

THE WAYWARD MOON

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For Pino

“All journeys have secret destinations
of which the traveler is unaware.”

—Martin Buber

“To attain any assured knowledge about the soul
is one of the most difficult things in the world.”

—Aristotle, *On the Soul*

PROLOGUE

Buqei'a, Galilee, 894

The grave was like an open wound in the rocky face of the mountain. Cold drops of rain lashed at the faces of mourners as they huddled together against the winds, the men in long cloaks, and women wrapped in their heaviest shawls. *Blessed is He beyond any blessing and praise and consolation that are uttered in the world. Now say: Amen.* "Amen," the crowd had cried sorrowfully with them, and Yair reflected that his mother, a humble woman who had lived out her days in a remote corner of the Galilee, had nonetheless left a mark on the world.

After the funeral, and for the entire seven days of the *shivah*, the house was filled with people from Buqei'a and the villages beyond. And when he had torn his robe and taken his place on the floor beside his elder brother Yehuda, the men of the village had embraced him and murmured, "Praise God you arrived in time to part with her; when you return to your studies in Sura, it will be with an untroubled heart."

There was a strange solace in the ancient rites and customs. To stand in prayer three times a day in a quorum of men who accompanied them as they chanted psalms. To receive the relatives and neighbors he had known all his life, simple God-fearing men and women who would take his hands in theirs and utter tearful blessings and words of praise, for her and for their entire family. To sit in the evenings with his brother and sisters, recalling her charitable works and her pure heart, so that when he rose from the seven days

of mourning, it was with a sense that the book of her life might be respectfully closed.



IT WAS ON the last evening of the shivah, when the grief that pervaded the house had begun to lift, that Ruth, the eldest of Yair's four sisters, came looking for him in the room behind the kitchen where the men sat in mourning. As she entered, they turned their eyes from her, and she knelt down to her brother and whispered, "Yehuda wants to speak with you. He's waiting in her bedchamber." Though Ruth was already a grandmother herself, it was she who had cared for their mother in her infirmity. The task had taken its toll; his sister's once brilliant green eyes seemed tired, and her legendary fair hair had begun to turn gray.

Yair pulled himself up, made his way through the kitchen where the village women were preparing dinner for the mourners, and slipped behind the heavy woolen curtain that set the sleeping quarters apart from the rest of the house. Yehuda was sitting on the bare bed, the one where their parents had slept for thirty years, and his mother had slept alone for ten more. A lamp flickered from its niche in the wall, and in its dim light, Yair saw that his brother clasped a tightly rolled scroll.

Yehuda looked up at him. Over the course of the week, he had received all who had come to pay their respects with the staid, dignified grace of a community elder. But now, alone in the room where their mother had died, he seemed to embody the bewilderment of a child betrayed. "Come here," he said quietly.

"What is it?"

Yehuda motioned with his eyes toward the curtain and Yair pulled it shut. "I've found something. Something terrible. I haven't spoken of it to anyone, but I cannot remain alone with it any longer."

Yair glanced at the bare straw mattress as though he expected to see his mother lying there, infirm, but with eyes still alert, still wise. "Tell me."

"On the morning that the burial society came for the body," he began in a voice just above a whisper, "they instructed me to burn her bedding. I was collecting the blankets when the bed came away

from the wall, and I noticed that one of the stones looked odd, as if it were not set in place.” Yair watched as his brother rose and moved the bed from the wall, exposing the section that was normally concealed. He then knelt down and pulled out a stone, which tumbled cleanly into his hand.

Yair stared at the gaping hole, perplexed. “It appears that this house has secrets.”

“More than anyone could imagine,” Yehuda replied in a hoarse whisper. He sat himself heavily on the bed and took the thick roll of parchment in his hand. “This is what I found hidden behind the stone.”

The scroll was cracked and dry; clearly it had lain in the wall for many years. “What is written there?” Yair asked uneasily.

“The night I found it, I took it to my study and told Tziporah that I was not to be disturbed. The reading was difficult. Rolled up it looks small, but it’s written in a minuscule hand. I read it through without eating or drinking or speaking with anyone. That was one week ago, the night of the funeral. Since that night, I’ve thought of nothing else.”

“For the entire week you’ve kept this to yourself? Who wrote it?”

Yehuda looked away, to the thin, ragged mat on the dirt floor of the room. “She did.”

“Who she?” Yair waited for a response, but he was met with silence. “But that’s impossible! She couldn’t even read, let alone write!”

“There are many things that we didn’t know about her. And now, having read this, I can only wonder if any of us ever knew her at all. There are things here. . . things that have stunned me to my core. Unutterable things. If the tales this manuscript reveals ever became public knowledge, they would tarnish her name, and ours, forever. My first instinct after reading it was to burn it.”

“Burn it? You would burn her words?”

“Yes! I wanted to destroy it, so that it would vanish from the face of the earth as surely as she has. And yet. . .” he shook his head, “I find that I can’t bring myself to do it without the consent of at least one other man.” He met Yair’s astounded gaze with a hard stare. “And naturally, my brother, that man could only be you. It is you, of all of us, who’s been blessed with father’s keen mind and mother’s

wisdom. And after all,” he added with a bitter grin, “you were her favorite.”

“Don’t be a fool. Mother had no favorite.”

“Yair, we are no longer children. She’s dead and gone, and there is no need to conceal what we’ve always known in our hearts. From the day you were six years old and the elders brought you home from the synagogue declaring that you had the mind of a scholar, she took it upon herself to make sure that you would one day go to Sura. The lessons, the rabbis she brought from Tiberius and Aleppo, the coins she saved—it was all so that you would one day study with sages. You were her greatest hope, Yair. Her most solemn prayer. The day we received word that you had been accepted at the yeshiva in Sura, she could barely speak from joy.” Yehuda shook his head in a gesture of confusion and sadness. “God willing, your righteousness and brilliance in study will redeem the transgressions of her youth.”

“Transgressions? What transgressions?” But again Yehuda was silent.

Yair’s eyes moved from the tightly rolled scroll to the place in the wall where it had lain in waiting for who knew how long. “Are you certain that no one else has seen this?”

“No one,” Yair replied as he handed the scroll to his brother, “and no one else will. Only you and I will ever know of its existence.”

Yair unrolled a little and examined the crudely formed script. “What language is this?”

Yehuda allowed himself a smile. “Let’s see if your love of books will prove itself useful.”

Yair held the scroll to the lamp. “Is this Syriac? She could write in the language of the Christians?” He looked up at his brother in amazement. “How is that even possible?”

“I’m afraid that you’re about to discover many things that will surprise you.”

But Yair was no longer listening. He unfurled the scroll and read out, *I, Rahel Bat Yair, was born in the city of Sura, which lies on the western bank of the river Euphrates in the land of Bavel, where the great houses of learning shine their light.* “Sura?” he cried. “But how can that be? She always told us that she was from some remote village!”

Yair rose and put a heavy hand on his brother's shoulder. "Tomorrow morning we will return to her grave. We will recite psalms and pray that her soul finds peace for all eternity, and my prayers will be as fervent as anyone's. But I can't remain alone with all that this manuscript contains. I cannot be the sole bearer of this burden. Time is short and a judgment must be made. Read all that is written here, and when you finish, send for me. Immediately."

FLIGHT

Buqei'a, Galilee, March 851

I Rahel Bat Yair, was born in the city of Sura, which lies on the western bank of the river Euphrates in the land of *Bavel*, where the great houses of learning shine their light. As I write these words, I can only wonder who will read them. Are you, honorable reader, a woman? I doubt that you are, and so as I record my tale, I will imagine that I address a man. But am I to envision one man, or many? Regrettably, I cannot know, and so I will speak as only a book is able, as if to a multitude of strangers, even though each man will hear my tale with his mind and heart alone.

Although I mastered, in the course of my misadventures, the skill of writing, I believed that I would never again have reason to take a pen in my hand. Here in these mountains, only scholars and scribes make use of reed pens and parchment, and obviously I am neither. Yet I've managed, by wits and guile, to obtain instruments of writing, and now, as I sit by lamplight at my table, my hand trembles; for I am about to record the true events of my life, those that are plain to me and those that remain a mystery, in all their horror and their wonder.



THOSE WHO'VE PASSED their lives amongst barren hills and goat droppings can't imagine life in a city. They know nothing of palaces and gardens built by men dreaming of symmetry and harmony, of

light and shadow and color. They've never wandered, dizzy with the intoxication of abundance, through the restless alleyways of a market. What can they know of a market? They, whose tables are ruled by the whims of nature, can scarcely imagine a place where pistachio nuts and apricots from the East are displayed alongside melons and dates from the South, and where the scents of cumin and coriander, fenugreek and saffron mingle in the air like unruly children. And of things that delight women—perfumes, scented oils, soft silks, and glittering stones—they know nothing at all. Here in the mountains, the women are ignorant of such indulgences.

It happens, of course, that these unfortunates travel to Tiberius, or Tyre, or even Damascus, which some try, pitifully, to compare with Baghdad. But these cities are tired; like sick, old men, their glory is behind them, and the ruins left by the Romans and their Christian children make these cities sad. Their buildings are crumbling, the public squares are dusty and somber, and the people walk with heavy steps, as though resigned to the fact that their day has passed.

To see real splendor, one must venture east, to cities blessed with culture and learning, where the tables of book shops are emptied before their owners can replenish what they've sold, and men argue in the streets over which of the sciences is most useful. Poets compose works for the sole purpose of delighting their listeners; singers and musicians practice their art in parks under the shade of flowering trees. Architects design fountains and public squares, academies and hospitals, each trying to outdo the other in grandeur and beauty. Prosperous merchants build villas, and then fill them with carpets and draperies, tapestries and chests of polished wood inlaid with ivory. Their vessels and bowls are wrought by artisans, and their beds are filled with the softest of duck feathers.

And this too must be said: the Jews of Bavel—of Sura, Pumbedita, Basra, Kufa and Baghdad—by virtue of dwelling in such cultured places, are themselves superior in culture, in learning, and in refinement to other Jews of the world. There is nothing surprising about this. Were not the Euphrates and Tigris the two rivers that flowed from the Garden of Eden? Was Abraham, the father of all Jews, not born beyond the river Euphrates? And now, when the holy places of *Eretz Yisrael* are homes to snakes and jackals, and the only Jews remaining are shepherds and farmers, is it any wonder that it was the Jews of Bavel who have set down God's laws in the *Talmud*

Bavli, which maintains its authority to this very day? Likewise, it is the heads of Bavel's great *yeshivot*, Sura and Pumbedita, who appoint judges and scribes to serve in all the places where Jews dwell. It is they who decide which sinners deserve to be exiled from the house of the God-fearing, and who may return. And it is to Sura and Pumbedita that the Seventy Scholars come, each spring and each autumn, to debate burning questions and fine points of law at the *Kallot* gatherings.

As a girl in Sura, I was unaware that I was living in paradise. I had to be driven from my home, to traverse deserts and mountains, to sleep under many skies and live amongst people of every sort, before I could know what I had lost.

And I lost it all. Suddenly, without warning. In less time than it takes for a pot of water to boil.



ROSES AND JASMINE sprang from shapely clay pots in our courtyard. The door to our home was framed by two date palms that curved downward, as if in a gesture of humility. Inside the house, the walls were hung with woven tapestries, and our floors adorned with soft carpets swirling with images of flowers and birds. The back of our house opened onto a green garden where, under skies bright with stars, my father and I would sit on warm nights, drinking mint tea and speaking of every subject under the sun. But on this night, his mood was sober. For a long while we sat in silence as he gazed at me with wistful eyes. When he finally spoke, he said he had something important to tell me.

But I already knew what he was going to say.

It was *Adar*, the month of the spring *Kallah*, when the Assembly of the Seventy Scholars convenes at the yeshiva in Sura to debate queries sent by Jews from every corner of the Caliphate. The inns and markets were filled with learned disciples and promising students, and whenever I went out into the street, I would steal furtive glimpses of their sprouting beards and bright turbans, thrilled and terrified that one of them might soon be my husband.

Since childhood, I had viewed the young brides, older girls who had suddenly become women, with envy and longing. I yearned for the day when I would don an embroidered gown and veil, and how,

with eyes made beautiful with khol and lips painted red, my new relatives would hang necklaces of gold around my neck and sing me wedding songs. In time, the brides were no longer older girls, but girls of my own age, and lately, to my great dismay, girls even younger than myself. Many of my childhood friends were already raising their children, and the women of Sura had begun to regard me with pity and concern.

There was only one reason for my prolonged maidenhood, and that was my father. From the time I first bled, I had begged him to find a groom for me, but he had always refused, insisting that no girl should enter into marriage before the age of seventeen. When I protested, he would try to frighten me with stories of the birth ordeals of young mothers. For he was a physician, and he had seen countless girls endure grave complications, which often, as in my own mother's case, led to their deaths on the birthing chair. But now, when my seventeenth birthday had arrived and I was practically an old maid, he had finally decided to make inquiries among the scholars attending the Kallah.

"As we agreed," he began, "I've made it known that my daughter is now of marriageable age." I tried to keep my expression serious, even as my feet tapped a dance under my robe. "Two days ago, Rabbi Elhanan sought me out. He told me of a young man who might be a suitable candidate for you." He paused, and with great effort I willed myself to sit still while he poured the tea. "Hiyya Bar Raban of Basra is attending the Kallah with his three sons. The older two are married, and word has it that he's looking for a bride for his youngest, a youth by the name of Asher. Rabbi Elhanan knows the family well, and can vouch for their good name and honorable status. He arranged for me to meet with the father and son."

My feet froze. "And so you've met them?" I managed to ask.

"This morning. In Rabbi Elhanan's library." He broke into a maddening smile. "They're fine people, and I'm sure that Bar Raban's son will be to your liking."

I drew a long breath to calm my racing heart. "Tell me everything about him! I want to know every detail!"

He laughed. "There's little to tell. "They're carpet merchants. They have a workshop in the market of Basra, where they employ twenty weavers. The two older sons help run the business, but the youngest has shown great promise as a scholar, so much so that he

has been invited to stay on and study under the tutelage of Rav Yanai. Bar Raban has consented to the offer and will provide full financial support, on condition that the boy marries.”

“A scholar,” I murmured, clasping my hands together like a gleeful child. “Is he very clever?”

He considered my question. “It’s hard to say. During the meeting he barely said a word. But he seems likeable enough, modest, and respectful of his father.”

As he spoke, I envisioned a pale, timid youth, and thought of Shalmi, the baker’s son, his face spotted with skin ailments, and his voice croaking like a frog’s. “What does he look like?”

“He is in good health.”

“Is he handsome? How tall is he? What color are his eyes?”

“Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain,” he replied, quoting one of his favorite sayings. “But you’ll be able to judge for yourself tomorrow evening, when Hiyya Bar Raban and his son pay us a visit.”

“Tomorrow?” I cried. “But I’m not ready. It will take days for me to prepare. Maybe even weeks!”

“There’s no need for any preparation,” he said, chuckling. “You couldn’t be more charming than you are right now. On the contrary, it is they who ought to concern themselves with winning *your* favor.”

I shook my head. “Impossible. How can I observe him when I know that he is observing me?”

“It is a delicate matter,” he agreed, “but I can’t make this decision in your place. First impressions are the most telling, though. Watch him carefully; take note of everything he does and says, and we’ll discuss our findings afterward.”

Such a reply was typical of my father. Though he spoiled me as a parent spoils his only child, he was constantly inventing new trials for me.

All that night, my mind burned as if in fever. A thousand imaginings flashed through my thoughts as I tried to conjure up an image of the boy who would be my husband. When I rose the next morning, my mind was overflowing with all of the preparations I needed to make. Nevertheless, I headed straight for my father’s study, where I knew I would find him engrossed in his reading.

Though he had trained as a physician, the breadth of my father’s knowledge and his love of inquiry reached far beyond the limits of his medical texts. It was his habit to rise early each morning in order

to read from the books and scrolls that he exchanged with his more learned patients. And indeed, though his study served as an office for receiving patients, his desk was that of a scholar. It was laden with parchment scrolls, blackened pens, a brass inkpot, and a pile of volumes in Arabic, Greek, Syriac, and Aramaic. "It's cruel to keep me in this . . . this ignorance," I protested as I dropped into the chair opposite his. "You have to tell me more!"

"But if I do that, how will you form your own opinion?" He grinned, amused. "Give the poor man a chance to present himself in his own fashion. Only then will you be able to appraise him fairly." I watched as he reached out and selected an apple from the bowl of fruit on his desk. Taking his dagger in hand, he sliced the apple in two and offered me one of its halves, which I refused with an anxious shake of my head.

For a moment I tried to envision it: how I would sit at my father's side, and he at his father's side. How I would avoid staring at him, even as I yearned to study him as my father studied his medical diagrams. Though I was well used to receiving my father's patients, and even exchanging pleasantries with them, I could scarcely imagine actually conversing with this boy. "How can I possibly appraise him? I know almost nothing about young men."

He tapped his right temple. "Intuition. Or rather, intuition and intellect; one must use both." He tilted his head thoughtfully and remarked, "Just now I was reading the end of a remarkable Greek drama. The main character is a girl of your own age. She's on the threshold of her marriage, just like you are. And like you, she has little experience of life. But her intuition and intellect are sharp, and these give her the will to take a stand, and to see that stand to its end."

I sighed, letting my eyes wander over his desk. "Is that the book?"

He closed the cover and turned it to face me. "Let's see if you can read the title."

My father had tried to educate me, far more than is normal for girls. I've always attributed this to my being his only child, when surely he would have preferred a boy. Rather than accepting my limitations, however, he chose to ignore nature and teach me reading and writing, not only in the Aramaic that we spoke at home, but also in Hebrew, so that I would be able to read from the bible, some Arabic, and also a little Greek. I leaned over the book and slowly, with diffi-

culty, I sounded out the Greek letters. “*An-ti-go-ne*. Antigone. What does it mean?”

“It’s the heroine’s name.”

“And what happens to this Antigone?”

He smiled as if, in spite of myself, I had passed a test. “There! Do you see, Rahel? That’s exactly my point. I’ve given you only a brief description of the work, and already you want to know more. You can sense that it might appeal to you. But this is not the time to speak of books.” He frowned as he rose from his chair. “Matters of great importance are before us. This evening you will meet the man who may become your husband. You will be busy from morning to night, first with your wedding, and then with your new life as a married woman. But a day will come when you’ll recall this conversation, and then, when the opportunity falls into our hands like a ripe fruit, we shall speak of Antigone again.

“And now,” he sighed as he selected two small vials from the medicine cupboard, “I’m afraid that we both have many things to attend to. I’ve promised Ben Simon that I would visit his ailing father today, and Hadija, the astrologer’s pregnant wife, is in bed with fever. They live on the other side of town, but if I go on horseback, I should be home well before sundown.”



AT THE TOWN baths, I instructed the attendants to scent the water with myrrh and sandalwood, and to wash my hair with the powder of crushed lotus leaves. Later, before the long mirror in my bed chamber, I slipped into my white dress and tied a blue sash around my hips. “Say nothing,” Shafiqah, our servant woman, advised me as she combed out my hair and fixed it back with a pearl comb. “A well-bred girl holds her tongue in the company of men. And remember to avoid their eyes. There is nothing as appealing in a girl as bashfulness. Of course, if they speak to you, or ask you a question, you must answer sweetly. But take care not to let your eyes linger on the boy; you don’t want them to think you a harlot.”

When she was done, she beheld me from top to bottom and broke into a joyful song that the Muslim women sing at weddings. And then she took my hands in her own and squeezed them tightly. “Promise to keep a secret?” I nodded excitedly, and she reached into

her apron, drew out a small cloth pouch, loosened the drawstring and withdrew a blackened gold necklace strung with a delicately carved *hamsa* pendant.

“It’s beautiful!” I cried.

“This,” she told me solemnly, “was your mother’s. It’s a proper *hamsa*, to keep the demons far away, and protect you wherever you go. Your father means to give it to you tonight if an engagement is announced. He told me to polish it until it gleams.”

A strange chill came over me, almost as if she, the stranger who bore me, was standing by my side. I reached out to touch the tiny gold hand and whispered, “This was hers?”

“She wore it the day she went before the rabbi to marry your father. He’s kept it for you for seventeen years.”

I opened the clasp to try it on, but just as I was about to fasten it around my neck, my father’s footsteps sounded in the courtyard. He called for her, and as she rushed out, I thrust the necklace into her hand. But I lingered behind, staring at the girl who looked back at me in the mirror.



WHEN MY FATHER was a young child, one quarter of the residents of his native city of Basra perished in a fever epidemic. Both of my grandparents were among the victims, and my father, an only child, was sent to Sura to be raised by his father’s brother, an eccentric young man by the name of Hannanya Bar-Ashi. This Bar-Ashi was reputedly kindhearted and generous, but also headstrong and impulsive. For seven years my father enjoyed a charmed childhood, until his uncle became utterly infatuated with a Karaite woman. In a fit of passion, Bar-Ashi sold all his possessions, sent my father to live with his grandfather Eliahu, and followed the woman to the far-off city of Tiflis.

Bar-Ashi’s grandfather Eliahu owned a book shop in the market in Sura. Appalled at his great-grandson’s lack of education, he wasted no time hiring teachers to school him: Hebrew for *Torah* and *Gemara*, Arabic for contracts and business, mathematics for calculations. When the old man passed on, my father was still a youth, alone in the world, but endowed with an inheritance large enough

to allow him to secure an apprenticeship in medicine with one of the renowned physicians of Sura.

Though he had neither the benefit of a respected family name, nor helpful connections to advance him, my father was blessed with a keen diagnostic ability, a congenial manner, and a talent for discretion. His reputation as a gifted physician soon spread, and his name did not escape the notice of the wealthy and powerful. Not surprisingly, a day came when the governor of the city sent emissaries asking if he was willing to take on an official role as his advisor.

My father had no taste for power and the intrigue that comes with it, and would have rejected the offer outright had he not received a visit from the elders of the community. They approached him after prayers one evening, urging that he agree to the governor's request. "Since Ben Abbaye fell ill last fall, there are no longer any Jews in the governor's office," my father explained to me. "They've asked that I accept the position for the sake of the community."

Yet the situation was a delicate one, for the governor had in his entourage a distant cousin, the eldest son of the Qaddi of Sura, by the name of Abu Said. It was well known that this man, a devout Muslim, was one of those poisoned with a strange, unrelenting hatred of Jews. Though the elders of the community enjoyed good relations with the governor, the Jews of Sura were wary of provoking Abu Said in any way.

My father was still deliberating when, late one evening, he was surprised by a visit from Mudar Al Bahri, the governor's brother-in-law and personal secretary. He arrived unaccompanied, and my father himself ushered him into his study, where we had begun a game of chess. "I apologize for calling at such an hour," Al Bahri began, "but the governor has asked me to speak with you discreetly."

I bid the secretary good night and took my leave, but curiosity made me slip out to the back garden and listen, crouched under the window, to what he had come to say.

". . . the governor has little patience for the endless line of incompetents and freeloaders being forced upon him," I heard Al Bahri tell my father. "He seeks the council of a man who's concerned with more than filling his own pockets."

"This is indeed a great honor," my father replied cautiously, "yet there are members of his retinue who would be extremely dismayed to have me in their presence."

“Abu Said is a greedy, conniving fool. The governor finds him insufferable.”

“But he is not without influence. Last week I saw him leaving the police offices with the commander of the *Shutra*.”

“Then it is all the more important for you to have access to the governor’s ear.”

My father was silent for a moment. “I need to think it over.”

“By all means, consider the offer carefully, but make your decision quickly. The governor wants to avoid the spread of half-truths and rumors. The sooner we make your appointment official, the better.”

After that night, Al Bahri’s words sat heavily in my father’s mind and it seemed to me that he was inclined to refuse the position. But several days later, while returning on horseback from a visit to a patient in a nearby town, a chance meeting changed my father’s thinking. As he rode into the town square, he came upon Abu Said and his friends walking home from evening prayers. Although Jews were not officially allowed to own or ride horses, special permits were granted to men who, like my father, employed them in the service of Muslims. On that evening, however, the sight of my father sitting atop his horse enraged Abu Said, and he called out, right there in the town square, “Will you look at that! The Jew Ben Shmuel rides a horse! The *Shurut Omar* clearly states that the *djimi* are forbidden to ride horses.”

Shouts of agreement rang out from Abu Said’s companions. But a Muslim patient of my father’s, who happened to be crossing the square, called out loudly, “But Abu Said, sir, how are we to understand your sudden concern? Ben Shmuel’s horse has never troubled you before.”

Laughter rang out from the crowd that had gathered around them, but Abu Said answered back, “There are many things that are not as they should be, many sights to which our eyes have been blind. It is a shame and an insult that a Jew should rule over us. Have any of you heard the rumor that the Jew Ben Shmuel has his eye on the governor’s office? If there is even the smallest bit of truth to it, no Muslim should sleep in peace.”

“The only one not sleeping in peace is you,” the patient cried, “because the Governor prefers the council of a wise man to that of a fool.”

More laughter ensued, but my father rode off before the situation could get any worse. By the time he arrived home, he had made his decision. When Al Bahri paid us a visit two nights later, my father gave his agreement to accept the position.

How shall I tell of what came next? The course of a life can change in the time it takes a pot of water to boil.



WHEN ABU SAID burst into our house, I was about to perfume my wrists with rose water. As I drew the delicate glass stick from the vial, it occurred to me that Asher Bar Raban might not like the smell of roses. Iyad, our gardener, had told to me that not everyone did.

It was then, at that exact moment, that I heard a shout from the front room. I put down the vial and ran out to the hallway. My father stood in the entrance of our home, and not ten paces from him, eyes flaming with the crazed gaze of a madman, was Abu Said. Although he was not a large man, the sight of him, panting and fuming with fury, was terrible. In his right hand he held a dagger.

“No believer will consent to this treachery,” he cried. “Do you hear me, Ben Shmuel? You will renounce the appointment, or suffer the consequences!”

“I will renounce nothing,” I heard my father reply sharply. “The governor himself has personally requested that I take on the position.”

“We will not be ruled by a Jew because of one foolish heretic!” he screamed.

“I advise you to watch your tongue, Abu Said.”

“What’s that, Ben Shmuel? You threaten me?”

“If you know what’s best, you’ll turn around and leave this house at once.”

Perhaps if my father had not been a proud man, events would have unfolded differently. Perhaps if he had agreed to renounce the appointment, or even say that he would reconsider the matter, Abu Said would have been satisfied. On the other hand, it is possible that nothing would have appeased him, for he had brought his dagger, and the notion of murder had taken root in his heart.

“Honored sir,” Shafiqia cried, falling at his feet. “Please go home. Your father, in his great wisdom, will fix everything.”

But Shafiqa's words only fed his rage. "You!" he roared. "You, who were once a good Muslim woman, shame yourself by working in the home of a Jew. Don't you know your rightful place? Where is your self-respect? This man should be *our* servant!"

Somehow, my father remained unmoved by Abu Said's hysteria. "This is your last chance," he warned. "Leave now, and we will both forget your childish outburst. Go home to your father. The Qaddi will be very distressed if word of your behavior reaches his ears."

"*Allahu Akbar!*" he screamed out, and in a mad rage, charged up to my father and plunged the dagger into his heart. Shafiqa let out a shrill wail. I ran to my father and fell to the floor, where he lay crumpled and moaning, a bright red stain of blood spreading rapidly over his robe. "Run!" he groaned. "Run to the study, close the door and move my desk to block it."

"No!" I screamed as I tried to lift his shoulders. "Don't close your eyes."

But his eyes fluttered shut, and with his last remaining strength he pulled me to him and whispered, "I'm dying. Save yourself."

I looked up and saw Abu Said's face, contorted with insane ecstasy, his hand still holding the dagger, wet with blood. I jumped up, dashed to the study, shut the door, and flattened myself against the wall.

Abu Said's steps were heavy. I heard the study door open, and I slid behind it. "Where did you go, you little snake," he muttered. "I saw you run in here. Do you think you can escape me now?" I was paralyzed beyond reason. It could only have been pure animal instinct that made my eyes dart around the room like a terrified animal until they fell on my father's desk where, alongside the bowl of fruit, lay the knife my father had used that morning. I reached out to grab it, but my trembling fingers pushed it to the floor, where it landed with a low thud. Abu Said swung around, his face shining with madness. In the space of an instant I swooped down and retrieved it. His eyes flashed just as they had in the moment before he stabbed my father. "*Allahu Akbar!*" he cried, lunging toward me.

With a terrible howl, I raised my right hand and plunged the knife into his neck. Blood spilled from the wound onto his robe. I watched in horror as his fingers slowly released the knife, which fell to the floor and spun around in frenzied circles. Shafiqa ran into the room screaming hysterically, while Abu Said gasped and writhed like

a fish pulled from the river. He staggered forward several steps, then fell to the floor. It was a gruesome sight, and I too began to scream.

Like a crazed choir, we screamed in unison. But while I felt myself to be on the very brink of madness, Shafiqa, by the grace of God, recovered herself. She held me in a tight embrace, as if she could see the powers of madness beckoning me to fall into abandon. "My daughter, you must run and hide," she whispered as she stroked my hair. "When word of this gets out, Abu Said's family will surely avenge his death." Somehow, the steady tone of her voice calmed me enough to hear her words and know that all she was saying was true. It was only a matter of time until Abu Said's relatives came looking for me. Revenge would be demanded and taken, long before I could plead my story to a judge. The only way for me to stay alive was to flee.

Shafiqa ran out of the room and returned seconds later holding items of my father's clothing. "You must dress in the clothes of a man." I glanced down and screamed again. My white dress was splattered with blood. The sight was so horrible that I could scarcely move. Shafiqa pulled my dress off, raised my arms, and wrapped an old headscarf of hers around me, flattening my chest like a boy's. She put my father's tunic over my head, and his pants around my ankles, and his rider's boots by my feet. Still stunned, I stepped out of my girl's slippers, slipped my arms and legs into the clothing, and donned the boots. In the meantime, Shafiqa had found one of my father's turbans. She gathered up my hair, stuffed it into the turban, and fixed it tightly on my head. Stepping back as if to appraise her work, she shook her head and muttered, "God willing, you might just pass for a boy."

I stared at her blankly, barely comprehending what was happening, and what was about to happen. She grabbed the cloth bag that she used when she went to market, and ran to the kitchen. Seconds later, she hung it across my flat chest.

I remember how she embraced me, then put her strong, rough hands on my shoulders. "You must run, my daughter. Run toward the date groves that grow along the road into town. I have no words of advice to give you. May God watch over you, as He watched over the holy followers of the Prophet in their flight from Mecca to Medina. I will tell Abu Said's men that you ran off in the direction of the

river, but remember, you run to the date groves. Allah protect you, child.” With that, she pushed me out the door.

Evening was falling. I flew through the darkening streets of Sura, the only streets I had ever known, and into the date groves that grow by the road that leads out of the city. I ran as the deer runs when she is escaping the tiger: blindly, with but one thought in her head. And when I reached the groves, I made my way through the labyrinth of their tall, jagged trunks until, breathless and exhausted, I collapsed at the foot of a low, sheltering palm tree.



THE EARTH WAS cold and damp, and as I stared up through the canopy of palm fronds, I couldn't fathom how I came to be lying there. But when I sat up and saw Shafiqa's bag lying open at my feet, a great wail rose up in my throat, and memory rushed over me like a flood. My heart failed to beat, as if it had forgotten how to breathe. I struck my head against the tree again and again, oblivious to the bleeding, until I collapsed, empty and exhausted. I lay like that for hours, lacking all will to move.

How much time had passed? I no longer cared. When I woke the next morning, Shafiqa's bag still lay at my feet. I stared at it for half a day, too weak and indifferent to open it, and eventually I drifted back to sleep. But the next time I woke, a great hunger came upon me, so that, with my dwindling strength, I sat myself up and pulled the bag to my side. Shafiqa had packed me a wool blanket, a clean tunic, a loaf of bread, a handful of dried dates, several cooked chicken legs wrapped in a cloth, a water flask, and the entire batch of sesame cakes that Shafiqa had prepared for the meeting with Hiyya and Asher Bar Raban. At the bottom of the bag I spotted, to my horror, the knife with which I had stabbed Abu Said. Somehow in those chaotic minutes before my flight, she had managed to wipe his blood from the blade.

I took the knife in my hand and stared at the blade; to drive it into my own heart would only take an instant. It might be days before they found my body, and when they did, I would be buried in the far section of the cemetery, together with the Jews who have committed the gravest and most shameful of sins. But that seemed a

laughable price to pay for the chance of escaping the wretched existence that would now be mine.

It is said that suicides are an outrage to God, but truly, it was He who had betrayed me. I had seen funerals where even as the mourners fell to their knees begging to join the dead in their graves, the rabbis chanted prayers proclaiming how the ways of God are a mystery to men, and that God, in His infinite wisdom, has written out a fate for each of us. This explanation had always sounded reasonable to me, but now it seemed like a pitiful excuse for what was nothing but treachery and cruelty. Why had He chosen this wretched fate for me? Why was I lying here on the cold earth when the other girls of Sura were safe at home in their beds?

As I gazed at the knife, there was only one thought that prevented me from doing away with myself; if I died, there would be no one left to mourn my father because, only I, as his sole relative, could perform the rituals of mourning. There would be no shivah for my father, no stream of friends to comfort me, no one to make a tear for me in my clothing, no weeping neighbors to sit at my side. Nonetheless, if I could find the strength to wait out the seven days of mourning, I could at least recite the psalms I knew and pray for his soul. And then, when the seven days passed, I would leave this world satisfied that I had fulfilled all of my filial obligations. It was this final obligation that made me lower the knife and make a small tear in the collar of my tunic. His tunic.

For five days I sat under the fig tree, reciting prayers for my father's soul, and weeping over all that had befallen me. I was in a place outside time and outside of the world, a great gaping emptiness which must resemble the hell where sinners endure their eternal punishments. Again and again, I relived the events that had expelled me from my life. I saw Abu Said, charging at my father like a beast. I saw my father crumple to the floor, the blood spreading over his shirt like a river of wine. Then I saw Abu Said, his hand raised, about to plunge his dagger, still wet with my father's blood, into my heart. Where had I found the courage to stab him? Even if I live to be one hundred and twenty, I'll never know.

But it was the nights that were most fearsome. From my bed on the hardened mud floor, I would gaze up at the distant moon. I would listen to the rustling of leaves and the trembling of branches, as visions of my newly made enemies, enemies who would not rest

until I were stone dead, came alive. For hours I would shake with cold and terror until, exhausted, I dropped off to sleep. Later, at the hour when the forest stilled and the stars hid themselves in the black sky, I felt my father's presence hovering close. And then, on the very brink of madness, I imagined that I was back in my bed chamber, with yellow sunlight falling on the soft carpet by my bed, and the sound of our neighbor Elisheva singing as she hung her laundry to dry on her roof opposite my window.

I would wake, damp and shivering, to a gray and empty sky. And then I would take the knife in my hand and gaze at it with longing. Each evening, as the light faded from the sky, I would put a date seed at the foot of the tree, so as to mark another day. When there were finally seven seeds, I knew that I had fulfilled my obligation, and that I was free to leave this world forever. Instead, in my exhaustion, I lay the knife down by my side and fell into the deepest sleep I had ever known.

Like all of the nights before, I met my father in my dreams. As he came near, I held out the knife as if to tell him that I would soon be joining him. But he, with the slow, certain movements of people in dreams, pried the knife from my hand and cast it aside. *No!* I wailed. I sank to the ground, howling as if wounded by a sharp, unbearable pain, but this neither alarmed nor surprised him. He merely nodded as if to say that he knew; he knew what this would mean, just as he knew everything that was going to happen to me. And then he turned and walked away. *You can't go!* I screamed. *You can't leave me here alone.* And then a terrible darkness came over me and I fell away.

When I awoke, the sun was high in the sky, and the trembling leaves of the palm trees were touched with gold. My head was throbbing and I no longer knew what was a dream and what was real.

I reached for my bag, pulled out the clean tunic, and exchanged it for the torn, mud-stained garment of mourning I had worn for the past seven days. The knife lay hot and gleaming beside me, but I refused its promise of solace, and packed it far into the bottom of the bag.

And then, as mournfully as Adam and Eve left Eden for the misery of this world, I tied the turban tightly around my head, rose to my feet, and hobbled out to the road.

I had gone only a short way when I heard the voices of men calling out to each other. I looked up and saw that I had come upon an

orchard of apple trees. The men were hidden by the branches, but their ladders revealed exactly where they were. For the first time in my life, I deliberated whether it would be better to beg or to steal. Begging came more naturally. My hunger was so urgent that I nearly forgot to take on the voice and speech of a boy. “*As-salaam alaykum,*” I called out weakly.

“Morning of light,” a voice called back. But still I couldn’t see anyone.

“Could you spare a few apples for a poor traveler?” I asked, speaking the words like one who is no longer certain what they mean.

“Open your bag, son,” the voice said with a laugh. Hesitantly, I approached the trees. “If you don’t open your bag, you’ll have to catch them in your hands.” I took the bag from my shoulder and held it open under them. And then, as if in a game, they tossed the apples in, one by one, until it was full.

“God bless you,” I called out as I took a fruit in my hands. “May God grant you great prosperity, and good health to you and to all of your family,” I cried, like the beggar women at the city gates.

“Wait. Are you hungry?” one of them called.

“Yes.”

“Wait there a minute.”

Like an angel of mercy, he descended the ladder, opened a straw basket under the tree, and took out a piece of barley bread with cheese baked on it. “My wife wants to fatten me up, so she packed me some extras,” he explained. “You take it. I’m fat enough as it is.”

I stared blankly.

“Go ahead. Take it.” I reached out and took the bread, and could not keep myself from biting off a piece. He watched me, amused, and asked, “Where are you off to, my son?”

“I . . . I’m on my way to my cousin’s house,” I blurted out, realizing that from this moment on, all that I spoke would have to be a lie. Not wanting to say more, I thanked him again and started down the road, devouring the bread as I went.

But the cheese was salty, and the water in my flask was gone. I knew that the road out of Sura runs parallel to the river, and so I made my way through the growth of weeds and wet leaves until I found the water’s edge. I filled my flask, and then, as if sealing the decision to continue along the strange and terrible path that God

had set out for me, I knelt down and washed the dust from my face and hands.

I couldn't return to Sura. Abu Said's family would not rest until I was dead, and I feared for the safety of any family who would offer me shelter. Though I racked my brain, I managed to conjure up only one plan. My father's uncle, Hannanya Bar-Ashi, had long ago gone to Tiflis in the footsteps of a Karaite woman. I once asked my father where this Tiflis was, and he explained that if one were to start at the great Tigris, and then follow it northward, one would reach the city of Mosul. From there, one only had to continue traveling north, following the road faithfully until, after a few weeks, one would come to the town of Tiflis.

I was thinking that if I could somehow get to this Hannanya Bar-Ashi, he might take pity on me and welcome me into his house. Perhaps in time he would even supply a modest dowry, and find me a local boy to marry so that I might live as a respectable woman.

The very idea that I, who had scarcely set foot out of Sura, who had never given a moment's thought to matters of food or shelter, who had, since the day of my birth, basked in the warm light of my father's esteemed name, would now have to travel roads and highways relying on nothing but my miserable wits, would have been laughable had it not been so horrific.

I couldn't imagine how in the world I might make such a journey. But if I was to go on living this wretched life of mine, I had no choice but to try.