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HOSSEINI  
THE KITE  
RUNNER

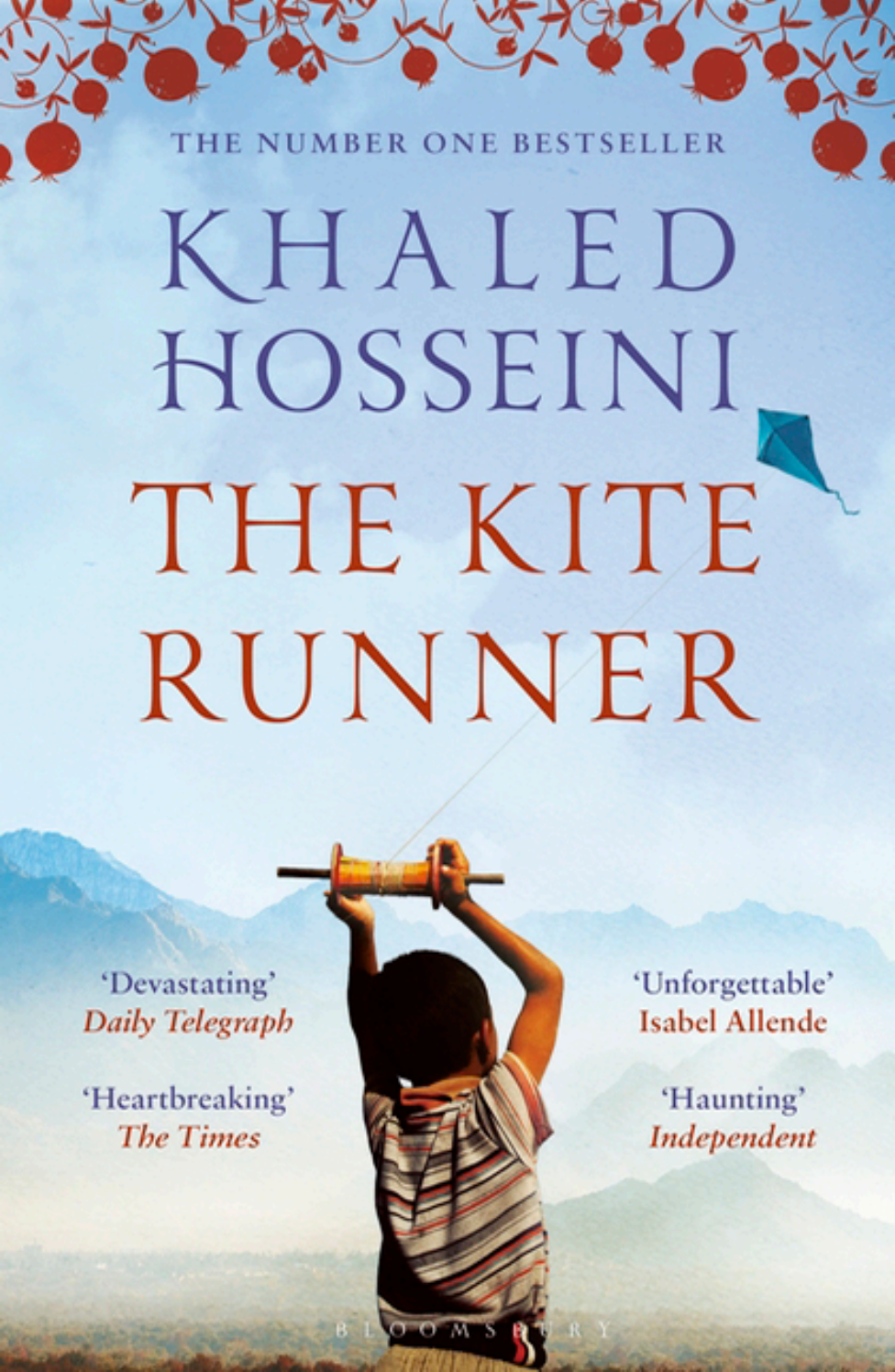


'Devastating'  
*Daily Telegraph*

'Heartbreaking'  
*The Times*

'Unforgettable'  
Isabel Allende

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## Praise for *The Kite Runner*

‘A rich and soul-searching narrative ... A sharp, unforgettable taste of the trauma and tumult experienced by Afghans as their country buckled’ *Observer*

‘Harrowing yet exhilarating ... The beautifully honed prose and the perfectly controlled narrative keep a tight rein on the horrors that unfold in this haunting, morally complex tale’ *Daily Telegraph*

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‘Shocking, tragic and inspirational, this wonderful novel details the vibrant culture of Afghanistan before the Taliban’ *Daily Mail*

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‘A devastating, masterful and painfully honest story of a life crippled by an act of childhood cowardice and cruelty ... It speaks the harrowing truth about the power of evil, personal and political, and intoxicates, like a high-flying kite, with the power of hope’ *Daily Telegraph*

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‘My top fiction book’ Joanna Trollope, *Observer*

‘The novel that made Afghanistan the talking-point of every book group’ *Guardian*, 50 Books that Defined the Decade

**KHALED HOSSEINI** is one of the most widely read and beloved authors. His novels *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed* have sold over 55 million copies all over the world. Hosseini is a Goodwill Ambassador for UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, and the founder of The Khaled Hosseini Foundation, a not-for-profit organisation which provides humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan. *Sea Prayer*, his fourth book, was published in 2018. Khaled Hosseini was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, and lives in northern California.

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Also by Khaled Hosseini

*A Thousand Splendid Suns*

*And the Mountains Echoed*

*Sea Prayer*

KHALED  
HOSSEINI  
THE KITE  
RUNNER

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This book is dedicated to Harris and Farah,  
both the *noor* of my eyes, and to the children of Afghanistan

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## *Foreword to the 10th Anniversary Edition*

When I began *The Kite Runner*, in March 2001, it was to tell myself a story that had taken root in my mind about two boys: one conflicted, on unsure emotional and moral ground; the other pure, loyal, rooted in goodness and integrity. I knew that the boys' friendship was doomed, and that their falling-out would impact their lives in a profound way. The why and how were the reason, the compulsion, that carried me through. I knew I had to write *The Kite Runner*, but I thought I was writing it for myself.

You can imagine my astonishment, then, at the reception this book has received worldwide since its publication. It amazes me to get letters from India, South Africa, Tel Aviv, Sydney, London, Arkansas; from readers who express their passion to me. Many want to send money to Afghanistan; some even want to adopt an Afghan orphan. In these letters, I see the unique ability fiction has to connect people, and I see how universal some human experiences are: shame, guilt, regret, friendship, love, forgiveness, atonement.

My childhood and Amir's mirrored each other in many ways, so I've long known how life can inform and shape fiction, but in the time since completing *The Kite Runner*, I've become even more aware, perhaps, of how fiction can affect life – in its readers, and even in its author. In March of 2003, with the novel proofread and in production, I returned to Kabul for the first time in twenty-seven years. Although the first two-thirds of *The Kite Runner* were informed by my own family's experiences, first in Afghanistan, then in California, I had written this Afghan homecoming trip for my protagonist before ever actually taking it myself. I had left Afghanistan an eleven-year-old, thin-framed seventh grader; I was going back as a thirty-eight-year-old physician, writer, husband, and father of two.



Given this unusual context, my two-week stay in Kabul took on a decidedly surreal quality because every day, I saw places and things I had already seen with my mind's eye, with Amir's eyes. A few lines from *The Kite Runner* came to me, as Amir's thoughts suddenly became my own: *The kinship I felt suddenly for the old land . . . it surprised me . . . I thought I had forgotten about this land. But I hadn't. . . . Maybe Afghanistan hadn't forgotten me either.* The old adage in writing is you write about what you've experienced. I was going to experience what I had already written about.

Soon, the line between Amir's memories and my own began to blur. Amir had lived out my memories on the pages of *The Kite Runner*, and now I strangely found myself living out his. But perhaps nowhere did fiction and life collide more dizzily than when I found my father's old house in Wazir Akbar Khan, the house where I grew up, just as Amir rediscovered his.

Baba's old house in that same neighborhood. It took me three days of searching – I had no address and the neighborhood had changed drastically – but I kept looking until I spotted the familiar arch over the gates.

I got to walk through my old house – the Panjshiri soldiers who lived there were gracious enough to grant me this nostalgic tour. I found that, like Amir's childhood house, the paint had faded, the grass had withered, the trees were gone, and the walls were crumbling. I too was struck by how much smaller the house was in reality than the version that had for so long lived in my memories. And – I swear to this – when I stepped through the front gates, I saw a Rorschach blot-shaped oil stain on the driveway, just as Amir had on his father's driveway. As I said my goodbyes and thanks to the soldiers, I realized something else: The emotional impact of finding my father's house would have been even more intense if I hadn't written *The Kite Runner*. After all, I had already been through this. I had stood beside Amir at the

gates of *his* father's house and felt *his* loss. I'd watched him set his hands on the rusty wrought-iron bars, and together we'd gazed at the sagging roof and crumbling front steps. Having written that scene took some of the edge off my own experience. Call it Art stealing Life's thunder.

Ten years have passed since the publication of *The Kite Runner*. I still love this book. I love it the way you would love your troublesome, awkward, unruly, ungainly, but ultimately decent and bighearted child. And I am still astonished by the world's reception in the ten years since its publication. As a writer, I am thrilled when readers respond to the story, to the twists and turns in the plot, to the characters, the troubled, guilt-ridden Amir, the pure and mortally doomed Hassan. As an Afghan, I am honoured when readers tell me that this book has helped make Afghanistan a real place for them. That it isn't just the caves of Tora Bora and poppy fields and Bin Laden for them anymore. It's quite an honor when readers tell me that this novel helped put a personal face on Afghanistan for them, and that they now see my homeland as more than just another unhappy, chronically troubled, afflicted land. I hope the same is true for you.

Thank you, as ever, for your support and encouragement.

KHALED HOSSEINI



# ONE

*December 2001*

I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975. I remember the precise moment, crouching behind a crumbling mud wall, peeking into the alley near the frozen creek. That was a long time ago, but it's wrong what they say about the past, I've learned, about how you can bury it. Because the past claws its way out. Looking back now, I realize I have been peeking into that deserted alley for the last twenty-six years.

One day last summer, my friend Rahim Khan called from Pakistan. He asked me to come see him. Standing in the kitchen with the receiver to my ear, I knew it wasn't just Rahim Khan on the line. It was my past of unatoned sins. After I hung up, I went for a walk along Spreckels Lake on the northern edge of Golden Gate Park. The early-afternoon sun sparkled on the water where dozens of miniature boats sailed, propelled by a crisp breeze. Then I glanced up and saw a pair of kites, red with long blue tails, soaring in the sky. They danced high above the trees on the west end of the park,

over the windmills, floating side by side like a pair of eyes looking down on San Francisco, the city I now call home. And suddenly Hassan's voice whispered in my head: *For you, a thousand times over.* Hassan the harelippped kite runner.

I sat on a park bench near a willow tree. I thought about something Rahim Khan said just before he hung up, almost as an afterthought. *There is a way to be good again.* I looked up at those twin kites. I thought about Hassan. Thought about Baba. Ali. Kabul. I thought of the life I had lived until the winter of 1975 came along and changed everything. And made me what I am today.

## T W O

When we were children, Hassan and I used to climb the poplar trees in the driveway of my father's house and annoy our neighbors by reflecting sunlight into their homes with a shard of mirror. We would sit across from each other on a pair of high branches, our naked feet dangling, our trouser pockets filled with dried mulberries and walnuts. We took turns with the mirror as we ate mulberries, pelted each other with them, giggling, laughing. I can still see Hassan up on that tree, sunlight flickering through the leaves on his almost perfectly round face, a face like a Chinese doll chiseled from hardwood: his flat, broad nose and slanting, narrow eyes like bamboo leaves, eyes that looked, depending on the light, gold, green, even sapphire. I can still see his tiny low-set ears and that pointed stub of a chin, a meaty appendage that looked like it was added as a mere afterthought. And the cleft lip, just left of midline, where the Chinese doll maker's instrument may have slipped, or perhaps he had simply grown tired and careless.

Sometimes, up in those trees, I talked Hassan into firing walnuts with his slingshot at the neighbor's one-eyed German shepherd. Hassan never wanted to, but if I asked, *really* asked, he wouldn't deny me. Hassan never denied me anything. And he was deadly with his slingshot. Hassan's father, Ali, used to catch us and get mad, or as mad as someone as gentle as Ali could ever get. He would wag his finger and wave us down from the tree. He would take the mirror and tell us what his mother had told him, that the devil shone mirrors too, shone them to distract Muslims during prayer. "And he laughs while he does it," he always added, scowling at his son.

"Yes, Father," Hassan would mumble, looking down at his feet. But he never told on me. Never told that the mirror, like shooting walnuts at the neighbor's dog, was always my idea.

The poplar trees lined the redbrick driveway, which led to a pair of wrought-iron gates. They in turn opened into an extension of the driveway into my father's estate. The house sat on the left side of the brick path, the backyard at the end of it.

Everyone agreed that my father, my Baba, had built the most beautiful house in the Wazir Akbar Khan district, a new and affluent neighborhood in the northern part of Kabul. Some thought it was the prettiest house in all of Kabul. A broad entryway flanked by rosebushes led to the sprawling house of marble floors and wide windows. Intricate mosaic tiles, handpicked by Baba in Isfahan, covered the floors of the four bathrooms. Gold-stitched tapestries, which Baba had bought in Calcutta, lined the walls; a crystal chandelier hung from the vaulted ceiling.

Upstairs was my bedroom, Baba's room, and his study, also known as "the smoking room," which perpetually smelled of tobacco and cinnamon. Baba and his friends reclined on black leather chairs there after Ali had served dinner. They stuffed their pipes—except Baba always called it "fattening the pipe"—and discussed their favorite three topics: politics, business, soccer. Sometimes I asked Baba if I could sit with

them, but Baba would stand in the doorway. “Go on, now,” he’d say. “This is grown-ups’ time. Why don’t you go read one of those books of yours?” He’d close the door, leave me to wonder why it was *always* grown-ups’ time with him. I’d sit by the door, knees drawn to my chest. Sometimes I sat there for an hour, sometimes two, listening to their laughter, their chatter.

The living room downstairs had a curved wall with custom-built cabinets. Inside sat framed family pictures: an old, grainy photo of my grandfather and King Nadir Shah taken in 1931, two years before the king’s assassination; they are standing over a dead deer, dressed in knee-high boots, rifles slung over their shoulders. There was a picture of my parents’ wedding night, Baba dashing in his black suit and my mother a smiling young princess in white. Here was Baba and his best friend and business partner, Rahim Khan, standing outside our house, neither one smiling—I am a baby in that photograph and Baba is holding me, looking tired and grim. I’m in his arms, but it’s Rahim Khan’s pinky my fingers are curled around.

The curved wall led into the dining room, at the center of which was a mahogany table that could easily sit thirty guests—and, given my father’s taste for extravagant parties, it did just that almost every week. On the other end of the dining room was a tall marble fireplace, always lit by the orange glow of a fire in the wintertime.

A large sliding glass door opened into a semicircular terrace that overlooked two acres of backyard and rows of cherry trees. Baba and Ali had planted a small vegetable garden along the eastern wall: tomatoes, mint, peppers, and a row of corn that never really took. Hassan and I used to call it “the Wall of Ailing Corn.”

On the south end of the garden, in the shadows of a loquat tree, was the servants’ home, a modest little mud hut where Hassan lived with his father.

It was there, in that little shack, that Hassan was born in



the winter of 1964, just one year after my mother died giving birth to me.

In the eighteen years that I lived in that house, I stepped into Hassan and Ali's quarters only a handful of times. When the sun dropped low behind the hills and we were done playing for the day, Hassan and I parted ways. I went past the rosebushes to Baba's mansion, Hassan to the mud shack where he had been born, where he'd lived his entire life. I remember it was spare, clean, dimly lit by a pair of kerosene lamps. There were two mattresses on opposite sides of the room, a worn Herati rug with frayed edges in between, a three-legged stool, and a wooden table in the corner where Hassan did his drawings. The walls stood bare, save for a single tapestry with sewn-in beads forming the words *Allah-ukbar*. Baba had bought it for Ali on one of his trips to Mashad.

It was in that small shack that Hassan's mother, Sanaubar, gave birth to him one cold winter day in 1964. While my mother hemorrhaged to death during childbirth, Hassan lost his less than a week after he was born. Lost her to a fate most Afghans considered far worse than death: She ran off with a clan of traveling singers and dancers.

Hassan never talked about his mother, as if she'd never existed. I always wondered if he dreamed about her, about what she looked like, where she was. I wondered if he longed to meet her. Did he ache for her, the way I ached for the mother I had never met? One day, we were walking from my father's house to Cinema Zainab for a new Iranian movie, taking the shortcut through the military barracks near Istiqlal Middle School—Baba had forbidden us to take that shortcut, but he was in Pakistan with Rahim Khan at the time. We hopped the fence that surrounded the barracks, skipped over a little creek, and broke into the open dirt field where old, abandoned tanks collected dust. A group of soldiers huddled in the shade of one of those tanks, smoking cigarettes and playing cards. One of them saw us, elbowed the guy next to

him, and called Hassan.

“Hey, you!” he said. “I know you.”

We had never seen him before. He was a squatty man with a shaved head and black stubble on his face. The way he grinned at us, leered, scared me. “Just keep walking,” I muttered to Hassan.

“You! The Hazara! Look at me when I’m talking to you!” the soldier barked. He handed his cigarette to the guy next to him, made a circle with the thumb and index finger of one hand. Poked the middle finger of his other hand through the circle. Poked it in and out. In and out. “I knew your mother, did you know that? I knew her real good. I took her from behind by that creek over there.”

The soldiers laughed. One of them made a squealing sound. I told Hassan to keep walking, keep walking.

“What a tight little sugary cunt she had!” the soldier was saying, shaking hands with the others, grinning. Later, in the dark, after the movie had started, I heard Hassan next to me, croaking. Tears were sliding down his cheeks. I reached across my seat, slung my arm around him, pulled him close. He rested his head on my shoulder. “He took you for someone else,” I whispered. “He took you for someone else.”

I’m told no one was really surprised when Sanaubar eloped. People *had* raised their eyebrows when Ali, a man who had memorized the Koran, married Sanaubar, a woman nineteen years younger, a beautiful but notoriously unscrupulous woman who lived up to her dishonorable reputation. Like Ali, she was a Shi’a Muslim and an ethnic Hazara. She was also his first cousin and therefore a natural choice for a spouse. But beyond those similarities, Ali and Sanaubar had little in common, least of all their respective appearances. While Sanaubar’s brilliant green eyes and impish face had, rumor has it, tempted countless men into sin, Ali had a congenital paralysis of his lower facial muscles, a condition that rendered him unable to smile and left him perpetually grim-faced. It was an odd thing to see the stone-faced Ali happy, or

sad, because only his slanted brown eyes glinted with a smile or welled with sorrow. People say that eyes are windows to the soul. Never was that more true than with Ali, who could only reveal himself through his eyes.

I have heard that Sanaubar's suggestive stride and oscillating hips sent men to reveries of infidelity. But polio had left Ali with a twisted, atrophied right leg that was sallow skin over bone with little in between except a paper-thin layer of muscle. I remember one day, when I was eight, Ali was taking me to the bazaar to buy some *naan*. I was walking behind him, humming, trying to imitate his walk. I watched him swing his scraggy leg in a sweeping arc, watched his whole body tilt impossibly to the right every time he planted that foot. It seemed a minor miracle he didn't tip over with each step. When I tried it, I almost fell into the gutter. That got me giggling. Ali turned around, caught me aping him. He didn't say anything. Not then, not ever. He just kept walking.

Ali's face and his walk frightened some of the younger children in the neighborhood. But the real trouble was with the older kids. They chased him on the street, and mocked him when he hobbled by. Some had taken to calling him *Babalu*, or Boogeyman. "Hey, Babalu, who did you eat today?" they barked to a chorus of laughter. "Who did you eat, you flat-nosed Babalu?"

They called him "flat-nosed" because of Ali and Hassan's characteristic Hazara Mongoloid features. For years, that was all I knew about the Hazaras, that they were Mogul descendants, and that they looked a little like Chinese people. School textbooks barely mentioned them and referred to their ancestry only in passing. Then one day, I was in Baba's study, looking through his stuff, when I found one of my mother's old history books. It was written by an Iranian named Khorami. I blew the dust off it, sneaked it into bed with me that night, and was stunned to find an entire chapter on Hazara history. An entire chapter dedicated to Hassan's people! In it, I read that my people, the Pashtuns, had

persecuted and oppressed the Hazaras. It said the Hazaras had tried to rise against the Pashtuns in the nineteenth century, but the Pashtuns had “quelled them with unspeakable violence.” The book said that my people had killed the Hazaras, driven them from their lands, burned their homes, and sold their women. The book said part of the reason Pashtuns had oppressed the Hazaras was that Pashtuns were Sunni Muslims, while Hazaras were Shi’a. The book said a lot of things I didn’t know, things my teachers hadn’t mentioned. Things Baba hadn’t mentioned either. It also said some things I *did* know, like that people called Hazaras *mice-eating*, *flat-nosed*, *load-carrying donkeys*. I had heard some of the kids in the neighborhood yell those names to Hassan.

The following week, after class, I showed the book to my teacher and pointed to the chapter on the Hazaras. He skimmed through a couple of pages, snickered, handed the book back. “That’s the one thing Shi’a people do well,” he said, picking up his papers, “passing themselves as martyrs.” He wrinkled his nose when he said the word Shi’a, like it was some kind of disease.

But despite sharing ethnic heritage and family blood, Sanaubar joined the neighborhood kids in taunting Ali. I have heard that she made no secret of her disdain for his appearance.

“This is a husband?” she would sneer. “I have seen old donkeys better suited to be a husband.”

In the end, most people suspected the marriage had been an arrangement of sorts between Ali and his uncle, Sanaubar’s father. They said Ali had married his cousin to help restore some honor to his uncle’s blemished name, even though Ali, who had been orphaned at the age of five, had no worldly possessions or inheritance to speak of.

Ali never retaliated against any of his tormentors, I suppose partly because he could never catch them with that twisted leg dragging behind him. But mostly because Ali was immune to the insults of his assailants; he had found his joy,

his antidote, the moment Sanaubar had given birth to Hassan. It had been a simple enough affair. No obstetricians, no anesthesiologists, no fancy monitoring devices. Just Sanaubar lying on a stained, naked mattress with Ali and a midwife helping her. She hadn't needed much help at all, because, even in birth, Hassan was true to his nature: He was incapable of hurting anyone. A few grunts, a couple of pushes, and out came Hassan. Out he came smiling.

As confided to a neighbor's servant by the garrulous midwife, who had then in turn told anyone who would listen, Sanaubar had taken one glance at the baby in Ali's arms, seen the cleft lip, and barked a bitter laughter.

"There," she had said. "Now you have your own idiot child to do all your smiling for you!" She had refused to even hold Hassan, and just five days later, she was gone.

Baba hired the same nursing woman who had fed me to nurse Hassan. Ali told us she was a blue-eyed Hazara woman from Bamiyan, the city of the giant Buddha statues. "What a sweet singing voice she had," he used to say to us.

What did she sing, Hassan and I always asked, though we already knew—Ali had told us countless times. We just wanted to hear Ali sing.

He'd clear his throat and begin:

*On a high mountain I stood,  
And cried the name of Ali, Lion of God.  
O Ali, Lion of God, King of Men,  
Bring joy to our sorrowful hearts.*

Then he would remind us that there was a brotherhood between people who had fed from the same breast, a kinship that not even time could break.

Hassan and I fed from the same breasts. We took our first steps on the same lawn in the same yard. And, under the same roof, we spoke our first words.

Mine was *Baba*.

His was *Amir*. My name.

Looking back on it now, I think the foundation for what happened in the winter of 1975—and all that followed—was already laid in those first words.

## T H R E E

Lore has it my father once wrestled a black bear in Baluchistan with his bare hands. If the story had been about anyone else, it would have been dismissed as *laaf*, that Afghan tendency to exaggerate—sadly, almost a national affliction; if someone bragged that his son was a doctor, chances were the kid had once passed a biology test in high school. But no one ever doubted the veracity of any story about Baba. And if they did, well, Baba did have those three parallel scars coursing a jagged path down his back. I have imagined Baba's wrestling match countless times, even dreamed about it. And in those dreams, I can never tell Baba from the bear.

It was Rahim Khan who first referred to him as what eventually became Baba's famous nickname, *Toophan agha*, or "Mr. Hurricane." It was an apt enough nickname. My father was a force of nature, a towering Pashtun specimen with a thick beard, a wayward crop of curly brown hair as unruly as the man himself, hands that looked capable of uprooting a willow tree, and a black glare that would "drop the devil to his

knees begging for mercy,” as Rahim Khan used to say. At parties, when all six-foot-five of him thundered into the room, attention shifted to him like sunflowers turning to the sun.

Baba was impossible to ignore, even in his sleep. I used to bury cotton wisps in my ears, pull the blanket over my head, and still the sounds of Baba’s snoring—so much like a growling truck engine—penetrated the walls. And my room was across the hall from Baba’s bedroom. How my mother ever managed to sleep in the same room as him is a mystery to me. It’s on the long list of things I would have asked my mother if I had ever met her.

In the late 1960s, when I was five or six, Baba decided to build an orphanage. I heard the story through Rahim Khan. He told me Baba had drawn the blueprints himself despite the fact that he’d had no architectural experience at all. Skeptics had urged him to stop his foolishness and hire an architect. Of course, Baba refused, and everyone shook their heads in dismay at his obstinate ways. Then Baba succeeded and everyone shook their heads in awe at his triumphant ways. Baba paid for the construction of the two-story orphanage, just off the main strip of Jadeh Maywand south of the Kabul River, with his own money. Rahim Khan told me Baba had personally funded the entire project, paying for the engineers, electricians, plumbers, and laborers, not to mention the city officials whose “mustaches needed oiling.”

It took three years to build the orphanage. I was eight by then. I remember the day before the orphanage opened, Baba took me to Ghargha Lake, a few miles north of Kabul. He asked me to fetch Hassan too, but I lied and told him Hassan had the runs. I wanted Baba all to myself. And besides, one time at Ghargha Lake, Hassan and I were skipping stones and Hassan made his stone skip eight times. The most I managed was five. Baba was there, watching, and he patted Hassan on the back. Even put his arm around his shoulder.

We sat at a picnic table on the banks of the lake, just Baba and me, eating boiled eggs with *kofta* sandwiches—meatballs



and pickles wrapped in *naan*. The water was a deep blue and sunlight glittered on its looking glass—clear surface. On Fridays, the lake was bustling with families out for a day in the sun. But it was midweek and there was only Baba and me, us and a couple of longhaired, bearded tourists—“hippies,” I’d heard them called. They were sitting on the dock, feet dangling in the water, fishing poles in hand. I asked Baba why they grew their hair long, but Baba grunted, didn’t answer. He was preparing his speech for the next day, flipping through a havoc of handwritten pages, making notes here and there with a pencil. I bit into my egg and asked Baba if it was true what a boy in school had told me, that if you ate a piece of eggshell, you’d have to pee it out. Baba grunted again.

I took a bite of my sandwich. One of the yellow-haired tourists laughed and slapped the other one on the back. In the distance, across the lake, a truck lumbered around a corner on the hill. Sunlight twinkled in its side-view mirror.

“I think I have *saratan*,” I said. Cancer. Baba lifted his head from the pages flapping in the breeze. Told me I could get the soda myself, all I had to do was look in the trunk of the car.

Outside the orphanage, the next day, they ran out of chairs. A lot of people had to stand to watch the opening ceremony. It was a windy day, and I sat behind Baba on the little podium just outside the main entrance of the new building. Baba was wearing a green suit and a caracul hat. Midway through the speech, the wind knocked his hat off and everyone laughed. He motioned to me to hold his hat for him and I was glad to, because then everyone would see that he was *my* father, *my* Baba. He turned back to the microphone and said he hoped the building was sturdier than his hat, and everyone laughed again. When Baba ended his speech, people stood up and cheered. They clapped for a long time. Afterward, people shook his hand. Some of them tousled my hair and shook my hand too. I was so proud of Baba, of us.

But despite Baba’s successes, people were always doubt-

ing him. They told Baba that running a business wasn't in his blood and he should study law like his father. So Baba proved them all wrong by not only running his own business but becoming one of the richest merchants in Kabul. Baba and Rahim Khan built a wildly successful carpet-exporting business, two pharmacies, and a restaurant.

When people scoffed that Baba would never marry well—after all, he was not of royal blood—he wedded my mother, Sofia Akrami, a highly educated woman universally regarded as one of Kabul's most respected, beautiful, and virtuous ladies. And not only did she teach classic Farsi literature at the university, she was a descendant of the royal family, a fact that my father playfully rubbed in the skeptics' faces by referring to her as “my princess.”

With me as the glaring exception, my father molded the world around him to his liking. The problem, of course, was that Baba saw the world in black and white. And he got to decide what was black and what was white. You can't love a person who lives that way without fearing him too. Maybe even hating him a little.

When I was in fifth grade, we had a mullah who taught us about Islam. His name was Mullah Fatiullah Khan, a short, stubby man with a face full of acne scars and a gruff voice. He lectured us about the virtues of *zakat* and the duty of *hadj*; he taught us the intricacies of performing the five daily *namaz* prayers, and made us memorize verses from the Koran—and though he never translated the words for us, he did stress, sometimes with the help of a stripped willow branch, that we had to pronounce the Arabic words correctly so God would hear us better. He told us one day that Islam considered drinking a terrible sin; those who drank would answer for their sin on the day of *Qiyamat*, Judgment Day. In those days, drinking was fairly common in Kabul. No one gave you a public lashing for it, but those Afghans who did drink did so in private, out of respect. People bought their scotch as “medicine” in brown paper bags from selected “pharmacies.” They would leave with

the bag tucked out of sight, sometimes drawing furtive, disapproving glances from those who knew about the store's reputation for such transactions.

We were upstairs in Baba's study, the smoking room, when I told him what Mullah Fatiullah Khan had taught us in class. Baba was pouring himself a whiskey from the bar he had built in the corner of the room. He listened, nodded, took a sip from his drink. Then he lowered himself into the leather sofa, put down his drink, and propped me up on his lap. I felt as if I were sitting on a pair of tree trunks. He took a deep breath and exhaled through his nose, the air hissing through his mustache for what seemed an eternity. I couldn't decide whether I wanted to hug him or leap from his lap in mortal fear.

"I see you've confused what you're learning in school with actual education," he said in his thick voice.

"But if what he said is true then does it make you a sinner, Baba?"

"Hmm." Baba crushed an ice cube between his teeth. "Do you want to know what your father thinks about sin?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll tell you," Baba said, "but first understand this and understand it now, Amir: You'll never learn anything of value from those bearded idiots."

"You mean Mullah Fatiullah Khan?"

Baba gestured with his glass. The ice clinked. "I mean all of them. Piss on the beards of all those self-righteous monkeys."

I began to giggle. The image of Baba pissing on the beard of any monkey, self-righteous or otherwise, was too much.

"They do nothing but thumb their prayer beads and recite a book written in a tongue they don't even understand." He took a sip. "God help us all if Afghanistan ever falls into their hands."

"But Mullah Fatiullah Khan seems nice," I managed between bursts of tittering.

“So did Genghis Khan,” Baba said. “But enough about that. You asked about sin and I want to tell you. Are you listening?”

“Yes,” I said, pressing my lips together. But a chortle escaped through my nose and made a snorting sound. That got me giggling again.

Baba’s stony eyes bore into mine and, just like that, I wasn’t laughing anymore. “I mean to speak to you man to man. Do you think you can handle that for once?”

“Yes, Baba jan,” I muttered, marveling, not for the first time, at how badly Baba could sting me with so few words. We’d had a fleeting good moment—it wasn’t often Baba talked to me, let alone on his lap—and I’d been a fool to waste it.

“Good,” Baba said, but his eyes wondered. “Now, no matter what the mullah teaches, there is only one sin, only one. And that is theft. Every other sin is a variation of theft. Do you understand that?”

“No, Baba jan,” I said, desperately wishing I did. I didn’t want to disappoint him again.

Baba heaved a sigh of impatience. That stung too, because he was not an impatient man. I remembered all the times he didn’t come home until after dark, all the times I ate dinner alone. I’d ask Ali where Baba was, when he was coming home, though I knew full well he was at the construction site, overlooking this, supervising that. Didn’t that take patience? I already hated all the kids he was building the orphanage for; sometimes I wished they’d all died along with their parents.

“When you kill a man, you steal a life,” Baba said. “You steal his wife’s right to a husband, rob his children of a father. When you tell a lie, you steal someone’s right to the truth. When you cheat, you steal the right to fairness. Do you see?”

I did. When Baba was six, a thief walked into my grandfather’s house in the middle of the night. My grandfather, a respected judge, confronted him, but the thief stabbed him in

the throat, killing him instantly—and robbing Baba of a father. The townspeople caught the killer just before noon the next day; he turned out to be a wanderer from the Kunduz region. They hanged him from the branch of an oak tree with still two hours to go before afternoon prayer. It was Rahim Khan, not Baba, who had told me that story. I was always learning things about Baba from other people.

“There is no act more wretched than stealing, Amir,” Baba said. “A man who takes what’s not his to take, be it a life or a loaf of *naan* . . . I spit on such a man. And if I ever cross paths with him, God help him. Do you understand?”

I found the idea of Baba clobbering a thief both exhilarating and terribly frightening. “Yes, Baba.”

“If there’s a God out there, then I would hope he has more important things to attend to than my drinking scotch or eating pork. Now, hop down. All this talk about sin has made me thirsty again.”

I watched him fill his glass at the bar and wondered how much time would pass before we talked again the way we just had. Because the truth of it was, I always felt like Baba hated me a little. And why not? After all, I *had* killed his beloved wife, his beautiful princess, hadn’t I? The least I could have done was to have had the decency to have turned out a little more like him. But I hadn’t turned out like him. Not at all.

IN SCHOOL, we used to play a game called *Sherjangi*, or “Battle of the Poems.” The Farsi teacher moderated it and it went something like this: You recited a verse from a poem and your opponent had sixty seconds to reply with a verse that began with the same letter that ended yours. Everyone in my class wanted me on their team, because by the time I was eleven, I could recite dozens of verses from Khayyám, Hāfez, or Rumi’s famous *Masnawi*. One time, I took on the whole class and won. I told Baba about it later that night, but he just nodded, muttered, “Good.”

That was how I escaped my father's aloofness, in my dead mother's books. That and Hassan, of course. I read everything, Rumi, Hāfēz, Saadi, Victor Hugo, Jules Verne, Mark Twain, Ian Fleming. When I had finished my mother's books—not the boring history ones, I was never much into those, but the novels, the epics—I started spending my allowance on books. I bought one a week from the bookstore near Cinema Park, and stored them in cardboard boxes when I ran out of shelf room.

Of course, marrying a poet was one thing, but fathering a son who preferred burying his face in poetry books to hunting . . . well, that wasn't how Baba had envisioned it, I suppose. Real men didn't read poetry—and God forbid they should ever write it! Real men—real boys—played soccer just as Baba had when he had been young. Now *that* was something to be passionate about. In 1970, Baba took a break from the construction of the orphanage and flew to Tehran for a month to watch the World Cup games on television, since at the time Afghanistan didn't have TVs yet. He signed me up for soccer teams to stir the same passion in me. But I was pathetic, a blundering liability to my own team, always in the way of an opportune pass or unwittingly blocking an open lane. I shambled about the field on scraggy legs, squalled for passes that never came my way. And the harder I tried, waving my arms over my head frantically and screeching, "I'm open! I'm open!" the more I went ignored. But Baba wouldn't give up. When it became abundantly clear that I hadn't inherited a shred of his athletic talents, he settled for trying to turn me into a passionate spectator. Certainly I could manage that, couldn't I? I faked interest for as long as possible. I cheered with him when Kabul's team scored against Kandahar and yelped insults at the referee when he called a penalty against our team. But Baba sensed my lack of genuine interest and resigned himself to the bleak fact that his son was never going to either play or watch soccer.

I remember one time Baba took me to the yearly *Buzkashi*

tournament that took place on the first day of spring, New Year's Day. Buzkashi was, and still is, Afghanistan's national passion. A *chapandaz*, a highly skilled horseman usually patronized by rich aficionados, has to snatch a goat or cattle carcass from the midst of a melee, carry that carcass with him around the stadium at full gallop, and drop it in a scoring circle while a team of other *chapandaz* chases him and does everything in its power—kick, claw, whip, punch—to snatch the carcass from him. That day, the crowd roared with excitement as the horsemen on the field bellowed their battle cries and jostled for the carcass in a cloud of dust. The earth trembled with the clatter of hooves. We watched from the upper bleachers as riders pounded past us at full gallop, yipping and yelling, foam flying from their horses' mouths.

At one point Baba pointed to someone. "Amir, do you see that man sitting up there with those other men around him?"

I did.

"That's Henry Kissinger."

"Oh," I said. I didn't know who Henry Kissinger was, and I might have asked. But at the moment, I watched with horror as one of the *chapandaz* fell off his saddle and was trampled under a score of hooves. His body was tossed and hurled in the stampede like a rag doll, finally rolling to a stop when the melee moved on. He twitched once and lay motionless, his legs bent at unnatural angles, a pool of his blood soaking through the sand.

I began to cry.

I cried all the way back home. I remember how Baba's hands clenched around the steering wheel. Clenched and unclenched. Mostly, I will never forget Baba's valiant efforts to conceal the disgusted look on his face as he drove in silence.

Later that night, I was passing by my father's study when I overheard him speaking to Rahim Khan. I pressed my ear to the closed door.

"—grateful that he's healthy," Rahim Khan was saying.

"I know, I know. But he's always buried in those books or shuffling around the house like he's lost in some dream."

"And?"

"I wasn't like that." Baba sounded frustrated, almost angry.

Rahim Khan laughed. "Children aren't coloring books. You don't get to fill them with your favorite colors."

"I'm telling you," Baba said, "I wasn't like that at all, and neither were any of the kids I grew up with."

"You know, sometimes you are the most self-centered man I know," Rahim Khan said. He was the only person I knew who could get away with saying something like that to Baba.

"It has nothing to do with that."

"Nay?"

"Nay."

"Then what?"

I heard the leather of Baba's seat creaking as he shifted on it. I closed my eyes, pressed my ear even harder against the door, wanting to hear, not wanting to hear. "Sometimes I look out this window and I see him playing on the street with the neighborhood boys. I see how they push him around, take his toys from him, give him a shove here, a whack there. And, you know, he never fights back. Never. He just . . . drops his head and . . ."

"So he's not violent," Rahim Khan said.

"That's not what I mean, Rahim, and you know it," Baba shot back. "There is something missing in that boy."

"Yes, a mean streak."

"Self-defense has nothing to do with meanness. You know what always happens when the neighborhood boys tease him? Hassan steps in and fends them off. I've seen it with my own eyes. And when they come home, I say to him, 'How did Hassan get that scrape on his face?' And he says, 'He fell down.' I'm telling you, Rahim, there is something missing in that boy."

"You just need to let him find his way," Rahim Khan said.



“And where is he headed?” Baba said. “A boy who won’t stand up for himself becomes a man who can’t stand up to anything.”

“As usual you’re oversimplifying.”

“I don’t think so.”

“You’re angry because you’re afraid he’ll never take over the business for you.”

“Now who’s oversimplifying?” Baba said. “Look, I know there’s a fondness between you and him and I’m happy about that. Envious, but happy. I mean that. He needs someone who . . . understands him, because God knows I don’t. But something about Amir troubles me in a way that I can’t express. It’s like . . .” I could see him searching, reaching for the right words. He lowered his voice, but I heard him anyway. “If I hadn’t seen the doctor pull him out of my wife with my own eyes, I’d never believe he’s my son.”

THE NEXT MORNING, as he was preparing my breakfast, Hassan asked if something was bothering me. I snapped at him, told him to mind his own business.

Rahim Khan had been wrong about the mean streak thing.

## FOUR

In 1933, the year Baba was born and the year Zahir Shah began his forty-year reign of Afghanistan, two brothers, young men from a wealthy and reputable family in Kabul, got behind the wheel of their father's Ford roadster. High on hashish and *mast* on French wine, they struck and killed a Hazara husband and wife on the road to Paghman. The police brought the somewhat contrite young men and the dead couple's five-year-old orphan boy before my grandfather, who was a highly regarded judge and a man of impeccable reputation. After hearing the brothers' account and their father's plea for mercy, my grandfather ordered the two young men to go to Kandahar at once and enlist in the army for one year—this despite the fact that their family had somehow managed to obtain them exemptions from the draft. Their father argued, but not too vehemently, and in the end, everyone agreed that the punishment had been perhaps harsh but fair. As for the orphan, my grandfather adopted him into his own household, and told the other servants to tutor him, but to be kind

to him. That boy was Ali.

Ali and Baba grew up together as childhood playmates—at least until polio crippled Ali's leg—just like Hassan and I grew up a generation later. Baba was always telling us about the mischief he and Ali used to cause, and Ali would shake his head and say, “But, Agha sahib, tell them who was the architect of the mischief and who the poor laborer?” Baba would laugh and throw his arm around Ali.

But in none of his stories did Baba ever refer to Ali as his friend.

The curious thing was, I never thought of Hassan and me as friends either. Not in the usual sense, anyhow. Never mind that we taught each other to ride a bicycle with no hands, or to build a fully functional homemade camera out of a cardboard box. Never mind that we spent entire winters flying kites, running kites. Never mind that to me, the face of Afghanistan is that of a boy with a thin-boned frame, a shaved head, and low-set ears, a boy with a Chinese doll face perpetually lit by a hareipped smile.

Never mind any of those things. Because history isn't easy to overcome. Neither is religion. In the end, I was a Pashtun and he was a Hazara, I was Sunni and he was Shi'a, and nothing was ever going to change that. Nothing.

But we were kids who had learned to crawl together, and no history, ethnicity, society, or religion was going to change that either. I spent most of the first twelve years of my life playing with Hassan. Sometimes, my entire childhood seems like one long lazy summer day with Hassan, chasing each other between tangles of trees in my father's yard, playing hide-and-seek, cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians, insect torture—with our crowning achievement undeniably the time we plucked the stinger off a bee and tied a string around the poor thing to yank it back every time it took flight.

We chased the *Kochi*, the nomads who passed through Kabul on their way to the mountains of the north. We would hear their caravans approaching our neighborhood, the

mewling of their sheep, the *baaing* of their goats, the jingle of bells around their camels' necks. We'd run outside to watch the caravan plod through our street, men with dusty, weather-beaten faces and women dressed in long, colorful shawls, beads, and silver bracelets around their wrists and ankles. We hurled pebbles at their goats. We squirted water on their mules. I'd make Hassan sit on the Wall of Ailing Corn and fire pebbles with his slingshot at the camels' rears.

We saw our first Western together, *Rio Bravo* with John Wayne, at the Cinema Park, across the street from my favorite bookstore. I remember begging Baba to take us to Iran so we could meet John Wayne. Baba burst out in gales of his deep-throated laughter—a sound not unlike a truck engine revving up—and, when he could talk again, explained to us the concept of voice dubbing. Hassan and I were stunned. Dazed. John Wayne didn't really speak Farsi and he wasn't Iranian! He was American, just like the friendly, long-haired men and women we always saw hanging around in Kabul, dressed in their tattered, brightly colored shirts. We saw *Rio Bravo* three times, but we saw our favorite Western, *The Magnificent Seven*, thirteen times. With each viewing, we cried at the end when the Mexican kids buried Charles Bronson—who, as it turned out, wasn't Iranian either.

We took strolls in the musty-smelling bazaars of the Shar-e-Nau section of Kabul, or the new city, west of the Wazir Akbar Khan district. We talked about whatever film we had just seen and walked amid the bustling crowds of *bazarris*. We snaked our way among the merchants and the beggars, wandered through narrow alleys cramped with rows of tiny, tightly packed stalls. Baba gave us each a weekly allowance of ten Afghanis and we spent it on warm Coca-Cola and rosewater ice cream topped with crushed pistachios.

During the school year, we had a daily routine. By the time I dragged myself out of bed and lumbered to the bathroom, Hassan had already washed up, prayed the morning *namaz* with Ali, and prepared my breakfast: hot black tea with

three sugar cubes and a slice of toasted *naan* topped with my favorite sour cherry marmalade, all neatly placed on the dining table. While I ate and complained about homework, Hassan made my bed, polished my shoes, ironed my outfit for the day, packed my books and pencils. I'd hear him singing to himself in the foyer as he ironed, singing old Hazara songs in his nasal voice. Then, Baba and I drove off in his black Ford Mustang—a car that drew envious looks everywhere because it was the same car Steve McQueen had driven in *Bullitt*, a film that played in one theater for six months. Hassan stayed home and helped Ali with the day's chores: hand-washing dirty clothes and hanging them to dry in the yard, sweeping the floors, buying fresh *naan* from the bazaar, marinating meat for dinner, watering the lawn.

After school, Hassan and I met up, grabbed a book, and trotted up a bowl-shaped hill just north of my father's property in Wazir Akbar Khan. There was an old abandoned cemetery atop the hill with rows of unmarked headstones and tangles of brushwood clogging the aisles. Seasons of rain and snow had turned the iron gate rusty and left the cemetery's low white stone walls in decay. There was a pomegranate tree near the entrance to the cemetery. One summer day, I used one of Ali's kitchen knives to carve our names on it: "Amir and Hassan, the sultans of Kabul." Those words made it formal: the tree was ours. After school, Hassan and I climbed its branches and snatched its bloodred pomegranates. After we'd eaten the fruit and wiped our hands on the grass, I would read to Hassan.

Sitting cross-legged, sunlight and shadows of pomegranate leaves dancing on his face, Hassan absently plucked blades of grass from the ground as I read him stories he couldn't read for himself. That Hassan would grow up illiterate like Ali and most Hazaras had been decided the minute he had been born, perhaps even the moment he had been conceived in Sanaubar's unwelcoming womb—after all, what use did a servant have for the written word? But despite