

CHAPTER ONE

A BRIEF HISTORY OF A FAMILY THAT HAD NO HISTORY

In the south of Iraq flows the Thirsty River, so-called because in the winter it dries up and people can walk over the riverbed. In the summer, fresh water flows, first as a small snake and later as a dragon, which spews not fire, but waves. On the banks of the Thirsty River lives the Bird family, which for many generations had been strong and stood firm against the famines, plagues and wars which had fallen on them from the unsettled skies of Iraq. Their problems began when a stork came down to earth.

Nadim immediately built a high tower and on the tower he built a large nest. That is how he wanted to encourage storks to come to Boran. Nadim liked birds. He had built a number of cages and spent all his time on his birds. He enjoyed listening to their song. One day he saw a stork flying through the heavens. He had no idea of how big the stork was, because he had only ever seen them high in the sky. No one in Boran knew how big a stork was, because no one had ever seen a stork from close up. If he had a stork, he would be the first in Boran to do so. So he began building a tower with clay bricks. The tower

grew higher and higher and when the tower became higher than the house, his family began complaining behind his back that he never paid any attention to anything except birds and his tower. But they said nothing against Nadim. He was the strongest man in the family. Although he had seven older brothers, all of them were scared of him.

One day the sheik of the mosque knocked on the door of their house. He said that God would be angry if Nadim's tower became taller than the minaret of the mosque. But Nadim, who believed more in birds than in God, chased the sheik away. People say that he grabbed him by the beard, as he would a goat, and shouted in his face: "Make the tower of the mosque higher than heaven, and I won't complain. But don't say anything about my tower, that I won't accept. The tower will go up and never down." It was said that the sheik of the mosque trembled with fear in Nadim's hands.

Nadim slept soundly after long days on the tower, while the men and women of the house were busy working the whole day earning money. He kept on building until his tower was higher than the minaret. People could see Nadim's tower from further away than they could the minaret. When the tower was complete, Nadim tied big branches together and built an enormous nest on top of his tower, big enough for a man. After that he sat beside his tower for the whole day awaiting the moment when a stork would land on it. Sometimes he clapped wooden slippers against each other, because he had heard that it made the same sound as storks made with their beaks, but no stork landed on Nadim's tower.

The sheik of the mosque said during Friday prayers that storks did not land on Nadim's tower because there were devils sitting on it, but Nadim did not believe that. He said there were no devils sitting on top of the tower, only a nest. Nadim climbed the tower and went to sit in the nest with two wooden slippers. The people believed what the sheik of the mosque had said. They thought that the devils were sitting in Nadim's

head, which made him think he was a stork.

A while later, one of the women from the household became sick. She lay on her deathbed and began to see devils coming in through the windows, doors and holes in the walls. The woman complained about Nadim's tower and she was taken to the home of her family, far from Nadim's tower and the devils on it. Everyone, except Nadim, became fearful of the devils on his tower. They begged him to make the tower lower than the minaret, but he refused. "I have already told you. The tower is not going down. If you are scared, then make the minaret higher than the tower."

After a while the faces of the home's inhabitants became paler, as if they never slept, and one by one, they started dying.. Still Nadim refused to make his tower lower. He built a wall between the house and the tower. No one died any longer and the residents of Boran expected that this time Nadim would die, but he didnot. The people saw him staring into the sky for hours on end with two wooden slippers in his hands. Sometimes they saw him sitting quietly in the nest, while daydreaming about a stork landing in his nest.

When spring arrived, Nadim woke up from a noise which sounded like the sound he made with the wooden slippers. He jumped out of bed and ran outside. There he saw a large black-and-white bird with two long, thin legs standing on the nest. It was clapping with its red beak, which gently drew the residents of Boran to Nadim's tower. That day no one went to the mosque when the sheik called them to prayer. Everyone looked at the wonder of Nadim's tower.

"If there were devils up there, the stork would not dare land there," Nadim said softly, because he did not want to scare the stork away. He watched the stork for the whole day. If it flew away, he became anxious and wandered around like a sleepwalker, just like Adam many years later. The family members said nothing to Nadim if the stork was not on the tower, because then he would not say a word. They thought

that the stork took Nadim's soul with it into the heavens and brought it back when it returned, because when the stork landed on the tower again, Nadim came alive.

With the end of the season, the time of the birds' migration arrived and the stork flew away. This time it circled for longer than normal around the tower and looked at Nadim, as if bidding him farewell.

"Shoot the bird dead, perhaps it won't come back," said one of the women, but Nadim was not listening. The stork flapped its wings graciously and flew higher and higher. Nadim felt that day that the bird would not return. He went to lie down on his bed and shivered with fever. He began to hallucinate and started wasting away and only ate and drank when the wooden slippers were clapped behind the screen. Five weeks later Nadim died.

The family broke the tower until it was lower than the minaret. They burnt the stork's nest, because they thought devils were occupying it, but the following spring the family was awoken by the sound of clapping slippers. The stork looked even bigger this time, because the tower was lower. The family wanted to chase it away, but they were afraid that it would take the soul of one of the family members with it.

The first members of the family were the first inhabitants of Boran. They were named Star. It was said of Dajim that he fled out of the desert fearful of revenge, because he had murdered a Bedouin who had used the name of his sister in a poem. He had sworn that he would not dismount from his horse until he had murdered the Bedouin. So he had been supported on his horse by two men, one on either side, to prevent him from falling off while he slept, and he used a bucket for his bodily functions. Once he had murdered the Bedouin, he immediately jumped off his horse, fell down next to the Bedouin's corpse and screamed from back pain.

One night he had slept with a group of travellers where

Boran would later be founded. Dajim wanted to live in that place. One of the travellers, a soothsayer, smelt the earth and told him that it would be better to move on, because the ground there smelt of dried blood. Dajim, fascinated by the breeze coming from the Thirsty River, decided to settle by himself in the place where they had spent the night, and when the sun rose the first inhabitants of Boran began to build houses with cellars underneath to sleep in during the heat of summer. The first house completed was that of Dajim Star.

Years later the men of the house fled into the cellar out of fear for the Ottomans, who wanted to take all the household's animals and the men to fight in the wars of their vast empire. From this the inhabitants of Boran learnt two things: the size of your moustache indicated how much of a man you were, and the better you listened to the sultan in Istanbul, the more of a Muslim you were. The Ottoman soldiers only saw a horse in Dajim's house, which Dajim had not been able to take underground, and the women and children. The Ottoman soldiers tortured the women with fire, after which one of the women led them to the secret cellar. The soldiers dragged all the men, goats, sheep and chickens outside and took all the men and animals with them to Istanbul. From that day on, the cellar's trapdoor was buried, until the day of the murder of Baan, when Joesr opened the wooden trapdoor to become the final inhabitant of the cellar.

The Star family did not have a good reputation. Nevertheless they were one of the most highly thought of families, highly considered above all others, because no one could see their women. There was not even any proof that the women existed. The men of the household had built a high wall and shut the windows with clay. At that moment in the family there were ten men with thick, black moustaches. Their mother said proudly that if she were to weave their moustaches together she could make a rope that would be able

to hold back a randy bull. The men were so occupied with the honour of the family that they banned any sex in the house. Even if it was screwing with their wives outside the house, behind the palm trees in hidden corners. One day one of the rams of the household jumped on one of the ewes. Because the girls in the house could see what was happening, the men immediately shot the ram dead.

It was one of the sheep which brought misery to the family, as was later to be the case with Kosjer's ram. Rumours were spreading that Dime, the only sister among ten brothers, was the most beautiful woman in Boran. After she had seen what the ram had done with the ewe, she began dreaming about men. She could not talk about it, except with one of the other women, whom she trusted. The woman said to Dime that she would be slaughtered just like the ram if she repeated even just one word of that. Dime, who was never afraid, laughed in the face that warned her. "They killed the ram, not the ewe," she said.

One day a young man from Boran accompanied by his mother knocked on the family's door. The ten brothers told him that no woman with any such name lived in that house and they said it would be the last thing he ever did if he knocked on that door again. So the young man, who had heard of Dime's beauty, but who had never seen her for himself, disappeared.

Then Dime trusted her fate to the sheik of the mosque. The sheik went to the ten brothers and told them that God forbade what they were doing. He spelt out how good sex was for the soul. He became so enthusiastic that he even told them how many positions there were and those which were and were not permitted by God. "Your wife is your field," he said. "Plant it any which way, except from behind." To clarify that the doggie position was allowed, but anal sex not, he continued: "Take your field from behind, but not in the behind. From behind and not in the behind is permitted, but from behind and in behind is not permitted by God." When he had finished explaining,

one of the ten brothers grabbed him, just like Nadim had long ago, by his beard, and dragged him outside like a goat.

Dime was like a flower that happened to blossom in a desolate place. She grew up alone. The seasons stretched out without her being plucked, without her being smelt or being treasured. Her beauty was unsurpassed and it protected her from hands that might have hit her; no one in the family hit her out of respect for her beauty, no one screamed at her or spat in her face. She was not asked to work hard, as the other women in the house were, where they worked harder than the men. For that reason the hormones, when these started swirling in her head, had a lot of room in that graceful body. From that moment on Dime no longer had any peace in her life.

In a house full of chickens, cows, flies and dogs, surrounded by walls of clay, Dime grew up in a few square metres. She was like a sea contained. With a needle in front of the mirror she searched for pimples on her face and then carefully pierced her skin, as if opening a tunnel of light in a dark mountain. If she found no pimples, she pricked her skin with the needle just to feel it. Then she pushed the needle deep into her skin and looked at the growing drop of blood until the moment when it ran down, and she touched the edge of her lip with the needle. That is how she translated her desire to kiss or to touch someone. Sometimes it looked as if her face had been stung by bees. Her mother admonished her, but she did not listen.

Dime became a tall, young woman and as she grew, so her ten brothers made the walls higher, so that no one from outside could see her. After she had gone to the sheik of the mosque, the only time she had been out of the house ever since her breasts had begun to grow, her brothers held her like a prisoner in her room. Once a day she quietly tried to open the door. If it was locked, she tried again the next day. Every day she opened the curtains in front of the densely plastered

window, listened to the clapping of the stork and dreamt that it would take her far away from Boran.

From the sunshine which streamed into her room through one little hole, she began digging into her face with the needle. Every day she cut a piece of her dress off. She began with her sleeves, until she came to her shoulders. Then she began on the collar, until her nipples were visible. She began at the hem, until the dress no longer covered her knees. After that she stuck the needle in her face, until the blood dripped from her round cheeks and her face became a mask of blood with two imprisoned black eyes.

One day one of the women of the house forgot to turn the key in the lock when she removed the pan which Dime used as a toilet. Dime then tried to open the door and this time it moved. Without anyone noticing, she slipped outside. She looked briefly at the stork and then began running naked through the streets of Boran. She screamed the words that are still being repeated, the words which changed the surname of the family from Star to Bird. "Hunter, hunter, my cunt has become a bird."

She ran to the Thirsty River and from the bank, threw herself into the water. Her ten brothers searched for her with a blanket in their hands. This would serve to cover her if she was found, so that no one would see her naked body, but they did not find her. Only when the Thirsty River ran dry the following winter, did one of the brothers come home with her bones and her hair in a sack. He had found her in the little stream at the end of the Thirsty River.

After Dime's death the strong men of the family fled the Bird home with their wives to faraway cities out of shame at her nakedness on the streets of Boran and the family began to lose its prestige in the town. The men earned their daily bread by weaving carpets and nothing of the previous glory of the family remained, except the high wall around the house. The generations who had forgotten Dime thought that the family

had the surname Bird because they were fond of doves and because of the stork's tower, but some of the older women in Boran still recalled the story of Dime. Some women said that the Thirsty River had devoured the flesh of Dime, thrown her bones into the stream and that is why it dried up every year, out of a sense of remorse over the death of Dime.