PART ONE

THE TALE

You told me, you know, that when a child is brought to a foreign country, it picks up the language in a few weeks, and forgets its own. Well, I am a child in your country.

George Bernard Shaw, Pygmalion
Grandmother Alia had never in her life heard of communism, despite the sickle laid upon her belly on Thursday, the first of April, 1954. Since the early hours of that morning, whose chill still scorches my memory, Abu Jameel, the village carpenter, had been working intently, turning the planks from an old cupboard into a coffin. His sense of humor usually covered for his slow work pace, but he was pensive and quiet now. The soft-footed wail of the plane seemed to leap over the shavings curling from the wood, to pad out of the darkness of Uncle Yusef’s house, across the courtyard from ours, and rub themselves like abandoned cats at my grandmother’s feet as she lay, hands crossed, on her mattress laid upon a straw mat on the cold concrete floor.

She had died the night before, and her belly puffed up, so in the morning my father laid the iron sickle on it. Abu Jameel said something about how tiny she was, that there is no need for so much wood, and really it’s a shame to waste the cupboard. From one of the leftover planks he made a low stool, which my mother would later sit on to do laundry or knead dough, and we would use it for the weekly hamma on Saturday nights, when we would place it in the tin tub of water that had been heated on the primus stove. I was four when Grandmother died. They had shoed me away,
to no distress on my part, and sent me to watch the coffin being built at Uncle Yusef’s. Only the sight of the sickle in my father’s hand took my enchanted eyes from the carpenter’s work. Abu Jameel winked and said, “The old woman’s fooling you—today is April first.”

A moth was circling above a dying body twenty-four years after that April morning. It was a miniature white moth, one of those attracted to electric light on summer nights in Haifa. At another time my mother would have called it a bashoora, an omen-moth, for good or ill. My mother didn’t notice this moth, because her veiled eyes were fixed upon the mouth that would open every few seconds to release, each time more faintly, the years that had been pressed into the body stretched out beneath the moth’s flight. A freight train clattered over the railroad tracks a few dozen meters from the house, and the walls, as always, trembled slightly. The rhythmic clatter of the wheels gave the scene an illusory order. Beneath the floor tiles which transmitted the vibrations of the engine to our feet, the roots of the eucalyptus slowly continued to gnaw away at the sewer pipes.

As the priest’s hand flicked at the moth, his chant was thrown off its track, but he adapted to this swerve and raised his voice above the racket of the train. For a moment it seemed that the whole scene was taken from some early-morning dream, as if the moth, which had intruded itself so delicately, had tipped the balance, and the whole scene would collapse upon one’s awakening. Even when the racket of the wheels had ebbed away, the voice went on in its loud tones to encourage the spirit that was no longer willing to inhabit the weak flesh: “Open for us the Gate of Supplication, Holy Mother.” But as the Holy Mother prefers the pleas of those who whisper, he then repeated his words in a subdued voice for the last time, asking the Holy Mother to open the Gate of Supplication for the dying man. The
moth flew out through the door, which had been open a crack. My father's head, which for years had been accustomed to a pillow stuffed with bran, now sank away on a cotton one.

Grandmother Alia was the one who had first conceived of stuffing the pillows with bran, during the years of the Great War, when her husband, Jubran, after whom my eldest brother is named, was away on the other side of the world. My father preserved the bran pillow as a memorial less to his mother than to the world that had vanished, as the saying goes, like the chaff which the wind driveth away from the threshing floor of the village he had left behind for the city in the early 1960s.

The place where my grandmother lay was beneath the western window. On its wide sill my mother would place the teakettle, from which she trickled water to wash her face. My father would use the sill to take apart the kerosene lamp every four weeks on Sunday afternoon. He would first close the window very tightly. Then he would turn a stool on its side, and between the rungs he would steady the "head" of the lamp, which held the magical fragile mantle inside which the kerosene turned to light. My father was always anxious that this mantle would fall apart for no good reason. The project of cleaning the lamp culminated in his inspection of the jet of pumped kerosene that sprang through the tiny hole that a very fine needle was responsible for keeping clean. The jet of kerosene made a joyful arc in the air, which would color the circles of light that came into the room through the leaves of the apricot tree that canopied the cistern. The filtered sun wove on the cold concrete floor a dappled rug, which fades whenever my father leans over the lantern to examine the cleaning needle that has broken in the hole.

No sun circles danced around my grandmother now. It was very early, and the sky was dark. As I listened to the
muted wail of the plane, I was thinking about the sickle used for the wheat harvest and about the blackness of the women kneeling around the body as I listened to the muted wail of the plane, intent upon preparing the final smooth couch for my grandmother, whose hard years had trickled out of her body through the wrinkles that furrowed her face.

I stood near the table Abu Jameel was using in the same place where at the end of the fall the strings of dried tobacco were brought to be stuffed into a special large wooden box. When they let me, I would pass Uncle Yusef the strings of tobacco already cut in two, which he would arrange artfully in the box. Whenever the box filled up and the tobacco threatened to spill over like boiling milk, my uncle and his son would lay a board over the leaves and stand on it to tamp them down. The smell of the first rain always arouses in me the smell of pressed tobacco sifting into the small square courtyard between our house and my uncle’s, the courtyard that was filling up that April morning with wailing women who had come to mourn for Grandmother as she lay there with clasped hands, the hands that held this same sickle during the harvest and held my hand when I went with her to visit my aunt Jaleelah, who had rejected the hand of Abu Jameel the carpenter.

I so loved the touch of Grandmother’s hand that I never complained about holding it for a long time, even though my raised arm would grow numb. It was only when we had gotten to the facade of the village church, halfway to my aunt’s house, and she would release my hand to cross herself, that I could circle halfway around her and tuck my other hand in hers.

It was my aunt Jaleelah’s hand that now held the hand of the dying man, usurping from my mother the touch of the hand she had so loved with a gesture which let her understand that even forty years of marriage did not prevail over the years of family ties.
Grandmother was said to have been born in the year of the Ottoman law on growing tobacco. My father did not know her birth date. In his notebook, bound in faded leather, he calculated the date by referring to other important events in the life of Grandfather Jubran. But, as I have said, the oral tradition puts Grandmother’s birth in the year the Ottoman tobacco law was published. Had I not chanced upon the 1874 volume of the Lebanese journal *Al-Jinan*, I would not have known that my father had actually been correct in his calculations.

The church was the walking distance of a single Ave Maria from our house. So a special relationship developed between my family and the priests, which cost my brothers and me our early-morning sleep when we had to serve at the altar during Matins and Lauds. At the end of the fifties an eccentric priest came to the village, who was apparently the first man to carry an open umbrella on the hot, dry days of summer. The white parasol protected the delicate priest from the ruthless sun but exposed him to many discreet smiles of ridicule and won him a prominent place on the list of eccentrics inscribed in the village memory. Along with the parasol the priest brought a collection of old books and journals, which my oldest brother, Jubran, coveted. Bit by bit this collection made its way to our bookcase, which was embedded in the thick wall. Its olive-colored door was locked with the yellow key that was kept in the cookie dish in the “armoire” that was brought disassembled from Beirut in 1940 in a truck and was loaded on the backs of two camels in the village of Rmeish, near the Lebanese border. Its doors, shelves and drawers were covered by a fragile brown veneer, which had survived the journey, and there was a thick mirror on its middle door. Behind this looking glass was the full cookie dish, kept under lock and key. There was a custom in the family that the key to the bookcase could not be taken
until the cookie dish was emptied by guests. However, everyone knew that my eldest brother, the book lover, who was systematically raiding the priest’s library, had found a way to loosen the lock by lifting the lower-left-hand corner of the mirrored door.

In time I, too, mastered this trick, which enabled me not only to raid the domain of cookies but also to handle a magical wooden sword with a red-painted blade, which my brother kept in the armoire. He had never returned it to its proper owner at the conclusion of a play that had been produced at the local school. For a whole trimester the pupils had to rehearse it under the heavy thumbs of the principal—the priest before the one with the parasol—and the math teacher. They even had to sleep at the school the night before the performance to guard the props, and it was then that they avenged themselves by throwing ink on the colorful maps of the continents and on the white walls and by giving the priest reason to believe that the water in the cistern under the floor of one of the classrooms, the water that went to the tank on the roof of the school and from there to the priest’s rooms on the second floor, was no longer pure. In the play my brother was a sword bearer, and though he didn’t have a single line to deliver, he was the only student who had a printed copy of the text. In time many books from the priest’s library joined it in the bookcase in the wall. Later these books changed hands in order to blur their tracks, but I still have the copy of Al-finan from 1874, the year my grandmother was born, in which I found the complete text of the law on growing tobacco.

Grandmother Alia complained all her life of the blind fate that had dumped her in the hands of the wayward Shammas family. My grandfather, who was fourteen years older, left her twice to sail far away. The first time was at the end of the last century, when he went off to Brazil for a year and left her holding Uncle Yusef, a squalling infant,
in her arms. Then, on the eve of the First World War, he went to Argentina, where he vanished for about ten years, leaving behind three daughters and three sons, all of them hungry. When he finally returned he brought a large wooden box and a pair of scissors. When his sons opened the box they found it was filled with rusty clothes. Grandfather, for some reason, had hidden a pair of scissors, which had rusted in the box and during the three-month sea voyage had wandered among the clothes, making "crazy patterns," as Grandmother called them.

Seven years after that she said goodbye to her son Jiryes, never to see him again. She preserved him in her mind by telling a story about two dairy cans of milk he had once brought her, which always made her laugh so that she would have to hide her face behind her head scarf. The war also took away one of her eyes, which was ravaged by a disease, and she was granted in its stead the art of staying home and the art of conserving matter. She never threw anything away; instead, she accompanied her things through their metamorphoses. Her shabby dress became the karah, the round baking pillow upon which the thin dough is laid in order to set it on the hot tin dome of the oven, and when the pillow wore out it became a turraha, a poor man's sitting mat, and when it was too worn for that it became a rag to polish shoes in my father's cobbler shop.

Letters from Uncle Jiryes, whom I never knew, would arrive from Argentina unpredictably. All of them, down to the very last one, which still lies between the pages of my father's missal, concluded, "And to everyone who claims I have not sent him greetings, I hereby send a thousand and one greetings." After my grandmother died, his letters began to reveal an open longing for his birthplace. My oldest brother, Jubran, who was then an apprentice cobbler in my father's shop, tried to squeeze through this opening a request for rolls of Argentine leather. But far from making this gesture to ease his homesickness, Uncle Jiryes instead
shrouded himself in a silence that went on for some ten years, until my sister reopened the correspondence in the mid-1960s. By then his letters were like the last signals from a sinking ship. Several months after his last one, we learned from a letter sent to the village by his friend, who had accompanied him on his voyage in 1928, that he had died penniless in an old-age home. Along with enormous debts, he had left behind rumors of a local wife. This would have been in addition to his first wife, Almaza, who had never set foot on Argentinian soil, and had last seen her husband waving from the ship steaming out of Beirut harbor to take my uncle there.

Uncle Jiryes was the only one of my grandfather’s sons and daughters, six in all, who inherited the “wrinkle in the mind,” as my grandmother called it, that may have been responsible for the great wanderings of the family’s patriarch in the early part of the last century. From a remote village in southwestern Syria, called Khabab, he eventually reached the remote village of Fassuta in Galilee, where I was destined to be born. But it seems that our ancestor was driven there less by wanderlust than by his family’s fear for his life, which was avidly sought by the Muslim clan in the village. He was still a boy when he set forth on his wanderings, accompanied by his father, who had become a priest after his marriage because he was blessed with a beautiful voice. This voice was finally to be his undoing in one of the villages of mixed religions in the lower Galilee. Some of the villagers there were so delighted by his voice that they tried to make him see, first by gentle persuasion and then by force, that he was wasting his talent in the shabby village church. He could just as easily bestow the pleasures of his voice upon a larger audience of the devout, by transmitting it to all four corners of the village as well as to the heavenly winds, from the heights of the minaret of the local mosque. Thereupon the priest was brought to the top of the minaret,