

"Masterfully imagined and brilliantly written."

—Wesam Albayati, University of Virginia

Euphrates A Novel Dance

Hussein Hussein

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CHAPTER FIVE

A Meeting with the Stranger

WHILE ABDUL CONTINUED TO HEAL MANY IN HIS CLINIC, across the street Salim's condition was deteriorating. Salim's vivid nightmares plagued him more frequently. He was quite certain that the blonde woman of his nightmares had taken up residence in Monira's room, and now he spat at, cursed, and tried to bite anyone who approached his bed to offer help. During seizures, his body shook the mattress until he rolled on the floor like a hooked fish. At those times, his limbs became rigid and his face pale. His eyes rolled back, his body soaked with sweat, and his tongue filled his mouth. Salim's seizures often stunned his family and shocked any guest who happened to be in the home at the time.

Monira somehow seemed to accept Salim's erratic and frightening behavior with patience and a grace that other midwives found remarkable. Much more than a mother's acceptance, her ministrations seemed almost understanding. When a seizure hit, Monira would order his brothers to grab his arms and legs so that he could not injure himself, while she sat on his stomach as Salim bucked in resistance. In her unknown language, Monira would shout at him louder and louder. Then, she would raise both hands and slap each side of his face. Salim's fighting would increase. Then his mother's face would distort, forming an image of evil. She would slap Salim again, growling in her mysterious language, as if ordering some force to desist. Then Salim's flailing would lessen, and within minutes he would be calm.

Salim's pale face and half-opened eyes would slowly return to normal.

His mother would bring cold water for him to drink, and proceed to dry his sweat. She would patiently rub his forehead, hands and feet. Salim finally would regain his senses, and fall into an exhausted sleep almost immediately. Each of his brothers would slump back to his own room and fall asleep for hours. But there was no sleeping for Monira. She closed herself off in her fortune-telling room, crying and talking with someone, her tones steeped in muffled anger.

One morning following Salim's latest seizure, after his brothers left for work, Monira entered Salim's room in her usual cheerful way. "Would you like to sit with me in the front yard? The weather is nice today. I brought you a special treat: watermelon."

They lounged on comfortable chairs in the corner of the porch where the sun shone through the apple tree. Spring was waning as summer approached, yet still embraced the town. Light breezes blew from the north, carrying a perfume from the seeds of the date palm trees. The red and yellow flowers in Monira's garden delighted the senses. Salim and his mother were facing different directions, but she could clearly feel his sadness. Salim's thoughts touched his very soul as he watched the sun glisten through the tree branches.

"What are you thinking about, son?"

"Just thinking," Salim replied without turning toward her.

"Abdul is still looking forward to meeting with you," Monira confided. "I know he might be able to help us, and he likes you. He thinks you are a special person."

"No, Momma, listen to me, I don't need any help from anybody. I just need to be left alone. The Sheikh's bitter memory still tortures me; I can't forget it," Salim answered sorrowfully. "I don't want anyone to complicate my life anymore."

"Son, I know you suffered a very bad experience, but you need to get on your feet again. Forget what happened; start a new life. You know this very well: nobody in this world loves and cares for you like your mother. You have the right to enjoy a happy life. Don't withdraw from the world because of one unfortunate experience." His mother's voice was kind and confident.

"No, mother, no, just forget the idea. I hate people now. The only people

I can trust are my family.”

“Salim, listen to me, son. The Sheikh fooled everyone, not only you. He deceived the entire city by claiming piety and religious reverence, but he finally paid for his lies. We saw the kind of death that deceivers get. So who is the winner and who is the loser?”

“I am scared, okay? I fear I’ll suffer more pain. Even more!”

“Trust me, son. Just trust your mother and let me walk with you on the right path. You’re my beloved son, and I’ll search any means to make you happy. Just trust me, and you won’t regret it. Accept this opportunity. Accept Abdul as a friend. You won’t have to stay in his house. He is our neighbor. Try him ... please, for me?”

“How can he help?” Salim turned and faced his mother.

“I don’t know exactly how, but I know he can.”

“How can you be so sure about him or other people? It’s a terrible world filled with terrible people, Mother,” snapped Salim, glaring into his mother’s eyes.

“I wouldn’t say it if it weren’t true. Don’t worry, my dearest son. This time I will be near you. I will not allow anybody to harm you,” she said firmly.

Salim gazed at her. Then he sighed and softened. He spoke reluctantly.

“All right, I’ll do it for you. When do you want us to meet him?” Salim saw his mother’s face shining with excitement.

“Tonight, after he finishes work.”

Monira stood up and threw her arms around Salim. He returned her kiss before she crossed the street to make the appointment. That evening, Abdul opened his door to greet Salim and his mother. He shook hands with Salim, welcoming him warmly. This was Salim’s first time to see Abdul face to face, and enter his house. Abdul led them to a large space in the family rooms, not the examination room. There were two sofas and a rectangular table with three chairs. Salim and his mother sat down on one sofa, and Abdul pulled up a chair to face them.

“Salim, your mother explained everything about your troubles. I’ll try to help you,” said Abdul with confidence. “I’ve noticed how lonely you are. Life is not so bad, Salim. Most people are burdened with some kind of trouble,

but most rise on their feet and resume life. This is our nature. Every person you see at the market carries a secret burden, yet they find the strength to do a day's work, find someone to love, and live in peace. It will please me so much if you accept me as a friend."

Salim studied Abdul, then asked, "Tell me, sir, why bother to help me? What's your purpose, and what would you achieve?"

Abdul smiled broadly, and exchanged glances with Monira. "Salim, I can relate to the distrust you feel toward everyone. It's natural for anybody to withdraw, and even hate all people after a calamity like you went through. I won't answer your question with a lot of details, but let me tell you this, in our world, there are good and bad people, with good and bad intentions. To me, the good people with good intentions fear God, and anticipate meeting Him in the hereafter. They only achieve such a great goal by doing good things for others. I consider myself one of these good people. It makes me extremely happy to help people like you become happy. Is my answer enough to satisfy you?"

Salim thought that Abdul sounded sincere.

The healer went on, "All I'll ask you is this, trust me. Believe in me and learn everything about me, the same way I am going to trust you, believe in you, and learn everything about you. Now, I want you to discard your fear of me this minute. This is the first step," Abdul said firmly.

"I like that," Salim said, "but, how did you know what I was feeling? Can you see through me?"

"I can read your mind, Salim. I can feel your weakness and your strength. I can tell you how many times your heart beats a minute without touching your chest."

Abdul stood up and walked upstairs. He came back holding a necklace with three stones: two black, with a white one in the middle. Abdul held the necklace close to his chest. Then, he raised it in front of Salim's face and said in a very soft voice, "Salim, let's all stand up to pray."

Salim's mother stood beside her son. Abdul closed his eyes and began speaking in a strange tongue. Then Abdul and Monira both began reciting in a low tone the verses of the holy Qur'an. Salim was pleased to hear his mother

recite the long verses.

The three remained standing until the prayer was finished. Afterwards, Abdul kissed the necklace, and Monira did the same. Salim kissed it only after instructed to do so. Abdul placed the necklace around Salim's neck. The boy felt an electric charge streak throughout his body. Then, suddenly, his intense fear and fatigue vanished. The depression that had been so constant seemed to fade, giving rise to a new feeling that Salim decided must be hope.

"I do feel good!" Salim felt tears as he smiled. "Momma, I feel better already. Tell me, what happened? Is this temporary? Why is this happening to me? Who am I now? Something great happened to me. Please, someone must explain." Salim reached out and hugged his mother.

"I am asking you to be patient—everything in time," replied Abdul, putting his arm around Salim's shoulders. "You will learn what you want to know, but be patient. That necklace is your exorcist, your protection from all evil spirits."

That night Salim went to bed free of any disturbing thoughts. He did not talk in his sleep or jump out of bed screaming deliriously, as he had so frequently for the past year. His brothers enjoyed a good night's sleep without fears for their brother. Even Monira rested peacefully.

Salim was happy to have finally found someone other than his mother to depend on, someone who surrounded him with kindness, provided security and protection—a mature person to talk with anytime and about anything in his life. He could learn from Abdul's deep thoughts and remarkable experience. At the same time, Abdul had found what he had always been looking for: a young man who looked on him with respect, seeing him as a mentor, even as a father figure.

Abdul admired Salim, an exceptional spirit coping with so much misery and pain. Salim proved to be a willing, cooperative patient. Abdul was surprised to watch Salim demonstrate openness to his treatments and advice, as well as outstanding ability to learn the art of healing. Never before had Abdul experienced a young man who sought to learn without any objection, to listen without the filter of pride, and to practice healing arts with exceptional patience.



One afternoon while returning from school, Salim bumped into Nejat, who had been a Mullaiah he had known at the Sheikh's house. Nejat had been the first of the Mullaiahs sent to his bed there, and Salim remembered her feminine charms with relish. Salim could hardly recognize Nejat, for she had lost her youthful glow and girlish allure. In fact, Salim thought, she did not appear very healthy. Nejat stood unevenly as if one leg was injured, and she wore black mourning clothes.

Deciding to overlook anything distasteful, Salim greeted his former friend brightly, "Hey, Nejat, how've you been? What has happened to you? You look different. Are you all right?"

"Hi, Salim, how are you doing? I was ill for some time. I'm doing better now. My brother Aziz was killed about three months ago, and my family is ruined." Salim thought the girl was holding back tears, and he noticed her eyes shifting from street vendors to passersby. Salim wondered what or whom Nejat feared.

"I'm sorry to hear that. I was familiar with your brother; he used to frequent the Sheikh's house. What happened?"

"I can't tell you. I'm afraid that if I say, I might get killed myself."

Salim wanted to learn more, but decided to ease Nejat's tension, and changed the subject. "Well, what are you doing these days? Are you still in the Sheikh's house?"

"No, I'm working on my own as a Mullaiah. Things changed entirely after the Sheikh's death, and most of the Mullaiahs quit their careers. They moved back to their homes, regained their place in their families. I went back home, also, but I like entertaining people with dancing and singing. I have been blessed with a good voice and townspeople frequently ask me to do services for them."

Salim looked with a slight smile into her sad eyes, and asked, "Are you married now?"

Nejat grinned broadly and replied, "To your relief, I'm engaged. But, I bet you still remember those great nights in bed at the Sheikh's house, don't

you?”

“I loved them, and you did too, Nejat,” he laughed.

“What are you doing these days—still going to school?” Nejat asked, studying his handsome features.

“Yeah, I have less than a year to finish high school.”

“Good for you. Listen, I also have another job. I own a little grocery store on the north side, near the General Health Clinic. You should come to see me, and we’ll talk more.”

“Wonderful, I’ll be seeing you, girl.”

The sight of Nejat upset Salim. She reminded him of his painful past. But he decided to visit her anyway, hoping to learn more about the Sheikh’s mysterious death, and his strange life, since Nejat had lived longer than Salim at the Sheikh’s house. Salim also reminisced about those wanton nights with Nejat, hopeful that he could resume a relationship with her. But Salim’s fantasies were not destined to happen.

Nejat refused to speak about the Sheikh’s murder, and she declined his advances, talking fondly of her engagement. Nejat seemed proud of how she had matured and made it clear that she now regretted her past. Nejat also encouraged Salim to repent, insisting he should join a group called the Dervishes, which she described as devout. She stressed the importance of affiliating himself with those who revered Islam, to learn about the depth of his faith, and become a scholar like the Sheikh had been.

“I don’t wish for you to be like the Sheikh, okay?”

“I’m talking about his fantastic knowledge,” she explained.

“But, I don’t need such great knowledge. Why do I need it?”

“Salim, on this point you’re totally wrong. Just forget about becoming the most respected Muslim in the whole town. Forget about giving your family an honorable title by being a scholar and revered among your brothers. Only think about the horrible day when every creature will be put to a severe account in the hereafter. Imagine yourself among the pious believers sent to live eternally in paradise. Wouldn’t that be an honorable life—something worth doing?”

A week later, when Salim’s next visited Nejat’s store, she introduced him

to an old, white-bearded man with handsome features, Hajj Ajil. The Hajj was wearing a plain religious cloak and appeared to be in his early sixties. His soft voice and polite demeanor did not impress Salim much. It was all too easy for Salim to envision the Hajj as the hateful Sheikh.

Surprisingly, the old man didn't talk about religion. He only asked Salim about his school, the educational system, and whether the teachers were still as qualified as when the Hajj was young. Then, the man asked Salim about his family and said how everyone in the city appreciated his mother for helping women deliver their children. The man wanted to know whether Salim intended to go to college after finishing high school. The Hajj asked other questions, but nothing too personal. Then Salim listened as the Hajj recalled memories about Nasiriya fifty years earlier.

"There were not many houses built then, and I still remember the day when your father and mother got married. Actually, I'm older than your father," the Hajj remarked jokingly. "It was about thirty years ago, when your father, after proposing to your mother, built the house for her wedding gift. Everyone in the city knew about it; we were a small community. We all knew what was going on in each other's lives. He bought his truck after building the house. I still remember that beautiful yellow truck, brand new, the first truck ever to arrive in the city. At the time, only a few cars ran on the streets of Nasiriya, and townspeople often poked heads out their windows to look at the passing miracle on the street. It was something astonishing for many people to see the cars drive by."

"Do you really know my father?" asked the pleased Salim.

"What? Are you kidding? And who didn't know your father then? Who doesn't know Wissam, that tall, handsome guy with broad shoulders who had everything then that anyone could wish to have! He was young, tough, and coins filled his pockets. Your father was one of the city team's best soccer players. He was recruited to play with the English officers' team at their camp, making friends among them. And, yes, he was tough. At one match where I was a spectator, he was fouled by a dirty player, an officer who injured Wissam's leg. Wissam sprang to his feet and hit the officer, knocking him flat on his back. He was given the red card and had to leave the match.

His friend, the English colonel, sitting in the stand, liked what your father did to that officer; and was sorry to see him leaving the game. Did you know that your father was such a good soccer player in his youth?"

"Yes, and we still have some of his trophies."

"I bet he would still have them! Your father was a popular man in town, and before his marriage to your mother, he was fun-loving. He loved to go to Basra, where he was often seen in the nightclubs, sitting among a bunch of artists, drinking and conversing. Some people swore they saw him light up one of the artist's cigarettes with a 1,000 dinar bill. He was something, your father!"

Back at home, an excited Salim related Hajj Ajil's stories.

Monira looked at her son and said, "Yeah, your father was all that and more! Thank God he finally settled down with one woman, me." Salim and his mother both laughed.

Salim became a frequent visitor to Nejat's store, where he listened ardently to Hajj Ajil, who kept telling him anecdotes about the city before his birth. "One time in the late fifties, after King Faisal was crowned, he toured Iraqi cities and visited Nasiriya. The king spoke with the townspeople through microphones from the balcony of the 'Sarai,' the Governors Palace, surrounded by local authorities. The citizens cheered the king fanatically. Then he left the palace and went on a little city tour. His car had to pass over the old wooden bridge while Wissam and some friends were swimming, and diving from the bridge into the river. As they saw the motor cavalcade, your father and the other boys got out of the water and stood in the middle of the bridge, cheering the King. They clustered around his car, and accidently, the King's car ran over Wissam's foot. No bones were broken, but the king ordered his driver to stop. The king got out seeing if the boy, your father, was injured. But Wissam politely bent his head down and kissed the King's hand. The king hugged your father, and gave him his personal card, inviting him to visit at the palace in Baghdad. I don't know whether your father made that trip or not, do you?"

"I really have no idea."

"If he had made that visit, there would have been a picture taken with

the King. Have you ever seen a picture like that at home?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Anyway, Wissam was a lucky man, and if I were him, I would have gone to see the King!”

Among the talks with the Hajj, Salim sometimes heard interesting facts about the history of Islam. The Hajj told how the Prophet Mohammad, alone, and by Almighty Allah’s will, established such a powerful religion that Muslims count in the billions nowadays. He told about the Prophet emerging from Mecca to Al-Medina after his followers were subjected to sanctions and torture by unbelievers. The Hajj gradually introduced Salim to life’s wonders within Islam. He told Salim how, if he joined the Dervishes, he would receive great peace of mind and live happily among his brother Muslims. Salim felt a genuine affection for this decent man and listened intently. He also began reading books the Hajj brought him—texts about Islam’s principles and virtues, and interpretation of the Qur’an.

Eventually, Salim brought the Hajj Ajil to meet his family. The old man assured them Salim would be in good hands, and the religious group would be greatly blessed by Allah for raising this talented boy to become a pious believer. During the meeting, Salim’s older brother Nadeem expressed concern about rumors of the Dervishes’ excesses. Nadeem said, “I hear that some of the Dervishes are dealing in usury. And in Islam, usury is considered a great sin.”

The Hajj responded politely, “Frankly, I have no knowledge of those people. Do you know their names? Do you know who are they? If I could get their names, we could investigate.”

“I really don’t know their names. People just say they are the Dervishes. If so, then the Dervishes have shown hard-heartedness towards the city’s impoverished people. Some say the Dervishes have lent them money, but they could not pay off on time. I saw the lenders knocking on doors, demanding payment in public. The lenders rejected their requests for a little more time to pay. Instead, they barged inside the house, taking their personal belongings by force. I was left wondering about the kind of faith practiced by these supposed Muslim brothers.”

“If anything like that had ever happened, I’m very sure that those people were not among our group,” the Hajj responded. “We have donated thousands of dinars to help impoverished people. We frequently buy food, clothes, shoes, and toys for the poor. Each Thursday night we provide a bounty of food for the hungry at the Mosque. We do much better than taking poor people’s belongings. Usury is a sin, and we don’t wish to anger Almighty Allah by committing the great sin, and to be punished in the fires of Hell.”

“I hope that I am wrong” Nadeem replied.

“I must introduce Salim to other brother Dervishes,” the Hajj explained. “Will you give your permission? We want to see your younger brother Salim getting on with his duties among the Dervishes.”

“It’s all right, if it suits Salim,” his mother said.

Salim nodded his head agreeably.

The following week, Salim told Abdul that he had joined the Dervishes to further his religious education. Abdul was devastated. In extreme fury, he sprang to his feet and began upbraiding him. “Why would you join the Dervishes without consulting with me? Why would you take the advice of a man you met on the street without asking advice from the doctor who has taken you into his personal care? How could an intelligent person like you be so stupid, Salim? Why? Why did you do such bad things to hurt yourself and your family while we have desperately tried to relieve your misery? What happened to you? Tell me? What have they told you?

“What drew you to them? Was it their atrocities to Allah’s religion and to Nasiriya’s people? Or are you just so reckless, so careless or maybe heartless—and I didn’t know? How could you be so naïve ... so weak ... to let these evil men laugh at you like that? My God, you’ve hurt me, Salim—deeply. You backed off on our pledge and you hurt my pride, your family’s pride, and the pride of every honest person in the city! What happened to our promise? Hadn’t we vowed to be truthful to each other? No, Salim, you have hurt us all. Why? How could you do such things to yourself? How can you face our neighbors after you join those roaches?”

Salim took a step back and stood in shock. He'd known Abdul to be a wise, calm, and mature man. Now—witnessing him so distraught—so burning in rage, Salim slumped motionless, eyes downcast.

"I didn't know all that, Abdul," he uttered weakly. "I didn't know I was wrong to listen to the Hajj. I'm sorry. I apologize for not letting you know. Hajj Ajil was my father's friend, who beautified the Qur'an and Islam. I believed him. He knew my father, and I trusted him for that. I thought I could become a knowledgeable believer. I thought it might please you. I wanted to ... surprise you."

"Ajil is your example of piety?" Abdul snarled. "You don't know Ajil. Do you know that when Ajil went to Mecca for Hajj, he bought merchandise—electronic tools and fine rugs—to sell at a profit when he returned to Nasiriya? That is Ajil's faith."

Salim stood in shamed silence. Then he asked Abdul, "What should I do to get out?"

The healer sadly shook his head. "There is no getting out; don't you know that, Salim? Once in, you are a Dervish for life."

"What will happen if I leave?" Salim asked fearfully.

"You cannot leave. The Dervishes consider leaving an insult to their faith. They will hurt you. But, having acted so foolishly, you deserve all that, Salim. Why would a loving person like you want to be among those thieves? They are deceivers, usurers, and killers."

Tears formed in Salim's eyes. "I'm so sorry. Please forgive me. I'm in terrible trouble now."

"Just blame yourself for your trouble," Abdul said soberly. "And, if you end up dead, no one can change that, Salim. You failed me. We had promised each other to be truthful, hadn't we? How could you not discuss such a decision with me before stepping into the abyss? I still can't believe that you could do that to yourself—and to me. Now, it is too late to turn back. Let's see where this road takes you, Salim. I will be near you, though I'm not sure what I can do for you. We'll see."

Abdul sighed, his eyes still burning with sadness and chagrin. He and Salim stood, separated by generations and years of study in the ways of God and man. The walls of the room were stained with desperate silence.