TRANSLATED BY MAIA TABET

The Baghdad Eucharist

A NOVEL

SINAN ANTOON

SHORTLISTED FOR THE INTERNATIONAL PRIZE FOR ARABIC FICTION

Displaced by the sectarian violence in the city, Maha and her husband are taken in by a distant cousin, Youssef.

As the growing turmoil around them seeps into their household, a rare argument breaks out between the elderly Youssef and his young guest. Born into sanctions and war, Maha knows nothing of the good years that Youssef holds dear.

Set over a single day, *The Baghdad Eucharist* is an intimate story of love, memory, and anguish in one Christian family.

"A beautiful text, a testimony of the time of mud and blood that besieges Iraq and the Arab East. In very moving language, this Iraqi novelist writes his country with the ink of pain."

ELIAS KHOURY, author of *Gate of the Sun*

"Like a masterful filmmaker, twenty-four hours is all that Antoon needs to present a modern-day Iraqi tragedy in his elegant novel."

AL JAZEERA

"Antoon is fast becoming not only the voice of the disaffections of modern Iraq, but also one of the most acclaimed authors of the Arab world."

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Translated by
Maia Tabet

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Sinan Antoon is an award-winning poet, novelist, and translator. He was born in Iraq, and moved to the United States in 1991 after the Gulf War. He received his PhD from Harvard University and is currently associate professor of Arabic literature at New York University. He is the author of two collections of poetry and four novels, including *I'jaam, The Corpse Washer,* and *Fihris* (The Book of Collateral Damage).

The Baghdad Eucharist (published in Arabic as *Ya Maryam)* was shortlisted for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2013.

Maia Tabet is a literary translator, journalist, and editor, who has translated prominent authors such as Elias Khoury. She was born in Beirut and is currently based in Baltimore in the United States.

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"Faithfully reproduces the difficult conversations between an Iraqi Christian family housed in Baghdad while the daily scenes of carnage are painfully recounted." —*The Guardian*

"Antoon seems to just get better and better." —*The National*

"Sinan Antoon is one of the most talented of the younger generation of Iraqi writers to have emerged from the chaos of that country's recent history." —*Banipal*

"The first novel to broach the tragedy of Iraqi Christians . . . narrating Iraq's wounds in beautiful language." —*as-Safir*

"[A] panoramic view of Iraq, its history, its iconography and its bitter present . . . Antoon is fast becoming not only the voice of the disaffections of modern Iraq, but also one of the most acclaimed authors of the Arab world." —*Al-Ahram Weekly*

"Like a masterful filmmaker, twenty-four hours is all that Antoon needs to present a modern-day Iraqi tragedy in his elegant novel. . . . This is a novel that comes to grips with an explosive topic, yet does so without a loss of artistry." —Al Jazeera

He came unto his own, and his own received him not.
The Gospel according to John, 1:11

Living in the Past

1

"You're just living in the past, Uncle!" Maha burst out as she ran from the living room after our argument. Luay, her husband, was upset and he called out after her, his face flushed.

"Hey, Maha, where are you going? Come back! Maha!" But she was already hurtling up the stairs that led to the second floor. He looked downcast as he apologized.

"Forgive her, Uncle. You know how much she loves and respects you." In a voice speckled with shame, he added, "She's a nervous wreck and can't help herself."

Before I could think of anything to say, the sound of her fitful sobbing reached us from the second floor.

"It's all right. It's no big deal. Go calm her down and comfort her," I muttered.

I was sitting on a chair set smack in front of the television and Maha's husband got up from the gray sofa where they had both been seated and came over to me. Placing his hand on my shoulder, he leaned down and kissed the top of my head.

"I'm really sorry," he said. "I owe you." He turned away and slowly climbed the stairs.

A host and his guest were having a heated discussion on television, and even though I was right up against the screen, their faces were nothing but a blur and I couldn't tell what they were saying, despite their raised voices. All I could hear were the words ringing in my ears, "You're just living in the past, Uncle!"

2

I didn't sleep well that night. I tossed in the dark as Maha's stinging pronouncement played over and over in my head. I kept asking myself whether I really did live in the past, but all I could come up with were further questions. How could someone my age, to some degree or another, *not* live in the past? Being in my seventies, most of my life was behind me and very little of it still lay ahead. She, on the other hand, was in her early twenties and, however gloomy the present may be, she still had her whole future before her. She was kindhearted and meant well but she was only half formed. Just like her past. She too would begin to revisit the past once it had grown a little, and she would dwell on it for hours—even were it to consist of nothing but misery. Her wounds would heal and she would retain only what was best. In any case, for me to stop living in the past, it would have to be dead. And it clearly wasn't—the past was alive and well, in one form or another, and it not only coexisted with the present, but continued to wrangle with it. Perhaps it was just being held captive inside the frames of all the snapshots hanging on the walls of the house, suspended along the mile-long walls of my memory, and lying between the covers of our photo albums? Hadn't she stood before them often enough and asked me to point out different family members and questioned me about what had happened to them, where they were now, how they had died, and when? How often had she asked me to tell her the stories contained within those frames? I had always responded to her questions readily, coloring in the details and following various threads that sometimes led to other photos or to other stories that hadn't been captured by the camera's lens—stories laced with sighs of pleasure or with laughter that were lodged in my memory, and others that were preserved in an archive guarded by my heart.

Was I really escaping the present and seeking refuge in the past, as she alleged? Even if it were true, was there shame in it when the present was no more than a booby-trapped snare full

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of car bombs, brutality, and horror? Perhaps the past was like the garden which I so loved and which I tended as if it were my own daughter, just in order to escape the noise and ugliness of the world. My own paradise in the heart of hell, my own 'autonomous region' as I sometimes liked to call it. I would do anything to defend that garden, and the house, because they were all I had left. I really had to forgive her. My youth was not her youth, her time and my time were worlds apart. Her green eyes fluttered open to the ravages of war and sanctions; deprivation, violence, and displacement were the first things she tasted in life. I, on the other hand, had lived in prosperous times, which I still remembered and continued to believe were real.

3

I woke at 6:30, as I had done for many years, without the use of an alarm clock. My bladder, which awakened me several times a night, was all the alarm I needed. I washed my face and shaved in front of the mirror in the bathroom by my bedroom, but didn't break out into one of my favorite songs, as was my habit, because I wanted to recapture the details of my dream. I took my dentures out of their glass of water, opened my mouth, and secured them in place. I had lost my teeth years ago, and I eventually grew used to the dentures, despite having found them uncomfortable for a while. I was proud that I still had a full head of thick, albeit white, hair. Anything but baldness!

In the dream, I *had* gone bald and that alone made it feel more like a nightmare. The house had been the same in every particular, except that it was a museum. Each room had become a hall with cordoned-off chairs and beds, and there were signs everywhere warning visitors not to touch or get too close. I was the docent, and as I recounted the history of each room, I explained who had lived there and where they had gone. Although I heard whispering and giggling, the rooms were empty. I went from hall to hall looking for visitors but there was no one around. Then, I heard a voice that belonged

to a man who was leading a group of visitors down the hallway but he was giving them faulty information about the house. I went toward them and shouted, "This is *my* house, and I am the docent here." But no one heard me or took any notice. I looked in the mirror and saw that I was bald.

I combed my hair and thanked my lucky stars I still had all of it. I opened my eyes wide and peered into my face in the mirror, raising my thick gray eyebrows slowly and crunching together the wrinkles time had etched onto my brow. I stepped back from the mirror, and dried my face and forehead one last time.

On my way from the bathroom to the kitchen to make tea, I stopped in front of the hallway calendar, just as I had done for years. Even after I had retired and there was no longer any business to attend to or any appointments to keep, I never gave up the habit. I'd stop in the hallway and signal the beginning of a new day by crossing out the previous one on the calendar. I would do this using a pencil that hung by a thread from the nail that held the calendar in place. I looked at the current month's photograph of an empty bench with a few yellowed leaves scattered on the paving stones in front of it; a fall wind had blown the leaves down from a nearby tree, whose trunk alone was visible. Below the photograph, only one day remained, the last day of the month of October 2010, which was a Sunday. "Hinna's passing," I had written into the small square.

Truth be told, I needed no reminder of the day my sister had left us, on a morning like this one seven years ago. I'd been to the church earlier this month to ask the priest to offer a prayer for the repose of her soul on the anniversary of her death, and had agreed to pay an extra tithe. The special service wouldn't be held at the sanctuary where my sister had gone for decades in the convent that had become her second home. Since the convent had closed its doors to worshippers for security reasons, the service would be held at what was popularly known as Umm al-Taq, the Church of Our Lady

of Deliverance. It was the church Maha and her husband attended on Sundays because he was a Syriac Catholic. Hinna would not mind that the service was being held there rather than at the Chaldean church, "our church" as she called it. The differences between the two were insignificant: both were Eastern Catholic denominations and the liturgy was almost identical, except for a few words here and there. In the end, the prayers were all addressed to the same God, regardless of language or denomination, and that's what counted.

It had been seven years since that fateful morning. How fast they had gone by! Had she lived to witness them, Hinna would have been incredulous. Not only had they been worse than anything that had come before, they even rivaled the last seven months of Hinna's life, the months that followed the outbreak of the 2003 war.

Hinna always got up before I did and made tea for both of us. Her breakfast was very simple: a piece of bread with a little white or yellow cheese, a spoonful of the apricot or fig jam which she loved and made herself, and two istikans of tea. She would sit the teapot on top of the kettle with the flame of the burner turned all the way down, so that the tea would still be hot when I woke up and was ready to drink it. Then, she would walk to church. Her gait had worsened over the years, she moved slowly and only with the help of a cane. She wouldn't hear of me getting up early to give her a ride nor would she listen when I suggested that she could go to church just on Sundays instead of every day. She was extremely hard-headed, especially when it came to her religious observances.

When I went into the kitchen that morning, I saw that Hinna had not made the tea. The teapot lay upturned on the dish drainer by the sink, just as it had been the previous night after we'd had our evening tea. I assumed she wasn't feeling well, so I filled the kettle, placed it on the right-hand burner, and lit a match under it. I put two generous tablespoons of tea leaves in the teapot, moistened them with a few drops of

water, covered the pot and placed it on top of the kettle, and waited for the water to boil before pouring it over the leaves.

I left the kitchen and went down to the end of the hallway toward her room, right by the door that led to the backyard. Her door was shut. I rapped three times, calling her name. "Hinna! Hinna! Hinna, dear . . . ."

No answer. I turned the doorknob gently and opened the door as quietly as I could. She was still in bed. The morning sun streamed through between the gaps of the drawn curtains and from either side. I stepped inside the room, which I rarely entered, and pressed on the light switch to the right of the door. Nothing happened. I remembered her telling me the day before that the bulb had burned out and needed replacing, and although I'd told her that I'd take care of it, I hadn't; I berated myself for having put off fetching the ladder from the storeroom, but my knee would hurt whenever I climbed up to change a bulb. What with all the power outages and trying to save on using the electric generator, I had rationalized that we would just use candles at night. Putting off such things was never a good idea.

I called out once more, "Hinna, what's wrong? Get up! Come on, Hinna!"

I went toward the window on the right, and pushed open the curtains. The sun flooded into the middle of the room. I shielded my eyes from the glare, turned around, and went toward the bed. She was lying on her left side, with the quilt drawn up over her shoulders. Approaching the edge of the bed, I looked at her intently. Her eyes were closed and a few strands of her silvery hair lay matted by her face on the pillow. Her hands, with the rosary wrapped around them, were clasped together at the bottom of the pillow to the right of her face; the rosary never left her and the rhythmical clicking of its tiny red beads accompanied all her prayers and invocations. She must have kissed it before falling asleep because the small silver cross at its tip was still resting on her lips.

I leaned down and shook her shoulder, gently repeating her name, "Hinna, Hinna."

She didn't stir. Her shoulder felt rigid and there was a waxy pallor to the crisscross of wrinkles that mapped her face. "Hinna, Hinna dear," I repeated quietly.

I tried to take her pulse but her clasped hands were entwined in the rosary. My heart sank. She was cold to the touch, and I knew instantly that she would never wake up. I wrapped my fingers around her wrist with the tip of my index against her vein, but the pulsing beat of life was silent.

That night, life gathered its last vestiges and vacated Hinna's body, leaving it to death's undivided attention. The good Lord had granted the wish she had often expressed over the years, at particularly painful or trying times. "Dear God," she would exclaim, "take me to You, and relieve me!" She always wished others a long life but for herself she sought only its curtailment. "No more, Lord. Let me be done!" she would say.

I sat on the edge of the bed. I wanted to embrace her one last time, but just stroked her silvery hair with my left hand. I hardly ever touched or kissed her, maybe once or twice a year on the occasion of a holiday. The last time I remembered stroking her hair was when I was still a child. We had lost our mother, and despite Hinna's tender age, it was to her that fell the task of caring for my younger brothers and me. She was only fifteen when she had to give up her dream of entering the convent, and she devoted the rest of her life to ensuring we were comfortable and had enough to eat. Whatever time was left after discharging her duties she spent in religious devotion, either at home or at church. I released her rigid hand to wipe away the tears that had begun to run down my cheeks. I kissed her cold forehead and said, "Rest in peace, Hinna." I said it out loud, as if she could hear me.

A picture of the Virgin Mary hung above the bed. The holy mother appeared full of grace, holding the fruit of her womb against her robes of blue. A shaft of celestial light

pierced the sky above and angels circled around her, wings aflutter. Despite the beatitude of her features, there was a sad cast to the eyes looking down on my sister and me.

The tears flowed as I prayed for Hinna's soul. I intoned, "Our Father who art in heaven," just as she had done for me over the course of an entire lifetime. And I followed that with, "Hail Mary, full of grace. Our Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen."

4

I let go of the pencil. Here was the past coming back to remind me of Hinna, as if I could've forgotten her in the first place. I went toward her room, which I had decided to keep exactly as it had been when she was alive. Except for her clothes, which I had asked one of my nieces to collect from the small closet following the condolence period, the room remained unchanged. Hinna's clothes had gone to the church for distribution to the poor.

I opened the door and stepped inside. The room was cold and dark as a tomb. I turned on the light, the switch was to the right of the door, but it didn't dispel the darkness. Then I remembered that we had no power, and in any case, I had never replaced that burned-out lightbulb. I didn't see the point after Hinna's own light was gone from the room, even when the women attending her came to wash her body, comb her hair, and clothe her in a manner befitting her final journey to the grave. I told the women from the neighborhood and our remaining female relatives in Baghdad that there was sufficient daylight for their purpose and I asked them to keep the room lit with candles throughout the night. I was sure that Maha had closed the curtains the last time she'd cleaned the room because I always left them open. The first time she cleaned Hinna's room, she'd said, "It's like a shrine, Uncle—you can feel her spirit is still there."

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