Nabeel's Song

Jo Tatchell

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Extract

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1

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To those born in a new Iraq, who will live in freedom.
To all the mothers who have suffered in the waiting.

Prologue

The wide streets of Basra are dusty and strewn with litter. Rubbish blows across the cracked, uneven pavement, and the noise of the city fills the air. Kerbstones, painted yellow and white, are worn and broken from years of use. Although it is the middle of the day the thoroughfares are busy. Traffic-lights, suspended from sagging wires above, change fitfully from red to green and back again. The army patrols and battered Toyotas driving past ignore them, using their horns to alert oncoming drivers. The city is poised and expectant.

Carrying his khaki knapsack, packed with bottles of spring water, his tape-recorder, newspapers and a pocket guidebook, Ahmed Goda, a journalist writing for the respected international Arabic newspaper *Asharq Alwsat*, treads carefully. His eyes roam the dilapidated apartment blocks and commercial buildings of the country's second city. The sun is high and the skies clear and blue, yet it feels to him like another world. One of the first wave of foreign journalists to enter the city, he is taking his first tentative steps in post-liberation Iraq.

Although some people seem cautious and subdued, most shops have raised their iron security grilles and occasionally he catches a face peering at him from within. In less extra-

ordinary times, he imagines that the tide of people and traffic on these city streets would be overwhelming, with vegetable traders, stationery sellers, hardware shops, furniture stores all vying for passing custom. As he progresses down the long market road children call, 'Hello, Mister – hey, Mister, how are you?' in broken English. He takes care to smile at them, and at the men who have started to appear in small groups of two or three. Some hang back but others gravitate towards him, calling greetings and questions. He has been expecting this. With their links to the Allied forces the foreign media are the only source of up-to-date information.

'Have they captured His Excellency the President the Leader God Placed Him?'

'Will Bush come?'

'Why are they letting the loyalists escape?'

'Do you not know they are leaving from the north of the city?'

'Hooray, we welcome you. Thank you, thank you.'

Knowing that most Iraqi people are not sympathetic to Arab journalists, who had, in the main, been supporters of Saddam Hussein, he pauses for a few minutes to answer each question individually. Of course, he has never been a supporter, and he knows many of the Iraqi writers and journalists in opposition in London, but the men with him will not know this. He smiles, and hearing the small Allied group guarding foreign media behind him, carries on into the city. Several men follow him and share news of the reprisals the Ba'ath loyalists are meting out in the name of their missing leader. 'They are animals and the world must know of it,' says one of the men, running beside Ahmed. 'My neighbour, my very good friend, his boy was killed for taking a cigarette from a soldier and waving at them when they drove past in their tanks. Tell your

people that this is what they are doing to us. What little boy in the world would not want to watch a parade of tanks and soldiers?'

Another weeps as he tells of an elderly couple living on the west of the city who had been strapped to chairs, doused in petrol and set alight in the street because the woman had been seen bowing to an American soldier. Their charred bodies had been left outside their home as a warning to all collaborators.

Ahmed can see that, while there is evident relief at liberation, the diehard nationalists are not giving up easily. In the heart of this city, the talk is of Iraqi Ba'athists starting to kill others. It would appear that the spectre of Saddam reaches so far into the psyche of his beleaguered people that they cannot now rejoice that he is gone. Some fear not only the possibility of his return but occupation of another kind. And while many other Iraqis are celebrating the fall of Saddam, the future is still uncertain.

As he walks further into the city, the crowd trailing him grows, drawing in men from doorways and shop fronts. Still unused to the waves of foreigners in the city and doubtful, in part, of their motives, their mood turns. What had started out as excitement at seeing a foreigner walking through the streets taking photos and asking questions has turned to resentment and thinly disguised anger.

Ahmed nods affably to the crowd. Peering down a side-street he is keen to give the impression that he knows exactly where he is going. But the further he moves from the main road, the more threatening the mob becomes. He can sense malevolence in the crowd now. He hears snatches of their hushed words to each other and knows they are suspicious.

'You are Arab, yes?' A man stabs a finger at Ahmed's back.

'Answer me. Are you an Egyptian? You look like an Egyptian.'

This is a leading question. Many Arab countries, and many Arabs, have supported Saddam Hussein's regime over the decades, Egypt among them. Despite this, Ahmed knows he must tell them the truth.

'I am an Egyptian,' he replies, reaching for the bottle of water in his knapsack pocket. 'What of it?'

Before he can say more, the crowd is jeering at him. A tall, angry-looking man steps out of the mob. 'We don't trust the Arab journalists any more. They don't like the Iraqis.'

Keen to avoid any misunderstanding, Ahmed addresses their concern. 'I am with the Iraqis. I am a journalist and I have lived for many years in London. Believe me, I care for what you have been through.'

But the crowd twitches with doubt and anxiety. 'Look, I am writing a piece for an Arabic newspaper, *Asharq Alwsat*,' he tries to reason with them. 'I count many of your exiled countrymen as friends. I am here to tell things the way they really are here, not to gloat or spread propaganda.' He did not like to use his friends and connections as a bargaining chip but, under the circumstances, he has no choice.

'We know all about the Iraqi exiles,' the ringleader sneers. 'Friends of the regime. They took our money and treasures with them when they went and now they live like kings while we starve.'

'What do these people living in London and America know of things here?' shouts another. 'Have any of them ever tried to help us?'

The crowd raises a resounding 'No.'

Ahmed raises a hand to speak. 'Listen to me,' he shouts. 'I

may be an Egyptian but I know what has been going on here. I have a good friend, an Iraqi man, who has suffered as you have. The president made him an Enemy of the State. Yes, he escaped – but only just. His brothers, sisters and cousins were not so lucky. They were beaten, tortured and left for dead. I talked to him just before I came here and he told me he is happy I can make this trip to write honestly about the situation here.'

'Pah! A million cowards have fled this place.' The angry man spits back at him. 'They were the lucky ones.'

'No, no. This man was a poet. His name is Nabeel Yasin.' He grasps frantically at anything that might save him. 'Though he has suffered he would consider me a friend.'

Remembering times spent with Nabeel at the Kufa Gallery in London and at the newspaper, Ahmed shares other facts that might ring true. 'He wrote a poem called *Brother Yasin*. He was put on Saddam's blacklist . . . an Enemy of the State.' He closes his eyes and waits for the crowd to surge forward, but no one moves. He hears silence. Unsure of what is happening he opens his eyes.

The spokesman is quelling the commotion. His face registers recognition.

'*Brother Yasin*,' he says, raising his voice to the crowd. 'I know it. He talks of the man who wrote *Brother Yasin* and *Brother Yasin, Again*.' Suddenly the man pulls away from the others and begins to recite:

'*Here I stand in life's desert,*
Composing a song to pass the evening
Holding my questions in my hands.

I am the last wretched wiseman in a time that
detests wisemen.

I am the last one clutching the dying embers as the fire burns out . . .
I am the last to burn . . .

A second later, from the back of the crowd, Goda hears two voices pick up where the first has left off. Others join in. Clearly, many know the poem by heart. Ahmed stands motionless, astounded, as they deliver the words line by line. They have almost forgotten about him and any anger they may have felt towards him has evaporated. Can this *really* be happening? Surely these people can't know anything of a blacklisted poet of the 1970s.

Back in London, Ahmed knows Nabeel well. During their many conversations about art, politics and the trials of living in exile, he had not been aware that Nabeel's celebrity extended back to Iraq. Of course, the signs were there, now Ahmed thought about it. He had heard that Nabeel's poetry was on Saddam's infamous blacklist – a long, comprehensive catalogue of banned literature that included Virginia Woolf, Sartre and even Tintin. But Ahmed had not realised his friend lived on in the public consciousness. Neither, he thought, did Nabeel.

'Is it really possible that you know of this man?' Ahmed asks those closest to him in the crowd.

'Of course,' says the tall man, mildly offended by the question. 'He is famous here.'

They tell him the story of *Brother Yasin*. The poem had been a sensation in its day, published, read and recited across the country. It spoke for a generation. The follow-up, *Brother Yasin Again*, written in exile, had also found its way into the country, passed through the underground from person to person, held up as an emblem of hope in a dark decade.

The story astounds Ahmed. His friend in London has no idea that his work has lived on in Iraq, that these epics have captured the mood of the times. He has been away for well over twenty years.

The tall man draws the crowd away, repeating his favourite lines until they all join in, stamping on the ground in unison. '*Brother Yasin*, *Brother Yasin Again*, *Brother Yasin*, *Brother Yasin Again*.'

They pull Goda into the throng, hailing him now as a hero. 'Where is the poet?' they clamour, taking it in turns to slap Ahmed's shoulders.

'Is he in good health?'

'Writing more poems?'

'Do you think he will write again for his people? Tell him he has many fans here still. Tell him he must come back to Iraq.'

Ahmed wants to laugh. He is a lucky man. Who would have thought Nabeel's name would mean so much? How strange and serendipitous life is. What a story he will have for Nabeel when he returns to London.

The tall man rolls up a shirtsleeve and holds out his arm. 'You must write your name here on my hand. I want the name of the man who is the friend of the poet Nabeel Yasin.'

Ahmed fumbles in his bag, finds a pen and begins to write.

BOOK I

The Swallow Tree
Summer 1954

Sabria sings as she works the dough. It is a slow lament of her own. These songs, with their rambling verses of half-formed thoughts and sad, swooping melodies, come to her every morning as she moves about the house. Her hair, thick, black and straight, swings from side to side in the early-morning sunlight as the melody dies to a hum, and is reborn a minute later, inspired by figures from the world of myth and legend, perhaps, her last pilgrimage to Karbala, her sister Makkya's troubles in love, the cool water she has drawn from the well in the courtyard or, as on this morning, her two older sisters, who died during the cholera outbreak in the year she was born.

Leaving the dough to rise, she goes to the well and draws two large tin buckets of water. As she walks back, she feels the baby twist inside her. She sings louder, directing her voice at her belly. This baby likes her singing, she is sure. Unlike Yasin, her husband. He listens as she waddles about the house, occasionally wincing and clicking his tongue until he can hold back no longer. 'Wife! In all the time we have been married I have not once heard you sing a happy song. Not once. Why must everything be so sad?'

She sets down the buckets and spins round to face him. 'Do I

tell you what to sing?' she hisses. 'What you choose to sing when you are working is your own business. What I sing is *my* choice. If you do not care for my sadness, you should go out. Anyway, you know that all Iraqi songs are sad – it's traditional.'

Yasin raises his eyebrows and smiles at her. She scowls back. 'Go and leave me in peace,' she says, and nods towards the front door.

The domestic routine has played itself out regularly over the fifteen years they have been married. Whenever Yasin is at home and not out laying track in the deserts to the south and west of Baghdad, Sabria knows she must get him out of the house as early as she can. Otherwise he becomes restless and wanders aimlessly about the house, distracting her from her chores. Since he is not in the habit of eating breakfast, or no more than fruit and yesterday's bread, he's best out of the way.

'Buy some onions,' she calls to him, as he pulls on his outdoor shoes. 'If you go to the market late, they will be cheaper. I need two bobbins and some white cotton, too. Don't forget, or the boys will have no trousers fit for school. And before you ask, no, I cannot go myself, and Bibi is not here to go for me. Go to al-Shawwaka market, to the haberdasher's at the back.'

'Yes, yes, my wife.' Yasin sighs, wrapping a fresh white cloth over his patterned skullcap. He waves, and she watches him disappear across the sandy courtyard and out through the battered tin gate. She knows exactly where he will go, the route he will take, and for how long he will be out. A creature of habit, he will wander across the cultivated fields of Karradat Mariam to the little coffee shop at the river's edge. He will meet with the other men of the neighbourhood – the old, those on leave, professional and military men, and others driven from their homes by their irritated wives – and while

away a few hours playing dominoes and sipping cardamom coffee, which he loves. He often stops to see it made, watching as the thick mixture rises slowly to the top of the tall aluminium jug and is poured, hot and syrupy, into long rows of glasses. Its smell is enough to distract him from whatever task he has undertaken.

He will settle himself at his favourite lucky domino table, one ear trained to the old Philips radio behind the counter, and wait for friends to arrive. Soon the room will echo with conversation and laughter, the gentle click-clack of *misbaha* beads and the news from Radio Baghdad. Yasin will be occupied blissfully for hours.

Now Sabria prepares the bread oven. She lays sticks and brushwood in the large bronze grate, then fans the flames with a frond until the embers set the new kindling alight. The fire will do now for her bread, then later for tea, coffee and a fish stew. It is a delicate balance: too much wood early in the day and the domed bread oven, which Yasin built against the back wall of the compound on the day they moved in, will smoke for hours. Too little and the fire will die. In the many years that she has performed this morning ritual, she has failed only a handful of times. Now such things are second nature.

Sighing, Sabria finds herself caught off-guard and momentarily unable to move. She is already exhausted and the sun is not even half-way up the sky. The baby inside her has robbed her of energy and she can only get about with considerable effort and slow deliberate movements. Standing beside the oven, she offers a small prayer that the baby will come soon. In the meantime she must try to rest. The housework can wait. With Jafar and Juma'a, her teenagers, at school and Yasin out, she might relax a little later.

Bibi, her ever-vigilant mother, had scolded her roundly just

the day before: 'You do too much. They don't lift a finger to help because you won't let them. They should look after themselves for a week or two until the baby comes. Three demanding children and a house to keep – that's too much for anyone.'

Sabria knows Bibi is right but she cannot hope to change anything now. It is easier for her to continue doing all the work herself than to instruct her men how to cook, clean and wash. If she can get the sewing done, perhaps she will put her feet up for a few hours.

Sabria has come to treasure the brief moments of calm when the house is empty. She can think, imagine, plan and even sing without fear of upsetting anyone. When they come home and the tiny compound is filled again with chaotic comings and goings, her time will no longer be her own.

Besides, her mother and Sabria's sister, Makkya, will be here soon. They will help. They are spending the morning shopping at the market and promised to be back before noon. Sabria knows they will come much later. It is to be expected. Her mother has probably been accosted and is, at this moment, crouching on someone's floor with her stick and her bags of herbs dispensing advice. A seer, a wise woman and herbalist, Bibi makes herself available to anyone who asks. It is an obligation, a duty bestowed by the gift itself.

'What should I do, Bibi? My wife, she cannot sleep and she has terrible pains in her shoulders . . .'

'My husband is sick, it is his stomach. Can you give me something for him?'

Above the wide cliffs of her cheekbones Bibi's eyes look deep into those of her patient until the truth is revealed. As she listens and looks, never blinking, holding their gaze, she is reaching into the bag at her feet and pulling out a sprig or two

with instructions to boil, drink or keep about the person. For as long as Sabria can remember her mother has carried herbs and special powders with her in the folds and cuffs of her robe and *fota*, the black cloth headscarf she wraps about her face. And while the gift itself has not been passed on, Sabria knows she has inherited some of her mother's insight.

After checking that the yeast is doing its work, she discards her house slippers, pads to the washstand and splashes her face with cooling flower water. Her youngest son Nabeel tugs at her skirt and, momentarily irritated, she shoos him away. 'Leave me alone, Nabeel. Go and play.' Half in a daze she makes her way to the shade of her room, unease blossoming inside her. 'I am tired,' she says to the child, 'and I have a lot of sewing to do. But if you are good, I will tell you a story when Bibi comes back.' She sits in the wicker chair in front of the old Singer sewing-machine, with a half-completed shirt and material for three pairs of trousers at her side, then stares out to the swallow – *sununu* – tree in the yard.

Little Nabeel knows that his mother is not quite herself. It has troubled him for days. He can feel that something big is about to happen but no one will say what it is. He scratches shapes and letters into the sand with the stick his mother uses to check for snakes hidden in the grass. He has always been good at entertaining himself.

Sabria watches him from the window as she cuts trousers from the grey cotton and pins them in place for sewing.

Nabeel is four and about to be joined by another brother or sister. How rapidly time has passed. He is no longer her miracle baby but a little boy, full of his own opinions and such a strong, wilful spirit. She smiles as she watches him run round the well, singing one of his own songs. 'Nabeel,' she calls.

'*Nabeel*,' she repeats the name to herself, almost as if she is hearing it for the first time. No one in the family has been called Nabeel before, and it isn't common in Iraq. Such looks she had had from everyone the day she announced it to the family. Even now it is strange to think that her son was named after her brother Rashid's favourite brand of cigarette. But it had been the only possible name for him.

'Sister, if you have another boy you must call him Napoleon,' Rashid had said emphatically, waving a ticket for the Napoleon cigarette lottery at his sister, who lay resting on a mattress.

'Whyever would I do such a ridiculous thing, brother?' she had said, astonished.

Rashid spoke as if his reasoning was flawless and obvious to even the dim-witted: 'Because this ticket is for a prize draw set to take place on the day your baby is due. And, sister, I have a strong feeling that if the baby is born on that day and it is a boy, I will win.'

'Win what?'

'A lifetime supply of Napoleon cigarettes! I feel it is a most auspicious name, sister.'

'To be named after a cigarette is not, in any way, auspicious, Rashid,' she had said, dismissing the notion with

a flick of her fingers. 'How could I ever face my child knowing I named him after a French leader or a cigarette?'

It wasn't until the baby was born, and Rashid called in to tell her he had won first prize, that she knew her brother would not let the matter be. 'What did I tell you, sister? One thousand cartons of high-quality cigarettes. Thank you very much, Mr Napoleon,' he had crowed triumphantly. 'It would be unwise to ignore such good fortune, don't you think?'

'It seems so,' Sabria admitted reluctantly. 'But I can't call him Napoleon, can I?' Rashid had raised his eyebrows and waved a lighted cigarette at her and the infant.

Encouraged by her brother's good fortune, Sabria had settled on the Arabic form of Napoleon's name, announcing to Yasin that they would call their third son Nabeel. She knew her husband would not protest: in the years they had been married she could not recall him objecting to anything of any importance.

Now that baby boy is an opinionated, garrulous four-year-old, with a seemingly inexhaustible desire to know about everything. He follows his mother everywhere, enthralled by her stories and explanations of the world. Unlike her other two sons, who are growing away from her, Nabeel loves nothing more than to curl up in the shadow of the hissing paraffin lamp, his head against her knee, listening to the legends of old Iraq that Sabria tells him. His favourites are tales of the present king, Faisal II, of his youth, his impetuousness, his travels to faraway countries, and of the enormous blue-domed palace he built on the outskirts of Karradat Mariam. In her imagination, this palace, a new

home for the monarch, was a wondrous place, worthy of fairytales about the powerful emperors, cruel monsters and spoilt dynasties who dwelt within.

Soon the bread oven is hot enough to begin baking. The smoke has all but died away and only the white-hot embers remain. Leaving the sewing-machine, Sabria fetches a raffia basket from the kitchen and walks to the oven with the soft dough patties. As she turns to close the screen door a spasm grips her and she sinks to the ground, sending them rolling into the sand. She knows the feeling: the baby is getting ready to come. The pain passes slowly and she looks up. From the corner of her eye, she sees Nabeel throw the snake stick at the well and jump for the forbidden *sununu* nest. She has lost count of the times she has told him and his friends to leave the hatchlings and the swallows' eggs alone. But the more she warns him away, the more intrigued by it he becomes. All of the neighbourhood children have been after them that spring, and it has taken extraordinary vigilance on her part to stop them plundering the nest.

Sabria knows she must ensure the birds' safety. Swallows are an omen of good fortune. They fly in from the south, returning to the same nest each spring, and lay their eggs. Man must not interfere with them – the scriptures are emphatic. The *sununu* are one of Allah's holy creatures, to be protected. She rises to her feet and is about to scold her son when she checks herself. Pausing to watch his agile frame arch upwards into the branches toward the wall, she wonders if he will stop short of the nest or reach for the eggs. With his bare feet gripping the trunk and one arm coiled round a branch, she watches his small hand reach expertly into the nest and feel for an egg. From overhead the mother bird darts about distractedly, sending out urgent alarm calls.

'Nabeel! Nabeel!' Sabria shouts, clapping her hands angrily. The sound bounces off the brown mud walls of the compound. 'Get down! You are in so much trouble, my son, that I don't know where to begin with you.'

Startled, Nabeel loses his footing and falls to the ground in a cloud of dust. Breathless though she is with the onset of labour, Sabria goes to the tree, grabs him by the ear and drags him into the house. 'How many times have I told you? *Sununu* are sacred, and stealing eggs is bad luck – for all of us. Don't you understand? I want good luck for my new baby.' She twists his ear hard. 'I know what you would have done with those eggs. Probably smashed them against the wall or rolled them along the road with your friends until they broke. You are a cruel, wicked little boy. Don't ever think of trying that again. I am your mother – I always know what you're doing. I have eyes in the back of my head.'

Nabeel runs crying back into the yard and hides in the crack between the compound wall and the house. Sabria picks up the dough patties, dusts them off as best she can and puts them into the oven. Then she wedges herself behind her sewing-machine and begins to stitch again. The baby will come soon and there is no one but Nabeel to help her.

Bibi, Sabria's mother, takes control. On returning home, she finds her daughter doubled up on the ground as the first contraction strikes. Under her instruction Makkya directs the elder boys, when they return from school, ordering them to get more wood and keep the fire going at all costs. 'Keep the kettle filled and the water boiling at all times. This is a most important task. Do you understand?' The boys nod solemnly.

Bibi brings the heavy copper kettle and pushes it at Jafar. She clicks her fingers at the free-standing iron tub and draws the pair to her. 'I will not have time to keep an eye on you. We will need water for the bath as well as the kettle. Do not let me down.'

Yasin returns from the market to find the compound buzzing with activity and his wife well into her labour. With everything under control, he settles into a chair in the shade of the verandah with Nabeel, and Makkya's children, Salah and Taha, at his feet, waiting for his orders. He is not unduly troubled by the unfolding drama: he has lived through it enough times to know it is best to keep out of Bibi's way until instructed to do otherwise. 'You three are to play outside until this is all over,' Bibi calls to the boys. 'There is nothing you can do now except to be no bother to anyone. Yasin, see to it.'

Yasin winks and gathers the children to him, promising sweet treats if they keep out of the house.

Bibi gathers into one hand the carefully laid-out bundles of leaves and clove, jasmine and juniper oils from her wooden cabinet. With the other, she picks up a kettle of freshly boiled water and a stack of muslin cloths, then she and the barefoot Makkya disappear into Sabria's room, closing the door behind them. An instant later the shutters are drawn across the window.

Although he is only four, instinct tells Nabeel he needs to keep his promise to Baba, his father. With his mother undergoing some unpleasant ordeal in her quarters, and the air of concern in the compound, he can't settle to anything. He has never seen Bibi, a little old lady, move with such agility and purpose.

And although Baba is sitting quietly, as he always does, he shifts a little as if something sharp is on the seat beneath him.

From his mother's room Nabeel hears her short, breathless cadences, snatched words and cries. He sneaks closer to the house but Baba calls him back to the tree. 'Mama is having a baby, Nabeel,' he says, putting his arm round Nabeel's shoulder and pulling him close. 'Bibi and Aunty Makkya are helping the baby come into the world.'

'How long will they be in there?'

'I cannot say. But when the baby is born we will bless him, just as we did Jafar, Juma'a and you.' And with Baba's simple explanation every question, worry and fear withers away. Baba has promised two things: that Mama will be with him again soon, with a new baby brother or sister to show him, and that he can eat as much fruit and bread as he wants. 'Just as soon as your brothers have baked it you can eat it.' This seems like the perfect arrangement. There is nothing better in the whole world than bread straight from the oven.

With his elder brothers engaged in their tasks, and Yasin's eyes fixed anxiously on his wife's door, Nabeel is free to roam about the mud house and the sandy courtyard unobserved. Bored by his cousins' stone-throwing game, he starts to climb, not the swallow tree but up on to the roof. No one has ever said the roof is out of bounds, have they? And even though his mother is still behind that closed door and cannot see him, she will know if he tries to climb the swallow tree again. The one-storey roof is easy enough to reach: the wall at the side of the house is uneven, with lots of little ledges for climbing. From the table inside he can slide out through the open window on to the ledge. From there, he has only to grab the overhanging grass fronds and swing his legs up.

Now he can see right across the courtyard, to Baba, his brothers and cousins, tall and spindly against the bare ground. No one notices him. Either that or they don't care that he is up there on his own. He lies down on the fronds that cover the roof and listens to the strange sounds that punctuate the calm of the late afternoon: his mother's occasional cries, the sound of water being drawn from the well and poured from bucket to copper kettle to bath. He wonders what the new baby might mean for him and Mama. She has been the only constant person in his life and he knows that everything is about to change. Mama had told him about the baby, how much fun his new brother or sister will be and how he must not be afraid. 'You'll have someone all to yourself.'

What did that mean? Maybe like Jafar has Juma'a. To have someone like that would be exciting, but he couldn't help wondering if it also meant that he would no longer have Mama to himself.

Lying there with the mid-afternoon sun on his back, the grass bristling against his bare legs, he hears Jafar and Juma'a shouting below. He watches them fight over the discs of bread as they pull them from the oven and drop them into the large round table-basket woven from dried palm fronds. The smell, which he loves above all others, reaches him but he doesn't want to go down, not just yet. Instead, he gathers a handful of pebbles from his pocket and drops them one by one over the edge of the roof, watching as they make little pits in the dust. Then he rolls over and stares straight up into the cloudless blue sky.

He is roused from his daydreams by Bibi's voice and rolls back to see her standing before Baba with her arms outstretched. She is smiling, wringing his hands in hers and kissing his cheeks. And Bibi never smiles. Nabeel can see

every one of her remaining teeth, small and quite white for someone so old. Baba is smiling too. Jafar calls to her and she nods. Juma'a holds up the kettle and tells her the water has boiled again. She pulls leaves from a hessian bag at her waist and pushes them into a small earthenware pot at her feet. Juma'a pours on water and Bibi swirls the brew. Although he doesn't fully understand what is happening, Nabeel knows that his mother's ordeal is over.

Bibi sets an ornamental glass on a brass tray and puts the earthenware pot next to it. As she walks back to the house, she starts singing and as the ancient song drifts up to him he feels lighter and more excited than he ever has before. He raises himself and lifts his arms skywards, expanding into the space about him. It feels as though everything is growing bigger, his eyes seeing further, with more clarity and detail than usual. He turns this way and that, scanning the horizon with his arms outstretched. All around him there are other houses like theirs – little circles with shaded verandahs round an open courtyard. In the distance he can see two barefoot women carrying huge pails along the road. Further away still he can see grass and scrub, and beyond that, in the far distance, the railway line where Baba goes to work, running off across fields and scrubland into the desert. Turning slowly, he sees orchards, meadows filled with fruit trees, everything from dates to apricots. On the other side is the river Tigris. He imagines it must be as big and furious as a sea. All around there are friends, and friends of friends, cousins and aunts, people who love him, doing so many things. It is a big world just going on and on. And he is part of it.

Birds scatter from one of the neighbourhood trees, sweep round them and settle again. He thinks of what Mama had said about the swallows, how they fly each winter to Africa

where it is warm, joining with all the other swallows fleeing the harsh winters in Europe. They fly out to the horizon and keep going. Then, one day in spring, they return, not just to the same country but to the same house and the same nest. How is that possible?

He has only to turn round again and gaze at the blue skies to feel his heart soar. Spring is becoming summer, and all around him it is as if the world has cracked open to reveal its secrets. He stretches further up, and tips his head back, crying out into the fresh, clear air, '*Ateer, ateer, leyteny*.' I want, I want to fly.