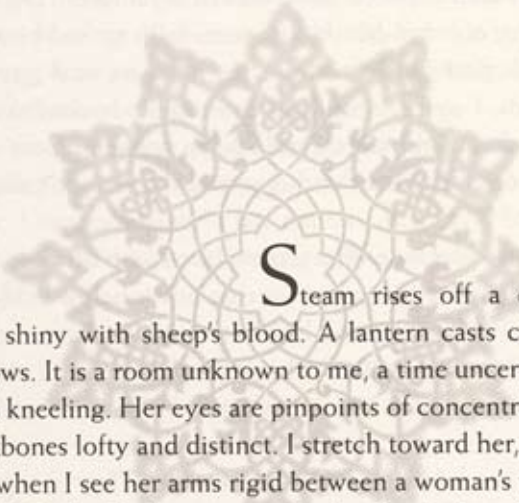


STAIRCASE
OF A
THOUSAND
STEPS



M a s h a
H a m i l t o n

J A M M A N A



Stream rises off a dirt floor made shiny with sheep's blood. A lantern casts contorting shadows. It is a room unknown to me, a time uncertain. Faridah is kneeling. Her eyes are pinpoints of concentration, her cheekbones lofty and distinct. I stretch toward her, then pull back when I see her arms rigid between a woman's thighs.

Faridah, blind to me, yanks her hands free. She flings off her silver bracelets, and they scatter like the Seven Sisters of the sky. "I have to . . ." Her murmur rolls past, blurred at first, but clear by the final word. "Now." She reaches into a reed basket, holds her hand over the lantern, and sprinkles brittle leaves into the fire. Once, twice, and again.

The flame flashes violet, then silver. The room reeks of stinkweed and decay. From between the writhing legs comes

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a choking sound. I glimpse a crowning head covered with feathers of hair. "Faridah, please," the woman on the ground begs. Faridah stiffens. Her headdress slips, revealing blackberry hair turned glossy from crushed rosemary oil.

The tiny head strains, struggles and stops, trapped. The one on the ground arches her neck and lets loose a howl that speaks of fury more than pain. I press my hands to my ears, but moans seep between the cracks of my fingers. "Do something!" I cry out. Faridah doesn't seem to hear. So I beat back fear, brush past her, enter clinging wetness and grip with both hands. I squeeze my eyes and tumble backward, dragging into this world, onto Faridah's lap, a plump form with a hint of bone. The merest suggestion of determination to come.

Faridah lifts it up. Her gaze is laced with dismay. An infant stares back with tiny novae that hover below eyebrows.

"A girl?" The woman lifts her shoulders from a coarse blanket folded like a pillow. She strains forward, her voice insubstantial as smoke, but victory in her eyes. "I'll name her Rafa."

Neither midwife nor infant listens. They study each other until Faridah bows, tearing the cord with her teeth. Forever severing the link.

In this way my mother was born.

Countless times I've relived this memory of a birth in the Samarian village of Ein Fadr eighteen years before my own, seeking its truth about my mama and the midwife I loved. It distorts all that came later—each life, every death. The last

funeral, Grandfather Harif's, was chanted two days ago during the Islamic Month of Great Division. A fitting coincidence of which I've just learned.

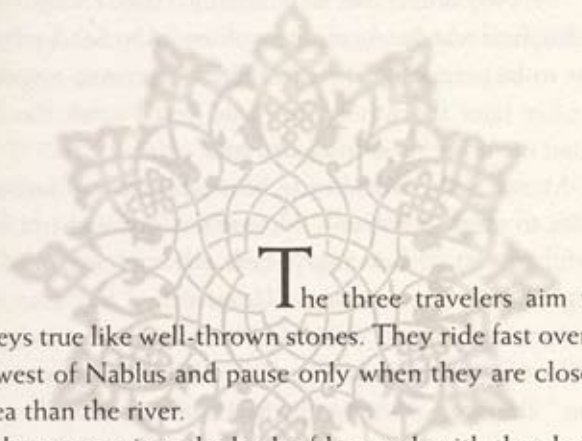
Now I'm alone, and I know, I know I should darken my face with soot, tear my hair, throw ululations to where sky joins heaven. But I can't mourn in the elders' way. I'm no longer that child Jammana. *She* was accustomed to the din of donkeys, the jab of sharp stones beneath bare feet, the music of men praising Allah as one. *I* live in Providence in a new century, American now, disdainful of unrestrained grief and skeptical of an omnipresent Allah.

Yet somewhere within me resides Grandfather and the midwife Faridah. And even a shred of that distant girl Jammana. I cannot abandon her entirely, not yet. Her sorrows, fresh and ancient, press against me like secrets demanding to be told.

WADI AL AHLAM, JORDAN

North of Jerusalem, west of the River Jordan

1966



The three travelers aim their donkeys true like well-thrown stones. They ride fast over hot hills west of Nablus and pause only when they are closer to the sea than the river.

Jammaña wipes the back of her neck with the checked bandanna wrapped on her wrist, and shakes her hair, glad she keeps it short in defiance of propriety. Mama and the merchant Abu Sa'id crowd beneath a limp terebinth tree, but Jammaña refuses the shade—part of her campaign to demonstrate she is more capable than her eleven years suggest. She drinks from the water skin Abu Sa'id offers. Mama, veiled for the trip, bends over and presses the hem of her dress to her forehead. Abu Sa'id smoothes his robe, then brushes dust from his trimmed mustache with a single fingertip.

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Parched hues of tan and ocher collide in the landscape; no other colors survive. The silence overwhelms—birds are grounded, lizards barely breathe, even bees won't hunt for nectar in this dry expanse midway between Jerusalem and Lebanon. Abu Sa'id looks back. "Drink quickly. We must move on."

Mama waves a hand vaguely. "He'll not chase us. He's working now."

"He's my oldest friend. Naturally, I didn't want his wife and daughter wandering out here alone." Abu Sa'id, palms up, seems to be practicing the explanation Jamma suspects he will offer later to Father. "You said you'd cross the desert without me if I refused to escort you."

Mama nods. "I'd already sent word to my father and Faridah to meet us halfway. So, you see, my husband will be grateful to you. If he's angry, he'll aim it at me. And soon enough, he'll"—she stumbles—"forgive."

Jamma detects doubt in Mama's tone and recognizes her duty to provide distraction. "Ya, what I'd give for some ice cream," she says unwrapping the bandanna from her wrist. "Remember your first taste, Mama? Father brought it wrapped in ice and burlap. You took a spoonful and told him it was sweet like molasses and"—she giggles—"salty like love."

Mama smiles. "And he promised to provide that flavor anytime." She studies her daughter, and her voice deepens. "But that was long before you were born. Seems a century ago. I'd forgotten all about it."

"Who told you the story, then?" Abu Sa'id has dismounted and is watering the donkeys from his cupped hands. "Your father?"

"I thought of it myself," Jamma says. She's surprised—she thought he knew.

"Memories come to her," Mama adds quickly. "Memories of events that happened decades ago. No one tells her. She just recalls on her own."

Abu Sa'id glances at Jamma. Only the twitch of his mustache gives away his skepticism.

"Such gifts of insight run in my clan," Mama goes on. "Surely my husband told you. It's a family characteristic, simple as the curve of an eyebrow or the shape of a lip. Only this one skips a generation. My father has special visions, as did his grandfather."

"Is that so?" Abu Sa'id asks politely.

"Small memories, usually," Jamma says. "Once, after a rainfall, I smelled the scent of a flower and knew it was my great-grandmother's favorite. Another time, a sip of water tasted sour and I understood Faridah must have chewed on lemon balm as she delivered her first baby. One morning, I remembered when a strange woman passed Grandfather Harif on a staircase and reached to tug his earlobe."

Abu Sa'id looks away.

"Everyone will believe my memories someday," Jamma says in a tone she knows uncertainty makes too insistent.

She does not speak of the memory she doesn't understand, the one that calls into question all she knows about Mama and Faridah and herself. But Abu Sa'id notices no omission. He is busy checking his donkey's hooves with more concentration than necessary. Jamma is used to this; people invariably shy away if she reveals that the histories of

others lodge in her mind like footprints clinging to a beaten trail. Once, she thought all children were like her, gathering the fleece of faded moments in their daydreams. She considered it compensation for being a child, for all the other insights denied. That was before she mentioned her memories to neighborhood children, before they began to look at her and snicker. Now she knows her far-flung recollections are as unlikely as the birth of a savior.

Her memories may be a gift, as Mama says, but they make Jammana feel a misfit. Her most steady playmate is her shadow; no one else invites her into games. Mama says never mind, she'll just have to bear it, and Grandfather Harif has been treated like an outcast, too, from time to time. As if this should be a comfort.

"Are we ready?" Abu Sa'id asks. Jammana knows he'd like to be back in his shop when her father walks by on the way home from work, both to diminish his role in this trip and to salvage the remainder of a business day. One can never tell, Abu Sa'id says, when someone will stop in with something to sell or barter, and only he can ferret out the honey-soaked tobacco, embroidery thread, and bags of pistachios in his shop's clutter. Only he can find, tucked away in corners, the James Bond poster, the well-thumbed surfing magazine, and, before Jammana bought it, the redchecked cowboy bandanna from America. Mama asked him to escort them since he often travels the desert on bartering missions and knows it well. Jammana suspects he agreed, at least in part, because he relishes gossip. She's counted eighty-two coffee cups stacked in the back of his shop—one for each friend who visits in the late afternoons. Missions like this, Jammana thinks, are fodder for the garrulous men of Nablus.

The travelers start out again, still headed west. "I thank the All-Merciful for the chance to help Ahmed's family, of course," Abu Sa'id says after a moment. "Still, why couldn't we tell him we are going?"

"He would have forbidden it. He says,"—Jammana deepens her voice, mimicking—"Ein Fadr is a primitive village—no telephones, no real beds, no *hygiene*—and Harif is a superstitious old man."

"Jammana!" Mama tries to look serious, but Jammana can hear the amusement in her tone.

"And Faridah," Jammana goes on, "she is—how does he put it?—'without moral base.' They'll be of bad influence. I'm a delicate child, you know."

Even Abu Sa'id can't suppress a smile as he says, "Still, he's your father. You must do as he says."

"I take it as my responsibility," Mama says quickly.

Jammana knows Abu Sa'id is wise to be wary of Father. She knows well. Once, when she was four and unable to swim, Father took her to the Lebanese seashore at Tyre. He stood with waves hitting his knees and, without warning, tossed her in. Cold water and topaz darkness entombed her. Drenching salt burned her nostrils. Hair like soggy bread clogged her mouth and eyes. At last he pulled her out, gasping and grateful. Then he began to swing her again. "One . . . two . . ." Jolly voice. She screamed and gripped him. But being held with such urgent need seemed to be the moment he sought. "And three!" He tossed, rescued, pried loose her fingers, and tossed again. Until she stopped begging. Until he wearied. He told Mama later how much fun Jammana had in the waves, and she was afraid to contradict him. Only in his presence does she fear speaking out. But she admits to a

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grudging admiration for his will, strong enough to allow him to paint the world in his own colors.

Besides, she must acknowledge that his frustration and cruelty are partly her fault. The men who visit him are all Abu Haseem and Abu Sharif and Abu Abdul. He cannot be Abu, the title conferred only on the father of a boy.