

**BRIDE OF THE SEA**

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Published by Tin House, Portland, Oregon

Distributed by W. W. Norton and Company

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data TK

Printed in the USA

Interior design by Diane Chonette

[www.tinhouse.com](http://www.tinhouse.com)

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OF  
THE SEA

A NOVEL

EMAN QUOTAH



TIN HOUSE / Portland, Oregon

*“We do tell you the best of stories . . . When Joseph said to his father, ‘O father, I have dreamt eleven stars and the sun and the moon; I saw them prostrating to me’ / [His father] said, ‘O my son, do not tell the story of your dream to your brothers . . .’”*

—*The Qur’an*, SURAT YUSUF (JOSEPH)

# B A S M A L A H

2018

Hannah dreams the family buries her mother, a woman they haven't seen in more than forty years. Hannah herself hasn't seen her mom in twenty years. The family buries Sadie in view of the Red Sea, a few miles from Jidda, where she was born. The water is a perfect, unending slab of turquoise.

Hannah focuses on the horizon. The Arabian Peninsula and everything on it disappear—the land behind her, beneath her, beside her. Hannah stands on firm ground. Ahead of her: miles and miles and miles of sea.

Before the burial and the sea, Hannah is in a small room with low cushions. Her mother's body lies in the middle of the floor on a sheet spread over a silk rug. Women in mourning white hunch over the body, the sleeves of their long dresses rolled to the elbows. Though she can't see their faces, Hannah knows—the way you sometimes know in dreams—who is touching her mother's lifeless

skin. Hannah's grandmother, Aunties Randah and Riham, a handful of female cousins.

They wash the hands and face three times, the arms, the feet, as though preparing the body for prayer. As though the dead could pray. They slide the washcloth down the body's right side and its left side, press the stomach with their flat palms to force a bowel movement. After they wash the body, they expertly swaddle it in white cotton, as though readying a baby for sleep. All that shows is a pale face, cheeks like crumpled sheets of unbleached paper.

The women burn sandalwood incense. In real life, someone would be howling with grief, calling her mother's given name: "Saeedah!" They would call Hannah's name, too, her other name: "Oh, Hanadi! God have mercy on your mother! God forgive her and protect her!"

In this dream: watery silence, as though they are at the bottom of the sea. Her mother looks harmless. Quiet and still. An object.

The sea becomes a great, brown, expansive lake. A sea again. A lake. Hannah turns from the water. Men in white thawbs, brown mishlahs, and white headdresses carry the body, the bundle that is her mother, down a beach that shines like a coin.

The body is veiled, disguised. It could be anyone. Maybe it is not her mother. Maybe bodies have been switched.

Soon the men, these uncles and cousins, both close and distant, are digging and digging, their thawbs hiked up around their waists and tucked into their boxer briefs, their mishlahs and headdresses thrown into a big pile on the sand. Behind the men are waves, and there is sound: a *whoosh* and *crash* and someone cussing, and though Hannah doesn't understand the Arabic words, she recognizes the tone of frustration, like someone stubbing a toe or jolting an elbow.

Meanwhile, the men dig and dig and the sand won't stop filling in, and the cussing continues, and the waves crash.

One of the men realizes they forgot to say God's name before they started. That part Hannah understands—a miracle of dream-translation.

The men put down their shovels. Together, their voices singsong and thrumming, they say,

*Bismillah-ir-rahman-ir-raheem.*

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.



OUT OF THE LAKE

1970



## BUQJAH

In weekly letters to his family in Jidda, Muneer will not write about coming back to the Cleveland Heights rental house after his journalism class and driving up the dark, half-shoveled driveway, his headlights illuminating Saeedah in a bank of snow up to her knees. She wears jeans and a turtleneck stretched tight across her belly, which is as round and hard as if she'd tucked a football under her top. No coat. Her lips are darkened with cold, her hair bright and glistening with flakes. She holds a metal shovel above her head, as though she wants to thwack someone.

He won't write that he's surprised she's home. She never tells him how she spends her time or who she's with, or asks him to drop her off or says she needs the car, or answers with more than "class" or "study group" or "the library" when he asks where she's going with the classmates who come to pick her up.

She is nineteen. He is twenty-three. They have been married for a year and a half and their first child will be born soon. And the word "divorce" is whispering in his ear, a secret no one else knows.

Muneer does not want to hear it. "God forgive me," he says, yanking up the parking brake and leaping out of the car without

cutting the engine. “For God’s sake, what are you doing?” he yells, his voice harsh against the night’s snowy hush. He grabs Saeedah’s arm, and she wrenches it back.

“Come inside,” he whispers. “It’s too cold.”

“I’m sweating.” She leans on the shovel. “Leave me alone.”

“Let me finish the shoveling,” he says. “It’s better for the baby.”

“I can do it.”

Icicles hang like legs of lamb from the eaves of their rental house, and six-foot-high, coal-black snow piles obscure the sidewalks. Standing outside this short time he finds himself shivering despite his long johns, wool socks, fur-lined boots, a turtleneck under a sweatshirt under a down coat. His toes feel like marbles. His breath leaves his body like a storm cloud.

He leaves her shoveling. His fingers stick to the ice-cold door-knob as he opens the unlocked front door. She says it’s the heat of shoveling that made her shed her outerwear, but every day she forgets her hat and gloves, her scarf. This is not the first time she’s ventured into the northeast Ohio winter with no coat.

“Jinn take her,” he mumbles as he shoves his way inside and slams the door.

The foyer’s warmth soothes him, until he sees her gloves like shriveled leaves on the floor. Her scarf winds its serpentine way to the door, as though she took the time to spell her first initial with it as she left. Her stiff knit hat is propped beside the gloves.

He drapes her coat over his arm, turns the porch light on, and again steps outside. Bundled in snow and night, the world looks smaller and snugger than usual.

Saeedah has moved to the driveway—but when he gets nearer, he fears her shovel, the way it slices through the snow, the way

she seems to be keeping him at a distance with the purposefulness of her shoveling. With a deep sense of futility, he holds the coat open while she digs the driveway clean, the sound of her scraping ice echoing along the dark street. Someone else is shoveling somewhere, too. When she gets to the car, she opens the door, reaches in to turn it off, and removes his keys. He comes down the steps. She gives him the keys. He keeps the coat. She goes back to shoveling.

Back in the house, he folds and stacks Saeedah's things and sits in the lawn chair she has placed by the door to take off his boots. He tells himself he has stopped being angry that Saeedah won't take care of herself, or let him take care of her. She'll do what she does, no matter the consequence. His mother told him so, before he and Saeedah were engaged.

He doesn't know what to do.

He tugs his first boot so hard he nearly falls off the chair.

*Jinn take her.*

He heats leftover lentil soup over the stove, ladles it into a bowl, squeezes a little lime into it, leaves it on the table for Saeedah, and goes to bed without eating. He's not hungry.

Every day lately, including these seconds before sleep, is as tension-filled as a final exam. Tonight, as usual, he's wide awake for an hour, listening for her, hearing nothing, not even the door slamming shut—*did she ever come in?*

Her body jostles him awake at two in the morning. They lie under the electric blanket, back to back, an inch of hot, static-y air between them like an unbridgeable river.

He says in English, "You have to bundle up before you go outside." Bundle. Is there an equivalent verb in Arabic? There is a noun: *buqjah*.

She fidgets against him, her feet still ice cold. He shifts his legs up toward his chest and tries again, in Arabic: "We're not in Jidda."

"You've said that before. We're not in Jidda. I say, I'm not a child." Her voice is as icy as her feet. "Maybe you think I should go home to my mother. Maybe I will."

She's threatened to go home before. He knows better than to believe her. He knows how she feels about her mother.

He yearns to feel what they share, to reach around her and touch her belly. The child growing. Something stops him, a lack of courage, as though he is eight years old and staring at a villa's wall. Wanting to climb it, knowing he can get up but not get down. He was that kind of child, one who stopped himself from doing things, who would rather observe. She was the kind of girl who scrambled up and didn't think twice. No risk seemed to scare her; nothing changed her mind.

Who will the baby take after? He prays for an answer. He prays to strike the hidden word "divorce" from his head.