gave no hint of her expansive kindness. His instinct, when he saw her, was to look for her family heirloom, pinned on her chest, always. *One, two, three, four . . . eighteen.* He developed a habit of counting the small pearls of her brooch while she inspected his homework.

Over the years, Hasan proved himself an assiduous pupil and quick study. The mentorship with Mrs. Perlstein continued until he "graduated" with Ari in 1943, the year when the two young men drifted apart for a while, as Ari developed a small group of friends at his school and Hasan became smitten with a young Bedouin girl named Dalia, who had stolen Ganoosh, his brother's horse.

THREE
The No-Good Bedouin Girl
1940–1948

Unlike marriages of their time, arranged at birth and kept within the family clan, Hasan's union with Dalia was born of forbidden love. He was a descendant of the original founders of Ein Hod and heir to great stretches of cultivated land, orchards, and five impressive olive groves. Dalia, on the other hand, was the daughter of a Bedouin whose tribe came to

work in the village every year during the harvest and eventually settled there.

The youngest of twelve sisters, Dalia was willful and paid little mind to convention. Despite living at the pitiless end of her father's belt, she did not always remember to wear the traditional coverings of hijab and let the wind roam her hair. Unlike proper girls, she'd hike up her dress to chase a lizard, soiling the bright Bedouin designs of her thobe with mud stains and cactus thorns. Often, she would forget to empty her pouch of strange new bugs and beetles collected that day, for which her mother would beat her. But the force of nature within her compelled her back to her curious ways. She relished her time with her six- and eight-legged little secrets until she had a four-legged one, a horse named Ganoosh.

Its young master, a boy whom she knew to be Darweesh, son of Yehya Abulheja, offered her a ride when he happened to see her walking the hills. She couldn't accept a ride with a boy. She'd be beaten if her father learned of it.

"No." She was as emphatic as an eleven-year-old can be, but as soon as she answered, her face relaxed into "maybe." Darweesh spoke softly, "I am happy just to walk in front and I swear on my honor I will not look back at you on the horse." He seemed trustworthy and there was no one around for miles among the hills. She looked around at the quiet expanse of rolling land. Her heart was pure. "How do I get on?"

"Watch me first, then try it when I turn my back," Darweesh said. Ganoosh allowed the petite figure to mount his back and then he walked slowly on. Suddenly she was overcome with fear of being caught with a boy and his horse. She demanded to stop, and as soon as she had dismounted she ran off.

Weeks later she returned to the spot to wait for her magnificent four-legged secret, until it arrived with Darweesh and she experienced the magic again. The secret lasted more

than two years and in that time, Dalia learned to ride alone. Darweesh would have done anything she asked, if only she had asked. In all that time, they never exchanged a word except on that first day. When Darweesh saw her coming, he would avert his eyes to show no disrespect, turn his back to her, and hold Ganoosh steady while she hitched up her thobe, pants underneath, mounted, and rode away. Darweesh would wait until she returned and go through the same ritual of modesty in reverse.

To the villagers, Dalia was like a wild gypsy, born of Bedouin poetry and colors instead of flesh and blood. Some thought the child had an aspect of the devil and convinced Dalia's mother to bring a sheikh to read Quranic verses over her. Most assumed the girl would simply grow out of her ways. Eventually, folks agreed that Dalia ought to be "broken." Almost fourteen now, she needed to be disabused of her childish carelessness.

"Break her, beat her, teach her a lesson," another Bedouin woman told her mother. "Look at her eat that orange! What shame on her family. All the boys are staring at her." Such was the village scorn of Dalia. The jingle of her ankle bracelets bothered the women. More, they hated Dalia's immunity to their acrimony. The unapologetic force that shone from her skin and floated off her hair reminded them of an irretrievable old bliss that they had willingly discarded. Dalia's vulgar carelessness was sexual, more so because she didn't know it.

Basima, Um Hasan, thought Dalia a godless thief with no shame, after Dalia had "stolen" her son Darweesh's horse for a covert respite from the backbreaking monotony of the olive harvest. No one would have been the wiser had Dalia not fallen and broken her ankle, sparking a scandal that caught the attention of Hasan. The whole village was abuzz. Darweesh thought of ways to defend Dalia, but he knew his involvement would bring a far greater punishment to bear on her.

Disgraced, Dalia's father vowed to crush his youngest daughter's insolence once and for all. To restore his honor, he tied Dalia to a chair in the center of town and put a hot iron to the hand she was forced to admit had been the one that had stolen the horse.

"This one? Put it out where I can burn it good," the father said, seething, as Dalia offered her right palm. "And if you scream, I'll burn the other hand," he added, turning to the crowd of onlookers for approval.

Dalia made no sound as the burning metal seared the skin of her right palm. The crowd gasped. "How cruel the Bedouins are," said a woman, and some people implored Dalia's father to stop in the name of Allah, to have mercy because Allah is Merciful. *Al Rahma*. But a man must be the ruler of his home. "My honor shall have no blemish. Step back, this is my right," the Bedouin demanded. It was his right. *La hawla wala quwatta ella billah*.

Dalia pulled the pain inward, the mean odor of burned flesh scorching the life at her core. Her complicity with nature, the intimacy of her hair with the wind, the jangling of her coin ankle bracelets, the sweet aroma of her sweat when she toiled, the gypsy colors of her—all of it that day became an ash heap in the center of town beneath the deep blue sky. Had she screamed, perhaps the fire would not have reached so deeply into her. But she did not. She spied a rabbit and transfixed them both in an impossible stare. She gripped the torture in her hand and held it there with a clench of her jaw as tears streaked her face. For the rest of her life, Dalia would have the unconscious habit of rubbing the tips of the fingers of her right hand back and forth on their palm while she gritted her teeth, giving the impression that she held something in her grip that was living and trying to get out.

* * *

Basima was unnerved by the Bedouin girl's stoicism and she wanted no part of "that family," for she was not unaware of Hasan's watchful eyes that followed the young Dalia as she worked at her daily chores in the village and in the fields.

To Basima, Dalia was a "no-good Bedouin" who would bring all manner of trouble to their peaceful village. Indeed, her worst fears were confirmed when her son, the young Hasan Yehya Abulheja, was unable to resist the audacity of Dalia's beauty and the wildness of her spirit and resolved to marry her.

With the determination that would characterize Hasan all his life, and with the reluctant blessing of his father, Hasan faced his mother with his decision.

"Yumma, marriage is not a sin," Hasan said, trying a conciliatory approach.

"No, no, no, no, no!" Basima was wild. In the drama of scandal, she flailed her arms, tugged at her thobe with pleas to Allah, beat her chest, and slapped her own face. She bemoaned the humiliation and rued the day "that Bedouin" ever stepped foot in Ein Hod. Her embarrassment would ripen to shame when she would be obliged to deliver the news of her son's rebellion and his refusal of his own cousin, who was already betrothed to him.

"Ya Abu Hasan, what will people say of us?" she pleaded with her husband.

Yehya tried to reason with his wife. "Um Hasan, let it be. He's a man now. We cannot force him."

But she went on as if her husband had not spoken. "That our word is not honorable? That we promise a girl marriage to our son, then allow him to disobey us? What fault has my innocent niece committed to be rejected for a filthy Bedouin thief?"

"This is Allah's will. Let it be, woman! The country is being turned upside down by Zionists and you're in a bad temper because your son wants to marry a pretty girl you don't like.

Don't you hear the news every day? Zionists killing British and Palestinians every cursed day? They're getting rid of the British so they can get rid of us and everybody's too stupid to see it or do anything about it." Yehya grabbed his cane in one hand, his nye in the other, and walked outside in disgust of his fears, which had been intensifying with the near daily BBC reports of terrorism by the increasingly militarized Zionist gangs.

On the marble steps of their home, Yehya exhaled through his precious nye, moved his fingers, and raised his brow at the first sound. He played for his trees, to resurrect simplicity and peace.

"Stop that!" Basima marched onto the portico Yehya had designed and tiled himself. She was furious.

"One of these days I'm going to break that thing," Basima growled softly, so the neighbors wouldn't hear, and stomped away, fearful that she had crossed a line. She was still muttering her displeasure as she walked across the Persian rugs of her foyer, through the tiled grand arches, into the family room, where she struggled onto her knees to sit briefly on the floor cushion. Years earlier, Yehya had wanted to buy sofas, like the British had, but Basima had refused; and now she thought sofas might be better. Restless, she unfolded her prayer mat to submit to Allah. After she had prayed two rukaas, she pulled herself up, walking over more Persian rugs scattered over the marble floor into the kitchen, where she looked around at Yehya's blue and green tile design. *He's stubborn, but he sure is an artist,* she thought. *Ya, Yehya, how can you agree to this marriage!*

No amount of Basima's pleading or cursing could dissuade her son. Only Darweesh understood the resolve with which Hasan defied their mother, for he too loved Dalia. And when the family went to ask for Dalia's hand in marriage, Darweesh wept in the company of his beloved Ganoosh and Fatooma, his

other Arabian horse and Ganoosh's mate that had a distinctive white streak between her eyes.

Dalia's father accepted with a great sense of relief from the burden of his youngest daughter, and two days later, as was the custom, he received her dowry. On that day, Dalia watched through the little holes in the privacy mesh of her window as a convoy of men brought money and gold to her father. She was less moved by the impressive dowry than by the sight of Darweesh walking among those men.

She had no say in the matter, though the idea of becoming an aroosa appealed to her, in the way dressing up like an adult appeals to little girls—but she wished it had been for Darweesh.

On the day of Dalia's wedding her female relatives—mother, aunts, married sisters and cousins—scrubbed and buffed every inch of her body. Aeeda was repeatedly smeared on and snatched off her legs, thighs, arms, belly, and buttocks. Dalia stretched her neck each time to survey the tiny forests of black hair extracted with every yank that seemed to send electric currents through her skin. The tender flesh between her legs was most painful. "It's okay, daughter," the mother said as she spread her daughter's legs wide. *Bismillah arrahman arraheem.* With the confidence and dexterity of a midwife, Dalia's mother drew away all of her daughter's recent pubic hair (of which Dalia had been so proud) in a single swipe of the aeeda that made Dalia spring to her feet with pain. The women laughed goodheartedly. "Come, daughter. Come back to the world of women." And when an aunt noticed the moisture on Dalia's thighs, she exclaimed to her sister, "Looks like your daughter will make a fine wife." They laughed again as Dalia was an obedient spectator to her own transformation.

She watched in the mirror as lines of kohl shaped her eyes with seduction and sketched on her face the age and maturity

that she lacked. She was an aroosa, the pretty center of her culture, and all the little girls watched her as she had watched brides before her being prepared for marriage.

Heavy with glowing gifts hung around her neck and across her brow and dangling from her wrists, ankles, and ears, fourteen-year-old Dalia married Hasan Yehya Abulheja in a grand ceremony. It was a celebration befitting the vindication of Dalia's father, the virulent bitterness of Basima, and the melancholy heart of Darweesh.

Bejeweled with half her weight in gold, the small bride inhabited her wedding quietly, rubbing her hand unceasingly, her jaw motionless on tight hinges, even when kissed by well-wishers.

Before joining the women, the men celebrated separately, sacrificing a lamb, dancing, and making joy with song and music. With a wounded heart, Darweesh led a dabke for his brother and toasted the groom with love, a secret sadness, and acceptance of Allah's will.

"Inshalla, you're next, brother," Hasan said sincerely, hugging Darweesh.

"Inshalla." God willing.

Within ten months of the wedding, Dalia ingratiated herself with the village by bearing a son, whom she named Yousef. Thenceforth, from the age of fifteen, Dalia was respectfully called "Um Yousef" and Hasan "Abu Yousef."

Even before Yousef was born, Basima had softened toward Dalia. She could not help being impressed by the tenacity with which Dalia tackled her chores, the skill with which she helped her own mother deliver babies in the village, or the delight of her new husband in her company. Furthermore, the families had agreed that Darweesh would marry the niece who had been abandoned by Hasan, and thus Basima's pride was saved.

Dalia's inexperience compelled the maternal instincts of her mother-in-law to induct her Bedouin daughter into the world of motherhood, teaching her the rhythms of breastfeeding and the treatments for colic. She instructed her in the secrets to regain the body's firmness and in tricks to keep the interest of her husband after childbirth.

"It all goes eventually—the breasts, thighs, they just fall," Basima said. "But olive oil is the trick." Basima's narrowing eyes glimmered with conspiracy as she moved closer and began describing the beauty concoctions she had discovered herself. "These are a woman's secrets that I'll only pass to you and, inshalla, Darweesh's wife, since it wasn't in Allah's plan for me to bear daughters."

Basima led Dalia through her herb garden, revealing the uses of various plants. She was giddy, excited to have a female heir to her empire of enchanted herbs. She had already taught Dalia how to prepare Hasan's chest medicine. "However, for beauty, olive oil is the main ingredient," she whispered. "Crush mint and basil in the oil and rub it over your body to keep the skin firm, and on your scalp to put a shine in your hair."

During times like these, Basima and Dalia learned to love each other, and slowly they became bound in a maternal allegiance and affection the likes of which neither had known before.

Ten months after Yousef was born, Dalia gave birth to a stillborn child, for which she suffered a feverish grief, cloistering herself in lockjawed solitude. An ungenerous village woman, wanting to curry favor with Basima, took the opportunity of that tragedy to tout Dalia's misfortune as proof of her unworthiness. "I'm not surprised. Bedouins are known to have their hands in black magic. How else could a girl like Dalia have gotten a man like Hasan to marry her?"

"Out of my house!" Basima threw the woman to the ground and went to Dalia. "No more mourning, my Dalia. Let's breed

new roses, for a new beginning," she said, coaxing her daughter-in-law from the clench of her own jaw and ending that episode of grief.

Three years later, when the olive trees were shedding their silver-green color, a bomb exploded in the near distance. "Damn Zionists! What the hell do they want from us?" Basima screamed toward the rising smoke, her husband's fears as much hers now. Basima's anxiety knotted in her chest, in her heart, and made her head spin, legs weaken, until she fell amid her rosebushes, clutching her right shoulder. She was still alive when Dalia ran to her, just in time to hear her last words: "Binti, binti." *My daughter, my daughter*.

Following Basima's death, Dalia became the custodian of her beloved roses. She crossed them for fragrance and color as Basima had taught her, expanded the garden, and planted a gravesite bed of the white-streaked red roses, Basima's most prized. She took Yousef with her every week to the cemetery to tend to that bed of roses. And months later, when Dalia's second son, Ismael, was born, she toted him along as well in a back harness.

But as the danger of Zionist incursions intensified, she went to the cemetery alone, leaving her boys to the care of relatives and the protection of the village for a brief while each week. It was on one such occasion that an accident occurred, an injury that would mark Ismael's face forever.

Everyone in the family had his or her own grotesque version of the injury. Yousef, the only witness to the event, never spoke of it, not even when asked.

Yousef was four years old at the time, the state of Israel was not yet born, and Ismael was almost six months. He was fussy that day, crying in the same crib that was once used to sleep his father. Though it was old and worn, Basima had insisted that

Dalia use it for her children, for it had been blessed by a Syrian Sheikh, known to heal the sick and perform miracles.

When Dalia became pregnant with Ismael, Basima had taken it upon herself to reinforce the crib rails with cedarwood that she nailed herself. And she bought new lining and padding and nailed that, too, in place. As Ismael lay there crying and Dalia was making her way home from Basima's grave, Yousef gathered the baby from the fluff of the embroidered white blankets, which Basima had sewn but had not completed before she died. With the unexpected weight of the crying, kicking baby, Yousef dropped Ismael. The baby's face caught a nail on the crib as he fell and Ismael's skin was torn in a line from his cheek up around his right eye.

The physical remnant of that day was a distinctive scar that would mark Ismael's face forever, and eventually lead him to his truth.