

SHAMAL DAYS

A NOVEL

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*For the generation of temporarily people
in the arabian gulf.*

Prologue

I am like a pelican of the wilderness;
I am like an owl of the desert.
I lie awake,
And am like a sparrow alone on the housetop.

(Psalm 102: 6–7)

It was a Friday of violent street protests and shelling in Gaza, and *Al Jazeera* aired another tape of threats from the Taliban. Though Abbas signed off on the edition calmly, despite the tension brewing within, he noticed that his fingers were shaking. All was not well.

He had gone through the wire copies with seasoned care and read through the lead story – cobbled together using details from different agencies – rewritten the lead headline and checked the edits. He knew that the troubles in Gaza and the threat of the Taliban were far off, but there was something intimate – under his own skin – that was beginning to crumble. Something was coming apart. Some peace was being disturbed.

It was a strange quandary. It was not that he no longer had any reason to live; on the contrary, he had discovered one. Looking at his trembling fingers for a brief moment, he thought of himself as a suicide bomber, who, with explosives strapped to his body, experienced a sudden urge to live.

Earlier in the day, a pregnant woman in her final trimester,

wearing a black abaya, had walked into a crowded marketplace in Haifa and blown herself up. Along with her and the baby in her womb, twelve men and five women – four of them American tourists – were shredded into unrecognizable pieces of burnt flesh.

Fatima – the woman who considered political issues more serious and precious than the promise of the baby in her womb – was a tall, honey-complexioned woman with fine features. Her suicide note, a video clip, was also sent to *Al Jazeera*, and was shown along with the horrifying visuals of thick, grey smoke hemmed in by deep orange flames. ‘This is my revenge against the Zionists. This is my statement that we will not compromise an inch of our soil. The Jews are out of Palestine!’

With her gruesome suicide, she instigated rowdy protests among hundreds of young Arabs – adrenaline gushed through their veins and passion blinded their eyes. Her boldness challenged them to give up their life as easily as flicking cigarette butts. On the other hand, she made Israelis shudder in cold fear and a colder unpredictability of life, which made them turn away from bustles of human crowd. She turned marketplaces into booby traps and drove xenophobia deep into people’s psyches.

Abbas looked out from his cabin. The end of every night in a newsroom was similar to the end of a funeral day. Silence overwhelmed sounds. The bursts of energy, so palpable early in the evening, had been spent, sapped by the hour. Finally, people left, and the handful that didn’t, sat either brooding or moving about in slow motion.

Every death was a joke, he had often felt. At the end of each day in the newsroom, the whole business of news seemed like a joke to him. Why do we want to know? Why do we want to be informed? Why do we want to let others know? He had been in the news media for over two decades now, and yet he himself was a man with no news for anyone.

Amid the silence, he began to hear his own pounding heart. If he put his wrists to his ears, he could hear his own pulse like the ticks of a wristwatch. All these years, he had guarded his heart with diligence, for he knew that from it sprang the difficulties of life. He had kept it in a cage – as if it were an Amazon parrot that would

blurt out all his secrets or remind him of his loneliness – and had hidden it safely in the bedroom wardrobe. It hardly rained in the desert country, but one spell of rain, and he knew that the arid, dull swathes of the desert could blossom with psychedelic flowers, as if reminiscing about a long-abandoned rhapsody. He imagined his heart to be the same as these flowering valleys in the desert. That's why he guarded it against its own potent inclinations to bloom into an iridescent spring at the slightest hint of a rare rain.

One of these days, Saddam Hussein would be arrested, if not killed, by the Americans. He had been on the run for several months, slipping in and out of sandy holes and underground hideouts in the very country he had terrorized, driving fear into the hearts of people with cold cruelty, and smearing the streets and the walls of fear-struck houses with a miasma of blood.

In the inevitable sweep of time, every dictator would come to face such an end. He would have to pay for the blood and tears he had made his people shed, the hearts he had broken. The shifts of seasons would bring him down, like Ozymandias, who called himself King of Kings. It could be sudden, like lightning out of a clear blue sky falling on his life-sized statue in the heart of the city, burning it top down or knocking it over. Or it could be slow, like a decaying cedar, poisoned by lavish doses of mercury.

What his sources across the region told Abbas was that it could happen any day. It didn't happen yesterday or the day before. He had waited for the news to break until the last minute, until he could afford to keep the press waiting. Saddam Hussein had been on the run for nearly ten months. He was somewhere near his hometown, Tikrit, hiding from the charging US troops.

Abbas remembered the day he interviewed him in his eerily silent palace in Baghdad. He remembered the rasping voice, the unmistakable air of megalomania, the palpable halo of impudence and arrogance. He remembered the fear and servility in the eyes of the ring of officers surrounding the man. And he also remembered, strangely, the passing shamal that picked up sheets of sand outside, beyond the highway, and played it like a fountain, dropping it suddenly, like a child losing interest in its toy all of a sudden. The officers had frisked Abbas almost naked, checked every slit in his

bag, made him wash his hands, and had disinfected him.

Four young officers with crew-cut hair, offered him qahwa and sumptuous Iraqi dates in a porcelain cup and saucer, respectively, before he was led into the presidential chamber a storey above. He had felt a slight trembling in his knees. ‘Intha fi kalam Arabic?’ he asked him in a low, throaty voice, but Abbas felt the words echo in the silent chamber. Dressed dapperly in a deep blue suit and sky-blue tie, Saddam smoked, incessantly – a Cohiba cigar; the smell of rotten eggs permeated the room. The brown cigar was poetically tucked between his middle and forefinger. He moved it often from his right hand to the left while smoking. Thick smoke, puffing out from his mouth along with his words, circled upwards.

He wished he could tuck away his memories into a box and bury it somewhere in the wilderness of the desert, where the next seasonal shamal, sweeping layers of sand upon sand, layered in grooves, would conceal it beyond the reach of any man. It would resurface only years later, along with perhaps the skeleton of an abandoned camel from long ago. Abbas imagined the skeleton lying like the keel of a wrecked ship, the animal’s enormous jaws and rows of teeth – sparkling white – rising above the mustard-yellow sand. The empty sockets of its eyes, round and smooth like holes on a desert course, gaped at the blue stretch of the sky. The skeleton resembled the remains of a lizard which had died unceremoniously behind a lampshade, only magnified. The shamal whirled theatrically, mixing the distinct whiff of parched sand with the depressing reek of emptiness.

No news from Operation Red Dawn. He decided to leave.

He didn’t wait for the first copy to arrive from the press downstairs. He got out of his cabin, shut the door without locking it, walked towards the lift, and pressed the button. And again, he noticed his fingers were shaking. Glancing at his own image on the *Mirror* of the lift, he pursed his lips and slipped his hands into the blazer’s side pocket to feel for the packet of Dunhill. Out of the lift, he walked towards the parking lot, paused to light a cigarette – the flame flickering to the tune of his unsteady fingers – and puffed out thin, blue smoke.

It was winter and yet, he felt hot.

By the time he reached his Pajero, his collar was wet with sweat. He threw down the cigarette, stamped on it and opened the car's door. Slumping into the driver's seat, he held on to the wheel, threw his head back and closed his eyes.

Only the other day, he laughed at his doctor who had asked him to stop drinking if he wanted his ravaged liver repaired. He had smirked: 'Who wants to live, doctor?'

But some time during the day today, while reading all the wire copies about yet another bloody Friday in the Strip, the thought – his desire to go in search of his own child – occurred to him. It came as a trickle, and by the time the edition had gone to press, his body had begun react to what his mind was refusing to acknowledge.

Of late, most of his thoughts had been morbid, lingering somewhere between forced forgetfulness and reluctant reminiscence. As he sat in the balcony of his apartment, the thought fell on him, pricking like cold rain. The very thought that he had been guarding his heart against.

Gradually, it pierced his flesh and touched his marrow. What qualifies or defines a man as a father: sperm or sweat? The carnal pleasures climaxing in a momentary gloopy ejaculation, or the sacrificial parenting with its painstaking, committed and unselfish love? Genitor or Pater?

SPERM. SWEAT. Five-letter words, both.

Abbas sat deeper into the chair in the balcony, sipped vodka, threw his head back and closed his eyes. The spiralling violence in Gaza didn't trouble him; the grainy videos of Taliban, shot in some monochrome hideout, did not rattle him either. Neither the impending fall of Saddam Hussein, nor the suicide of the pregnant woman affected him.

The thought slid into his mind. Droplets of sweat gleamed above his brows.

Sperm vs Sweat.

Like Ali vs Foreman.

Pleasure vs Hard Work.

He put himself in the first category and Bhaskar in the second.

Abbas vs Bhaskar.

How could he lay claim over his own child, Abbas wondered. He knew that DNA tests may help prove his claim as the biological father, but the heart doesn't always align with scientific inference. Does it? Love cannot be proved, or claimed, based on laboratory charts, nor can it be derived from the twisted, ladder-like strands of chromosomes.

He sipped again.

The cold drink worked its way down. The silence in the apartment had permeated into the balcony, but it was often broken by the many noises of quotidian traffic.

If sex leads to life, and sin leads to death, what about sinful sex? After all, what he had had with Ratnam was illegitimate. She had cheated on her husband. Bhaskar could have killed him in a fit of anger. But the sudden U-turn he took that day, fifteen years ago, was the worst punishment he could mete out to Abbas, the young colleague who had slept with his wife and impregnated her.

Was it a boy or a girl?

TWO YEARS after Bhaskar and Ratnam left the country for good, with Abbas's baby in Ratnam's womb, Abbas received a courier from India. He opened the brown envelope and a black-and-white photograph slipped out of it. Abbas picked up the photograph from the ground and read the word written in black ink: 'Thanks!'

He quickly turned over the photo. It was of a toddler, lying on its stomach, its head lifted. It was smiling.

It was his baby. His heart pounded. He smiled at it. 'My baby ... my baby!'

Along with the photograph came a tuft of soft hair. He took it in his hands, delicately, as if he were holding the baby, and kissed it. Then, he brought it close to his nose and smelt it, desperate to get a whiff of his baby's scent.

He left office early, and back in his apartment, he kept looking at the baby. Is it a boy or a girl? There was no way he could find out. All babies looked the same. In photographs in which they