



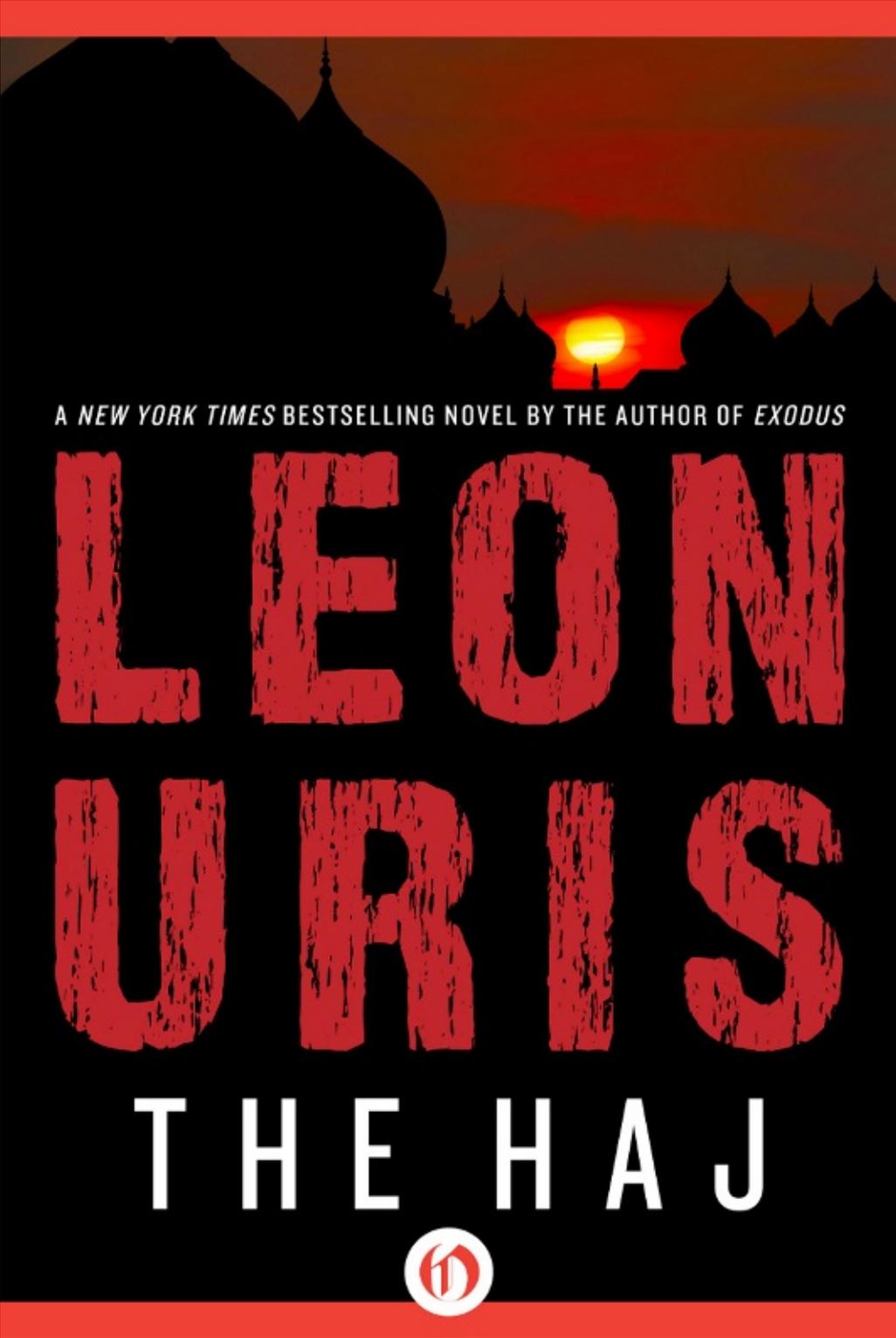
A NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING NOVEL BY THE AUTHOR OF *EXODUS*

LEON

URIS

THE HAJ





THE HAJ

Leon Uris



For
MARK

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A Biography of Leon Uris

In order to spend the years necessary to travel, research, and write a novel such as *The Haj*, the writer must necessarily become a self-centered creator and is apt to test the strength of his relationships. My wife, Jill, embraced this project with no less devotion than myself. She unselfishly gave everything: compassion, loyalty, love. She took care of me, often in dark and dangerous places. And importantly, she made a major contribution by her astute and wise advice during the writing. These pages could scarcely have been written without such a partner at my side.

I was already aware from writing *Trinity* that my research associate, Diane Eagle, possessed a mystical quality of understanding what I was trying to say and what the story required. *The Haj* was a ponderous challenge for any researcher. She answered by pulling a thousand and one brilliant reports. Each day when I went into battle at the typewriter, the facts in these reports were close at hand and immediate assistance was only an office away. She not only added considerably to the background and authenticity of the novel, she lightened my work load immensely. Mostly, I want to thank Diane as a buddy for her unfaltering friendship to Jill and me.

Many of the events in The Haj are a matter of history and public record. Many of the scenes were created around historical incidents and used as a backdrop for the purpose of fiction.

There may be persons alive who took part in events similar to those described in this book. It is possible, therefore, that some may be mistaken for characters in the novel.

Let me emphasize that all the characters in The Haj are the complete creation of the author, and entirely fictional.

The exceptions, of course, are the recognizable public figures who were associated historically with this period, such as David Ben-Gurion, the Mufti of Jerusalem, Abdullah, Yigal Allon, and others.

Arabic and Hebrew words often have many different spellings when translated. I have settled on the easiest and most recognizable spelling for the reader.

Prelude

1922

YOUNG IBRAHIM QUIETLY TOOK his place at his father's bedside, watching the old man wheeze out his final scene.

The glazed eyes of the sheik gave his son an inkling of recognition and he rallied his remaining strength. Reaching beneath the pillow, he withdrew the jeweled dagger and, trembling, handed it to Ibrahim, enacting the ancient rite of the passage of power.

'This belongs to Farouk,' Ibrahim said. 'He is my elder.'

'Your brother is a dog with no teeth,' the father rasped. 'Already the others are conspiring to select a new muktar. The power must remain with us, the Soukoris,' he said and thrust the dagger into his son's hand. 'It is small, as weapons go,' the sheik said, 'but it is the weapon by which we rule our people. They know the meaning of the dagger and the courage of the man who can drive it in to the hilt.'

The old sheik died and the village wailed, and true to his dying thoughts, the four other clans had selected a new muktar for Tabah, breaking the Soukori hold of a century. An hour after his father was buried, Ibrahim invited eight of the leading members of the other clans to his home. In the center of the room stood a crude wooden table. Ibrahim suddenly produced eight knives and stabbed them in a line into the planking, then pulled back his robes, revealing the jeweled dagger.

'I believe,' he said, 'it is time that we hold an election for the new muktar. If anyone disagrees with the continuity of the Soukori rule ...' He left the sentence unfinished and waved an open hand at the array of knives. Ordinarily the election of a new muktar would take a thousand hours of haggling before coming to the conclusion that Ibrahim had now presented to them. This election was over within a minute, with each of the eight adversaries stopping before him one at a time, bowing, kissing his hand, and declaring his loyalty.

Ibrahim al Soukori was in his mid twenties and Muktar of Tabah, and he knew the power of the dagger in Arab life.

Part One

The Valley of Ayalon

1

1944

I AM ISHMAEL. I WAS born in Palestine during the riots of 1936. Since many things written here took place before my birth, you ask, ‘How could Ishmael know of them?’ Take the case of my father, Ibrahim, becoming the Muktar of Tabah. In our world the repetition of stories is a way of life. Everyone eventually knows all of the tales of the past.

Other events happened here when I was not present. Aha! How could I know of these? Do not forget, my esteemed reader, that we Arabs are unusually gifted in matters of fantasy and magic. Did we not give the world *A Thousand and One Nights*?

There are times I will speak to you in my own voice. Others will speak in theirs. Our tale comes from a million suns and moons and comets and all that I cannot possibly know will reach these pages with the help of Allah and our special magic.

As a male child I was entitled to my mother’s breasts for as long as I demanded them and was not weaned until my fifth birthday. Usually this signaled the boy was coming out of the kitchen, but I was small and still able to hide among the women. My mother, Hagar, was a large woman with great breasts. Not only were they filled with milk, but they gave me a place where I could nestle and feel an enormous comfort. I managed to hide from the world of men until 1944, when I was eight years of age. One day my father, Ibrahim, sent my mother away to her own village many miles to the south. She was rarely given time off, so her sudden departure was both traumatic and ominous for me. As an infant and a young child, I lived with women who sheltered and protected me. My grandmother had raised me part of the time because my mother not only had the duties of the kitchen, the house, and the family, but she worked in the big fields and attended the plot beside the house as well. It was a few days after my grandmother died that my mother was sent away.

Fetching water had been my only chore. I had gone to the village well with my mother every day. Now she was gone. I was greeted with taunts. The women all cackled and laughed at me. They told me my father was going to take a second wife. That was why my father had sent her out of the village, to spare himself her anger and humiliation. Soon my playmates joined in the chorus of taunts and some threw stones at me.

I saw my father taking his morning stroll to the coffeehouse, which was owned by him and my Uncle Farouk and which was where he spent most of his day. I ran up to him and cried about what was happening. As usual, he brushed me aside harshly, walking on. I ran after him and tugged at his coat, a tug barely strong enough to demand his attention. As he turned I threw my little fist at him and said I hated him.

My father grabbed me by the arm and shook me so violently I thought I would faint. Then he tossed me like garbage, so that I landed in the open sewer that ran down from the top of the village.

There I was, dressed as a girl, shrieking at the top of my lungs. I could feel salt from my tears and snot from my nose dripping into my mouth. I shrieked in desperation, for even at that age I realized there was nothing I could do about my situation. There was no way to either rebel or protest.

I have seen that little boy over and over again in refugee camps playing in garbage dumps, being hit and shaken and taunted by adults and family and playmates. All screaming to an unhearing Allah.

Our Village of Tabah sat near the road to Jerusalem. My family was of the Soukori clan, which had once belonged to the Wahhabi Bedouin tribe. The Wahhabi were great warriors who came from the Arabian Peninsula about two hundred and fifty years ago and purified the region for Islam through sword and fire.

Eventually the power of the Wahhabi was broken by invading Turkish and Egyptian armies. Many of the clans split off from the main tribe and some migrated to Palestine. Our branch of the tribe roamed an area between Gaza and Beersheba, crossing back and forth from the Negev to the Sinai deserts.

Several clans, numbering over a hundred and fifty families, moved north and settled on the land. However, we still retained very close ties with the Wahhabi through marriage, reinforced at festival and wedding and funeral times, and we used them as cameleers during the harvest and manure-gathering seasons.

My father, Ibrahim, was a great man who was feared and respected in the entire region. My father was not only the mukhtar, the head of the village, he was the agent of

the landowners. Our family were sayyids, direct descendants of the Prophet Mohammed, and this gave us status above the others. In addition to Tabah, there were smaller villages of former Wahhabi Bedouin in the area and he controlled them as well. My father's power came from the fact that he ran the legal, clerical, and police apparatus and was endowed to verify the documents that spelled out the property and inheritances of the villagers. He was the only one in the area who had made the Haj, the pilgrimage to Mecca. A painting and the date over the front door of our house commemorated the glorious event.

At first he was known as Ibrahim al Soukori al Wahhabi, to denote his clan and tribe, but Arab names change with the birth of male children. Unfortunately, my parents' first two were girls and this was a small disaster. Everyone, particularly the women at the village well, whispered behind his back that he was Abu Banat, A Father of Daughters, a most terrible insult.

My father threatened to get rid of my mother, who had brought this humiliation to him. She begged for a final chance, and by Allah's will their third child was a son, my oldest brother, Kamal. After Kamal's birth my father could then assume the honorable title of Ibrahim Abu Kamal, which means 'Abraham, father of Kamal.'

Three more sons followed Kamal and my father basked in glory. But alas, there were three more daughters before my own birth. One of my brothers and two of my sisters died before I ever knew them. My brother died from cholera. One of my sisters died of the stomach and the other from a chest ailment. They all died before their first year. It was usual for a family of ten to lose three or more children, but my father felt particularly blessed to have four sons who survived.

My two oldest sisters were eventually contracted into marriage. They married in the Wahhabi tribe but to men from distant villages. As was the custom, they went off to live in the home of their husband's parents.

My father was only a young man, in his early twenties, when he declared himself muktar, 'the elected one.' His father had been muktar and when he died there was to be a new election. The sheiks of the other four clans had agreed that the eldest among them would take over the position. However, my father disagreed and the story of his courage and greatness has been told many, many times.

Ibrahim had been born five years before the turn of the century. When he became muktar he had achieved the most exalted position in the village, for he no longer had to work. In a short time, he had three sons, one remaining daughter, and a wife, all of working age. He had the best and most of the land, collected the rents, and governed

six villages. He did not even wear field shoes but shoes that others wore only on the Sabbath.

My Uncle Farouk was a slave to my father. He and my father owned the village café and store together. Uncle Farouk had been a sickly child and had been left in the kitchen to die, but as the fate of Allah would have it, he was discovered by some Christian missionaries who had a nearby settlement and they nursed him to health and also taught him to read and write. He was the only truly literate person in Tabah and my father was able to use Farouk's great powers to his personal advantage.

Ibrahim would make a perfunctory round of calls each day on his way from the house to the café, fingering his worry beads, reciting the Koran under his breath, and generally reinforcing his position. Most of the day he held court at the café, smoking his water pipe, greeting, and sincerely listening to complaints of the villagers. Mainly, he and the other men repeated stories from the past.

When my father came home each night, my mother and sister, Nada, washed his feet and he sat in an oversized chair. Just before the meal, my brothers came into the room, knelt, kissed his hand, and reported on their day's work. Uncle Farouk or some male cousins or friends were generally invited to the meal, which was eaten while sitting on the floor, and they ate with their fingers from a common plate. Later, my mother, Nada, and I ate in the kitchen from the leftovers.

My father owned the best horse in the village, a faint remainder of our Bedouin past. My next older brother, Jamil, was responsible for grooming him. Once during each phase of the moon my father rode off to settle matters in surrounding villages. He was an extraordinary sight to behold, galloping off with his special robes flowing out behind him.

Until the day I was abruptly weaned from my mother, my life had been pleasant enough. The only child left who was near my age was my sister Nada, who was two years older. I loved her very much. We were still allowed to play together because I was in the province of the women, but I knew that the day would soon come when I would be forbidden to have a friendship with a girl, even though she was my own sister.

Nada had great brown eyes and liked to tease and hug me. To this day I can feel her fingers rubbing through my hair. She took care of me, often. All the mothers worked in the fields and if there was no old grandmother to attend the children, they had to look out for themselves.

We had no toys except what we made of sticks and yarn, and until I saw the

Jewish kibbutz I did not know that things like playgrounds or toy rooms or libraries even existed. Nada had made a doll of sticks and cloth that she named Ishmael, after me, and she would pretend to nurse it against her tiny nipples. I think she had her nursing fantasy because, as a girl, she had been weaned at an early age and I still had the privilege of my mother's breasts.

My mother continually tried to push me over the threshold into the room to join with the men, but I was in no hurry to leave the warmth and comfort of the women for a place I sensed was hostile.

2

MY FATHER TOOK AS HIS second wife Ramiza, who was the youngest daughter of Sheik Walid Azziz, chief of the Palestinian Wahhabi Bedouin tribe. The great sheik was my father's uncle, so his new wife was also his first cousin. She was sixteen and my father almost fifty. After their wedding my mother was allowed to return to Tabah.

I never saw my mother smile again.

My father's bedroom had the only raised bedstead in the village. Everyone else slept on goatskin rugs or thin mats. The room that is usually built for a second wife had not been completed, so my father took Ramiza to his bed and ordered my mother to sleep in the adjoining room on the floor. There was an opening atop the door between the two rooms to allow the breezes to flow through the house, so everything that happened in the bedroom could clearly be heard in the next room.

I slept with my mother, folded up in her arms, my head between her breasts. When my father and Ramiza made love every night, my mother lay awake, only a few feet from them, forced to listen to them have sex, sometimes half the night long. When my father kissed Ramiza and groaned and spoke words of endearment to her, my mother's massive body convulsed with pain. I could feel her fingers claw at me unconsciously and hear her stifled sobs and sometimes I could feel her tears. And when I wept as well, she soothed me by stroking my genitals.

After many, many nights, when my father's initial passion for Ramiza had been spent, he invited my mother to return to his bed. But something had left my mother. She was cold to him and he could no longer arouse her. This infuriated him. In anger, he virtually cast her out of the house.

The Village of Tabah was a two-hour donkey ride to the town of Ramle and a three-hour ride to Lydda. Each town had two market days a week and the family owned a stall in the marketplace. Until my father took his new wife, my second brother, Omar, tended the stalls. Now Hagar, my mother, was ordered to Ramle and Lydda four days a week to sell our surplus produce. She started out after the morning prayer at sunrise and returned very late in the evening after dark.

Hagar was one of the two best dayas, or midwives, in the village. She was greatly respected as a keeper of the formulas of herbs and medicines. These days when she went to the village water well or the communal ovens, there was snickering behind her back and cruel insults in passing.

As in any society where women are the chattel of men, they seek the path of revenge through their sons, and my mother selected me. Four days a week I rode on the donkey cart with her to Ramle and Lydda.

It was in the stall at the Lydda bazaar that I first saw someone use an abacus, a wooden frame holding sliding beads for adding and subtracting. The man was a leather merchant, a maker and mender of harnesses, and he allowed me to enter and play in his booth. We became friends and together we fashioned an abacus like his by using prayer beads. Before I was nine I could count to infinity and became faster than the merchant in addition and subtraction.

‘Learn to count,’ my mother had been saying repeatedly.

At first I didn’t realize what she meant, but she pressed me to learn to read and write as well. The leather merchant was semiliterate and helped me greatly, but soon I surpassed him again. After a time I could read all the labels on all the crates in the entire bazaar. Then I began to learn words in the newspapers we used for wrappers.

When I was free to play at home, Hagar ordered me to count all the houses in Tabah, all the orchards, and learn who farmed each field. After that she dropped me off in the outlying villages where my father collected rents and she told me to count their houses and fields as well. A family could own or sharecrop as many as ten to fifteen separate plots scattered from one end of the village’s land to the other. With continued intermarriages, dowries of land to new brides, older people dying off, and dividing the land among many sons, it was extremely difficult to have an accurate record of who farmed what. Since most of the land was sharecropped, the farmers always tried to work an extra plot that was not accounted for or in other ways tried to cheat on their rent and taxes.

My father was barely literate himself and unable to contend with all the official documents, with their adornments of stamps and seals that spelled out boundaries, water rights, inheritances, and taxes. Uncle Farouk, who was partners with my father in the village store, the khan, and the coffeehouse, was far better able to cope with the mysteries of the documents. Farouk was also the village imam, the priest, and keeper of the official records for my father. My father didn’t fully trust him and so he sent my oldest brother, Kamal, to school in Ramle as a precaution.

When my father collected the rents, he turned them over to the great landholder Fawzi Effendi Kabir, who lived in Damascus and who visited the Palestine district once a year to collect.

My mother had always suspected that Kamal and Uncle Farouk were working

together to cheat my father, who got a percentage of the Effendi's rents as his agent.

When I had made my secret count of all the fields of the area, my mother pushed me out of the kitchen and told me to stick to my father like his shadow. At first I was fearful. Almost every time I slipped alongside him he would curse me off and other times he seized my arm and shook it or he would strike me. It was not that Ibrahim hated me or treated me any worse than he treated my brothers. Arab men can be very affectionate to their sons when they are little and dressed as girls and living with the women. But once they cross the threshold into the man's world they are generally ignored by their fathers. The relationship from then on is centered on obedience: complete, absolute, unquestioning obedience. It is the father's privilege. For this he allows his sons to work his fields for their living and when they take a bride, she comes into the father's house.

The father must be alert too, that his sons are not cheating him, and so the tradition of paternal indifference is a way of life. In order to vent frustrations, male children have full leave to boss around all the females, even their own mothers, and they are allowed to slap around their younger brothers. By the time I was four I had already learned to order my grandmother around, and on occasion I would assert my male rights over Nada and even my mother.

The more my father ran me off, the more my mother pushed me back. I walked alongside my father so often that after a time he simply tired of my persistence and accepted my presence.

One day I summoned the courage to confront him. I told him that I had learned to count and read and write a little and that I wanted to go to school in Ramle. As the youngest son, I was due to become the goatherd in a few years and that was the lowest job in the family. He scoffed at the idea.

'Your brother Kamal knows how to read and write. Therefore it is not necessary for you. You will tend the goat flock by your next birthday and the rest of your life is already predestined. When you take a wife someday, you will remain in my house with your own room.'

This seemed final. I drew the deepest breath I had. 'Father, I know something,' I blurted out.

'What do you mean, you know something, Ishmael?'

'Something you should also know. A reason I should go to school in Ramle.'

'Stop playing riddles with me!'

'There are nine hundred and sixty-two separate parcels of land in Tabah,' I gasped

out, nearly choking on my fear. 'There are eight hundred and twenty parcels in the other five villages. These do not count the communal land that is farmed together.'

Ibrahim's face grew somber, a hint that he was grasping my message. I controlled my trembling ... 'In the account books that Kamal keeps, there are only nine hundred and ten listed for Tabah and eight hundred for the other villages.'

I braced myself as I watched his face grow crimson. 'You are certain of this, Ishmael.'

'As Allah is my judge.'

Ibrahim grunted and rocked back and forth in his large chair. He beckoned me to come close to him with a wiggle of his forefinger. I almost bit through my lip with fear. 'What does it all add up to?' he asked.

'Kamal and Uncle Farouk are collecting rents for seventy-two parcels for themselves.'

Ibrahim grunted again, reached out, and patted my head. I'll never forget it, for it was the first time he had done so since time began. He patted my face softly where he had slapped it so many times before.

'Will you let me go to school?'

'Yes, Ishmael. You go to school and learn. But you are never to speak about this to another living soul or I'll cut your fingers off and boil them. Do you understand?'

'Yes, Father.'

It happened so fast I had no time to explain or even to flee. Kamal, who was nineteen, seized me from behind in the barn and flung me down, leaped on me and choked me and slammed my head against the ground.

'You dog!' he screamed. 'I'll kill you!' I kicked as hard as I could, three times, four, five. He bellowed in pain, released me, and doubled up on his knees. I scrambled to my feet and seized a pitchfork. Kamal crawled to his feet, still doubled over, and lunged at me. I jabbed out and hit him in the chest and he screamed again, then staggered around the barn, careening off the stalls. He found another pitchfork and menaced toward me deliberately.

'Dog!' he hissed.

'Kamal!'

He turned as our mother entered. 'Do not touch Ishmael!'

'What do you know, crazy old woman! You sow! Ibrahim does not even sleep with you!'

'He has called me to his bed tonight,' she said calmly. 'I will have some

interesting things to tell him.'

Kamal had never been known as much of a fighter among those of his own age and size. He had been able to defend himself only because he was the mukhtar's son and could read and write. He thought it over for only an instant, then dropped the pitchfork.

'You will never touch Ishmael again,' my mother repeated. She took the pitchfork from my hands, looked at us, one to the other. 'Never again,' she repeated, then left.

'A day will come,' Kamal said.

'We do not have to be enemies,' I said. 'There are still thirty parcels I have not told Father about. If we go in on this together, I will want half.'

'It is very early for you to be playing such games, Ishmael,' he said.

'I want half. You will give my half to Mother.'

'What about Uncle Farouk?'

'It must come from your, half. Uncle Farouk had better be careful because Father is ready to throw him out of the village. Well, do you agree or not?' Fuming, he shook his head in agreement and left.

When my mother and I slept together again in a few nights she stroked my head and kissed my face a hundred times over and cried of how proud she was of me. So before I was nine I had learned the basic canon of Arab life. It was me against my brother; me and my brother against our father; my family against my cousins and the clan; the clan against the tribe; and the tribe against the world. And all of us against the infidel.