



# 31 HOURS

MASHA  
HAMILTON

UNBRIDLED BOOKS

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I think we should maybe have the courage to identify ourselves with and humanize the torturer. Maybe we should look at ourselves, instead of saying “never again,” which does not work. We could maybe try to ask a new question, as well as a very old one: “How is it possible?” We may find the answers in ourselves.

—*François Bizot,*  
*ethnologist captured*  
*by the Khmer Rouge*  
*in 1971 and author of the*  
*memoir The Gate*

And everything  
and nothing  
is as sacred as we want it to be.

—*Beth Orton,*  
*“Central Reservation” lyrics*



NEW YORK: 1:44 A.M.

MECCA: 9:44 A.M.

A wolf's howl. But more shrill, more prolonged. Carol sat fully upright, an inhale caught in her chest, before she realized there was, of course, no rabid wolf dodging Manhattan traffic. It was only winter's wind slicing past her eleventh-floor apartment window with enough ferocity to rouse her. Then she gasped, in quick succession, that she'd been half-awake before the noise began, that her stomach hurt, and that her mind was filled with Jonas. Her son. Her wild-haired precious. When he was tiny, on a frenzied night like this, he would have snuggled with her in this very bed, bare toes pressing against her leg. Now he extended over six feet, and though he hugged, he didn't snuggle. God, where had those days gone?

More important: Where was he now?

She lay back down, reached to pull a pillow close, and smoothed her forehead with a hand as if wiping dust from a table. She wondered if she could will herself back to sleep but doubted it. Her most successful years of slumber stretched from Jonas's birth through his toddlerhood, when the basics felt simple and pure and her arms had been full of husband and baby, potter's clay and homemade bread. Through the remaining, darker days of marriage, divorce, and the occasional lover, erratic sleep became the status quo. Still, whenever she awakened in the wee hours, she wanted nothing more than to breathe in time with an-

other human body—a desire that pointed to a primitive quality in her, she thought, one not suited to this modern life. At age forty-eight, she still wasn't used to sleeping alone.

When Jake was already gone and Jonas still a boy, she would sometimes crawl into her young son's bed, rest a hand on his tummy, and match her breath to his. Often, if her presence woke him—she hadn't thought of this in years—he would lull himself back to sleep by twirling her hair with his fingers, as if they were joined. He was so small then that air passed through his body at a pace more urgent than soothing. But the rise and fall of his stomach connected her to nothing less than the universe itself. Jonas saved her from facing her own mortality during those long nights. Next to him, imagining herself a kite finally cut free of its string, she slept.

That perfect boy with his drowsy warm scent and hair falling on the pillow like a piece of art. Why hadn't he returned her calls?

But why should that be such a big deal? At twenty-one, separating from parents and establishing one's individuality was a desired, even critical, stage. "Differentiation" was the term, wasn't it? She had to give him space, trust him. That's what it meant to be the parent of a grown child.

Well, screw differentiation. Screw psychobabble that blurred the particularities of Carol and her son and her mother-intuition. He'd always been so sensitive, before. He would never have wanted her to feel this scared, and if he wouldn't—or couldn't—pick up the phone to ease her anxiety now, that only proved it. Something was wrong.

She massaged her scalp for a moment and then squeezed her eyes closed, trying to picture Jonas in his Greenwich Village apartment. She failed. She tried to envision him in a lecture hall at NYU. That didn't work, either. A hospital bed in Midtown? Sunk to the bottom of the East River?

Oh, God. Night-fed fears; she knew all about them. Keep this up, and shadows would become serial killers hiding beneath the bed. She was as unreasonable as a child awakened from a nightmare, she told herself, but that thought, though reassuring, felt unconvincing. This must be what it meant to worry oneself sick—although this emotion seemed closer to premonition, which made it even more alarming. Simple worry she could dismiss as wisps of weariness-fueled nonsense. Portent was born of concrete facts not yet processed by the conscious mind.

She threw her arm over her face. *Be rational*, she instructed herself. *Put it into words: I am worried because . . .*

Because Jonas recently had seemed so troubled. Too vulnerable, too raw, even for him. Too prone to anger that would rise like a wind gust and then die as swiftly. Too distant—perhaps that most of all. The heaviness she'd been feeling in her limbs for days *could* be dismissed as some delayed empty-nest response. But what if it was caused by something larger? What if her past with her baby, her boy, hadn't simply evolved as it was supposed to with one's grown children? What if, somehow, all those moments and memories laid in place like bricks used to build a house had vanished entirely, become dust while she'd been looking the other way?

A pipe moaned in the walls, while out in the hallway the elevator lumbered to life. On the icy streets below, on a night like this, cars careened with vulnerability, bakers lingered close to their ovens, and subway grumbled on their tracks as they rushed young partygoers and workers just off night shifts to their homes. She rolled onto her stomach and buried her nose and mouth in the pillow until she had to turn her cheek to the side to breathe. Breathe, she told herself. Rest, and soften the shoulders, and stop the mind's seesawing, at least until dawn. Yes,

NEW YORK: 1:44 A.M.

dawn. And then, young adult or not, she would track him down. She would touch his cheek and hug him tight—mother him until he shrugged her off—so the next time night fell, she could hold assurance close to her like a childhood blanket and rest with the vigor of the innocent and the blessed.

MASHA HAMILTON



NEW YORK: 1:49 A.M.

MECCA: 9:49 A.M.

Tile.

Cool, powder-blue tile, chipped in places and hard against his bare feet.

And a razor with an orange handle. A package of them, actually. Ten in all.

Bathroom tile and drugstore razors.

Bathroom tile and drugstore razors.

Bathroom tile and drugstore razors.

It was a prayer.

That wasn't such a preposterous idea—anything could be a prayer. Should be, in fact. Every step Jonas took, every idle thought that eased through his head: a holy, ongoing dialogue with God. Or perhaps a plea, because at this moment, he shouldn't be chatting with God as though they were dinner partners. He needed to be a supplicant. *Please. Please give me the brains to remember what I've been taught and, please, the speed to do it quickly. And the calm, so that I can avoid undue attention and accomplish what I need to accomplish. Mercy, too. Have mercy, please, oh God, on my soul.*

Allah, rather. Allah, for God's sake. Allah. Get with the program.

Unexpectedly amused by his own private stumblings over his Creator's proper name—or name in proper context—and pleased that he



still *had* the capacity to be amused, Jonas smiled faintly at himself in the mirror. His skin looked even paler than usual under the fluorescent light, smoky-white and artificial, and it merged seamlessly into the ash-blond hair that stood out on his head in waves of thick curls. Ridiculous hair, really. Locks that little boys have but then outgrow, only he never did. Women loved his Jewfro. Always had. When he was twelve, that friend of his mother's poked her fingers into his tangle of hair and he'd seen her eyes go foggy and he'd realized even then that she was fantasizing—perhaps not about him, exactly, not about her friend's little boy, not that—but still some fantasy that was loose and sensual, arising from the way his long hair twisted out from his head and the way her fingers felt, vanished among the silky strands. It had surprised him, scared him, really, and later angered him. He sensed something predatory in it, something that failed to take him into account at all. And when he mentioned it to his mother—his bohemian, touchy-feely, let's-talk-about-it mother—she'd pulled away as if he'd slapped her and said he was wrong; her friend had known him since he was in diapers, since he made “doodies” (that was the way she talked) and she'd had to wipe him clean.

And that was enough, more than enough, to end that conversation forever. As she'd no doubt intended.

Jonas sat on the toilet and stretched his long legs, already stripped of their jeans. He hadn't been able to sleep, had been sleeping poorly for months, in fact. So he might as well begin the process now. He knew the drill, this part of it, anyway. He had to purify himself. That was step one. Purify by removing all hair except for the curls on his head; they'd told him to leave those for later. Then pray toward Mecca. Then eat if he wanted, or fast if he chose, either option permissible, Masoud had said. Then pray and purify even more. Later, Masoud would bring the

clean clothes and the Qur'an, which Jonas would place in his right-hand pocket. How did it go? Something old, something new. Something borrowed . . .

He twisted his torso to pick up his digital camera from the top of the toilet tank. He intended to document each step along the way so the pictures could be there for someone to look at later, and maybe understand. He had an idea, loosely formed, that he would want to be understood if there was any wanting left on the other side. He hoped candid shots of him preparing might illustrate his foresight as well as his determination, because the news reports would surely flatten him to a two-dimensional zealot. He'd be seen as naive—mad, maybe. Someone might accuse him of being a crackhead, though he never used drugs and rarely drank. Others would be perplexed, especially people who were able to overlook evil and lose themselves in their own narrow lives. They'd find it hard to figure out why he couldn't just ignore, too. Those who could identify with his anguish over the way things were would probably be unwilling to admit it aloud for fear of being seen as sympathizing with a nut-job. Deirdre might be the only person who would really understand, though he'd lost touch with her long ago. How long?

Jonas snapped a photograph and glanced at his wristwatch. Seven minutes to 2. In seven more minutes, it would be—he used his fingers—thirty-one hours until.

Thirty-one.

The maximum number of days in a month, the length between menstrual cycles. Al-Khabir, the All-Aware, the thirty-first name of Allah. Thirty-one verses in Genesis, Chapter 1. The thirty-first verse: *God saw all that he had made, and behold, it was very good. It was evening and it was morning, the sixth day.* Thirty-one hours which, given the elasticity

of time, could shrink to thirty-one seconds or expand to thirty-one years. Who knew what the next thirty-one hours would feel like to him? And then he snapped a picture of his legs, hairy, with knotty apple-knees. Men's legs, in general, aren't very attractive, though they are functional and it's more important to be useful than attractive.

There it was: another prayer.

More important to be useful than attractive, oh Allah.

Jewish dad, atheist mom, raised faithless, Jonas had, despite that, grown adept at spotting prayers.

He perched on the ledge of the bathtub, swinging his legs around and in as he picked up the can of mint-scented gel. He shook it, and sprayed some on his right ankle, spreading it upward until his leg turned white—almost gleaming under the insistent lighting—and he wondered how it would feel to be made of snow, and to reflect brightness, and to fear nothing except the sun. Then he carefully removed the cover from the first razor. He felt a bit clumsy, taking that initial swipe on the right side of his calf near his ankle. Was it uncontrolled nervousness or simply unfamiliarity? He had the advantage of being pretty hairless to start with. In fact, he shaved his stubble only twice a week. He'd always hated how his smooth cheeks made him look younger than he was.

Jonas turned on the water so he could rinse the razor as he went. The tub's enamel was chipped, and a streak of rust reached out from the drain like an orange cobweb. In another time and another part of Manhattan, he used to put dirty dishes in his apartment's bathtub if he knew his mother was dropping by. He would pile them up and close the shower curtain. Later he would have to move the dishes back to the kitchen and, eventually, wash them. So if you thought about it, it was

really more work in the end, but still he enjoyed it, fooling his mom. Or so he thought until the day she called to say she'd be stopping by that afternoon and added, a lilt in her voice, "and I'll be wanting to take a bath."

He put the blade to his calf and let the sharp metal graze the surface, felling coarse hair as it went, leaving behind naked flesh. Despite his intense concentration, he noticed the subway passing nearby, causing the bathroom wall to vibrate. It was the J, or maybe the M. He wasn't that familiar with the City Hall district. Jonas had grown up on the Upper West Side and had attended an artsy high school in Midtown and then NYU. He felt surprisingly like a foreigner over here, where the bridges stretched longingly toward Brooklyn and he could buy a pack of disposable razors in a store called Confucius Pharmacy. "Say it again?" he'd asked when Masoud had told him that the studio apartment where he would stay was right off the Avenue of the Finest. A street praising the diligence of New York City cops. He'd never heard of it. He felt sure Masoud was joking. And although the street did exist, it *was* a joke of sorts. A creepy, haunting joke the media might pick up on, afterward. But they'd be busy with other distractions, so maybe they wouldn't, and that didn't matter because by then it would have taken on all the intimacy of a private joke for the benefit of Masoud.

And Jonas felt fine with that. He did.

After a few swipes, he angled the razor under the running water and shaved more and then more, dulling two razors before the right calf felt smooth to his touch, a girl's leg. Next he spread shaving cream on his shin, where the bone strained against the skin. This part, he knew, was a bit trickier; this was where women often nicked themselves. He knew this because Vic had told him. About a month ago, he'd asked her what

was the worst thing about shaving and she'd laughed one of her short, husky laughs that made him ache with longing and said, "You ask the damnedest questions, Jonas."

"But just tell me," he insisted. "Like, the first time you ever shaved. What was the worst part?" He was already thinking about today.

So she'd told him. She'd sprawled on her couch, flung a leg on his lap. "My shinbone," she'd said; "this part here," and she'd taken his fingers and placed them at her ankle and then drawn them slowly up her dancer's leg, over that bone so intimate with her cool, smooth flesh, and then beyond her knee, directly toward her heart, and she'd stopped midthigh, her smile wicked, her tone challenging, and teased: "Is your curiosity satisfied, boy?"

God, he would miss her. If missing is possible, afterward. What he felt was so intense, even more intense than with Deirdre. He thought now of changing his mind, running away somewhere to hide until he could figure out how to tell them it was off. That would be the way of a coward, though. That would be throwing everything out: the training, the commitment. He'd already made *baty al-ridwan*, a pledge not to waver. Besides, though Vic had heightened his joy, she'd also increased his suffering. She'd stopped calling, and it wasn't a surprise. He was a loner; he'd always been a loner; that was the way life had gone for him. He'd known from the start that someone as solid and wonderful as Vic would eventually weary of his intensity and mood swings and move on, forgetting him.

This way, he would never be forgotten.

The bathroom suddenly felt airless. What would Masoud advise? Don't think of her would be his counsel. "This kind of personal attachment is not indicated for us," Jonas imagined him saying. Remember the lessons that must be taught, the sins that must be atoned for. Seek

refuge from hypocrisy, and from the love of this world. Remember your good fortune in having been chosen. That was always his mantra, one Jonas did still believe. He knew what had to be reversed, and why and how. He recognized a will and wisdom greater than his own. The personal wasn't paramount. He was acting out of an obligation larger than himself.

Jonas thought of a line from the Qur'an. *O Prophet! Strive hard against the Unbelievers and the Hypocrites, and be firm against them, their abode is Hell—an evil refuge indeed.* Sura 9:73. He chanted the line a few times, then added a little extra shaving gel to his leg and, holding his breath, carefully began to draw the razor up against the delicate shinbone. After the first sweep, he exhaled. So far, so good. No blood. No blood yet. No blood and—he tested with a pointed finger—slick as a whale. Why had he thought of a whale? He didn't know, except that he remembered being told that story countless times in childhood, about Jonas in the belly of the whale. Besides, a whale was strong and vigorous, and that was what he wanted to be: slick, and strong, and headed for purity.