

BETWEEN THE
TWO RIVERS

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A STORY OF THE
ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

AIDA KOUYOUUMJIAN



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe my love and dedication for *Between the Two Rivers* to my mother, Mannig Dobajian Kouyoumdjian. She instilled in me the value of memory—not as a human quality but a privileged responsibility to share. I heard her survival stories in the form of lullabies in Felloujah, Abu-Ghraib, Hillah, Mosul and Baghdad—the locales where my father, Mardiros Kouyoumdjian, was assigned to build a dam or engineer the canal-networks for the Irrigation Department of the Iraqi Government. Her melancholic chants ingrained in me how painful it is to lose one’s family. Her survival stories taught me not to give up—Mannig, to live, and I, to tell her story in English. When asked, “How long did it take you to publish her memoirs?”

“A lifetime.”

After Mannig immigrated to the United States, she and I spent many hours over a cup of Seattle’s delicious coffee talking about her life. We repeated similar scenarios whenever my sister, Maro Kouyoumdjian Rogers of South Carolina, visited us. Eventually, my mom handwrote several stories of her memoirs and, just before her death, in 1985, she recorded a short tape.

You will notice I spelled my father’s surname with the letter ‘**d**.’ Our family name in Iraq remains under the influence of French spelling, requiring a ‘**d**’ for its accurate

pronunciation. On my arrival in America, I wanted to shorten our long and difficult-to-pronounce name. I dropped the letter '**d**.' My mother and my sister followed my example, but my father, who passed on in Baghdad before he could emigrate from Iraq, retained the traditional spelling—as have most members of our kinfolk in the Diaspora.

Personally knowing the principal individuals of ***Between the Two Rivers***, has been my fortune—their names are factual, such as my *morkor*, Adrine, *deidie* Sebouh Papazian, and *diggin* Perouz. The Kouyoumdjians of Felloujah and Baghdad are also identified by their own names. The remaining characters are real, but their names are fictitious. Any resemblance is purely coincidental. My mother spoke of Dikran, Romella, and the sisters from Van, but their true names had faded from her memory.

Thanks to Zola Ross, the founder of the Pacific Northwest Writers Association, for encouraging me to write Mannig's story and later urged me to enter their annual contest. An award in the non-fiction category inspired me to write of the Armenian Genocide, an issue emotive to living Armenians. Every April 24th, the Republic of Armenia and communities throughout the world commemorate the memory of 1.5–2 millions who were annihilated during World War I. We mourn our loved ones who perished and rejoice with the descendants of survivors whose agonizing stories elucidate and expand our historical knowledge—a continuous renewal of our Armenianness.

My gratitude goes to three award-winners in my critiquing group for their editorial expertise who tracked the progress of my mother's story to its completion. Joyce Lindsey O'Keefe, Genie Dickerson and Mary Kay Windham graciously guided the flow of the genre of ***Between the Two Rivers***.

Thanks to Jim Farrell for connecting me with Coffeetown Press, and to Michael Lettini, my neighbor, for his assistance with computer glitches.

I value the tacit support of my sons, Armen, Brian, Roger and their families who never prodded me for a publishing date.

My utmost thankfulness goes to our Lord for protecting my mother from the 'claws of the Ottoman gendarmes' and for all His goodness upon my family.

September 16, 1916—
To the Government of Aleppo:

It was at first communicated to you that the government, by order of the Jemiet, had decided to destroy completely all the Armenians living in Turkey. . . . An end must be put to their existence, however criminal the measures taken may be, and no regard must be paid to either age or sex nor to conscientious scruples.

—TALAAT PASHA, Minister of the Interior

August 22, 1939—I have given orders to my Death Units to exterminate without mercy or pity men, women, and children belonging to the Polish-speaking race. It is only in this manner that we can acquire the vital territory which we need. After all, who remembers today the extermination of the Armenians?

—ADOLF HITLER

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1—Luxury in the Grave

Mannig breathed freely. Ah, but staying alive—a different story.

Her fear of whips vanished with the disappearance of the gendarmes—this, after they drove her family from their beautiful home in Adapazar, near Constantinople. Three years later, they abandoned the deportees in the middle of the Mesopotamian Desert and disappeared like a mirage.

Mannig wallowed in freedom now. At the age of ten—more likely younger—she depended on her own wits to fend for herself. She had no skills for survival, but eventually emerged profoundly mature through blocking out horrific memories. She managed to remember only a kaleidoscopic Adapazar from her early childhood—twirling in her yellow dress; air swirling between her legs; melodies on Mama’s violin; warmth from the charcoal brazier. I’m alive! My happy days will survive. Like the flickering rays of the hurricane lamp in their parlor, bits and pieces of her family’s devotion helped her survive her grief. Ignoring pain was her way to resist the suffering brought by the annihilation of her loved ones. I must not forget. Who cared if her toe hurt? Foraging for edibles in this famine-stricken city of Mosul absorbed her wakeful hours.

A chilly November in 1918 summoned a cruel winter in the largest city along the northern shores of the Tigris River. The winds blew in from the rugged Taurus Mountains and swept across the metropolis before cooling the Mesopotamian Desert.

Mannig squinted into a gust of cold wind and shivered. She folded her bare arms and looked at the midday sun. It peeked above the high roofs of the deep alley. Unlike the

blistering sun of the desert, this sun barely emitted warmth. Even their sun is weak. She slid her hands inside the wide armholes; the tawny burlap sack dangled down her bony shoulders.

Ahkh! She yelped at her chilled hands, as her fingertips crawled up and around her hunger-distended belly. Why is my foodless stomach so large? In Adapazar, her family had laughed when she sucked in her belly to touch her back—even after stuffing herself with mante, Mama’s specialty of pastry squares stuffed with ground spicy lamb. Her tummy had been flat when she lived with the Bedouin, too. They had sheltered her in their tent for several months after they rescued her from the scorching sun. She had gobbled Arabic bread stuffed with zesty onions and never hungered, but her stomach had been flat then. Now, she hardly found anything to send down her stomach, yet when she wanted to see her toes, a protruding belly hindered the view.

Mannig’s stomach growled—a cue to look for food morsels.

A wad of cloth in a pile of rubbish steered her to forage down the alley. A hop across the open sewer-ditch, and she pulled on the rag. Could it be a coat?

Before salvaging it, she scanned her surroundings for other scavengers preparing to pounce on her. None emerged. Bent in half, she freed a piece of cord from the trash and mud. Disgusted at such a useless find, she almost discarded it, and then she changed her mind—a find is a find, in spite of its stink. She belted the rotten sack and covered her body with it. Ahkh! She shuddered. The rotten coarse fibers of the garment scratched against her bare skin; it needled the sores on her chest and back. She pressed her exposed arms close to her ribs and snuggled her hands in her armpits, a stance she often adopted to prevent her budding breasts from peeking from the ragged armholes.

Mannig sauntered into an unfamiliar alley. Chatter, clatter, and smells enticed her deeper into it. A whiff of yeast

wafted from the billowing smoke of a chimney. Like the Adapazar bakery? She dashed to the adobe walls and peered through a window-like hole. “Khattir Allah, Joo’aaneh,” she sniffed and cried. “For God’s sake. I’m hungry.”

“Imshee!” the woman shooed Mannig away. “Scat! We’re all hungry. All of Mosul is starving; millions of us are always hungry.”

I don’t want bread for all of them; I only want a bite for me.

Not far ahead, a prominent minaret pierced the chilly blue sky, and the mu’adthin’s melancholic chant reminded the Muslims of their vows. In Adapazar, the opening scores of Allah-oo-Akbar had aroused Mannig to sing along the prayer of God is great—if not loudly, at least humming with the clergy’s trills and tremolos. She relished the carefree image of her life four years before.

Adapazar belonged to the past.

In Mosul, hunger squashed other sensations.

Across from the bakery, Mannig lingered over the aroma of the seething sesame oil gusting from fritters over an open fire. Her nostrils flared. She smiled at the Kurdish woman poking the embers.

“Khattir Allah, Joo’aaneh,” she cried, eying the woman.

“Imshee!” the woman shooed Mannig off with her arm and crouched closer to her pan. She readjusted her ocher-checked scarf around her head. “If I give you food today, my own children will waste away tomorrow.”

Mannig knew the futility of competing with children who had a mother.

She swerved around just when a jeering “Get out of my way!” shout startled her. She barely dodged a ragged fellow tugging at his donkey. She gazed at the animal. Its back curved low under the weighty water sloshing in goat-skin sacks; the protruding ribs framed its back like the mangy dogs scavenging nearby.

She caught her breath. Kheghj esh. Poor donkey! It must be as starved as she.

Her heart thumped in rhythm to the pounding of two coppersmiths. They hammered pretty, shiny bowls a few strikes and then rested to chat with each other.

“We work, and we work,” complained the younger one. “But we haven’t sold anything since the Ottomans retreated from Mosul.”

“Conditions will change as soon as the Englaizees arrive,” the sage said. “They will promote commerce here, just as they are doing in Basra. Hear my words, young man. They are headed this way even as we speak.”

“I wish they would hurry. I want them to drive away the Kurds ... and ... keep the Turkomen within their separate enclaves,” the youth waved his hammer in the air and struck his bowl. “We want Mosul for us, the Arabs. Those ethnic tribes are stealing our businesses, and soon they will wed our women. I hope the Englaizees will remember that we, the Arabs, helped them in the Big War. Without us, they wouldn’t have crushed the hated Ottomans. When will the English come? ”

No food hand-out here, Mannig told herself. She ambled by while glancing at their brown striped robes, reminiscent of the Bedouin garments.

“They will come soon,” the sage said, lifting his hammer.

“Sure they will—after we’ve starved and gone,” the youth said just when Mannig caught his glance. “She’s starving too,” he pointed the hammer at her. “But I bet she won’t for long. She’s pretty.”

No one had called her pretty in four years. It made her feel nice inside. She flashed a smile, but she stopped short when he shifted his stance and grabbed his crotch. He fondled himself while he ogled her.

Nudged by instinct to shield herself, Mannig tucked her elbows in to hide any bare flesh sneaking through the large armholes of her burlap dress. Spurred by survival energy,

she dashed round the bend, out of the bazaar, and into a new alley.

No starvelings here? What luck. Scrawny arms dangling like dried cloth from her shoulders, and skeletal legs like useless sticks, she darted from stone to rubbish. Ahkh. Hop, hop: she jumped to alleviate the sharp sting in her infected toe. Zakhnaboot. She stubbed her wound again. It's never going to heal! To check the damage, she stuck her foot out beyond her malnutrition-distended belly. The toe bled; the gash ached anew. Shoes! I must find shoes ... one shoe? But first, I need food, then a coat ... and then shoes.

She explored alleys farther beyond the khan, the abandoned inn for caravans that she called home. She needed something to eat before spending the night with the horde of Armenian orphans, all of whom were just like her—scrawny, pathetic, and alone.

In spite of Mannig's petite stature, she dreamed big. Searching for edibles occupied all her waking breaths, but her heart's desire nudged for things beyond. She wanted to read and write, like her older sister, Adrine. She fantasized about becoming a teacher, like Miss Romella, her kindergarten tutor in Adapazar.

A large brick building cast a shadow in her path. A school? She visualized herself seated at a desk, donned in her gray uniform with pink embroidered MB, MangaBardez—denoting kindergarten. “Who can count from one to ten?” Miss Romella's voice echoed in Mannig's head. How she used to squeal, wiggle and raise her hand before the other children to answer the teacher's question first. I will be number one!

Her curiosity about the building ended fast.

Swathed in the dun Kurdish turban and a pair of brown sharwal, a man creaked open the huge mahogany door while pulling up a riotously brilliant jacket over an open necked shirt.

His size, more than his appearance, scared Mannig, and she dashed away as far away as she could. School musschool! Being housed with a family like her sister prevailed over her scholarly ambition.

She knocked on a door of an adobe dwelling. “Can I do chores for you?”

“You’re too puny,” the khatoon shooed her off, slamming the door.

“You’re good for nothing,” cackled the matriarch at the next house.

“I do the chores here,” said a tall orphan who opened the gate of a tenement.

“Your looks will scare the young ones,” said the master of the next dwelling.

My looks? Not long before, someone had called her pretty.

She scurried in and out of dirt heaps, evading the littered stones to prevent re-opening the wound in her toe. As if sidestepping the poppies in her father’s orchard, she skipped here and there. Adapazar loomed ... so far away. It stayed fresh with her; she wore her licorice-black shoes. Three long years ago. How foolish to discard them in the desert just because they felt hot and heavy on her feet! The buried pain surfaced and accentuated the throbbing pain of the present. The desert heat between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers failed to melt the agony, and Mama wasn’t alive to take away her pain.

Entering a side street, Mannig saw her sister, Adrine, fetching water in a goatskin, saddled to her back as if she were a vendor—more like a donkey in the bazaar.

“Why are you lugging water?” Mannig asked, walking backward in front of her sister to face her.

“We don’t have a well,” Adrine said. “Now get out of my way.”

Mannig stepped aside. “Are you a water vendor, now?”

“No!” Adrine’s voice rose in irritation. “The khatoon makes me fetch water because the Tigris flows nearby, and she doesn’t have to pay a vendor.”

Mannig sauntered beside her sister. “Will the lady of the house give you a lot of food for all of this work?”

“Hah!” Adrine sneered. “She gives me only bread.” she snorted, raising her nostrils, the sole characteristic of her personality remaining intact. Adrine, bonier and skinnier than Mannig, maintained a radiant, pinkish complexion under the black abaya, swathing her from head to ankles like an Arab woman.

Mannig noticed changes in her sister since the bad thing happened to her. She forgot the word the grownups used for when the gendarmes had hurt her in the middle of the desert. They hurt the big girls, too. Oh, rape! Mannig prided herself in recalling a word absent in her daily vocabulary. Rape, rape, she repeated silently. They had raped all the maidens on the deportee route. Not Mannig. Why bother with the sooty, ugly, and puny, when older ones whetted their appetites? Mannig hurt at how Adrine’s identity had changed to a mode of mere existence. She had become a living lump, dependent upon others. She no longer resembled the beautiful, matured girl of fourteen she had been. But she did everything right when told what to do. The Kurdish khatoon took advantage of harboring a Christian orphan. She required Adrine to clean the house, wash the clothes, and attend to three pre-teen children. And when the master of the house returned with his caravan, she yelled, “The Sahib is here!”, the cue to collect the camel dung, squash it into patties and lay them on the flat roof of the house to dry. Before descending, Adrine lugged down a stack of the dried-up patties for fuel to bake the bread.

“Can you give me some of your bread?” Mannig raised her voice, swallowing a painful jolt of hunger.

“No!” Adrine yelled and veered aside with the water sloshing on her back.

Mannig rejected such an answer. Hobbling close behind her sister, she entered a high adobe-fenced courtyard and snuck inside the mud brick enclosure.

“I told you not to come here,” Adrine whispered, dropping the goatskin with relief. She whisked Mannig behind burlap curtains, the family courtyard buffer from the camel shed. “If the khatoon sees you loitering, she will accuse me of stealing food for you.”

“So why don’t you steal food and give it to me?” Mannig prodded. “I’m your sister.”

“Steal?”

“Yes—if I were in your place, I would do anything for my little sister.”

“You say such things because you are not in my place,” Adrine said.

“If you don’t give me bread, I will die like Mama and Baba and ...”

“Hush!” Adrine hissed. “Shut your mouth and don’t talk of them. Now get out of here!”

It hurt Mannig, too, to remember her parents’ deaths. It saddened her to relive the pain of being left alone. But nothing stung as much as hunger. She connived to exploit every bit of her past for a bite. “You and I are our only family left. If you don’t give me bread, I, too, will die ... and you will be the only one ...”

“Adi? Adi?” The khatoon’s voice ended Mannig’s doomsday theatrics.

“I’m coming,” Adrine said.

Adi? Adrine lost even her own name. Mannig always surmised her sister was given the pretty name because she was the first child in her family. People uttered Adrine melodically. Not Mannig—guttural and final. Setrak, her brother’s name, was harsh too, but then he was a boy. She missed him so. She wouldn’t dwell upon his death in the refugee camp.

“Where are you, girl?” the yelling continued. “Bring five dung patties and start the fire. The dough is ready. Adi? Adi?”

“Now go!” Adrine shoved Mannig out. “Go, before she throws me out.”

“I’m going to wait for you outside,” Mannig said, leaning against the mud brick enclosure in the alley. “Right here—until you bring some bread for your sister.”

“Adi? Adi?” The khatoon’s voice was closing in.

Adrine growled low in her throat and rushed back inside the courtyard.

Mannig squatted on the unpacked dust and waited, uncertain of her sister’s return. She picked up a dry leaf, shook off its dust, and into her mouth it went.

She looked for more within reach. If only she were sitting among the red-red poppies of Adapazar, instead of stones stabbing her toes and prickly leaves gnashing her bloody mouth. If only green grass grew—somewhere, in the cracks or the mud walls. In Mosul? The parched city? Even the rains avoided it.

Her gaze followed the dust rising at the heels of every passerby. Tiny specks funneled like dirt devils before settling in crannies. There was none of the trees and shrubs in lush emerald hues that she remembered surrounding her Adapazar home.

The high sun traipsed above the flat roofs, removing the chill of a November noonday. Comfort escaped Mannig’s thoughts. Leaning against the door, she waited for Adrine’s compassion. Would her sister share her daily bread today?

“Mye, mye!” The voice of a water vendor wafted over the jingling bells on his donkey’s halter. He stopped at the door across the alley and after chanting mye, mye several times, the door opened and the trading ensued—a goat-skin full of water for a cluster of dates. He ate one and spit out the pit.

Mannig dashed to the pit and popped it into her mouth. She sucked and sucked on it, following him to the next door hoping for more. The next payment was a bag of grain, perhaps rice. Not helpful. The waterman tucked it inside his vest.

Anticipating the waterman's next stop, Mannig rushed back to the walls of Adrine's courtyard. She assumed an exchange of water for bread, being baked in the khatoon's courtyard. She planned her strategy to grab the loaf and run.

To Mannig's chagrin, the waterman bypassed the khatoon's door. He has seen Adrine lugging the water herself.

I wish I owned a goatskin. I could carry its water-weight better than the donkey in the bazaar. No one could brush me away like the fat woman for being so small and useless. Mannig could hear her even now, "Your kind is worthless; you don't do anything, and you eat everything."

Footsteps in the courtyard approached the gate. She jumped up. Adrine? Bringing bread for her?

Her sister stood at the threshold, eyes widening upon seeing Mannig.

Mannig faced her, disgusted at the sight of a pair of empty hands. She is the worthless one. But no one knew that.

"Look, Mannig," Adrine whispered. "Just because we are sisters, it is no reason for both of us to be homeless. Do you want me to lose my livelihood for your sake?"

Mannig worried about her own empty stomach, not her sister. She sniffled and cast a pleading eye. Her insides hurt—her heart as much as her hunger. The end of day waned, and her hands were empty. How to end her desperation? She scratched a sore on her chest. The sting brought tears to her eyes.

She noticed a sudden nervous shift in Adrine's stance. Did her sister actually feel sorry for her? Exactly what

Mannig wanted. She resumed a noisier snuffle, throwing in a moan.

Suddenly, Adrine stood motionless—staring with glassy eyes and rubbing her hands as if she were washing them clean, a compulsion since the gendarme's attack on her.

For the first time, Mannig noticed how Adrine's hazel eyes lacked expression. The color seeped out of her face and breaths, shallow. Many of her features were defined by straight lines: quill eyebrows, pointy nose, and narrow lips. But mostly, wariness waxed across her face. Much taller than Mannig, Adrine towered over most Armenian girls. The difference between the two sisters made it hard to believe they claimed the same parents. Mannig envied the combed, silky hair and the floral, feminine tunic on her sister's lanky body. Most of all, she wished for a similarly flat belly.

Adrine stood stiff, eyes glazed. She rubbed, cupped, and shook her hands, over and over again.

Mannig really looked into her sister's eyes; she probed deep, thoughtful, and penetrating. Whatever rape was, it must be something horrifying. Its meaning? Why her sister's strange actions? Those escaped her. She lacked understanding what rape really meant; she only knew that Adrine was harmed in a way that she herself had never been.

Mannig had witnessed atrocities during the deportation, but she was spared physical pain upon her own body. She saw her family perish: Baba suffered bastinado lashings on the soles of his feet until he expired; Haji-doo, at 70, slowed the pace of the deportees, prompting the gendarmes to shoot her down; Hagop-Jahn was shoved off the cliff with all 'boys 12 and older'; her younger sister was suffocated in the cattle train, brother died of typhoid, and Mama, of influenza at the deportation camp in Deir Zor. Mannig relished her luck in surviving the Ottoman onslaught of the Armenian massacre but only understood the pain of hunger. Finding food engulfed her whole being. It ravaged her. Only Adrine's lifeless face and impenetrable demeanor surpassed her hurt.

No, no. She rebuffed her desires to exchange places. She'd rather remain hungry than have Adrine's memories.

A sudden twinge in Mannig's heart mellowed her thoughts. She leaned forward to grab Adrine's hand. "Stop washing them," she said. "They are clean now. Go in and close the door. I am walking away now. See? I am leaving."

Adrine reawakened into the present. She straightened her neck and held her stance on the threshold of her abode. "Wait!" she said. "Come back tomorrow. Uhm! Tomorrow. When the Sahib returns from his travels. Tomorrow, the khatoon will be busy with the sahib and, and, and she will concern herself with things other than what I do. Yes, come tomorrow. I will give you ... "

Before she finished her promise, Mannig kissed her from face to hands, back to face with uncontrollable zeal. Real tears rolled down her cheeks. "I am so lucky to have you as my sister. I will go away immediately. You say I should come tomorrow? You really want to help your little sister. I will come here only when you want me." Mannig took a breath and, without a second glance at Adrine, vanished among the noonday rambles in the alley.

Her thoughts ran as fast as her feet. Besides anticipating the morsels in her mouth, her head reconstructed every word and each action that aroused Adrine's sympathy. She must remember the details—was it her tears? Her face? Voice? Could the touching of hands have made a difference? She must keep those images vivid, in case she needed to resort to them again.

Children's giggling and the splashing of water lured Mannig downhill into an alley, and unexpectedly, the shores of the Tigris River lay below. Women flocked into the path, some carrying copper jugs, others clay pitchers, filled with water. A few sidestepped down to the riverbank to fill theirs.

Mannig squinted at the glistening river in the brightness of the midday sun. Children's voices swooped in from the opposite shores of the wide river and co-mingled with the

ones on her side. The river flowed low and tawny, its twirling gentle currents dissipating into the water's edge.

Mannig slowed her stride among the babbling women. Most looked like Arabs—dressed in the traditional black abaya. Some attended the children, who dipped in and out of the water with excited voices, while others crouched in twos or threes.

One woman came from behind Mannig, her anklets clinking until she stepped into the water. She slowed her pace, scuffing the bottom of the shoreline to assure a steady foothold. Moving deeper into the current, she dunked her jug. When the trapped air bubbled out and the jug was filled, she swung it to her shoulder and carefully waddled to shore and back up the hill, water drops trailing her

Mannig followed her. “That’s too heavy for you. Let me carry it.”

“I must do it myself,” the woman said. “Otherwise, I won’t get paid.”

Dejected again, Mannig turned toward the river and waded in. She sprinkled a few drops of water on her head. It felt good. She plunged down to her waist, stirring up silt; the murky water swished around her. Cool tingling up her breasts felt even better. She plopped down and wiggled her hips, sliding farther down the slope. She giggled when her burlap dress ballooned up to her chin. Silt and sludge twirled in front of her face and then floated down with the curving current. The cool water against the sores on her chest was like a smooth hand of healing, not unlike the jasmine oil Mama had rubbed on her knee in the Turkish bathhouse. She blinked. Oh Adapazar! Thoughts of childlike carelessness overwhelmed her. Adapazar existed a long time ago, thriving only in her head.

She must care for her wounds. The promise of food changed her attitude and gave her a new outlook on life. She dunked her face and swished it in the water. Realizing moisture made it easier, she whisked her fingers across her

eyelids and scraped the crusts off her lashes. Her cheeks came next, but she stopped short at the stinging, red-hot infected lip. With her hand, she blew off a few floating twigs for a drink, then took another sip. More gulps followed. It felt good to send something to her stomach, cool and wet, though just water,

Upon leaving the river, she sensed a joy at being alive. She must come back for another dip soon. Energized, she wandered toward the distant echo of another Muslim prayer chant. Water slid off her rag dress, and the sun, still high, dried it as she wandered. Up ahead, the mosaic-tiled dome of a mosque seemed to float in the haze. She knew Islam beckoned the men from their chores to the afternoon worship. If they were near water, they washed their hands and feet; if not, they pretended to wash them, almost like Adrine.

Adi. A new name for her sister. Did Adrine adopt Islam? No, no. She pretended to wash her hands. The Muslims in Mosul pretended “cleanliness” of the body and mind, as a symbolic gesture before praying. One man, a few yards ahead of Mannig, spread a prayer rug in the alley and fell onto his knees—in silence. Pedestrians also held their silence, perhaps the whole city, inside and out—except for the mu’adhin, who climbed atop the slender balcony surrounding the minaret and chanted Qur’anic verses. Mannig stood silent too, listening. Her Christian faith remained in name only, while the Muslim melody elevated her soul. Her spirit soared with the waves of the resonating voice.

Mannig explored one new alley after another, hoping to find something to eat before returning to the khan. She stopped at the outskirts of the city. A cemetery? Her curiosity led her into the furrows and mounds, dug and piled. The absence of markers bearing names and dates didn’t bother her. She was unable to read anyway. Even if she had learned, what difference would that make? No one

in her family had received any formal burial in the desert between the two rivers. They had perished and died, and her loving family had vanished. She remembered hearing the deported Armenians complain about not being able to breathe under the whips of the gendarmes. How they were mistaken! Now, free from the Ottoman persecution, they breathed normally, but to stay alive, everyone struggled. With persistent effort, she blocked out the wrenching memories of her loved ones. Why did the painful realities hound her? Perhaps she was loitering at the threshold of a dead-end territory.

She leaped across a shallow pit and sidestepped a mound of fresh soil. On her way out, she saw an old empty grave pit. A dog's bark startled her. It won't see me in the hole! She slid down into it. With dirt, pebbles, and gravel crumbling under her feet, she fell with a thump into the empty grave. She shut her eyes. The dog suddenly yelped with pain as if someone had kicked it on its rear. She held her breath until the barking faded away.

A flash of greenery surrounded her. Not believing such luck, her eyeballs ballooned in their sockets—so much that the muscles around her eyes hurt. Unlike one who, finding the treasure sought, in the first moment of delight ignores the find, she feared that every orphan in Mosul had seen the vibrant vision of her green grass. Rejoicing at her solitude, in her private domain, she luxuriated beside the lush leaves! A yellow-yellow dandelion! She plucked it with her left hand. A green-green clover! Off with her right. With gusto, both slid down her throat. But a limey-lime blade required chewing. Ahkh! That required jaw and lip movement—so painful with a split and infected lower lip. In minimizing the burning sensation, Mannig had resorted to holding her facial muscles tight and immobile. A continuous supply of grasses, the sweetness of dandelions, the mintiness of clovers, and the tanginess of sumac led to the pain of her infected lip and perhaps also to its healing. She broke off one green blade

after another in dreamlike bliss, feasting on what belonged to her, and only to her.

What a day! Adrine promised to give her food tomorrow. Her sores pained her less after soaking in the river. The foliage quieted her grumbling stomach.

She wanted to stay in the grave and guard her cache forever.

What if Romella, as promised, came back to fetch her, but found no trace of her in the khan?