

Chapter One

Hues and Shades

And when they commit obscenity, they would say: so we found our fathers doing and so God has commanded us to do. Say: God commands not obscenity. Do you say of God what you know not?

(7.28)

More than fourteen centuries ago in Mecca, a landmark city in the heart of the Arabian Peninsula where Abraham built the Ka'ba, or the House of God, at a spot said to have been marked by angels, Islam was born.

During that time, people used to circle the Ka'ba the way Muslim pilgrims do today, or almost. The ancient Meccans carried out the sacred rite indecently: they circled the House of God naked!

The above verse is believed to have instructed the early Muslims to renounce the pagan heritage of their ancestors. Nudity was banned at the holy place once and for all, yet the influence of pre-Islamic cultures on the doctrine remains a source of controversy to this day.

Scene One

I don't think I will ever be able to forget what happened that evening. I still remember every single detail: the silence, the heaviness in the air—or was it hovering death that weighed the air down? I really don't know, but I remember that it felt exceptionally heavy. I was the night-shift guard at the gateway of the engineering unit where I spent my months of military service. I had just graduated from university and was having a hard time adjusting to military life. I kept myself amused by counting down the remaining days until my discharge.

Luckily, Iraq wasn't at war then. Saddam had lost the war in 1991, and we were still suffering from the aftermath of defeat. It was a tough time for everyone, but if there was a silver lining to the ordeal, it was probably the reduction of the mandatory military service term for university graduates to eighteen months only. Before the defeat in Kuwait, there had been no maximum term, no specified end-point. I carried an old Kalashnikov and stood in a small cabin at the barbed-wire gate waiting for the long, dull hours of my shift to end. As though it was thriving on my ennui, time went by with sadistic slowness.

The hospital next to our unit was a large modern building, quite impressive from the outside. But that wasn't the case inside: all medical services in Iraq had deteriorated badly over the last two years, and many patients died every day. I was standing in the cabin by the gate that day when a doctor or a nurse broke bad news to a poor family. Their young son was dead. I've heard many people cry before, but the wailing of those men and women was completely different. What started out as groaning soon escalated to piercing screams that muted all other sounds. At that moment, it occurred to me that the whole universe was listening to their wounded voices, bowing its head in shame and remorse.

I stood there motionless, no longer an observer of their pain; I *became* their pain. If death had ever had an anthem, this was it. But voices alone fell short of expressing their fury. One of the men picked up a rock from the side of the road and split his own head open. Fresh blood spurted out and sprayed red lines down his pale robe. I felt dizzy and couldn't stand the sight of it, so I closed my eyes and leaned against the cabin wall. My body was soaked in a cold sweat. I thought I was going to faint, but I didn't.

When I opened my eyes, I saw something totally unexpected. One of the women grabbed the collar of her gown and tore it open, exposing her breasts to everyone on the street. The other women followed suit and started to beat their naked chests so hard that they turned purple with bruises. My jaw dropped. It was my first time seeing Iraqi women's breasts revealed in public. I wiped the sweat from my face with my sleeve. When they had first arrived on the scene, I could barely see any of their faces. They walked behind the men, holding the edges of their black cloaks under their chins to prevent them from opening or slipping down. But now they were standing in the middle of the road, hair uncovered and half naked while their torn clothes hung loose from their waists.

Another man took out a gun and started shooting bullets in the air, the villagers' way of venting their feelings in sadness and in joy. They still do that at weddings and funerals. I had seen Saddam do it on several occasions on television. The women sat in one big circle, yowling and throwing dirt on their scratched faces and bare chests. They stayed like that for about an hour until their shrieks settled down into faint groans again. As darkness fell, they all left.

I drove back home feeling sick. Although we were all Iraqi Muslims, it felt as if we belonged to two different worlds. I couldn't sleep that night. I took sleeping pills, and when that didn't work, I ran to the shower and doused myself with cold water.

Scene Two

When my father told me that his friend Dr. Khaled had passed away, I was dismayed. I felt sad of course for the man and his family, but I was even more upset for the agony-packed days of mourning awaiting me, and all the nonsense they would entail. I've never been fond of social duties, but attending mourning sessions, out of all other obligations, was what I loathed most.

I was fortunate to have been excused from this until I was twenty or so. Even then, I still had the luxury of being selective about it; I went where I wanted to go and met the people I wanted to meet. My father and elder brother had been representing the family most competently, and my occasional appearance with them would only mean that we were extra concerned about the other family—an additional cordiality, so to speak. All that changed when my brother left the country and I had to step up to fill his place beside my father. I no longer had a choice.

Two separate sessions were set up shortly after the funeral procession: one for the women—at the family house—and another for men at the large reception hall annexed to Al Buniya mosque. In times of economic prosperity, both sessions would last for seven days and seven nights. But after years of war, death has become our daily bread in Iraq. The prolonged mourning sessions have thus shrunk, rarely exceeding three days. Which can still be very expensive.

Many mourning halls in Baghdad are furnished with black or brown faux-leather sofas placed against the walls. In the more crowded sessions, parallel rows of rented plastic chairs and tables, each with an ashtray on top, fill the middle of the space. Well-off families, as was the case with Dr. Khaled's, use sterling-silver cups for serving bitter coffee to the consolers, fragrant incense and rose water to perfume their hands, and famous brands of cigarettes, carefully arranged on hand-carved silver trays for the smokers. Instead of playing recorded recitations, they hire renowned reciters to read the Koran at their events. Several prominent reciters are blind—they have memorized whole chapters of the book by heart. They usually arrive at the mosque with young assistants who sit next to them to take care of technical and financial matters.

I heard the blind reciter's voice as I approached the entrance. No handshakes were expected upon arrival. I picked a seat and made myself visible to the grieving family, standing by the door. Before sitting, I offered a short, silent prayer to the soul of the deceased, followed by an audible *Amen*, while wiping my face with the palms of my hands. And then came the most annoying part.

Right before my buttocks touched the chair, I had to rise again as if pricked by a needle. Somewhere between sitting and standing, while rotating the torso in different directions, I was obliged to salute everyone in the hall with the right hand slightly touching my temple, in almost a military way. For someone with poor synchronization skills, this gesture was too much yoga to undergo. I nodded at my neighbors and sat down quietly instead.

Hardly anyone in the hall paid attention to the blind reciter. There was a large cloud of smoke hovering over our heads, and bursts of laughter interrupted the manly chatter every

once in a while. Coffee, cigarettes, and chitchats with friends, all for free—what more could men ask for? Everyone seemed to be enjoying his time. Grief was a mere background extra.

The women's mourning session wasn't much different from the men's, my mother later told me. The Koran recitation, the bitter coffee, smoking, and chitchat were typical there too. Dr. Khaled's family placed a mattress on the floor for his bereaved wife, daughters, and sisters to sit on and cry. The other women kneeled to embrace them and cry together or whimper aloud. The abandoning of chairs was meant to show how deeply grieved the family was. And the more tears were shed, the better the family name was honored. Iraqi widows wear black clothes for months, even years. I knew some ladies who wore black for the rest of their lives.

Two grand dinner banquets were thrown on the third and final night: one for the men at the mosque and another for the women. The open buffets with incredible amounts of food were necessary for wrapping up the ceremony and maintaining family pride in excellence. A five-star hotel catered the feast with waiters in uniforms and exquisite cutlery, china, and glassware. For us Arabs, pride is the best investment we can ever make. It's money very well spent.

Time for the final act, another challenge to my poor multi-tasking skills. After repeating the entry silent prayer, my father and I shook hands with the male members of Dr. Khaled's family, "kissed" them on their cheeks without making actual contact, and murmured a few cliché condolences. My father easily orchestrated his gestures, but it was impossible for me to do both the kissing and the talking. I could either kiss or talk, not both. On my way to the car, my mind calculated the mistakes I'd made during the evening. Unfortunately, there were plenty of them.

Scene Three

Every year on the Prophet's birthday, mystics demonstrated supernatural powers in Adhamiya, a district in northwest Baghdad. I was still in high school when a friend of mine told me about the spectacle. We promised ourselves that we'd watch them together the next year. Indeed, a year later, on the Prophet's birthday, my friend and I were walking through the streets of Adhamiya. As if the whole neighborhood had come out to celebrate the occasion, candles were lit at every doorway and small, colorful flags hung across the streets.

The sound of hymns from distant speakers resonated splendidly through the serpentine alley. For a moment, I thought we must have gotten lost. It was dark and there was no sign of any performance. My friend seemed pretty confident, so I just followed his lead, and we finally reached the venue at a small four-way intersection surrounded by old traditional houses. Everything was well prepared, and the space, usually dark at that time of night, had been illuminated for the show. I heard the faint rhythm of drums in the distance. The beating grew louder and louder, echoing through my chest. Young men with braids slightly above their shoulders, dressed in white gowns, beating drums, and waving huge green flags (green is believed to have been the Prophet's favorite color) turned up.

Except for the dozens of light bulbs that hung over us in a glowing web, there was hardly any other reminder of the twentieth century. I felt a sudden detachment from reality. The way those men looked and dressed took us back in time to the early years of Islam.

The surrounding architecture seemed to fit perfectly too. The mystics sat on low cushions around a large carpet. The audience stood watching and listening to the singing and drumming that continued until the real show began.

A young performer stood up, took off his turban, and walked to face another man who was holding a brick between his hands. Complete silence fell over the crowd. In a flash, he bent forward and hit the brick hard with his forehead, splitting it into two pieces. Everyone cheered and applauded. The mystic smiled timidly and went back to his seat. My heart raced at the sight of blood oozing out of his head. He wiped it off with a piece of cloth and seemed to be doing perfectly well. I sighed.

A couple of men walked into the middle of the ring. One of them held a block of wood firmly against the other's back. I had no idea what was going to happen next, and didn't dare speculate. A third mystic carrying a long sword approached the two men. He unsheathed his sword and waved it in the air before everyone's eyes. The polished blade gleamed and shimmered, reflecting the light of the bulbs on our faces. I thought, *Oh no, not blood again!*

When the swordsman set the point of the blade against the first man's abdomen, we held our breath, and before we knew it, the swordsman had stabbed him. The sword slowly penetrated the man's body like a skewer spears a fresh piece of meat. There wasn't a single expression of pain on his face. Moreover, a ghost of a smile hung on his dry lips. When the assistants removed the wooden block, meant to prevent him from retreating, we saw the sword's tip coming out of his back. There was blood on both ends. It wasn't a trick, either: we really saw it. The sword was still inside the young man when everything suddenly grew dark. I was fainting. My friend, standing right next to me, held my arms and pulled me aside, where I gradually regained consciousness.

Applause roared again. The stabbed man's eyes were open now.

"Thank God he's not dead," I muttered under my breath.

The assistants pressed white towels on his wounds as the swordsman waved the bloodstained blade in the air. No longer shimmering, the sword was dead metal again.

"Breathtaking acts are yet to come," my excited neighbor said.

Not sure I could take any more of this, I took a taxi back home. Supernatural? Absolutely, and overwhelming too. But not so religious. In fact, I still don't know why the so-called mystics had chosen the Prophet's birthday to give their annual show.

When I mentioned that to a Moroccan friend online, he said such practices were very popular in his country. People there considered them to be manifestations of God's ultimate power.

"That's not what we think here," another friend from Saudi Arabia commented. "They are strictly banned. If a man were caught doing those things, he would probably be sentenced to death."

Scene Four

The Baghdadi school of Koran recitation is quite significant in the Islamic world, and it can be easily distinguished from other provincial schools. Our local music and *Maqam* singing imbue the reading with deep poignancy, somewhat converting it into a chanting of laments. This interaction can also be observed in Malaysia, Turkey, and the Muslim countries in North Africa. Traditional music and songs have left their fingerprints on Koran

recitations and the call to prayer, just as regional arts have influenced the architecture of mosques. Diverse cultural backgrounds give each one an architectural identity of its own, with the integral domes and minarets differing impressively from one country to another.

Variety, however, is not limited to arts and architecture. For years I thought there were only two types of Islamic prayers, Sunni and Shia. The most obvious difference between them would be the position of the arms. While Shia keep their arms to the sides, Sunnis crossed them over their chests or slightly above the navel. Only by chance, and while discussing prayer with a friend whose mother was Syrian, I realized that some of my beliefs were mistaken.

Sarmad had spent much of his childhood years in Damascus, where he'd learned to pray the Sunni way. I too had been taught Sunni prayer in my elementary school in Baghdad. When we prayed at the mosque, we performed exactly the same movements and uttered the same Koranic verses. As for the supplication, which should be repeated silently during the seated part in the middle and at the end of prayer, neither Sarmad nor I knew that we'd been reading two different versions. And it wasn't just a word or two: actually, there were considerable differences between the two texts. This was quite a discovery for both of us. *I wonder what other hidden differences there are*, I remember thinking.

Scene Five

When he came back from a weekend trip to Germany, Ali, my childhood friend and namesake—a civil engineer who had been living and working in London—was subjected to a lengthy interrogation on arrival at the airport. “Why did you go to Germany? Where did you stay? What were you doing there?” After endless repetitions of the same questions and answers, Ali was finally fed up. He unzipped his handbag, took out the porn DVD he'd bought in Berlin, and put it down on the officer's desk. “Look! Do you see what I have here? You really needn't be afraid of me. Just because I have an Arabic name and was born in a Muslim country, that doesn't make me a terrorist. I'm not!” The officer smiled, and with typical British reservedness told Ali that he never said he was a terrorist. He did let him go after seeing the DVD, nonetheless.

Whatever the officer's true intentions may have been, I think Ali made a very good point (even if I don't agree with his means of proving it). Saying someone is a Muslim hardly tells anything about the human he or she is. It doesn't say if he's an extremist, a mystic, a secular person, or even an atheist who's being called a Muslim simply and only because he was born to Muslim parents. It's a vague statement that hardly gives any guidance, like introducing someone by saying they're from the Northern or Southern Hemisphere. We tend to forget that every label is but a vast spectrum that consists of millions of different individuals with different—and sometimes conflicting—views of life.

Scene Six

I didn't know it at the time, but the images I saw through the taxi window on my way to the airport would be my last of the city where I was born and had spent much of my life. The streets, the palm trees, and the Tigris River... everything seemed so poignant. Thinking I was only going to be gone for a month, I had barely enough clothing items in

my suitcase to survive winter. When the plane landed in Amman, Jordan, the city felt like heaven: a steady flow of electricity and water; no hours of lining up at gas stations for fuel; and most importantly, no car explosions, suicide bombers, or abductions—the lethal banalities of postwar Iraq. Amman seemed like an oasis of peace where I could walk safely down the streets at any given time, day or night. And walk I did.

Every single day, no matter whether it rained or snowed, I walked for hours on end. One month followed another, and another. With harrowing news about the worsening situation in Iraq, the prospect of my return to Baghdad seemed to evaporate. I stayed in Jordan for two and a half years. Even when I left Amman in 2008, I still had to go back every now and then to deal with family issues. On one of those visits, I read a newspaper article about a public meeting with Indian spiritual leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar.

The guru had arrived in Jordan after a short visit to Baghdad, where he'd given healing courses to groups of traumatized Iraqis of different sects. Until then, I hadn't heard the man's name and knew absolutely nothing about his courses and his foundation, The Art of Living. I was impressed, though, that he'd risked going to Iraq at a critical time to help the victims of violence, and I couldn't pass up the opportunity to hear his account of the trip. I arrived early at the Sheraton Hotel's grand ballroom and sat close to the podium. In less than half an hour, the room was packed to the rafters. The audience of mainly Jordanians, but also Arabs and foreigners, teemed with anticipation for *Guruji*—as his dedicated followers loved to call him.

I was interested to learn more about the courses and their relaxing properties. It struck me, though, that not a single person in the room was communicating in Arabic. Some spoke flawless English, so much so that I thought they were British. But when they started discussing local matters, a few Arabic words escaped their lips, enough to make me realize they were actually native Jordanians. I was baffled. I listened to the ladies behind me as they talked about the expensive American school in which they had enrolled their little children. Although they tried to conceal it, their accent was so obvious. When they couldn't find the right English words, they used Arabic synonyms, and then swiftly switched back to English, making horrible grammar mistakes along the way. I wondered, *What's wrong with using Arabic, their mother tongue?* I couldn't fathom why an Arab would communicate with another Arab through a foreign language neither of them had mastered.

The room rang with applause when the speaker arrived. Sri Sri talked about his mission in Iraq and worldwide. His foundation was teaching a special breathing technique that helped—or so they claimed—to eliminate daily stress. He then took some time to answer questions from the audience, and at the end of the evening we all did a short guided meditation. As I walked back to my hotel, I wondered whether I was so different from the audience at the Amman Sheraton ballroom: I too expressed myself in English occasionally. So if a passerby heard me one day, would they think I was inauthentic, exactly the way I had thought of the ladies behind me?

Scene Seven

Bewildered, I watched millions of Iraqi Shia on television as they marched to their holy shrines on Ashoura Day—the anniversary of the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandsons in Karbala, in southern Iraq. During his years in power, Saddam had strictly banned the ritual. But when he was gone, it came back more passionate than ever. The penitents brutally beat

themselves until their bodies bled. I couldn't understand why people would willingly torture themselves like that. If these weeping men and women were my people, then how come I felt so estranged from them? It wasn't the first time I had asked myself this question.

The way my siblings and I were raised was quite different from the way the majority of Iraqi parents raised their children. At the age of five, I was taught to sing "Old MacDonald Had a Farm," "London Bridge Is Falling Down," "Roly Poly," and the French "Frère Jacques." I learned the English ABCD in kindergarten before I learned the Arabic alphabet in elementary school. And while I used a knife and fork to cut the food on my plate, thinking it was the natural way to eat, thousands of Iraqi children my age sat on the floor and used their bare hands to eat rice and okra stew from a single plate that served the entire family. When they had meat, they devoured it and would not let go of the small pieces until they had eaten every last bit right down to the bones, and sucked the marrow too. No cutlery, napkins, or tablecloth were necessary. In many cases, there were not even tables.

No, I wasn't born into a rich, aristocratic family. My parents—like thousands of young, educated, middle-class Iraqis—had chosen to lead a Westernized lifestyle because it was the trend at the time they got married. When I joined the army, I first realized how encapsulated I was. Being abruptly uprooted from my comfortable, hybrid ghetto and forced to mingle with people with whom I had very little, if anything, in common was disorienting. I found a couple of hybrid friends like myself there, but we felt lonely and isolated from the rest of our mates.

I kept my mouth shut most of the time, lest I make a stupid remark on religion that could have irritated someone or hurt their feelings. I also pretended to have a stomach ulcer and lived on water and bread alone because I couldn't eat any of the food served to us at the camp. I think I managed to deceive everyone, but I wasn't happy. While my mates clearly belonged to the land, I felt I didn't belong anywhere. I was a cheap replica, a parasite.

"Mama, Mama!" my brother called our mother while we were playing one day. A poor rural woman who had been cleaning our house then was down on her knees scrubbing the floor. I saw her smile and say under her breath, "Mama? Let's see what happens when you grow up and your friends in the army hear you say that!" She thought I didn't hear her, but I did. Her own children never called her Mama. Most likely, they called her *Youm*, or *Youmma*—the native equivalents of the word. She was a simple illiterate woman, but very astute. I remembered her quip twenty years later. Indeed. There was absolutely no way my brother or I could have referred to our mother during our military service as *Mama*.

The Muslims on the Bridge

It's not new to me. I've felt like a stranger most of my life. More so in Baghdad than now in Amsterdam, Omar, an Iraqi dentist, said as we chatted online. He, his wife, and their two children had been admitted as refugees in Holland. Omar's words didn't surprise me because I knew exactly what he meant. Over the years, I've met and talked with many Arab Muslims like us, who not only spoke, dressed, and ate differently from the majority of people in their own countries. Most importantly, they/we also *thought* differently.

I sometimes envy the Muslims who don't feel the need to question their faith, its teachings, and its rules. I wish I could allow my mind to indulge in the comfort of total

submission. But my mind doesn't work like that. It's been trained to reason and argue, and there is no button I can press to switch it off. It's a big problem in our part of the world, where it is risky for thoughts, opinions, and ideas not to conform to mainstream values and standards. But what if those standards and values are wrong? The question has often left me perplexed and feeling like I'm standing on a bridge—a frail suspension bridge, shaking in the wind.

My only consolation is that I'm not alone. There are so many of us out there. We are neither accepted by our own people, whose blood, physical features, and language we share, nor will we ever be fully welcomed by the people on the other side, whose thinking and lifestyle we're more familiar with. East and West. The seventh century and the twenty-first century. Torn between two different affiliations and times that combat inside and outside of us, the bridge has become our mandatory buffer zone.

When I last left Baghdad in 2006, more than a dozen bridges—several of which had been closed for security reasons—connected the banks of the Tigris. A year later, a suicide truck bomb exploded on the oldest one and brought it down. I had passed by that bridge on my way to the airport. It felt very refreshing and soothing, and I often marveled at how pretty the city looked from there. I try to think positively about my metaphorical bridge position too. *Maybe from where I'm standing I can have a better view and understanding of both banks/ worlds*, I sometimes tell myself. I've always loved driving and walking across bridges. Maybe *living* on a bridge is not so bad after all.