

SARMADA

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Chapter One

Azza

There wasn't anything about her that caught the eye. To tell the truth, I didn't even notice her until my friend introduced me – in Arabic – to the man from Syria standing beside her. We exchanged a few pleasantries, the way two compatriots do when they meet abroad, with restrained good cheer, dubious of what lay behind the words. Then he asked me where I was from. 'From the mountains.' When he asked me whereabouts exactly, I said, 'Sarmada,' and just as soon as the words 'a village called Sarmada' left my mouth, the woman turned to us as if what I'd said had had some impact on her. She addressed me, looking a little out of sorts, and apologised for butting in.

'Did you say you were from Sarmada?' she asked.

'Yes,' I answered calmly, though slightly unsure of where this was going. 'Do you know someone from there?' I asked, trying to decipher the look in her eyes. She was in her forties, wearing a black dress, accentuated by beads of the same colour. There was a look of smouldering disbelief in her eyes, and her face had become stern, severe even, as she examined me. I smiled placidly.

'What are the chances of meeting someone from Sarmada in Paris of all places?' she said. 'Do you live here?'

'No, no. I'm just here on business – a quick trip. I leave tomorrow.'

'How are things in Sarmada? How's the village doing?' she asked, her stare softening.

‘Things are good – but, to be honest, I don’t go back very often. I live in Dubai ...’ I was interrupted by the sound of heady applause echoing from around the hall. The French media personality, in whose honour the Institut du Monde Arabe was throwing this reception, had arrived. The woman’s voice faded away and one of those dapper older gentlemen walked over to her, shifting her attention from our conversation to the party at hand.

Before she left, she said, ‘My name’s Azza Tawfiq. Have you got a pen?’ I felt at my pockets, but I couldn’t find one. She borrowed one from the sedate, dapper old man, who was looking at me icily. She scribbled her phone number down onto a napkin and handed it to me, her seeking eyes teemed with words unsaid. ‘Call me. It’s important...’, she said; her voice was swallowed up by the celebratory din. The hall was packed and everyone was speaking French, which I didn’t understand. My friend was caught up in the proceedings, and so I slipped quietly away. I strolled along the river Seine, watching the boats pass and the traffic in the street, savouring the splendour of a stroll through Paris, as my mind began to fill with images of my own tiny hometown. How had that woman suddenly brought Sarmada roaring back into my thoughts? Empty nostalgia had never been able to get its claws into me before. I’d built up defences against it over the many long years since I’d left that empty place, where lives are crushed, that land of waiting endlessly for what never comes.

Sarmada had never been anything more than a hollow shell that I’d happened to pass through. My bitterest days were spent there, and it had saddled me with pain and fear and fading out. It had taken me years to get it out of me. And now, by the banks of the Seine, something new was flickering inside of me, bringing Sarmada back; or at least what little of it had remained: a few, dusty old faces and some bland memories. There was no special taste or flavour left to tempt you into reminiscing about anyone in particular. As my footsteps quickened, my head began to swirl with sudden crazed thoughts. Can a man ever truly reject the

place he was born, try to disown it, to deny its afflictions? So that's how it started, and it was like sinking into mire.

By the time I got back to the Hotel Alba in Saint-Michel, it was past eleven. I packed, took a hot shower, and let sleep swallow me up. I woke up feeling unusually energetic after a night of strange sleep. I went down to reception, settled my bill, took care of a few visa formalities, and left my bag at the desk. Then I called her. The voice on the other end was thickly drowsy, and thoroughly feminine. 'It's Rafi Azmi.'

'Who?'

'We met last night at the reception for Alain Ghayouche and you said I should call you.' Something must have clicked because her voice suddenly came to life.

'Oh, yes! Hello. When can we meet? Where?'

'My plane leaves from Charles de Gaulle this evening, so now, if you're not busy.'

'No, fine. Where are you?'

'Café le Depart – St. Michel.'

'I'll be there in half an hour.'

It was my last day in Paris and I was off to Damascus to continue researching a documentary I was working on about *Building Bridges between East and West*. My work as a film-maker meant I had to travel all over the place to arrange interviews and scout out shooting locations, but luckily for me I'd managed to finish everything I needed to do the day before. I'd decided to cap the day off by meeting up with an old friend from university, who'd invited me to the reception where the woman and I had met.

We sat at a corner table opposite the Gibert Jeune bookshop. There was a severity, and a certain whispering sadness, in her big, brown eyes, and a fairly noble air seemed to overlay her features. She spoke Lebanese Arabic, and after no more than a few words of small talk, delved straight into the heart of the matter. 'I'm from the Chouf, and I've got relatives in Sarmada.'

‘Right, well that explains everything,’ I said, and parried, ‘So this is all just sectarian sentimentality?’

‘No, it isn’t that.’ She was silent for a beat, and then she looked straight into my eyes and in all seriousness said, ‘I lived in Sarmada in a past life. If you believe in transmigration, or if you’ve ever heard of it, you’ll know what I mean.’

I didn’t say anything. I was too shocked to say anything. Of course, I had been raised in a culture that considered the transmigration of souls to be a key part of everyday faith and loved to tell stories about transmigrators, from the childishly entertaining to the wilfully exaggerated – if only to underline the fact that a belief in metempsychosis made the Druze stand out from all the other esoteric sects, who believed in transference, or animal, vegetable and mineral transmutations. Transmigration is when a soul travels from one human being to another, and it’s entirely distinct from those other beliefs – about the soul being transferred into the body of an animal, or into a plant, or the worst punishment of all, into a rock, which was only for the souls that would be the most tortured of all, bound and confined within a rock or a boulder, a kind of eternal punishment until it’s decided that the soul should be freed from its rocky imprisonment.

Transmigration, one of many mysterious tenets of the Druze faith, gives the community a feeling of blood purity and unadulterated lineage because Druze souls only ever transmigrate into Druze bodies. Not once in my life had I ever given the topic the slightest thought. I just considered it to be one of the many charming religious spectacles that Syria takes such pleasure in. She continued undeterred, ‘I was murdered at half past four in the afternoon on the first Tuesday in December, 1968. My name in that life was Hela Mansour. I can still remember a lot about that previous life and – if you’re interested – a lot of the details of what happened in the last two and a half hours. I can see it all with perfect clarity as if it were only yesterday.’

I studied her face, my own mouth agape, and saw how her

expression became clouded as she told her disturbing story. ‘I don’t really know how to put this,’ I said, ‘but the truth is, I don’t actually believe in transmigration, or in much else, for that matter – except reason and science. To me, stories of transmigration are just collective memory. People who think they’re recalling a past life are just recalling some common occurrences.’ I thought about telling her the joke about the overweight fortune-teller, but something about her look – and her patronising smile – stopped my detached logic in its tracks.

‘Listen, Rafi,’ she began. ‘I teach quantum mechanics at the Sorbonne and I wrote a PhD thesis on the development of Chaos Theory – if you even know what that is,’ she added mockingly. ‘But here I am, and I’m telling you that I had a past life and that my brothers murdered me ... I wanted to ask you about them. To ask how they’re getting on.

‘In any case, scientific logic and my personal life are two different things as far as I’m concerned. I’ve never told anyone what I’m about to tell you now – or at least not like this – but as Einstein said, “If the facts don’t fit the theory, change the facts.”’

‘Are you saying you’ve got a theory about transmigration?’ I shot back with equivalent condescension.

‘No, not hardly. My own pride and logic always rejected the idea of my past life, or metempsychosis. And plus, I can’t prove anything empirically. But the truth’s inside of me, I realise that, and it’s there with me. I’m carrying two lives – at least – inside of me, but that doesn’t bother me anymore: after this life, I’ve started seeing things more clearly, less black-and-white. After all, Einstein also said that “Imagination is more important than knowledge.”’

My memory threw out another Einstein quotation – not to provoke her, but to give her something to contemplate: “Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one.”

‘And in practice,’ she added grudgingly, ‘a persistent illusion beats an idiot’s imagination.’

I felt like someone was trying to dismantle everything I thought

I knew and send me back into the deep anxiety I'd escaped so long ago. I thought that God, religion and all that other hocus pocus would never be able to trouble me again. But she cut in on my own silent self-trial and called upon the genius of relativity to boot, conjuring him up with a mystic's fluency: "As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain, as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality." I backed down in the face of such unanticipated resolve, and to be even more frank, I don't think anyone in the whole wide world would've been able to resist the assuredness and sadness in that lovely woman's eyes. I let myself listen to her story, holding my judgment for another time.

She asked about the village: about some people I knew, others I'd at least heard of, and a few I didn't know at all. Little by little, we recreated the village together. We told its story and called forth its characters in that Parisian café just over the road from the statue of Saint Michel himself. Our conversation was amiable, full of some unknown cheer. I genuinely needed her help to be able to see the village where I'd grown up, the place I'd abandoned years earlier, and which was now nothing more than a stifling confine I liked to visit every few years or so to see my family and what friends were still around and then to make a hasty exit. Six hours flew by and it was time for me to leave. I told her I'd be back in Paris soon to continue my work and I promised her that I'd go to Sarmada and get the answers she was looking for, and that I'd be happy to see her when I got back. She hugged me and kissed my cheek and we both felt as if we'd known each other for years. When she wished me a safe flight, I felt like I was saying goodbye to a relative.

Not once during the entire five-and-a-half-hour flight did the story of Azza Tawfiq leave my thoughts. I didn't believe a word of what she'd said, of course, but all the same it had left me with a trace of pity and grief that tempered my cool detachment and filled me with a warm and burgeoning affection. For the first time since I'd left Sarmada years ago, something was happening inside of me, a moment of brightness, of revealing, that made me feel as

if I were someone else. I took out my notebook and began recording – ‘writing’ isn’t the right word – Azza Tawfiq’s story, or maybe it was Hela Mansour’s, and I forgot all about my to-do list.



I arrived in Sarmada.

I carried her story around with me. I made enquiries, compared, contrasted. The evidence I’d collected in the beginning didn’t prove anything: Hela Mansour could have been Azza Tawfiq, but she could have been any other woman for that matter. For a whole week, I roamed around the village and through its ruins, trailing the story, collecting and comparing all the different versions. Azza’s voice returned and I could hear her as she told her story. Her words echoing in those places, in the faces of men and women who were still alive after all those years. I prodded at their memories and told the story from the very beginning.

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On a Tuesday at noon just after a light shower of rain, I, Hela Mansour, returned to Sarmada from the southern road, my hands free of warts, walking just as I had thirteen years before when I walked down to the Salt Spring. I slowed down as I crossed Poppy Bridge and looked out over the valley stretched beneath me. My eyes surveyed the contours of the village and the houses, which hadn’t changed much, and I steeled myself, determined to keep it together for those few moments before I’d have to face the others. I knew full well the law in these parts. The blood of any woman who married against the wishes of the Druze community was considered suitable only for holy sacrifice or permanent banishment. I hadn’t cared much about the details when I ran off with Azaday at the age of eighteen. I left my five brothers to endure excruciating pain and a great deal of derision, but I’d answered the call of my