

# No Road to Paradise

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## Chapter One

ON THE DAY MY DOCTOR told me I was ill, my first and strongest reaction was that once again I must not let on how frightened I was. When he appeared in the doorway to my room I knew instantly what he was here to tell me. Still in his operating-room attire, he stood there frowning and silent for a moment before instructing my nephew—who had stayed close by for the whole of my hospital visit—to leave us alone. As soon as my nephew went out of the room the doctor came in, closed his fist around the doorknob, and pulled the door firmly shut. Whatever words he was about to say, I knew I was going to be informed that yes, I did have the illness that had long filled me with such dread. He didn't call it by name. Not then. He told me, as I sat utterly still in the chair next to the bed, that the biopsy had revealed something in the tissue they'd removed from my body. I was instantly in terror. I began to sweat and felt a wave of fever mounting to my head, leaving me dizzy. I had kept my eyes lowered and I was still staring at the floor tiles when he added that what I had was not life-threatening. But that didn't lessen the panic I felt. I didn't look up from the floor. I didn't look him in the eye and ask him to tell me something more, something—anything—that might reassure me. All I wanted at that moment was for him to be gone. If he left me alone perhaps I could at least rid myself of the terrible anxiety I felt about revealing my fear in his presence. If he left me alone I could creep into the bathroom

and wipe away my sweat on the massive bath towel hanging there. Then I could go out onto the narrow little balcony off my room to let the breeze swab my face, though I knew there would be little air in that cramped space and what there was would be unpleasantly acrid.

Before he had come in I was already working on myself, hardening myself to hear his words. It wasn't so much about preparing to hear him say that this illness of mine had indeed arrived but more about how to conceal, perhaps even suppress, my fear of having this disease. Months before this day—or if the truth be told, years before—I had sensed it coming. This disease precisely, and no other. I never experienced this kind of dreadful premonition about my heart, for instance, although I knew that heart disease was the second most-feared malady among people I knew. It was as though I had chosen it myself. Cancer. The first of the two. The lion rather than the tiger. Whenever anyone said that word in my presence, I broke out in a terrible sweat and began to shiver. Maybe, I thought, I had planted the seed myself. I had sown it somewhere inside of me. And then I had tended it as it grew month after month, maturing silently, and then choosing its moment to appear full-grown in my body.

He did not call it by name, this physician who didn't stay with me long in that room. Reaching again for the doorknob he said that I should get ready to leave now. I should come to see him in his clinic tomorrow, or the day after. A day or two for me to rest and relax, as he saw it. He wanted to reassure me; that was obvious. He wanted to leave me with the impression that this disease was not moving so fast that a day or two would make my condition any worse.

My brother's son Bilal, who was not slow to show up at the door to my room after the doctor left, seemed to know already what it was I had. A single swift glance that managed to combine scrutiny with alarm told me he knew. Then he dropped his eyes, seeking a refuge elsewhere by fixing his gaze

on every object he could find. I forgot my need to go to the balcony although I was still holding the towel, fully open as though I were trying to dry it out now that it had absorbed my sweat and was still giving off the damp heat of it. Taking heart from Bilal's presence, feeling fortified by our relationship—a paternal uncle speaking to his beloved nephew—I said we would have to come back to visit the doctor in a day or so. But even as I tried to draw encouragement from our bond my voice betrayed me. It came out thin and weak like the voice of a little boy. Even in front of him—this lad of no more than thirteen, and my own nephew—I found myself trying desperately to conceal my fear. At the back of my mind already was the realization that when I got home I would have to face up to the same thing all over again with my wife. She would already know anyway, since there was no doubt that she would have found someone who would phone the doctor to ask. My children too, the two boys first of all. They might be deaf, but it wouldn't be long before they knew what I had. Then there were the people who, once they heard I was ill, would come to visit me, but only really to see how sick I was and how I conducted myself as an invalid. And then my father, who for once would extract himself from his usual stupor, his eyes no longer drowsy and absent. His stare would be strong enough to stop the movement of my hand bringing the next spoonful of food to his mouth.

Returning the towel to the bathroom, I asked Bilal to fetch my turban from the wardrobe. In the mirror my face looked different, as though the heavy sweat streaming down it had whittled new wrinkles and left the skin raw and reddened. When Bilal returned with my turban, carrying it bottom up with both hands, he reminded me that I couldn't leave the room before I had their permission. Anyway I needed some time before going out into the long corridor where all the doors to the rooms, on either side, were wide open. I needed time because those people out there would not simply watch

as I made my way down the corridor. They would greet me and I would have to respond. As-salaamu alaykum, greetings to our Shaykh. And as each of them turned to me and spoke I would have to respond, in a voice loud enough to be heard. Alaykum as-salaam, I would say, over and over. In a film I saw once, a doctor studied his own blackened lungs on the X-ray image and said to a colleague standing nearby, Here it is, my cancer. I don't have much time left. He said it just like that, in such an ordinary way, as though the image he had put up against the lit screen was just another one of the many pictures he had to examine in the course of a routine workday. As if it didn't make a difference—he was capable of examining his own lungs exactly as he would observe those of his patients. At the time when I watched that film, I believed that the older people get the more able they become to control their own reactions and the expressions on their faces, whatever it is they are thinking about at the time.

Although I have been putting on the abaya and turban of my shaykhly profession since I was a very young man, I still find myself reacting as though I always had to put them on in spite of myself. It wasn't that I didn't know how to manage walking properly in this garb; or how, wearing it, I ought to address people on the way home; or how, as a man of the cloth, I must conduct congregational prayers or give a sermon as I stood before the worshipers in one or another Hussainiya. I could handle all of that perfectly well. Lingering in their seats after the prayer service, the congregation would be moved enough by what they had heard from me to raise prayer after prayer for Muhammad and his sacred family. But what I felt inside, every time I reached for my turban before leaving the house, was that I was having to urge myself on, as if I was saying to myself, each time, Come on, you! Let's go to work now. In the photograph that hangs in the room where I receive guests and where I normally sit, the two of them—my

father and my grandfather, Sayyid Murtada—look like they couldn't be happier together wearing the robes of the Shi'i ulema. My father is showing how completely comfortable he is, since he has neglected even to have his cloak pressed. The stitching shows clearly even in the photograph: the thread is heavy enough to be visible, wandering unevenly across the fabric as if he had sewed up the abaya with his own hands, using a pack needle rather than the thinner version a tailor would use. It's like what men wear into battle, I used to say to my brother Adnan, comparing my father's outfit to a soldier's uniform. Only when I had been out there in Najaf did I realize that my father's inattention to what he wore was a matter of principle. It stood for a particular kind of religious practice, or an outlook, that he had adopted along with some of his classmates there.

I want to study at the university and they've offered me a place. That's what I said to him. Once. And then I had to say it again. Whenever my father did not want to hear something, he simply acted as though he hadn't heard it. He would go on stroking his beard—if that is what he had been doing when the unwelcome words were said—or if he had been pacing as he pondered some issue or other, he went on pacing, without breaking the rhythm of his gait. He only had one thing to say to me about this, and he only said it once. I was the one who must go to Najaf for training as an imam, he told me, and not my brother, who loathed study of any kind. It looked to me like I was being offered up as a sacrifice. Even worse, like other sacrificial victims, I had no right to object or even to ask any questions. Tell him to talk to his brother, I demanded of my mother. Mama, tell him to talk to Sayyid Aqil about sending one of *his* sons. My mother was the only person my father ever listened to, even if he wasn't going to act on what she said. The sons of your Uncle Aqil will be just like their father, she would answer me, forcing me to reflect on how he—my Uncle Sayyid Aqil, that is—always planted himself among the

women when he was at our house. He teased them and told jokes to make them laugh, oblivious to his enormous body and the fact that it was draped in the robes of a religious scholar.

When I started wearing the cloak and turban of the religious, I felt like I was living in someone else's clothes. The sensation was so strong that when I returned to my village for the summer breaks, I even felt surprised myself at who I seemed to be. I felt a stranger in my own skin every time someone stared at me on the street. That first quick glance, before he alters his course to come to me and say, *As-salaamu alaykum*. I can tell he is thinking I am too young to be dressed as an imam. After greeting me and going on his way he turns back to stare at me, perhaps dropping back to walk behind me as he tries to ascertain whether what he finds so disconcerting about me is really there. Surely he is studying the way I walk. I had never been confident that it was the appropriate gait for a man who stands before other men to lead them in worship. I pick my feet up when I walk, and swing my arms to match my stride. Anyone seeing my light, bouncy walk through the village must have thought I was feeling particularly happy about something.

Even my practice sessions in front of the mirror at home couldn't alter the way I walked, nor did the single comment my father once made about it. I walked, he remarked, as though I had dance steps in my head and they might move down to my feet at any moment. Sometimes I did think at least that surely something would happen to completely change the way my feet and body moved. The bones in my feet might start aching, and the pain would slow me down; or I might come down with an infection that would send contractions shooting through my spinal column. I tried out alternatives in front of the mirror: I tried taking steps with just the edge of my foot touching the floor instead of the whole foot coming down solidly all at once. I would start trembling in that room where I was alone—for even here in our house it wouldn't look good

if someone saw me imagining my own movements in front of the mirror. I would practice walking toward the mirror, but it was such a small room and only a few steps separated the mirror from the facing wall. Hilw, ismallah alayk! my mother would have exclaimed if she had seen me standing there and staring into the mirror at my own body, or bringing my face closer to it so I could study every detail.

Cute, may God bless your little heart! . . . This word hilw, on my mother's tongue, was the equivalent of a curt dismissive nod of my father's head along with a sharp little gesture of his hand. He didn't like it, and it was his way of saying he was chasing away whatever it was he didn't want to see. My father believed mirrors were only for women. Every time I saw him talking to the people who used to come around to our house I would say to myself, He doesn't even know what his face looks like when he speaks. It's not just that he doesn't look in mirrors now, I would think, but that he never ever looked into them before. My father would lift his upper lip off his teeth and gums as he stared at the person he was speaking to, staring hard as though his narrow little eyes weren't big enough to allow him to see clearly. In the presence of his congregations at the Hussainiya, he would yank off his turban, unconcerned about exposing the pale ring of flesh on his head that was whiter than the rest because it had always been concealed beneath the folds. And if, at a certain moment, he straightened up to tug at what he had on beneath the jubba he wore under his abaya, rearranging what was down there, beneath his robe and cloak, full in front of the two hundred or so people who had come to hear him, I would tell myself that he must be doing this deliberately. He must have been confident that people would not whisper to each other, disapproving of his behavior, as they huddled there together where they sat. They wouldn't have to work at suppressing their laughter either, since in such circumstances it wouldn't even occur to them to laugh.

That is because they trusted him, and they believed in him. They obeyed him, too. He wasn't simply testing their loyalty when he accused them, for example, of being lazy, inactive people who were always sitting on their backsides, and so—he would go on to say—it wasn't surprising if they found their rights gobbled up. Once they had even jumped up from their tables, abandoning their packs of cards and the money they were gambling with, when they saw him coming to the square where their card tables were set out from one end to the other. I was with him. I was already a man of religion like he was. I stood watching as he overturned the tables with his own hands, first one and then the next. By then the men had gotten up and scattered to the edges of the square. Come on, he said to me as he started to walk away, leaving the men standing where they were, waiting for us to get out of sight so that they could retrieve their coins and their cards and the other belongings that were spilled across the square.

He knew that whatever he did, they would accept it. He didn't even give a thought to what might happen when he upended their card tables, telling them as he did so that only bastards do unlawful things. As we moved further away, not once turning back to look at them, I realized that for him there was only the tiniest gap between him and whatever he was doing or saying. He didn't go through a series of complicated mental jumps when he saw something that angered him. I watched him out of the corner of my eye as we strode quickly along that lane. Whatever might be going through his head now, it was happening only inside his head. It was no longer about the people he had left there, nor about those he would find wherever it was he was heading. It wasn't about me, as I cast furtive glances in his direction and hesitantly followed him.

The wave of fever that brought on the dizziness was accumulating in my head again, and it would soon build up and surge through me and drain my strength. As we made our

way from the hospital, my nephew asked if it might be better for us to find a taxi. That would have given me some relief but I was already walking toward my car, parked in the lane above the street where the hospital's main entrance was. My nephew followed me at a half run, hopping now to one side of the pavement and now to the other, trying his best to stay even with me so that, being at my side, he could shield me. Coming in the other direction, crowds of people were pushing forwards toward the hospital as if they were in a race to the door. I had to be alert, both hands ready to push away anyone who might collide into me. It made me anxious and wore me out even more; and with every two or three steps, I was looking over my shoulder to see if my nephew was still close behind me. He knew how I was feeling. Over and over, he said, I'm right here, Uncle. I'm right behind you.

Three days sitting on this street had given my car a coat of sticky dust and grime. But at least there was a vacant space in front of it which meant I wouldn't have to inch it forward and backward again and again in order to edge it out into the street. Once I was settled inside, resting my hands on the steering wheel, my nephew—still standing at my driver's-side car door—asked if I had anything in the car that he could use to remove the filth smeared across the front windshield. The blotch looked oily: thick and impenetrable, like it was affixed permanently to the glass. I peered into the dark corners of the car looking for the box of tissues I thought would be there, but I found it hard to care whether or not I could locate it. When I stopped twisting around to look, dropping back against the headrest to relieve my aching head and neck, my nephew stuck his hand between me and the wheel, groping for the button that would spray water across the windshield. All that came out of the two needle-sized holes was that familiar dry sound, something between a rattle and a gurgle. Without looking at me or saying a word, my nephew turned on his heels and headed for the line of shops on the other side of the

road. By the time he was back, the box of tissues in his hand was already open. He pulled out a handful and began rubbing at the oily stain, but it seemed immune to his efforts, having baked itself into the glass. He had to go back to the shop and fetch a bottle of water. Before he turned completely away to go there again, I waved at him to climb in, even though I knew that for the entire journey the blotch would be there, inescapable, disgusting me and straining my eyes as I tried to look beyond it.

The eighty kilometers that separated me from the house would not make my fatigue any worse. It might even restore me somewhat, at least if the road we had to take wasn't too choked with traffic. Anyway, it wasn't the kind of tiredness that would make me drowsy. That woman who had come from Venezuela to live with us used to always answer my father, whenever he asked her if she was feeling better, with just one word. Sleep . . . sleep. That is all she ever said, in the hoarse metallic voice that issued from the steel plate covering the holes in her throat. When we were there at home, it was clear that she didn't sleep, because the raspy panting sounds she made just trying to breathe never stopped and we constantly heard her opening her suitcases and then walking from her bedroom to the kitchen at the other end of the house. She didn't sleep last night either, my mother would say in the morning to whoever woke up next. She kept her voice low because she didn't want this woman—who might be anywhere in the house—to hear her. She might even be right behind my mother as she spoke, or near the open door to the bathroom as I washed my face and ears, or in the corridor between the rooms, standing there even though there was nothing in the corridor to keep anyone occupied. My mother didn't grumble or complain or say to my father, Who else but us would let a woman they don't know live in their house, a woman who came here from Venezuela because she didn't want to die there?

And she—that woman—accomplished what she had come here to do. In our home she managed it. One day my father went into the room where she was lying flat on her back, and said immediately to my mother who was standing just outside, She has died. Just like that he said it, without even pushing up her eyelid to check the pupil of her eye, or taking her hand to see whether she still had a pulse. She has died, he said. Then he turned to leave the room as if nothing further needed to be done about it.

Sleep. For myself, now, I could sense already how remote it was, and how hard it would be to capture and hold onto, even if I were so exhausted that I could not handle a dog darting out into the road in front of me. And then, I couldn't shake off my memory of that woman standing at the doorway into the kitchen, the rough sounds of her breathing and her croaky attempts at speech, gruff and hollow at the same time as they issued from the tube puncturing her body. I was nine or ten years old at the time. I was just learning about the illness and how to name it. How to think about the thing and its label, crammed together bewilderingly into that little patch of bare, open skin at the hollow just below her neck. The disease of cancer. That's what my mother called it as she spoke to her visitors in a near whisper. It has gotten her, my mother would tell her visitors. She whispered the words but she named the thing and its definition. The disease of cancer. The illness and the name it bore, as if to let them in on something they weren't familiar with. The disease of cancer! they echoed back, at once frightened and pitying. They did know it, this word cancer, but only as something that had to do with someone very far away, someone who had died of it in one of those remote villages, only the news of it reaching them.

When we reached the autostrade I stopped the car. I told my nephew Bilal to get out and get rid of it—that splotch I knew I couldn't help staring at for as long as it sat there just waiting for my eyes to latch onto it. He couldn't find anything

to use on it except a key he fished out of his pocket. He began scratching at the glass, making a dry whine. He gave me a look, wanting to know if he should stop making that sound which might also scratch the glass and harm it. I didn't respond right away, mostly because I felt so listless. It won't come off, he said to me as he returned to his seat. Not unless we use gasoline. His words brought me out of my torpor momentarily. I asked myself how this nephew of mine—he was still such a young boy, after all—could be wise enough to know what drivers do to get rid of messes that stick to the windshields of their cars.

So, do you know how to drive the car? I asked him. I realized that, to my surprise, thinking about my nephew and his knowledge of gasoline could take me away, if only for that one brief moment, from my obsession with my sickness.

Bilal knew or at least sensed the condition I was in. He waited for me to ask my question again. When it didn't come, he simply turned to look at me and then shifted his gaze forward to look again at the autostrade stretching ahead of us.

Should I take you home? Or do you want to come with me to our place?

I had driven almost the whole way back without saying anything, and I could tell that my silence was upsetting him. It made him uneasy. And of course he would not want to be with me at that moment when my wife was standing there at the door wordless, surreptitiously trying to look into my face at the same time she was avoiding meeting my eyes.

My mother's alone in the house, he said. She's been alone for three days.

His mother in her home: the image of it came to me. She was standing three or four steps away from where I always sat, in that large armchair. As exhausted as I was, now I held onto that image of her as though I were testing myself. As though I wanted to see whether my memory of her would give me some comfort. On my visits—I made them once a month—we always sat far apart, me at one end of the long

sofa and her at the other. I never allowed myself to sit comfortably or to look relaxed, by for instance turning my face and body slightly in her direction. This is from my father, I would say as I put out my hand toward hers. Without saying a word she would reach her hand nearer to mine in order to take the money which was tucked into a folded piece of paper so that the bills could not be seen. It never happened that her hand touched mine. That hand. I never more than glanced at that hand even when it was close enough to me. I will make coffee, Sayyid, she would say. And I, wanting to make it look like my every movement was subject to strict time constraints, and that was what determined whether I would go or stay, always looked at my watch, studying it as though I was counting the minutes in my head before I said, Why not, coffee. Yes, all right. But no sugar.

I wouldn't keep my eyes on her form and the way she walked for very long, as she turned to go into the kitchen. Not more than an instant, perhaps even less. Then I would turn my head forward again. Face and body composed and aligned, as I perched on the edge of my seat.

But she doesn't get home until late in the afternoon, I said. I wanted to remind him that she was not spending all of her time alone. But I also wanted to learn from him that she was still going to her work just as before.

To support my attempt to reassure him that she hadn't been all alone, he said, turning to look at me, The teachers sometimes come home with her when school is over.

Are there a lot of them? I asked. And, after a pause, These women are her colleagues? But as I spoke I gave my head a little toss, wanting to show him that I wasn't much concerned about the answers to my own questions.

Sometimes they all come.

He always seemed aware that when I was asking about her I was anticipating hearing back something more than my question was actually asking. He knows, I thought. Sometimes

his answers gave me what I was looking for, going beyond the vague question I would ask in the details he gave. Sometimes I got the feeling that this inquisitiveness of mine toward his mother pleased him.

So I'll take you home.

No, no—I can get out at the service-taxi stop. I always find a car there to take me home.

Because I always wanted to prolong these little moments of tacit collusion, where we seemed to understand each other without needing the words for it, I would go quiet and he would follow my lead, neither of us saying whatever it was we had been about to say. That's what I would always do. But right now my fatigue was getting the better of my desire to keep up a conversation about her—that desire I had given myself every encouragement to pursue.

Do you have enough money for the car?

Yes, he said, stretching his body along the car seat so that he could reach his hand into his pocket. You gave me enough, and my mother did too, he said as he shoved his open palm in my direction to show me the wad of bills.

When I stopped the car there, three service-taxis were waiting for their complement of passengers. But he took his time. His hand still gripping the half-open door of my car, he seemed to be having second thoughts about whether he wanted to get out. It only lasted a moment. He turned back to me and asked if I wanted him to stay with me. It was his way of apologizing for getting out of the car and abandoning me. Once outside, having closed the car door, he flipped around again and poked his head through the open window to tell me to wait here so that he could get rid of the splotch that still clung insolently to the window directly in front of my eyes. I wanted to drive off but his insistence kept me there. I watched as he hurried over to the service drivers who were standing together next to one of their cars, talking.

The plastic bottle he was clutching when he returned was more than half full of water, and grubby from so much re-use and refilling. But when I saw the water pouring down against the windshield I suddenly realized how dry my throat was and how thirsty I felt. He had emptied the bottle completely when he motioned to me to activate the wipers. But the stain on the windshield defeated him this time too. I motioned back to tell him to forget about it, and that I would go now.

Illness doesn't arrive just like that, unbidden, without some prior summons. The rest of the way home, now that I was alone, the onrush of thoughts in my head clamored for my attention as they tried to crowd each other out. Perhaps it was my home that had made me ill. The air I had been breathing was poisonous because it hung stale and still in the closed rooms of that house and refused to leave. Or maybe it was my wife who had brought on the illness. Though she never seemed capable of putting on anything but those worn-out, shapeless gowns that always had a water stain down the front, she never stopped letting me know—merely by the looks she gave me—that this was not how people lived. This life she was living, not knowing how to live any other kind of life, did not please her. Every time I had to encounter her in the narrow corridor, pressing her body against one wall so that I could pass by, I tried to imagine her looking different—some other shape, some other expression on her face—but I never succeeded. I couldn't even manage to add a little color to her cheeks, not even a smidgen. That wan yellow coloring that she seemed to have sucked in from the recesses of this stale house gave her face a thin, drawn, bloodless look, as if a layer of skin had been stripped away.

She plasters her body to the wall, her entire body, from her backside to the top of her head, as if to make certain that not a centimeter of me will touch her as I go by. When she is coming toward the sitting room where I am sitting with

whoever happens to be visiting me, but she is still on the other side of the doorway, she is already summoning me to take what is in her hands, speaking in a tone of voice that is an instant rebuke. The tea tray, she snarls. Or—again, from the other side of the doorway—she snaps, Your father! It is her way of telling me he needs some help from me.

Sometimes I have a recollection that she was pretty once. Just once, when she stood in the entryway to her house, there at the top of the stairs. Mashallah! my father exclaimed as he craned his neck to give his small eyes a closer look. He said the same thing to her father, Sayyid Jaafar, once we were inside their house. At the time, she was twelve or thirteen years old.

Yes, I accept. That is what I wrote back to my father when he wrote to say that now I must get married. She is the youngest daughter of Sayyid Jaafar, our relative in al-Kawthariyeh, he wrote. And that was all he ever said about her, since he did not think it would be proper—as my father—to describe her in any other way. To say, for instance, that she was pretty, or to go into any details about her appearance, commenting on her eyes or her mouth or her voice when she spoke. Yes, I accept, I wrote back, exactly as if I had been standing right there facing him as he conducted the small ceremony affirming the marriage contract. As though I were not, at the time, so far away—all the distance that separated our village in south Lebanon from the holy city of Najaf in Iraq.

I didn't find her particularly pretty when she arrived in Najaf with him. But she wasn't like she was now, feeble and colorless. Yet in the four or five years since I had seen her that one time, she had changed. She was no longer the girl she had been on that day. They were strange, those first looks she gave me, long and direct. She didn't avert her gaze as other girls did. She kept her eyes fixed on me even when I finished saying whatever it was I had to say to her. As though she were informing me, by letting her eyes linger for two or three

seconds more on my face, that I had harmed her by allowing them to bring her to me. I began thinking that perhaps she was like me. She was a person who was waiting for another life, even expecting a different life to be granted to her. Or, perhaps like her schoolmates, she was dreaming of a life that would be something other than the life she had lived with her family or the life she would live with me.

That reproachful, even censorious look: she always had it ready for me. When she stood up after a meal to carry away the tray and our plates into the kitchen; when, already at the door, I told her that I was going out; when I opened the door to let myself in after being out. Likewise, when I came to her at night; and then when, after our union, she bent down to pick up her gown from the floor and take it into the bathroom.

In those days—through the entire ten years that passed without her getting pregnant—I used to tell myself that anyway, the kind of union we made wasn't one that would produce children. When she did begin to have children, I began telling myself that a woman like her would get pregnant only with the sort of children she did finally produce.

When I pushed open the solid iron door that fronts on the street, gating our house, my daughter Hiba was sitting behind it halfway up the steps to the door above that opened into our house, her doll in her lap. She looked up but when she saw it was me coming in, she went back to the doll who was now napping on the step beside her, covered up to her chin beneath a scrap of fabric. She didn't raise her head when I stopped in front of her or when I spoke, asking her if she had fed her doll. Come. Come inside with me, I said to her, putting out my hand to help her up. But she went on sitting there, occupied with the pair of tiny eyes that rolled open again as soon as she had shut the eyelids with her fingers.

Get up, I said. Come on, come and play with her in the house, she doesn't like sleeping on the stairs.

When those eyelids went on resisting her she pressed her entire palm down over them to keep them shut, as if to force the doll to go to sleep against its will.

I left her there and continued climbing the stairs slowly, my legs heavy and sluggish. My wife had heard the sound of my steps. I saw her standing behind the door, which was only a crack open, straightening her hijab hurriedly, tugging it into place across her forehead.

What did they say to you?

No one had told her anything, then. She hadn't found anyone she could ask to phone the hospital. Or perhaps she didn't make an effort to find anyone.

They said to come back in two days.

I could have postponed any further response, but as I opened the other door—the one leading into the room where I received my guests—I turned back and corrected myself.

In two or three days. That's what the doctor said.

She followed me in, silent, and stood facing me. She didn't move or speak, just gazed at me steadily as I lifted my turban off my head and took off my abaya. She was waiting for me to finish saying what I had to say. When I collapsed onto the armchair, my body feeling heavy and lifeless, the look on her face informed me that her thin store of patience, which she had been holding valiantly in reserve, had now run out.

Two or three days? What happens after two or three days?

I don't know. He said I am sick.

Gradually, one feature at a time, her face went from blank neutrality to curiosity and then to the expression I knew so well, her way of showing surprise and disbelief. I knew she had finally reached the point where she couldn't avoid knowing what my illness was, and acknowledging it, calling it by its name at least in her head.

Is the doctor going to put you in the hospital?

I don't know. He said I should come back in two or three days.

She knew, as well, that she must—right now, in this very moment—stop asking these questions of hers that left me craning my head from one side to the other, unsure of where to direct my eyes. I will make you tea, she said, turning to go into the kitchen.

Sitting in my usual armchair, my thoughts turned to the photograph on the opposite wall. Long ago I should have brought it lower, I reflected. Every time he had come to visit, my brother Adnan had teased me about it. Why had I hung the three of them so high up there, as if they were strung up on the gallows? That picture—their picture—hung at such an elevation that its frame nearly touched the ceiling. Adnan went on telling me that I must bring it far enough down that it would be at eye level for a normal man. He was right, I thought. After all, I could no longer make out their faces, whether or not I had my glasses on, though it was clear enough that there were three men in the picture and they were the men I knew. Whenever I glanced at it, as high overhead as it was, and as tiny as it looked way up there in its braided silver frame, memories of them as they were when that photograph was taken would fill my head.

From where I sat I mused about what it would be like to see that picture from close up. To see my father at the age of thirty, the figure he made then, his narrow eyes staring at the photographer as if urging him to hurry, as if he wanted this stranger to pick up his camera and go away. Trying to compensate for the smallness of his eyes, or perhaps just to explain why they were as narrow as they were, my mother always used to say that those eyes held enough terror to frighten anyone on whom they happened to fall. Even the two cats who had lived with us since they were tiny kittens used to back off, one leg raised slightly off the ground, before scurrying away as if they were little boys. That's the example my mother always gave, sketching the scene of him coming out of the house and going

over to the paved area between the house and the garden to give his eyes some temporary relief from the darkness of his room, as if he needed to stand up and assure himself that his legs were still working after the fatigue of sitting in that gloomy room with its row of square cushions that imams sat cross-legged on.

Do we have a ladder in the house?

My wife gave me one of her usual looks. She was standing over the little side table that she had just lifted off the floor in order to bring it over to where I sat.

Ladder? Why the ladder?

I'm going to move the photograph lower down on the wall. It's so high, no one can see who is in it.

She swiveled her head to stare up at the picture even though she was still half bent over the table where she had set down the tea. Without straightening up she looked over at me again.

You are going to move it down? Now?

Not right now. But that's where it should go, down there.

She twisted around again, this time presumably to look where I was pointing. But she made it obvious that she was staring into empty space as if to let me know that she was thinking about something else and that I too ought to be thinking about other things.

Well. Anyway. He got sick while you were there in the hospital.

Got sick the same way he always does?

Got sick like he always does, her voice intimating that he had worn her out as he usually did, and she wanted me to know it. A thought forced itself on me. Maybe what had made him ill this time was my being away.

Did he sleep in his own bed?

In his bed one night and on his easy chair one night. Drink your tea first, she said as she saw me set my hands down, palms open and flat, bracing myself to get up.

It's not just my being away, though. It's that he sits there in his easy chair all the time and no one ever comes in to talk to him.

The boys . . . I was going to ask her if the boys had entertained him by playing with their sister somewhere near enough that he could see them, but it suddenly dawned on me that I had not even asked her about them.

Where are they?

Out. When your father was willing to eat, it was Ahmad who fed him from a spoon.

I pictured my son Ahmad standing in front of my father, a plate of food in his hands, waiting for his grandfather to swallow what he had in his mouth before bringing the spoon close again. The spoon would be heaped with food. My father would not know how to take only as much as he could chew and swallow at one time.

Did he eat?

Who?

My father. Did he have lunch?

Feed him now. That was what I must do. And doing it would surely make me feel a bit better. Good, I thought. Coming into the room carrying his food will make it seem as though I was never away from him after all.

It's as though I am silencing him by putting this in his mouth. His lips take what is on the spoon but his eyes keep returning to me, staring at my face. He knows I will manage to dampen whatever curiosity he has, to keep him silent with these words I repeat time and again. Eat, Father. In good health, Father. Here, take this one, too. This will give you strength. But with every word I say, he makes me sense how much I am tiring him out. He even makes me feel I'm causing him pain.

Eat, Father, I say, even if I am just waiting for the insistence in his eyes to grow sharper, until it is so intense that I think I can see him summoning all the strength he has left to speak, and I imagine that forceful voice of his that he has kept

imprisoned inside his body all these months. He is about to say to me, Where were you? Tell me—where were you?

Still, the voice I will hear would not be that first voice of his, that angry bellow ripping through his listeners to give them a good scolding. You two, over there, quiet! he would roar at two men murmuring together in the back as he delivered a sermon at the Hussainiya. If they did not stop talking immediately he would say to them—just like that, in front of everyone sitting in there—Get out! They would make a show of looking around, to let everyone know how genuinely chagrined they were and how they felt the awkwardness of actually getting up and leaving. And they would stay like that until the other people in the Hussainiya made it clear that they had to leave. He would not resume his homily until he saw their backs vanish, going down the stairs. He who knows God and worships Him . . . , he would bark, going back to his explanation of the passages he had recited from Abu Dharr.

You did well . . . you did well. That's what he began saying to me as I gave my first sermon on one of my trips back from Najaf. I did not deserve his praise. My legs, concealed by the pulpit behind which I stood, were shaking and my voice came out hesitant, careening unpredictably between my own normal voice and the more forceful voice of a seasoned sermon-giver. Good, you did well, came his voice from somewhere to the right of the pulpit where he was sitting facing the congregation. It was clear that he wanted to make certain they heard what he was saying to me. That way they would remain quiet and still, staying in their seats, and they would listen attentively to what I was saying. I knew this was his intention; I knew what his words meant. But I accepted those words of his anyway; indeed, I anticipated hearing them. I waited for him to say these words again. You did well. Once, twice, many times, so that perhaps even I would believe the truth of what he said.

I knew he would not say anything more—anything about my hesitant delivery—after they had all filed out of

the Hussainiya. He didn't respond at all when I remarked that I wasn't the way I should have been. He remained silent, seemingly occupied in studying the road in front of him. At that moment I really felt I had embarrassed him, not only because of my weak voice and my confusion and my evident and mortified inability to rise above the situation, but also because I had put him in the position of having to demonstrate his approval, out there in front of the congregation, in a situation where he was not particularly pleased and certainly wasn't ready to show any true admiration for what he saw and heard.

Eat, Father . . . this food will give you strength. I went on repeating it. And he went on obeying me, opening his mouth every time I brought the spoon close. Perhaps he was waiting for me to obey him as he was obeying me, in his case by eating even though he felt full. Waiting for me to tell him that I had been in the hospital, and that I would be going back there in two or three days.

He ate everything on his plate, I said to my wife, who was standing halfway down the corridor. She was slapping at the dust and dirt that covered Hiba's clothes, and she did not turn toward me to take the empty plate from my hands. As I headed toward the kitchen to set it down next to the sink I could tell that Hiba was on the point of breaking into sobs. Her mother's blows against her backside were getting stronger and stronger. They were beginning to hurt, and Hiba understood that it was no longer about getting rid of the dirt; it was a punishment. Seeing me coming out of the kitchen she ran toward me, her arms outstretched. I picked her up and carried her over to where her doll lay sprawled on the floor. As I bent down to pick up the doll I told her it was still asleep. Take her . . . here . . . hold her. Before she wakes up, I said. But Hiba made a show of refusing to take the limp form by shrugging her shoulders to shake me off and then giving her doll a hateful look.

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