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from
THE SLIGHTEST GREEN

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FOR HAFEZ'S MOTHER, Sundus, it begins with seashells. She shuts her eyes and her childhood house appears behind her lids. Her own mother is ambling toward the stone brick wall, her swollen belly intruding upon the space between her and their neighbor, Um Husni, who's called her mother over to talk.

Her mother rubs her belly in wide circles as she listens to the other woman, cuffing her eyes from the sunlight. Spring gradually warms the air as it mingles with traces of the salty sea.

"Aywa, aywa," her mother murmurs, nodding her head in acquiescence to whatever Um Husni is telling her. Sundus's mother is a beautiful woman—slender and tall, her thick wavy hair gathers into a bun at the nape of her neck. She wears a house dress she can no longer belt, the color of purple thistle Sundus and her friend Amjad have plucked for their playhouse under her family's loquat tree. The two of them are busy lining it with seashells from their holidays at the shore. It is an elaborate design: a kitchen, a parlor for receiving guests, and a private sitting room for Sundus to enjoy her books.

"It faces east, so you can have the morning sun," Amjad proudly declares. He is the chief architect on their project. They diligently work under a canopy of branches that protects them from the late morning sun. Their houses are separated by the stone brick wall no higher than her waist; Um Husni is Amjad's mother. Sundus can't recall her eight-year-old life without Amjad; her childhood has been defined by a few significant adults and schoolmates. He netted Sim-Sim for her, a lovely rock thrush, its blue head fading into a grayish body. Skittering to and fro inside its domed cage, it watches the two of them playing, speaking to them in chirrup and short whistles. Besides Sim-Sim, Amjad is her first real friend in the whole world.

They've played together every day since their schools have been shuttered. The headmaster assured students that they would resume classes

soon. But Sundus knew this was a lie, because Sayida Mansoor's voice shook when she told their class they had nothing to fear. The next day, her teacher was gone, and Sayida Rahman—who taught the older pupils and had a large mole on her chin—appeared for part of the day. The substitute teacher instructed their class to work on grammar exercises longer than Sundus could stand, so she doodled flowers on the back of her copybook. The headmaster stepped in for the second half of the day, and under his watchful eye the murmur of her schoolmates died down. Now there is talk that the schools will be integrated, given that attendance continues to drop; more of their classmates are kept home to be tutored. This makes Sundus happy: she can see Amjad all day long.

On the playground, her friend Hiba told of horrible things happening in the countryside, things the yahood did in a village called Safuriyya.

They round up all the men and shoot them first. Then they find the pregnant mothers, cut out their babies.

She's seen Jews before. On his monthly visits to the neighboring villages around Hayfa to tend to his patients, Yabba takes Sundus along with him, and they drive past a neighborhood where fair-skinned and blue-eyed folks live, mothers pushing baby prams, men in slacks and button-up shirts—just like what her father wears. Some are deeply bronze-skinned like Abu Musa, who delivers a crate of fresh cactus fruit to her mother every season.

And Sundus sees them at the beach at Eid, when they stay at a small inn off the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, where she's collected shells every holiday. But Sundus never plays with the children of yahood—not that she's been forbidden, but she never broaches the invisible boundaries that are inexplicably drawn between them. Children like her and Amjad splash near the shoreline, while their parents lounge on blankets, enjoying a spread of goat cheese, figs, and apricots. The older women hitch up their thawb and tuck one side of their embroidered caftans into a wide belt, exposing a white underdress. On every trip, Sundus fills a basket of seashells she's collected. At home, she deposits them into a large zir her mother let her have, previously occupied by a small trellis of hot peppers.

She and Amjad busy themselves under the loquat tree. He blows sand out of a conch with delicate pink swirls before wiping it on his shirt. As they frame imaginary rooms, Sundus asks Amjad if what Hiba said was true: Do they kill babies too?

Amjad shrugs his shoulders. He picks at a scab on his elbow. Days before, he fell from his bicycle, and blood seeped from a small gash the size of a coin. He looked disappointed when Sundus didn't gasp and quickly look away from his injury. Yabba has taught her that blood is natural, rich in minerals and vitamins.

"Safuriyya is far from here," Amjad assures her. "Don't be scared."

Still, fear puckers her insides like she's eaten a sour plum. Each evening, Yabba instructs Sundus to read aloud from *Filasteen*, one of several newspapers scattered on the floor at his feet, and he listens absentmindedly as she recites details about the latest ambushes of villages whose names she knows because she's driven to these places in her father's black Ford, sitting beside him on the tan leather seat. When she announces the death tolls, Yamma interjects, smacking her hands together. *Bee kafee! I don't want to hear anymore.*

By the boundary wall, Amjad's mother's voice is high-pitched, distracting Sundus again. "My husband says we should leave soon." Sundus cranes her neck, can see the white mandeela wrapped around the woman's head. "Travel to the coast then, up north. God protect our son Husni."

Sundus listens, rubbing the belly of a seashell with her thumb.

Husni is Amjad's older brother, ten years older, which makes her friend an only child like Sundus. Husni has joined the Arab militia; he disappeared one night and sent word to his family that he would suck out the Zionist poison infecting their country. Um Husni had wept on her mother's shoulder.

"How long do you think we'll be gone?" Sundus hears her mother ask. There is a tremble in her voice.

"No more than a few weeks, inshallah," Um Amjad reassures her mother, clasping both of her mother's hands. She is shorter than Sundus's mother, her body stoutly shaped like the bottom of a coffee ibrik. "Be ready. Take only what you can carry. On foot if necessary." Their mothers exchange a few more words before parting ways back to their respective homes.

"Let's finish this," Amjad says, squatting down.

But Sundus can no longer concentrate on their playhouse. She stands up, still clutching the seashell in the palm of her hand. Beyond the countryside, she has traveled only once to Al Quds, to visit an old mentor of Yabba's, a retired professor. She cannot fathom any other place worth living that doesn't meet the sea. Her first memory is of water, rushing her toes, rising to her belly while someone holds her arms, and the feeling

is exhilarating: trusting she will be safe despite the thrill of being swept by this powerful force, enveloping her from every angle.

Amjad stands again and lightly touches her shoulder. “No matter what, our families will be together—we’ll be together. I’ll protect you.” He puffs out his chest like a rooster. When he plays with the boys, Sundus watches them from her bedroom window: child soldiers, each claiming to be Fauzi al-Qawuqji, the leader of the Arab Liberation Army who endured a dozen bullets and survived. Amjad owns a pocket-sized rendering of the warrior in a white hatta, a black cord securing it around his head. His regal profile exudes courage. The image is dog-eared and cracked down the middle, but Sundus smiles in exaggerated admiration. She is moved that he has withdrawn it from a cedar box of treasures to show her.

From the saha of her stone house, her mother calls to her. “Sundus! Where are you, girl?”

“I have to go,” she tells Amjad, dusting red dirt from her short pants.

He grabs her hand. “Remember what I said. Don’t be afraid. We’ll be together.”

Sundus nods, pretending to believe him like she always does. Last spring, when a bird had fallen from its nest and appeared on the brink of death, Amjad had assured her it would live and return to its family. She’d come back to the place where they’d been nursing it to health, and it was gone.

I told you, Amjad had said. It’s flown back to its mother.

Later on she discovered a small burial mound meters away from the tree where it had fallen.

Sundus throws her friend a smile before dashing away to help her mother prepare for this journey whose destination is uncertain to her. She carries Sim-Sim, frantically chirping in its cage. She stops to reassure it, petting its head through the bars.

She hops onto the saha, where pink bougainvillea blooms at the edges of the landing. Her mother’s herb garden has begun to flower. The wild za’atar hadn’t produced the first season Yamma had planted it, but her mother had been patient. Sundus had stood over the patch and declared its brown stems dead, but her mother had pointed out a single green one. *If it possesses the slightest green, there’s hope.*

And Yamma was right. Before the summer was over, white flowers began to sprout from the stem.

A firepit full of ashes is in the center of the saha, surrounded by

wooden stools. Her parents often welcome the neighbors for evening qahwa. The men smoke pipes and English cigarettes. Through a pair of open windows, the ballads of Leila Murad soar from a record spinning on a gleaming Victrola that their neighbor Abu Ziyad pulls outside on his saha, turning the volume up high. The lyrics drape over Sundus and the other children roaming the orchard like a lovely haze:

Sing for me always, and tell me always

Love is a song full of dreams . . .

Their mothers hug their elbows beneath their knit shawls as the men tap their feet, smoke curling grapevines then vanishing into the night.

Inside their bayt, her mother is on her knees, spreading a cotton sheet across the floor. Because of her slender body, until she turns around it is hard to tell she is with child. Sundus rushes to grab a corner and pulls it toward her feet. Yamma then gives her small rags and leftover fabric from her sewing and shows Sundus how to wrap each glass of a hand-painted tea set that had belonged to her mother's maternal grandmother. The blown glasses are from Al-Khalil, blushing pink with gold leaf.

"Why do we need these?" Sundus asks, carefully cradling the glasses.

"If yahood come this way, who knows what they'll take."

She ponders why these blue-eyed people will take what belongs to them. Why do they have need of such things? But Sundus doesn't ask her mother, whose lips form a taut, straight line—a sign she is deep in thought and planning.

Sundus gazes at the small pile of other objects her mother has already assembled. Two framed photographs of Sundus's grandparents and a carved treasure box with pearl inlay that her aunt, Khalti Azeeza, had gifted her mother.

How does her mother decide what to take? Suddenly objects seem to emerge as individual entities, permanent features in the daily landscape of their home, now rushing up, demanding to be valued, to be taken. The gilded Quran that sits on a wooden display. A mantel clock with hands in the shape of peacock feathers.

"What about these?" Sundus points to the brass chargers displayed in the China cabinet in the dining room. Her father brought them back from Cyprus during his medical studies.

Her mother shakes her head and sighs. "They can have those." She rests a hand on her belly, her eyes roving around the room, a sad expression clouding her face, as if it will be the last time she'll see this room, their bayt.

And will they give up the books that line Yabba's study? Or the atlas Sundus spends hours with, tracing her finger over borders and rivers, mouthing the names of countries that sound like mythical places from the tales Shahrazad spun? She races to the study and grabs a pair of copper binoculars she's peered through at the shoreline, following the journey of seagulls across the sea until they vanish deep into the sky.

She holds out the case. "Can we take these?"

Her mother starts to protest then smiles, her eyes shining. "Of course, *habibti*. They might be of use on our trip."

Satisfied with the bundle, her mother instructs Sundus to pull the corners of the sheet to its center, and she ties them into a knot. "Now go to your room. Fold some underwear and a few clothes. *Yalla!*"

"And my books?"

Her mother holds up two fingers.

Sundus scampers to her room. She scrutinizes her windowsill where her books sit. Several have been gifted to her by Yabba's professor friend who'd returned from Europe last summer. They are mostly in French—*Le Petit Prince* and *Les Aventures de Pinocchio*; the latter gave Sundus nightmares, when the wooden boy was hanged for his offenses. The professor also gave her a diary with a lock. *For all your secrets*, he'd winked at her. She doesn't possess any secrets, so she gifted the diary to her friend Nuha who's been pining for Malik, the shortest boy in their neighborhood. Sundus is certain Nuha carries more secrets than her.

She glances around her room. Her mother did not say anything about her toys. Sundus grabs her favorite doll, a little girl with yellow bobbed hair and eyes with lids that open and close when she tilts her. She goes to her wardrobe and ruffles through the dresses she wears on Eid and for school pageants. She pulls a forest-green one from a hanger, presses the soft velvet fabric against her face. The collar and cuffs are white lace, and pearl buttons run down the back of the dress. Along with a few shirts and slacks, Sundus returns to her mother, offering her traveling attire.

"You don't need that dress! Hang it back up," Yamma orders.

Crestfallen, Sundus's shoulders slump. She has no idea where they are heading. All the adults seem to be planning to leave their homes without a clear destination—or at least not one her own parents will share with her. How long will they be gone? And how does her mother know she won't need a dress at this place once they arrive?

Her mother sets down a pair of Yabba's slacks and pulls Sundus close. "It's temporary, *habibti*. We must only take what we need."

“What if they steal my books, my clothes?” Her lower lip trembles. The image of strangers pawing her belongings threatens tears.

Her mother’s pained expression answers her question: she can’t guarantee anything. Sundus starts to cry.

“My love, such things can be replaced, I promise you,” Yamma cajoles. “For now, we have to travel wisely.”

Sniffing, Sundus returns the dress. Above her bedframe is a portrait of the sea she’d painted with watercolors. Once a month, a beautiful Armenian woman came to her school to teach them about art. Sundus carefully untacks the thin sheet of canvas and rolls it up before tucking it into her school satchel. She roams the bayt, every object suddenly calling to her to carry it along on an unknown journey.

A SUDDEN hacking cough pierces through these memories, and the present seeps back. Sundus blots her tears with the heel of her palm and listens again at the door. The horrid cough stops and only wheezing comes again from Hafez’s room. She quietly returns to the saha outside and descends the stone steps to the dawali.

Beyond the vineyard is the orchard whose trees she and her beloved Jalal had planted; she knows each one, the formations and blemishes on their limbs like the marks and scars on a child’s precious body.

Her parents have gone, and Jalal after them—Allah be merciful upon their souls—and soon her son will join his father. Inna lillahi wa inna lillahi raji’un. The trees have remained for her granddaughter to inherit. Will she accept them and al ard on which they sit? Or will she turn her back on all of it?

A wind from the valley flutters the hem and sleeves of her thawb. Sundus turns, and, for a moment, it sounds like the rush of waves from a distant sea.

GAHANA PRISON, JULY 1990

MEN WERE SHOUTING in the distance. Hafez didn’t lift his head toward this noise. His eyes, half-opened slits, were fixed on the scuffed floor until they closed altogether. He could only take in so much light after being plunged in absolute darkness for—what month was this? What year?

He’d stopped keeping track after the first week, when he could barely lift his arm, grab a plastic spoon, and drag it along the concrete floor,

and mark time as tiny matchsticks. After the third day in the black box, he'd realized that day and night no longer existed. They kept him in perpetual darkness, and he felt time moving forward like a river, obliterating his past. The only sensation was pain, and his tormentors descended upon him at any moment. When he wasn't screaming (into a putrid rag stuffed into his mouth, or inside his skull), he'd still wonder about the time. And when they unbolted the door and it swung open to the outside, only artificial light from panels of fluorescent bulbs poured inside the space. Yet before terror made him scuttle to a corner in the darkness, he wondered about the particular hour of day it was.

Now he was hearing voices. Men hooting in Arabic. He caught their words like pollen on the wind, and a vague sense of hope rose in his throat. A warm and sweet taste on his tongue. But instinct made him swallow it back down, the darkness licking at his heels.

"Come on, ya zalama! You've got it!" It was a young man's voice. Hafez's teeth tingled and his tongue grew heavy. If he were returned to the general population, he had a chance.

As he was dragged along, his rubber slipper disengaged from his left foot; the guard following behind the two who held him by each arm stopped to retrieve it. He didn't return it to Hafez's foot, using it instead to slam against cell bars, quieting each group of prisoners as they passed.

The guards uncuffed him and shoved him inside the cell; his slipper finally returned, after it was thrust at his head. He flinched but didn't touch the spot, conditioned to keep his arms at his side. The steel door was bolted behind him, and he flinched again.

In the middle of the floor, he attempted to pull himself upright. He could feel the curious eyes on him, suddenly aware of his own body and the space it took up, clean after a mandated shower. His battered limbs were hidden beneath a uniform that was too large for him. But it was also clean, absent of all the other odors the darkness had cultivated. Feces, urine, vomit, and blood. He cinched the waist of his pants to hold them up, glad for something to grip now that he was free of the two guards. He was afraid to touch his face, his scraggly beard. He looked down at his free hand, at what had once been his fingernails, now small ugly stubs. Still, he could see his hand and that could only mean he was really here.

"Ahlan! Ahlan!" someone called out. "Welcome! Welcome!" The tone was childlike and out of place. Hafez's eyes darted in the direction of a lanky man, sitting on the edge of his cot. His long legs were pulled to

his chest. “Welcome! Welcome!” he parroted again.

“Over there,” someone else said, pointing to an empty cot on the top bunk.

Shame rushed down his neck—how would he manage to get up there? Still, Hafez gave an imperceptible nod and shuffled toward his new cot. He’d been sleeping on a dirty blanket separating him from the cold floor. Before climbing, he regarded the short ladder, with the scrutiny of the other men an extra load he’d have to carry up there on his shoulders. Hafez lifted one foot at a time, clenching his jaw. The simple exercise exposed every new and dormant pain in his muscles. Once he reached his mattress, he curled into a ball, his back to the others.

A few more moments of silence passed before the volume of the radio was raised again, the men eager to return to the match.

“Ahlan, ahlan!” the parrot voice called out again. “Welcome! Welcome!”

THE NEXT TIME he was ordered to move, Hafez forced his legs, one after another, over the side of his cot and turned his body to climb down the ladder. When he heard the commands of a guard through a steel-barred, square opening in the door, his stomach turned cold, and he braced himself as best as he could. They were ordered to file out of the cell—where to, he was not sure. But he felt a strange safety, marching between two of his cellmates, shielded from danger, until a guard slid behind him and kicked the back of his legs hard with his boots. Hafez’s lower body collapsed, and he careened into the man in front of him. He was helped up, and the line continued down the concrete walkway until again he was shoved. Once more, the line fell out of formation before quickly assembling again, like a child’s tedious game.

“Leave him alone already,” someone hissed at the guards. But they only laughed and shoved harder.

They finally arrived at a mess hall. At a long table, Hafez didn’t eat. His nerves were frayed so thin he was afraid to open his mouth. He lay his head on folded arms. A guard marched over, his boots thudding the floor, and he pulled Hafez’s head up so forcefully that the other prisoners thought his neck would snap.

“Eat!” the guard commanded him.

Talk of the match between West Germany and Argentina suddenly halted. Hafez was aware of dozens of spoons suspended over plastic trays around him. An eerie silence fell over the hall.

“Eat!” the guard commanded him again. The voice belonged to the

one who had shoved him in line. Another guard clambered over; each one towered over Hafez. His heart beat wildly in his ears. They exchanged heckles in Hebrew, words he knew: “achbaroch,” rat.

Hafez was unable to open his mouth, even to protest. On a tray before him, the smell of the greenish slop in a bowl made Hafez want to vomit. The first guard held his head back, while the other used Hafez’s spoon to scoop up portions of the mush and smear it across his face. More laughter, hollow and thin, as the rest of the men silently watched the spectacle. When the guards became bored, one flicked the spoon at his face then marched away.

“Fuck their mothers’ cunts,” someone seated close to Hafez muttered.

“Loolad iklab,” another agreed. “Sons of bitches.”

Back in his cell, someone handed Hafez a towel. It smelled moldy, but he wiped the green soup from his face and beard.

“There you are!” This cheerful voice belonged to an older man with a bald head covered by a white skull cap. “We can see your face again,” he chuckled.

“There you are!” the parrot voice repeated.

“Bas, ya Sadeeq!” the older man admonished. His tone was gentle but firm. “Come pray with us, brother.”

Hafez looked up from his towel. The invitation was intended for him.

The white-capped man cupped his shoulder. “I am Abu Jadallah,” he said, his other hand over his heart. “Allah has not abandoned you, my son. You are here—” The old man patted the air. “You are alive. Only He can restore your faith, but you must turn to Him to get His blessings.”

He’d stopped searching for God in the darkness. Could he still recite al-Fatiha?

Bismillahi rahman irraheem

In the Name of Allah—the Most Compassionate, Most Merciful.

All praise is for Allah—Lord of all worlds, the Most Compassionate, Most Merciful . . .

The verse came back more quickly than he’d guessed. Still, Hafez slowly shook his head at Abu Jadallah, who waited with expectant eyebrows. Someone younger snickered. All five of the men stood in the center of the cell, huddled next to each other across the concrete floor now covered with several straw mats. They faced Hafez, who had already climbed up to his cot, the effort growing less laborious. He lay on his side, studying each man for the first time.

Abu Jadallah led them in prayer, hand cupping his ear. "Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar . . ."

It was the noon prayer. Hafez glanced up at the window. He was aware that time was beginning to reassemble, like the shards of a broken plate.

Next to Abu Jadallah was the tall, lanky one. His lips moved in supplication, like a child trying hard not to recite the verses out loud with his parrot voice. He kept his eyes clenched shut. This must be Sadeeq. His head was shaved, and a long, pale scar cut through the black stubble of hair, like a path cleared through a forest. It started behind one ear and snaked up the side of his face to the middle of his forehead.

Hafez rubbed his own closely shaven head. They'd neglected his beard, which had turned wiry. He didn't want to see his reflection, with its record of the violence his jailors had committed so exquisitely upon him. He reached for his nose, a faint bump on the bridge. They'd broken it twice and thrown him a dirty towel to catch the blood. Perhaps it was better to have a stranger looking back at him in the mirror. Hafez Jaber felt like a ghost.

He gazed down on the men again. Beside Sadeeq was a shorter, middle-aged man who kept his head bowed the whole time. The remaining two prostrating in the line were young shabab; one appeared to be ostensibly older than the other, though they were close in height.

After they turned their heads from side to side, offering the final salutation, they scattered to their assigned cots. The older men sat on the edge, their bodies leaning forward to keep from hitting the roof of the top bunks. To Hafez, they looked like they were waiting for someone or something. Two bunk beds were positioned on each wall. The fourth wall was bare except for the window. A small transistor radio sat on its narrow ledge. He found himself desperate to claw up that wall and press his face against the glass and the natural light.

"Itfadal." The older of the shabab held up a pack of cigarettes to Hafez. One was already poking out for him to take.

Hafez lifted himself to a sitting position, his back against the wall. He propped up one leg to form a triangle, steadying his core, relieving the throbbing in his back. He peered down at the young man's offering, hesitated, and then carefully pulled the cigarette from the lip of the pack. He leaned forward to catch the flame of a lighter.

He inhaled, and the result was a harsh flush of smoke singeing his throat. Hafez hacked while the young man laughed.

“Take it easy, man! It’s been a while, yes?”

A memory suddenly surged in his brain. He was eleven years old, playing with his best friend, Mu’tassem. The migrant workers had come to harvest the grapes. No one was watching when Hafez held his very first cigarette between his lips, his grasp awkward as his friend lit it. A toothless worker had shown them how to roll the tobacco, and they’d stowed it near the dilapidated well on the other side of his family’s border wall. Hafez swallowed and doubled over, the smoke an awful invader of his lungs. He’d never tasted anything so nasty.

Before that memory morphed into something else from his past, he quickly snuffed it out, like the cigarette he shakily pinched between his lips.

“Ahlan wa sahlán.” The young man gave Hafez a two-finger salute with his own cigarette. “I am Nasser.” He pointed across the cell. “That’s my father. And that’s my brother Nijmy.”

Hafez wasn’t certain he’d heard correctly. He’d been repeatedly struck in the side of his head by the butt of a guard’s rifle, muddling the voices of his interrogators in his left ear.

Abu Nasser grinned at him, amused. “Alhamdulillah for my sons,” he declared. Hafez would later discover that Abu Nasser was captured in 1981, when his operation to hijack a tourist bus had been foiled. He’d already served nine years when both of his sons were arrested, in raids during the Intifada. Nasser was twenty-three years old, his brother Nijmy twenty-one.

I am happy and I am sad, Abu Nasser would later tell Hafez concerning this perverse reunion. Combined, they had already served twelve years.

Nijmy only nodded in Hafez’s direction as he reached for the radio. Upon closer scrutiny, their fraternal resemblance became obvious. They shared the same intensely black eyebrows—their father’s graying and scragglier—and boxy torsos. The younger one lacked the brighter disposition of his brother, a permanent scowl etched across his face.

“Welcome, my brother,” Abu Jadallah, the white-capped man,0 joined in.

“Welcome, my brother,” Sadeeq repeated from the toilet he now sat on, he elbows propped on his knees. A series of wet, gassy noises erupted. The odor that rose up and drifted toward him didn’t bother Hafez. He’d slept in his own shit for a year. “Welcome, my brother,” the parrot voice called out again.

“Do not mind Sadeeq,” Abu Jadallah told Hafez. “He’s had too many visits to the Zinzana.”

Hafez nodded, dread piercing his chest. They'd aptly named that dark place the Dungeon. How much blood and flesh had Sadeeq left behind, to mingle with new blood and flesh?

Nasser handed him a rusty can, half full of cigarette butts. "Tell us your name, brother."

Hafez tapped his ashes inside and took another drag. This time it seeped directly into his lungs, producing a welcome light-headedness. His name? Until this young man asked for it, Hafez realized how long it had been since he'd actually heard it. In the beginning, the first team of interrogators had said it often, as if they were his friends.

Yalla, ya Hafez. Tell us who your comrades are and things will be better for you.

What would your mother think, ya Hafez, if we brought her here to see your ass get fucked?

Then they stopped calling him by his name. He was *sharmoot* and *faggot*, the insults punctuated by a blow to his kidneys or a sharp jab between his shoulder blades.

As he collected the two simple syllables on his tongue, he tapped his ashes into the can again. "Hafez," he finally uttered.

"Hafez?" Abu Nasser stood. "Hafez Jaber?"

"Yoh!" his son Nasser cried. "You did that mission!"

For the first time, the younger one called Nijmy appeared interested; he lowered the volume of a music station, its static-laced songs momentarily muted. "Which mission?"

"That a'maleeya in Bayt al-Hawa, man! He took that soldier's leg," Nasser said, studying Hafez incredulously. "That was you, yes?"

Hafez nodded. The details of that attack made the hair on his neck stand. Would his jailers suddenly storm the cell and drag him back to the Zinzana?

"Only a leg?" Nijmy sneered, turning the volume up again. "A drop in the ocean, ya zalama."

"Mashallah!" Abu Nasser praised. "You're a hero, son."

Nasser joined his father. "Azeem, man!"

Abu Jadallah regarded him sadly. "Yes, yes. We heard all about you. You came all the way back from America to fight?"

The question sank deep into Hafez's chest; the old man's tone was not impressed. And it plunged Hafez into another kind of darkness: he would never see his daughter Intisar again. His body had been wrecked so badly that the thought of Intisar had mercifully been extinguished,

like the artificial light of the black box before the door slammed and clanked shut on him.

Hafez was gaining a new consciousness now that his body had been returned to him—at least for the present. There was always a worse punishment, he realized, while Abu Jadallah waited for him to respond. Worse than the Zinzana, as these men called it, was the irrevocable separation from his daughter. This truth was a new kind of darkness into which he'd plunged himself.