

As long as he can remember he has had a sense of himself as prince of the house, and of his mother as his dubious promoter and anxious protector.

J. M. Coetzee, *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*

Esma

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My mother died twice. I promised myself I would not let her story be forgotten, but I could never find the time or the will or the courage to write about it. That is, until recently. I don't think I'll ever become a real writer and that's quite all right now. I've reached an age at which I'm more at peace with my limitations and failures. But I had to tell the story, even if only to one person. I had to send it into some corner of the universe where it could float freely, away from us. I owed it to Mum, this freedom. And I had to finish it this year. Before he was released from prison.

In a few hours I'll take the sesame *halva* off the hob, let it cool by the sink and kiss my husband, pretending not to notice the worried look in his eyes. Then I'll leave the house with my twin daughters – seven years old, four minutes apart – and drive them to a birthday party. They'll quarrel on the way, and, for once, I'll not scold them. They'll wonder if there will be a clown at the party, or, better still, a magician.

'Like Harry Houdini,' I'll say.

'Harry who?'

'Who-deeny, she said, you silly!'

'Who's that, Mummy?'

That will hurt. A pain like a bee sting. Not much on the surface, but a growing burning within. I'll realize, as I have done on so many occasions before, that they don't know anything about their family history because I have told them so little. One day, when they're ready. When I'm ready.

After I have dropped off the girls, I'll chat for a while with the other mothers who have shown up. I'll remind the party host that one of my daughters is allergic to nuts, but, since it is difficult to tell the twins apart, it is better to keep an eye on both of them and make

sure neither gets any food with nuts, including the birthday cake. That is a bit unfair to my other daughter, but between siblings that does happen sometimes, the unfairness, I mean.

I'll then get back into my car, a red Austin Montego that my husband and I take turns driving. The journey from London to Shrewsbury is three and a half hours. I may have to make a pit stop just before Birmingham. I will keep the radio on – that will help to chase the ghosts away, the music.

There have been many times when I thought of killing him. I have made elaborate plans that involved guns, poison or, better yet, a flick-knife – a poetic justice, of sorts. I have also thought of forgiving him, fully and truly. In the end, I haven't achieved either.



When I arrive in Shrewsbury, I'll leave the car in front of the railway station and take the five-minute walk to the grimy prison building. I'll pace the street or lean against the wall across from the main entrance, waiting for him to come out. I don't know how long this will take. And I don't know how he'll react when he sees me. I haven't visited him for more than a year. I used to go regularly, but as the day of his release drew closer I just stopped.

At some point the massive door will open from inside and he'll walk out. He'll gaze up at the overcast sky, unused to seeing this vast expanse above his head after fourteen years of incarceration. I imagine him blinking at the daylight, like a creature of the dark. In the meantime, I'll stay put, counting up to ten or one hundred or three thousand. We won't embrace. We won't shake hands. A mutual nod and the thinnest of greetings in small, strangulated voices. Once we get to the station, he'll hop into the car. I'll be surprised to see how athletic he is. He's still a young man, after all.

Should he want to have a cigarette, I won't object, even though I hate the smell and don't let my husband smoke in the car or in the house. We'll drive across the English countryside, passing through quiet meadows and open fields. He'll inquire about my daughters. I'll tell him they're fine, growing fast. He'll smile, though he hasn't the slightest idea about parenthood. I won't ask him anything in return.

I will have brought a cassette along to play. The greatest hits of ABBA – all the songs that my mother used to hum while cooking or cleaning or sewing. ‘Take a Chance on Me’, ‘Mamma Mia’, ‘Dancing Queen’, ‘The Name of the Game’ . . . for she’ll be watching us, I’m sure. Mothers don’t go to heaven when they die. They get special permission from God to stay around a bit longer and watch over their children, no matter what has passed between them in their brief mortal lives.

Back in London, once we reach Barnsbury Square, I’ll search for a parking space, grumbling to myself. It will start to rain – tiny crystal drops. Finally, we’ll find a spot into which I’ll squeeze the car after a dozen manoeuvres. I can deceive myself that I’m a good driver, until it comes to parking. I wonder if he’ll scoff at me for being a typical woman driver. He would have done so once.

We’ll walk together towards the house, the street quiet and bright behind and ahead of us. For a fleeting moment we’ll compare our surroundings with our old home in Hackney, the house on Lavender Grove, marvelling at how different things seem now, and how time has moved forward, even when we couldn’t.

Once inside, we’ll take off our shoes and put on slippers – classic charcoal for him, a pair of my husband’s, and for me burgundy slippers with pompoms. His face will crumple when he sees them. To put his mind at ease, I’ll tell him they are a present from my daughters. He’ll relax, now realizing that they are not *hers*. The resemblance is merely coincidental.

From the doorway he’ll watch me make tea, which I’ll serve without milk and with lots of sugar, that is, if gaol hasn’t changed his habits. Then I’ll take out the sesame *halva*. We’ll sit together by the window, with porcelain cups and plates in our hands, like genteel strangers, watching it rain on the violas in my back garden. He’ll compliment me on my cooking, saying how much he has missed sesame *halva*, though he’ll politely decline another serving. I’ll tell him I follow Mum’s recipe to the letter, but it never turns out as good as hers. That will shut him up. We’ll lock gazes, the silence heavy in the air. Then he’ll excuse himself, saying that he feels tired and would like to rest, if that is all right. I’ll show him to his room and close the door, slowly.

I'll leave him there. In a room in my house. Neither far away nor too close. I'll keep him confined within those four walls, between the hate and the love, none of which I can help but feel, for ever trapped in a box in my heart.

He is my brother.

He, a murderer.

Names Like Sugar Cubes

A Village near the River Euphrates, 1945

When Pembe was born, Naze was so sad she forgot about all she had suffered for the previous twenty-six hours, the blood oozing between her legs, and tried to get up and walk away. At least, that's what everyone said – everyone present in the delivery room on that blustery day.

As much as she might have wanted to leave, however, Naze could not go anywhere. To the surprise of the women in the room and her husband, Berzo, waiting in the courtyard, she was forced back into bed by a new wave of contractions. Three minutes later the head of a second baby appeared. Lots of hair, reddish skin, all wet and wrinkled. Another girl, only smaller.

This time Naze did not attempt to run away. She gave a wisp of a sigh, buried her head in the pillow and turned towards the open window, as if straining to hear fate's whisper in the wind, as mild as milk. If she listened attentively, she thought, she might hear an answer from the skies. After all, there must be a reason, a justification unbeknownst to her but surely obvious to Allah, as to why He had given them two more daughters when they already had six, and still not a single son.

Thus Naze pursed her lips like a folded hem, determined not to say a word until Allah had explained, fully and convincingly, the motive behind His actions. Even in sleep her mouth was clamped tight. During the next forty days and forty nights she did not speak a word. Not when she was cooking chickpeas with sheep's-tail fat, nor when she was giving her six other daughters baths in a large round tin bucket, nor even when she was making cheese with wild garlic and herbs, nor when her husband asked her what she would like to name the babies. She remained as silent as the graveyard by the hills where

all her ancestors were buried and where she, too, would some day be laid to rest.

It was a rugged, remote Kurdish village with no roads, no electricity, no doctor, no school. Barely any news from the outside world permeated its sheath of seclusion. The aftermath of the Second World War, the atomic bomb . . . The villagers hadn't heard of any of this. And yet they were convinced that strange things happened in the universe, that is, beyond the shores of the Euphrates. The world being what it was, there was no point in wishing to discover it. Everything there had been, and everything there ever would be, was already present here and now. Human beings were ordained to be sedentary, like trees and boulders. Unless you happened to be one of these three: a wandering mystic who had lost his past, a fool who had lost his head or a *majnun* who had lost his beloved.

Dervishes, eccentrics and lovers aside, for the rest of the people nothing was astonishing, and everything was as it should be. Whatever took place in one corner was heard, at once, by everyone else. Secrets were a luxury only the rich could afford, and in this village, named Mala Çar Bayan, 'House of Four Winds', no one was rich.

The village elders were three small-statured, forlorn-looking men who spent most of their time in the sole tea house contemplating the mysteries of Divine Wisdom and the stupidities of politicians while they sipped tea out of glasses as thin as eggshells, as fragile as life. When they heard about Naze's oath of silence, they decided to pay her a visit.

'We came to warn you that you're about to commit sacrilege,' said the first man, who was so old the slightest breeze could have knocked him down.

'How can you expect Allah the Almighty to reveal His ways to you when He is known to have spoken only to prophets?' remarked the second man, who had but a few teeth left in his mouth. 'Surely there was no woman among them.'

The third man waved his hands, as stiff and gnarled as tree roots. 'Allah wants to hear you talk. If it had been any other way, He would have made you into a fish.'

Naze listened, now and then dabbing her eyes with the ends of her

headscarf. For a moment, she imagined herself as a fish – a big, brown trout in the river, its fins glittering in the sun, its spots surrounded by pale haloes. Little did she know that her children and grandchildren would, at different times in their lives, feel attached to various kinds of fish, and an affinity with the kingdom under the water would run in the family for generations to come.

‘Speak!’ said the first old man. ‘It’s against nature for your kind to be quiet. What goes against nature goes against Allah’s will.’

But still Naze said nothing.

When the honourable guests had left, she approached the cradle where the twins were sleeping. The shimmer from the lighted hearth painted the room a golden yellow, giving the babies’ skins a soft glow, almost angelic. Her heart mellowed. She turned to her six daughters, who had lined up beside her, from the tallest to the shortest, and said, in a voice both hoarse and hollow: ‘I know what I’ll name them.’

‘Tell us, Mama!’ the girls exclaimed, delighted to hear her speak again.

Naze cleared her throat and said, with a note of defeat, ‘This one will be Bext and the other, Bese.’

‘Bext and Bese,’ the girls echoed in unison.

‘Yes, my children.’

Upon saying this, she smacked her lips, as if the names had left a distinct taste on her tongue, salty and sour. Bext and Bese in Kurdish, Kader and Yeter in Turkish, Destiny and Enough in every language possible. This would be her way of declaring to Allah that even though, like a good Muslim, she was resigned to her fate, she had had her fill of daughters and the next time she was pregnant, which she knew would be the last time because she was forty-one years old and past her prime now, He had to give her a son and nothing but a son.

That same evening, when their father came home, the girls rushed to give him the good news: ‘Papa! Papa! Mama is talking.’

Pleased as he was to hear his wife speaking again, Berzo’s face clouded over when he learned about the names she had chosen for the newborns. Shaking his head, he remained silent for few awkward minutes.

‘Destiny and Enough,’ he muttered finally, as though to himself.

‘But you haven’t named the babies, really. You’ve sent a petition to the skies.’

Naze stared down at her feet, studying the toe poking out of a hole in her woollen sock.

‘Names hinting at resentful feelings might offend the Creator,’ Berzo continued. ‘Why draw His wrath upon us? Better stick to ordinary names and stay on the safe side.’

Thus saying, he announced that he had alternatives in mind: Pembe and Jamila – Pink and Beautiful. Names like sugar cubes that melted in your tea, sweet and yielding, with no sharp edges.

Though Berzo’s decision was final, Naze’s choices were not easily discarded. They would linger in everyone’s memory, tied to the family tree like two flimsy kites caught in some branches. Thus the twins came to be known by both sets of names: Pembe Kader and Jamila Yeter – Pink Destiny and Enough Beauty. Who could tell that one of these names would some day be printed in newspapers all around the world?

Colours

A Village near the River Euphrates, 1953

Since she was a little girl, Pembe had adored dogs. She loved the way they could see into people's souls, even in deep sleep through closed eyes. Most grown-ups thought dogs did not understand much, but she believed that was not true. They understood everything. They were just forgiving.

There was one sheepdog in particular that she treasured. Droopy ears, long muzzle, a shaggy coat of black, white and tan. He was a good-natured creature that liked to chase butterflies and play catch with twigs, and ate almost everything. They called him Kitmir, but also Quto or Dodo. His name changed all the time.

One day, out of the blue, the animal started to act strangely, as if possessed by a mischievous *djinni*. When Pembe tried to pat him on his chest, he lunged at her with a growl and bit her hand. More than the shallow cut he caused, it was the change in the dog's character that was worrying. Lately there had been an outbreak of rabies in the region and the three village elders insisted that she go to a doctor, except there was none within sixty miles.

So it was that the girl Pembe, with her father, Berzo, took first a minibus, and then a bus, to the big city, Urfa. The thought of spending the day away from her twin, Jamila, sent a chill down her spine, but she was equally delighted to have her father all to herself. Berzo was a solidly built, broad-boned man with strong features and a large moustache, the hands of a peasant, and hair greying at the temples. His deep-set hazel eyes were kindly, and apart from the times when he displayed a temper, he had a calm disposition – even if it saddened him profoundly not to have a son to carry his name to the ends of the earth. Though a man of few words and fewer smiles, he communicated with his children better than his wife did. In return, his eight

daughters competed for his love, like chickens pecking at a handful of grain.

Travelling to the city was fun and exciting; waiting at the hospital was neither. Lined up in front of the doctor's door were twenty-three patients. Pembe knew the exact number because, unlike the other eight-year-old girls in her village, she and Jamila went to school – a decrepit, one-storey building in another village forty minutes' walk away – and could count. There was a stove in the middle of the classroom that spurted more smoke than heat. Younger children sat to one side of it, older children to the other. As the windows were rarely opened, the air inside was stale and as thick as sawdust.

Before starting school Pembe had taken it for granted that everyone in the world spoke Kurdish. Now she understood that wasn't the case. Some people didn't know Kurdish at all. Their teacher, for instance. He was a man with short-cut, thinning hair and a doleful look in his eyes, as if he missed the life he had left behind in Istanbul and resented having been sent to this forsaken place. He got upset when the students didn't understand what he was saying or made a joke in Kurdish at his expense. He had recently introduced a set of rules: whoever uttered a word in Kurdish would have to stand on one foot by the blackboard with their back turned to their classmates. Most students stayed there for a few minutes and were then pardoned on the condition that they didn't repeat the mistake; but from time to time someone was forgotten in the course of the day and had to spend hours in the same position. The rule had generated opposite reactions in the twins. While Jamila clammed up completely, refusing to speak any language whatsoever, Pembe tried hard to excel in Turkish, determined to learn the teacher's language and, through that, to reach his heart.

Meanwhile, their mother, Naze, didn't see the point in their going to such lengths to master words and numbers that would be of no use, since they would all get married before long. But her husband insisted that his daughters be educated.

'Every day they walk all that way back and forth. Their shoes are wearing out,' Naze grumbled. 'And what for?'

'So that they can read the constitution,' said Berzo.

‘What’s a constitution?’ she asked suspiciously.

‘The law, you ignorant woman! The big book! There are things that are allowed, things that are forbidden, and if you don’t know the difference you’re in deep trouble.’

Naze clucked her tongue, still not convinced. ‘How’s that going to help my daughters get married?’

‘What do you know? If one day their husbands treat them badly, they won’t have to put up with it. They can take their children and leave.’

‘Oh, where will they go?’

Berzo hadn’t thought about that. ‘They can seek shelter in their father’s home, of course.’

‘Uh-hm, is that why they trudge so far every day and fill their minds with that stuff? So that they can return to the house where they were born?’

‘Go and bring me tea,’ Berzo snapped. ‘You talk too much.’

‘Perish the thought,’ Naze murmured as she headed to the kitchen. ‘No daughter of mine will abandon her husband. If she does, I’ll beat the hell out of her, even if I’m dead by then. I’ll come back as a ghost!’

That threat, empty and impetuous though it was, would become a prophecy. Even long after she had passed away, Naze would come back to haunt her daughters, some more than others. After all, she was a stubborn woman. She never forgot. And she never forgave – unlike dogs.

Now, as they waited at the hospital, Pembe gaped with her child’s eyes at the men and women lined up in the corridor. Some were smoking, some eating the flat breads they had brought from home, some nursing wounds or wailing in pain. Over everything hung a heavy stench – of sweat, disinfectant and cough syrup.

As she observed the state of each patient, the girl felt a growing admiration for the doctor she had yet to meet. The man who could provide a cure for so many diseases must be an extraordinary person, she decided. A seer. A magus. An ageless wizard with miraculous fingers. By the time it was their turn, she was brimming with curiosity and eagerly followed her father into the doctor’s room.

Inside, everything was white. Not like the suds that formed on the surface of the fountain when they washed their clothes. Not like the snow that piled up outside on a winter's night or like the whey they mixed with wild garlic to make cheese. It was a white she had never seen before – unyielding and unnatural. A white so cold it made her shiver. The chairs, the walls, the floor tiles, the examination table, even the cups and scalpels were awash with this no-colour. Never had it entered Pembe's mind that white could be so disconcerting, so distant, so dark.

What surprised her even more was that the doctor was a woman – but different from her mother, her aunts, her neighbours. Just as the room was swathed in an absence of colour, the doctor in front of her eyes had none of the female qualities with which Pembe was familiar. Underneath her long coat she sported a knee-length taupe skirt, stockings of the finest and softest wool, and leather boots. She wore glasses so square they gave her the appearance of a grumpy owl. Not that the child had ever seen a grumpy owl but surely this was what one must look like. How different she was from the women who worked in the fields from dawn to dusk, got wrinkles from squinting in the sun and bore children until they had enough sons. Here was a female who was used to having people, including men, hang on her every word. Even Berzo had taken off his cap and dropped his shoulders in her presence.

The doctor gave the father and daughter no more than a grudging glance. It was as if their mere existence tired – even saddened – her. They were clearly the last people she wanted to treat at the end of this arduous day. She did not talk to them much, letting the nurse ask the important questions. *What was the dog like? Was he foaming at the mouth? Did he act strangely when he saw water? Had he bitten anyone else in the village? Was he examined afterwards?* The nurse spoke very fast, as if there was a clock ticking somewhere and time was running short. Pembe was glad her mother had not come with them. Naze wouldn't have been able to follow the conversation, and would have made all the wrong assumptions, prickly with apprehension.

While the doctor wrote out a prescription, the nurse gave the child an injection in the stomach that sent her into a full-throated wail. She

was still crying hard when they stepped out into the corridor, where the attention of the strangers worsened her distress. It was at that point that her father, with his head straight, shoulders erect – Berzo again – whispered in her ear that if she would be quiet and behave like the good girl that she was, he would take her to the cinema.

Pembe instantly fell silent, eyes glittering with expectation. The word ‘cinema’ sounded like a wrapped sweet: she didn’t know what was inside, but she was sure it had to be something nice.



There were two theatres in the city. The larger one was used more by visiting politicians than by local performers and musicians. Before and after the elections crowds of men gathered there and fiery speeches were made, promises and propaganda circling the air like buzzing bees.

The second venue was far more modest but just as popular. It showed films of varying quality, thanks to the tastes of its owner, who preferred adventures to political tirades and paid smugglers large commissions to bring him new films, along with tobacco, tea and other contraband. Thus the people of Urfa had seen a number of John Wayne Westerns, *The Man from the Alamo* and *Julius Caesar*, as well as *The Gold Rush* and other films involving the funny little man with the dark moustache.

On this day there was a black-and-white Turkish film, which Pembe watched from the beginning to the end with her mouth slightly agape. The heroine was a poor, pretty girl in love with a boy who was very rich, very spoiled. But he changed. Such was the magic of love. While everyone – starting with the boy’s parents – disparaged the young lovers and connived to separate them, they would meet secretly under a willow tree on the banks of a river. There they would hold hands and sing songs as sad as a sigh.

Pembe loved everything about the cinema – the ornate foyer, the heavy, draped curtains, the thick, welcoming darkness. She couldn’t wait to tell Jamila about this new wonder. On the bus back home, she sang the film’s theme song over and over.

*Your name is carved on my destiny,
Your love flows in my veins
If you ever smile at someone else
I'd kill myself or grief would kill me first*

As Pembe swayed her hips and fluttered her hands, the other passengers clapped and cheered. When finally she fell silent, more out of weariness than out of any sense of propriety, Berzo laughed, his eyes creasing around the edges.

‘My talented girl,’ he said, with a touch of pride in his voice.

Pembe buried her face in her father’s broad chest, inhaling the lavender oil that perfumed his moustache. She didn’t know it, but this would be one of the happiest moments of her life.

★

When they returned home, they found Jamila in a dreadful state – eyes swollen, face puffed up. All day she had waited by the window, fidgeting with her hair, chewing her bottom lip. Then, suddenly and without reason, she had unleashed a terrible cry. No matter how hard her mother and sisters tried to calm her down, she hadn’t stopped wailing.

‘When Jamila started to weep, what time was it?’ Pembe queried.

Naze gave this some thought. ‘Sometime in the afternoon, I suppose. Why are you asking?’

Pembe offered no answer. She had learned what she wanted to know. She and her twin, though miles apart, had cried out simultaneously at the moment of the injection. People said twins were two bodies with one soul. But they were more than that. They were one body, one soul. Destiny and Enough. When one closed her eyes, the other one went blind. If one hurt, the other bled. And when one of them had nightmares, it was the other’s heart that pounded inside her chest.

That same evening, Pembe showed Jamila the dance steps she had seen in the film. Taking turns to mimic the heroine, they twirled, kissed and hugged like a couple in love, giggling.

‘What’s all this noise?’

It was Naze, her voice stiff with disdain. She had been winnowing rice on a flat tray.

Pembe's eyes widened with resentment. 'We were just dancing.'

'And why would you do that?' Naze retorted. 'Unless you two have decided to turn yourselves into harlots.'

Pembe didn't know what a harlot was but dared not ask. She felt a surge of resentment course through her – why couldn't her mother enjoy the songs as the passengers on the bus had done? Why were perfect strangers more tolerant than one's closest kin? She was still contemplating this question when she heard Jamila take a step forward, as if to own up to the guilt, and murmur, 'We're sorry, Mama. We won't do it again.'

Pembe glared at her twin, feeling betrayed.

'It's for your own good that I say what I say. If you laugh too much today, you'll be crying tomorrow. Better to feel bad now than soon after.'

'I don't understand why we can't laugh today and tomorrow and the next day,' Pembe remarked.

It was Jamila's turn to scowl now. Her sister's brazenness had not only taken her by surprise but also put her in an awkward position. She held her breath, fearing what would follow next: the rolling pin. Whenever one of the girls crossed a line, Naze smacked both of them with the thin wooden rod in her kitchen. Never on their faces – a girl's beauty was her dowry – but on their backs and bottoms. The girls found it strange that the instrument they so bitterly abhorred also made the fluffy pastries that they cherished.

Yet that evening Naze did not punish anyone. She scrunched up her nose, shook her head and looked away – as if she longed to be somewhere else. When she spoke again, her voice was calm. 'Modesty is a woman's only shield,' she said. 'Bear this in mind: if you lose that, you will be worth no more than a chipped kuruş.* This world is cruel. It won't take pity on you.'

In her mind's eye Pembe flipped a coin in the air and watched it land on her palm. There were always two sides, and two sides only.

* Small unit of Turkish currency.

Win or lose. Dignity or disgrace, and little consolation for those who got the wrong one.

It was all because women were made of the lightest cambric, Naze continued, whereas men were cut of thick, dark fabric. That is how God had tailored the two: one superior to the other. As to why He had done that, it wasn't up to human beings to question. What mattered was that the colour black didn't show stains, unlike the colour white, which revealed even the tiniest speck of dirt. By the same token, women who were sullied would be instantly noticed and separated from the rest, like husks removed from grains. Hence when a virgin gave herself to a man – even if he were the man whom she loved – she had everything to lose, while he had absolutely nothing to lose.

So it was that in the land where Pink Destiny and Enough Beauty were born, 'honour' was more than a word. It was also a name. You could call your child 'Honour', as long as it was a boy. Men had honour. Old men, middle-aged men, even schoolboys so young that they still smelled of their mothers' milk. Women did not have honour. Instead, they had shame. And, as everyone knew, Shame would be a rather poor name to bear.

As she listened, Pembe recalled the stark whiteness of the doctor's office. The discomfort that she had felt then returned – only now the feeling was magnified. She wondered about the other colours – periwinkle-blue, pistachio-green and hazelnut-brown – and the other fabrics – velvet, gabardine and brocade. There was such variety in this world, surely more than could be found on a tray of winnowed rice.

It would be one of the many ironies of Pembe's life that the things she hated to hear from Naze she would repeat to her daughter, Esma, word for word, years later, in England.

Askander . . . Askander . . .

A Village near the River Euphrates, 1962–7

Pembe was a woman of untenable thoughts and unfounded fears. This part of her personality wasn't something that had evolved over the years. Instead, she had turned superstitious abruptly, almost overnight: the night Iskender was born.

Pembe was seventeen years old when she became a mother – young, beautiful and apprehensive. There she was in a room bathed in a dusky light, staring at the cradle, as if she was still not convinced that this baby with his pink, fragile fingers, translucent skin and a blotchy purple mark on his button nose had defied all the odds and survived; that he would, from now on, be her child, hers alone. Here was a son – the son that her mother had craved, and prayed to have throughout her entire life.

Naze had had one more full-term pregnancy after Pink Destiny and Enough Beauty. It had to be a boy this time – there was no other possibility. Allah owed her this; *He was in her debt*, she said, even though she knew she was speaking utter blasphemy. It was a secret agreement between her and the Creator. After so many girls, He was going to make it up to her. Such was her conviction that she spent months knitting little blankets, socks and vests in a blue deeper than stormy nights, all of them designed for her perfect little boy. She wouldn't listen to anyone – not even to the midwife who examined her after her waters broke and told her, in a voice as quiet as the breeze, that the baby wasn't positioned right, and that they had better go to the city. There still was time. If they set off now they could be at the hospital before the contractions started.

'Nonsense,' Naze retorted, holding the midwife's eyes in her fiery stare.

Everything was fine. Everything was in His hands. She was

forty-nine years old and this would be her miracle child. She was going to give birth here in her own house, in her own bed, as she had done with each and every baby before, only this time it would be a boy.

It was a breech birth. The baby was too big and it was pointing the wrong way. The hours passed. Nobody counted how many, for it would bring bad luck. Besides, only Allah was the owner of time, the Divine Clockmaker. What was unbearably long for mere mortals was only the blink of an eye for Him. Thus the clock on the wall was covered with black velvet, just like all the mirrors in the house, each of which was a gate to the unknown.

‘She cannot push any more,’ said one of the women present.

‘Then we’ll have to do it for her,’ said the midwife resolutely, but her eyes gave away the fear she was hiding.

The midwife put her hand straight through Naze until she felt the sleek, slippery baby squirm under her fingers. There was a faint heart-beat, like a sputtering candle that had reached its end. Gently but firmly, she tried to turn the baby inside the womb. Once. Twice. She was more relentless the third time, acting with a sense of urgency. The baby moved clockwise, but it was not enough. Its head pressed against the umbilical cord, dangerously stifling the amount of oxygen that went through it.

Naze had lost so much blood she was fading in and out, her cheeks the colour of winter. A choice had to be made. The midwife knew it would be either the mother or the baby. There was no way she could save them both. Her conscience was as silent as a moonless night, and just as dark. All at once, she made up her mind. She would pick the woman.

At that moment Naze, lying there with her eyes clamped shut, dancing with death, bleeding umbrage, lifted her head and yelled: ‘No, you whore!’

It was a cry so shrill and forceful, it didn’t sound as if it had come out of a human being. The woman in bed had turned into a wild animal, famished and feral, ready to attack anyone who stood in her way. She was running in a thick forest where the sun cast shimmering gold and ochre reflections on the leaves – free in a way she had never

been before. Those within hearing distance suspected she had lost her mind. Only the mad could scream like that.

‘Cut me, you bitch! Take him out,’ Naze ordered and then laughed, as if she had already crossed a threshold beyond which everything was a joke. ‘It’s a boy, don’t you see? My son is coming! You spiteful, jealous whore. Take a pair of scissors! Now! Cut my belly open and take my son out!’

Swarms of tiny flies whirred in the room, like vultures circling a prey. There was too much blood everywhere. Too much rage and resentment smeared on the carpets, the sheets, the walls. The air inside the room had become heavy, listless. The flies . . . if only the flies could be made to disappear.

Naze did not survive. Nor did the baby for long – the baby whose gender she had been wrong about the whole time. Her ninth infant, the child who killed her and then quietly passed away in her cot, was another girl.

So on that day in November 1962, as she lay awake in her maternity bed late into the wee hours, it was the thought that God could be so arbitrary that distressed Pembe. Here she was, only seventeen and already breastfeeding a son. She couldn’t help suspecting that from somewhere in the heavens, under a watery light, her mother was watching her with envy. *Eight births, five miscarriages, one dead baby, and not one was a son . . . And here You are already giving a healthy boy to my hare-brained daughter. Why, Allah? Why?*

Naze’s voice echoed in Pembe’s ears until it became a ball of fury that rolled down to her chest and nestled in her stomach. Hard as she tried to fend off her anxieties, she ended up only building new ones. They drew circles in her mind, spinning like a pegtop, and suddenly there was nowhere to hide from the evil eye that was her late mother’s gaze. Once she started paying attention to it, she noticed that gaze everywhere. It was in the grain and cashew nuts that she pounded in a stone mortar, turned into a paste and then consumed to enrich her milk. It was in the rivulets of rain that streamed down the windowpanes, in the almond oil that she applied to her hair at every bath, and in the thick, bubbly yoghurt soup that simmered on the stove.

‘Allah the Merciful, please make my mother shut her eyes in her grave and make my son grow up strong and healthy,’ Pembe prayed, rocking herself back and forth, as if it were she who needed to be put to sleep, not the baby.



The night Iskender was born, Pembe had a nightmare – as she had had many other times during her pregnancy. But this one felt so real that a part of her would never recover from it, never return from the liquid land of dreams.

She saw herself lying supine on an ornamental carpet, her eyes wide open, her belly swollen. Above her a few clouds slithered across the sky. It was hot, too hot. Then she realized the carpet was stretched over water, a rowdy river swirling under her weight. *How is it that I’m not sinking*, she thought to herself. Instead of an answer, the sky opened up and a pair of hands descended. Were they the hands of God? Or the hands of her late mother? She couldn’t tell. They cut open her belly. There was no pain, only the horror of being aware of what was happening. Then the hands pulled out the baby. It was a plump little boy with eyes the colour of dark pebbles. Before Pembe could touch him, let alone cuddle him, the hands dropped the baby into the water. He floated away on a piece of driftwood, like the prophet Moses in his basket.

Pembe shared the nightmare with only one person, her eyes bright and burning as she spoke, as if she had a fever. Jamila listened, and, either because she truly believed in it or because she wanted to free her twin of the terror of Naze’s ghost, she came up with an explanation.

‘You must have been jinxed. Probably by a *djinni*.’

‘A *djinni*,’ Pembe echoed.

‘Yes, sweetheart. The *djinn* love to take a nap on chairs and sofas, don’t you know? Adult *djinn* can make a dash for it when they see a human coming, but infants are not so fast. And pregnant women are heavy, clumsy. You must have sat on a baby *djinni* and crushed it.’

‘Oh, my God.’

Jamila twitched her nose as if she had caught a foul smell. ‘My

guess is the mother must have come for revenge and put a spell on you.'

'But what am I going to do?'

'Don't worry, there's always a way to appease a *djinni*, no matter how enraged,' said Jamila authoritatively.

And so, while Pembe was nursing her newborn, Jamila made her toss dry bread to a pack of stray dogs and rush away without looking back; throw a pinch of salt over her left shoulder and a pinch of sugar over her right; walk through newly ploughed fields and under spiderwebs; pour sacred rosewater into every cranny in the house, and wear an amulet round her neck for forty days. She thus hoped to cure Pembe of her fear of their late mother. Instead she opened the door to superstitions – a door Pembe had always known existed but through which she had never before ventured to go.

Meanwhile Iskender was growing. His skin the colour of warm sand, his hair dark and wavy and gleaming like stardust, his eyes brimming with mischief and his birthmark long gone, he smiled copiously, winning hearts. The more handsome her son grew, the more Pembe became terrified of things over which she had no control – earthquakes, landslides, floods, wildfires, contagious diseases, the wrath of Naze's ghost, the vengeance of a mother *djinni*. The world had always been an unsafe place, but suddenly the danger was too real, too close.

Such was Pembe's unease that she refused to give her son a name. It was a way of protecting him from Azrael, the Angel of Death. If the baby had no particular affiliation, she thought, Azrael would not be able to find him, even if he wished to. Thus the boy spent his first year on earth without a name, like an envelope with no address. As well as his second, third and fourth years. When they had to call him, they would say, 'Son!' or 'Hey, lad!'

Why didn't her husband, Adem, object to this nonsense? Why didn't he take control of the situation and name his heir like every other man did? There was something holding him back, something stronger than his quick temper and male pride, a secret between the two of them that empowered Pembe and weakened Adem, pushing him away from home towards an underground world in Istanbul, where he could gamble and be the king, even if only for one night.

Not until the boy had turned five did Adem take the reins in his hands and announce that this could not go on for ever. His son would soon start school, and if he did not have a name by then the other children would make sure he had the most ridiculous one imaginable. Grudgingly, Pembe complied but only on one condition. She would take the child to her native village and get her twin's and family's blessings. Once there, she would also consult with the three village elders, who, by now, were as old as Mount Ararat, but still dispensing sage advice.



'It was wise of you to come to us,' said the first village elder, who was so frail now that when a door slammed near by its vibration shook him to the core.

'It is also good that you did not insist on naming the baby yourself, like some mothers do nowadays,' remarked the second elder, who had only one tooth left in his mouth – a little pearl shining out like the first tooth of a toddler.

The third elder then spoke, but his voice was so low, his words so slurred, that no one understood what he said.

After a bit more discussion the elders reached a decision: a stranger would name the boy – someone who knew nothing about the family and, by extension, Naze's spectre.

With a borrowed confidence Pembe agreed to the plan. A few miles away there was a stream that ran low in winter and frantically high in spring. The peasants crossed the water in a makeshift boat attached to a wire that had been stretched between the two banks. The journey was unsafe, and every year a few passengers would fall into the river. It was decided that Pembe would wait where the boat landed and ask the first man who got across to name her son. The village elders, meanwhile, would hide behind the bushes and intervene should the need arise.

Thus Pembe and her son waited. She was attired in a crimson dress that reached below her ankles and a black lace shawl. He was wearing his only suit and looked like a miniature of a man. Time crept by and the child got bored. Pembe told stories to entertain him. One of those stories would stand out in his memory for ever.

'When Nasreddin Hodja was a boy he was the apple of his mother's eye.'

'Did she have apples in her eyes?' he asked.

'That's an expression, my sultan. It means she loved him very much. *The two of them lived in a nice cottage on the outskirts of the town.'*

'Where was the father?'

'He had gone off to war. Now listen. *One day his mother had to go to the bazaar. She said to him, "You should stay at home and watch the door. If you see a burglar trying to break in, start shouting at the top of your voice. That'll frighten him away. I'll be back before noon."* So Nasreddin did as he was told, not taking his eyes from the door for even a moment.'

'Didn't he have to pee?'

'He had a potty with him.'

'Wasn't he hungry?'

'His mother had left him food.'

'Pastries?'

'And sesame *halva*,' Pembe said, knowing her son well. *'After an hour, there was a knock at the door. It was Nasreddin's uncle, checking on how they were doing. He asked the boy where his mother was and said, "Well, go tell your mother to come home early and prepare lunch for us. My family will stop by for a visit."'*

'But he is watching the door!'

'Exactly. *Nasreddin was puzzled. His mother had advised him to do one thing and his uncle another. He didn't want to disobey either of them. So he pulled up the door, saddled it on his back and went to get his mother.'*

The boy chuckled but he quickly grew serious. 'I wouldn't do that. I would always choose my mother over my uncle.'

No sooner had he said this than they heard a noise. Somebody had crossed the stream and was walking towards them. To Pembe's – and the village elders' – surprise it turned out to be an old woman. She had a spectacularly aquiline nose, hollows under her wrinkled cheekbones and a set of crooked teeth. Her small, beady eyes constantly moved, refusing to settle anywhere.

Pembe told her that her son urgently needed a name and asked if she would kindly help, avoiding details like Naze's ghost or the village elders waiting behind the bush. The old woman didn't seem the least bit surprised. Leaning against her staff, she weighed something

up in her head, calm and compliant, as if a request of this kind was the most ordinary thing in the world.

‘Mum, who is this?’ the child asked.

‘Hush, my lion. This nice lady here is going to give you a name.’

‘But she’s ugly.’

Pretending not to hear that, the woman took a step closer and scrutinized the boy. ‘So you haven’t found your name yet, I gather.’

The child raised his thin eyebrows, refusing to comment.

‘All right, well, I’m thirsty,’ she said, pointing to where the water-course had formed an inlet. ‘Will you go and get me a cup of water?’

‘I don’t have a cup.’

‘Use your palms, then,’ the old woman insisted.

With a deepening frown the boy glanced at the woman, then at his mother, and then at the stranger again. ‘No,’ he said, a new edge to his voice. ‘Why don’t you go and get your own water? I’m not your servant.’

The woman tilted her head to one side, as if the words were a blow she had to dodge. ‘He doesn’t like to serve, does he? He only wants to be served.’

By now Pembe was convinced that they had picked the wrong person. To appease the situation she said in her most conciliatory tones, ‘I’ll go and get you water.’

But the woman didn’t drink the water Pembe brought to her, cupped in the palms of her hands. Instead she *read* it.

‘My daughter, this child will remain a boy for a long time and he will grow up only when he has reached mid-life. He will mature very late.’

Pembe gasped. She had the distinct impression that the woman was about to give away a secret, something she wasn’t supposed to reveal.

‘Some children are like the Euphrates, so fast, so rowdy. Their parents cannot catch up with them. I’m afraid your son will break your heart to pieces.’

The words fell between them like a stone hurled from out of nowhere.

‘But that’s not what I asked you,’ Pembe said, a bit tensely. ‘Have you thought of a name for him?’

‘Yes, I have. There are two names that might suit him well, depending on what you expect. One is Saalim. Once upon a time there was such a sultan. He was a poet and a fine musician to boot. May your son, too, learn to appreciate beauty should he be given this name.’

‘And the other?’ Pembe held her breath with anticipation. Even the boy seemed interested in the conversation now.

‘The second is the name of the great commander who always marched in front of his soldiers, fought like a tiger, won every battle, destroyed all his enemies, conquered land after land, united the East and the West, the sunrise and the sunset, and was still hungry for more. May your son, too, be invincible and strong-willed, and preside over other men should he be named after him.’

‘This one is better,’ said Pembe, her face brightening up.

‘Well, then, you are done with me.’

With that, the old woman grabbed her staff, and started to walk away down the road with a surprisingly agile gait. It took Pembe a few seconds to collect her thoughts before she ran after her.

‘But what is it?’

‘What is what?’ The woman turned and studied her – as if she had forgotten who she was.

‘The name! You didn’t tell me what it was.’

‘Oh! It is Askander.’

‘Askander . . . Askander . . .’ Pembe repeated with delight.

When they returned to Istanbul the boy was registered at the office of the local registrar. Though several years late, with a lot of pleading and a substantial bribe, his existence was legally accounted for. The name written on his card when he started school was Iskender Toprak.

‘A name worthy of a world leader,’ Pembe said. By then she had learned who Alexander the Great was.

So it was that her first child, the apple of her eye, would become Askander in Kurdish and Iskender in Turkish. When the family immigrated to London, to the children and teachers in his school, he was Alex – and this was the name he would be known by in Shrewsbury Prison, by convicts and guards alike.

A Prince in the Tree

Istanbul, 1969

The spring when he was not yet seven, Iskender ran away from a man whom he had never seen before but had heard much about. Although the man was different from what he had imagined, this made him no less frightening. He had thick-rimmed glasses that slid down his nose, an unlit cigarette between his lips and a large leather bag that was rumoured to contain sharp instruments and a piece of skin from each of his victims.

At the sight of him, Iskender felt a bolt of fear shoot along his spine. He spilled the cranberry sherbet in his hand, red drops trickling on to his white shirt, like blood on snow. He tried to wipe off the stain, first with his bare hands, then with the hem of his cape. It was no use. His beautiful costume was ruined.

Stain or no stain, he was still a prince in his long silvery cape and his cap studded with sparkling beads, carrying a sceptre so polished it was almost translucent. Throughout the afternoon he had sat in a high chair like a nobleman inspecting his lands – though being a bit short for his age all chairs were high for him. To his left were four boys, older and taller but similarly attired. As if sizing them up for a fight, Iskender had studied them from head to toe and decided their costumes were not as impressive as his.

While the other princes gobbled sweets and cracked jokes, Iskender waited, jiggling his legs. How could they be so silly when they knew what was about to happen? His eyes strayed anxiously. There were many people in the room, but he was certain that none would come to his rescue, not even his mother, Pembe, especially not her. She had wept all morning, telling him how proud she was that her little boy was becoming a man. For that is what you became when you were circumcised: a man.

Iskender couldn't understand for the life of him how he would become a man with one cut of a knife. It was a riddle hard to solve. With less you became more. Nor could he fathom why he was told not to cry, though it was clear he would be hurt – while his mother could weep to her heart's content, though absolutely nothing was happening to her.

Out of the corner of his eye he watched the man with the leather bag, noticing a scar that ran from his left cheek to his jaw. Perhaps one of the boys on whom he had operated had given him the wound. For a minute he indulged the idea, imagining how, just when the man was about to circumcise him, he would free himself of the hands holding him down, snatch the blade and slash his tormentor's right cheek. Then he would help the other boys to their feet, and together they would dash for the door, victorious. But the fantasy faded away and the room came alive again – a blind *hafiz* reciting the Qur'an, a woman serving tea and almond paste, the guests chatting in hushed tones, and his most feared moment moving dangerously closer.

Slowly, Iskender slid down in his chair. His feet touched the floor, the carpet opening up beneath his weight. He took a step and held his breath, waiting for someone, anyone, to ask him where he was going, but no one did. He tiptoed past the double bed that had been placed in a corner – wrought-iron headboard, embroidered pillows, amulets against the evil eye and a satiny, cobalt-blue bedspread. Blue was Iskender's favourite colour. It was the colour for boys, which meant the sky was a boy. So were the rivers and lakes. And the oceans, though he had yet to see one.

Feeling lighter and bolder with each step, he sneaked through the back door. Once outside he began to run, picking up speed as he made his way across the garden, around the well, down the gravel road, past the neighbours' houses, up the hill. His costume was soiled but he didn't mind. Not any more.

Iskender thought of his mother's hands – combing her wavy, chestnut hair, making yoghurt in clay cups, caressing his cheeks, moulding figurines out of pastry dough. Until he reached the oak, he contemplated these images and nothing else.

It was an old tree that had roots running in four directions above

the ground and branches extending towards the billowing clouds. His breath coming in gasps, he began to climb, fast and focused. Twice his hands slipped and he almost tumbled down, but each time he regained his balance. He had never been this high before and felt disappointed that there was no one to see his achievement. From up here the sky seemed so close he could almost touch it. Beneath a blanket of clouds, he sat with sweet satisfaction and pride, until he realized he did not know how to get down.

An hour later, a blackbird perched a few feet away. It was an exquisite creature with yellow rings around its eyes and touches of crimson, bright as rubies, on its wings. It chirped once, timid and frail but full of life. Had the bird come any closer, Iskender could have caught it between his palms and listened to its tiny heart beat against his skin. He could have sheltered the bird, loved and protected it, but in one swift movement he could also have broken its neck.

No sooner had this thought crossed his mind than he felt a pang of remorse. There were huge cauldrons in hell, bubbling away for those who nursed such sinful thoughts. His eyes watered. He had been confident that his mother would notice he had gone missing and send out a search party, yet no one was coming. He was going to die here, perish of cold or hunger. What would people say when they learned that he had died not because of illness or accident, like everyone else seemed to do, but because of cowardice?

Perhaps they had looked for him in all the wrong places and assumed he was gone. Perhaps they thought he had been attacked by wolves, not that there were any in the area. He imagined a terrible death savaged by the claws and teeth of ferocious animals. Would his mother be devastated or would she secretly rejoice at having one less mouth to feed?

Thinking about his mother's cooking made him realize how hungry he was. More urgently, he had to pee. Unable to contain himself any longer, he pulled down his trousers and held his willy, the cause of all his distress. He had barely started to relieve himself when he heard someone shout.

'Hey, he's up there! I've found him!'

In a few seconds a man appeared, then another, then ten more.