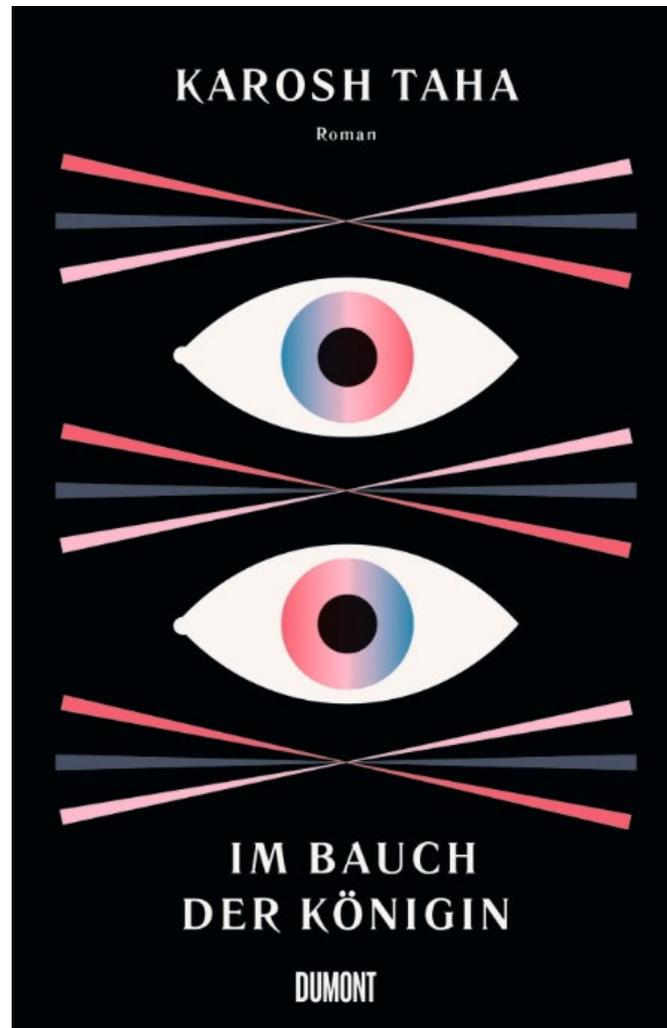


DUMONT



Karosh Taha
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[Raffiq]

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No one wants to fight Younes. When he clocks you in the temple, you stand beside yourself like a shadow, your body is numb to touch, food tastes salty, you run to the bathroom and throw up, and the fear of Younes grows. You could spread a world map across Younes's back and there'd still be room for another Asia. When I stand directly behind him, his shoulders block my view, and I take a seat on the floor with the others, all lined up in a row. They don't look at Younes—they behold him.

He doesn't know all that, but maybe he can sense it and it makes him sad.

I volunteer, stand up, try to look as tall as possible. My mouth guard tastes sour because I forgot to wash it. It's too big for me. I feel vulnerable, because it pushes out my lips so much, it's like Younes's fist is already in my mouth. After a while my jaw will start to hurt.

Walid yells, "At least he finally shut up."

The others laugh, and the Czech student teacher stifles a grin. He's been coaching us for a few months, and the boys like him, because he used to be a bouncer and amateur boxer, but now he's a Muslim. So he says, at least.

He says: The tattoos on his forearms are his witnesses.

He says: There's no erasing past mistakes.

He says: They show you who you might have become.

The boys nod solemnly when the student teacher serves up his seventh grade philosophy lessons. His posturing annoys me, but he's sturdily built and scary when he gets in your face. Younes isn't thinking about the Czech, he's looking at me, his expression not stern but grateful, because I've saved him from standing alone in the ring. We're fighting against each other, Younes, not together, I want to remind him. We're not in fifth grade anymore, when I would punch anyone in the stomach who gave him a hard time. I don't need to anymore, because Younes has grown into a mountain.

Younes's face half disappears behind the cover of his red gloves; he's careful, despite his size, got hit too often in the past. That fear grew in time with his bones, so every move he makes is deliberate. He darts forward when throwing a punch, never neglects the footwork; his body is a unit. My punches patter against his gloves. To get to Younes, I'll have to break through his cover with my body.

"Get small!" the Czech yells.

"Don't provide him with a target!" the Czech advises.

His whole life Younes struggled not to be a target, but somehow he always failed, because we all know how to get to him. But the Czech obviously means me.

Target. You don't need to know the word to know what it means, it's as precise and clear as a carefully pruned hedge. Boxing is all about risk, I want to call back, but at that moment, Younes's fist finds my jaw, and I'm only too grateful he's wearing gloves.

After the first round, the Czech thinks he's giving me great advice by saying I have too much rage in my belly, have to keep a cool head as I approach the fight, it's all about strategy, not street fighting.

“How sage,” I say. He ignores me and turns to Younes, praises him. Younes is rejoicing inside, but I can see how hard he’s working to conceal any sign of happiness on his face. He doesn’t want people getting any ideas, thinking he’s so desperate for praise from a grown man that he starts wagging his tail like a dog the moment one deigns to pat him on the head. Younes has reached the point where he shields himself as readily from praise as he does from punches, lest anyone think he was somehow neglected or looking for approval. Younes stands there like a memorial. I’m tempted to turn around and tell the boys to take a picture of him for posterity.

I’m more careful in round two, maintain distance, and the mountain comes at me. I force myself not to run away. That would give the boys something to laugh about. They’d definitely take a picture of that for posterity. At that moment, as if my thoughts were spread out in front of Younes, he misses me on purpose. His glove grazes my left ear, and it burns from the friction. Younes never misses a punch, and I know it. He looks me in the eye for two seconds, tells me he knows what I was thinking, knows my thought processes, would never hurt me, I was his only true friend, he says in those two seconds, says, I’m counting on you, says a lot more in those two seconds and offers me another two seconds without cover, a mistake so I can hit him, so I’ll emerge the winner who got to Younes. I refuse to do him the favor of letting him feel good about letting me win, like a child. You don’t defeat someone who carries two Asias on his back; at most you touch him, but as lightly as you would the Kaaba. The boys would never believe I got in a solid blow, they’d think Younes allowed it out of pure friendship. The only honorable way to exit the ring is to go on the defensive. Makes for a boring fight, not much for posterity, but plenty for a Thursday afternoon. The Czech tells us to shake hands after the fight, as though he were providing for peace on earth. I high-five Younes, because shaking hands is for people forced to respect each other.

The Czech wants to analyze the fight and asks the boys if Younes and I made any mistakes we should watch out for next time. The boys just gape at us wide-eyed. They open their mouths, and nothing comes out but air, then Walid crows, “Raffiq needs to grow some.”

The boys laugh, and the Czech stifles his stupid grin again, like he genuinely doesn’t want to offend me, but doesn’t realize that’s actually way worse.

“You occasionally dropped your guard, Younes,” he says.

There are free periods at practice when we can work on our sparring with a partner. We scatter around the gym, but a bunch of the Turks cluster around the Czech, hot for the fact that a Christian’s a Muslim now, like it somehow boosts Islam’s stock value. They listen to him quote the hadith to justify the things he says. Younes and I keep our distance, try not to get sucked up in the celebration of this guy’s conversion. Today, though, I feel like giving him a hard time, so I approach the group and hear the Czech prattling on about women. Even the way he sets it up: “Our prophet Muhammad—”

“Dude, your prophet is Jesus!” I yell. The Turks glare at me, Younes laughs, and the Czech continues, “Our prophet Muhammad, sallallahu alaihi wasallam, said that paradise lies under the feet of mothers, so—”

“What if your mother’s a whore?” Younes asks, and since the mountain rarely speaks, no one glares at him. Had anyone else asked that question, the group would have pounced, buried him in laughter and snide comments, but like I said, Younes is

Younes, so who would dare groan in annoyance? I relish the tension in the air and passivity Younes has imposed on everyone. The Czech's head is about to explode. But he's the first to snap out of it and says, "Excuse me?" Some of the blue drains from his eyes.

"What does the prophet say about mothers that are whores?"

"It's pretty disrespectful to speak about mothers that way, Younes."

"What if it's true?" Younes insists that some mothers are whores.

The other boys await a response from the Czech.

"It's still disrespectful."

"You don't know, do you? Besides, I want to know what the prophet said, not some random bouncer."

The Czech, who used to be a bouncer and a boxer and still is a boxer, but a Muslim now, is very patient with Younes. His chest rises as he starts telling a tale from the past about some guy on his death bed: The entire village gathered around the man, who was suffering and shaking and sweating, in terrible pain; even the doctor didn't know what to do. The people were baffled, because the dying man was a devout Muslim who had never lied nor cheated nor behaved in an untoward manner. Why would Allah let him suffer thus? His wife and children cried and prayed for him, that he might soon find peace. Then the sheikh entered the room, and the moment he saw the dying man, he knew what was wrong. He sent some village youths to inform the man's mother, because only his mother could release him from this hideous pain, by forgiving her son his aberrations. The mother forgave her son, whereupon he died peacefully in bed.

Younes quietly packs his bag while the boys talk about our upcoming *Abitur* practice exams, but Younes is in another world, and his silence draws me in, makes me want to disappear with him. We live on the same street, so we always walk home together—always have, always will. Younes hates the neighborhood, because he walks its streets with his head down and shoulders stooped. He can bulk up all he wants at the gym, but a quick glance or meaningful smirk is all it takes to bring him down.

Younes smokes so he doesn't have to talk. I walk beside him and feel him sharing his burden with me. I want to tell him that everyone's got it hard in life, but then I'd sound like the Czech, so I keep quiet. A Czech trying to teach me and Younes about Islam, a dude whose knowledge comes from some used books he bought online for five euros. The Czech doesn't know Younes, he doesn't know Shahira, who he would argue holds Younes's peace in the palm of her hand. And because the same thoughts are hounding Younes, he lights another cigarette, doesn't give a shit about his lungs hurting next practice. He drags as hard as he can on the butt. We say bye at his front door. I watch Younes, watch that giant with the broken back, till he disappears into the building. I feel kind of bad for him again. I struggle to believe that Younes will suffer because his slut mother has to consent to his dying. Like I said, the Czech talks too much, he doesn't know Younes, doesn't know what happened in the past, which is why he doesn't know what's happening now, who Younes is, who his mother is. All the Czech can do is prattle on and quote old books about what he should do or what other people should do.

I need to visit Herr Schandt and tell him about the Czech, who doesn't know Younes or his mother, and who talks about Islam as if it were a balm to soothe any infection.

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What's annoying about Jamal's wife isn't just that she's Jamal's wife, it's the way her facial expression and gestures accompany her stories like a second voice. There's not much to admire about my mother, but to witness her attention when listening to Jamal's wife really does command respect. Jamal's son is sitting beside his mother, and he can't be more than eight, but his eyes, with their heavy lids, exude a wisdom beyond his years. I'd bet anything he isn't thinking a single thought right now. When I was his age, I would scheme ways to escape boring situations, whereas this kid seems to beam himself past them, superior as he is to earthly pleasures; someone really oughta smack him. The indifference with which he sits there, as though he could just as easily be somewhere else, and the way he sips his orange juice from the glass without slurping—he's far too wise to make any noise while drinking, much unlike his mother. He has his father's eyes, his father, who carries indifference around like a backpack. My mother asks whether he wouldn't like to go to my sister Newroz's room. They're in the same class, which is about all they have in common.

When Jamal's wife starts talking about Younes's mother, though, I listen up. She was at the vegetable shop, she says, where she saw that dêhlik—that bitch—touch the cashier Ramsy's hand longer than necessary. She placed each coin individually in his palm, and their giggling grew louder with every coin, and after the final coin, Ramsy, the cashier, tried to grab that dêhlik's fingers, but she pulled them away playfully and all of the coins fell to the floor. At that point, the other shoppers no longer hid the fact they were watching, but stared at them and knew. Ramsy turned bright red and picked up the coins with a ridiculous smile on his face while that bitch left the store, swinging her fat behind. Each sentence is laden, not only with scorn for Younes's mother, but with hyperbole, as if the truth would not suffice to disparage her. Jamal's wife refuses to utter Shahira's name. I don't know what it would sound like, coming from her, and how her expression would change. The name would probably get caught in her crooked throat, so she avoids mentioning it.

Shahira spreads out in my mouth like oil. I have to pull myself together when I think of her as Shahira. I have to think of her as Younes's mother, if I want to talk about her.

And then I hate Younes's mother even more, although I always think my hatred of that woman couldn't possibly keep growing. But it does. I've hated her since grade school, since the first time I saw Younes and he was hiding behind his mother and would have grabbed the hem of her skirt, if it weren't so short and tight.

Instead, Younes vanished behind her legs and clung to her thigh with one hand, hiding his face behind her bulbous ass. "Younes, let go," she shrieked. "You're going to rip my nylons." She delivered him to the front entrance, gave the teacher a quick wave,

and teetered away. Younes just stood there silently, watching her leave; the other kids jostled him, and it pissed me off that he wouldn't move. Didn't he realize he was in the way, or was he retarded? In class too, Frau Blinder had to keep telling him to please sit down. Whenever there was a new seating chart, Younes always chose the spot closest to the door.

The afternoon after I beat up Younes, his mother came to our door. My mother didn't invite her in and just asked what she wanted.

"Your son beat up my Younes."

"I don't believe you," Mother said. "Raffiq, come here."

It felt like I'd forgotten how to walk, I moved so slowly toward the door. Younes's mother started howling the instant she saw me. She extended her neck like a cobra, leaned forward, and screamed: "Why did you beat up Younes?" She pulled his t-shirt up over his back, revealing a reddish blue bruise.

"What kind of behavior is that? You're not an animal!" She wagged her finger in Mother's face. "If your son ever touches my Younes again, God help him."

"Girl, I wouldn't talk so big if I were you," my mother responded, although Younes's mother was hardly a girl.

"Your son must have picked it up from you and your husband. Behavior picked up from animals. Just like animals!" she continued.

Both women screamed their heads off while we just watched. The neighbors peeked out, then quickly closed their doors and listened from there. After Younes's mother teetered away, there was no one left to yell at, so Mother turned and slapped me in the face with a cold hand.

"Shame on you!" she said and sent me to my room with the threat of my father's beating. He didn't beat me, though, just came to my room, which was enough to make me whimper.

"Why did you hit that boy?"

Because he always stood by the door. Because he didn't respond to questions. Because he was always sad and never wanted to play ball. I don't know, I said to my father. He sat down on my bed and told me about Younes's family, although I didn't understand what that had to do with me. Father concluded his story by telling me never to touch that boy again. But that wasn't why I never did.

In fourth grade, Frau Blinder planned a breakfast for the parents right before Christmas vacation, so she didn't have to teach. Some parents baked cookies, others brought fresh rolls, cheese, jam. There was hot chocolate for the kids, lots of coffee for the Almans, and even chai for our parents, and we all sat together at our group tables and ate with the parents.

At some point, one of the girls yelled so loudly, everyone froze, "Frau Blinder, Younes is crying."

Then all eyes were on Younes, who was sitting at a table with a German family, a roll lying untouched on his lap. Younes was crying into his hands. Frau Blinder kneeled beside him, rubbed his bony back, and said everything would be okay. The other parents asked what was wrong, why on earth the boy was crying. My mother looked at Father and said, in Kurdish, "What hasn't that woman done to her family?"

And a Turkish mother whispered to a Polish mother, “His mother didn’t come.”
From then on, I left Younes alone.

My parents came to all the open houses and parent-teacher conferences, although my mother sometimes sent my father, because she got so wrapped up in planning what she wanted to say, that she only half listened. Then my father would ask what the teacher had said, and she would say she forgot and stir something quick on the stove or pull out the vacuum. Eventually, my father realized it wasn’t that she’d forgotten, it was that she hadn’t even been listening. But she’s good at listening to Jamal’s wife and waits for a pause in conversation to come into the kitchen and stir her sauce. She clears my plate, just like that. Amal would feel vindicated, because she says I never have to clean up after myself, meaning I’ll never become a self-reliant man. But Amal also believes human behavior is like a math problem—father’s behavior plus mother’s behavior, times societal expectations, equals character trait in child. And since we’ve kind of been boyfriend and girlfriend for a few months now, she thinks she can explain to me how the world works, and I pretend not to be interested, even though she’s way smarter than me, but doesn’t know it.

My mother stirs her sauce, then licks the spoon before dropping it in the sink. It grosses me out, and I want to tell her not to. But I withhold comment, otherwise I’ll have my whole upbringing thrown in my face: Oh, and you think it wasn’t gross, wiping shit off your butt in the middle of the night, or when you puked milk all over my chest. Mother looks at me and asks what’s wrong, but splits her attention between me and her food; she thinks she can stir something within me with her question, but she can’t. To do that, she’d have to look at me longer, grant me at least as much attention as she does Jamal’s wife. I get up and leave the apartment.

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I want Shahira to lick her wooden spoon, I want to see her tongue in motion. But she never does. She’s always happy to see me.

“Come on in, Raffiq.” She saunters barefoot into the kitchen. She’s wearing leggings, like the girls in our grade, but her shirt covers her behind; still, you can see every curve. When she wears high heels, she’s Amal’s height, and I could easily put my arm around her. Her dark, dyed hair cascades over her shoulders and breasts, which is different from the girls. Sometimes she clips her hair up, and you can see her neck, which is darker than the rest of her body. I don’t know what her belly looks like, or the creases beneath her ass, which are white on Amal, because she goes tanning. Shahira sometimes tans in the afternoon sun, but not too much, she says, because it gives you ugly wrinkles and spots. She used to sit on the balcony in little sundresses and let the sun shine on her gleaming legs for half an hour. She fanned the back of her neck with her hand, and whenever a gust of wind came and kicked up her little dress, she would spread her legs slightly and air out her pussy.

Although Younes sat beside me, all he saw was his mother, whereas I saw Shahira. She would smile at us, and she's smiling today too, but today she knows that I see her.

"How was school?" she asks, gesturing behind her, toward Younes's room, with the wooden spoon. "He doesn't tell me anything anymore."

"Today our boxing coach told us that mothers hold the highest position in Islam."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, and that a mother can determine whether her kid goes to heaven or hell."

"Not God?"

"The mother's the key, at least."

"What do you believe, Raffiq?"

She pronounces my name correctly, not like in school: one time, the word "rare" came up in a reading assignment, and someone asked what it meant. Our teacher explained, "Infrequent, little." Something like that, and then Walid said, "What, like 'Raffuq'?" The class lost it. Even the teacher smirked, that prick, just because they can't say my name right.

Shahira rolls the R and swallows the Q, so it spreads across the tongue and crackles in the throat.

"Raffiq, you daydreamer, I asked you a question," she says.

"I don't know," I reply.

"That wasn't the question. I asked what you believe."

"Believing is no different from wishing," I say. I probably heard that somewhere, but it makes her stop and think.

Younes comes out of the bathroom, his hair still wet. He never brushes it, and Shahira scolds him playfully, as if she were just pretending to be his mother, and runs her fingers—with those long, red nails—through his black hair, and she's proud, because he's so much taller than her and taller than me and taller than anyone in the neighborhood. He won't stop growing.

We help Shahira set the table and serve the food, then sit together and eat, and although I already ate, I eat with Younes and Shahira too. She asks Younes what happened in school today, but he just shrugs, nothing special. She looks at me, as if to say: See, I told you. And I would love for my look to respond: So now you care about his school stuff?

Younes is careful not to be seen with his mother in public. Shahira is a spirit that swirls around Younes and that's always with us, without being there, as if we were trapped in her belly. Eventually Younes will outgrow her belly, and no one knows what will happen then, and it makes all of us nervous.

Younes was fourteen the last time he was seen in public with his mother, at the weekly market. They moved from one stand to the next, Younes trudging a few steps behind his mother, who knew all of the vendors by name, like a teacher. The Turk sold her things at half price and double-bagged her purchase, just to be safe, to make sure nothing tears, he said, laughing, staring at Shahira's cleavage, and even asked if she needed help carrying her things home. Shahira said no, sampling a grape, and pointed at her son. This service was not available to other women.

“I’m a regular,” Shahira said, thus confirming Younes’s suspicion that this exchange of looks and offers was not standard. The air of entitlement with which Shahira ambled across the market, which was there just for her, stoked the other women’s rage. They greeted each other, but not Shahira, even turned away when she approached. To Shahira, the women were extras planted there to make the market appear more lively.

The Kurdish produce vendor gave her half a watermelon for free, even though she politely declined. But the Kurd insisted, wouldn’t take no for an answer. They lugged the bags home, and those unfamiliar men’s words and gazes and the women’s revulsion weighed so heavily on Younes’s shoulders that he couldn’t eat for days.

[Amal]

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And they kept asking me how I'd done it, how I'd managed to beat up the new kid, who was a lot bigger and stronger than me, so I told them, because they were all ears and made me feel like I'd accomplished something significant, and I told them because the men got a kick out of it and the women got mad, and because my father would hold me on his lap and let me tell the story to his male friends as if it were one of his own anecdotes and I were his hand puppet. But this is my story, I almost said, almost turned around to my father and told him, this is my story. I was still young enough to get a group of men to laugh, but too old to sit on someone's lap, even if it was my father and even if he did invite me to sit on his lap because they kept asking me how I'd done it, how I'd managed to beat up the new kid, who was a lot bigger and stronger than me. So I told them, and each time, I recalled another detail and at some point I started inventing new details because I wanted to keep them all ears, but eventually even the men said, You'd better keep an eye on her, and that's when my father stopped holding me on his lap like a puppet, also because my mother yelled at him for doing it. Every night they'd scream at each other, and Mother closed all the windows and the door to the balcony, and the heat fogged up the windows, and the heat ran down the windows. They wept because no one else would. My father opened the windows after the fight, and the apartment could breathe again, and I could sleep, so the next day I could tell the older boys in the neighborhood about how I'd beaten up the new kid, because they asked me about it. One of them was holding the soccer ball under his arm—they interrupted their game just to hear me tell the story of how I'd beaten up the new kid. Then one of the boys asked to see my biceps, but I didn't know what that was, so he pushed up the sleeve of his t-shirt a little, bent his arm and strained to make a ball on his arm, so I copied him and made them all laugh, and then another one asked to see my dick, and they all laughed again and went back to their game.

I told the teachers who asked about it too, but since they always looked so shocked, I shortened the story and went easy on the details—especially the invented ones—and they all said I shouldn't take pleasure in what I'd done. But I didn't. I just felt I'd accomplished something significant. My mother forbade me from telling the story anymore, but I couldn't help it because everyone kept asking about it. She was just pissed because the boy's mother had come to our door and told us off, criticizing Mother for not having me under control. A girl who beat up boys? There must be something wrong with me, I was totally spoiled and it was all Mother's fault—she said all that. You're animals, she said, then repeated it till I believed it myself, and all I wanted was to whup her son again, who just stood beside her with puffy eyes, hanging his head, but then his mother leaned in, as if she'd read my thoughts, and threatened to tear out my eyes if I laid another finger on her son. Mother shielded me from the other mother with her arm and tried to drown her out with her own threats, but I still heard what she said and wasn't scared and wanted to kick her in the shins, but my mother slammed the door shut, as if she'd sensed movement, and Mother threatened to do the same to me as the other mother and concluded the scene with a slap in the face and an

invitation to be ashamed of myself. That night she yelled at my father and he screamed back and said that if she didn't shut up, he'd take us back to Kurdistan, but my mother didn't flinch and suggested he pack his bags, but Father ignored her and finished his cigarette while the windows wept.

My parents were called in to meet with the principal, but since Father was at work, Mother came alone and listened to everything the principal had to say. She said certain measures would be taken, that you had to be tough with them from a young age, Frau Zaynal, you really have to be consistent, the principal said, using a lot of lines to try and break Mother's hardened expression, and then she said, you have to be on the same page as your husband, and at that, Mother covered her face, which gave everything away and put us all to shame—she buried her naked face in both hands. She cried and breathed in short bursts, cried like a schoolgirl, and all my mother could do was apologize and say this wasn't how she'd raised me, that I was constantly roughhousing with boys, so this behavior must come from them, it must have rubbed off somehow, and Mother was exactly like the other girls, who tattled on me to our teachers, her finger pointed in my direction, eyes pleading. The principal's face relaxed, relieved at the sight of Mother crying, and the principal absolutely agreed, she said, absolutely, but Mother didn't stop crying, and the principal saw to it that she not stop and said, Amal is like a boy, totally out of control, and she nodded fervently and said she had been observing me for some time and she was glad my mother had also picked up on this behavior, and then she leaned in, and the edge of the desk cut into her gut, but she didn't care, and she told my mother I was like Mowgli, who was raised by wolves, and that made my mother cry even harder and call me a Mowgli girl as she blew her nose in the tissue the principal had handed her as a sign that it's wasn't her who was being punished here, but her daughter, the Mowgli girl. It would help if she had more female friends, the principal said, a social rehabilitation of sorts, she said, but wasn't sure if my mother understood, so for the first time, the principal looked at me and asked, Amal, do you have female friends, and if so, how many. I did not respond.

Amal, you don't need to be embarrassed, she said, trying to get me to cry, like she'd gotten my mother to cry. None of the girls wanted to be friends with me, and the principal knew it, because I had teased every last one of them at some point, teased them like the boys did, and then they went and told everyone in school. They loved telling each other how I'd teased them, loved describing how they'd suffered and how hurt they'd been. If I shoved one girl, I shoved them all, because they immediately told each other and because they all listened to each other and then passed the story on as if each of them were personally affected. And that night my parents had another screaming match, because my mother blamed my father for the humiliation she'd suffered in the principal's office—that's how she described it—and she said how ashamed she'd felt that he wasn't there, as if he didn't care about his own daughter. She really emphasized my being his daughter—your daughter did this, your daughter didn't do that—as if I had crept out of his belly button. He was left with no option but to request that she shut her trap for once, which made her even angrier, and for weeks she refused to speak to him, and because I was the reason for the fight, she didn't speak to me, either. My father and I enjoyed the first few days of her silent treatment, because we could eat in peace, play cards, veg out in peace, do everything in peace

and quiet. Then things got tricky, though, like when my father couldn't find his lighter, but she wouldn't speak, and I couldn't find my glue stick, but she wouldn't speak, till her silence grew so powerful that we too fell silent and the windows stopped weeping. But my father, who loved telling stories, who loved laughing, finally apologized to my mother, and he must have done it right, because my mother really is stubborn, because she has a cinderblock in her head. Our neighbor asked how he did it, because she knew how stubborn my mother could be, and my mother smiled sheepishly and slurped her chai, slurped and slurped, as though her little glass were bottomless. After finishing her chai in one gulp, she wiped the sweat mustache off her upper lip, because that's where Mother sweats when she's hot, and then she said he had spoken to her in the sweetest tongue. Our neighbor laughed out loud and said, I bet that's not all he did with his tongue, and Mother got up quickly and poured herself more chai.

I couldn't use words to make it up to Mother. My father always spoke for the both of us, but this time he'd spoken only for himself, so I started making my bed, throwing my clothes in the hamper without being told, or clearing my plate, but Mother kept silent and at some point I offered to let her comb my hair, but without using words, because it turned out I really was a Mowgli girl. I went to Mother and handed her a hair tie and comb, so she could tame my hair, which had always bothered her. I sat down at her feet, so she could stay on the couch as she worked. My hair looked neat after that—even the principal noticed, and my gym teacher told me I shouldn't pull my hair back so tight, otherwise I'd get a headache—but even then, Mother said no more to me than absolutely necessary. And when the boys played soccer and wouldn't let me play and called me Rapunzel, I just thought of how bad my temples hurt, and the pain reminded me of Mother, so I didn't do anything, didn't shove the boys who got too close, didn't cuss out the girls who whispered about me, and didn't talk back to the teachers who confused me with foreign words. The pain was there and I couldn't escape it, because it sat right there on my head, till one day in class I couldn't take it anymore and I swiped the teacher's scissors while she wasn't looking and cut off my bun. The other kids screamed, and the teacher's attention turned to me. She ran toward me with fear in her eyes and took the scissors away and only then did she grow angry and forget all her fine, foreign words and start yelling at me in those I understood. A few of my classmates laughed, while others were in shock, but it didn't matter because the pain had released its claws from my scalp and was dissolving, and that felt good, the way it was dissolving, like a shower in the middle of my head, and I reveled in how the pain had transformed into a shower and then everyone asked me why I'd chopped off my hair in the middle of class and laughed when I explained that the bun had hurt, but that it had then transformed into a shower.

Father took me to the hairdresser so he could cut off the rest, and even the hairdresser asked me why I'd cut my hair so short, but he didn't laugh when I said the bun had hurt; he just said I had to tell my mother not to pull my hair back so tight, but I couldn't tell the hairdresser that I didn't know how to speak to my mother. My mother cried when she saw me with short hair and told my father very quietly, which wasn't her style, that he had ruined me, that I was a lost cause. He didn't take her seriously, though, considering how often he rubbed my head, from my forehead to the back of my neck, and his hand would rest there, and with his hand on the back of my neck, he'd

sometimes walk me home from school. If he got off work early, he'd stand outside the school gate and wait for me, and if he saw one of the older boys push me as I came running out of the building with all the other kids, he would tell me to push back and not take anyone's crap, and that especially as a girl, I shouldn't take anyone's crap, they had no right to get so close to me, and if I didn't have the muscles for it, I should bite because nothing was off limits in self-defense. Then one day Father was out there waiting with the new kid's mother, and they were smoking together, and Father didn't notice me till I was right in front of him, and the woman looked at me and smiled, didn't want to tear my eyes out anymore. And then her son came. His name was Younes, and my father said that was a nice name, but the boy didn't say thank you, he just looked sad, and his mother said Younes was a shy boy, and I thought coward was more like it, but I didn't say that to the woman because she no longer wanted to tear out my eyes. Younes and his mother lived in the building next door to ours and seemed like nice people, my father said, so I should leave him alone.

That night Mother scolded Father; after closing the windows and balcony door, she screamed at him, because one of our neighbors told her she'd seen Father walking home with the neighbor who always wore tight, short skirts, and evidently it was a pretty lively conversation, because Father hadn't greeted our neighbor as she passed, so evidently he'd been pretty engrossed in conversation with the other neighbor, the one who always wore such tight, short skirts, it was as if she were looking to offend Mother personally. She felt dishonored by the fact that Father would talk to that bitch in heat, as she called her, and asked whether he wasn't ashamed to speak to a woman whose skirt gave everything away, and what the neighbors must think now, of my father and of my mother and presumably of my father and the new neighbor, but Father just smoked his cigarette and opened the window, as if he wanted the meddling neighbor who'd caused this fight to get a piece of it. But at that, Mother shut up, which was pretty nice, and Father came into my room and promised to teach me to drive, so that someday I can drive away whenever Mother annoys me, and we both laughed, me nervously and he pensively. Then I asked him to tell me a story from *Alf Layla wa-Layla*, because he was so good at it and I wanted to distract him, so he told me stories from *Alf Layla wa-Layla*, back when women were still queens and afreetes emerged from the seas to make life difficult for humans, and I listened, watching his face because the way he told the stories, it was as if Scheherazade herself were sitting on his tongue. If Scheherazade stopped telling stories, she would die. I was afraid she would run out of stories to tell. The king would kill her. So Scheherazade kept talking.

And Mother asked me what I had seen on the street when Younes's father dropped him off and everyone was staring and Younes was crying. But I didn't answer, and Mother yelled at me and wanted to know why I wasn't like other women's daughters, who told their mothers everything, and I wanted to know how she knew Younes's name. And Mother nagged me to tell her, so I told her about the time I beat Younes up, which pissed her off, and she sent me to my room, but I went outside instead.

Younes's father had dropped him off at the front door, had dragged him out of his car, and Younes doubled over as if his stomach hurt, and his mother in her tight skirt

scurried around Younes and tried to hold him back, because he wanted to chase after his father's car, and everyone was staring. His mother squeezed him close, whispered things in his ear that no one else could hear; although everyone was staring, Younes's mother focused on him and managed to calm him down, but he was still crying and everyone was staring. Younes's mother took him inside and yelled at the people to stop staring and haven't you ever seen a crying boy before, she screamed, and several people stopped staring. The grown-ups were embarrassed and looked away, pushing their kids in front of them, then looked back one last time to see how it all would end.

From that day onward, Younes sat on the curb every day after school and waited for his father and at first everyone stared and talked about what they'd seen that day, the day everyone was staring, and then they talked about what they'd been thinking as they stared, and they shook their heads as if they felt bad for Younes, who was waiting for his father and reminding everyone on the street that he was waiting for his father. In the evening his mother brought him inside. He followed her, his head hanging, and the sadness leaked from his eyes and dripped onto the asphalt. Plump beads of water dampened the path from the curb to the front door.

Even weeks later, Younes didn't seem to have forgotten his father, and he sat on the curb, but the people who had stared before didn't stare anymore, because they preferred staring at Younes's mother, who wore short, tight skirts. And he kept waiting, but the memory didn't fade, nor did the sadness, not even when his mother gave him a basketball to take his mind off things. Younes just dribbled half-heartedly where he sat. He never stood up, as if someone had broken his knees. When the rubber of the basketball hit the pavement, it echoed throughout the neighborhood, and the dribbling became part of the afternoon, and everyone knew that Younes was outside, sitting and waiting. Whenever a car turned onto our street, he hugged the ball to his chest and looked up. Younes sat on the curb and concentrated on the sound of the basketball hitting the pavement, till the streetlights automatically turned on, and his mother no longer had to bring him inside, he went willingly, because he knew he could wait again tomorrow. As Younes waited, the neighborhood boys figured they could use his back as a goal, since he never moved and had broken knees, and it annoyed them that the son-of-a-whore never stopped waiting, they said, and we'll make him stop waiting, one of them said. They even scored a point if they hit him, but not all of them did, they were actually pretty bad, but Raffiq always hit Younes's back, always shot the ball furiously, and everyone held their breath for a second, torn between pity and curiosity, hoping to witness Younes run bawling into his building. But Younes didn't move, he just sat there and breathed hard and dribbled and didn't hear the fury in Raffiq's shot; what he heard was the steady sound his basketball made on the pavement, and it echoed so loudly in the neighborhood, and it echoed so loudly in Younes's body, his stooped back twitched, but the sound of Younes's basketball was louder and you could hear the sound in the stairwell and in the kitchen and when Father told me stories, and the basketball was louder than Scheherazade.

I was furious, not at the boys, but at Younes, for not pelting them in the head with his basketball or getting up and leaving. It made me mad that he put up with the pain, and it made me mad that it made me happy when they hit him, because I thought surely he would get up then and stop waiting. One day my father came home from work early

and caught the boys using Younes's back as their target. He told them off and asked if they weren't ashamed of harassing a little boy, and Raffiq, who always shot the ball so furiously, said, Younes is playing with us, Uncle, we're not harassing him, he said, using too big a word for his mouth, and the other boy, Walid, said, Younes is the goal, and my father roared that they'd better find a different damn goal, then. We didn't have a goal in the neighborhood, though, we always had to improvise using backpacks or water bottles; there was a playground with a swing broken on one side, because there were more children than options for play in the neighborhood, and my father knew that and always ranted that the city had forgotten our neighborhood, so Father grabbed the ball and told the boys to follow him. We all followed my father, who led us to the big shopping plaza, where Lidl was, and asked if any of the boys had a permanent marker. They handed him one, and my father drew a big rectangle on the outside wall of the grocery store and announced that this was their goal now, and the boys gawked in astonishment, as if my father had shown them the universe. Then they started to laugh and said, wow, man, thanks, Uncle, but before they could say any more, my father threatened to whup them if they laid another finger on Younes, and Raffiq turned to me and said, Amal, tell us about the time you beat Younes up, and I was ashamed, because that made my father look stupid. My father turned to me in horror and asked if I had played their dumb game too, but I put his mind at ease. I thought I knew why I wasn't allowed to beat Younes up anymore—so my father could protect him from the others, without getting an earful. Then Father told me why Younes was sitting there, as if I didn't know.

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No one wants to fight Younes. They lurk like hyenas, prowl around him and whisper in each other's ear, then burst out laughing and screech something unintelligible, and it makes me want to stick my fist in their mouths, but all I'm allowed to do is sit on the bench, the only person there; I'm a girl and there are no spectators because it's boring, because no one will get in the ring with Younes. I'm just here with Younes, who really wants to fight in the boxing club for boys and already scares people and makes me come watch, because I'm not allowed to be here, because the boxing club is just for boys, the student teacher says. Younes told me I didn't have to come, and I didn't say that I don't trust Raffiq's crowd. I didn't have to, because we both remembered the basketball dribbling. We both know they're sneaky cowards, like five fingers that are strong as a fist, but otherwise easy to break. I kind of like seeing their insecurity, but only kind of. With Younes in the middle, they look like little hills. Younes transforms them into the fifth-grade boys that circled him, tugged at him: the hands came at him from all directions, and I wasn't strong enough, so I started biting, and they pulled my hair, which Younes and I chopped off in the bathroom, we took his mother's scissors and chopped furiously and planned how we were going to take down Raffiq and his friends, but our plans remained just that, because they surprised us by yanking Younes's backpack on the stairs to our classroom, and I managed to catch Younes from

falling, and they called him a son-of-a-whore, and I pushed Raffiq off the stairs and he broke his leg, so he couldn't play soccer anymore and had to wait and the boys grew even wilder, their group transformed into an animal hunting us. Younes kept a straight face, as if he were just waiting for his father to come back finally, to come back finally so they'd stop hitting him in the back, and we ran to Younes's mother, and she sheltered us in her arms.

Today Younes stands before these little boys and challenges them. He points at Raffiq and says, you and me, says, let's fight, and Raffiq shakes his head, shakes and looks at the others, says he'd rather let Walid (who's also shaking his head) punch him in the face than let someone like you touch him, he says, and Younes stands quietly by the student teacher, who looks completely lost beside Younes; he can't force anyone to fight Younes, so he claps his hands and suggests everyone practice sparring with a partner, and he knows that Younes doesn't have a partner, and all I'm allowed to do is sit on the bench.

The boys scatter around the gym, and Younes hangs back with the student teacher. He looks over and I smile at him, cut my hair so I can be by his side, wear baggy t-shirts, walk the same speed so I can stay by Younes's side, but it's not enough. He smiles back, as if he had to assure me he's okay.

And the student teacher seems lost in this big gym, and his words are worthless here, they don't reach anyone, including Younes, who strides toward Raffiq, runs, and his movements instill meaning in the wind. The partner pairs all watch Raffiq, who freezes on the spot, and you can't tell from his expression whether he's currently suffering a stroke or just scared. I can taste blood. When Younes reaches him, Raffiq flinches, and it only lasts a second, but it's enough to show Younes that he's accomplished his goal, and in that moment, as the boys and student teacher are my witness, Younes grows four inches, as if God decided to stop keeping his existence a secret and perform this miracle before our eyes. Younes grins at Raffiq in parting, grins at the amazing joke he played, at Raffiq flinching, and at God, who helped him grow before our very eyes, and he parts from Raffiq with an amazing grin and comes over to me, strips off his gloves, throws them on the bench and just asks, *Wollen wir?* One of the most beautiful questions in German: Shall we? And I can choose whatever I want to fill in the blank and complete the question in my head, and I would love to grab Younes's hand as we leave the gym. Together, Younes and I are indomitable, we're titans, we could build whole worlds if we wanted, just give us seven seconds, and I fill in the blank with all of that as Younes and I leave the gym and let the wind be wind and leave the student teacher behind, as seemingly lost as ever.

Like a magic trick, Younes collapses outside, now that none of Raffiq's boys can see him. We break our knees, because we were never titans, we're not even a man and woman—we're children on stilts.

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We're going to driver's ed: we're going to sign up, we're going to do it together. Younes and I, and since my father left, and since his father left, we sat together on the curb and waited for cars to turn onto our street, and at some point we decided we should learn to drive, ourselves, and Younes said it wasn't even that hard and I confirmed, yeah, it wasn't hard.

My father never wore jeans, I told Younes, and he nods, he knows that, and keeps puffing away, like my father—Younes has a clearer memory of my father than of his own. To Younes, his father stands for waiting and withstanding, withstanding waiting.

He always wore black trousers with his shirt tucked in loosely, I say to Younes, and he was lanky, so his shirts would flap on the sides. It always seemed his clothes were a half size too big for his body, yet fit just right. No briefcase. Nonchalance was his accessory of choice, and I wonder how he dresses now, whether he still wears clothes he had in college.

Father took me to work once, and everyone greeted as we passed, his black-haired coworkers slapping him on the shoulder, the Almans just giving him a nod, and I noticed that everyone, with the exception of my father, was wearing jeans, dirty, tattered, black, blue, tight, or baggy jeans—my father was the only one wearing black trousers, and his shirt was always too big for his upper body, which I realized as I saw these other men in their work clothes. My father put on a dark blue vest like everyone else and handed me one too, because it was cold in there, to keep the fruits and vegetables fresh.

Father was just supposed to listen at work and speak only if there was something he didn't understand, otherwise he was just supposed to nod and do as he was told, and that's what he did, and we drove around in a forklift, and Father moved palettes of fruit crates from one spot to another and joked with his coworkers and fell silent whenever the boss appeared. And during the break, one of his coworkers asked why I had such short hair, and Father replied that otherwise it got in the way when playing soccer, and then his boss appeared and asked whether I shouldn't be at school, and Father said he bet I would learn more here than in the classroom, and his boss gave him a stern look and asked me what I'd learned today, but I couldn't tell his boss that my father didn't like him, that my father never wore jeans, always wore black trousers. Later on, I also understood why he flew into a rage and tore the jeans my mother had bought him out of the wardrobe and onto the floor, although she explained that jeans would make a lot more sense in his line of work.

My father did not identify as one who stacked fruit crates, though; he still viewed himself as an architect who wore black trousers and white shirts, even if they were too big for him, but he didn't tell her that.

But my mother wanted to dress him up like a stacker of fruit crates, wanted him to blend in so he'd finally forget about his actual profession, but she didn't tell him that.

She thought that in a pair of jeans, he wouldn't be an architect anymore, and my father thought that in black trousers, he still was. So he started attending school at night,

rather than fight with Mother, who chatted on the balcony with neighbors, who told stories about the one in short, tight skirts.

He left and forgot to teach me how to drive, he was going to teach me to drive, I tell Younes, and Younes smiles as if he had to assure me he's okay. Younes smiles to let me know I can keep talking about my father, who left me and forgot to teach me to drive before he left me. I had only learned to steer, because he let me sit on his lap once, and I got to steer the big car; he told me which way to go, but I got to steer and even got pretty decent at turning. But he never taught me to drive, leaving some man I don't know to do it, some man who doesn't even know that my father promised to teach me to drive, and I almost make the mistake of asking Younes if his father was also planning to teach him to drive, and then I hear the sound of his father furiously racing away, and Younes doubled over, as if he had stabbing pain in his sides, and I didn't tell my mother what I had seen.

And I started to gather traces of Father. Father left behind absence, Father left behind nothingness, Father left behind shame, Father left behind uncertainty. Father left behind fragmentation, Father left behind dissolution.

And Father left behind incompleteness.
