

The Unexpected Love Objects of Dunya Noor

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The events of this book take place during the fin de siècle period of the last century, when a mustachioed military dictator, with an abnormally large head, named Hafez al-Assad (father of Bashar) ruled Syria.



Prologue

Dunya Noor had once heard that, when love occurred, the object of her love would begin to sparkle, because true love often appeared in the unexpected form of *light*. Was this really true? Only God knew—only God and possibly also her camera. All she would need to do was to take a photograph of that light if and when it shone in the face of her beloved, that was how she'd prove that he was the One.

For there could only ever be One.

There could only ever be One God, One Father, One Mother, only One.

There could only ever be One Sun in the sky, One Moon, only One.

And in a country like Syria, there could only ever be One Truth, only One, and there was only one man who knew it—and his name was Hafez al-Assad.



BOOK ONE
An English Rose



1

The Beauty Contest

IT WAS THE SUMMER OF 1996 in the Democratic Arab Republic of Syria and the sun was blazing above its most important, but little known, Mediterranean harbor city of Latakia. On the large and marble-tiled terrace of the old colonial Casino Hotel, five young women stood on an elevated platform, each next to her own specially designated bamboo chair. They flicked their hair, stood up, walked about, and allowed the audience to judge them.

Dr. Joseph Noor carefully inspected the girls and tried to make up his mind as to who should win. He glanced at the audience behind him: a collection of heavily made-up and overly perfumed society women and their pampered, pot-bellied husbands. He tried to avoid looking at his English wife Patricia, because he suspected that she was about to cry, as she sometimes did during such occasions. He could hear her heavy breathing next to him and feel her agitated movements. Out of the corner of his eye, Dr. Joseph Noor saw his wife crossing one of her legs over the other and then uncrossing it, over and over again, and instead of looking at him or at any of the contestants, she distracted herself either by inspecting her expensive designer shoes or by sipping loudly from a glass of bitter lemon which she put back on the table next to her with a sharp bang. It was as if Patricia was trying to force Joseph to take notice of her. But Joseph continued to ignore her and instead stared at the beautiful young contestants, assessing each one according to her merits.

Attending Latakia's annual beauty contest was becoming more and more difficult for Patricia as the years went by, because (according to her self-critical green eyes and the large bedroom mirror custom-made for her in a famous glass factory in Damascus), her own once-striking beauty was now fading.

"I think Dunya would've won if she'd been here," Patricia whispered in her husband's ear. Her long artificial eyelashes swayed a little, like lost exclamation marks.

"I disagree," Joseph said gruffly, while observing a contestant who wore a sophisticated blue hat, "I think Jamila Zamani is far prettier."

Patricia looked at Jamila contemptuously and said, "Huh?" She saw Joseph's rude comment as a snub to herself as well as to their daughter Dunya, who had always managed to get on her father's nerves, even though she lived at a distance of at least four thousand kilometers in a northwesterly direction (England).

"You have the strangest taste in women, Joseph," Patricia said.

"Perhaps that's why I married you," Joseph answered.

"She's our only child. Why do you dislike her so much?" Patricia looked at Joseph.

"She's not a child any more, Patricia. She's a strange young woman who prefers her camera to a decent man. What kind of daughter is that? No family in Syria has ever had a daughter like ours." Joseph huffed and puffed until his yellow short-sleeved shirt started to shake visibly, and he didn't stop huffing until his straw hat fell on the floor and rolled away like an irresponsible thought.

"But Hilal is a decent man, isn't he? And she loves him, more than her camera, I should think," Patricia said.

"*Hilal!* Please don't mention that name in front of me. How can I allow my daughter to marry a man whose name is Hilal? And besides, how can you call someone whose job it is to stare at the moon a man?" Joseph's face puffed up

like some strange pastry—he looked like a balloon that was about to explode.

“He’s an astronomer, Joseph. It’s his job to study the moon and contemplate the stars. Just because no one practices astronomy in Syria doesn’t make it a disreputable profession,” Patricia said. “Dunya says he’s about to discover a theory! He’s probably a genius—what more could you want from a son-in-law?”

“He is a Muslim, remember? Do you want our daughter married to a Muslim?”

“I don’t care if he’s a Muslim as long as she loves him. And besides, he’s handsome, so very, very handsome.”

“You’re English and that is why you’ll never understand,” Joseph said. He turned away from Patricia and concentrated his gaze at Jamila Zamani, his favorite contestant. Her hat had just been plucked by a grasping sea bird and she’d caught her dress in the back of her bamboo chair. Joseph gasped in embarrassment, but he wished that his own daughter was a little bit more like Jamila: engaged to an architect from a good Greek Orthodox Christian family, and had recently graduated (with flying colors) in law.

“She’d be an idiot to marry a man like that Hilal, the son of a *tailor*.”

“What is wrong with tailors? I love tailors. Yves St. Laurent is a tailor, isn’t he?”

If he’d had a gun, Joseph would have liked to be able to use it right then, to pull the trigger and shoot that man who was plotting to steal his daughter.

But luckily Hilal was out of reach, munching a biscuit on an airplane that was bulleting its way toward Damascus airport as fast as it could.

As Mr. and Mrs. Noor were twirling their thumbs waiting for the beauty contest results, and after Joseph had cast his vote, his best friend Salman Ghazi came toward them, beaming.

Mr. Ghazi was an exceptionally loudmouthed lawyer who normally described himself as an ‘avocado’—an Arabization of the French word ‘avocat,’ which means lawyer.

“Patricia tells me that Dunya’s coming home next week, is that true?” Mr. Ghazi asked Joseph. “Why didn’t you tell us? Maria will be over the moon when she hears of this.”

“She only told us of her visit this morning.”

“She flies out of the country in the dead of night without saying goodbye and then turns up all of a sudden, *ten years later*, without warning? I thought you preferred to visit her in England. What if . . . ?” Mr. Ghazi cut his own nervous whisper short.

“What if *what?*” Joseph asked.

“What if she gets herself into trouble again?” Mr. Ghazi said.

“She’s no longer the reckless little girl she used to be. She’s a grown-up woman now, with her head on her shoulders.” Joseph said this with some hesitation. “Patricia and I are getting tired of flying so often to see her and she’s missing Syria. It’s time she came back.”

“If it’s true she’s a reformed character as you say, perhaps you should find her a husband while she’s here, Joseph. Isn’t she Maria’s age? Don’t leave it too late. And remember, I can help you find the right husband for her. You don’t want her to marry a cold fish of an Englishman, do you?”

“It’s too early for her to be thinking about husbands, she needs to concentrate on her studies and her career first. I don’t want her to be a wife right now, Salman, she’s not ready for it. Our girls are not like their mothers, they need to be independent and then find a husband later.”

“I expect she’ll become a doctor won’t she?” Salman said.

“She wants to be a photographer.”

“A photographer? You must be joking. Don’t you want her to be a heart surgeon like you, or at least a dentist, or a, or a . . .”

“She’s made up her mind, Salman.”

“Well, how about a lawyer, a banker? Who wants his daughter to be a photographer? What’s she going to photograph? Who’s going to pay her to take photographs?”

“Well, photography seems to be a good career in England. Apparently it’s considered an art,” Joseph said with a clear lack of conviction.

“Don’t believe what she tells you. Only an Armenian would think photography is a career, that and hairdressing. Even my wife, who is good at nothing but complaining, can take good photographs. It’s not a skill. I’ll talk her out of it—if you can’t. When a girl is wilful it’s an art to lead her to the right path. They always say boys are difficult, but in my opinion girls are more so and their lack of obedience more dangerous. You need to learn from me, Joseph, look at my daughter Maria. She does what I say.”

A big copper bell rang and some ecstatic belly dance music blared out of the five loud speakers. “The winner of this year’s Miss Latakia Beauty Contest is Maria Ghazi. Hey, Maria, come onto the stage,” boomed a rather macho voice. And the beauty queen was duly crowned to the applause of the crowd and awarded twenty pairs of Yves St. Laurent shoes (a year’s supply) as well as a five-star holiday for two in Greece.

A whole balcony full of Latakians clapped bitterly because their daughters hadn’t won. They muttered to one another, “Anyway, who cares! What kind of cheap prize is this? And if Maria goes to Greece with one of her friends they’ll certainly get up to no good and no one will *ever* want to marry them when they come back. What a loose generation this is!”

Mr. Ghazi looked at his daughter Maria proudly. “Oh darling, I knew you’d win. Your granny will take you to Greece, and you’ll have a whale of a time there.” He burst into a bombastic belly laugh, which caused his mustache to jump up and down. Maria looked disturbed by what she’d heard but she kept

her mouth shut. Mr. Ghazi had decided that she would go to Greece in the company of her half-blind granny Anaïs, who hadn't had a trip abroad for the last forty years. And what Mr. Ghazi decided was always law. Who would dare cross him?

Granny Anaïs had been far too busy breaking news hither and thither to have had time to travel. She was the Central City Gossip, a prominent member of Latakia's daily morning gossip clubs, which operated as an environmentally friendly alternative to newspapers. Instead of wasting precious paper, they only needed air to circulate. Their mainly female members worked as unpaid information hubs; they were Latakia's very own news agencies. And being half blind she was able to see the strangest things; her tongue wagged constantly in anticipation of terrible scandals and disaster.

Maria suddenly wished that she hadn't won the competition. There was no way she could go to Greece with her fiancé Shadi because that would be considered indecent by every decent person in the city, but going in the company of her grandmother Anaïs would bring her to her knees.

Joseph stood up and stared at the horizon with sad and worried eyes. The Mediterranean Sea spread in front of him for miles, blue and magnificent and indifferent to his petty family squabbles. He felt faint and he wondered whether it would happen to him one day, "Am I really going to die of a heart attack and will it be because of Dunya or Patricia, or a fatal combination of the two?"

2

Mr. and Mrs. Noor

EVERYONE KNEW THAT JOSEPH NOOR was the most famous heart surgeon in the Syrian Arab Republic. He was famous for having rescued most of the high and mighty in the country from possible death by heart dysfunction or heart attack. To be attacked by one's heart was quite a common occurrence in Syria, particularly for men. The problem with Joseph Noor was that his heart also had a will of its own, and had launched a few attacks on him at regular intervals since the age of six when he'd heard that, like his father Ibrahim, he might one day become bald. It was rare for a child of only six to fall down for such reasons. As a result, his mother Marrouma began to see him as an extremely sensitive and fragile boy and began to spoil him rotten. And all of his family made sure that Joseph Noor grew up to be one of the most spoiled men in the city, perhaps in the country, possibly in the whole wide world. Spoiling him to death seemed like the only way to save Joseph's life.

Thus it came about that his heart was the center of his life and Joseph became obsessed not merely with the medical aspects of hearts in general, but his own in particular. He thought that if he learned all about the human heart he might be able to save his own from itself indefinitely.

Apart from its propensity to launch attacks at him, Joseph's heart seemed to lack other interests. He had never fallen in love or been passionate about any woman or felt any

particularly tender feelings toward anyone until he reached the ripe age of twenty-eight.

At his birthday party, which took place in a pub in London near Imperial College, where as an undergraduate he was slowly plotting to take over world heart surgery, Joseph glimpsed a girl sitting on a chair. The moment he saw her, Joseph stopped being able to see anything else at all in the room, and walked straight toward her. He stood in front of her, red as a rose and smiling like the village idiot.

The girl had never met a man with such curly black hair in her life before, nor such a big nose. She didn't understand why he was smiling as he was and not saying a word. Suddenly a sentence made its way out of his mouth in a sort of whisper, "What is your name?"

She thought he was trying to flirt with her—which he was—but instead of responding with an encouraging smile, she gave him a hard slap on the face and briskly walked out. One reason for her cruelty was that all of Joseph's doctor friends were looking on from behind them and laughing. She thought he'd made a bet with them and was about to make a fool of her.

As she walked out into the fresh air, she found Joseph following her. His hair was on end and he had a pleading look in his eyes. "I really need to know your name."

"Pat-ricia," she said.

"Patri-cia?" He looked at her for a moment as if he were looking at someone or something that it had never occurred to him he might come across. "I've never heard of such a beautiful name before," he said in a gentle voice.

Joseph became perfectly quiet and didn't know what else to say. She was, he thought, the most beautiful woman he had ever set his eyes upon. Her green eyes and her tall majestic figure, her blond hair and her elegant aristocratic cheekbones, everything about her was perfect, including her subtle air of cold haughtiness which made his heart beat ten times faster

than it should. She had that sort of icy beauty that not many women in Syria had and which he found irresistible.

Patricia could tell from his accent that Joseph was a foreigner. She thought he might be French, Jewish, or Spanish—at any rate, someone who clearly belonged to a culture marked by curly hair and random emotional outbursts.

He had correctly calculated that Patricia might find his pretended ignorance endearing. “I’ve never heard of such a beautiful name before.” This was the only sentence he had ever invented for the delicate purpose of ensnaring a woman, and as if by miracle, it worked.

The two married within six months of meeting and Joseph promised Patricia that they would live in London and that he would become famous. But after only four years of living in a rented apartment in Marylebone, while Joseph effortlessly climbed the ladder of success in the heart surgery world, he woke up one morning and said to her, “I cannot bear this any longer.”

“You can’t bear what?”

“I cannot bear London. I feel it’s suffocating me.”

“Well, we could move to the country, darling. I could teach you golf. You’d love it.”

“No, Patricia. I need to live in Latakia.”

“Latakia? What do you mean, Latakia? What about me? How am I supposed to live there? You wait until I’m pregnant to tell me this? What about the baby? Do you want your children to grow up in *Latakia*?”

“Well, why not? I grew up there and look at me, as good as gold, as sound as a bell!”

Latakia was nothing special to the unaddicted eye. If you did not happen to be born there it might never have any sort of hold on you. It never succeeded in getting a hold on Patricia who found it boring, parochial, and cement-ridden.

“Joseph, why do you keep on calling it a *she*?” Patricia soon started to get irritated. “It’s just an ugly little town.”

Since they moved back he'd been frantically showing Latakia off to her.

"You act as if we're in Venice," Patricia often said resentfully.

"You say that because you're a snob. You think the only worthwhile place on earth is England. You English are so cold, your judgments can't be trusted."

Latakia had many problems as a town: it was full of unpainted buildings with television aerials sticking out of them like unkempt hair, its streets were half-finished, and its trees were painted white up to the top of their trunks, to deter cockroaches from traveling up and devouring the leaves and likely fruits of the season.

Despite its many glaring defects Latakia seemed to exert a strange influence on its inhabitants, most of whom developed feelings for it that could only be described as romantic. Most dyed-in-the-wool Latakians often thought of their city as a beautiful girl. Her official moniker was 'Bride of the Sea.'

Patricia thought that this might be a psychological condition, brought on by a mixture of heat and totalitarianism, as Syria was a superstar police state, and Latakia—which was the apple of President Hafez al-Assad's eye—because he was born in a village nearby—had fast become a satellite beach resort of neo-Stalinism. It had an array of Russian ships regularly patrolling its harbor and pictures of the heart-throb president pasted on every surface imaginable, from car windows to school classrooms. In one such picture, his head replaced a pearl inside an open shell; he smiled beatifically. Everybody's heart had to beat for one person: Mr. al-Assad. Everyone insisted that they were ready to sacrifice their lives for his beautiful eyes or for his alluring mustache.

Anything less than that was considered political treason.

Joseph couldn't understand why Patricia didn't fall for Syria's charms, or why she was constantly pining for the abnormally green grass of England, because like most Syrians

he believed that his country was the best country on earth, that they had the best trees, the best food, the best mountains, and the best sea.

Latakia seemed to generate a syndrome in some of its inhabitants generally known as Superiority Syndrome, and otherwise known as a Superiority Complex. Not only, as general opinion had it, did ancient Latakians (in nearby Ugarit) invent and give birth to the alphabet as we know it (A, B, C, D) but the genius Arabs had also given the world algebra, and the mystical non-number zero—as well as three world religions. They had given the world God himself.

Latakia was born lucky, at least four thousand years ago, and had survived seven earthquakes in the interim, as well as many natural, social, and political disasters—so people assumed it was an immortal city. They also assumed that whatever disasters might befall her at present, she would inevitably rise again like the phoenix and take the world by storm. Superiority Syndrome reigned supreme.

Patricia never understood all of this and never forgave Syrians, and particularly Latakians, for being so pleased with their past achievements that they ignored their present failings to a point that, in any European city, would be regarded as criminal neglect.

But despite her barely hidden scorn and because of her striking looks and blond hair, Patricia became an instant hit in Latakia and was treated like visiting royalty from the moment she set foot in the city; all of Joseph's friends were green with envy.

Although she enjoyed the attention at first, Patricia soon fell into a deep state of depression, because, apart from socializing and gossiping, there was nothing for a woman of her social status to do. Even going shopping was considered too low class for her and could cause a major scandal, which would destroy Joseph Noor and his entire family's carefully guarded reputation in a matter of seconds.

Moments after her mother-in-law Marrouma saw Patricia going into a butcher's shop one morning wearing a slightly flimsy summer dress, Joseph received a hysterical phone call. "How can you let *your wife* go and mix with all the lowlifes? Why is she shopping in the first place? Can't Dr. Joseph Noor send a boy to buy his wife's groceries for her? And if you saw what she was wearing your heart would've exploded! She even smiled at the butcher and chatted with him as if he were her long-lost friend. What will people say, Joseph?"

It only took Patricia a few months of residence in Latakia to grow to reciprocate her mother-in-law's open hostility. From Marrouma's point of view, Patricia was "Not From Here," and she didn't deserve the most handsome young man in Syria. A man not just intellectual and kind, but who also possessed blue eyes. "Where she comes from, most men have blue eyes and she could have had her pick," she often said. Marrouma regarded Patricia as a cunning son-thief skilfully disguised as an elegant and beautiful woman, who was as foreign as the French but, in fact, English. Altogether she must be a thief, because it was a commonly acknowledged fact that "all the colonials did was to rob our country dry"—even when it came to husbands.

Despite the relentless negative publicity campaign orchestrated against Patricia by her mother-in-law, almost everyone in Latakia fell head over heels for her. She became an instant celebrity; their token blonde woman, their local fashion icon, and a reminder of the outside world, which most people had never been to but had watched with fascination and awe on cinema and television screens.

Poor Marrouma swiftly turned into an archetypally evil mother-in-law, while Patricia's popularity only served to fan the flames of her hatred.

3

Mustache Power

DUNYA'S CURLY HAIR, WHICH SHE inherited from her father Joseph, flew up in small circles, defying the laws of fashion and gravity. This was not a good look to have for a girl in Latakia.

And, as if to make things worse, Dunya was also born with what was generally considered a big mouth—also regarded as a major handicap for a girl in Latakia. Instead of learning how to say the right thing at the right time, she seemed to relish saying the very opposite of what was expected.

She had another strange quality, which in Latakia was considered unbecoming and even dangerous for a girl: curiosity. She liked to look at things—almost anything—as if she thought that the more she looked at it, the more an object or a person would reveal their mystery to her. She appeared to see mysteries in things that were commonly believed to have none. On the whole, it was agreed that it was as if she were not really the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Noor. She was neither sufficiently Patricia-like nor Joseph-like, nor a gratifying combination of the two.

Granny Marrouma, who was increasingly exasperated at Joseph's continued adulation of his wife and his refusal to publicly acknowledge that he had made a mistake in marrying an English woman, revenged herself against him by also persecuting Dunya—whenever the opportunity presented itself.

“It's a pity you didn't get your mother's blond hair, although it does make her look a little unintelligent. Still, it

helped her catch a husband, didn't it?" Marrouma would mutter while Dunya sat on her lap. Then she would play with Dunya's hair as if it were a weird shrub and say plaintively, "Such curls don't suit girls. I wonder who will ever marry you when you grow up. And, what's more, you're neither this nor that, you're a *mongrel!*"

Patricia would try to protect her daughter. "Madame Marrouma, stop talking to her about husbands, she's too young for that."

"I'm only telling the truth," Marrouma would insist.

Things only got worse when it was time for Dunya to go to school.

When Patricia saw the sort of uniforms that girls were required to wear, she almost fainted. Even in the most exclusive school, the School of the Carmelite Nuns where she was expected to send her daughter, military khakis with black boots and black socks were de rigueur (after the age of eleven). Wearing even brown or dark blue socks was against school regulation and punishable by caning. Wearing yellow or red socks was considered a sign of open mutiny and could lead to serious disciplinary action. Short nails were compulsory and no jewelry allowed, apart from the plainest earrings, which were to be affixed to some girls' ears within hours of their birth (as a mark of their gender), and always in the color blue, which it was rumored had the power to avert the dangerous influence of the evil eye—a curse mechanism believed to be widespread in Syria and caused by excessive envy.

When Patricia heard that her soon to be Syrian-educated daughter would be trained to use a machine gun as part of her future education, all her fears about living away from England were confirmed. "Joseph, I told you this is not a place for our daughter to grow up!"

Joseph thought his wife was being racist and that she was overreacting to what in fact was nothing more than a show. He

believed that this sort of show of patriotism was important in a country that was, technically speaking, at war. Once peace was established, all this totalitarian nonsense and playing with guns would be abandoned; Joseph was willing to be patient.

Since the late forties, Syria had been at daggers drawn with one of its newly created neighbors, Israel, a country that had not existed since biblical times and whose traumatic rebirth had caused all hell to break loose. The Syrian army kept sending them their tanks, which always came back battered, but always claiming victory. What kind of victory it was, no one dared to ask.

“It’s your fault anyway. You British,” Joseph often told his wife. “You gave it to them and it wasn’t yours to give!”

“Yes, darling. Everything is always our fault. We are always apologizing, darling. We are always so very sorry.”

Joseph wished that he hadn’t fallen in love with an offspring of the colonials, but he couldn’t help it. And now it was too late. Marriage, he mused, was an eternal knot. Patricia became increasingly unhappy at living in what she saw not only as one of the least known cities on Earth, but also possibly the ugliest one! She was unable to accept her fate as a citizen of Latakia and considered herself a reluctant visitor who was always about to leave. But despite her regular attempts, Patricia miserably failed to convince her husband that it was time for them to abandon his patriotic experiment and move back to England. So she spent most of her spare time crying and crying. Sometimes Patricia contemplated running away, though she was afraid that if she took that route (which would involve kidnapping Dunya as in Syrian law the father always keeps the children), she might inadvertently kill Joseph—because of his volatile heart. Joseph’s illness gave him the power of veto: it was, as ever, the ace up his sleeve.

At other times Patricia tried to use Joseph’s heart as an excuse for immigrating back to England, where the health care was vastly superior. “You can’t operate on yourself, can you? Who can you trust in Latakia to operate on you? Are you telling

me you're prepared to die for love of your country?" But Joseph was stubborn as a goat, and his answer was always, "Yes, I am."

When Patricia finally understood that she would have to spend the rest of her life in Syria, she went to the hairdresser Shahira and asked to have her hair dyed black. This was not only a public display of depression at discovering the truth of her dark fate; she also did it because she had become sick of being stared at. Her bloneness had turned her into a local sex symbol; a status that was inappropriate for the mother of a young child, she thought. She also did it to upset Joseph, of course.

The hairdresser, who loved Patricia's hair and felt lucky to be honored with the task of trimming it, shed a tear while she was applying the chemical dye and refused to take payment.

"You're not the woman I married," Joseph said. "You look like everyone else's wives now." Patricia's physical transformation came to him like a stab: sharp, deadly, and straight where it hurt (his ego).

That was when Patricia started her long vigil of mourning for her own life. (Although her black hair did not last for more than a season.)

What Patricia had failed to appreciate was that Syria was in the throes of a rather interesting revolutionary experiment: a Dictatorship of the Proletariat. It was something that sounded so novel at the time that most well-meaning people didn't immediately run a mile. On the contrary, it actually motivated some men, like Joseph, to return home instead of living abroad. The man who had started it all was Mr. Hafez al-Assad (whose name happened to mean the 'Protector Lion') and he had called it 'Demoqratiya al-Shaabiya,' meaning 'Democracy of the People.' Patricia was not unimpressed by Hafez al-Assad to start with. Women loved him because he was considered good looking (the usual) and men admired him because he used to be a pilot and because it was rumored that he cried when he was forced to kill one of his two rivals during the ascent to

power. Three men had undertaken to rule the land. That was clearly impossible. Assad promised a golden age but instead he promptly turned his own country into a cage. A huge number of people were sent to jail either for thinking, saying, or doing the ‘wrong’ thing. He took most of the land and the factories from a handful of Sunni and Greek Orthodox men and redistributed them to the people. This happened on March 8, 1970.

As the number eight in Arabic looks like a Syrian mustache:



Ever since that day, having a mustache of that sort was considered a patriotic gesture.

Joseph came back to Syria because he wanted to see his country progress and to give a helping hand. Why not? What is patriotism for, if not for men with mustaches to help one another? Joseph didn’t dare to grow any type of mustache, however, because Patricia forbade him to.

A Syrian mustache was one of the highest male expressions of patriotism, a gesture where both mind and body were united.

The men in mustaches did a lot of good. First of all they changed the law and gave women greater equality with men (in theory, at least, more than that would be indecent). There was a mushrooming of free education for all and free hospitals (where rats could run freely). The countryside was to be electrically empowered and water, water everywhere, though (often) not a drop to drink. And this was all thanks to the Euphrates Dam project, which made damn sure that Syria’s biggest river was turned into a god again—becoming the source of most electrical enlightenment.

The reason that the Democracy of the People traumatized Patricia so much was because it was nothing more than a euphemism, and soon the dreams of the masses turned into

a nightmare as bad and grim as what had transpired before them; as bad and grim as the four hundred years of Ottoman rule by bamboo stick and feudal rule by the boot, followed by colonialism, when Syria was flooded with French nuns and priests, who prayed loudly and preached, while French colonels stole all the tobacco that grew on Syria's shores and shipped it to Paris. The French had found it hard to leave Syria because they loved hummus far too much and got a taste for a dish called kibbeh, as well as kebab, but the Syrians convinced them to leave in the end using a world-renowned, much-tested traditional method: the barrel of the gun.

After hordes of Phoenicians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Caledonians, Romans, Byzantines, Muhammedans, Ottomans, the feudal lords, and the French, Hafez al-Assad's Baath Party and its band of mustachioed young men decided that it was time for them to rule Syria. And it was then that the rule by mustache officially began.

Since then only a man with a mustache born in the vicinity of Kurdaha (a tiny Alawite village near Latakia) was allowed to have any sort of political power. Hafez al-Assad was born in Kurdaha and because his brothers and cousins were also born there, many of the uncouth and streetwise toughs of Kurdaha swiftly rose to the highest echelons of government and ruled Syria Mafia-style.

The barrel of the gun was still as popular as ever.

SELECTED HOOPOE TITLES

No Knives in the Kitchens of This City

by Khaled Khalifa, translated by Leri Price

The Baghdad Eucharist

by Sinan Antoon, translated by Maia Tabet

Of Sea and Sand

by Denyse Woods



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