



The
Road
From
Damascus

'Impressive, rambunctious,
daring, entertaining ...
pungent with noise, clamour
and chaos' *The Times*

ROBIN YASSIN-KASSAB



www.penguin.co.uk

The Road from Damascus
by
Robin Yassim-Kassab

Copyright © Robin Yassim-Kassab, 2008

All rights reserved



Penguin Books Ltd

This is a limited extract from The Road from Damascus

To find out more please visit www.penguin.co.uk

I

The Other Path

Uncle Mazen drove Sami into the city as far as the parliament building, then shrugged and peered out through the windscreen. 'The car wouldn't make it up there,' he said, pointing an ear at the mountainside. 'There aren't any roads anyway. Just steps. Perhaps you can walk.'

Sami disembarked and straightened on the pavement. A man of average height, somewhat hunched, with a pale complexion, a sensitive, moving face, black eyes flashing with an intensity called beautiful by those that love him, and thick and curling hair, also black, grown longer than in his youth to distract from climbing baldness. Still handsome. But a body aging quickly, increasingly swell-bellied. Thirty-one years old.

And feeling foreign now, unsteady in the heat, among balloon salesmen, bootblacks, cassette stalls, exhaust fumes. Sami searching for breath in the smothered heart of Damascus, home of his ancestors, the former city of streams and orchards the Prophet had refused to enter, not wishing to commit the sin of believing himself in Paradise. But Sami, unconcerned with Paradise, for better or worse, had entered. Damascus was supposed to offer him answers.

He'd been here for a month, in order to (he listed): reconnect with his roots; remember who he was; find an idea. And the tourist stuff too: to bathe in the wellsprings of the original city, the oldest continuously inhabited city on earth. A city that had briefly ruled the world. Where jasmine and honeyed tobacco scented the evening air. Where Ibn Arabi wrote his last mystical poetry, where Nizar Qabbani wrote 'Bread, Hashish and Moon'.

Years ago Sami thought he would write a doctoral thesis on

Qabbani. Not thought; assumed. It had seemed inevitable, and it had never happened. Nothing remained of whatever that idea had been. So he was here to find a new idea, gather material – and then return home, write the thesis, become Dr Sami Traifi. As a proper academic, like his father before him, he'd be able to get it all back on course, his place in the world, his marriage, his mother. So he believed. A new idea, a turned leaf. It was time, it was perhaps his last chance, to leave childish things behind.

In front of him the mountain was sandy red and imposing, shiny with whitewashed shacks and satellite dishes. One of those buildings, his maternal aunt Fadya's house, was his destination. To his right as he walked there was the rubble of destroyed four-storey Ottoman homes: tangled wood and plaster and a back wall still intact with a mosaic of dead rooms printed on its surface. You could make out the hitherto private squares of paint, entire inescapable universes for their inhabitants, now brought borderless into promiscuous intimacy. On one patch there was some religious calligraphy. On another, what looked like family photographs. Though the demolition was some days old, white dust motes swirled thickly. History refusing gravity.

Just about all the women Sami could see were wearing the hijab, many more than on his last visit. He didn't like it. He didn't like supernaturalism, nor backwardness in general. And in this country a return to religion meant a return to sect. It was just under the surface, just under the smiling face of this hospitable people, the secret loathing of the other path. They don't respect each other, Sami thought. They fear the strong and despise the weak. This cacophonous country: each individual playing from his own score, ignoring the others. But it was his country too. His father's country.

Struggling upwards against the descending swell of well-wrapped ladies, across Corncob Square with its melancholic bronze president, Sami imagined roadblocks, men with armbands and guns and armed identities. That's what it could be like, very easily. The wrong identity would end you at the intersection. Dead for wearing a cross. Dead for wearing a hijab. Dead for Ali's sword swinging

from your car mirror. It had nearly happened in the eighties when the Muslim Brothers took over the city of Hama, and the government had stopped it, rightly. In the face of the Brothers' fanaticism the government stood unwaveringly firm. Sami's father, Mustafa, safe in London, had explained it to him. Beards disappeared. Surely a good thing. The headscarf tide was reversed. Hair breathed freely. What rational person would disagree with that?

And as he bobbed past coffee merchants, past careening taxis and minibuses, past a line of shawarma furnaces flaring the afternoon into more surreal heat, he asked himself what his father would think if he could see this determinedly Muslim population, hairy and hijabbed not twenty years after the Hama events. What would his father say? It would represent the very end of the world he'd hoped for.

Back in London, Sami's own wife was threatening to wear the hijab, which somehow seemed to represent the end of everything Sami had hoped for too.

The road stopped as Uncle Mazen had said it would. Up here mucky children replaced traffic, children loud as traffic, smudge-eyed, tangle-haired, brandishing bleeping plastic weaponry. There was the occasional fruitless mulberry tree. The ground was dust, mud where something had spilt. In the winter it would all be mud. Mud and dust alternating, flesh and bone, life and death.

He breathed outside Fadya's wooden door, then swung the knocker. Fadya opened up with a show of surprise and welcomed him, thanked God for his safety, told him he had illumined her house. Her family crowded around him, everybody kissing solemnly and shaking hands. Fadya welcomed him again. Her hair was collected under a white scarf which she didn't remove, despite her blood relationship to Sami, even after the door was shut. His two cousins asked him dutifully for his news, and asked him to make himself at home, following the formulas. Then they sat on the floor in front of the TV, their large backs to him, their lined and stubbled faces immobile.

When Fadya brought Turkish coffee with sweets and joined him

on the sofa, Sami's eyes hadn't yet adjusted from the glare outside so he saw in black and white, with patches of blindness, as through a photographic negative. The room was windowless and dark, lit dimly by the Intifada on the TV screen. Boys throwing rocks and flaming bottles at armoured cars, the cars shrugging it off, dispensing the occasional efficient bullet.

Through the door to the darker interior of the house Sami sensed something shuffling.

He unslung his shoulder bag and brought out a notebook. He had a page of questions already prepared for this interview. Fadya and sons would provide the responses of ordinary people, ordinary Syrian Arabs, to Sami's poetic enquiries. Doctoral material.

'Aunt,' he began. 'Let me ask you a question. What kind of poetry do you like?'

Fadya aimed at him the eyes of someone used to staring through storms. She staged a smile. They watched each other, stalled. And then a cousin stood up and faced Sami, with blue chin raised, slight moustache quivering.

'I'll tell you, cousin, which poetry is important to us. Probably not to you, but to us.'

'Tell me,' said Sami. But why the defiance? Sami hadn't had anything to do with these boys since playtime in the distant past.

'The Qur'an,' said the cousin. 'The Noble Qur'an. The Perspicacious Book. That's what.'

'Aha,' said Sami, creasing a new page, and writing: *The Qur'an as poetic text*. 'Please go on.' But his cousin sat down again sideways on, face back to the Intifada, making tutting and clucking noises. Why the anger?

From the gloom of the house Sami heard a cough. Something was stirring also in the inner chambers of Sami's memory.

'Who's there, aunt? I should greet them.'

'Never mind, nephew. Leave him alone. Will you drink more coffee?'

'Please, don't treat me as a guest.'

And suddenly inexplicably dizzy, and with an English petulance,

he stood up, Fadya rising with him, the cousins too, all watching him narrow-eyed, heads inclined. He watched them back. And stepped towards the inner door.

Sami saw Fadya nod at her sons with weighty significance. Then she looked at him, her too, with malice. And a palms-up shrug.

‘Go on,’ she said. ‘Go ahead. My house is yours.’

On the other side of the door: a square airless room, no TV, no shelves, no pictures, and another door, into further gloom. In the middle of the room, on a chair, doing nothing, facing nowhere, a man. There was a secret here which Sami alone had not penetrated.

Sami advanced. ‘Hello, uncle,’ he said, stretching out a hand. In Arabic every older man is called uncle. Uncle looked up. His white-flecked mouth, salt-and-pepper beard, wispy salt-and-pepper hair, salt-and-pepper skin gleaming a little in the TV light from behind Sami. Not returning Sami’s greeting. Not bothering to wipe away the sweat which dripped from his head into blinking fish eyes. Just worrying prayer beads – click, click – in a relentless chain of cause and effect.

This was the skeleton in the backroom, then: a loonish relative. This was what they were ashamed of. With an inward smile, and a wrinkling of the nose against the hot mustiness, Sami returned to the others.

‘So tell me, aunt. Who is this?’

‘You want to know who this is?’

‘Yes. Tell me his story.’

Fadya’s eyebrows were raised high. ‘You’ve come here to learn. So I’ll teach you something. Just listen. Don’t write in your notebook. I’ll tell you the story of a man in this country. Let’s call him Faris Kallas.’

Kallas is Sami’s mother’s name, his aunt’s name. But he’d never heard of a relative called Faris.

‘Faris is a student, twenty years old, hasn’t even begun his life yet. He studies at the university. What else? He wants to be an engineer. He wants to get married, have children. He wants to build a house. Don’t we all want the same things?’

This assumption of Fadya's, that everybody knows what they want, marked her foreignness to Sami.

'It happened in the eighties, when you were happy with your father in London. It was chaos then. But Faris went to his university lectures, always interrupted by mukhabarat coming in and reading out the names of people whose names were never spoken again. When people disappeared their families didn't dare enquire about them, didn't mention them. The mukhabarat could do magic, you see. When they read names the owners of the names ceased to exist. God only says "Be!" and it is. With the mukhabarat it's the other way round. They cancel by speaking.

'So when any sensible man would keep a sweet smile on his face and his mouth shut, this Faris decided to join the Brothers. He didn't do anything, mind you. No plots or bombs. Just said yes when another student asked him if he wanted to join the organization. They said they'd fight corruption and the Communists who'd surrendered our land to Israel, and this donkey Faris agrees with them and lets them write down his name.

'After three months of earnestly doing nothing but go to engineering lectures, Faris is informed on. Someone tells someone that he's a Brother. Then they came to his home. They walked in and got him, beat him in the kitchen in front of his parents and sisters until they couldn't see his face for blood, and then put him in their car.

'They drove him somewhere in the city. He doesn't know where because there was a hood over his head. His blood stuck the hood to his skin as it dried, but loosened again with slaps and kicks when he arrived. In a cell smaller than this room, and forty others in there with him. No food, no water.

'Then they took him to Tadmor, in the desert. You'll have visited the ruins, the tourist sites, not the prison with the words over the entrance arch: "Who enters here is lost; Who leaves is born again." First they made him write his name, his family's names, and his address. Then they burnt the paper and stamped on his hand. Because he had no name or family or address any more, nothing

to write down. They slapped him and spoke to him politely. "Please step this way, Mr Nobody".'

'He was kept alone in a cell too small to stand up in. They gave him rice with stones in it and dirty water. After sleeping he could think properly, which meant he wasn't able to sleep again. The fear was worse than the pain. He thought he was going to die.

'They tortured him for a time and left him for a time. Then tortured him again. It became a normal routine, so he no longer feared death. He feared life instead. A routine, except a routine requires ordered time. In there, there's no time. They live in darkness. No suns or moons. And what was left of him outside was darkness too. His family stepped around his shadow in the house. They couldn't forget him and neither could they assume he would come back.

'Later, after years perhaps, time returned to Faris. Ways of telling the time. He had yoghurt for breakfast, rice for lunch, a potato for dinner. Once a month he was shaved. But when they shaved him they slashed his ears and nose and lips with the razor. Why do that? What's the point of it? Why?'

Sami spread his arms in innocent incomprehension. 'I don't know. Why are you asking me?'

'Why do you think I ask you, nephew? Why do you think?'

Sami was open-mouthed, almost tearful, too warm.

'Never mind,' she went on. 'What you don't know you're innocent of. And if you don't know the answer to the question, then neither do we. What was the point of any of it? What was the point of ripping women's hijabs off in the street? What was the point of murdering tens of thousands in Hama?'

In other circumstances Sami would attempt a partial answer, about Hama at least. His father had explained it to him. The Brothers murdered plenty of Alawis and Party members in Hama before the government responded. The response had been harsh, certainly, but the alternative was also harsh. The Brothers in control of the cities and the Party in control of the army. It would never have ended. But this was no time for historical debate.

‘If there were men they left alive,’ continued Fadya, ‘that’s because they’d killed the man inside them. Before they released Faris they asked him about his politics. Politics is men’s business, so he had nothing to say. He had no opinions, no desires. That’s why his family didn’t recognize him when he walked in. Twenty-two years had passed. His father was dead. His mother ill. His sisters married. Your mother had left the country before they took him. There was almost nobody there to recognize him. Only his little brother. And he didn’t recognize him. He remembered a man, not a ghost.

‘That’s what we call lucky here. We thank God, anyway. Many men never came out. Some came out but found everyone dead. Some found their homes but the key wouldn’t fit the door. There were strangers inside.’

It reminded Sami of Palestinian families in the refugee camps, and their useless keys sometimes brought out of a cabinet to show to a guest, sometimes hooked on a nail in the reception room, thicker and heavier than keys of today. The image extended. Entire countries, and pasts: houses without keys. Houses no longer homes.

‘And what should he do?’ Fadya continuing. ‘He couldn’t marry. He couldn’t work. He cries and has bad dreams. Look at him.’

But the door had closed, and Sami had seen enough.

‘You mean to say, aunt, that the man in the next room is my mother’s brother? Faris?’

Fadya nodded twice.

‘I didn’t know about this. I’ve never heard of an uncle called Faris. My mother didn’t tell me. I wish she’d told me. She should have.’

Sami didn’t talk to his mother, not any more, because she hadn’t talked to his father, even when he was dying, and because she’d betrayed his father’s secularism by wearing a hijab. She’d stayed in London after her husband died. Lived alone, and worked in the man’s world of a halal butcher’s shop. And now she’d humiliated her son. She must have known he’d visit her family in Syria one

day – and she'd let him grow up without telling him this essential piece of family information, about her brother.

The cousin who'd mentioned the Qur'an spoke again, this time very quietly and without defiance, as if only to himself.

'I wonder,' he said, 'I wonder who informed on Uncle Faris? I wonder who told the mukhabarat?'

And the other cousin asked, almost wistfully, 'Who betrayed him?'

'Well, there's a question indeed,' responded Fadya. 'Faris told only close family members he'd joined the Brothers. Not including his little brother, who was too young. Of course we didn't speak in front of children. There was the danger they might repeat what they heard. So it was only us who knew.'

Everyone's eyes rested expectantly on Sami.

'So?' he asked.

Aunt and cousins waited, eyes unmoving.

Sami stood, shouldered his bag, took two steps towards the inner door. Manners as well as curiosity suggested he should make his new uncle's better acquaintance. But something stopped him. And then a flush of anger followed that impulse as if to clothe its too obvious nakedness. What did he want with broken Islamists? And Sami was too old to be discovering new relatives.

That's the way he left. Seeing himself out, without any eastern courtesy. It was too much information of the wrong sort, this Faris story. Nothing that would help his thesis or his fraying life in London. Sami endeavoured not to let it set him off course. And in the wind and the muffled city sound and the blanket of warmth it was easy not to think, easy to forget.

But before awakening with a bolt into the next day's voice-cluttered dawn – his last dawn in Syria – Sami dreamt an uncomfortable dream. Of a galloping and a heartshaking. An acceleration of hooves. Sami beginning to run, slapping into boughs, becoming entangled in newly sprouted undergrowth, his feet disobedient. Unable to push the panic from his brain into his body, into action.

Horse saliva showered his neck. He could feel its breath. He opened his mouth to scream.

Yet in place of the scream he heard a mighty crash, and its aftermath, a backdraft of air. He wheeled around to see the dead horse, which was not at all cartoonish. An ordinary, dead, brown-flanked, sweating horse, with only one difference from the normal model: this horse wore the face of Sami's dead father. Mustafa Traifi's face, elongated to fit the equine muzzle. Hence the bolt of awakening.

Sami had never before been visited by his father in nightmare form. All his dreams of him had been burnished memories, night nostalgia of the kind that occasionally provoked wholesome tears. There was nothing wrong in the father-son relationship, nothing except the fact that the father was dead, had been dead for sixteen years, was dead, embalmed and mummified. Mustafa Traifi, porcelain sepulcher. Mustafa Traifi, enshrined in Sami's head. The only member of Sami's family who Sami had no problems with. None at all. Mustafa Traifi who'd shown his son the stars, taught him his history, protected him from womanly superstition, planned for him a career – all this before the boy's sixteenth birthday, before turning still and cold in snowy North London, leaving Sami alone on this dried ember of a world.

So nothing wrong in the father-son relationship. Not until now. Bubbles were rising – marsh gas, deadly methane – from the trowelled-up earth of Sami's brain. What could it mean?

It took him all the hot morning, until Uncle Mazen dropped him at the airport, to regain his frozen-hearted cool. Sitting in a grey area of the departure lounge, against the evidence, wishfully thinking, he pieced together his thesis theory. And beyond that, the pride and peace of mind his achievement would provide him, the improvement in his marriage, the future of professional success, respect, wealth.

And then in this transition between worlds the hashish of his thoughts momentarily released him, and he lucidly conceded that things were complex, that nothing was simple. There were paths

The Other Path

other than the one his father had trodden. Other, but not necessarily mistaken. Paths taken, for instance, by his wife, or by his mother. Other, valid paths. He conceded it just for a few moments. It would take a summertime for the realization to sink into his core, corrosively, like salt into snow.

2

A Mirror for Sami

To avoid hostile airspace the plane looped east and north over sudden desert before turning west, above dry brown hills and valleys like scar tissue, and green mountains, and then to where the shining sea and the sky spat photons at each other. The gnaw of the engines, and the carbon spreading behind them into the fizzing, popping sky. Sami watched until the dazzle hurt his head, too narrow to contain it, and called for wine and paracetamol, slammed shut the plastic blind, and set to thinking. Arrowing westwards like his father before him, faster than the sun to where the day was younger, he thought of the past. Of the wife he was returning to.

What had he first noticed about her? That her laughter was like the scattering of birds? That her eyes burnt their target in soft fire? Or was it just that she seemed preordained, that she measured up to something he was waiting for?

Summer 1991. The British Museum. Life stretching before him like a creature to be conquered.

He'd had previous girlfriends, if girlfriend is the word. Perhaps 'willing victim' is more suitable. Not that he was fierce. It was a mutual victimizing, and as innocent as looking in a mirror: he was prey too of the grainy sensation-hungry English girls he found clustered in dance halls or in the student-union bar, drawn so easily, by their own momentum, into his careful net of difference.

And what was *he* hungry for? Sensations, certainly. He was 21 years old then. But also, more importantly, he hungered for confirmation of the difference he flaunted. Like a tiger that killed in order to be assured of the sharpness of its teeth, he sought the

sensation of his own reality. He observed his image in the (frequently dilated) eyes of women. The girls too saw in reflection what they wanted to see of themselves.

The image he saw in his conquests' eyes was a definite, deliberated image, constructed of solid elements. These included, firstly, Arabism. He had come to terms with what he now described as his heritage by means of a transplanted nationalism in which the significance of signs had swivelled away from their original focus. He often sported a kuffiyeh, either the black and white check of the (first) Intifada or the red and white worn by Syrian labourers and farmers. A member of his class in Syria would never wear one. Wouldn't be seen dead in one. But this wasn't Syria. To distinguish himself from the students who wrapped kuffiyehs around their necks like braces against the whiplash of adulthood he wound his tightly around his head, actually in a Kurdish style. He wandered about the campus with it, above a firm expressionless face, as if wearing it were a question of asserting rights. He also wore it in the bar, and during lectures. He had a T-shirt of the Palestinian flag, and another which read *Darkness Never Lasts* in both languages. On top of these he wore a crinkly black plastic jacket with *ACID* written on the back. It communicated, he felt, a fine mix of hedonism and anti-imperialism.

Recycling third-world meanings: again, there was nothing special about him here. From body tattoos to nose rings, his contemporaries were all at it. Striking poses, claiming allegiances. Sami's allegiance, in memory of his father, in homage to himself, was to a sexy version of the Arab world.

And Muntaha was an Arab. A proper Arab. Baghdad-born, she had an accent. The way she dressed, tidy and formal, declared her. So did the careful way she walked. Her movements and her speech were upright and courteous. She was every bit as Arab as the kuffiyeh he checked in the mirror before leaving his flat.

How he'd loved mirrors in those days. A couple of years before then he'd accepted his face only reluctantly, and only after hours of precise mirror-bound analysis. If he compared his face with the

English people's, there was something overdramatic about it. A face that was trying too hard. There was too much crammed in, too much life. The features were too big, too expressive for his English-style emotions. They suited someone else. Someone foreign. That's what schoolboy Sami felt. But with his maturity, in his university years, he came to amicable terms with his appearance. He was an Arab, was all. He contrasted well with the blandness of Englishmen. The English girls believed so, and he could see the evidence himself. His full, tasting, mobile lips. His passion-heavy eyebrows. His pale unblemished skin. His curls. He felt love for the face he'd been ashamed of before, and compensated with pouts and meditations which pulled him in to the centre of the reflection, into the dark dreamy eyes. They made him dream of his destiny. Of poetry.

Poetry: the second element of Sami's identity. He'd done his first degree in Arabic, and he'd known for years that, as his father had before him, he would write books about Arabic poetry. Modern stuff, not old. He kept sleek volumes visible on tables in his flat. He carried them with him to meetings in bars, the better to explain their importance. Poetry still mattered in Arab societies, he expounded. It was appropriated by pop singers. It had political relevance. And Sami had grown up on the simple, revolutionary language of Nizar Qabbani, language which smashed both literary and social conventions. This was particularly important. Its eroticism, secularism and defiance all contributed to the sexiness of Sami's Arabism. And Mahmoud Darwish, national poet of Palestine, was a further source. Sami would gloweringly recite Darwish in Arabic to the bar girls:

Record! I am an Arab
And my identity card is number fifty thousand . . .
I have a name without a title
Patient in a country
Where people are enraged . . .
Beware . . .
Of my hunger!
And my anger!

Poetry wove a web of wonderful origins: jasmine-scented, fruit-laden, tasting of dusk. Even the despair in it seemed romantic. Despair which expressed a nobility of perspective.

Add to these jazz or hip hop for embellishment and you had the theme tune to Sami Traifi. Black music, Arabism and poetry: these were what he considered himself to be made of.

And Muntaha was a girl it was easy to read in poetic terms. To visualize her skin colour Sami had only to think of the crops of the earth. The colour of mature wheat on a Levantine afternoon. The darkest olive oil. Her skin which looked smooth as butter and felt smooth as milk. He had to speak like Qabbani to describe to himself what he meant. The feminine flow of her compact body, thickening like a trapped river towards her hips. And her voice, the disembodied projection of the body, the intermediate station between body and soul, soft, various and intelligent in its gentle penetration of his ear. There was also harshness in its depths. It spoke with incense breath. It sounded like the voice of home. All this was poetry. And that her name, Muntaha, meant The End. That it sounded like Moon.

Poetry too in their meeting. Summer 1991. They were in one of the Mesopotamian rooms at the British Museum. Sami turned from an ancient diadem and glimpsed her, the kind of woman who would have worn such jewellery. Muntaha was caught in sunlight (was there a window in the room, was there a clear sky that day? He remembers the atoms dancing around her, the light and shade). Gazing at the Sumerian ram and tree, a gold and lapis offering stand to Dumuzi the shepherd god, she didn't notice him. She was entirely still, like an exhibit herself. A Mesopotamian woman in communion with Mesopotamian art, about to launch herself from its past into Sami's life.

This was the sort of meaningful coincidence that the inexperienced believe is only found in fiction. People like Sami believe this. It seemed to him that there had once been meaning in the real world, when he was a child, before his father died. But to his adult brain meaning had become diffuse, scuttling out of sight behind

curtains, draining through floorboards and through the cracks beneath doors. Meaning had left the earth with his childhood reflection and taken up residence in a realm of artificial images, where it was caught, concentrated so it could be tasted. As he read the final page of a novel and then sat still until the traffic outside or rain against the windowpane retrieved him. In poems, of course. In the fullness of his heart at the climax of a film. In the music which released a hormone flood into his bloodstream. Even an advert could make him alert and tearful. These triggers detonated his soul (though he would dispute this word) like a baton swung against a gong. Not God's real world that made music of him but the worlds made by men. But here, in her Sumerian shapeliness, in her awe-struck eyes trembling before the ram, and in what followed when she looked at him and began to speak, was the shiver and the stern inner silence, the moment of clear vision prompted only by art.

'Does this have a special meaning for you?' she addressed him in Arabic, as if continuing a conversation.

'It does. How do you know that?'

'You were looking at it with such passion.' Her accent confirmed she was Sumerian, Iraqi.

'And so were you.'

She smiled. 'Tell me why it's important.'

'My father used to bring me here. This was his favourite exhibit. I suppose it makes me feel nostalgic. And why is it important to you?'

'I don't know if it's important or not. It depends on what you're looking for. It's beautiful, and very old.'

'It comes from your land. You must be proud of it.'

She laughed. Birds scattering from the tree. 'I'm from Iraq, not Sumeria. We have different gods today. Gods with moustaches.'

Sami laughed too.

She had met his eye and begun walking with him as if introductions were unnecessary. He liked that, particularly from someone not born here. Tradition over there demanded introductions,

and false modesty, and all kinds of pointless etiquette. Sami considered tradition a concrete and formidable enemy, and saw her immediately as Qabbani's new woman, self-created from conflict with the East.

He listened as they stepped from Sumeria to Babylon, from Babylon to Assyria. She spoke through pomegranate lips. He was already captivated, already entranced.

'I learnt about all this at school in Iraq,' she said, 'but it was taught only to make a point. It doesn't mean anything until you see it yourself. Of course I saw the museum there. They took us three or four times and marched us round. The teacher read nationalist poetry and made speeches about the people and the leader. I had to get away from her to feel what it meant.'

He allowed her to talk.

'It didn't make me more proud to be Iraqi. It made me think how strange it is to be human. Believing in your gods, thinking you understand things, making beautiful statues, and then dying and waiting for people to guess who you were. The teacher said it showed the eternal nobility of the Arab nation. Maybe that's right too. It can mean different things to different people. But you have to get away from other people's ideas to know what it means to you.'

For him, the real world held no surprises; it had to be turned into poetry first. She was saying the opposite. That it's necessary to escape from poetry to see the world in front of your nose.

The world in front of her nose made Muntaha overbrim with excitement; that was clear from her breathing, from her expressions, her tone of voice. He presumed she was excited by him.

They walked around the British Museum from Egypt to India to Mexico. They observed each other sideways. He noticed the luxury of her hair, and her beauty belatedly made him nervous. He moved heavy eyes, an anaesthetized tongue.

Fighting the paralysis of this awe, Sami started to take the lead, showing her round, explaining things. This was a pattern that would continue through the coming decade. Here in the museum,

spending too long on the wall plaques, he asked himself what he could teach her. Not much about the Arabs, he expected. But jazz and hip hop. Probably sex. He knew more about those than she did.

He did most of the talking. She seemed to be encouraging him.

‘You know so much. Did your father teach you all this?’

‘I learnt a lot from him, and a lot after him.’

She noted the implication of his father’s death, this most important fact about Sami.

‘I like knowledge,’ he said. ‘It puts you in charge of the world.’

They’d stopped speaking Arabic once they left the Iraqi rooms. She’d been in London for all her teenage years, and was used to meeting people in English. To him, English felt more natural. And her voice was still more authentic in her second tongue, tripping a little, rolling too much. He decided never to correct her pronunciation.

‘How does it put you in charge?’ she asked, with more range of tone than a native woman. ‘I thought money did that.’

‘The world respects money, yeah. But knowledge lets you see straight. That’s the advantage.’

‘Knowledge illumines the mind,’ she said, ‘while wealth darkens it.’

‘Exactly. That’s a good way of putting it.’

‘When knowledge is distributed it increases. When wealth is distributed it decreases.’

‘Excellent! Who said that?’ And it was excellent. She could speak in quotes. Arab, and educated, and eloquent. She reflected him.

‘Imam Ali.’

Sami frowned. ‘Are you Shii?’ Here was the drawback of an Arab woman, the shackle-weight of history.

Muntaha halted. ‘Don’t you like the Shia?’

‘I’m not sectarian. I don’t think much of the whole religion thing.’

‘Neither do I. I’m not Shii, anyway. My mother was.’

Sami noted the death of her mother. He stopped frowning. So

religion was dealt with, out of the way. He noted too, once again, her beautiful free-flowing hair: black as . . . moonless darkness . . . black as emotional disarray.

They arrived at the exit. Huge grey columns reached above them with all the mocking solidity of London. Fat grey pigeons stumbled in the low grey sky. It smelled of rain, beer and petrol fumes.

Now they shook hands. Both had large, strong hands with long fingers. Muntaha's hands were large, out of proportion to her body.

'Fursa saeeda. Happy chance,' she said, translating the Arabic literally, comically.

'Pleased to meet you too. I really am.'

He really was. But Sami also felt disabled by happiness, as if it was a trap, a drunkenness necessary to make him fall. Muntaha's happiness, on the other hand, was unalloyed.

'I am Sami Traifi.'

'And I am Muntaha al-Haj.'

'Do you study, Muntaha?'

'I'm going to study history. And then be a teacher. What about you?'

'I study too. Arabic literature. I'm starting my doctorate.'

Then they exchanged phone numbers. She nodded goodbye and moved off with Iraqi intentness until she merged with the crowd and the cars beyond the railings, leaving a tingling in Sami's groin and a more impactful churning in his intestine, rising to his chest and throat. The beginning of addiction. The memory of her warmed him like the memory of fire.

This was who she would end up with. Sami chose Muntaha. And she chose him. He was good with her family. Polite. He was also clever and funny, which seemed to please her father as well as her friends, although her father's target virtues in a son-in-law were steady religion and morality, not cleverness and wit. And Sami befriended her brother, Ammar, who needed befriending.

So he was a decent man. A good choice. They had a civil marriage and a honeymoon in Scotland, wilder, quieter, more hidden than she'd ever been. Clouds of midges danced in the thick wet air.

The Road From Damascus

Trees creaked on heavy hillsides. Fertile darknesses, greens, blues and browns in the ponderous northern dusk, drained into one. A lightening moon in the sky full enough to be a lamp. The land feeling old to her, and them too, as if they'd been together for years. And after that she loved their long conversations, their gentleness to each other, their sex. Sami looking after her, bringing her breakfast in bed, preparing coffee for her when she came home from work. She loved that he was an educated man, and that he talked to her about his ideas. All his enthusiasm, all his passion. His hopes for the future, for them together.