

The Branding*

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The house began to darken little by little, as the gloom crept across from the faraway grain and hay silos, then spread to the roof of the house. Out of a small window in the western wall extended a beam of light, which settled as a flickering circle on the back of one of those seated inside. Within the beam of light danced thousands of specks of dust. The men's voices clammered, in clipped, short phrases.

The sun slid below the hills, and all that remained visible of it was a small, laughing edge. Then it fell away suddenly, and the sky began to lose its rarefied, shimmering blueness. Pink clouds gave the impression that the sky was extremely high and wide. The evening star was pale and trembling. Out of the East, descending from the desert, a gray darkness crept toward the village.

The beam of light which extended from the small window was cut off, and darkness fell on the house, silent and heavy. One of the men stopped speaking, as though the darkness had cut off his voice from the others. In a deep, husky voice, he entreated God for refuge from Satan.

And silence reigned.

From outside the house came familiar but indistinct voices. The sound of the paraffin stove grew so loud it seemed exaggerated. One could also hear the kneading of dough. One of the men said, "The sun has set."

Then, from the heart of the gloom, rose the voice of the house's owner, who sounded as though he were calling for help: "Light the fire." In the corners of the house there were tense movements, and the angry voices of women looking for matches, and for paraffin to fill the lamp.

Voices rose up in supplication for mercy. In a deep voice, someone said, "We are God's children, and to him shall we return."

*The Arabic title, *Al-Bashlah*, refers to a ritual in which a piece of metal is heated in coals and placed on the tongue of an accused criminal. If the accused is burned, this means he is guilty. If he remains unharmed, it is because he is innocent and God has protected him from being burned. It's essentially a witch trial.

†Originally Jordanian, 1936-1986.

‡American, 1978-present.

As light shone forth from the sooty lamp, this end-of-the-day ritual ended, announcing that night had begun in the village, which sat on the edge of a desert which extended for thousands of miles... Night, which carried with it the anticipation of nightly bedouin raids and attacks by vagabonds and those bent on revenge, and the cruelty of life in the mountains.

And a waiting silence reigned.

A man with disheveled hair coughed and all eyes turned to face him. He had sunken eyes and a large nose. Fine wrinkles completely covered his face up to his nose and ears, and seemingly even under the light hair of his beard. He let out a joyless laugh, and said, "There's a saying: 'The one who makes you bitter is more bitter still.' "

As the man turned toward the light, deep wounds in his forehead appeared. He repeated his throat-rattling laugh, and went on, saying, "By God, no one has made us bitter but one who is more bitter still. We have always been brothers. Between our family and yours there has never been any serious dispute. In good times and bad we have been equals. Whatever has occurred, you have borne it along with us, and we have never fallen short, for our part. We have been brothers and we will remain brothers, as long as there is good in the world. But the truth cannot anger anyone, and we can't help but repay an insult in kind."

Then he began to mix a deliberate and studied agitation into his voice, saying, "My sword defended your father, may he rest in peace, from the attack of Turki. Turki came like the wind on his horse, unsheathing his sword and bearing down upon your father. I fell upon him, striking the back of his horse. The bridle fell from his hand, and I rushed toward him, but he fled from me. That was at the bottom of Resurrection Valley."

A stream of love gushed forth as he spoke of these memories. The other men lowered their head, embarrassed at being so stirred.

Now rose the voice of the mother from behind the men, who sat in a circle around pitchers of black coffee. Their faces turned to her, staring. She said, "But the bullet which killed him struck him immediately afterward."

The disheveled man, showing signs of exhaustion, replied patiently, "It was in the hands of God."

Severity and impatience returned to the men's faces. The mother said, "Do you hate speaking plainly? Does the truth anger you when you hear it?"

Speaking as though he were acting in a play, the disheveled man replied, "Who could hate the truth?"

Other voices followed his: "All of us want the truth... We ask for nothing else... There is nothing more noble than the truth."

The mother was resting with her back against the wall. Her face was like those of some blind people: heavy, with hardened lines, her eyes wandering without settling on anything in particular.

She asked now, "Do you think my son would abandon the bed of a beautiful and well-fed woman, the sight of whom causes men's mouths to water? Would he abandon that bed lightly only to shack up with some despicable crone dried up like a twig in an oven? Has he

gone blind that he would see anyone other than your daughter and abandon her tender bed? I'm an old woman on the doorstep of the grave, and only the truth matters to me. It's as clear as day! If even I can see what's going on, how is it that you men can't? By God, I'll..."

The disheveled man interrupted her, saying, "With God as our witness, we haven't accused anyone. Who said we had accused anyone? Even if I had seen our daughter in the arms of your son with these very eyes of mine, I wouldn't have believed it. He is like a brother to her, and no brother would stain the honor of his sister. But people have been talking, and we can't have that. It is their gossip which we want to put an end to. Do you want us to have to cast our eyes down in shame when we pass through the village? What we want shouldn't anger anyone. Your son will stick out his tongue, the hot metal will be placed on it, and if he's guilty his tongue will be burned, as is the lot of the guilty. If he's innocent, then the hot metal will fall cold and harmless on his tongue, as it did with our lord Ibrahim. We hope to God that it will be so."

The mother replied, "Who exactly is going to keep the people from gossiping? Their talk is endless. It is only the talk of the envious, and of those with nothing better to say. The women are always talking. A woman's mind is always in the gutter, and if no one keeps her under control then she'll just go ahead and say anything horrible that she pleases. What does it matter to her if it fills people's hearts with evil and they rise up against each other?"

A tea pot had begun boiling, and the water spilled from it, extinguishing the flame below. The mother yelled out, "You silly bitches!" This was followed by agitated yelling among the women. One pushed another, and mumbled something under her breath. A child was crying, and someone slapped his face to shut him up. Then everything calmed down and one could again hear the sound of the stove burning.

Then the paraffin stove was turned off, and a heavy silence reigned. Not even the sound of tea being poured into cups interrupted it. A tray of tea was passed around and the men immersed themselves in drinking it. When the oldest son began to speak, the disheveled man put down his cup and began to listen with interest. The oldest son's voice was calm, but there was anger concealed in his tone.

He said, "I testify that there is no god but God, and that our lord Muhammad is his messenger. Listen, men, we've been debating back and forth since noon, and haven't arrived at anything. May God give me strength to see that you leave in peace, even though your quarrel is with one of my kin. But I have one question which I would like you to answer. How will we feel if the hot metal burns my brother so that he remains unable to speak for the rest of his life, and afterwards it turns out that he was as innocent with respect to your daughter, just as Joseph was innocent with respect to the wife of the Aziz¹? Should I go along with you men and do my brother wrong?"

One of the younger men, reddening in the face, stamped the ground threateningly with

¹*Aziz* is a title used in the Qur'an, surah XII, to refer to the priest of On, referred to by the title "Potiphar" in the Old Testament.

his stick and began to speak, saying, “By God, we will not take this injustice in silence. We will not be quiet, even if it means that blood will flow in rivers! The women will remain quiet – and only the women!” The disheveled man turned toward him and said, “Get up and feed our mounts.” The youth bowed his head and said in a whisper, “That’s what women are for.”

The disheveled man faced the elder son, saying, “Saïd is a brother to us just as he is your brother, and ‘the wound has struck our hearts’, as they say. You know, they say old Turki once called a doctor to treat his leg, which had been broken. So the doctor set the leg, and when the bandages were untied, Turki saw that it was bent like a bow. So he took up a hammer and broke his own leg a second time. He asked the doctor, ‘Should I walk among people with such a leg? Set it right this time!’ Put yourself in our place, Abu Ali. We’ll leave the judgement to you, except listen to this: would you take your son Ali in your lap and swear that your brother is innocent? We could accept this oath from you.”

The elder son replied, “Do I stand accused, as well?”

“Who has accused you?”

To this the son said, “How am I supposed to take an oath about what I’ve never seen? Should I swear on my own flesh and blood?”

The mother spoke up now, saying, “Why don’t you ask her husband? Ask him! He’ll tell you.”

The disheveled man moaned, “Her husband... Her poor husband.”

The mother remained alone in the house. Once the men had left, the house seemed huge and empty. Suddenly the darkness attacked from every hidden corner – from behind the columns, and from the storerooms, and from behind the benches – until nothing could be seen. The lamp seemed to stand alone, not lighting anything but itself amid vast stretches of darkness. The mother, who had loomed huge and frightening even as the house roared with the voices of the men, now seemed to be a lost ember, neglected and cast aside, glowing in the middle of this black expanse.

Fear crept from the corners of the large house and turned slowly into a tormenting anticipation. She imagined she saw a long procession in which the faces of the living mixed with those of the dead, walking toward some known end. Out of this a funeral dirge arose, along with images of shrouded corpses. The song told of a life which used to fill the house and then abruptly ended; of a young man’s whining; of a woman from the mountain road; of the darkness; and of a mother waiting expectantly. She thought, without any fear, “In the grave I will be alone just as I am now.” The funeral song began to enfold everything: its rhythm harmonized with the beat of her heart and the movement of her breathing, with the voices of the mounts and the chirping of the crickets, and with the uneasy silence of the village.

Along with all of this, a profound grief erupted. A silent sadness in which everything seemed to be only an impossible waiting: hands and lips burning to be touched; clothes hanging in resignation, calling out to be removed from the wardrobe and worn in splendor; the threshold of a house waiting for its master to return; the ear longing for the voice which was still ringing in it. Everything before her was a question waiting for an answer. And the mournful dirge encompassed all of it, hid inside it, ran from it, floated on through the air.

The mother realized suddenly that the the funeral song was coming from outside, and she shuddered violently, muttering, “He isn’t even dead yet. I am his mother, and I won’t let him die.” She stood in the middle of the house, leaning on her cane, panting. The terrible nightmare had stopped. Stopped, but never really went away, just as an expression of surprise can remain forever on a stone face.

As she began to walk, the darkness had retreated into the hidden corners of the house, and the lamp shone like the sun. Her grief and misery turned to cruelty. This was always a prelude to some daring action. She began to slowly climb the slippery stairs, resting one hand on the wobbly wooden railing and the other on her cane. The door to the upstairs room opened, and a river of strong white light poured into the darkness. She walked inside, shielding her eyes from the harsh lamp-light with a plump, calloused hand.

The air in the room was suffocating. The window was closed. The smoke cast forth by the lamp stung her eyes. A sudden exhaustion fell upon her, but in her toughness she regained self-composure. This prudent determination of hers was a safe-guard against any calamity.

She paused a few moments, not seeing anything, not hearing even the wheezing of the lamp. Then she said, “Where is his lordship?” From a corner, shielded from light by the big brass bed, rose Saïd’s voice: “Please come in, Haja.”

The mother replied, “‘Please come in, Haja,’ he says. I’ve already come in, you dope.” Next to the door stood Warda, her body voluptuous, her face big, white and expressionless, its features drawn downward as though by invisible threads. She went to the corner of the room, picked up a mattress, and placed it on the floor. She walked with legs apart and feet angled out, as though pregnant. She said to the mother, “Take a rest, Haja.”

“God willing, I will take a rest – from all of you, and from the troubles of life – in the grave.” Then she bent over and folded up the mattress, saying, “Put it back where it was.”

Warda replied, “As you wish, Haja. May God grant you long life.” She said this with her sweet voice as though speaking to no one but herself, and added, “Tell him to eat something, Haja. He hasn’t eaten since yesterday. Please tell him to eat.”

The mother turned toward her, hissing, “Shut up, you!” She reverted her attention to Saïd, saying, “Son, stand up and walk with me!” She exited the room. Saïd got up and followed her out, stepping lightly. Within, Warda was sobbing. The mother poked her head back in the door, her face contracting in anger. She shouted, “Shut up, you daughter of a mule! I don’t want to hear a peep, do you understand?” Then the stairway railing began to shake violently under the weight of her hand. Saïd tried to help her, but she pulled her

hand away and said, "Let go of my hand, you unclean son of an unclean father! Your father was depraved, just like you. Whenever he saw the skirt of a woman passing by, he would throw aside everything to follow her. The men in this family are all lechers!"

Saïd replied, "Leave me alone, Haja."

"May your bones burn in the red fires of hell, just like the bones of your damned womanizing father!" The two of them walked silently in the broad, fenced courtyard, with its quiet noises: the camels chewing their cud, the goats frisking, the meowing of cats whose phosphorescent eyes occasionally shone forth in the darkness as they carried on a nightly conversation with friendly spirits. From a nearby house came the howls of a dog.

The mother stopped suddenly. She looked around at him and said disapprovingly, "Are you crying? Your father was a whoremonger too, but he never cried. He would rather have died. He would furrow his brow and roar like an agitated camel, but I never heard him cry or whine. Never!" They stopped in front of the mother's room. She pushed the door open, and Saïd followed her in. The room was small, with a high ceiling. It was full of cushions and pillows, and locked, multi-colored boxes. It was lit by a small lamp.

The mother stuck her hand between two mattresses and began to search around for something. Then she took out a small yellow tin tied in blackened rags. She opened it with the most deliberate care imaginable, and took from it a stack of banknotes. She considered the notes for a minute, turning them over in her hand, and said as though to herself, "My life savings, son. I was going to use it to have a goat slaughtered over my grave."

"You have a long life to live, yet, mother," spoke Saïd, his voice choking up.

She extended her hand, saying, "Take it and get the hell away from this village. There's no life for you here. Marry her, and go south, where men are still men. Only there will you be safe. Come back in two or three years. You won't find me at that time. I will have died. I've readied your horse, and I've prepared a meal for your saddlebag, which you'll find at the door. As for your father's rifle and sword, you'll find them in that box over there."

Saïd replied, "It's all of no use. She refused to marry me."

"Refused? Why would you allow her to refuse?"

"Well, she had agreed at first, but then the cripple began wailing like a child, and said that if she left him he would kill himself."

"So let him kill himself! Or you should kill him. Death would be better for him."

Saïd was silent, with the image before his eyes of the cripple hobbling around the house with his bowed legs, grabbing her by the ankles and kissing her feet, saying, "If you leave, I'll die of hunger. Let me die in my own bed, and I won't weigh you down much longer."

She had kicked him away at first, and he was thrown on his back. He yelled hotly. His legs and arms flailed madly in the air to bring him upright again, much like a large bug that has been turned over on its back. She bent over him and sat him up, saying, "I won't leave you, no matter what happens." But he continued wailing and pleading.

The mother said, "Wait here a while and I will talk to her myself."

“But it’s no use now. All of the entrances to the neighborhood are guarded by armed men. There are men on the rooftops, as well.”

The mother was still holding out her hand with the stack of cash, her eyes staring into space. She very quickly regained her self-composure, and slipped the cash into the tin, then returned it to its place between the mattresses. She said to him, “Everything will end well. Never fear. Wait for me and I will return shortly.”

The mother returned shortly after, followed by Zeina, her long black dress dragging on the ground behind her, rustling faintly. Saïd was sitting on a pillow which had been thrown upon the floor, with his elbows dug into his thighs and his face hidden in the palms of his hands. His mother began to examine Zeina: tall stature emphasizing her horribly slouchy posture regardless of the loose clothing, small pert breasts, a long proud neck and a dark brown face with remarkably high cheek bones. Her upper lip protruded a little, giving her face an expression of mature motherhood mixed with inattentive childishness.

The mother said to her, “I have no idea what would make my son fall in love with you. You’re dark-skinned, and you’re dried up like a twig, whereas I chose a plump, fair-skinned woman for him.”

Zeina didn’t reply. She was staring – with her wide blue eyes – at Saïd, who was lying stiff on his pillow.

The mother added, “If you were a man, I wouldn’t give you a second look. What would my boy want with a dry heap of bones like you? Did you cast some sort of spell over his mind?”

Zeina started to speak. She straightened up in preparation, and addressed them both together, saying, “Night after night, winter and summer, even on nights when snow was coming down in blankets, or nights when rain turned small trickles from the hills into cascading waterfalls, for uninterrupted stretches of nights I can’t even count, your son would watch me. His eyes would peer out through cracks in the door, to the point where I imagined the door was inhabited by spirits. When I stretched my arms in the morning, I would tremble feverishly as though I were naked and being watched. I managed to discourage him night after night, though he never took his eyes off of me. His eyes were on me when I took off my clothes. I felt his eyes like daggers in my body; the wounds would bleed in my dreams. And in the day his eyes would spy on me from the upstairs window. Night and day I would meet his gaze, undressing me. Can clothes hide a woman’s crippled body? I never tried even once to entice him. I’m an orphan, and I know that nothing but trouble can come from being noticed by the likes of him. Then one day he took me by force. I was asleep, and woke up to the cripple wailing and pleading for him to go.”

Then she added in an absent voice, “Then everything passed as though it were ordained.”

To this the mother said, “I didn’t mean to upset you, my daughter. Everything will turn out all right.”

Zeina turned toward Saïd, saying, “Was I lying? Did I not tell the truth? Why don’t you speak?!”

The mother said, “Everything’s going to be fine. Don’t get angry. I’ll leave you two alone to talk now. Don’t be afraid. I’ll be sitting outside. Don’t be afraid.”

Without moving, Saïd followed her with his eyes as she headed for the door. She went out and shut the door behind her.

In the dark outside, the mother sat, a shapeless, featureless heap of black, resting her back against the gate. Some beams of light poked out from inside the room through cracks in the door, alighting on the ground in front of her. One of these beams seemed to permeate the entire door, spreading along the ground and climbing up her body.

She heard an occasional woman’s voice rising up from the neighboring houses, in playful shouts that received no response. Then quiet reigned once again, and she wondered whether the shouts had only been imagined. She focused all of her attention on listening, trying to remember that sad song which everyone in the village was singing: the song about the mother who had lost her son.

The beams of light were blotted out a number of times by bodies passing between the lamp and the door, and then appeared again on the ground of the courtyard. Silence enshrouded the room. As though out of a dream, came the echo of a dog’s sharp, agonized barking, which could probably be heard many settlements away. The pained barking mingled with the sad song of mourning:

At the burial ground	cries out	a young man
Oh uncle,	return me	to my homeland
The path is rugged	and the night is pitch black	

She heard the voice of a woman scolding the dog, and the smack of a stick against his hide. The dog began to bark sorrowfully, apologetically, and the woman’s screaming rose up from beyond the wall: “You mangy, filthy bastard!”

The mother thought that maybe the scent of the men lying in ambush had been caught by the dog, and she felt her heart ache at the thought. She was overtaken by a longing for sleep, and for everything to be over with. But that was only for a moment. The voice of the woman came to her again, this time calling for her: “Haja! Oh, Haja! Do you hear me?” The mother turned her head in curiosity, but she didn’t respond. The woman’s voice rose again: “What’s happening on this ill-omened night? Hasn’t the village had its fill of misfortunes yet? Do you hear me, Haja? I know something terrible’s going to happen! The shooting stars have been falling in torrents, like dead birds, all night long, falling to earth behind the mountains. Did you see the shooting star that rent the sky a few minutes ago? It was as bright as the sun!”

The woman fell silent as the dog took up its mournful barking once more. The mother turned her head toward the wall and said, “Don’t you ever shut up, you whore? Aren’t there

any men out there who can cool the fever in your belly and cut off your tongue?"

The woman answered, "Did you see the shooting star that rent the sky just then? The dog hasn't stopped barking since it happened."

Another woman's voice rose up: "Are you ever going to shut that dog up? It woke me up, and now my body is shaking like a leaf!"

"Did you see the shooting star that rent the sky a few minutes back? Look! Look! There's another one! And another one still! My lord! A few minutes ago one passed by from the South, and it cut the sky right in half, with a bright tail dragging behind it from one end of the sky to the other!"

The other woman replied, "Your dog woke me up, and I'm shaking uncontrollably! My whole body is drenched in cold sweat! In my sleep I thought I heard a lot of crying and mourning."

"This village will never have its fill of misfortunes! A few minutes back..."

The mother shouted, "You stinking whores! May your tongues be cut off!"

Suddenly, silence reigned.

The mother could imagine their faces showing hurt and distress, and she heard their apologetic muttering. Then the sounds of the night broke loose as though they had been lying in wait. From somewhere far away in the hills rose the song of one of the shepherds, a song complaining of lost loves, of the night's cruelty, of loneliness... And from the rhythm of this song, the mourner's lament once again filled the mother's head:

I've spent my whole life trying to please my master
My master is not satisfied and my life is not yet over

The mother heard a man say in a broad, loud voice, "Shut that dog up!"

The threads of light from the door were blotted out suddenly, and the door opened. Zeina stepped outside lightly. At that moment, the mother saw her as beautiful, tall, and slender, bursting with vitality and youth. Violent feelings approaching desire consumed the mother's thoughts. Zeina approached with a few quick elegant steps, the ends of her gown rustling softly on the ground behind her.

The mother asked her, "Did you cry out just now?" Zeina did not respond.

The mother asked, "You've finished, then? So quickly? How is he?"

Zeina said in a soft, submissive voice, "He's just lying there, drowning in sweat. He can't stop shaking."

His mother said disapprovingly, "Is he afraid?"

"He says he's not afraid, but he's dripping with sweat as though he had just been swimming in a lake, and he won't stop shaking."

"Why didn't you comfort him? That was why I brought you here!"

Zeina replied, "I was afraid."

“Was that why you cried out?” Zeina was silent, and did not reply. But the mother pressed her: “Was that why you cried out?”

Zeina began to speak very quickly, saying, “We weren’t alone in there. There were others surrounding us. I sensed that from the moment I left the house, but it was only a feeling. Your son’s body was dripping with sweat, and I saw that his tongue was dry and black like a piece of worn out leather. I took him in my arms and tried to comfort him. But he was calm. He was calm for a very long time, until finally I assumed he was asleep. I asked him if he was afraid, and he said he wasn’t. Straining, he added, ‘I swear to you, I swear to you. I’m not afraid.’ Then I raised my eyes and saw someone staring down at us, his face so wide it took up the whole window.”

The mother shivered a little, then regained control of herself, saying, “Who? That’s impossible!”

“He’s done it before. He must be a very good climber.”

“No! No! That’s impossible.”

“I saw him just as plainly as I see you now. His eyes were large and glowing like two oil-lamps, and in them I saw terrible pain, pain for which he seemed to blame me.”

The mother asked, “Did he say anything?”

“When I turned toward him he hid.”

The mother said in a calm voice, “It was just a hallucination, my dear. Fear is making you imagine things. I haven’t seen anyone pass by since I shut the door on you two.”

Zeina replied, “But the window is on the south side of the building, and you can’t see it from here.”

“I would have heard him. I was listening so intently that a whisper would not have escaped me. It was just a figment of your imagination, created out of fear. Go back inside to him, and talk to him.”

“Impossible.”

“So you are afraid, aren’t you, my dear?”

“No, but why should I go back in to talk to him, when he’s become like a child drowning in his own stupidity, and fear has tied his tongue? Have pity on me. How can I possibly go in there again?”

The mother said to her tenderly, “Come, sit here beside me.”

Zeina sat, and the mother gently took her head and placed it in her lap. She began to stroke her hair. Because they were touching so closely, she discovered that Zeina had a full, youthful body, despite her lanky appearance. Zeina was calm for a while as the hand stroked her hair, and she thought to herself, “It all seems so very long ago.”

The mother felt tears wetting her leg, and almost violently, intense feelings of longing burst forth inside her. As she spoke, there was a tone of complaint in her voice: “My dear, it’s a woman’s fate that she should have little joy and boundless suffering. She casts herself down, and a man raises her up only to humiliate her. She has to endure the pains of pregnancy and childbirth. She has to endure degradation and beatings, and a life of

disadvantages without any right to protest. I think about my life, and I find nothing in it but torment and humiliation. On our wedding night, after my late husband had finished having his way with me, he was frowning, and asked me, 'I thought you were a virgin. Where is the discharge?' I said, 'I don't know,' and he told me look for it. I asked, 'Where?' Then he began beating me with a stick, and didn't stop until I lost consciousness. Then he took me again while I was unconscious. Every part of my body ached. In the morning, when people saw the bruises he had left on my body, they only said, 'He's a man. He knows how to maintain his authority over her.' I tell you, there's nothing for us women except torment and humiliation, my dear. Now go inside, and comfort him."

Zeina lifted her head and said, "I can't. I already told you it's impossible. How can anyone stand to be with a man who's afraid? What did I do to deserve this? A man is going to die because of me. Because of me! It will torment me until the last minute of my life."

She jerked herself upright, brought her face very close to the other woman's face, and said, "Don't I already have enough problems? Isn't it enough that they married me off to a lousy cripple so that they could obtain his land? Isn't it enough that they made me a servant to their women? And now here I am, with a man about to die because of me! What did I do? What did I do to deserve this?"

The two women were silent. When the mother finally spoke, her voice came as though from far away: "All of this was inevitable. If it hadn't been you, it would have been some other woman. I always knew it was inevitable. Since he was a child, I knew. I often saw in his eyes a penetrating stare that could bore through your chest like an awl and stop your heart. I am convinced that there was no way to prevent this from happening. That stare that could pierce a woman's heart, and make her come crawling on her knees, panting and drooling. I deceived myself sometimes, thinking that his wife is so plump and fair-skinned. But he would never have been satiated. The sheikh's wife was still just a bride when I discovered that she had been meeting him in the cave. She cried in front of me, saying, 'It was out of my hands. There was a fire burning in my body that made me lose control of my senses.' And there were other women, many others. I always knew that one day they would hunt him down like a rabbit."

Zeina got up suddenly and said, "I will go back in to him." She took a few quick steps, pushed open the door, and stopped there for a minute. Then she let loose a piercing scream and rushed inside.

At that moment the voice of a man rose up, loud and deep like the neigh of a horse, shouting, "Shut that dog up!"

And a shooting star fell to earth behind the mountains.