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Winner of  
the International Prize  
for Arabic Fiction

A Novel

# Frankenstein

## in Baghdad

كان موضع الأنف مشوها بالكامل. وكان



Ahmed

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عدة  
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Saadawi

وكانه تعرض لأقضية من حيوان



ACCLAIM FOR  
*Frankenstein in Baghdad*

“A remarkable book from the heart of terror, where violence dissolves the divide between reality and unreality.”

—Thomas McGuane

“*Frankenstein in Baghdad* is a quietly ferocious thing, a dark, imaginative dissection of the cyclical absurdity of violence. From the terrible aftermath of one of the most destructive, unnecessary wars in modern history, Ahmed Saadawi has crafted a novel that will be remembered.”

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“Horribly funny and allegorically resonant, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* captures very well the mood of macabre violence that gripped Baghdad in 2005.”

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“Weaving as seamlessly from parable to realism as a needle weaves a tapestry, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* perfectly captures the absurdity, mayhem, and tragedy of war. Mahmoud the hapless journalist, Hadi the unwitting Dr. Frankenstein, and Elishva the mother are all profoundly human and appealing, our guides to a rare glimpse of the human beings on the receiving ends of our wars. Funny, bizarre, and captivating, this is a must-read for all Americans who are curious to see the war at last from an Iraqi point of view.”

—Helen Benedict, author of *Wolf Season* and *Sand Queen*

“A haunting allegory for sectarian violence.”

—*The New York Times*

“Matter-of-factly, Saadawi sets out a reality—Baghdad in 2005—so gothic in its details . . . that, when the novel makes a turn to the supernatural, it barely shocks.”

—*The New Yorker*

“*Frankenstein in Baghdad* courageously confronts the bizarre events set in motion by the violence after the American occupation of Iraq. . . . It’s a painful and powerful story that goes beyond the limits of reality, in an attempt to reach the essence of the cruelty of war. . . . [Saadawi’s] lively style is reminiscent of horror movies and detective stories, with touches of black comedy.”

—Hassan Blasim, author of *The Corpse Exhibition*, in *Publishers Weekly*

“Expertly told . . . A significant addition to contemporary Arabic fiction.”

—Judges’ citation, International Prize for Arabic Fiction

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ahmed Saadawi is an Iraqi novelist, poet, screenwriter, and documentary filmmaker. He is the first Iraqi to win the International Prize for Arabic Fiction; he won in 2014 for *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, which also won France's Grand Prize for Fantasy. In 2010 he was selected for Beirut39, as one of the 39 best Arab authors under the age of 39. He was born in 1973 in Baghdad, where he still lives.

# FRANKENSTEIN IN BAGHDAD

A NOVEL

AHMED SAADAWI

*Translated from the Arabic by*  
JONATHAN WRIGHT



PENGUIN BOOKS



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Yet I ask you not to spare me: listen to me; and then, if you can, and if you will, destroy the work of your hands.

—Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

The king ordered that the saint be placed in the olive press until his flesh was torn to pieces and he died. They then threw him out of the city, but the Lord Jesus gathered the pieces together and brought him back to life, and he went back into the city.

—The Story of St. George, the Great Martyr

You who are listening to these recordings now, if you don't have the courage to help me with my noble mission, then at least try not to stand in my way.

—The Whatitsname

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## List of Characters

- Abdullah:** Mahmoud al-Sawadi's brother, who lives in Amara  
**Abu Anmar:** the owner of the dilapidated Orouba Hotel in Bataween  
**Abu Jouni:** the janitor at the offices of *al-Haqiqa* magazine  
**Abu Salim:** an elderly neighbor of Elishva and Hadi; the husband of Umm Salim  
**Abu Zaidoun:** an elderly barber and ex-Baathist, held responsible for sending Daniel off to war in the 1980s  
**Adnan al-Anwar:** a journalist at *al-Haqiqa* magazine  
**Ali Baher al-Saidi:** a prominent writer, and the owner and editor of *al-Haqiqa* magazine  
**Aziz the Egyptian:** the gossipy owner of the local coffee shop  
**Daniel:** Elishva's son, who disappeared in the Iraq-Iran war  
**Daniel (junior):** Elishva's grandson, the son of her daughter Hilda, who lives in Melbourne  
**Elishva:** an elderly Assyrian Christian widow living alone in Bataween  
**Faraj the realtor:** a small-time real estate manager who acquires properties in Bataween  
**Farid Shawwaf:** a journalist who writes for *al-Haqiqa*  
**Hadi the junk dealer:** creator of the Whatitsname  
**Hammu:** the receptionist at the Orouba Hotel  
**Hasib Mohamed Jaafar:** a hotel guard whose soul animates the Whatitsname's body  
**Hazem Abboud:** a news photographer and Mahmoud's occasional roommate  
**Hilda:** one of Elishva's daughters in Melbourne; the mother of Daniel junior  
**Father Josiah:** Elishva's parish priest  
**Luqman:** an Algerian man who lives in the Orouba Hotel  
**Mahmoud al-Sawadi:** a young and ambitious journalist at *al-Haqiqa*  
**Brigadier Sorour Mohamed Majid:** the head of the mysterious Tracking and Pursuit Department  
**the Mantis:** a gangster politician in Amara  
**Matilda:** one of Elishva's daughters in Melbourne  
**Nader Shamouni:** the deacon at Elishva's church  
**Nahem Abdaki:** Hadi's late partner in the junk business  
**Nawal al-Wazir:** a glamorous middle-aged film director  
**Ninous Malko:** the head of an Assyrian family that stayed for a while in Elishva's house  
**Sultan:** Ali Baher al-Saidi's personal driver  
**Umm Raghad:** the madam at a local brothel  
**Umm Salim:** an elderly neighbor of Elishva and Hadi; the wife of Abu Salim  
**Veronica Munib:** a middle-aged Armenian woman who cleans the Orouba Hotel  
**Zaid Murshid:** a journalist at *al-Haqiqa*  
**Zeina:** a prostitute with a superficial resemblance to Nawal al-Wazir

**TOP SECRET**

## **FINAL REPORT**

### **I.**

WITH REGARD to the activities of the Tracking and Pursuit Department, which is partially affiliated with the civil administration of the international coalition forces in Iraq, the special committee of inquiry set up under my chairmanship, with representatives of the Iraqi security and intelligence agencies and observers from U.S. military intelligence, has come to the following conclusions:

a. On September 25, 2005, under direct political pressure from the Iraqi side, the activities of the Tracking and Pursuit Department were partially suspended for the purposes of the inquiry, and the committee summoned the department director, Brigadier Sorour Mohamed Majid, and his assistants to testify. They briefed the committee on the nature of the work they had been engaged in since the formation of the Coalition Provisional Authority in April 2003 and up to the time of the inquiry. It is clear that the department had been operating outside its area of expertise, which should have been limited to such bureaucratic matters as archiving information and preserving files and documents. Under the direct management of Brigadier Majid, it had employed several astrologers and fortune-tellers, on high salaries financed by the Iraqi treasury, not by the U.S. authorities. According to Brigadier Majid's testimony, their only purpose was to make predictions about serious security incidents that might take place in Baghdad and surrounding areas. It is not clear to the committee to what extent these predictions helped avert security incidents or whether they had any practical benefits.

b. The committee established that a number of files preserved in the department had been leaked from inside. All those working in the department were subsequently detained for questioning.

c. Through an examination of the computers used in the department, it was discovered that documents had been sent by e-mail to someone referred to as “the author.” Upon further investigation, this person was identified and arrested at his place of residence in the Fanar Hotel on Abu Nuwas Street. No documents related to the Tracking and Pursuit Department were found in his possession. “The author” was found to be in possession of the text of a story he had written drawing on material contained in documents belonging to the Tracking and Pursuit Department.

d. The story is about 250 pages long, divided into seventeen chapters. Experts from the committee examined the text and concluded that it does not violate any provisions of the law, but for precautionary reasons they recommended that the information in it should not be published under any circumstances and that the story should not be rewritten.

## **II. Recommendations**

a. The committee recommends that Brigadier Sorour Mohamed Majid and his assistants be transferred from the Tracking and Pursuit Department and that the department revert to its original work of archiving and documentation. Those employed as astrologers and fortune-tellers should be laid off. The question of the mistakes the department has made over the past few years must remain under review, and the documents relevant to the department’s activities must be preserved.

b. The committee discovered that the personal information in the identity papers of “the author” is incorrect. It therefore recommends that “the author” be rearrested and questioned in order to learn his real identity and any other information relevant to the work of the Tracking and Pursuit Department, and also to identify the people in the department who cooperated with him and to assess the extent to which this matter poses a threat to national security.

Signed: Committee Chairman

## CHAPTER ONE

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# THE MADWOMAN

### 1

THE EXPLOSION TOOK place two minutes after Elishva, the old woman known as Umm Daniel, or Daniel's mother, boarded the bus. Everyone on the bus turned around to see what had happened. They watched in shock as a ball of smoke rose, dark and black, beyond the crowds, from the car park near Tayaran Square in the center of Baghdad. Young people raced to the scene of the explosion, and cars collided into each other or into the median. The drivers were frightened and confused: they were assaulted by the sound of car horns and of people screaming and shouting.

Elishva's neighbors in Lane 7 said later that she had left the Bataween district to pray in the Church of Saint Odisho, near the University of Technology, as she did every Sunday, and that's why the explosion happened—some of the locals believed that, with her spiritual powers, Elishva prevented bad things from happening when she was among them.

Sitting on the bus, minding her own business, as if she were deaf or not even there, Elishva didn't hear the massive explosion about two hundred yards behind her. Her frail body was curled up by the window, and she looked out without seeing anything, thinking about the bitter taste in her mouth and the sense of gloom that she had been unable to shake off for the past few days.

The bitter taste might disappear after she took Holy Communion. Hearing the voices of her daughters and their children on the phone, she would have a little respite from her melancholy, and the light would shine again in her cloudy eyes. Father Josiah would usually wait for his cell phone to ring and then tell Elishva that Matilda was on the line, or if Matilda didn't call on time, Elishva might wait another hour and then ask the priest to call Matilda. This had been repeated every Sunday for at least two years. Before that, Elishva's daughters had called irregularly on the land line at church. But then when the Americans invaded Baghdad, their missiles destroyed the telephone exchange, and the phones were cut off for many months. Death stalked the city like the plague, and Elishva's daughters felt the need to check every week that the old

woman was okay. At first, after a few difficult months, they spoke on the Thuraya satellite phone that a Japanese charity had given to the young Assyrian priest at the church. When the wireless networks were introduced, Father Josiah bought a cell phone, and Elishva spoke to her daughters on that. Members of the congregation would stand in line after Mass to hear the voices of their sons and daughters dispersed around the world. Often people from the surrounding Karaj al-Amana neighborhood—Christians of other denominations and Muslims too—would come to the church to make free calls to their relatives abroad. As cell phones spread, the demand for Father Josiah's phone declined, but Elishva was content to maintain the ritual of her Sunday phone call from church.

With her veined and wrinkled hand, Elishva would put the Nokia phone to her ear. Upon hearing her daughters' voices, the darkness would lift and she would feel at peace. If she had gone straight back to Tayaran Square, she would have found that everything was calm, just as she had left it in the morning. The sidewalks would be clean and the cars that had caught fire would have been towed away. The dead would have been taken to the forensics department and the injured to the Kindi Hospital. There would be some shattered glass here and there, a pole blackened with smoke, and a hole in the asphalt, though she wouldn't have been able to make out how big it was because of her blurred vision.

When the Mass was over she lingered for an extra hour. She sat down in the hall adjacent to the church, and after the women had set out on tables the food they brought with them, she went ahead and ate with everyone, just to have something to do. Father Josiah made a desperate last attempt to call Matilda, but her phone was out of service. Matilda had probably lost her phone, or it had been stolen from her on the street or at some market in Melbourne, where she lived. Maybe she had forgotten to write down Father Josiah's number or had some other excuse. The priest couldn't make sense of it but kept trying to console Elishva, and when everyone started leaving, the deacon, Nader Shamouni, offered Elishva a ride home in his old Volga. This was the second week without a phone call. Elishva didn't actually need to hear her daughters' voices. Maybe it was just habit or something more important: that with her daughters she could talk about Daniel. Nobody really listened to her when she spoke about the son she had lost twenty years ago, except for her daughters and Saint George the Martyr, whose soul she often prayed for and whom she saw as her patron saint. You might add her old cat, Nabu, whose hair was falling out and who slept most of the time. Even the women at church grew distant when she began to talk about her son—because she just said the same things over and over. It was the same with the old women who were her neighbors. Some of them couldn't remember what Daniel looked like. Besides, he was just one of many who'd died over the years. Elishva was gradually losing people who had once supported her strange conviction that her son was

still alive, even though he had a grave with an empty coffin in the cemetery of the Assyrian Church of the East.

Elishva no longer shared with anyone her belief that Daniel was still alive. She just waited to hear the voice of Matilda or Hilda because they would put up with her, however strange this idea of hers. The two daughters knew their mother clung to the memory of her late son in order to go on living. There was no harm in humoring her.

Nader Shamouni, the deacon, dropped off Elishva in Lane 7 in Bataween, just a few steps from her door. The street was quiet. The slaughter had ended several hours ago, but the destruction was still clearly visible. It might have been the neighborhood's biggest explosion. The old deacon was depressed; he didn't say a word to Elishva as he parked his car next to an electricity pole. There was blood and hair on the pole, mere inches from his nose and his thick white mustache. He felt a tremor of fear.

Elishva got out of the deacon's car and waved good-bye. Walking down the street, she could hear her unhurried footsteps on the gravel. She was preparing an answer for when she opened the door and Nabu looked up as if to ask, "So? What happened?"

More important, she was preparing to scold Saint George. The previous night he had promised that she would either receive some good news or her mind would be set at rest and her ordeal would come to an end.

## 2

Elishva's neighbor Umm Salim believed strongly, unlike many others, that Elishva had special powers and that God's hand was on her shoulder wherever she was. She could cite numerous incidents as evidence. Although sometimes she might criticize or think ill of the old woman, she quickly went back to respecting and honoring her. When Elishva came to visit and they sat with some of their neighbors in the shade in Umm Salim's old courtyard, Umm Salim spread out for her a woven mat, placed cushions to the right and left of her, and poured her tea.

Sometimes she might exaggerate and say openly in Elishva's presence that if it weren't for those inhabitants who had *baraka*—spiritual power—the neighborhood would be doomed and swallowed up by the earth on God's orders. But this belief of Umm Salim's was really like the smoke she blew from her shisha pipe during those afternoon chats: it came out in billows, then coiled into sinuous white clouds that vanished into the air, never to travel outside the courtyard.

Many thought of Elishva as just a demented old woman with amnesia, the proof being that she couldn't remember the names of men—even those she had known for half a century. Sometimes she looked at them in a daze, as though they had sprung up in the neighborhood out of nowhere.

Umm Salim and some of the other kindhearted neighbors were distraught when Elishva started to tell bizarre stories about things that had happened to her—stories that no reasonable person would believe. Others scoffed, saying that Umm Salim and the other women were just sad that one of their number had crossed over to the dark and desolate shore beyond, meaning the group as a whole was headed in the same direction.

### 3

Two people were sure Elishva didn't have special powers or anything and was just a crazy old woman. The first was Faraj the realtor, owner of the Rasoul realty office on the main commercial street in Bataween. The second was Hadi the junk dealer, who lived in a makeshift dwelling attached to Elishva's house.

Over the past few years Faraj had tried repeatedly to persuade Elishva to sell her old house, but Elishva just flatly refused, without explanation. Faraj couldn't understand why an old woman like her would want to live alone in a seven-room house with only a cat. Why, he wondered, didn't she sell it and move to a smaller house with more air and light, and use the extra money to live the rest of her life in comfort?

Faraj never got a good answer. As for Hadi, her neighbor, he was a scruffy, unfriendly man in his fifties who always smelled of alcohol. He had asked Elishva to sell him the antiques that filled her house: two large wall clocks, teak tables of various sizes, carpets and furnishings, and plaster and ivory statues of the Virgin Mary and the Infant Jesus. There were more than twenty of these statues, spread around the house, as well as many other things that Hadi hadn't had time to inspect.

Of these antiques, some of which dated back to the 1940s, Hadi had asked Elishva, "Why don't you sell them, save yourself the trouble of dusting?" his eyes popping out of his head at the sight of them all. But the old woman just walked him to the front door and sent him out into the street, closing the door behind him. That was the only time Hadi had seen the inside of her house, and the impression it left him with was of a strange museum.

The two men didn't abandon their efforts, but because the junk dealer usually wasn't presentable, Elishva's neighbors were not sympathetic to him. Faraj the realtor tried several times to encourage Elishva's neighbors to win her over to his proposal; some even accused Veronica Munib, the Armenian neighbor, of taking a bribe from Faraj to persuade Elishva to move in with Umm Salim and her husband. Faraj never lost hope. Hadi, on the other hand, constantly pestered Elishva until he eventually lost interest and just threw hostile glances her way whenever she passed him on the street.

Elishva not only rejected the offers from these two men, she also reserved a special hatred for them, consigning them to everlasting hell. In their faces she

saw two greedy people with tainted souls, like cheap carpets with permanent ink stains.

Abu Zaidoun the barber could be added to the list of people Elishva hated and cursed. Elishva had lost Daniel because of him: he was the Baathist who had taken her son by the collar and dragged him off into the unknown. But Abu Zaidoun had been out of sight for many years. Elishva no longer ran into him, and no one talked about him in front of her. Since leaving the Baath Party, he had been preoccupied with his many ailments and had no time for anything that happened in the neighborhood.

#### 4

Faraj was at home when the massive explosion went off in Tayaran Square. Three hours later, at about ten o'clock in the morning, he opened his realty office and noticed cracks in the large front window. He cursed his bad luck, though he had noticed the shattered windows of many other shops in the area. In fact, he could see Abu Anmar, owner of the Orouba Hotel across the street, standing bewildered on the sidewalk, in his dishdasha, amid shards of glass from his old hotel's upper windows.

Faraj could see that Abu Anmar was shocked, but he didn't care: he had no great affection for him. They were polar opposites, even undeclared rivals. Abu Anmar, like many of the hotel owners in Bataween, made his living off workers and students and people who came to Baghdad from the provinces to visit hospitals or clinics or to go shopping. Over the past decade, with the departure of many of the Egyptian and Sudanese migrant workers, hotels had become dependent on a few customers who lived in them almost permanently—drivers on long-distance bus routes, students who didn't like the college dorms, and people who worked in the restaurants in Bab al-Sharqi and Saadoun Street, in the factories that made shoes and other things, and in the Harj flea market. But most of these people disappeared after April 2003, and now many of the hotels were nearly empty. To make matters worse, Faraj had appeared on the scene, trying to win over customers who might otherwise have gone to Abu Anmar's hotel or one of the others in the area.

Faraj had taken advantage of the chaos and lawlessness in the city to get his hands on several houses of unknown ownership. He turned these into cheap boardinghouses, renting the rooms to workers from the provinces or to families displaced from nearby areas for sectarian reasons or because of old vendettas that had come back into effect with the fall of the regime.

Abu Anmar could only grumble and complain. He had moved to Baghdad from the south in the 1970s and had no relatives or friends in the capital to help him. In the past he had relied on the power of the regime. Faraj, on the other hand, had many relatives and acquaintances, and when the regime fell, they were the means by which he imposed authority, winning everyone's



respect and legalizing his appropriation of the abandoned houses, even though everyone knew he didn't have the papers to prove he owned them or had ever rented them from the government.

Faraj could use his growing power against Elishva. He had seen her house from the inside only twice but had fallen in love with it immediately. It had probably been built by Jews, since it was in the style favored by the Iraqi Jews: an inner courtyard surrounded by several rooms on two floors, with a basement under one of the rooms that opened onto the street. There were fluted wooden columns supporting the arcade on the upper floor. With the metal railings, inlaid with wood, they created a unique aesthetic effect. The house also had double-leaf wooden doors with metal bolts and locks, and wooden windows reinforced with metal bars and glazed with stained glass. The courtyard was paved with fine brickwork and the rooms with small black and white tiles like a chessboard. The courtyard was open to the sky and had once been covered with a white cloth that was removed during the summer, but the cloth was no longer there. The house was not as it once had been, but it was sturdy and had suffered little water damage, unlike similar houses on the street. The basement had been filled in at some point, but that didn't matter. The main drawback for Faraj was that one of the rooms on the upper floor had completely collapsed, with many of the bricks having fallen beyond the wall shared with the house next door; the total ruin inhabited by Hadi the junk dealer. The bathroom on the upper floor was also in ruins. Faraj would need to spend some money on repairs and renovations, but it would be worth it.

Faraj thought it would take only half an hour to evict a defenseless old Christian woman, but a voice in his head warned him that he risked breaking the law and offending people, so it might be better to first gauge people's feelings about the old woman. The best thing would be to wait till she died, and then no one but he would dare to take over the house, since everyone knew how attached he was to it and acknowledged him as its future owner, however long Elishva lived.

"Look on the bright side," Faraj shouted to Abu Anmar, who was wringing his hands in dismay at the damage to his property. Abu Anmar raised his arms to the heavens in solidarity with Faraj's optimism, or maybe he was saying "May God take you" to the greedy realtor whom fate had taunted him with all day long.

## 5

Elishva shoved her cat off the sofa and brushed away the loose cat hairs. She couldn't actually see any hairs, but she knew from stroking the cat that its hair was falling out all over the place. She could overlook the hair unless it was in her special spot on the sofa facing the large picture of Saint George the Martyr that hung between smaller gray pictures of her son and her

husband, framed in carved wood. There were two other pictures of the same size, one of the Last Supper and the other of Christ being taken down from the cross, and three miniatures copied from medieval icons, drawn in thick ink and faded colors, depicting various saints, some of whose names she didn't know because it was her husband who had put them up many years ago. They were still as they were originally hung, some in the parlor, some in her bedroom, some in Daniel's room, which was closed, and some in the other abandoned rooms.

Almost every evening she sat there to resume her sterile conversation with the saint with the angelic face. The saint wasn't in ecclesiastical dress: he was wearing thick, shiny plates of armor that covered his body and a plumed helmet, with his wavy blond hair peeking out from under the helmet. He was holding a long pointed lance and sitting on a muscular white horse that had reared up to avoid the jaws of a hideous dragon encroaching from the corner of the picture, intent on swallowing the horse, the saint, and all his military accoutrements.

Elishva ignored the extravagant details. She put on the thick glasses that hung from a cord around her neck and looked at the calm, angelic face that betrayed no emotion. He wasn't angry or desperate or dreamy or happy. He was just doing his job out of devotion to God.

Elishva found no comfort in abstract speculation. She treated her patron saint as one of her relatives, a member of a family that had been torn apart and dispersed. He was the only person she had left, apart from Nabu, the cat, and the specter of her son, Daniel, who was bound to return one day. To others she lived alone, but she believed she lived with three beings, or three ghosts, with so much power and presence that she didn't feel lonely.

She was angry because her patron saint hadn't fulfilled any of the three promises she had extracted from him after countless nights of pleading, begging, and weeping. She didn't have much time left on this earth, and she wanted a sign from the Lord about Daniel—whether he was alive and would return or where his real grave or his remains were. She wanted to challenge her patron saint on the promises he had given her, but she waited for night to fall because during the day the picture was just a picture, inanimate and completely still, but at night a portal opened between her world and the other world, and the Lord came down, embodied in the image of the saint, to talk through him to Elishva, the poor sheep who had been abandoned by the rest of the flock and had almost fallen into the abyss of faithless perdition.

That night, by the light of the oil lamp, Elishva could see the ripples in the old picture behind the murky glass, but she could see also the saint's eyes and his soft, handsome face. Nabu meowed irritably as he left the room. The saint's long arm was still holding the lance, but now his eyes were on Elishva. "You're too impatient, Elishva," he said. "I told you the Lord will bring you peace of

mind or put an end to your torment, or you will hear news that will bring you joy. But no one can make the Lord act at a certain time.”

Elishva argued with the saint for half an hour until his beautiful face reverted to its normal state, his dreamy gaze stiff and immobile, a sign that he had grown tired of this sterile discussion. Before going to bed, she said her usual prayers in front of the large wooden cross in her bedroom and checked that Nabu was asleep in the corner on a small tiger-skin rug.

The next day, after having breakfast and washing the dishes, she was surprised to hear the annoying roar of American Apache helicopters flying overhead. She saw her son, Daniel, or imagined she did. There was Danny, as she had always called him when he was young—at last her patron saint’s prophecy had come true. She called him, and he came over to her. “Come, my son. Come, Danny.”