Frankenstein in Baghdad

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF AHMED SAADAWI

Ahmed Saadawi grew up in Baghdad, Iraq, during a time when books were scarce. Due to the Iraqi state's censorship of many books, along with international sanctions on the country from 1990 to 2003, Saadawi had access to very few books while growing up. Despite these difficult circumstances, he developed an intense passion for literature. Throughout his life, he has found various ways to express this passion for storytelling: in addition to working as a screenwriter and documentary film maker, he is the author of a volume of poetry and three novels. While working as a journalist in Iraq, including during the period of the Iraqi Civil War (2006-2008), he became committed to relating the horrors of this period to the public. This led him to write *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013). He felt that a novel was better capable of communicating characters' life circumstances and emotions than journalistic reporting. In this novel, Saadawi sought to criticize the disastrous consequences of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 by focusing on its impact on the local population. The novel was nominated for the Man Booker International Prize and won the International Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2014. The book has since been translated into a variety of languages and has received international acclaim. Ahmed Saadawi currently lives in Baghdad.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The events in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* take place in a period of intense political tension and conflict in Iraq. In 2003, an international coalition led by the United States invaded Iraq in order to remove Saddam Hussein and the Baath Party from power. The U.S. accused the Iraqi dictator of producing weapons of mass destruction and of cultivating ties to terrorist organizations. Although the Iraqi government did use weapons of mass destruction in the past—for example, against the Kurdish population during the "Halabja massacre" in 1988, as part of the Iran-Iraq War—these two hypotheses, which drove the U.S. invasion, were later discredited. The U.S. invasion succeeded in capturing and executing Saddam Hussein, who was convicted of crimes against humanity. Afterwards, the U.S. set up the Coalition Provisional Authority, in charge of administering Iraq before the organization of democratic elections in 2005. This launched a period of intense sectarian violence, in particular conflict between Shiite and Sunni Muslims, which ultimately escalated and gave way to the Iraqi Civil War (2006-2008). Violent conflict in Iraq caused a variety of humanitarian crises: nearly one million children became orphans in the country, and over four million Iraqis were forced to flee as refugees.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Frankenstein in Baghdad is based on Mary Shelley's classic gothic novel *Frankenstein* (1818). It also bears the influence of a modern adaptation of this novel: the movie *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994), starring Robert De Niro. Like Mary Shelley's monster in *Frankenstein*, the character of the Whatsitsname seeks to punish humanity for its cruel deeds. *Frankenstein in Baghdad* also bears similarities with the work of Franz Kafka (1883-1924), an author who blends realism with fantasy in order to denounce the absurdity of war and political repression. In a local, Middle Eastern context, Saadawi mentions other sources of inspiration: the works of Iraqi novelist Mehdi Issa Saqr, as well as Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani's novel *Men in the Sun* (1962), which examines the difficult lives of Palestinian refugees and denounces political corruption in different Arab societies.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Frankenstein in Baghdad
- **When Written:** 2008-2012
- **Where Written:** Baghdad, Iraq
- **When Published:** 2013 (in Arabic)
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Fantasy, Science Fiction, Horror
- **Setting:** Baghdad, Iraq, in 2005, following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003
- **Climax:** The Whatsitsname recounts his story in Mahmoud's digital recorder and realizes that his followers are nothing but criminals.
- **Antagonist:** Although different armed groups fight for power in Iraq, the true antagonist in the novel is violence itself. Instead of identifying a single culprit, the novel suggests that no one is ever wholly innocent. Despite demonizing their rivals, many people have taken part in unethical deeds themselves.
- **Point of View:** The novel primarily uses third-person omniscient narration, but reverts to first-person narration in the final chapters, where it follows the perspective of the character known as "the writer."

EXTRA CREDIT

Twitter Congratulations. Despite criticizing both the U.S. occupation and the past and present political administration of Iraq, Saadawi received congratulations on Twitter from the

Iraqi prime minister when *Frankenstein in Baghdad* was nominated for the Man Booker International Prize.

Neighborhood Life. Saadawi, who grew up in a different neighborhood of Baghdad, spent a year and a half living in the working-class Bataween district to pursue research for his novel. He chose this setting for his work because of the neighborhood's historic religious and ethnic diversity.

PLOT SUMMARY

Set in Baghdad, Iraq, in 2005, Ahmed Saadawi's novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013) tells the story of a supernatural monster, the Whatsitsname, who commits a series of murders in a country already torn apart by terrorist attacks and sectarian violence (conflict between different religious groups). After the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, which caused the fall of Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime, the country finds itself in a state of transition. During this period, three groups vie for territorial control and political power: the Iraqi government, allied with the U.S. military, and the opposing Sunni and Shiite militias. It is in this atmosphere of intense political tension that the Whatsitsname appears, questioning the possibility to achieve justice and peace in a violence-ridden country.

One day, Hadi Hassani Aidros, known as Hadi the junk dealer, tells the story of the creation of the Whatsitsname. Hadi is a man in his 50s known for constantly smelling of alcohol and telling cheerful, yet unreliable stories, which have earned him the nickname of "Hadi the liar." He lives in a half-destroyed, one-room house known as the "Jewish ruin" in the neighborhood of Bataween, and repairs broken furniture for a living.

To his audience in the coffee shop of his friend Aziz the Egyptian, Hadi describes stitching together a corpse made of different body parts: the remains of victims of terrorist attacks. Hadi explains that his goal was to creates a human-like body that would denounce the government's inability to curb violence in the city. Partially moved by the memory of his friend Nahem's death in a car bombing, Hadi wants to prove that the victims of terrorist attacks are real people who deserve a dignified burial, not a mere set of disjoined body parts.

After finishing the corpse, Hadi passed in front of the Sadeer Novotel Hotel. There, Hasib Mohamed Jaafar, a young hotel guard, left his sentry box to observe this suspicious passerby. At the very same moment, a garbage truck, manned by a suicide bomber, exploded in front of the hotel gate, instantly killing the hotel guard. Although Hadi was thrown off the ground and superficially wounded, he quickly ran home, in a state of shock. The next day, upon waking up, he realized that the corpse—which he called the Whatsitsname—had disappeared from his house.

After the anguished spirit of Hasib the hotel guard inhabited the corpse's body, the Whatsitsname came alive, and decided to enter Hadi's neighbor Elishva's house. Elishva is an old lady who lives alone with her cat Nabu and who believes that her son, Daniel Tadros Moshe, who died 20 years ago in the Iran-Iraq War, is still alive and will one day come back to her. When she sees the Whatsitsname enter her house, she believes that **the picture of Saint George the Martyr**, which she believes has spiritual powers, has fulfilled her wish: this human-like creature, she concludes, must be her son.

Buoyed by Elishva's affection, the Whatsitsname later leaves her house and takes part in a series of murders. His first victims are the four beggars: drunk beggars who attacked him in the street after seeing his deformed face. Later, the Whatsitsname kills Abu Zaidoun, a cruel, former Baathist responsible for sending many young men to war, including Elishva's son. The Whatsitsname's goal is to bring justice to the city by killing those who have committed crimes in the past—and, in particular, the people responsible for the brutal deaths of the victims that compose his body.

In the meantime, as the Whatsitsname murders people across the city, two people become interested in his story: Mahmoud Riyadh al-Sawadi and Brigadier Sorour Mohamed Majid. Mahmoud is a young, ambitious journalist who becomes the protagonist of this story. Intrigued by Hadi the junk dealer's unusually serious tone when recounting the story of the Whatsitsname, Mahmoud concludes that this disturbing story must be true. The journalist lends Hadi his **digital recorder** so that the junk dealer can record concrete evidence of the Whatsitsname's existence.

To Mahmoud's surprise, Hadi later returns him the digital recorder, through which the Whatsitsname has interviewed his own self. Mahmoud listens to this recording, in which a calm, collected voice—at odds with Hadi's description of an extravagant monster—tells horrifying stories. The Whatsitsname explains that he has been living in a destroyed building along with an extensive team of assistants and followers. His followers are divided into three groups, each following the doctrine of a given "madman." If the old madman and the eldest madman believe that the Whatsitsname plays a prophet-like, religious role on earth, the young madman trusts that this creature serves a political function: given its heterogeneous mix of body parts, the Whatsitsname represents the first true "Iraqi citizen," the product of cultural, religious, and ethnic mixing.

In the meantime, Brigadier Majid is part of a mysterious institution, the Tracking and Pursuit Department, which seeks to prevent violent "security incidents" in the city. With an eccentric team of astrologers and fortune-tellers, Brigadier Majid is busy desperately pursuing a mysterious criminal they call "the One Who Has No Name." Although his team succeeds in determining the Whatsitsname's whereabouts, they are later

forced to disband due to internal conflict between two astrologers: the senior astrologer and the junior astrologer, whose rivalry has kept them from successfully catching the criminal.

Over time, the Whatsitsname realizes that his body parts rot if he does not avenge them in time. Therefore, he collects the body parts of new victims in the streets, sometimes going so far as to kill other human beings in order to protect his own body. The Whatsitsname thus realizes that he is now killing people out of self-interest, not to promote a given notion of justice.

In parallel, he also realizes that no one is ever entirely innocent or entirely criminal, and, therefore, that his strategy of brutal vengeance is not necessarily valid. After violent conflict erupts among his followers, the Whatsitsname concludes that he is responsible for bringing even more brutality and social divisions to the city, instead of achieving peace and justice. As a result, he decides to temporarily halt his activities, in order to understand how best to proceed from there.

During this period, Mahmoud discovers that his editor, Ali Baher al-Saidi, is accused of stealing millions of dollars in U.S. aid. This is a deeply distressing event for Mahmoud, who is interrogated by secret services and loses trust in his boss, a man he has always admired—Saidi is a fascinating, well-connected man who has served as a mentor figure for the young journalist. This catastrophe motivates Mahmoud to leave Baghdad. Before doing so, he sells his digital recorder—which contains the story of the Whatsitsname—to a mysterious man known as "the writer." Fascinated by Mahmoud's story, the writer begins to compose a novel about the Whatsitsname. Due to the sensitive nature of this story, which contains confidential information about government activities, the government arrests the writer, considering him a potential security threat. However, instead of giving in to intimidation, the writer resolves to continue writing his story.

Due to escalating violence in the city, many characters leave Baghdad for safer parts of the world. Elishva agrees to join her daughters Hilda and Matilda in Melbourne after meeting her grandson Daniel, who looks just like the son she lost. Having lost his job, Mahmoud returns to his hometown of Amara. There, after witnessing so much chaos in Baghdad, he concludes that the violence in Iraq is senseless: it is futile, he realizes, to hope for order and justice in the midst of total anarchy.

At the end of the novel, the government arrests Hadi, whom they accuse of being the Whatsitsname. Mahmoud concludes that the government has failed to capture the mysterious criminal and wants to reassure the population by claiming that the innocent junk dealer is the culprit. The novel's final scene confirms Mahmoud's intuition: while the population celebrates Hadi's arrest, a mysterious figure—whom the reader is encouraged to understand as the Whatsitsname—watches the scene ominously, while petting Elishva's cat, Nabu, his new friend.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Mahmoud Riyadh al-Sawadi – The protagonist of the novel, Mahmoud is a young and ambitious journalist for the *al-Haqiqa* magazine. He is a hard worker dedicated to protecting truth and justice, but also capable of taking part in unethical acts. Thanks to the guidance of his editor and mentor, Saidi, Mahmoud grows to be a successful journalist who is promoted to editor in chief. Mahmoud's willingness to sacrifice his own well-being in the name of the ideals of journalistic investigation has brought him problems in the past. Indeed, criticizing a criminal—the Mantis's brother—in his hometown of Amara has led him to receive death threats and, ultimately, to flee to Baghdad. In contrast with this ethical commitment to standing up to criminal power, Mahmoud infringes on journalistic ethics when he fails to protect his witness, Hadi the junk dealer, who has provided precious information about the Whatsitsname. In addition, Mahmoud's brutal, domineering attitude toward two women—Nawal al-Wazir, with whom Mahmoud claims to be in love, and the prostitute Zeina—reveals a darker side of Mahmoud's personality: his tendency to impose his desire on others instead of seeking consensual reciprocity. At times, Mahmoud is wary of Saidi's secretive, contradictory attitudes. However, the young journalist deeply admires his superior—a confident man connected to the highest political circles of power—and hopes to become like him. However, after discovering that Saidi is accused of stealing millions of dollars in U.S. aid, Mahmoud resolves to distance himself from Saidi's manipulative behavior and to reaffirm his commitment to principles of fairness and transparency. As a result, Mahmoud sells all of his belongings to pay the staff of the disintegrated *al-Haqiqa* magazine—an attempt to demonstrate that, unlike Saidi, he is committed to treating his employees with respect. By the end of the novel, Mahmoud is disillusioned with journalism and no longer believes in notions of order and justice. Instead, he trusts that the political dynamics in Iraq have led to pure chaos, affecting criminals and innocent people alike. He has also learned to distance himself from Saidi's influence, accepting that his former boss is too contradictory to be reliable.

The Whatsitsname – The titular "**Frankenstein** in Bagdad," the Whatsitsname is a supernatural monster made of different people's body parts. He is known as "the One Who Has No Name" by Brigadier Majid and his astrologers, as "Criminal X" by the government, and as "Daniel" by Elishva. After Hadi the junk dealer created this corpse out of the bodies of victims of terrorist attacks, the Whatsitsname is inhabited by the spirit of hotel guard Hasib Mohamed Jaafar, killed in a suicide bombing. His goal, from then on, is to pursue what he considers a form of justice: seeking revenge for the victims whose body parts

compose his own body. Throughout this process, the Whatsitsname proves to be a callous assassin, feeling no remorse for the many lives he takes. In part through the guidance of his assistant, the Magician, the Whatsitsname comes to realize that the distinction between criminality and innocence is hazy: some criminals might have been victims in the past, and some victims might have behaved in evil ways at other points of their life. This dilemma leads the Whatsitsname to a moral crisis, causing him to question the validity of his vengeful murders. When his large team of followers launches an internal "civil war," the Whatsitsname finally realizes that, instead of promoting peace, he has sown greater divisions among humans. And instead of curbing violence, he has generated new forms of brutality in the city. This realization suggests that the Whatsitsname is capable of a certain degree of self-criticism. Other episodes—such as his affection for Elishva and his protective behavior toward his creator, Hadi—also reveal that the Whatsitsname is capable of feeling empathy toward the few people he cares about. However, the Whatsitsname remains committed to ensuring his own survival, thus revealing that self-interest is more powerful in his mind than a clear vision of the ideals for which he stands.

Hadi Hassani Aidros – Hadi the junk dealer, a man in his 50s, lives in a semi-destroyed house in Bataween. Due to the stories he tells, which offer a fanciful mix of realistic details and imaginary occurrences, he is also known as "Hadi the liar." Despite his usually cheerful attitude, Hadi has been deeply affected by the death of his friend and business partner, Nahem Abdaki, who was killed in a terrorist attack. Since then, Hadi has developed "two faces," alternating between moments of energized storytelling and periods of depression. The fact that any mention of Nahem in Hadi's presence leads the junk dealer to turn aggressive is a sign that Hadi has not overcome the trauma of his friend's death. However, Hadi proves to have a kind heart and noble intentions: he stitches together the body of the Whatsitsname out of different victims' body parts in order to denounce the dehumanizing effect of violence on people in Baghdad, which denies them a dignified burial as human beings. This project reveals Hadi's humanity and empathy: he understands the physical and emotional toll that violence has on people's lives. In addition, despite his reputation as a liar, Hadi proves honest in dealing with Mahmoud: instead of selling the journalist's **digital recorder**, he later returns it, as promised, with evidence of the Whatsitsname's existence. In addition, Hadi's terror at noticing that his severely burned face—the result of a car bombing near his house—is reminiscent of the Whatsitsname's reveals his desire to live a peaceful life, far from the brutality and horror that this supernatural creature has brought to the city. These events suggest that Hadi has pure intentions to lead a happy, respectful life. The government later arrests him, accusing him of being the Whatsitsname, but the book implies that this is a mistake: the result of the authorities' inability to catch the true criminal. In this sense, Hadi can be seen as yet another casualty of the senseless violence in Iraq, which turns criminals into victims and victims into criminals.

Elishva – Elishva is an old lady who lives in an elegant, historical house that many people, including Faraj the realtor, hope to buy. Although she lives alone with her cat, Nabu, she feels accompanied by two additional beings: **the picture of Saint George the Martyr**, which she believes has spiritual powers capable of fulfilling her wishes, and the memory of her late son, Daniel, who was killed in the Iran-Iraq War. Some people see Elishva's obsession with her dead son—and her belief that he's alive and will one day come back home—as a sign of dementia. However, Elishva's daughters, Hilda and Matilda, understand that, on the contrary, this belief—however delusional—gives their mother something to live for. Elishva's grief also expresses itself in the form of anger: her desire for revenge aligns with the Whatsitsname's notion of justice as murderous vengeance. In this light, she is happy to learn of ex-Baathist Abu Zaidoun's death. However, by the end of the novel, Elishva's memory of her son no longer takes over her life. After meeting her grandson Daniel, who looks just like the son she lost, she realizes that, instead of living in the past, she should invest in nourishing bonds of love with her current family members. Her decision to follow her daughters and her grandson to Melbourne, Australia, reveals that the notion of "home" is not geographical. Rather, home is where one's fondest memories and one's deepest affection lie: within one's own family.

Ali Baher al-Saidi – The owner of the *al-Haqiqa* magazine is an extraordinarily intelligent, well-connected editor and writer who leads a secretive life. Although he seems devoted to helping Mahmoud thrive in his career as journalist, he also reveals manipulative tendencies in his relationships toward others, meant to protect his own professional ambitions. In this sense, Saidi's relationship with Brigadier Majid is highly ambiguous: although Saidi claims to despise the Brigadier for being a Baathist and an assassin, the editor also seeks to cultivate a friendly relationship with the government official. Mahmoud thus concludes that both Saidi and the Brigadier are more interested in securing their professional advancement than in upholding ideological and ethical principles. Other bonds, such as Saidi's relationship with Nawal al-Wazir, are equally ambiguous: it is unclear whether Saidi is manipulating the young woman or vice-versa. In general, Saidi believes that one should not outwardly shun or condemn evil behavior, but that one should learn to interact with powerful people in a way that secures one's own protection. The editor's self-interest and potential lack of morality becomes more explicit when he is accused of stealing millions of dollars of U.S. aid. Although Saidi later tries to persuade Mahmoud that he is innocent, the editor fails to protect his employee throughout this process: he lets Mahmoud be interrogated by the secret services and thus puts him in danger. Convinced that, despite all the help Saidi has

provided him, his former boss is too contradictory and unreliable to be believed, Mahmoud concludes that he will never know the truth concerning Saidi's true intentions. Therefore, despite Saidi's unusual eloquence and persuasiveness, uncertainty and ambiguity ultimately define his character.

Brigadier Sorour Mohamed Majid – The head of the mysterious Tracking and Pursuit Department is a former member of Saddam Hussein's regime who has succeeded in integrating the transitional government, despite restrictions against former Baathists. Like his friend Saidi, Brigadier Majid is motivated by self-interest. Less interested in committing to stable ideological principles than in advancing in his professional career, he does not hesitate to work under a variety of governments, regardless of their political principles. He often adopts ambiguous attitudes, for example behaving in alternately friendly and threatening ways toward the journalist Mahmoud, who possesses precious information about Hadi and the Whatsitsname. Although Saidi accuses Brigadier Majid of being part of an assassination squad at the service of the Americans, it is unclear whether the Brigadier actually takes part in violence. Indeed, he often demonstrates the exact opposite: a commitment to peace. For example, he shuts down the astrologers' activities when he discovers that they have been involved in a car bombing in Bataween, and he generally seems dedicated to catching dangerous criminals. However, the difficulty of understanding the character's true motives sheds a dark light on his personality. After the dissolution of the Tracking and Pursuit Department, the Brigadier feels alone, abandoned by his team, but succeeds in avoiding retirement by working for police headquarters outside of Baghdad. Brigadier Majid's ability to survive in this cutthroat political system underlines his resourcefulness and his capacity to manipulate others in order to achieve personal goals.

Faraj – This realtor in Bataween has taken advantage of the violence in Baghdad to appropriate abandoned houses, which he rents to other people in the city. Faraj's aggressive, domineering behavior, along with his engagement in illegal activities, makes him comparable to a gang leader, although he is not yet known to have taken part in violent deeds. However, he does resort to occasional aggression, going so far as slapping the employee of an NGO that seeks to buy Elishva's house—a house that Faraj has been coveting for years. He is also religiously intolerant, as he vehemently condemns the fifth beggar for being drunk and believes that people's lack of respect for strict religious prohibitions, such as the interdiction to drink, is responsible for the country's current problems. This leads him to believe in the institution of the sharia law as a possible solution to the current insecurity. Faraj's combination of business acumen and belligerence identifies him as a character intent on making profit off of other people's misery. However, he does secure a fair deal with his rival Abu Anmar, whose hotel he ultimately buys.

"The Author"/"The Writer" – The "author" or the "writer" is an unnamed character in charge of turning the story of the Whatsitsname into a novel. The author purchases Mahmoud's **digital recorder**, which the journalist is selling in order to settle his remaining debts before returning to his hometown of Amara. Fascinated by the story of the Whatsitsname on the recorder, the writer researches the story in depth and receives tips from anonymous sources, including the "second assistant," which allow him to compose a novel. The author is later arrested and interrogated by the Committee because of his knowledge of confidential information concerning the Tracking and Pursuit Department. Although the Committee releases him on the condition that he will not rewrite his novel, the author ignores this. At the end of the novel, the author flees Baghdad after learning that he is going to be arrested once more. The author's experience highlights the dangers of storytelling in such a politically explosive context, in which even writing fiction can be seen as a threat to authority.

Farid Shawwaf – Mahmoud's colleague and fellow journalist Farid Shawwaf is less dedicated than Mahmoud to the *al-Haqiqa* magazine. However, Farid shares interesting thoughts concerning the violence in Iraq. He concludes that fear is the underlying factor driving the violence in the country: as people fear terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda, more armed groups appear, thus creating new cycles of violence. Farid's lucid analysis of the situation suggests that no single actor is responsible for the political chaos in the country. Rather, what the country needs are thoughtful leaders committed to building peace and cooperation among the population, instead of greater divisions and hatred.

The Magician – The person whom the Whatsitsname considers to be his most important assistant is a former member of Saddam Hussein's Baathist government who took part in war crimes. Now devoted to the Whatsitsname's cause, the Magician is in charge of devising secret routes through destroyed buildings in the city for the creature to travel without being seen. The Magician is also responsible for pointing out that no one is ever entirely criminal or entirely innocent: rather, everyone is capable of taking part in alternatively good and alternatively evil deeds. The Magician's realistic perspective also allows him to understand that the divisions among the Whatsitsname's followers are likely to lead to conflict, which soon becomes true. The Magician is later murdered by his rival, the Sophist, who is jealous of the Magician's influence on their leader the Whatsitsname.

The Sophist – The Whatsitsname's second assistant is a manipulative, tyrannical character who becomes the Magician's rival. A specialist at making any kind of argument persuasive, the Sophist is defined by his lack of principles and, therefore, his ability to adapt his arguments to any interlocutor. For example, although he tries to argue that the Whatsitsname is

not made of criminal body parts, he later decides that, even if the opposite is true, the Whatsitsname will become a "supercriminal," better than all other criminals—that is, that the Whatsitsname will be admirable in either case. His lack of moral values becomes apparent when, during the conflict that pits the three groups of the Whatsitsname's followers against each other, he murders his colleague the Magician.

The Enemy – The Whatsitsname's third assistant is the current member of a counterterrorism unit. Disappointed by the government's inability to bring justice to its citizens, he has decided to ally with the Whatsitsname. He provides insider information about the government's activities. However, the government soon finds his activities suspicious. The Enemy warns the Whatsitsname that an inquiry has been launched against him and soon disappears. This mysterious ending suggests that the government might have imprisoned or, even, killed him.

The Young Madman – The first leader of the Whatsitsname's followers believes in the creature's political rule. He trusts that the Whatsitsname is an ideal "Iraqi citizen": a mix of the country's cultural, religious, and ethnic affiliations, all gathered in a single body. The young madman is the only who survives the miniature "civil war" that erupts among the Whatsitsname's three groups of followers. As a result, the Whatsitsname realizes that this man must be even more savage and criminal than everyone else. Although the young madman helps his leader record his story on Mahmoud's **digital recorder**, the Whatsitsname later kills him as punishment for his evil deeds. This event reveals the Whatsitsname's double standards: although he denounces other people's cruelty, he does not necessarily realize that he partakes in it himself.

Nawal al-Wazir – This middle-aged film director leads a secretive life and is interpreted in different ways by different characters. Although she claims to have a purely professional relationship with Saidi, some people believe that she is Saidi's lover. Saidi's driver, Sultan, goes so far as to say that Nawal is responsible for the legal actions taken against Saidi, because she used her political contacts against her former lover. Mahmoud, who claims to be in love with her, finds that her behavior toward him is ambiguous: although she rejects him, she also seems to want to cultivate a certain intimacy with him. Overall, it is difficult to ascertain Nawal's true motives, since she is always seen through different characters' eyes. This makes her just as difficult to understand as Saidi and suggests that, like the editor, she, too, might be less interested in transparency than in manipulating those around her.

Aziz the Egyptian – The owner of the local coffee shop in Bataween is, according to Hadi, the junk dealer's only friend. He lets Hadi tell vivid stories in his coffee shop but also looks out for his friend when suspicious members of Iraqi security try to interrogate him about the Whatsitsname. In this sense, Aziz helps Hadi come to terms with the fact that storytelling can be dangerous in such unstable political circumstances, in which having too much information about criminal activities can mark one as a suspect. Aware that the journalist Mahmoud is indirectly responsible for Hadi's savage beating at the hands of police officers, Aziz also protects Hadi by telling Mahmoud that Hadi's story about the Whatsitsname is entirely fabricated. This keeps Mahmoud from further interrogating Hadi and, thus, putting him in danger. At the end of the novel, Aziz is convinced that Hadi's arrest is unfair and that his friend is not actually the Whatsitsname. However, his participation in public celebrations of Hadi's arrest reveals his own despair at seeing violence escalate so severely in Baghdad—and his desire, along with the rest of the population, for so much brutality to come to an end.

Abu Anmar – The owner of the dilapidated Orouba Hotel in Bataween grows increasingly desperate as he enters a financial crisis. Ever since the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, Abu Anmar's business has deteriorated, leaving him nearly penniless and unable to renovate his hotel. Despite these desperate circumstances, he behaves with dignity, allowing Mahmoud to leave his hotel for a fancier one without showing his desperation. Conscious of the powerful position he used to have in the neighborhood before the fall of the former regime—a position that contrasts starkly with his current poverty—Abu Anmar ultimately decides to sell his hotel to Faraj in order to relocate to his hometown in southern Iraq, after living in Baghdad for over 20 years. His decision to leave emphasizes how extreme economic instability and political insecurity have become in the city.

Umm Salim – Elishva's elderly neighbor, Abu Salim's wife, believes that Elishva has positive spiritual powers, capable of protecting the Bataween neighborhood when she is present. The explosion in Tayaran Square after Elishva went to church and the car bombing in Bataween the morning after Elishva left for Melbourne convince Umm Salim of the validity of her interpretation. Even though Umm Salim believes that Elishva's belief in the eventual return of her son, Daniel, might be a form of delirium, she behaves in a protective way toward the old lady, offering to protect her from Faraj the realtor's efforts to appropriate her house. Overall, Umm Salim is one of the few supportive contacts Elishva maintains with the outside world.

Hasib Mohamed Jaafar – This 21-year-old man, working as a hotel guard at the Sadeer Novotel Hotel is killed in a suicide bombing: a garbage truck driven by a terrorist explodes in front of the hotel where he is working. Hasib behaves courageously, firing at the terrorist in order to fulfill his professional duty and defend the people in the hotel. Hasib's young age, along with the fact that he leaves behind a young wife and their baby daughter, highlights the tragedy of these terrorist attacks, which murder innocent people every day. After his body is destroyed in the explosion, Hasib's soul inhabits the Whatsitsname's corpse, motivating it to seek revenge on those

responsible for the attack at the hotel.

Abu Salim – This elderly neighbor of Elishva and Hadi's is Umm Salim's husband. He spends his days on his balcony, observing other people's lives. This gives him a privileged position to identify suspicious events, such as when a strange figure—the Whatsitsname, whom he assumes to be a criminal—enters Elishva's apartment. He also witnesses the departure of the officers who savagely beat up Hadi and stole his belongings. This leads him to take part in an action of solidarity toward the junk dealer: he calls out to various men in the neighborhood and, together, they bring medicine and supplies to Hadi, helping him recover from his beating. This demonstrates the links of friendship and generosity in the neighborhood of Bataween. Although the "writer" later recognizes Abu Salim's voice as the voice of the Whatsitsname on Mahmoud's **digital recorder**, the novel presents no additional information to give credibility to this link, thus suggesting that the resemblance between the two voices might be nothing more than a coincidence.

Matilda – Elishva's second daughter lives in Melbourne, Australia, along with her sister, Hilda; their husbands, and Hilda's son, Daniel. Both daughters call their mother Elishva at church every Sunday by calling Father Josiah's cell phone. Although Matilda is usually patient with Elishva's fanciful belief that her late son, Daniel, will return to Baghdad, she frequently threatens her mother to come to Iraq in order to take her away from so much violence. This initially sounds like an empty threat, but it finally comes true at the end of the novel, when Hilda and Matilda send Elishva's grandson Daniel to the old lady's house: they use the boy's resemblance to Elishva's son to convince the old lady to follow them back to Australia. This elaborate scheming reflects Hilda and Matilda's concern for their mother, as well as their conviction that leaving Baghdad is necessary given the current conflicts ravaging the city.

Hilda – Elishva's first daughter, the mother of Elishva's grandson Daniel, lives in Melbourne, Australia, along with her sister, Matilda, and their husbands. Although little is known of her personality, she suffers from psychological problems at the beginning of the novel and worries a lot about her mother's safety in Baghdad. Both daughters call their mother Elishva at church every Sunday, through Father Josiah's cell phone.

Daniel Tadros Moshe (Elishva's Son) – Elishva's son, Daniel, was around 20 years old when he was killed in the Iraq-Iran War, although his body was never recovered. Little is known about this character, besides the fact that he enjoyed playing the guitar. However, he plays a central role in Elishva's life: given that the old lady believes that her son is still alive and will come back to her one day, Daniel's memory motivates her to keep on living.

Daniel (Elishva's Grandson) – This young boy, around the age of 20, is Hilda son and, therefore, Elishva's grandson. He takes part in a plan that Elishva's daughters and Father Josiah devised to convince the old lady to follow her family to Melbourne instead of staying in conflict-torn Baghdad, where she waits in vain for her late son, also named Daniel, to return. His kindness, along with his resemblance to Elishva's son, convinces the old lady that she should nurture this special bond with a current family member, instead of spending all of her time reflecting on her son's death.

Father Josiah – Elishva's parish priest at the Assyrian Church of Saint Odisho, outside of the Bataween district, is a kind, generous man dedicated to helping others. During periods of intense destruction in the city, he allowed members of the neighborhood to contact their families abroad, regardless of their religious affiliation, via his cell phone. He believes in sustaining solidarity in the community, instead of behaving in self-centered ways. This leads him to condemn those who flee the violence in Baghdad, claiming that people should stay, in the same way the Assyrian people faced oppression in ancient times. However, this belief does not keep him from helping Elishva's daughters Hilda and Matilda to take her to Melbourne. In this way, Father Josiah reveals his empathy and his willingness to let everyone make their own decisions, even if they clash with his own perspective. This highlights this religious leader's tolerance and desire to promote cooperation between all human beings.

The Senior Astrologer – This member of Brigadier Majid's Tracking and Pursuit Department consults special cards in order to predict the future, and, in particular, to determine the whereabouts of the Whatsitsname, which he knows as "the One Who Has No Name." The senior astrologer is obsessed with seeing the Whatsitsname's face and, for this reason, is eager to arrest him. However, his conflict with the junior astrologer ultimately leads to the Department's disintegration. This seemingly avoidable conflict suggests that fostering human cooperation in a professional context marked by competition can be difficult, despite the common goal that all employees share: to catch this mysterious criminal. The Whatsitsname, controlled from the outside by the junior astrologer, later kills the senior astrologer in a brutal way, cutting off the man's hands with an ax.

The Junior Astrologer – This member of Brigadier Majid's Tracking and Pursuit Department uses magic sand to determine the Whatsitsname's position and to control the criminal's mind. This leads the junior astrologer to conclude that he is now more powerful than his superior, the senior astrologer, whom he views with contempt. Unlike the senior astrologer, focused on seeing the mysterious criminal's face, the junior astrologer wants to kill "the One Who Has No Name." This leads him to control the mind of a suicide bomber and to place him in the neighborhood of Bataween. Ultimately, though, although the blast of the explosion causes serious damage to Elishva, Hadi, and Umm Salim's houses, the Whatsitsname escapes unharmed. This brutal event leads Brigadier Majid to

suspend the astrologers' activities and to shut down the Department. In addition, the junior astrologer is later responsible for controlling the Whatsitsname's mind in order to kill his rival, the senior astrologer. This suggests that, even among security forces focused on reducing violence in Baghdad, some employees use violence to achieve their goals. This highlights the occasionally blurry distinctions between security officials and criminals, both of whom can engage in brutal deeds.

Nahem Abdaki – Hadi's friend and business partner is killed in a terrorist attack. This event marks a turning point in Hadi's life, as it leads the junk dealer to alternate between bouts of cheerfulness with dark periods of depression and aggression. Nahem is a peaceful, devout Muslim who accepts Hadi's dissolute lifestyle with great tolerance, without forcing his friend to follow Muslim prohibitions, such as the interdiction to drink. In this way, Nahem reveals his openness to a variety of religious behaviors and his dedication to friendship. This open-mindedness makes the irony of his death all the more striking: Nahem dies in a terrorist attack against a religious institution in the city. This tragic death highlights the absurdity of armed groups who use religious affiliation as an excuse for violence, whereas the most devout members of society promote religion as an instrument of peace.

The Mantis – Nicknamed "the Mantis" because of his height, this criminal accuses Mahmoud of being responsible for the death of his brother, a notorious gang leader who was killed in Amara. Mahmoud had written an article celebrating the Mantis's brother's arrest and speculating on three types of justice, including "street justice." When the Mantis's brother was later killed in the street, thus exemplifying the notion of "street justice," the Mantis accused the journalist of encouraging his brother's murder. His threats toward Mahmoud forced the journalist to leave his hometown of Amara for Baghdad. The Mantis's later success as a politician underlines the fragile distinction between criminality and politics in such an unstable, conflict-ridden country, in which domination over others can take various forms. Although the Mantis dies a brutal death, which could confirm Mahmoud's notion of "street justice," the journalist now denies the validity of this concept. Mahmoud argues that the violence in Iraq is pure anarchy and that people's deaths cannot be associated with any notion of justice: rather, all they reflect is chaos and destruction.

Hazem Abboud – This news photographer is Mahmoud's friend and the occasional occupant of a room in Abu Anmar's Orouba Hotel. He introduces Mahmoud—who had never been physically close to a woman before—to prostitutes, in order to take Mahmoud's mind off of Nawal al-Wazir. After working for an American news agency, Hazem is able to receive a green card and immigrate to the U.S., given that the nature of his work could bring dangerous consequences for him in Iraq. Although this underlines the potentially dangerous nature of journalistic storytelling, Mahmoud believes that his friend is simply fulfilling his long-standing desire to move to the U.S., using his sensitive activities as an excuse to do so.

The Four Beggars – After running into the Whatsitsname one evening, and finding his deformed face horrifying, these drunk beggars decide to kill him,. Two of the beggars kill each other by mistake and the Whatsitsname, convinced that these men are criminals, kills the remaining two. He then places the four beggars' hands around each other's necks, thus suggesting that they each played a role in orchestrating their own death. This is the first of the Whatsitsname's murders and brings an eerie atmosphere to the neighborhood of Bataween.

Mahmoud's Father – Although known as a respected gentleman in Mahmoud's hometown of Amara, Mahmoud's father revealed the full truth of his life, including uncomfortable sexual passages, in his diaries. This approach to truth-telling inspires Mahmoud, who finds comfort in knowing that writing can allow for self-expression and the revelation of all aspects of reality. However, these diaries also illustrate the potential dangers of storytelling: Mahmoud's mother burns them all after his death, unwilling to let her husband's truth come to light. In his notebooks, Mahmoud's father also discussed the origin of their family, which Mahmoud is shocked to learn was not originally Arab: one of Mahmoud's ancestors converted to Islam, and his father actually invented their family name "Sawadi," in order to replace their tribal name. These events highlight the political importance of something so intimate as family relationships, since belonging to a given social, religious, or ethnic group can determine one's fate in an environment marked by sectarian violence.

Abdullah – Mahmoud's brother, who lives in Amara, encourages Mahmoud to stay in Baghdad while the Mantis is still alive, in order to stay safe. However, he ultimately accepts Mahmoud's decision to return to his hometown as violence escalates in Baghdad. He says that Mahmoud's family does indeed miss him. In this way, he confirms that Mahmoud will be able to benefit from a warm, loving family environment after leaving the chaos of Baghdad.

Sultan – Saidi's personal driver views Mahmoud's interactions with Nawal al-Wazir with suspicion. He argues that Nawal is a manipulative woman who fell in love with Saidi and wanted to marry him, but is now responsible for launching legal accusations against the editor. Although Sultan does not necessarily have any reason to lie to Mahmoud, his unshakable loyalty to Saidi suggests that he is not necessarily an objective observer in this situation. In this sense, he simply causes Mahmoud more confusion about Saidi and Nawal's secret motives in their interactions with him. Sultan disappears while driving Saidi's mother and sister toward Amman, the capital of Jordan, where Saidi's mother is meant to be treated for a severe illness. Given the presence of armed groups who have

been murdering people because of their religious affiliations, the group is likely killed on the road.

Abu Zaidoun – This elderly barber and ex-Baathist is known as a cruel man responsible for sending many young Iraqi men to war in the 1980s, during the Iran-Iraq War. Even though he is no longer engaged in such activities, he is one of the first people whom the Whatsitsname kills, seeking revenge for the death of Elishva's son Daniel.

Zeina – Mahmoud calls this prostitute with a superficial resemblance to Nawal al-Wazir to his hotel room one night. There, despite her clear reluctance, he forces her to answer to the name "Nawal." When Zeina continues to object, he behaves in a brutal way with her, aggressively putting his hand on her mouth to keep her from speaking while having sex. This episode highlights both Mahmoud's desperate obsession with Nawal and his extreme lack of empathy for certain people—in particular, his tendency to aggressively impose his physical desire on women, regardless of their consent.

Tadros – Little is known about Elishva's husband, except that he broke their son Daniel's guitar out of grief, after learning of his death. His insistence on having a formal funeral for their son, despite the absence of a body, reveals that he was capable of accepting his son's death without entering in denial like Elishva.

Nader Shamouni – The deacon at Elishva's church behaves kindly toward the old lady, bringing her home from church after the terrorist attack in Tayaran Square and, later, encouraging her to come back to church after a long period of absence. He also plays a role in Elishva's decision to move away from Baghdad, as he drives Elishva's grandson Daniel to visit her, in order to convince her to follow her family back to Melbourne.

The Old Man – This man has discussed the possibility of selling his furniture to Hadi because he plans to sell his house and move to Russia to join his girlfriend. However, he changes his mind one day and sells his entire house, including the furniture, to someone else, thus depriving Hadi of an important business opportunity.

The Committee – This committee, composed of members of Iraqi security forces and of U.S. intelligence, launches an investigation against Brigadier Majid's Tracking and Pursuit Department. It concludes its inquiry by denouncing the presence of astrologers in a department that was meant to pursue administrative work. Ultimately, it fires the entire staff. It also interrogates "the writer," destroys his novel, and prohibits him from rewriting it, because it reveals some of the Department's secret activities.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Old Madman – The second leader of the Whatsitsname's followers believes that the creature is a prophet opening the way for the arrival of a true savior.

The Eldest Madman – Considered the most insane of the three, the third leader of the Whatsitsname's followers believes that the creature is a religious savior, capable of bringing about planetary change.

The Fifth Beggar – This drunk beggar, who witnesses the murder of the four beggars, tells Faraj that there were five men—not four—on the scene of the murder, thus revealing the participation of a mysterious, fifth person: the Whatsitsname.

Abu Jouni – Aby Jouni is the janitor at offices of *al-Haqiqa* magazine. He looks at Mahmoud with contempt on the day the journalist discovers that Saidi has been accused of stealing millions of dollars and that *al-Haqiqa* is therefore going to have to shut down.

The "Second Assistant" – The so-called "second assistant" is a mysterious member of the Tracking and Pursuit Department who sends the "writer" confidential files concerning their investigations.

TERMS

Al-Qaeda – Al-Qaeda is an extremist Sunni organization whose goal is to create a broad caliphate or Islamic state. In the various countries in which it operates, it seeks to crush both foreign powers and moderate Muslims through violence. The organization became active in Iraq in 2003, after the U.S. invasion. The group launched many terrorist attacks in the country, in particular against Shiite Muslims (the country's majority), and thus played an important role in stirring up the sectarian violence that ultimately led to a civil war.

Assyrians – Assyrians are a Middle Eastern ethnic group. **Elishva** belongs to this group and, in particular, to the sub-group of Syriac Christians. The language she speaks with her family bears the same name as her ethnic group: "Assyrian" or "Syriac." Assyrians were persecuted in post-2003 Iraq, and many of them were forced to flee the country.

Baath Party – The Arab Socialist Baath Party exists in a variety of Arab countries. In *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, the party is mentioned in the context of its decades-longs rule of Iraq (from 1968 to 2003) and refers in particular to Saddam Hussein's Baathist dictatorship of Iraq. Although the Baath party in Iraq was initially dominated by Shiite Muslims, it later became Sunni-dominated—even though the majority of people in Iraq were Shiite Muslims. Although the Baath Party initially brought unprecedented economic growth to the country, Saddam Hussein also developed a repressive police and paramilitary system meant to crush his opponents. He was responsible for attacking Iran in 1980, thus launching the eight-year Iran-Iraq War. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 sought to put an end to Baath Party rule, and Saddam Hussein was tried and executed for crimes against humanity. The U.S. then launched a process of "de-Baathification" meant to remove all former Baath Party

members from the new political system. In *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, Brigadier Majid—a former Baath Party member under Saddam Hussein's rule—succeeds in avoiding these restrictions.

Coalition Provisional Authority – The Coalition Provisional Authority was a transitional government set up by a U.S.-led coalition after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Administered primarily by members of the U.S. military, it ordered the de-Baathification of Iraqi society and created a temporary Iraqi government, to which it transferred its power in 2004.

Iran-Iraq War – The Iran-Iraq War was a protracted, eight-year war (1980–1988) that had deep social and economic consequences on the entire region. After a Shiite-led revolution in neighboring Iran, Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein felt that his Sunni-dominated Baath Party might be under threat. As a result, he declared war against Iran. Iraq employed cruel methods to try to vanquish its enemy, such as the use of chemical weapons and the targeting of civilian populations. The war ended through a ceasefire organized by the United Nations, which declared a stalemate. This war, which brought economic and social devastation to Iraq, is considered as one of the factors responsible for the rise sectarian conflict in the entire Middle East.

Sectarian Violence – Sectarian violence is a conflict that opposes different sects of a certain religion. More specifically, sectarian violence in Iraq refers to the conflict between two strands of Islam: Shiite Muslims (a majority in Iraq) and Sunni Muslims (a minority). The rift between the Shiite and Sunni derives from centuries-old theological disagreements. However, in modern times, it has taken the form of violent political conflict. During the period covered by *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, Sunni and Shiite militias viciously fought amongst each other—as well as against the provisional Iraqi government, allied with the U.S. military. The escalation of violence between these groups led to the eruption of the Iraqi Civil War from 2006 to 2008, which caused hundreds of thousands of deaths and over 4 million refugees.

Sharia Law – Sharia law or Islamic law is a religious law that applies Muslim precepts to the political sphere. The particulars of its application are widely debated in a global, contemporary setting. In particular, the relationship of sharia law to concepts such as democracy and human rights is a matter of intense debate.

Shiite – Shiism is one of the two primary branches of Islam, along with Sunni Islam. The division between Shiite and Sunni Islam derives from centuries-old theological disagreements concerning the succession to the prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam. Although the majority of the population in Iraq is Shiite, the Baath Party was primarily Sunni. The exclusion of Shiites from Saddam Hussein's Iraqi government contributed to Shiite discontent and to the emergence of sectarian conflict in the country.

Sunni – Sunni Islam is the largest branch of Islam. The division between Shiite and Sunni Islam derives from centuries-long theological disagreements concerning the succession to the prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam. Although the majority of the population in Iraq is Shiite, the Baath Party was primarily Sunni. The exclusion of Shiites from Saddam Hussein's Iraqi government contributed to Shiite discontent and to the emergence of sectarian conflict in the country.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

TRUTH, LIES, AND STORYTELLING

Set in Baghdad, Iraq, in 2005, Ahmed Saadawi's novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* tells the story of a supernatural monster, the Whatsitsname, who commits a series of murders. Hadi Hassani Aidros—an alcoholic junk collector and compulsive storyteller—created this creature by stitching together body parts from the remains of people killed in terrorist attacks. Hadi's goal is to give dignity those who were killed, so that they might be seen as full human beings, not anonymous body parts. However, like the protagonist of Mary Shelley's classic novel **Frankenstein**, the Whatsitsname develops special powers and a mind of its own. Soon, he begins killing human beings and terrorizing the local population. In this context, Hadi's stories about the Whatsitsname cross the boundary between truth and fiction: many people believe that Hadi is making the story up, yet he knows that this is, in fact, a true story. Through such events, the novel examines the central role that storytelling—both real and fictional—plays in people's lives. The novel suggests that, more than truth, what ultimately matters is a story's impact: who believes it, and what the personal and political consequences of this storytelling might be.

The novel shows that all storytelling, but especially fiction, can be mentally and emotionally healing in the midst of widespread political violence. Telling stories can allow people to survive the wounds of the past. Two decades ago, Elishva, an old lady living in a historic house, learned that her son, Daniel Tadros Moshe, had been killed in the Iran-Iraq War. His body was never found and, since then, Elishva has refused to accept her son's death. Elishva's belief that Daniel would soon return leads many of the old lady's neighbors to conclude that she is completely deluded. What these people do not understand—but what Elishva's daughters, Matilda and Hilda, fully grasp—is that the story

Elishva tells herself and others about her son's eventual return actually plays a crucial role in her life: it gives her the hope and motivation necessary to keep on living. Matilda and Hilda do not care that their mother's conviction is a delusion: they realize that this fictional story gives her the strength to stay alive.

In fact, the novel suggests that fictional stories, more so than true stories, often help people to stay sane in the midst of violence and chaos. For instance, while Hadi the junk dealer tells stories to entertain his audience, such stories also allow him to free himself from the emotional toll of these traumatic events. He recounts the story of the Whatsitsname because repeating it over and over again helps him forget that it is actually true—and absolutely terrifying. In this sense, framing his story as fiction gives Hadi a sense of agency in a violent environment over which he has, in fact, absolutely no control.

In contrast, while telling fictional stories can be healing, the novel emphasizes that telling true stories—though just as important and impactful—can be extremely risky, especially in an atmosphere of political violence and secrecy. After writing an article celebrating the arrest of a notorious gang leader in his hometown of Amara, the young and ambitious journalist Mahmoud Riyadh al-Sawadi receives death threats from the criminal's brother, a man known as the Mantis. This forces Mahmoud to flee his hometown for Baghdad. This episode illustrates the danger of journalistic work, which aims to denounce crimes and tell the truth—but which, in doing so, can offend those who have power.

In addition to criminal gangs, the government also behaves aggressively toward those who spread sensitive information. Although Hadi is not actually involved in the Whatsitsname's murders, the simple fact of telling stories about this creature has violent consequences for him. Police officers beat him up for supposedly being the monster's accomplice, and, later, they arrest him for *being* the Whatsitsname. These episodes emphasize the impact that stories can have on people's lives: stories can reveal powerful truths—truths sometimes so powerful that they can put the storyteller in danger, when faced with repressive authorities.

In this context, it becomes impossible to tell which stories are true and which are not, as everyone relies on a personal narrative—a possible mix of lies and truth—to protect their own interests and their own lives. For example, Hadi's arrest confirms that the Iraqi government is not actually interested in uncovering the truth. As Mahmoud argues, the government does not care about Hadi's guilt: what they want is to give the population a sense of peace and safety. By presenting themselves as heroes, capable of catching an elusive criminal, government officials hope that people will trust in their authority and power. Similarly, over the course of his work at the *al-Haqiqa* magazine, Mahmoud realizes that his editor, Ali Baher al-Saidi, manipulates information to serve his own interests. Saidi accuses other people of misdeeds—claiming, for example, that Brigadier Sorour Mohamed Majid is part of an assassination squad—in order to divert attention from his own secret affairs. As a result, when Saidi is later accused of stealing millions of dollars of U.S. aid, Mahmoud realizes that his boss's stories were actually full of lies. Given the difficulty of discovering the truth in a context so fraught with political manipulation, Mahmoud concludes that accepting ambiguity and uncertainty is the only solution.

As different characters—each with their own allegiances and interests to defend—present contradicting visions of reality, the reader is free to choose which narratives are more convincing than others. Along with Mahmoud, readers are encouraged to understand that most of these characters' narratives might contain elements of truth, but that these are difficult to disentangle from a web of lies and ambiguity.

GOOD VS. EVIL

Through its depiction of armed conflict in Iraq, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* explores the difficulty of achieving justice in the midst of savage destruction. The Whatsitsname initially provides a ray of hope for the community: claiming to speak in the name of innocent victims, the creature seeks justice for those who have been unfairly harmed. However, as the Whatsitsname conflates justice with murderous revenge, he soon proves just as criminal and reckless as those he aims to punish. The novel ultimately suggests that, in a context of such extreme violence, the boundaries between innocence and criminality are blurry. Innocent or not, all Iraqis are forced to endure the same fate: unpredictable bloodshed and destruction. *Frankenstein in Baghdad* bleakly concludes that, among so much lawlessness, justice is impossible to achieve. Instead, one must simply accept the unfair, arbitrary nature of violence, and strive to survive as best one can.

In the beginning, the Whatsitsname presents itself as a victim seeking justice in an unfair world. When Hadi the junk dealer first gathers body parts from the victims of car bombings in Baghdad, his goal is to denounce the state's incapacity to protect their own citizens—people who are reduced to a mix of anonymous body parts. Similarly, when this corpse comes to life and becomes the Whatsitsname, the creature's goal is to achieve justice: he seeks retaliation for the innocent victims whose murderers went unpunished. One of his first targets is Abu Zaidoun, a member of the Baathist Party responsible for sending young men to war, where many of them—including Elishva's son, Daniel—died. The Whatsitsname understands Abu Zaidoun's death as a form of punishment: this man's cruel deeds justify his own murder.

However, associating justice with murderous retaliation turns the Whatsitsname into yet another criminal: he, too, takes part in unjustified violence in order to survive. Indeed, the

Whatsitsname conflates justice and revenge. Instead of seeking to reform criminals and to promote peace, he chooses to kill them, thus supposedly ridding the city of evil. Through these methods, however, he takes part in—and thus perpetuates—the very same violence that he seeks to eradicate.

This leads the Whatsitsname to reflect on a central ethical dilemma: who deserves to live and who should die? Ultimately, the Whatsitsname realizes that no one is wholly innocent or entirely criminal: for example, some people who suffer violent, inhumane deaths might have inflicted harm on others in the past. In addition, the Whatsitsname begins to kill people for selfish purposes: he uses their body parts to replace those that are currently rotting in his own body. His killings thus start to diverge from his supposed pursuit of justice. Although the Whatsitsname sees himself as a savior, endowed with superpowers to bring justice to humanity, the purpose of his survival ultimately proves less aimed at helping others than, simply, at allowing him to live as long as he can.

In an atmosphere of chaos and destruction, justice fades in the background: death, then, should be seen as arbitrary and survival as a matter of luck. Mahmoud the journalist initially develops a theory concerning three types of justice: "legal justice, divine justice, and street justice." He believes that, sooner or later, all criminals are bound to suffer from one form of justice. This theory helps him explain what happens to a noted gang leader in Amara, the brother of the Mantis. Although this man is initially arrested, "legal justice" soon fails: the criminal is released after a couple of days. Yet a few days later, the gang leader is assassinated in the street. This series of events seemingly confirms Mahmoud's theory: the criminal has succumbed to one of the three types of justice, "street justice." However, after witnessing so much death and destruction in Baghdad, Mahmoud no longer believes that justice and violence go hand in hand. He knows that innocent people are killed every day just for being at the wrong place at the wrong time. As a result, Mahmoud concludes that the country has dissolved into anarchy: anyone—criminal or not—might die in a violent way. It is wrong, the journalist concludes, to equate justice with death, since the circumstances of one's death reveal nothing about one's moral worth.

Rather, in a context of widespread insecurity, justice and fairness lie beyond human control. As a result, Mahmoud argues, one should accept the role that luck and randomness play in life. When brutality is rampant, death is arbitrary, and punishment is unjustified, survival becomes nothing more than a matter of chance. Instead of seeking to inflict violence on others, the novel concludes, one should try to coexist as peacefully as possible. The use of force, on the other hand, only leads to greater cycles of destruction and harm.

POWER, AUTHORITY, AND SOCIAL DIVISIONS

Frankenstein in Baghdad describes the dynamics of sectarian violence—conflict between different religious groups—in Baghdad, in the period preceding the Iraqi Civil War (2006-2008). After the U.S. invades Iraq in 2003, causing the fall of Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime, different armed groups fight for control in the country. Three groups vie for power in Baghdad: the Islamist Iraqi government, allied with the U.S. military, against Shiite and Sunni militias. In light of this political context, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* illustrates the ease with which people can turn against each other on the basis of group identity. As the Whatsitsname experiences after eliciting a group following, it is easy to foster divisions among social groups, to the point of sparking armed violence. In this context, although some people succeed in taking advantage of chaos for personal gain, the novel suggests that most people are victims: innocent citizens whose lives are ruled by fear and hatred. The only solution to such severe divisions, the novel suggests, is for people to overcome fear of the other and to recognize the value of their common heritage, in its full, religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity.

The Whatsitsname's experiences highlight how easily people can turn against each other, moved by fear and hatred for people who are different from them. The creature's first contact with humans takes place through his interaction with the four beggars. One night, after seeing how ugly the Whatsitsname's face is, four drunk beggars decide to attack him. They intend to kill him because he is "the Other": instead of showing empathy for this strange creature, they resort to violence because they are terrified by someone with such an unusual appearance. These men's brutal reaction serves as an illustration of the evil forces that can be unleashed when humans come into contact with someone who is radically different from them.

These reactions also help explain the emergence of sectarian violence. After the Whatsitsname acquires a group of followers, these followers divide into three different groups, each with a different interpretation of the Whatsitsname's purpose on earth. These divisions soon turn into armed conflict: a small "civil war" erupts among these three factions, each of which wants to impose its interpretation on the others. This event symbolizes the sectarian conflict taking place in Iraq, where three different groups are busy killing each other because of divergences in religious and political beliefs.

At the same time, some people take advantage of this situation of lawlessness, turning chaos into personal profit. Some characters, like Faraj the realter, capitalize on the political instability for their own economic gain. Faraj appropriates houses that people have abandoned after fleeing violence. Over time, Faraj increasingly takes on role of a gang leader: he intimidates others—such as the members of a state-sponsored

NGO who want to buy Elishva's house—in order to defend his territory. The absence of the rule of law benefits him, allowing him to pursue his own interests without worrying about legal sanctions.

In turn, people such as Brigadier Majid and the editor Saidi modify their political and religious allegiances as a function of changing circumstances. Despite being a member the former Baathist regime, Brigadier Majid is now allied with the Americans. Similarly, Saidi maintains a large network of contacts, including American officials, despite claiming to be opposed to the American presence in Iraq. Neither man is committed to stable ideological principles. Rather, they are willing to collaborate with anyone currently in power—whether the Baathist, the Americans, or a future Iraqi government—in order to promote their personal career.

In addition, some groups not only benefit from lawlessness, but also promote it. According to Saidi, the American military in Iraq seeks to create enough chaos among Shia and Sunni militias to hold onto power. Maintaining an "equilibrium of violence" among rival groups gives the Americans a position of authority, allowing them to defend their own interests in this foreign country.

In this context of political and economic rivalries, putting an end to these divisions involves eradicating fear and celebrating cultural diversity as a common heritage, a source of strength instead of hatred. One day, dozens of people die on the Imams Bridge because rumors about the presence of a suicide bomber caused people to panic. Commenting on this tragic event, journalist Farid Shawwaf argues that the root of violence in Iraq is fear. Only by eradicating fear—for example, the fear and hatred that leads people to kill those who do not agree with their vision of religion or politics—will it be possible to build a new, more peaceful country.

Some symbolic events provide a ray of hope in this bleak environment, highlighting the possibility of peaceful coexistence. In Hadi's house, different symbols of religious affiliation hide behind each other: on the wall, the Throne Verse of the Quran covers the statue of the Virgin Mary, which, in turn, is placed on top of the representation of a Jewish candelabra. This combination of multiple religious symbols in the junk dealer's house serves as a symbolic representation of peaceful coexistence: it is possible for people to live among a variety of religious faiths. In addition, after a car bombing destroys Hadi's home, people discover an important archeological ruin hidden beneath the house. This series of events can be understood as a symbolic representation of the current state of Iraq: Iraqis' true, communal sense of belonging is hidden away behind a proliferation of religious creeds. Beneath religious differences and violent conflict lies a common heritage, buried under the violent divisions destroying the country.

The novel thus suggests that Iraqi citizens should reclaim their common heritage and seek to live in harmony with each other, regardless of their religious identity. However, it also concludes that this is unlikely to happen any time soon, because everyone is too busy protecting themselves from bloodshed and destruction.

FAMILY, FRIENDSHIP, AND HOME

In *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, Iraq's capital city is presented as an economic center that's disintegrating: the city is on the verge of turning into a full-blown war zone. These circumstances create a dilemma for Baghdad's inhabitants, who must decide whether they are willing to stay or whether they prefer to immigrate to more peaceful areas of the country or the world. Those who choose to stay are condemned to a degree of loneliness, made all the more acute by the constant danger for friends or family to die in a terrorist attack. At the same time, they also benefit from networks of solidarity, as bonds between people attempt to compensate for the widespread insecurity. Ultimately, though, multiple characters realize that solidarity is not enough: the most meaningful bonds in their lives are those associated with a sense of home, which is itself a combination of memory and family. This definition of home helps explain why some people stay in Baghdad, while others—whose true "home" is elsewhere—prefer to leave.

Different characters in the novel initially seem condemned to solitude. Alone in her house, Elishva seems bound to spend the rest of her life waiting for her dead son, Daniel, to return from the war. Only Elishva's daughters, Hilda and Matilda, currently living in Melbourne, still listen to their mother's fantasies. As a result, Elishva resigns herself to living alone in her apartment, accompanied only by her cat, Nabu, the image of **Saint George the Martyr**, and Daniel's memory. Other characters, such as Hadi, have an even smaller support network. Since the death of his work partner, Nahem Abdaki, Hadi believes that his only friend left is Aziz the Egyptian, owner of the local coffee shop. He concludes, despondently, that no one would truly miss him if he died.

Other characters compensate for their solitude by retreating into a fantasy world of human connection. Aware that his love for Nawal al-Wazir—a woman believed to be his boss Saidi's lover—will probably remain nothing but a fantasy, Mahmoud hires a prostitute, Zeina. He wants to pretend that Zeina is Nawal, so that he can feel like he's making love to Nawal. Ultimately, however, Mahmoud ends up behaving aggressively toward both women. He behaves aggressively toward Zeina when she refuses to be called "Nawal," and later, he kisses Nawal against her will. These actions reveal a dark side of Mahmoud's personality: a selfish focus on his own desire, combined with a certain lack of empathy, keeps him from seeking reciprocity. He prefers to impose his desire on these women instead of respecting what they actually want.

Despite this sense of desolation, the novel also suggests that people are not always as isolated as they believe. After Iraqi security forces beat Hadi up in his home, his neighbor Abu Salim, who has witnessed the scene from afar, comes over to help. Abu Salim calls out to different men in the neighborhood. Together, they buy medicine and bandages to heal the junk dealer's wounds. This surprising moment of solidarity reveals that underlying networks of protection run through the neighborhood. Even someone as isolated as Hadi can benefit from his neighbors' protection. This suggests that people are not always as lonely as they believe they are: they are integrated into a fabric of human interactions, part of a social world that can provide protection and comfort.

However, the spread of violence ultimately forces people to rely on the most stable tie of all: their notion of home, which the novel suggests is based on a combination of memory and family. Despite Elishva's skepticism about her daughters' commitment to take her out of Iraq, Hilda and Matilda actually do come to rescue their mother. They use Elishva's grandson Daniel—who looks just like Elishva's dead son Daniel—as an emotional tool: they want Elishva to be moved by the sight of her grandson, so similar to the son she has lost, in order to agree to follow him back to Australia. The plan works: although Elishva knows that this young Daniel is not her son, she still feels comforted by his presence. Ultimately, she realizes that this family bond is the most important thing in her life. The old lady's agreement to leave Iraq suggests that she has finally found a way to reconcile her memory of the past with her current family: through her grandson Daniel, she recovers both the memories of her lost son and the concrete bond with family members in the present.

Other characters choose similar paths, fleeing the violence in Baghdad to return to their prior home. For example, Abu Anmar, owner of the dilapidated Orouba Hotel, leaves the city after 23 years to return to his hometown in southern Iraq, where his nephews currently live. Similarly, after losing his job, Mahmoud returns to his family in Amara. These characters' decision to leave reflects not only the escalation of violence in Baghdad, but also the comfort and strength of their attachment to a notion of "home." Home, these characters conclude, is where their family and their most cherished memories are. This justifies their decision to leave and allows them to make the bold leap to rebuild their life in a new environment.

SUPERSTITION AND RELIGION

In *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, religious practices and faith in the supernatural allow the novel's characters to maintain a degree of agency over their lives, amidst an environment marked by death and destruction. At the same time, although some characters are open-minded and flexible with regard to religion, others are more intractable in their approach to religious rules. This divergence in religious approaches helps explain the potential danger of equating religion with politics. The desire to impose one's beliefs on others can lead to religious intolerance and, as becomes evident in the context of war-torn Iraq, sectarian violence.

For many people, spirituality allows them to maintain a degree of control over a chaotic environment: they put their faith in religious practices and superstitious signs that reassure them about the future. More than her religious affiliation with the Church of Saint Odisho, Elishva's strongest spiritual bond is with an image: the **picture of Saint George the Martyr**. The old lady believes that the saint has the power to bring about miracles. Therefore, she asks him to fulfill her deepest desires: in particular, receiving a sign from her long-lost son, Daniel. Elishva is convinced that the saint is alive and answers her demands. This relationship gives her a sense of comfort and protection. It allows her to hold onto hope, despite the escalating chaos in the country. Similarly, Elishva's neighbor Umm Salim holds superstitious beliefs: she is convinced that Elishva has special powers, capable of protecting their Bataween neighborhood from violence. Whenever Elishva leaves the neighborhood, Umm Salim argues, bad things happen.

In both cases, some of these women's beliefs do come true. Two bombs explode after Elishva leaves the neighborhood on two separate occasions, confirming Umm Salim's beliefs in the old lady's special protective powers. In turn, the Whatsitsname appears one day, after Elishva asks Saint George to make her son Daniel appear. To the old lady, this serves as proof of her son's return and of the saint's spiritual powers. Regardless of the actual truth of these superstitious beliefs, these episodes signal people's need to trust in *something*: they need a measure of stability and hope in a world that seems to be so rapidly disintegrating all around them.

Although some people use their spiritual beliefs to promote peace and cooperation, others aggressively seek to impose religious rules on others, which leads to intolerance. Some characters have a flexible, open-minded attitude toward religion and coexist with each other peacefully. For example, even though Hadi leads a dissolute lifestyle, marked by alcoholic excess and sexual promiscuity, his friend Nahem, a devout Muslim who respects the prohibition not to drink, remains close to him. Nahem places the Throne Verse of the Quran, a sacred text, in Hadi's home, but does not force his friend to modify his behavior. This demonstrates Nahem's tolerance of religious diversity and proves that it is possible for characters of different creeds to get along perfectly. Similarly, despite attending the same church for many years, Elishva has a flexible, pluralistic attitude toward religion. After she meets the Whatsitsname—whom she believes is her son, Daniel—she gives thanks to God by visiting a variety of houses of worship: Muslim, Jewish, Anglican, etc. Her gratitude is not limited by religious bounds. Rather, she recognizes that all of these

religions have in common one thing: the belief in a powerful God, capable of affecting human affairs for the better.

In contrast with this openness, some characters behave aggressively toward those who do not follow their same understanding of religion. For example, Faraj the realter gets angry with the fifth beggar—a man who witnessed the Whatsitsname's murder of the four beggars—after noticing that the man is drunk. Faraj argues that people like the fifth beggar—and, more generally, people who drink—are responsible for all of Iraq's problems. Faraj believes that religious rules, such as the Muslim prohibition to drink, should be turned into law, thus forcing everyone to obey fixed religious precepts. Faraj's virulent speech, which instills terror in the fifth beggar, reveals that some people are intolerant of other people's religious behaviors and seek to impose their religious views on the entire population, even if this involves the use of force.

Ultimately, the novel suggests that, for all of these characters—as religiously fluid as Elishva or as rigidly intolerant as Faraj—religious, spiritual, or superstitious convictions give stability and meaning to their lives. By providing a stable structure in the midst of anarchy, they make uncertainty and violence more bearable. At the same time, religious extremism also runs the risk of exacerbating divisions and, thus, feeding the intolerance and hatred that pits armed groups against each other. In light of the severity of sectarian violence in Iraq, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* warns against seeking to impose one's own beliefs on others. The novel suggests that personal attachments to spiritual beliefs can play a positive role in people's lives. Yet it also shows that merging religion and politics can have dangerous consequences, if this involves forcing everyone to behave according to one's personal religious beliefs.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

FRANKENSTEIN

References to the fictional creature of "Frankenstein" in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* suggest that fiction and reality are not always easy to differentiate. The character of the Whatsitsname in Ahmed Saadawi's novel is based on the character of "the Creature" (popularly known as "Frankenstein") in Mary Shelley's classic novel *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818). The novel acknowledges this original source of inspiration on multiple occasions: different characters mention the movie *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994), starring Robert De Niro, and Saidi transforms Mahmoud's article on the Whatsitsname into "Frankenstein in Baghdad"—the very title of this novel. These references identify similarities between the two fictional characters. For example, like the Whatsitsname, Shelley's original "Creature" feels that humanity has treated him unfairly because of his hideous appearance. As a result, he seeks revenge on humans for their cruel actions.

More broadly, direct and indirect references to Shelley's novel serve a political role: to launch a reflection on the fragile limits between fiction and reality in conflict-torn Baghdad. Characters' transformation of the Whatsitsname into a fictional entity—as Saidi does when he calls the creature "Frankenstein"—aims to relegate horror to the realm of fiction, when, in fact, real-life gruesome events take place on a daily basis in the Iraqi capital. Using a fictional frame of references allows characters to maintain a sense of control over the chaotic reality around them, but also emphasizes the brutality of their current environment. References to Mary Shelley's work thus reveal the multiple purposes of fiction in these characters' lives, as they attempt to make sense of the horror around them and to cope with its psychological toll.

THE PICTURE OF SAINT GEORGE THE MARTYR

The picture of Saint George the Martyr in Elishva's house reveals the old lady's evolving relationship with the memory of her son, Daniel, who was killed in the Iran-Iraq War, and with her family as a whole. As the Christian saint is shown to calmly fight against an evil dragon, the image highlights, for Elishva, the importance of trusting in God and of combatting injustice. This takes different forms throughout the novel. For example, Elishva's trust in the saint's powers initially leads her to believe that the Whatsitsname is a version of her son, Daniel. She supports the Whatsitsname's strategy of revenge, celebrating the death of Abu Zaidoun, the man responsible for sending her son to war.

Later, Elishva's meeting with her grandson Daniel marks a radical shift in her life: instead of focusing on revenge and imaginary dialogues with the saint, she now puts her faith in positive human bonds. The saint, in this sense, might have fulfilled his promise—he brought her a version of "Daniel"—but he might have also become irrelevant: Elishva no longer needs him now that she is going to integrate a safe, loving environment. In this sense, Elishva's relationship with the image of Saint George reflects the evolution of her relationship with other people: from isolation and loss, the old lady now turns to peace, openness, and the cultivation of love in the present.

THE DIGITAL RECORDER

The journalist Mahmoud's digital recorder highlights the difficulty of uncovering the truth

(and especially a single truth) in a complex political environment, marked by social conflict. A variety of characters come into possession of the recorder. Although Mahmoud generally uses it to record his impressions of events for journalistic purposes, he later lends it to Hadi, who gives it to the Whatsitsname so that the creature can interview his own self. Later, both Brigadier Majid and the "writer" become interested in the stories the digital recorder contains. Over the course of the novel, no character interprets these recordings in the same way. Some characters believe that the Whatsitsname is real: Mahmoud, for example, doubts that Hadi could have invented such a complicated story on his own. Others, such as Aziz the Egyptian, argue that Hadi has invented everything from scratch, asking friends to impersonate the characters. The diversity of perspectives concerning the meaning and validity of these recordings underlines the difficulty of finding out the truth in a political context fraught with lies, in which storytelling can be a form of survival. The digital recorder, then, does not necessarily record a single, factual version of reality. Rather, the recorder becomes the symbol of the multiple "realities" that co-exist in a complex social world, as each character interprets events according to their own experiences and beliefs.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* published in 2018.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ 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.

Related Characters: Hilda, Matilda, Elishva

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

The first chapter of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* opens with a car bombing in Tayaran Square, near the Bataween neighborhood where Elishva lives. This violent first scene sets the tone for the book: in these characters' lives, murderous and unpredictable terrorist attacks are part of the rhythm of ordinary life. The frequency of these brutal events is evident in the way in which the city handles such matters: after barely a few hours since the explosion, the streets are clean and quiet, as though nothing had happened. This suggests that both the authorities and the local population are used to such events. Helpless at preventing such events from taking place, all people can do is move on with their lives.

Through Elishva, however, the novel identifies one way to cope with these oppressive circumstances: family support. The relief that Elishva feels in talking with her daughters, Matilda and Hilda, who currently live in Melbourne, suggests that staying connected to a notion of "home" is crucial to the old lady's well-being—however far away her daughters might be. Over the course of the novel, Elishva will come to terms with the importance that family plays in her life. Although she cares about her home in Baghdad because of the memories associated with her house, she will later conclude that staying close to one's family is what matters most.

❝ 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.

Related Characters: Hadi Hassani Aidros , Daniel Tadros Moshe (Elishva's Son), Hilda, Matilda, Elishva

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Beyond the emotional comfort that Hilda and Matilda bring Elishva, the two women also play a key role in comforting their mother: they validate the old lady's fantasies. Over two decades since her son Daniel's death in the Iran-Iraq War, Elishva remains convinced that her son—whose body was never found—is still alive and will return to her one day.

Although this belief risks trapping the old lady in a fantasy world, fueled by wishful thinking, Elishva's daughters realize that it also plays a positive role: it gives their mother something to live for. Elishva is evidently in denial and refuses to accept the reality of her son's death—refuses, in other words, to give in to the full weight of grief. However, this helps her endure a difficult present, marked by widespread insecurity and a sense of solitude.

These considerations suggest that the truthfulness of stories is not necessarily important: what matters more is how they help people cope with their lives. Along with characters such as Hadi, who tells stories in order to forget about his own grief, Elishva tells herself stories to herself that make her present life more bearable. These stories give her a sense of optimism and orient her days toward a positive outcome, instead of the prevailing sense of doom around her as the city follows a downward spiral of violence.

Chapter 2 Quotes

"The shock of Nahem's death changed Hadi. He became aggressive. He swore and cursed and threw stones after the American Hummers or the vehicles of the police and the National Guard. He got into arguments with anyone who mentioned Nahem and what had happened to him. He kept to himself for a while, and then went back to his old self, laughing and telling extraordinary stories, but now he seemed to have two faces, or two masks—as soon as he was alone he was gloomy and despondent in a way he hadn't been before.

Related Characters: The Whatsitsname, Elishva, Hadi Hassani Aidros , Nahem Abdaki

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Hadi the junk dealer, known for telling fanciful stories, used to have a relatively stable and successful business with his friend Nahem Abdaki. As business partners, the two of them restored and sell old furniture. However, months before the explosion in Tayaran Square, Nahem was killed in a car bombing in the street. As a result of the explosion, his body was severed into various, unrecognizable pieces.

This tragic event had deep effects on Hadi's personality, and suggests that the junk dealer's current personality cannot be separated from the political chaos in the city. Indeed, despite not being physically hurt by this explosion, Hadi has suffered from profound grief, which has modified his behavior.

Hadi's transformation of grief and suffering into bouts of anger and depression mirrors other characters' reactions, such as Elishva's desire for revenge for her son's death. These aggressive reactions highlight the Baghdad population's helplessness before the widespread terror and violence that rocks their lives, tearing their loved ones away from them.

The notion that Hadi now has "two masks" mirrors the Whatsitsname's face, made of an alternation of different people's body parts. It creates ambiguity concerning Hadi's character, suggesting that he might be more complex—and, perhaps, more unreliable—than his cheerful demeanor seemingly indicates.

"I wanted to hand him over to the forensics department, because it was a complete corpse that had been left in the streets like trash. It's a human being, guys, a person," he told them.

"But it wasn't a complete corpse. You made it complete," someone objected.

"I made it complete so it wouldn't be treated as trash, so it would be respected like other dead people and given a proper burial," Hadi explained.

Related Characters: Hadi Hassani Aidros (speaker), Aziz the Egyptian, The Whatsitsname

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

In Aziz the Egyptian's coffee shop, Hadi recounts the story of the Whatsitsname, describing how he stitched together different body parts—the remains of victims of terrorist attacks—to create a single corpse. Although Hadi is known as a fanciful storyteller and an unreliable source of information, the junk dealer's goal appears quite noble: he seeks to denounce the unjust violence affecting so many people's lives in the city and to give dignity to those who have died. Despite his apparent lack of religious conviction in other aspects of his life, Hadi gives importance to burial ceremonies, which he sees as a means to honor a person's existence.

This dialogue reveals a thoughtful side of Hadi's personality: like everyone else in the city, he is desperately searching for a way to resist the terror and dehumanization that such unbridled violence generates. His respect for human life reveals that he is not a callous or frivolous storyteller but, rather, a thoughtful citizen who understands the difficulty of surviving and preserving one's dignity existence in such an oppressive environment.

Chapter 5 Quotes

Sitting in the coffee shop, he would tell the story from the beginning, never tiring of repeating himself. He immersed himself in the story and went with the flow, maybe in order to give pleasure to others or maybe to convince himself that it was just a story from his fertile imagination and that it had never really happened.

Related Characters: Aziz the Egyptian, The Whatsitsname, Hadi Hassani Aidros

Related Themes:

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

When he recounts the story of the Whatsitsname, Hadi reflects on storytelling's purpose in his life. He enjoys spending time in Aziz the Egyptian's coffee shop and narrating events that contain a mix of realistic details and fanciful events. Despite frequently feeling lonely, Hadi realizes that this activity allows him to stay in touch with others: specifically, to make other people entertained. This reveals a generous, sociable aspect of Hadi's personality.

On the other hand, Hadi also realizes that this storytelling might serve a deeper psychological purpose: it allows him to live partially in an invented world, in which traumatic events have not taken place. In this particular case, recounting the story of the Whatsitsname allows the junk dealer to stay in control of a story that has actually escaped his control: the Whatsitsname has mysteriously disappeared, in circumstances that Hadi does not understand.

Although one might expect Hadi to try to forget about these terrifying events by never speaking about them, he does the opposite: he speaks about them all the time, in order to neutralize its possibly traumatic effects. Transforming reality into fiction thus serves a soothing purpose, allowing Hadi to move on with his life.

If the argument was interrupted, Elishva would argue with herself instead or grab hold of one of the women in the church to listen to her fiery sermon about how she refused to leave her home and move to a place she knew nothing about. Father Josiah encouraged her to stay, because he saw it as a religious obligation. It wasn't good that everyone should leave the country. Things had been just as bad for the Assyrians in previous centuries, but they had stayed in Iraq and had survived. None of us should think only of ourselves. That's what he said in his sermon sometimes.

Related Characters: Daniel Tadros Moshe (Elishva's Son), Hilda, Matilda, Father Josiah, Elishva

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

Elishva's daughters, Matilda and Hilda, live in Melbourne, Australia, with their husbands. After escaping the violence and economic uncertainty of Baghdad, they now want their mother to join them. Elishva, however, is committed to staying in Baghdad, because she believes that her dead son Daniel might one day come back from war.

In this sense, Elishva's reasons for staying are distinct from those that Father Josiah raises. Father Josiah, whose church serves as a hub of solidarity in the neighborhood, believes in resistance and generosity as a form of living. Instead of thinking about personal survival, he argues, people should be concerned with the well-being of the entire community.

Although Father Josiah's beliefs promote positive values of selflessness and cooperation, they also ask many sacrifices of his churchgoers. The priest tells his congregation that they should accept the constant threat of violence—which could harm their family or themselves at any time—in order to ensure the survival of a given ethnic group.

This conviction clashes with many characters' actions: most of them decide that fleeing the violence is the most logical decision in such a chaotic environment. When faced with a threat to their lives, many characters—including Elishva—ultimately decide that what matters most is their own survival and that of their immediate family.

Chapter 6 Quotes

Although he had clout in the neighborhood, he was still frightened by the Americans. He knew they operated with considerable independence and no one could hold them to account for what they did. As suddenly as the wind could shift, they could throw you down a dark hole.

Related Characters: Faraj

Related Themes:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

Faraj the realter has succeeded at maintaining a thriving

business in the midst of violent chaos. To do so, he has depended on a network of contacts, who have been able to support him in his illegal activity of appropriating abandoned houses. However, despite his prominent position in the Bataween neighborhood, Faraj—like the rest of the population—is still vulnerable to the decision of important political actors: in this case, the U.S. occupying forces, currently allied with the Iraqi government.

Faraj's fear of the Americans derives from the fact that the American military is accountable to no one: they are not an elected government but, rather, an occupying force, whose authority depends on its control of a given territory. This political situation highlights a special form of injustice: the local population's obligation to obey the orders of a brutal force that does not actually represent them—and that, in all likelihood, does not have its best interests at heart. From this perspective, centered on the local population's vulnerability, the American military appears as an oppressive force, wreaking havoc among locals for no discernable reason. In this sense, its violent deeds are comparable to those of the other groups causing chaos in the city.

❝ But there were two fronts now, Mahmoud said to himself— the Americans and the government on one side, the terrorists and the various antigovernment militias on the other. In fact "terrorist" was the term used for everyone who was against the government and the Americans.

Related Characters: The Whatsitsname, Brigadier Sorour Mohamed Majid, Ali Baher al-Saidi, Mahmoud Riyadh al-Sawadi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

After meeting Brigadier Majid in his office with Saidi, Mahmoud realizes that both men are more interested in serving the Americans than in defending stable ideological convictions. Indeed, despite presenting themselves as true patriots—and, therefore, opposed to the U.S. occupation—both Brigadier Majid and Saidi work with the Americans in order to protect their own professional interests.

Mahmoud thus concludes that the U.S. invasion has caused people to be divide into two groups: those allied with the Americans, and those against them. The Whatsitsname later mentions that three groups are fighting for power in Iraq: the Iraqi government (allied with the Americans), and the opposing Sunni and Shiite militias.

However, Mahmoud's simpler, more schematic division suggests that part of the conflict revolves around an issue of political language: anyone opposed to the current coalition is labeled a "terrorist." This strategy serves to delegitimize opposition groups, by giving them such a negative label.

Mahmoud thus realizes that part of the government's strategy for domination and control is based on storytelling. Indeed, presenting the opposition as vicious "terrorists" gives less validity to these groups' claims for power and to their political vision. Those determining this vocabulary are the groups currently in power, who get to shape the way in which current events are presented to the public.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ Honestly, I think everyone was responsible in one way or another. I'd go further and say that all the security incidents and the tragedies we're seeing stem from one thing—fear. The people on the bridge died because they were frightened of dying. Every day we're dying from the same fear of dying. The groups that have given shelter and support to al-Qaeda have done so because they are frightened of another group, and this other group has created and mobilized militias to protect itself from al-Qaeda. It has created a death machine working in the other direction because it's afraid of the Other. And we're going to see more and more death because of fear. The government and the occupation forces have to eliminate fear. They must put a stop to it if they really want this cycle of killing to end.

Related Characters: Farid Shawwaf (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

One day, several people die on the Imams Bridge in Baghdad after rumors spread among the crowds of the presence of a suicide bomber on the bridge. Some journalists accuse the government of failing to protect their population, while others accuse terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda for this event.

Combining these different perspectives, journalist Farid Shawwaf argues that fear is responsible for the chaos in the city. Fear, he argues, leads people to focus only on their own survival. In the absence of a stable government, this, in turn, encourages them to ally with various armed groups, which

only generate more violence and chaos.

As a result, people no longer trust institutions: the only people they trust are those who come from their own social groups. Rival groups, by contrast, are perceived as a dangerous threat. In other words, Farid argues that fear and social divisions breed violence, which in turns breeds more fear and social divisions, in an endless cycle.

Although Farid does not indicate what kinds of measures the government could put in place to eradicate fear, he does signal the path to follow. He suggests that building trust among people from different groups is an important strategy, as cooperation and unity can provide an antidote to suspicion and fear.

Chapter 9 Quotes

"It was the Sudanese suicide bomber who caused his death," Hadi said confidently, trying to exploit the situation to his own advantage.

"Yes, but he's dead. How can I kill someone who's already dead?"

"The hotel management, then. The company that ran the hotel."

"Yes, maybe. But I have to find the real killer of Hasib Mohamed Jaafar so his soul can find rest," said the Whatsitsname, pulling up a wooden crate and sitting on it.

Related Characters: The Whatsitsname, Hadi Hassani Aidros (speaker), Hasib Mohamed Jaafar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, inhabited by the soul of hotel guard Hasib Mohamed Jaafar, the Whatsitsname is looking for the person responsible for the man's death. He initially accuses Hadi the junk dealer, since Hadi's passage in front of the hotel caused the hotel guard to leave his sentry box and thus expose himself to the suicide bomber driving. However, seeking to divert the Whatsitsname's attention, Hadi defends himself by accusing other people, thus engaging in a debate about crime and responsibility.

The Whatsitsname's confusion concerning who to punish for Hasib's death suggests that a whole network of actors might be directly and indirectly responsible for every single terrorist attack. In fact, later in the novel, the Whatsitsname finds the name of a Venezuelan responsible for recruiting suicide bombers, including the one responsible for the Sadeer Novotel attack. These attacks are not isolated events, produced by the mind of a single suicide bomber but, rather, attacks that form part of a broad strategy of terror organized by political groups fighting for the control of a given territory.

The conversation between Hadi and the Whatsitsname also indicates that there might be no easy solution to find peace after such a violent murder, which is the product of such complex political circumstances. In this context, the Whatsitsname's obsession with killing culprits can be seen as a futile—and criminal—effort to eradicate evil, which comes in such a broad variety of forms.

The Whatsitsname talked about the night he met the drunk beggars. He said he tried to avoid them, but they were aggressive and charged toward him to kill him. His horrible face was an incentive for them to attack him. They didn't know anything about him, but they were driven by that latent hatred that can suddenly come to the surface when people meet someone who doesn't fit in.

Related Characters: The Four Beggars, The Whatsitsname

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 130-131

Explanation and Analysis

In the recording in which the Whatsitsname interviews himself, he recalls his first murder: the killing of four drunk beggars in Bataween. Although people have described this as a vicious act of gratuitous cruelty, the Whatsitsname defends himself by portraying it as self-defense.

His description of the four beggars' unjustified hatred mirrors the political dynamics in Baghdad, in which different sectarian groups attack each other out of fear and hatred. The Whatsitsname suggests that, instead of reacting with compassion and curiosity toward someone who is different from them, people can tend to react with fear—which, in turn, leads to violence.

The Whatsitsname's reaction is just as brutal: he kills those who tried to murder him. In this sense, this narrative suggests that intolerance fuels violence. If people could approach each other with empathy—that is, understanding that difference does not have to be a threat—they could put an end to the cycles of violence ravaging the city and the

country.

Chapter 10 Quotes

The young madman thinks I'm the model citizen that the Iraqi State has failed to produce, at least since the days of King Faisal I.

Because I'm made up of body parts of people from diverse backgrounds—ethnicities, tribes, races, and social classes—I represent the impossible mix that never was achieved in the past. I'm the first true Iraqi citizen, he thinks.

Related Characters: The Whatsitsname (speaker), Hadi Hassani Aidros , The Eldest Madman, The Old Madman, The Young Madman

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 146-147

Explanation and Analysis

The Whatsitsname notes that his followers are divided into three groups, each following a different "madman" with a particular interpretation of the Whatsitsname's role on earth. While two of the madmen believe in the Whatsitsname as a religious prophet, the young madman believes that this creature has a political role: it symbolizes the underlying unity of the Iraqi nation.

The young madman mentions King Faisal I, a King of Iraq in the first half of the 20th century who sought to unite Sunni and Shiite Muslims, divided by centuries-long conflicts. The young madman's description implies that the Whatsitsname, too, could help bring about greater unity in the country, thus saving it from its current, sectarian wars.

However, although the Whatsitsname does indeed care little about his victims' religious affiliation, he is ultimately incapable of fostering unity, since his methods are so brutal. In fact, his own followers soon engage in conflict amongst each other, thus demonstrating that the Whatsitsname has actually caused new fractures—instead of new cooperation—in Iraqi society.

From a purely physical perspective, though, the Whatsitsname does embody a certain notion of human dignity. As Hadi had hoped to achieve when creating the Whatsitsname's body, the creature is a physical representation of the destruction of lives in modern-day Iraq. In this sense, he can be seen as a spokesperson of sorts—however violent and ineffective—for all the people who have been victims of violence in the country's recent history.

I was careful about the pieces of flesh that were used to repair my body. I made sure my assistants didn't bring any flesh that was illegitimate—in other words, the flesh of criminals—but who's to say how criminal someone is? That's a question the Magician raised one day.

'Each of us has a measure of criminality,' the Magician said, smoking a shisha pipe he had prepared for himself. 'Someone who's been killed through no fault of his own might be innocent today, but he might have been a criminal ten years ago, when he threw his wife out onto the street, or put his aging mother in an old people's home, or disconnected the water or electricity to a bouse with a sick child, who died as a result, and so on.'

Related Characters: The Magician, The Whatsitsname (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 156

Explanation and Analysis

As the Whatsitsname's body gradually rots away, he is forced to use new victims' body parts as replacements. Although he believes that he is only using the flesh of innocent victims, a conversation with his assistant the Magician brings to light the fragile demarcation between innocence and criminality—or, more broadly, good and evil—in human life.

The Magician argues that everyone is capable of harboring evil intentions and of committing harmful deeds at any point of their lives. Not all harm has to take the form of armed violence: being aggressive or negligent toward one's family or one's neighbors can have fatal consequences, even if one's intentions was never to cause anyone's death.

The Magician thus broadens the notions of evil and harm beyond the armed conflict taking place in Iraq. His description suggests that it might be impossible to categorize human beings: everyone is capable of acting in good or evil ways at different moments of their lives. In this sense, being a victim today does not erase one's past criminality. Similarly, one's current criminal behavior does not imply that one was never a victim in the past.

This conversation essentially invalidates the

Whatsitsname's moral campaign against so-called criminals. Indeed, if everyone is capable of acting in alternatively good and evil ways, it is no longer possible for a fixed label—"criminal" or "innocent"—to represent the entirety of one's life.

Chapter 11 Quotes

The Mantis's brother had led a small gang that terrorized the locals until he was arrested and detained. The news of his arrest was greeted with great joy by many, including Mahmoud, who then wrote a newspaper article about the need to enforce the law against this criminal. He philosophized a little in the article, saying there were three types of justice—legal justice, divine justice, and street justice—and that however long it takes, criminals must face one of them.

Publishing the article won Mahmoud points for courage and for embodying the journalistic ideal of enlightenment in service of the public interest.

Related Characters: The Whatsitsname, The Mantis, Mahmoud Riyadh al-Sawadi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

In his hometown of Amara, young journalist Mahmoud al-Sawadi takes a stance against organized criminality by publicly celebrating a notorious gang leader's arrest. Mahmoud's three types of justice can be seen as a lens through which to understand the actions taking place in the novel—and the fragility of such optimistic notions of justice.

First of all, his article celebrates the first type of justice: "legal justice," which has allowed for the criminal's arrest. However, the gang leader's release after barely a few days suggests that the law is not necessarily effective at protecting its own citizens.

Secondly, the mention of "divine justice" recalls the actions of the Whatsitsname, who considers himself a conduit for God's will. However, the Whatsitsname's own criminal deeds, along with his frequent doubts about the validity of his actions, suggests that "divine justice" is difficult to identify and can lead to divergent interpretations.

Finally, when the gang leader is killed in the streets of Amara a few days after his release, his death seemingly confirms Mahmoud's notion of "street justice." However, given the violence taking place in the streets of Baghdad—which affects innocent people and criminals alike—the notion of "street justice" loses credibility as a mechanism that only punishes those who deserve it.

The fragility of these three types of justice suggests that justice is never guaranteed. Rather, the fight against injustice requires self-sacrifice and courage, such as Mahmoud's commitment to journalistic reporting: the bold actions of people willing to stand up for the truth and the defense of human dignity.

He turned to Mahmoud and said, "Brigadier Majid is one of the people you'll have to get used to dealing with."

Mahmoud said nothing but waited for further explanation because he didn't plan to see Brigadier Majid and would try as far as possible to make sure that kind of meeting didn't happen again.

"There are people like him in our world," said Saidi, "and we have to learn how to deal with them tactfully, how to get along with them, how to accept that they exist."

Related Characters: Ali Baher al-Saidi (speaker), The Whatsitsname, Brigadier Sorour Mohamed Majid, Mahmoud Riyadh al-Sawadi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 177

Explanation and Analysis

After being interrogated by Brigadier Majid about the story of the Whatsitsname—a criminal the Brigadier is desperately pursuing—Mahmoud tells his boss Saidi about this event. Instead of showing concern for Mahmoud, Saidi accepts the Brigadier's threatening attitude as an ordinary facet of politics. Immersed in Iraqi society's political circles, Saidi accepts that politicians are focused on their own career and that they might behave aggressively toward those who stand in their way. Instead of seeking to change or avoid these people's harmful behavior, Saidi embraces it is an inevitable part of life, which journalists like Mahmoud should learn to handle.

In this sense, Saidi's strategy clashes with the Whatsitsname's notion of justice. Instead of promoting the eradication of evil, like the Whatsitsname, Saidi adopts an attitude of compromise: learning to interact with dangerous people, even if this leads to unpleasant experiences.

Saidi's attitude is realistic, because he accepts that cruelty and domination will always be a part of human life.

Diplomacy, in this sense, might be the best solution. At the same time, Saidi's behavior also promotes a certain degree of passive acceptance: instead of attempting to change the world, one should learn to accept a certain degree of fear and injustice.

Overall, this tension between the activism that journalism can promote and the necessity to deal with a possibly repressive political sphere creates a difficult moral context for idealistic journalists such as Mahmoud to navigate.

> Yes, for a year or more he's been carrying out the policy of the American ambassador to create an equilibrium of violence on the streets between the Sunni and Shiite militias, so there'll be a balance later at the negotiating table to make new political arrangements in Iraq. The American army is unable or unwilling to stop the violence, so at least a balance or an equivalence of violence has to be created. Without it, there won't be a successful political process.

Related Characters: Ali Baher al-Saidi (speaker), Brigadier Sorour Mohamed Majid, Mahmoud Riyadh al-Sawadi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 177-178

Explanation and Analysis

When discussing Brigadier Majid's position in Iraqi politics, Saidi argues that the Brigadier takes part in an assassination squad that the Americans organized. Saidi argues that the goal of the American army is not to put an end to sectarian violence in the city but, rather, to emerge as the most powerful group in this conflict—even if this involves fostering war among lower groups.

Saidi's comments suggest that no political group is truly interested in promoting peace and justice; rather, all they seek is territorial control and political domination. This cynical view of conflict in Iraq deprives the war of any moral worth. It identifies the underlying dynamics of this conflict as greed and selfishness.

At the same time, given Saidi's tendency to manipulate the truth for his own purposes, it is unclear whether his depiction of the situation is reliable. Although it is possible that his description of political dynamics in the country is accurate, Brigadier Majid's involvement in armed conflict remains uncertain, corroborated by no other episode in the novel.

In this sense, Saidi's description might also be an act of domination. He might seek to portray Brigadier Majid in a negative light in order to achieve a personal goal: for example, being seen as more patriotic than the Brigadier and thus securing his employee Mahmoud's trust.

> Anyway, the best way to protect yourself from evil is to keep close to it. I humor him so he doesn't stand in the way of my political ambitions, and so he doesn't put a bullet in the back of my head, fired by one of those fat guys with shaved heads, in response to an order from the Americans.

Related Characters: Ali Baher al-Saidi (speaker), Brigadier Sorour Mohamed Majid, Mahmoud Riyadh al-Sawadi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

Once again, Saidi confirms that his affinity with Brigadier Majid is purely instrumental. It does not reflect adherence to the Brigadier's project but, rather, a necessary compromise in such a complex political context.

In this case, Saidi focuses specifically on self-interest. Aware of the fact that he could be killed at any moment, he accepts the protection that Brigadier Majid can offer him, even if this involves interacting with people whose values he does not share. In this sense, Saidi's approach to immorality and criminality is based on pragmatic considerations, instead of moral principles: he accepts to cooperate with supposedly evil people in order to survive.

Through such methods, though, Saidi proves just as morally corrupt as anyone else: he prioritizes his professional advancement with little regard for morality. Although this posture is understandable from the perspective of survival, it also highlights Saidi's indifference to firm, ethical or ideological principles.

This, in turn, suggests that his relationship with Mahmoud might be equally instrumental. Saidi interacts with people not out of commitment or affinity but, rather, because he expects to use these relationships for his own interests.

Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ She looked at the picture of the saint hanging in front of her, his lance raised and the dragon crouching beneath him. She wondered why he hadn't killed the dragon years ago. Why was he stuck in that posture, ready to strike, she wondered. Everything remains half completed, exactly like now: she wasn't exactly a living being, but not a dead one either.

Related Characters: The Whatsitsname, Elishva

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis

After the Whatsitsname shares some of his recent experiences and moral doubts with Elishva, who does not seem to understand what he is saying, the old lady interrogates the picture of Saint George the Martyr. She believes this picture is capable of fulfilling her wishes and creating miracles, but she now wonders about the saint's own incapacity to fulfill a single task: killing the dragon.

Elishva's frustration with the saint's incompetence is humorous, given that it the saint is an inanimate object—and, therefore, cannot change the composition of the picture. At the same time, Elishva's questioning serves a symbolic purpose, relevant to the context of her life and of the novel as a whole. She wonders why it takes so long for humans to combat injustice, metaphorical "dragons" that make people's lives unbearable. In this way, she denounces the prevailing climate of danger and violence permeating Iraqi society.

Elishva's frustration also promotes the same kind of immediate "justice" that the Whatsitsname brings forward: killing those who have caused harm to others. In fact, Elishva's realization that she is in a state of limbo, neither dead nor alive, mirrors the Whatsitsname's state: a corpse that has somehow been given life.

In the context of Elishva's life, this comparison to a corpse-like being signals that she has been so immersed in her memories that she is not actually "living" or enjoying the fullness of life. This realization serves as a turning point in her story, as she comes to terms with her own isolation. This helps explain why she later finds so much comfort in reuniting with her family, who succeed in bringing past memories and current relationships together.

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ In his mind he still had a long list of the people he was supposed to kill, and as fast as the list shrank it was replenished with new names, making avenging these lives an endless task. Or maybe he would wake up one day to discover that there was no one left to kill, because the criminals and the victims were entangled in a way that was more complicated than ever before.

"There are no innocents who are completely innocent or criminals who are completely criminal."

Related Characters: The Magician (speaker), The Whatsitsname

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

In line with the Whatsitsname's doubts about the moral validity of his murders, he reflects on the words his assistant the Magician once shared with him: the notion that no one is ever entirely criminal or entirely innocent.

Part of the Whatsitsname's dilemma derives from the current Iraqi political context, in which violence is escalating and thus producing an increasing number of victims. In these circumstances, the Whatsitsname's deeds are bound to keep on increasing, reflecting an external context of brutality in which killings never seem to cease.

However, the Whatsitsname's realization that he might one day have no one left to murder signals his embrace of the Magician's words: if everyone is partially innocent and partially criminal, the only solution to killing all the "criminal" elements in society is to kill everyone or, on the contrary, to kill no one.

The Whatsitsname's understanding of this moral dilemma explains his later passivity: his decision to stop all of his targeted murders until he understands how to proceed. Implicitly, however, this standstill suggests that the Whatsitsname's strategy has been wrong all along. Instead of destroying more lives, he should focus on more positive methods to prevent criminality—methods that do not involve revenge and that do not inflict more harm on humanity.

Chapter 15 Quotes

He told her it would be about the evil we all have inside us, how it resides deep within us, even when we want to put an end to it in the outside world, because we are all criminals to some extent, and the darkness inside us is the blackest variety known to man. He said we have all been helping to create the evil creature that is now killing us off.

Related Characters: The Whatsitsname, The Magician, Nawal al-Wazir, Ali Baher al-Saidi

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 227

Explanation and Analysis

Planning to make a movie with Nawal, Saidi shares with her his theory concerning human responsibility. In line with the Magician's belief in everyone's mix of innocence and criminality, Saidi asserts that everyone is at least partly evil.

This belief impacts the reader's understanding of the Whatsitsname. Indeed, if the Magician's analysis questioned the Whatsitsname's murderous behavior, Saidi's comment, by contrast, justifies the Whatsitsname's existence. Indeed, although Saidi only mentions a metaphorical "monster"—he does not yet know of the Whatsitsname's existence—he argues that human beings as a whole are responsible for the current, "monstrous" violence in Iraq. The Whatsitsname only exists because human beings have been evil to each other. Without such human tendencies toward evil, no "monster"—no war and no corpse-like assassin—would exist.

Saidi's argument, however, extends beyond the Whatsitsname, because he argues that everyone in Iraqi society is capable of behaving in an evil manner. As a result, even those who do not actively partake in violence are part of this human tendency toward harm: they, too, possess a certain degree of evil that can express itself.

This belief is somewhat self-serving. If the Whatsitsname's reflections on morality lead him to pause his murderous deeds, Saidi's comment, by contrast, seems to justify his own illegal actions. By considering that everyone is responsible for the existence of evil in the world, Saidi implicitly argues that no one is uniquely responsible. This serves his own interests: it allows him to justify his own, possibly criminal behavior as an instinct common to all human beings.

Chapter 16 Quotes

There were people who had returned from long journeys with new names and new identities [...]. There were people who had survived many deaths in the time of the dictatorship only to find themselves face-to-face with a pointless death in the age of "democracy"—when, for example, a motorbike ran into them in the middle of the road. Believers lost their faith when those who had shared their beliefs and their struggles betrayed them and their principles. Nonbelievers had become believers when they saw the "merits" and benefits of faith. The strange things that had come to light in the past three years were too many to count. So that Daniel Tadros Moshe, the lanky guitarist, had come back to his old mother's house wasn't so hard to believe.

Related Characters: The Whatsitsname, Hilda, Daniel (Elishva's Grandson), Elishva, Daniel Tadros Moshe (Elishva's Son)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 235

Explanation and Analysis

One day, Elishva opens her door to find herself face-to-face with a 20-year-old boy who looks just like her son, Daniel—the boy who died in the Iran-Iraq War two decades. In fact, this boy is her grandson (also named Daniel), not her son. However, the similarity between the two boys' appearance leads everyone to believe that a miracle has taken place: Elishva's son has come back from the war after two decades.

This passage reflects on the distinction between the earthly and the supernatural. Although some events might seem extraordinary in other contexts, war and senseless violence have caused a variety of implausible events to take place in modern-day Iraq. Paradoxically, sudden deaths and reappearances, as well as changes in people's identities and religious principles, are part of everyday life for people who have experienced such traumatic events as dictatorship, war, and ongoing political instability.

It is in this light that other events in the novel can be understood. For example, the creation of the Whatsitsname defies all biological rules: it is not possible for a corpse made of different people's body parts to come to life. However, instead of depicting this as a preposterous event, the novel inserts this creature in its home-grown environment: a context of extreme violence, which turns ordinary human rules upside down.

Through such episodes, the novel thus denounces the

unstable circumstances in which so many Iraqis live: a context in which peaceful normality has given way to chaos.

Chapter 18 Quotes

❝ Some claimed it was part of the wall of Abbasid Baghdad and was the most important discovery in Islamic archaeology in Baghdad for many decades. Others ventured to speak, rather boldly, about the "advantages of terrorism," which had enabled this important discovery. But the Baghdad city authorities ignored all this and took everyone by surprise by filling the large hole with soil. The spokesman for the city authorities said, "We do not take half measures. We're going to preserve these remains for future generations, and they can judge for themselves how to deal with them. If they decide to demolish the whole Bataween district, that's their business, but for now we have to repave the street."

Related Themes:

Page Number: 266

Explanation and Analysis

After a car bombing in Bataween, an ancient wall sits in a crater that the bomb created. Although this wall has great archeological value, government authorities decide to cover it in order to rebuild the street.

This passage identifies a tension between different forms of belonging. Indeed, although the government's actions are meant to help people go about their daily lives—a difficult feat given how common violence is in Baghdad—it also destroys a possible symbol of Iraqi unity: the centuries-long roots that form the basis of this country.

In other words, the government privileges short-term solutions to sectarian conflict (repairing broken roads and buildings) whereas the wall identifies another possible form of reparation: symbolic reparation. It is only by emphasizing everyone's belonging to a common, distant past—which this wall symbolizes—that the country will be able to move forward and overcome its violent divisions.

This passage thus interrogates the possibility of promoting civic engagement—making people feel as if they belong to common roots—as a form of peace-making. It concludes that such initiatives might be effective at making people bond together, but that they are difficult to put in place in a context of such extreme devastation.

Chapter 19 Quotes

❝ Mahmoud thought back to his theory about the three kinds of justice, but he wasn't convinced it was valid. It was anarchy out there; there was no logic behind what was happening. He took a deep breath and gave a long sigh. What mattered now was that he had broken free of a worry that had been weighing heavily on him.

Related Characters: The Mantis, Mahmoud Riyadh al-Sawadi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 273

Explanation and Analysis

Back in his hometown of Amara, Mahmoud learns that a criminal known as the Mantis, who is now an important local political figure, has been murdered. Given that the Mantis had been persecuting Mahmoud for months, Mahmoud is relieved to hear of the man's death.

Mahmoud used to believe in three types of justice: legal justice, divine justice, and street justice. The Mantis's death could confirm Mahmoud's theory. Indeed, even though the Mantis succeeded in having a successful political career, he was later murdered and thus confirmed that he could not escape "street justice."

However, after witnessing such chaotic violence in Baghdad, Mahmoud now realizes that associating people's death with a notion of "justice" is wrong. Although some criminals might suffer a violent death, such bloodshed affects everyone, criminal or not. In this sense, brutality is inherently senseless: it follows no greater logic beyond the logic of destruction.

This conclusion is particularly striking in the mouth of a journalist who has spent so much effort and energy in identifying the specific political circumstances that drive violence in the country. In this sense, Mahmoud abandons political analysis in favor of a broad understanding of human life. He accepts that some phenomena, such as life and death, lie beyond the reach of human control. They should be accepted as arbitrary events that lack any deep moral meaning.

But what if one percent of his story were true? Isn't life a blend of things that are plausible and others that are hard to believe? Isn't it possible that Saidi reaching out to Mahmoud was one of those hard-to-believe things?

That's why Mahmoud didn't send a hostile response to Saidi's message, or any other kind of response. He left things in a gray area, like the sky that day, trying to use Saidi's own style against him, leaving him uncertain.

Related Characters: Ali Baher al-Saidi, Mahmoud Riyadh al-Sawadi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 277-278

Explanation and Analysis

After Saidi is accused of stealing millions of dollars of U.S. aid, the police interrogate Mahmoud to try to find out more about Saidi's secret activities. After these events, Saidi writes Mahmoud an e-mail in which he argues that all of the accusations against him are false.

Although Mahmoud is initially inclined to believe his former editor, he later concludes that Saidi is not a reliable person: he has behaved in contradictory ways in the past and has kept too many secrets from his employee for Mahmoud to trust in Saidi's words. Unable to decide which parts of Saidi's message are true and which ones are false, Mahmoud decides not to answer the e-mail.

In this way, Mahmoud suggests that it is sometimes impossible to uncover the full truth, since everyone shapes their personal narratives in order to defend their own interests. Mahmoud neither excuses nor condemns Saidi. Instead, he accepts that uncertainty is an inevitable part of life—but that, at the same time, he no longer wants to waste energy on understanding such a deceptive person as Saidi.

Ultimately, Mahmoud's cultivation of uncertainty mirrors his former boss's techniques. This suggests that the journalist, too, has learned to manipulate others, as a form of self-defense. It serves as a signal that Mahmoud is no longer as naïve as before, but that he now knows how to protect himself in a context of deceit and manipulation.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

TOP SECRET: FINAL REPORT

In 2005, a special Committee investigates the activities of the Iraqi Tracking and Pursuit Department, associated in part with the international coalition force governing the country. This Committee, composed of members of both Iraqi and U.S. intelligence, interviews the Department director, Brigadier Sorour Mohamed Majid. Afterwards, the Committee concludes that the Department, which should have engaged in administrative tasks, took on functions beyond its assigned role.

The official document examined in the introductory section of Frankenstein in Baghdad *questions the separation between fiction and reality. This fictional document uses verified historical facts—such as the political alliance between the Iraqi and U.S. military during the U.S. occupation of Iraq—as the basis from which to build an invented narrative. Despite being fictional, the official nature of this document gives the novel an authoritative quality and historical relevance.*

Since the creation of the Coalition Provisional Authority in 2003, the department employed astrologers and fortune-tellers. According to Brigadier Majid, these employees were in charge of anticipating "security incidents" in or around Baghdad. The Committee remains uncertain whether such predictions were accurate and actually helped avoid certain violent events.

The Coalition Provisional Authority was a transitional government set up by the U.S. after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. It was meant to establish a temporary, functioning administration before the organization of democratic elections in 2005. These transitional political circumstances are crucial to the novel. They help explain the increased tensions in Baghdad in 2005, as different political groups seek to achieve enough power and to garner public support in order to take part in the administration of a "new" Iraq.

The Committee also notes that confidential files from the department were illegally divulged via e-mail to a person known as "the author," who was later arrested. Among the author's belongings, the officers found a story divided into 17 chapters, whose plot was based on materials he had received from the Tracking and Pursuit Department. The Committee determined that this information should remain confidential and prohibits the story from being rewritten.

The arrest of a mysterious "author" highlights the danger of writing and storytelling in the midst of such uncertain political circumstances. Given the secrecy of many government activities, a writer's words, even when transformed into fiction, can be interpreted as a threat to authority. The novel further stresses this idea by suggesting that this character of "the author" might be the author of Frankenstein in Baghdad *itself. Indeed, the fictional character of "the author" begins to speak in the first person right after Chapter 17, thus giving the impression that he is responsible for composing the 17 first chapters.*

After this analysis, the Committee provides some recommendations. They recommend firing the astrologers and fortune-tellers and removing Brigadier Majid from the Tracking and Pursuit Department. The Department as a whole, they insist, should revert to bureaucratic activities. The Committee also notes that the information they had concerning the identity of "the author" was false. They recommend re-arresting the author in order to assess whether or not he represents a security risk.

The purpose of the Tracking and Pursuit Department remains mysterious, all the more so because of the mention of extravagant actors such as astrologers and fortune-tellers. However, the Committee's decision to dissolve the Department reveals a pragmatic approach to the situation: it suggests that the people currently administering the country value rational considerations over possibly superstitious activities. At the same time, they also understand that products of the imagination, such as a novel, can have political of power, since they view such literature as a political threat.

CHAPTER 1: THE MADWOMAN

Barely two minutes after an old woman named Elishva boards the bus to go to church, an explosion takes place 200 yards away in Tayaran Square, in the center of Baghdad. Chaos erupts, as everyone nearby succumbs to shock and terror. However, Elishva does not seem to have heard anything. She does not react. She has left her neighborhood, the Bataween district, to go to the Church of Saint Odisho, as she does every Sunday. Some of Elishva's neighbors believe that the explosion was caused by the old lady's departure. They believe that the old woman has spiritual powers and can prevent bad events from taking place when she is in her own neighborhood.

These events introduce many themes that will recur throughout the novel: the frequency of terrorist attacks and the role superstition plays in people's lives. People's belief in Elishva's special powers does not entirely square with reality: if Elishva's presence were absolutely necessary to maintain peace and security in Bataween, the neighborhood would erupt into violence every time the old lady leaves—that is, every single Sunday. These people's belief in Elishva's powers is therefore based on selective information, namely the few moments in which it actually is possible to establish a correlation between the old lady's departure and a violent event. This perspective tends to overlook the large number of days in which, on the contrary, Elishva left the neighborhood but no violent events took place.

Elishva, in the meantime, is lost in her own thoughts. Since the American invasion of Baghdad, her daughters Hilda and Matilda, who live in Melbourne, have called her every week at church. Father Josiah receives their call on his cell phone. During periods of violence, in which landlines were destroyed, he also used to receive calls from his congregation's family members. More broadly, he also accepted calls from the relatives of people in the neighborhood, who did not have any other means to keep in touch with their families abroad. Even since cell phones have become more popular and accessible, however, Elishva has continued to rely on Father Josiah for this service. As soon as she hears her daughters speak, she feels relieved.

Elishva's reliance on Father Josiah to receive calls from her daughters suggests that the Church is not only a place of worship but also, importantly, a safe haven in times of extreme violence. This particular church's role in helping the entire neighborhood—regardless of whether or not people are affiliated with this particular religion—shows that some networks of solidarity in Baghdad extend beyond religious identity. This highlights Father Josiah's generosity and kindheartedness, as well as the possibility—in stark contrast with the sectarian violence rocking the country—that people of all religions can live together peacefully and to help each other in times of need.

On the bus, Elishva reflects that she does not truly need to hear her daughters' voice. Instead, what she appreciates is being able to talk with someone about her son Daniel. Everyone around her, including her fellow church-goers, have grown tired of hearing her repeat the same story. For many people, Daniel is just one of the many casualties that Iraq has known in recent history. Elishva, however, is convinced that her son is still alive. Her family, she recalls, only buried an empty coffin. However, she no longer shares this belief with the skeptical people around her. For this reason, she values her calls with her daughters Hilda and Matilda, who understand that this belief plays an important role in giving Elishva the will to live.

Incapable of accepting the trauma of her son's death, Elishva retreats into a world of imagination and wishful thinking to cope with this difficult reality. She prefers to believe that her son is not dead and will one day return to her. Her story suggests that enduring the disappearance of a loved one—specifically, not having a physical body to bury—can be even more difficult to bear than physical proof of that person's death. In this sense, her story anticipates many important themes in the novel: in particular, the dehumanization that terrorist attacks can provoke, as they turn human bodies into a heterogeneous set of separate body parts.

By the time the deacon, Nader Shamouni, drives Elishva back home to her house on Lane 7 in Bataween, the streets around Tayaran Square are quiet and have been cleaned. But signs of the day's violence are still present—blood and hair, for example, can be seen on an electricity pole. When he notices this, Nader feels fear running through his body. Elishva, however, does not notice anything. She is already anticipating opening the door to her house and seeing her cat, Nabu. She also plans to get angry at **Saint George**, who promised her good news the night before.

The quiet and cleanliness of the streets near that morning's explosion highlights the relatively ordinary nature of such events in the city: however violent and traumatic these explosions may be, life must go on as usual afterwards. However, Nader's shiver of fear at seeing human remains shows that the locals never actually get used to the violence: they simply try to live with it as best they can. By contrast, Elishva's lack of awareness of her surroundings suggests that she is living more in the past—and in a superstition-filled future—than in the present.

Although many people believe that Elishva is simply an old lady who suffers from dementia and memory loss, her neighbor Umm Salim trusts that this woman has spiritual powers and is divinely protected. She believes that neighbors with such powers are responsible for keeping the neighborhood free from violence for so long. At the same time, even Umm Salim later becomes confused when Elishva begins to recount strange stories that are difficult to believe. The other neighbors laugh on such occasions, saying that Elishva's descent into madness forges a path that everyone in the neighborhood is bound to follow.

People's disagreement about Elishva's mental state reveals two contrasting attitudes toward the future. Umm Salim wants to believe in stability: she wants to trust that concrete circumstances—such as Elishva's presence in the neighborhood—promote security. By contrast, others accept that, given how widespread violence is in the city, its insecurity and the emotional toll it provokes—such as madness—is bound to affect them. Both interpretations reveal the fragility of peace and the local population's dread of violent chaos.

Two people in the neighborhood are particularly convinced that Elishva is a madwoman: Faraj the realtor and Hadi the junk dealer. For the past few years, Faraj has wanted to buy Elishva's seven-room house, which he considers too big for her and her cat to live alone. He does not understand why the old woman does not prefer to sell it and spend her last years living comfortably. And Elishva's neighbor Hadi, an unkempt, unpleasant man who always smells of alcohol, wants to buy Elishva's furniture, but she refuses to sell it.

Faraj's attitude toward Elishva reveals his calculating behavior: he is less interested in an old lady's well-being and survival than in the profit he could make off of her. At the same time, his confusion at Elishva's decision to stay in her home mirrors the fact that, while most people are concerned with pragmatic details of everyday life, Elishva is more focused on the past than the present: she refuses to leave her home because it is a special place associated with her son.

Elishva hates both Faraj and Hadi, whom she considers greedy and immoral. She curses them, along with Abu Zaidoun, the Baathist barber responsible for forcing her son, Daniel, to enroll in the army. Abu Zaidoun, however, no longer spends much time in the neighborhood, now that he has left the Baath Party and suffers from medical problems.

Abu Zaidoun's affiliation with the Baath Party reveals that he actively supported Saddam Hussein's regime before it fell as a result of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. His life story reflects a larger dilemma that appears throughout the novel: how should people be judged—and, perhaps, punished—for crimes committed in the past?

After the explosion in Tayaran Square, Faraj notices that there are cracks in the front window of his realty office. On the other side of the street, Abu Anmar, who owns the Orouba Hotel in front of Faraj's office, grows desperate as he notices that the upper windows of his hotel are shattered. The two men are rivals. Since April 2003, most of Abu Anmar's clients, migrant workers from Egypt and Sudan, have left. During this period, Faraj came to the neighborhood, taking advantage of the tumult in the city to appropriate abandoned houses with no known owners. He then rented rooms to displaced people fleeing sectarian violence and the various violent conflicts that emerged after the regime fell.

This episode highlights the economic effects of terrorist attacks and insecurity: not only does violence affect victims physically, but it also ravages the local economy. In this context, the contrast between Faraj's wealth and Abu Anmar's financial decline reveals a fundamental difference between the two men's behaviors. Although Abu Anmar is helpless before so much chaos, Faraj actually benefits from violence: he takes advantage of fear and chaos to expand his business, regardless of the moral and legal implications of his actions.

Abu Anmar, who came to the neighborhood from southern Iraq over two decades years ago, has no family or friends to support him. His business has therefore depended on the stability of the regime. Faraj, by contrast, has many contacts in Baghdad. This allowed him to find allies when he began appropriating abandoned housing, without the adequate legal papers to justify his acts. One of Faraj's goals is to appropriate Elishva's house, which he finds beautiful. However, he knows that evicting an old woman by force might cause him trouble in the neighborhood, and he decides to wait until she dies to take over the property.

Abu Anmar and Faraj's financial situations depend in part on their contact networks. Given that the fall of Saddam Hussein's has caused profound instability in Iraqi society, people have been forced to rely on other forms of stability, such as personal relationships. This, in turn, creates unofficial power circles: instead of depending on the rule of law, people depend on territorial and social domination—or, in Elishva's case, on a certain degree of neighborly protection. On a larger scale, these dynamics mirror the sectarian violence in the city, as each political or religious group aims to extend its territorial reach through brute force.

In her home, Elishva sits on her sofa in front of a large picture of **Saint George the Martyr**, as she does every evening. The saint is shown in armor, on a horse, fighting off a vicious dragon. Elishva examines the picture closely and notes that no emotion is visible on the saint's face. Rather, the saint acts with the tranquility of knowing that he is honoring his God. Elishva treats this saint like a family member, along with her cat Nabu and the memory of her son, Daniel. These three "ghosts" keep her from feeling lonely.

The image of Saint George the Martyr plays an important role in Elishva's life. Through the saint's symbolic fight against the dragon, it highlights the hope of vanquishing evil forces: like Saint George fighting off the dragon, Elishva hopes to fight off death and destruction and to be reunited with her son. The saint's calm attitude suggests, for Elishva, that she, too, should place her faith in God, trusting that he will find a way to improve her current circumstances.

That night, Elishva is angry because she has spent many nights desperately pleading with **Saint George** to bring her a sign about Daniel. At night, she is able to have conversations with the saint. That night, the saint tells her that she should be patient and accept that God always fulfills his promises, but that one can't know when exactly this will happen. After half an hour of discussion, the saint's face, which had become animated, returns to its tranquil state, signaling the end of this conversation. The next day, while American helicopters are flying in the sky, Elishva sees Daniel in her house and understands that the prophecy was correct. She calls her son, telling him to come to her.

In addition to the picture's symbolic significance, Saint George is also significant because it has a true, personal presence in Elishva's life. This highlights the old lady's isolation: it seems that she needs to dialogue with a supernatural being in order to feel less alone in Baghdad. At the same time, it also underlines the power of faith and of the imagination: regardless of the fact that Elishva's relationship with the saint is based on superstition, her trust in his powers allows her to endure a difficult past and present reality. It encourages her to interpret even terrifying events—such as the irruption of a mysterious man in her home—in a positive light, because she is so convinced that the saint has indeed pledged to bring her son back.

CHAPTER 2: THE LIAR

At Aziz the Egyptian's coffee shop, Hadi tells animated stories, adding realistic details to make his tales more engaging. One day, he tells one of the stories he often recounts, this time for a special group of journalists, including young Mahmoud al-Sawadi. Hadi is in a disheveled state, smells of alcohol, and beings to ramble. After a while, one of the members of his audience leaves, realizing with frustration that his story is based on a Robert De Niro movie.

The Robert De Niro movie mentioned is Mary Shelley's Frankenstein *(1994), which, like* Frankenstein in Baghdad, *tells the story of a supernatural creature made of dead people's body parts. Comparing Hadi's story to a movie blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction, making it easy to believe that Hadi's story is entirely fictional, and thus discrediting him as a reliable storyteller.*

Undisturbed, Hadi pursues his story, which he left off at the moment of the explosion in Tayaran Square. Mahmoud listens carefully to this story, which he has heard before, only because he wants to see if Hadi will contradict himself. Hadi recalls running out of the coffee shop after the terrible explosion and being hit with the horrific smell of burned plastic and human flesh, which he finds impossible to forget.

Mahmoud's desire to see if Hadi will contradict himself reveals a central ambiguity concerning Hadi: it is difficult to tell when he is telling the truth and whether he is intelligent enough to invent such a complex story from scratch. Hadi's mention of the horrific smell after the explosion highlights his humanity: just like any other person, he, too, is vulnerable to the emotional brutality of vicious terrorist attacks.

In his story, Hadi then walked toward the location of the explosion. The people who were neither killed nor injured—for example because other people's bodies served as a barrier between them and the bomb—noticed the damage around them: the cut electricity wires, dead birds, and cracked or collapsed buildings. Hadi watched the police arrive and block off the scene, in which injured people moaned and dead bodies, covered in blood, were piled up. At the square, Hadi was looking for a particular object. When he finally saw it, he hurried to seize it and put it in his canvas bag.

The contrast between the shocked survivors and the pile of dead bodies suggests that survival is primarily a matter of luck: some people were lucky enough to be shielded by random objects, whereas others simply happened to be more exposed. This horrific scene highlights the injustice and arbitrary nature of such deaths. People are in agony for absolutely no reason except for being at the wrong place at the wrong time; the people who died had done nothing wrong and those who survived are not morally or physically superior to them in any way.

Hadi then returned home, to a makeshift house with a single room in the back and holes in the roof. Three years earlier, Hadi and his colleague Nahem Abdaki used it as the center of their operations. They toured the city with a horse-drawn cart, buying old furniture from people. Together, they rebuilt this house, known as "the Jewish ruin," despite displaying no concrete evidence of Jewish influence. Over time, the two men became full members of the neighborhood. No one knew what their origins were, but so many strangers had come to the neighborhood in the past years that no one was truly an authentic inhabitant.

Hadi's relationship with Nahem reveals a stark contrast between his past and present life: although he used to have a stable work partner and friend, he is now seen as a lonely, alcoholic storyteller. In addition, the mystery of his house, the "Jewish ruin," suggests that the neighborhood has retained a form of historical, collective knowledge: they know this house has something to do with the Jewish religion, even though traces of this affiliation are no longer visible. Both considerations suggest that present circumstances do not provide an accurate depiction of people's identity: only by exploring the past can the true complexity of one's identity come to life.

Later, Nahem married and left the house, even though the two men still worked together. Nahem was in his 30s, 20 years younger than Hadi. The two of them were sometimes believed to be father and son. In stark contrast with Hadi, Nahem was strictly religious and did not drink, smoke, or have sexual relations before marriage. He was responsible for placing a framed copy of the Throne Verse of the Quran on the wall, in order to "baptize" the house.

Nahem and Hadi's friendship suggests that, despite the sectarian conflict ravaging the city, religious divisions do not necessarily impact people's individual behaviors. Despite adopting a strict attitude toward religious behavior, Nahem does not impose his views on Hadi but, rather, accepts his friend as he is, without trying to change him.

Nahem died many months before the explosion in Tayaran Square. He was killed by a car bomb targeting the office of a religious party, and both he and the horse drawing the cart were killed. After the event, his flesh could not easily be differentiated from the horse's.

Nahem's violent death is presented in an absurd light. Despite Nahem's religious tolerance and pacifism, he is killed as a result of religious conflict in the city. In addition, the difficulty to differentiate his body from the horse's suggests that, through such violence, people have been completely dehumanized. In death, their flesh is comparable to that of animals. This event highlights the injustice and senselessness of violence in the city.

This tragic event had a severe impact on Hadi, who grew aggressive whenever he saw vehicles belonging either to American forces or to the Iraqi police and National Guard. Afterwards, Hadi returned to his usual self, but his personality remained divided in two, as if he had "two faces": despite his usual good cheer, he also experienced bouts of depression. This led him to drink more often and to neglect his appearance, letting his beard grow long and his clothes get dirty. Now, no one is allowed to mention Nahem Abdaki, because this leads Hadi to grow aggressive and to insult his interlocutor.

Hadi's aggressive behavior toward the authorities in power reveals the local population's helplessness before the violence perpetrated in their city. Hadi's anger does not suggest that he supports one group over the other, but rather that he is indignant about the violence that the country's current administration has failed to curb—and maybe even fosters. Hadi's emotional reaction also reveals a vulnerable side of his personality: although he presents himself as a carefree, joking storyteller, he, too, is profoundly affected by the human devastation taking place in the city.

Hadi resumes his story about the nose in his canvas bag. Mahmoud is disappointed to note that Hadi has remained consistent, not once contradicting previous versions of the story. In the story, Hadi walked from Tayaran Square to the shed at the back of his house, where a large corpse lay. Blood and various liquids leaked from the body, whose skin did not have a homogeneous color. With shaking hands, Hadi placed the blood-covered nose, freshly removed from the scene of the explosion, onto the corpse's face, which was missing a nose. The new nose fit perfectly, as if it had always belonged there. Hadi knew that he now had to sew the nose onto the face, a task he found horrifying.

Mahmoud's conclusion that Hadi's story has not changed suggests that the junk dealer's story is probably true: had Hadi invented it, he would have been inclined to forget or modify certain details. The absolute horror of the scene Hadi describes makes the storyteller seem deranged: why, if not through madness, would anyone take part in such an activity? At the same time, this disturbing scene mirrors a variety of disturbing events in the novel, such as the effects of terrorist bombings. This suggests that Hadi's actions might be somehow related to the violence in the city: collecting body parts might be a way for him to cope with traumatic events, such as the death of his friend Nahem.

Hadi explains that he intended to bring the corpse to the forensics department. His goal, he argues, was to show that human beings should not be treated as trash. Out of separate body parts, he created a full corpse, which he called the Whatsitsname, to prove that these victims deserve a respectful burial. After sewing the nose onto the face, Hadi left to negotiate a business transaction. He hoped to buy furniture from an old man in the Karrada neighborhood who was planning on leaving the country to join his girlfriend in Russia. Although the man wanted to sell his house, he found it difficult to separate himself from his furniture, which had sentimental value.

Despite the revolting and seemingly unexplainable task Hadi has taken part in, the junk dealer's motives are surprisingly noble: he wants the Whatsitsname to serve as a political symbol, meant to honor the victims of terrorist attacks and to denounce the violence that the state has failed to contain. Hadi's indignation, from the margins of society, suggests that everyone—regardless of religion, ethnicity, or social class—handles grief and trauma in different ways, but that it can profoundly affect any member of the population.

After receiving no answer at the old man's house, Hadi he decided to return home by foot, collecting empty cans on the way, which he could later sell. He passed in front of the Sadeer Novotel hotel and collected empty cans from the restaurant's trash. On the restaurant's television, Hadi saw a government representative announce that terrorists had planned 100 car bombings that day, but that the government succeeded in avoiding all but 15 of them. The 16th explosion, however, would soon take place.

The government's claim to have avoided dozens of car bombings is impossible to verify, given that those attacks never took place. In the context of so much political manipulation and uncertainty, the government's boasting can be seen as a strategy to instill trust in the population, so that they might stay hopeful about the fact that the government is actually succeeding at containing the violence.

Hadi usually tried to avoid passing in front of this hotel, because the guards yelled at him. However, he was preoccupied about the corpse at home, and concluded that, instead of keeping the corpse whole, he would separate the body parts and disperse them throughout the city.

Hadi's decision to undo his past actions shows that he is aware of how repulsive—and, to a certain degree, senseless—his corpse-building enterprise is. This suggests that he is not as crazy as people believe him to be, but also that he knows that his actions are unlikely to have any positive effect on putting an end to the violence in the city.

When Hadi passed in front of the hotel, the guard approached him, to make sure this man with a bag full of aluminum cans was not dangerous. While telling his story, Hadi then turns to Mahmoud, in his audience, so that the young journalist can confirm this episode: a garbage truck was driving toward the hotel gate. The truck soon exploded, lifting Hadi into the air and causing him to land farther away. Mahmoud, present on the scene, helped Hadi get up but Hadi, too shocked to know how to react, started running away.

Despite his reputation as a liar, Hadi knows when aspects of some stories are difficult to believe: for this reason, he seeks confirmation from a reliable person in his audience, Mahmoud the journalist. This suggests that Hadi was indeed close to two explosions that day. Instead of making Hadi's story less believable, this event highlights the frequency of terrorist attacks in Baghdad.

Having survived other explosions, Hadi knew that, despite feeling pain all over his body, his injuries were minor, because he had not been hit by shrapnel. When he reached his home, he fell asleep on his bed, perhaps sinking into a temporary coma. The next day, after waking up at noon, he realized that the corpse was gone. Confused and panicked, he searched for it everywhere. To his impatient audience, he admits that he does not know where the corpse went.

Hadi's past experience with explosions once again emphasizes that what might appear unthinkable in other parts of the world—witnessing not one, but a large variety of terrorist attacks—is part of Baghdad residents' everyday reality. The disappearance of the corpse symbolizes the unpredictable consequences of violence, whose trauma—or further violence—lie largely beyond human control.

CHAPTER 3: A LOST SOUL

Hasib Mohamed Jaafar, the guard at the Sadeer Novotel Hotel, was 21 years old when he was killed by a Sudanese suicide bomber operating a stolen garbage truck. Hasib kept the man from detonating the explosives inside the lobby by firing at the truck as soon as he understood the drivers' intentions. There were only a few of Hasid's belongings and small, burned body parts for Hasib's family—which included his wife and their baby daughter—to put in his coffin. Hasib's entire family cried in despair on the day of the funeral. That night, they all dreamed of Hasib. The separate dreams recomposed Hasib's life and body, thus compensating for his lost body parts. Hasib's soul, meanwhile, floated over them in unrest.

Hasib's family's dreams, which metaphorically recompose the guard's life, illustrates an important idea: that people do not exist alone, but, rather, are made in part of other people's interpretations. Hasib, in this sense, exists through his family members' memories of him. At the same time, as in the case of Elishva's lost son, Daniel, this story highlights the difficulty of accepting death without having a physical body to bury. The injustice of this situation—the literal pulverization of human life—creates despair and anger, rather than quiet acceptance.

After the explosion, Hasib found himself peacefully observing the scene from above. From his elevated position, he saw the entire city, including, in the distance, the dark river. He saw a couple of dead bodies floating in the river. One of them told him to go discover what has happened to his body. This led Hasib to the cemetery, where he met a young boy sitting on his own grave. The boy told him that Hasib's soul must have separated from his body, and that he needed to find a body for himself, otherwise something bad was bound to happen.

Hasib's dialogues with dead people temporarily shifts the focus of the novel from the living to the dead. These scenes suggest that cities are filled with dead people just as much as they are inhabited by living residents. This shift in perspective establishes a difference between people who die with their body intact and those who don't. It suggests that losing one's body is particularly bad, for reasons that remain unspecified but that—following Hadi's own beliefs—pertain to human dignity.

After looking everywhere, Hasib still failed to find his body. Finally, in Bataween, he saw a horrifying, naked body sleeping. Convinced that dawn would bring disaster for his lost soul, Hasib decided to sink into this body, filling the corpse with his soul. Satisfied, he decided to wait for the man's family to take the corpse to the cemetery, even if this meant being buried with someone else's name.

Hasib's willingness to inhabit another body contrasts heavily with the stark divisions along the lines of identity that pit different groups against each other in Iraq. Hasib's sheer happiness at having a body suggests that, when examined from a critical distance, divisions among the living are meaningless. In the end, regardless of one's identity or name, everyone shares the same fate: a more or less peaceful death.

CHAPTER 4: THE JOURNALIST

The explosion in Tayaran Square woke Mahmoud al-Sawadi early in the morning, but the journalist stayed in bed for a couple more hours, exhausted and suffering from a headache. He got up a couple of hours later, when his editor at the magazine *al-Haqiqa* called him, telling him to head to the scene of the attack immediately. After leaving the Orouba Hotel, Mahmoud reached the square. There, he saw the large, black hole left by the explosion, and imagined the death it has caused.

On the one hand, Mahmoud's job as a journalist is presented in a trivial light: like any other worker, Mahmoud does not want to sacrifice his sleep and well-being to go to work early. On the other hand, the importance of Mahmoud's profession is made all the more poignant by the scene of destruction he witnesses: he has the power to report on serious events and share the truth to the population, thus contributing to noble ideals of truth and democracy.

Mahmoud turned on his **digital recorder** and began to curse his friend Hazem Abboud, who took him out partying the night before. The two of them got drunk in a brothel. Two girls took Mahmoud, who had never been so close to a woman before, to a room. Afterwards, the two men returned to the Orouba Hotel and Hazem angrily told his friend never to talk about Nawal al-Wazir to him again. Mahmoud agreed.

Mahmoud's digital recorder plays a crucial role throughout the story, as it preserves the journalist's version of events and thus contributes to unmasking the truth of different episodes. Mahmoud and Hazem's night of partying depicts them as men who do not observe traditional Muslim prohibitions, such as not drinking alcohol and not engaging in premarital sex. This illustrates the variety of religious and non-religious attitudes that coexist in Baghdad.

Nawal al-Wazir is, according to Mahmoud, a beautiful, 40-year-old woman who claims to be a film director. She is known as the lover of his editor, Ali Baher al-Saidi, a famous writer with many connections to politicians. However, Mahmoud, who is obsessed with Nawal, prefers to believe the two of them are simply friends.

The ambiguity of Nawal and Saidi's relationship renders both characters mysterious. It highlights the difficulty of ascertaining people's true motives in a context marked by political manipulation, in which social contacts can serve a political and economic function.

Mahmoud started working as a journalist in 2003 in his hometown of Amara, before suddenly moving to Baghdad for reasons he has kept secret. Mahmoud admires Saidi, who is about 20 years older than him. He finds that his editor is always perfectly dressed and has a contagious positive energy, encouraging others to be just as dynamic as him. Although Mahmoud is constantly tired, due to how much he works, he trusts that his boss is turning him into a better journalist.

Saidi's enthusiasm contrasts with the gloomy atmosphere in Baghdad. Saidi's buoyant personality suggests that not everyone is affected by fear and violence in the same way: some people, like Saidi, are able to maintain a cheerful outlook. It is unclear whether this attitude suggests naïve optimism or, on the other hand, if it reflects Saidi's ability to take advantage of this difficult situation for his own interests (mirroring the economic ambitions of people such as Faraj the realtor).

On the scene of the explosion in Tayaran Square, Mahmoud recalled Saidi's instruction to always dress elegantly, so that people would respect him, and felt ashamed about his current, disheveled state. Therefore, before heading to his office, Mahmoud quickly washed his face and shaved at a restaurant. When he reached the building, the editor called him into his office.

Saidi's focus on outward appearance could suggest one of two things: that his elegance mirrors his internally cheerful attitude, or that he believes appearances are just as important as what lies behind them. In either case, this suggests that appearances are capable of influencing people's opinions, whether or not they actually reflect someone's moral worth.

In the editor's office, Saidi told Mahmoud that his colleagues had performed poorly and that he planned on firing three of them. He told Mahmoud to warn Farid Shawwaf to work harder. Then, he surprised Mahmoud by telling him that he was working too much but that, as a result, he had been promoted to the position of editor in chief.

Mahmoud's trust in Saidi seems justified, given that Saidi rewards the young journalist's work by giving him a promotion. This event suggests that, despite Saidi's air of mystery, he is worthy of trust (at least from Mahmoud's perspective), because he is committed to helping Mahmoud succeed professionally.

After work, Mahmoud chatted with his colleagues in a small tavern. He did not know how to tell them about his promotion. When Farid began to share his ideas for a book project, Mahmoud tried to convince him to adapt them so that they could be published in the magazine first. Mahmoud's colleagues laughed at him, telling him that he was working too hard.

Mahmoud's colleagues' laughter emphasizes the new division between the journalists: although his colleagues do not know this yet, Mahmoud is now in a position of authority over them. This gives him additional responsibility—in this case, making sure that his friend Farid is not fired.

When the four of them left the bar, Farid was still talking excitedly about his book project. At the same moment, a garbage truck exploded in front of the hotel nearby, causing everyone in the group to fall down, impacted by the blast. Mahmoud ran to help a man who hit by the explosion, whom he recognized as Hadi the junk dealer or "Hadi the liar," as people tend to call him. The group did not see anyone else and believed there were no casualties apart from the suicide bomber himself.

Despite the mention of "Hadi the liar," this scene proves that Hadi does not always tell lies: Mahmoud and his friends, too, were present to witness one aspect of the Whatsitsname's story, namely the explosion in front of the Sadeer Novotel hotel. The group's conclusion that no one else was harmed underlines the hotel guard Hasib's tragic fate: his body was so severely destroyed that no trace of him was left.


On their way back, Mahmoud told Farid that his storytelling saved him, since it kept him from crossing the street to catch his bus home at the moment of the explosion. Farid looked at Mahmoud with a stunned expression, realizing that Mahmoud might be right. Mahmoud then returned to his hotel and obsessively repeated, in his **digital recorder**, that being "a positive force" would allow him to survive. However, he soon realized that the batteries in his recorder were dead.

Unlike other situations in which telling stories creates psychological healing, in this case, storytelling serves as a life-saving force, for motives that are purely circumstantial. Mahmoud's obsession with positivity mirrors his boss Saidi's beliefs. This demonstrates Mahmoud's attachment to following his editor's mindset, but also his desperation at holding on to a stable belief—positivity will allow for survival—in the midst of so much chaos.


CHAPTER 5: THE BODY

Elishva calls out to her son, Daniel, and the body reacts by standing up. This body, made of a variety of body parts and the soul of Hasib Moham Jaafar, has now been given a name: Daniel. Elishva is standing in the room of her house that has collapsed, looking down into Hadi's house. The body whom Elishva calls Daniel walks through the hole in the wall into the old woman's house.

The Whatsitsname's ability to travel from one place to the next in Baghdad depends on the destruction in the city: the creature takes advantage of holes in people's walls, such as the one between Elishva and Hadi's house. This suggests that violence in the streets benefits the Whatsitsname: human brutality is responsible for helping him survive.

Elishva brings her son's old clothes and does not look at the body too intently. She realizes that this body does not correspond to Daniel's, but she has promised **Saint George** not to interrogate God's will. She concludes that few people come back from war looking identical to their past selves. She recalls other women's stories about how the faces of those who return are never the same as the ones they kept in their memory. Elishva, however, is convinced that she is experiencing a miracle.

Despite being accused of madness or dementia, Elishva is able to examine the situation from a critical standpoint: she knows, from a rational perspective, that this is not her son. But she has invested so much emotional energy in believing that her son would return and in trusting in the image of Saint George that she prefers to interpret this unexpected event as a positive sign.

The body, in the meantime, notices his reflection in a glass and finds himself ugly. Then, when he puts on the clothes Elishva has given him, he finds that he looks just like Daniel Tadros Moshe, Elishva's son, whom he sees in a picture next to the image of **the saint**. Soon, he notices that the saint's lips are moving, and he hears Saint George tell him to be careful with Elishva—otherwise Saint George will kill him with his lance.

Although Elishva can be seen as a lady with an unsound mind when she talks to the picture of Saint George, the fact that the Whatsitsname, too, can hear the saint's words suggests that Elishva might be correct in believing in the saint's powers. This enhances the story's fantastical nature and also gives Elishva more credibility.

In the meantime, Hadi spends the day looking for the Whatsitsname, but does not hear any useful information from his neighbors about his corpse's whereabouts. That day, Elishva wears a read headscarf to replace her mourning headband, and she heads to the butcher's to buy a lot of meat. Impressed by the change in the old woman's appearance, Umm Salim asks Elishva about it, and she tells her that God has fulfilled her wishes, bringing her son Daniel home. Umm Salim concludes that Elishva indeed has gone crazy.

This episode signals the difficulty of believing stories that are out of the ordinary, Although Elishva is telling the truth, people interpret her ideas as madness or lies—just like with Hadi. At the same time, however deluded Elishva might be, the presence of the Whatsitsname in her life brings about positive changes—whether or not the man is her son Daniel. Elishva's decision to abandon her mourning clothes suggests that she has found a new reason to live, capable of turning her life around.

Hadi, in turn, concludes that the Whatsitsname's disappearance has spared him the trouble of unsewing the body parts and scattering them in the city. However, he enjoys telling the story of this creature over and over again, perhaps because it convinces him that this is merely a figment of his imagination, not real-life events.

Hadi's pleasure at telling the Whatsitsname's story reveals one of the purposes of storytelling: to forget about the terrifying events. Secretly affected about his creation of the Whatsitsname and the creature's disappearance, Hadi attempts to convince himself that none of these disturbing events ever happened. This gives him some peace of mind, keeping him from worrying about the creature's whereabouts.

As Elishva prepares food for her guest, she concludes that God has fulfilled her wishes. Father Josiah, however, always corrects Elishva, telling her that only Muslims understand their relationship with God as demands to be fulfilled. However, Elishva does not believe, as Father Josiah does, that God is a distant, overbearing presence. She sees him as someone close to her, like a friend.

Elishva's non-traditional mix of Christian and Muslim perspectives on God reveals that she does not pay too much attention to religious protocols: rather, she cares about religion only insofar as it has concrete effects on her life. This allows her not to discriminate between different religious creeds but, rather, to pick and choose which ones best fit her current circumstances.

Although Elishva's guest does not eat anything, she remains unperturbed. She spends the day and night talking to him, sharing with him secrets she has not confided to anyone in a long time. She explains that she did not agree with her husband, Tadros, who wanted to bury an empty coffin for Daniel, filling it only with some clothes and bits of his guitar. Elishva refused to go to the funeral. She only saw her son's grave after Tadros's death, when she finally went to the cemetery, where son and father were buried side by side.

The stories Elishva tells the Whatsitsname highlight her loneliness up until now: not only does she not have anyone to tell these stories to, but she also probably misses her husband's and son's presence in this house. In contrast with her husband's attitude, Elishva's refusal to bury a coffin for their son reveals her refusal to face reality: instead of accepting the weight of her grief, she engages in denial, refusing to accept this devastating event.

During this period, Elishva's daughter Matilda married one of their neighbors. People were open to the idea that Daniel might still be alive, because so many people returned from the war after years. For example, one of Elishva's neighbors returned after years in Iran, becoming a Shiite Muslim during years of prison there, a fact that his Christian family violently disapproved of. People also returned after the war in Kuwait in the mid 1990s.

The Iran-Iraq War lasted eight years (1980-1988) and reflected the dynamics of sectarian violence in Iraq: the Iraqi, Sunni-led leadership fought against Shiite Iran, which gave support to Shiite groups in Iraq. The Gulf War, by contrast, erupted after Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, despite opposition from the United Nations. Frankenstein in Baghdad *examines the effect these conflicts had on the local Iraqi population, who are less concerned with international political dynamics than with knowing their family is safe and secure.*

In this historical context, when economic sanctions were declared against Iraq, Matilda and Hilda's husbands decided to live abroad. Elishva promised to join her daughters in the future, once all hope of Daniel's return was crushed. In the meantime, her daughters worried about her, knowing that "demons" were now roaming the city, wreaking destruction. They often threatened to come to Baghdad to force Elishva out of the city. However, Father Josiah agreed with Elishva's decision to stay. He believed it was people's religious obligation to stay in the city and support the community, in the same way the Assyrians had suffered in Iraq in the ancient past.

The United Nations imposed economic sanctions on Iraq after Iraq invaded neighboring Kuwait in 1990. The objective of these sanctions—which greatly curtailed the country's ability to import and export goods—was to force Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait. Frankenstein in Baghdad *explores the effects on the population: Elishva's daughters' desire to emigrate reflected the country's dire economic condition. This situation highlights the population's helplessness before political decisions taken at the national and international level: all people can do is flee, in search of a better life, or stay and endure increasing violence and economic devastation.*

Elishva shares all of these stories with her guest. She also describes Abu Zaidoun, a Baathist who would force people to join military service, and who physically dragged Daniel away. When Elishva and Tadros received an empty coffin for their son, brought to them by the military, Tadros destroyed his son's beloved guitar out of grief. Multiple women in the neighborhood shared Elishva's anger at Abu Zaidoun and vowed to make sacrifices to God if the man died. Elishva, too, had made a secret vow, and reveals it to her silent guest.

Elishva's ongoing anger toward Abu Zaidoun reveals the long-term effects of grief: however many years have passed, she is unable to forgive this man for causing her son's death. The old lady's desire for revenge suggests that she is unable or unwilling to accept injustice—in particular, the death of her son—peacefully. This suggests that, however long people have been immersed in violent situations, the intensity of their emotions doesn't always decrease: even after decades, they can remain just as indignant as before, when it comes to defending human dignity and their personal notion of justice.

After many hours of listening to Elishva in silence, the Whatsitsname finally speaks. In a hoarse voice, he says he must leave. Elishva, who is worried that he might never come back, just like Daniel, asks him to stay, but he promises to return. After her guest leaves, Elishva notices that **Saint George**'s shield is particularly shiny. This lasts a brief moment, and then the picture returns to its normal state.

Some ambiguity remains as to whether the transformations of the image of Saint George over the course of the novel reflect an actual observable phenomenon—which the Whatsitsname also experiences—or, simply, the old lady's desire to believe in the saint's powers.

CHAPTER 6: STRANGE EVENTS

One morning, two police tankers arrive in the neighborhood. The soldiers, which include one U.S. military policeman, interrogate Faraj the realtor, who is walking toward his office. They ask him about an event that took place in one of the houses. Faraj is scared of the Americans, because he knows they can make people disappear at will and are accountable to no one. He nervously tells the soldiers that the house is his, and that he has been renting it. He produces some papers to support his claim.

Although Faraj is able to take advantage of lawlessness on a local level for business purposes, his fear of the Americans suggests that the lack of a fixed, reliable justice system can also harm him. This suggests that the local population is subject to arbitrary rules over which they have no power: they did not elect the foreign forces that are currently ruling over them and that can determine the course of their life at will.

Then, Faraj sees the bodies of four dead beggars. Each man holds the neck of the man in front of him, as though they were all strangling each other. Faraj feels sorry for their violent deaths and wonders who killed them. He concludes that if Hazem Abboud had taken a picture of this scene, he would have been rewarded by an international prize. As people in the neighborhood begin to gather to observe the scene, the policemen unfasten the beggars' hands so that they can remove the bodies from the neighborhood.

This eerie, disturbing scene turns violence into a symbolic spectacle. The beggars' positions symbolize violence in Iraq: local armed groups are intent on killing members of their own country, yet this only leads to a string of violent acts, with no resolution in sight. Faraj's comment about photographing the scene suggests that even horror can become a spectacle, or a source of entertainment. It serves as implicit criticism: such "international prizes" might shed light on the horrors taking place in a variety of countries, but it does not actually provide a solution to their problems.

In the meantime, another beggar is watching the scene. He recalls what took place the previous night. He had been drinking when he heard screams. Fighting frequently erupted among drunk beggars, angry and desperate at the state of their life. When light from a passing car illuminated the scene, the man saw five people holding hands in a circle. Later that afternoon, he recounts this scene to Faraj, who believes that he can use this story to increase his power among authorities. However, Faraj gets angry at the beggar for being drunk, adding that the government should implement sharia law to keep people from drinking.

Faraj's focus on turning other people's misery into personal gain—specifically, in this case, serving as an informant for those in power—reveals his profit-oriented attitude centered on his own success rather than on the neighborhood's well-being. In turn, his anger at seeing people drunk—despite the Islam's prohibition to drink alcohol—reveals his desire for politics to merge with religion: sharia or Islamic law seeks to establish Islamic codes of behavior in society. Faraj's intolerance toward other people's religious behavior reveals his domineering attitude, as he hopes to impose his own religious beliefs on others.

Frightened by Faraj's outburst, the beggar nevertheless tells him that one of the men was a horrific man with a large mouth. He insists that there were indeed five beggars, not four. The four beggars, he explains, wanted to grab the fifth man's throat, but ended up killing each other. In the city, at the same moment as Faraj exclaims that this makes no sense, Brigadier Sorour Mohamed Majid inspects a file he has just received, called the "four beggars."

The fifth beggar's description of the mysterious man's horrific face immediately points to the presence of the Whatsitsname on the scene. In turn, Brigadier Majid's inspection of documents related to this murder signals the possibility for this story to acquire importance beyond the Bataween neighborhood, and to become a matter of city-wide security.

In the meantime, in the *al-Haqiqi* offices, Saidi tells Mahmoud to accompany him on an errand. Saidi frequently creates suspense in this way, refusing to give more details about his activities, but taking Mahmoud to places frequented by important politicians. On such occasions, when looking at himself in mirrors, Mahmoud dismisses his reflection as insignificant. Instead of his own self, he sees Saidi's network of contacts.

Saidi cultivates a sense of mystery around himself. This could be meant to manipulate Mahmoud into building trust in him—so that the journalist would stay loyal to his editor—but could also indicate that Saidi has certain secrets he prefers not to talk about. Saidi's contact with politicians signals the difficult balance between independent journalism—which should be free to criticize politics—and the interests of politicians who seek to maintain a positive self-image.

Saidi tells Mahmoud that they are going to visit an old friend of his, so that they can collect information to use against the Americans and the government, responsible for so much insecurity in the city. Mahmoud is surprised to hear this, because he believed that Saidi was allied with the forces in power. Mahmoud's friend Farid says that Saidi "believes in the future" because Saidi knows the future will bring him personal success, not because the country will be better off. However, Mahmoud prefers not to pay too much attention to his friend's words.

Saidi's words identify a gap between a person's appearance and their true beliefs: ultimately, Saidi's political affiliations remain ambiguous. Although he claims to disagree with the authorities currently in power, he also engages with them frequently throughout his journalistic work. This ambivalence makes it difficult to understand what Saidi's true beliefs are—or, even, whether he even has a consistent belief system, beyond the desire to become powerful and successful.

In a neighborhood that Mahmoud does not recognize, Mahmoud and Saidi reach an imposing gate. They enter a peaceful, tree-lined street, far from the commotion and police sirens rocking the rest of the city. After parking next to an American Hummer, they enter a building, where they are led to a fancy office, permeated by the smell of an apple-scented air freshener. Saidi hugs a short, balding man, who shakes Mahmoud's hand. This man, Mahmoud learns, is Brigadier Majid, head of the Tracking and Pursuit Department. Mahmoud wonders what the object of this department's activities might be.

The tranquility of this office building suggests that not all inhabitants of Baghdad are equally affected by the violence in the city. Thanks to their powerful position—the Hummer likely indicates contact with the American military—some of them are able to stay relatively shielded from chaos. Mahmoud's ignorance of the Tracking and Pursuit Department, despite his position as an investigative journalist, signals that the government itself is full of secrets: its own citizens are not aware of the full extent of its activities.

For two hours, the three men chat amiably, and Mahmoud discovers that Brigadier Majid and Saidi are old friends who went to middle school together. They are now engaged in a common enterprise, working for "the new Iraq." Although Brigadier Majid had a high function in the army during the Baathist regime, he was able to avoid de-Baathification regulations and receive a special post. His goal is to serve the Americans by monitoring strange crimes and to prevent violence from erupting. The Tracking and Pursuit Department is kept secret, so that its members can stay safe.

Saddam Hussein's government, toppled by the U.S. invasion in 2003, was ruled by the Baath Party. After the regime fell, the U.S. prohibited former members of the party and the government from working in the public sector, in a process known as de-Baathification. In this context, Brigadier Majid's ability to avoid such punishment reveals his ability to protect his own interests, probably thanks to his political savvy and network of contacts.

Mahmoud wonders why his boss Saidi trusts him to take part in such confidential conversations. He realizes that, given his editor's wealth and power, Saidi is just as likely to be killed as any politician, and whoever accompanies him would also be likely to die. Mahmoud concludes that Saidi must be either brave or completely ignorant.

Mahmoud's fear at being killed for staying close to Saidi reflects the intensity of the insecurity in Baghdad: any powerful person can be murdered, for relatively arbitrary reasons. Murder has become a political tool, meant to assert one's group's domination over a given territory or sector of society.

While insisting that nothing he tells them can be published, Brigadier Majid tells the two men that the Department relies in part on the work of astrologers and people who communicate with spirits. He does not reveal whether or not he actually believes in this, but he argues that the Department's objective is to decrease violence and prevent a civil war. Mahmoud is terrified by this thought. Meanwhile, Saidi asks whether he should buy a printing press, to which Brigadier Majid replies that he should avoid doing so.

The Department's dependence on astrologers and fortune-tellers of various kinds adds a note of dark humor to the text: politicians are so desperate to contain violence—which they are largely incapable to control—that they rely on any means possible, including people with alleged spiritual powers. Mahmoud's terror at hearing discussions of a possible civil war contrasts with Brigadier Majid and Saidi's apparent nonchalance. This suggests that they might have more information than Mahmoud about the country's current state.

Brigadier Majid tells them about the four beggars who strangled each other, which he believes is a crime meant to send a cryptic message. He notes that the department has received news about criminals who are immune to bullets and do not die or bleed. As he says goodbye to his visitors, he laughingly asks them who would even believe them, were they to publish what he has just revealed to them.

Brigadier Majid's joking behavior signals a certain ambivalence: although he does not want to be seen as an irrational believer in fantastical events, he also seems inclined to trust that strange—and possibly supernatural events—are taking place in the city.

That evening, Mahmoud recounts the day's events in his **digital recorder**. He is confused by the fact that, on the way back, Saidi mocked Brigadier Majid's dependence on fortune-tellers yet still asked his friend whether or not he should buy a printing press. Mahmoud concludes that Saidi is trying to gather as much information as possible about the country's political state, so that he can feel safe traveling around the city. Mahmoud is also shocked by the light tone with which the two men discussed the civil war, as though it were a movie. He concludes that he should stay close to Saidi to ensure his own survival.

As the journalist's doubts reveal, Mahmoud is inclined to conclude that both Saidi and Brigadier Majid might believe more strongly in superstition than they want to reveal. Like other characters in the novel, Saidi and the Brigadier attempt to maintain a sense of stability as much as they can—even if this involves relying on dubious information, such as what astrologers provide. In the same vein, Mahmoud, too, seeks stability: he convinces himself that staying close to Saidi, who has so many political contacts, will be sufficient to protect him if a civil war erupts.

Mahmoud also reflects that neither Saidi nor Brigadier Majid is fully faithful to their allegiances: Saidi used to be an Islamist, while Brigadier Majid used to be Baathist. Mahmoud does not understand why Saidi made fun of his friend on the way back: Saidi said that Baathists were obsessed with apple smells and made a joke about the chemical weapons that Baathists dropped on Halabja, which also had an apple smell. Mahmoud was disturbed by this joke. Later, he decided to ask Abu Anmar about the "four beggars," and understood that people in the neighborhood believe that the killer strangled these men before placing them in this theatrical position.

Saidi and Brigadier Majid's oscillating allegiances reveals their willingness to prioritize self-interest over consistent, coherent beliefs: they are willing to adapt to the authorities currently in power, rather than defending deeply held convictions. The Halabja chemical attack (1988), which took place at the end of the Iran-Iraq War, was a genocide: Saddam Hussein's Baathist government sought to eliminate the Kurdish civilian population in Iran. Saidi's joke reveals his normalization of such horrific events—an attitude that clashes with Mahmoud's empathetic attitude toward these innocent, murdered civilians.

Mahmoud concludes that the Brigadier was in a delicate position, spying on his citizens in the same way people spied on him, in part because of his relationship to the old regime. However, the Brigadier receives support from the Americans. Mahmoud concludes that two groups face each other: the Americans and the Iraqi government, against terrorists and antigovernment militias. Anyone who is against the first camp is immediately labeled "terrorist," Mahmoud notes. He reflects to himself that, despite their self-promoted image as patriots, both Saidi and Brigadier Majid are collaborating with the Americans.

Mahmoud's reflection on the political situation in Iraq depicts an intensely complicated scenario, marked by generalized mistrust and hypocrisy. Despite criticizing the Americans, Brigadier Majid depends on them for survival, because he is viewed suspiciously by fellow Iraqi politicians. In this context, political groups derive their strength not from moral worth or ideological coherence, but from sheer power. Because of their superior power, the U.S. and their allies are able to label their enemies "terrorists"—a term meant to demonize any opposition to the current balance of power.

The next day, when Mahmoud leaves his room at the hotel, he runs into his friend Hazem Abboud, who tells him that someone was killed that morning, and that the police have now taken over the neighborhood. The murder victim is the local barber, Abu Zaidoun. Someone killed the old man, who suffered from severe dementia, by stabbing him in the neck with a pair of scissors in his own shop. People in the neighborhood remember Abu Zaidoun's Baathist convictions, which led him to force young men to join the war. Because of these actions, he had many enemies, although no one knows who his murderer is.

Abu Zaidoun's murder suggests that the balance of power is no longer in his favor: although he used to be a member of the government, capable of determining other people's fates, the fall of the Baathist regime has left him vulnerable. His murder does not signal the advent of a better, more just society, as it simply replaces one criminal act with another. Instead, it suggests that murder—and not a fair trial—is the primary form of political expression in conflict-torn Baghdad.

At the man's funeral, people emphasize Abu Zaidoun's positive qualities, giving him dignity by relegating his cruel behavior to the first years of the Iran-Iraq War. By contrast, Elishva refuses to forgive the old man. When Umm Salim tells her the news, Elishva realizes that Umm Salim has forgotten her promise to sacrifice a sheep at Abu Zaidoun's death. 20 years ago, the man had sent her son Salim to war, where he was killed, and Umm Salim seems to have forgotten her desire for vengeance. Elishva, by contrast, believes that revenge will give her motivation to stay alive.

Elishva's dedication to her son's memory takes a sinister turn: her incapacity to forgive past harm leads her to believe in violence as a form of reparation. On a larger scale, the book shows that it is precisely this mode of thinking that fuels the violence in the city, as armed groups use murder as a form of punishment and an opportunity to achieve greater power. Elishva's anger thus highlights her own suffering, but also signals an incapacity to express this suffering in more productive ways, for example by fostering peace instead of murderous revenge.

In the meantime, at Aziz's coffee shop, two men turn on a **digital recorder** and ask Hadi to tell them the story about the Whatsitsname. Aziz gives Hadi a silent warning, and Hadi understands that these men are members of a security agency, who could arrest him. Therefore, Hadi tells them that the Whatsitsname has died and leaves the shop precipitously. Confused and angry, the two men leave the shop a moment after.

The authorities' interest in Hadi's stories suggests that they are taking the idea of a supernatural being seriously. Although Hadi is not implicated in any crime, he knows that the justice system is unlikely to treat him fairly. Aziz's kind gesture to his friend reveals the solidarity between local inhabitants of the Bataween neighborhood against repressive authorities.

When Hadi returns to the coffee shop later in the day, Aziz angrily tells him to stop telling the story of the Whatsitsname. He invokes the murders of the four beggars and of Abu Zaidoun to insist to Hadi that his stories are likely to put him in danger. He says that the Americans could capture him and make him disappear at any moment. Terrified by this prospect, Hadi secretly resolves to keep the story of the Whatsitsname to himself from now on. Aziz tells Hadi that multiple witnesses have described the criminal as a horrific-looking man with a mouth that looks like an open wound. Others have described his body as covered in sticky liquid. The criminal has also been shot without showing any apparent wounds.

Aziz's conviction that the Americans could kidnap Hadi mirrors Faraj's earlier terror at being interrogated by the U.S. military. These fears among the population reveal the occupying forces' lack of accountability. The book suggests that, in in this foreign territory, the U.S. is free to act with impunity, without having to go through the usual steps of the legal process. Hadi's worry about being arrested also suggests that stories are not innocent; they can have concrete consequences in the social and political world. In this particular case, Hadi is forced to confront an uncomfortable truth: the creature he was trying so hard to forget about is apparently wreaking havoc in the city.

Aziz concludes that Hadi's stories are scaring people. Moved by fear, Hadi goes home, realizing that it might be possible for lies to turn into reality. He understands that, apart from his friend Aziz, no one would look for him if ever anything happened to him. In the evening, Hadi sees American soldiers in his neighborhood and decides to spend the night drinking alone in his home. He raises his glass to ghosts, including people who have died. Suddenly, the door opens and a tall figure approaches. His face is covered in stitches and bears a wound-like mouth.

Although Hadi does not explicitly mention this, his feeling of isolation is in part due to losing his close friend and business partner, Nahem: when he raises his glass to ghosts, it is likely that he is thinking of this beloved friend. The Whatsitsname's appearance at this very moment serves as a reminder that this creature, too, is made of people who have died: he symbolizes the unfair deaths that have plagued the city.

CHAPTER 7: OUZO AND BLOODY MARY

One morning, Faraj is angry to discover that members of an association concerned with the preservation of Baghdad's historical houses are marking some of his properties with blue paint. This includes Elishva's house, although she refuses to open the door to them. Even though the employees reassure Faraj that this is a customary operation, Faraj addresses them angrily, convinced that these people are trying to steal his properties.

Although Faraj is currently benefiting from the protection his contacts afford him and is experiencing a period of financial security, his situation, too, is unstable, because it depends on illegal appropriations. Faraj must therefore try to hold onto his acquired territory as much as he can, through intimidation and manipulation—just like other, more violent groups in the city.

Later, Faraj discovers that these government employees have already visited Elishva to propose a deal to her: she could stay in her house without paying rent but would give her house away to the state after her death. Faraj is terrified that the old lady might accept this offer. However, he learns that she has refused to do so before her son, Daniel, who has temporarily left the house, comes home.

It is unclear why the state is so insistent on trying to acquire Elishva's house. However, this situation highlights the contrast between current economic and political processes taking place around Elishva and the old lady's aloofness: her lack of concern for issues that do not directly concern her memories of her family.

Although some people initially believe that Elishva has gone mad, others argue that they have indeed seen the figure of a young man enter her house at night. Umm Salim declares that she knows the truth about Elishva. Her husband, Abu Salim, who spends his days sitting by the window, has seen a visitor enter Elishva's house. He believes him to be a criminal who hides in the old lady's house.

Abu Salim's observation of Elishva's house suggests that the neighborhood maintains a close eye on each other's lives—for purposes that include protecting each other from harm. However isolated Elishva might feel, she actually benefits from the benevolent protection of her neighbors.

One woman, whom Faraj once mercilessly evicted from her home, believes that Faraj must be responsible for this sinister turn of events. She trusts that he is the cause of all bad events taking place in the neighborhood. This woman also recounts a moment of tenderness that she witnessed between the mysterious young man—whom she believes to be a murderer—and Elishva. When the man saw Elishva speak Syriac to the picture of **Saint George**—and it certainly sounded as though two voices were interacting—he was moved by the dialogue. Elishva then turned toward him, called him "my boy" and fell into his arms, crying.

In the same way that Umm Salim believes in Elishva's positive spiritual powers, this other neighbor believes Faraj to be responsible for all evil occurrences. Both beliefs—one aimed at identifying positive forces, the other focused on negative powers—reflect an impulse to attribute unexplainable, arbitrary occurrences, such as explosions of murderous violence, to a definite cause. This underlines the human difficulty to accept chaos as an ordinary aspect of life, as well as people's tendency to appeal to external factors to explain the existence of evil.

Although many people do not believe this version of the story, they still appreciate its emotional import. As a show of solidarity, they curse Faraj the realtor and, buoyed by this collective support, the woman who initially accused Faraj of wrongdoing feels her hatred dissipate.

The neighborhood's solidarity toward this woman's anger at Faraj shows that collective support can assuage even intensely negative emotions. Anger and hatred, the woman concludes, is not the only solution to past harm: one can also move on peacefully from such difficult events, with the help of friends' support.

In the meantime, it has been a week since Elishva has gone to church. She prefers to visit other religious institutions to complete her "Islamic" vows. During the week, she leaves henna paste or sprinkles water on the Saint Qardagh Church, the Anglican Church, the Syriac Orthodox church, the Jewish synagogue and the Orfali Mosque. Finally, she visits her usual Church of Saint Odisho, lighting incense to fulfill her vows. Elishva stays for Mass, eats with her fellow church-goers, says goodbye to everyone (including the policemen in charge of guarding the church), and waits for her daughters to call. Father Josiah told her they had asked for her during the week.

Elishva visits a variety of religious institutions in order to give thanks for the appearance of the Whatsitsname, whom she is convinced is her son, Daniel. Her "Islamic" vows refer to her previously mentioned belief in God as a force capable of fulfilling her desires and respecting a series of conditions. Elishva's openness to different religions' presence in the city suggests a peaceful, cooperative attitude toward religious co-existence: she values the God that all of these religious institutions represent, regardless of differences in doctrine.

Finally, the phone rings and Matilda tells Elishva that Hilda has been suffering psychologically and had to go to the hospital. Instead of showing concern, Elishva replies that Daniel has returned. Matilda ignores this information. Impatient, she tells Elishva that Hilda, whose son looks just like Daniel, is angry at her, and that they both want her to come to Melbourne.

Elishva's lack of concern for Hilda does not necessarily reflect a lack of love but, rather, Elishva's deluded state: she is unable to focus on anything besides the return of her son, Daniel. Matilda, by contrast, understands that her mother's fantasy world will not protect her from the very real dangers in Baghdad, and that it would be safer for the old lady to leave the city.

Angry at her daughters' complaints, Elishva tells them not to worry about her or be sad. She warns Matilda not to call her again until she can speak to her calmly. Elishva hands the phone to Father Josiah. Matilda tells him that they will have to come to Baghdad to take her away by force. After the phone call ends, Elishva firmly tells Father Josiah that she no longer wants to answer her daughters' calls. If he doesn't respect this wish, Elishva threatens, she will attend the Saint Qardagh Church instead.

Elishva's harsh behavior toward both Matilda and Father Josiah reveals her practical understanding of life, despite her belief in seemingly fantastical events such as her son's return. Indeed, Elishva knows that she can manipulate Father Josiah into respecting her demands by threatening to leave his church. Elishva shows a practical awareness of church politics: she knows that Father Josiah needs people to attend his church, since he wants it to survive as an institution.

In the meantime, Saidi frequently takes Mahmoud on outings and allows him to answer his phone when he is not in the building. Once, Mahmoud answers a call from a member of the parliament who accuses the magazine of publishing news that goes against their interest.

Mahmoud's conversation with an angry politician reveals the potentially dangerous nature of his journalistic work, which can reveal uncomfortable truths about powerful groups, including the authorities currently in power.

On another occasion, Mahmoud answers a call from the number 666, which he recalls as the symbol of a biblical "beast from the sea" in an American movie. When he picks up, he hears the voice of Nawal al-Wazir, who believes that she is speaking to Saidi. Her angry voice causes Mahmoud to hang up, and he concludes that the woman must indeed be romantically involved with his editor.

The association of Nawal's phone number with a fictional monster gives the woman an air of danger. The ambiguity of her relationship with Saidi heightens both the mystery of her own life, but also the possibly secretive affairs of Mahmoud's boss, who does not reveal anything about his private life.

Later, Saidi enters the office and tells Mahmoud that what Brigadier Majid said was true, although he does not explain further. The two of them then leave on a couple of outings. At the end of the night, they reach a secret nightclub, where they are searched for weapons at the entrance. In the chaotic atmosphere of the nightclub, filled with loud music and voices, the two men drink Bloody Marys and whiskey.

As usual, Saidi's unexplained comments create a sense of mystery, possibly aimed at increasing Mahmoud's admiration for his employer's secret networks of information and contact. The fact that Mahmoud and Saidi are searched for weapons suggests that Baghdadis are never spared the threat of terror and violence.

Mahmoud reflects on his relationship with Saidi. Although Farid tells him he is too deferential toward the editor, Mahmoud believes that Saidi is the one who needs him. However, he is not sure why Saidi trusts him so much, and he wonders about Saidi's true intentions. In the end, he decides to ask Saidi about what he meant concerning Brigadier Majid's statements. Saidi smiles and says that the Brigadier was correct in telling him not to buy a printing press. The insecurity in the city, combined with the imminence of new elections, has caused too much uncertainty to launch new investments.

The elections Saidi refers to are the 2005 parliamentary elections in Iraq, the first elections since the U.S. invasion of the country in 2003. These elections are considered important—and likely to elicit tensions among rival political groups—because they aim to provide the basis of a "new Iraq," a post-Baathist administration. Brigadier Majid's successful prediction suggests that, despite his work with astrologers, the Brigadier is aware of the most important political and economic developments taking place in the country.

Emboldened by the alcohol, Mahmoud wants to ask more questions, but the loud music keeps him from making his voice heard. While observing his editor, Mahmoud realizes that he admires Saidi and hopes to become like him. However, Saidi then turns toward Mahmoud. He confesses that he wished he were in the young journalist's position, but that it is now too late. Astounded, Mahmoud feels as though a dream has been fulfilled. He is too shy to tell his boss that, in fact, he, too, wishes he were Saidi: the only purpose in his own life is to become like him.

Like most of Saidi's pronouncements, the editor's comment is ambiguous: it's unclear whether his goal is to flatter his employee Mahmoud, or whether he is sincere in wanting to be like him. This last possibility suggests that Saidi might wish he had less power—perhaps because he has gotten in trouble. Either way, this comment succeeds in fueling Mahmoud's admiration for his boss, whose power and charisma he admires.

In the meantime, Hadi learns that the old man with whom he was negotiating has sold his entire house, including the furniture, to someone else. Hadi has spent the past few days completely drunk, in order to forget about the Whatsitsname's visit. After his talk with the old man, he sits down on the sidewalk and believes that he could be killed right then and there by a car bomb. He does not understand how he has succeeded in staying alive for so long, despite the fact that at least one car bomb per day explodes in the city. He believes that his destiny is to end up as a casualty on the news.

Hadi's failed commercial enterprise highlights the precariousness of his business—whose lack of success could very well be correlated with his unkempt, unprofessional appearance. Although Hadi's reflections on death reflect a despondent attitude, they also highlight a form of thinking that is perfectly realistic, based on the tragic events that occur in the city every day. His thoughts identify the way in which violent insecurity affects people's minds, weighing as a constant burden on their spirit.

When Hadi returns to his Bataween neighborhood, he discovers that Abu Anmar wants to talk to him. Abu Anmar, in fact, wants to sell him the furniture in his hotel. Although Hadi realizes that the only furniture that is still in good shape belongs to the four currently occupied rooms, he still accepts to sell the damaged furniture.

Abu Anmar's business proposal arrives right after Hadi has been reflecting on economic failure and death. It brings to light a certain sense of neighborhood solidarity—Abu Anmar approaches Hadi because he is a well-known presence in the neighborhood—but also the unpredictability of fate, which takes positive and negative twists and turns for no discernable reason.

Mahmoud then enters the hotel lobby, still drunk from his night with Saidi in the nightclub. He greets the two men and sits down to chat with Hadi. In order to forget about his physical discomfort, caused by his drunkenness, he asks Hadi about the Whatsitsname. Hadi, however, no longer wants to tell a story that has come true. He feels like a passive agent involved in serious events he cannot control. He is unsure whether his creation is "a prophet, a savior, or an evil leader."

Hadi's reluctance to tell a true story shows that his storytelling usually serves as a buffer between him and reality: as soon as stories begin to reflect the terrifying, oppressive reality of their everyday lives, Hadi no longer finds comfort in relating such narratives. Hadi's uncertainty about the Whatsitsname's function in society will remain a constant thread in the novel, as characters question the meaning of justice in their current circumstances.

Although Mahmoud expects a light, entertaining story from Hadi, the junk dealer turns serious. He agrees to recount what has happened since his last iteration of the story, but only on the condition that Mahmoud reveal to him a secret in exchange for his, and that he buy him dinner and a bottle of ouzo, the local alcohol.

Hadi's demand for a secret in exchange for his story underlines his businesslike approach to life: if he is going to entertain others, he, too, wants to be entertained. His request for dinner and ouzo also highlights his financial difficulties and his awareness that he must find creative ways to survive.

CHAPTER 8: SECRETS

At noon, Brigadier Majid receives a report from his senior astrologer that one thousand ghosts will assemble on the Imams Bridge, crossing the river Tigris. Brigadier Majid believes that these ghosts are none other than the pilgrims currently crossing the river to head to religious ceremonies. However, at the very same time the Brigadier is perusing his astrologer's report, he sees on his television that several people have died on the bridge. A rumor about a suicide bomber caused panic in the crowds, leading some people to be trampled to death or to drown in the river after jumping from the bridge.

The contrast between the astrologer's report and the information on the TV signals two ways of looking at reality: through the lens of superstition and imagination (the people on the bridge are "ghosts") or through a more pragmatic approach (the "ghosts" are those who have died on the bridge). These two separate interpretations reveal different understandings of violence: as a mysterious phenomenon, orchestrated by superior forces, or as the consequence of harmful human behavior. Both interpretations try to find an inherently mysterious phenomenon: death.

Frustrated by his inability to prevent this catastrophe, Brigadier Majid realizes that his reports are never taken seriously. The criminals he identifies are rarely arrested. When they are, another member of the government takes credit for these operations. In these circumstances, Brigadier Majid has been working on a special operation that would demonstrate the high quality of his work and bring him a promotion. He is intent on solving mysterious crimes perpetrated around the city, for which he believes a single criminal is responsible. His senior astrologer calls this man "the One Who Has No Name." The Brigadier is skeptical about this qualification. He wonders if this name suggests that this person will never be caught and sent to jail.

Although Brigadier Majid is concerned with public security, one of his primary interests is his personal success and advancement. In this sense, his frustration with his work also relates to the shifting political situation in the country: political instability leads people to defend their own interests first, in order to ensure their survival. In addition, although the Brigadier is inclined to believe in the Whatsitsname's existence, he still retains a pragmatic approach toward this criminal, focused on sending the Whatsitsname to prison. The Brigadier's unwillingness to give this criminal a mysterious nickname shows that he prefers to focus on a traditional understanding of justice, according to which criminals—however fascinating they might seem—should be punished for their violent deeds.

In the meantime, Brigadier Majid focuses on the Imams Bridge catastrophe. His junior astrologer tells him that the people on the bridge are ghosts temporarily inhabiting the people's bodies, which can break loose when people become scared. This explains their name: "familiars of fear."

The junior astrologer's explanation is fanciful and extravagant. However, it also describes, in metaphorical terms, the way in which emotions can take control of people's bodies: fear causes people to behave in unusual ways, as though they were possessed by ghosts.

Later in the day, after finalizing this report, the Brigadier has the impression that his thoughts are wandering around his body. They are centered on his personal version of the "familiars of fear": his obsession with the nameless criminal. Brigadier Majid is also worried that he might one day be fired from his job, and that the Americans might thus leave him prey to the Iraqi political parties. He also wonders if his enemies are using the same tools that he is, such as astrologers and fortune-tellers, who could be able to instill such fears in him. When he tries to grab the ghost of the nameless criminal, in order to get rid of this fear, he realizes that there is no one in his office besides himself.

Brigadier Majid understands the junior astrologer's descriptions not as supernatural phenomena, but as an ordinary feature of the human brain: in a situation of violence and insecurity, it's normal to become overwhelmed by fear. Such fear is not irrational: it reflects the actual dangers that can affect members of the political system. At the same time, the Brigadier also realizes that such fears can become dangerous obsessions: when moved by powerful emotions, people can become their own enemies.

In another part of the city, Hadi finishes recounting his story to Mahmoud. Mahmoud then tells the junk dealer, in exchange for this story, that he is in love with his boss Saidi's lover, Nawal al-Wazir. However, Hadi is dissatisfied with this uninteresting secret, disproportionate to the danger of the Whatsitsname story. After reflecting a while, Mahmoud finally accepts to reveal a deeper secret: he admits that his family was not originally Arab. One of his ancestors, he believes, converted to Islam. His father recounted the story in his diaries, but his family burned it after the man's death.

Mahmoud's family secret reveals the importance of telling stories and cultivating careful social appearances in a society marked by social and ethnic divisions. Mahmoud's secret does not only impact his understanding of his family: it also determines how he is viewed in society—specifically, whether or not he is seen as an "outsider." In a violent context in which religious and ethnic affiliations can lead to murder, Mahmoud's fears of revealing this secret are entirely justified.

Mahmoud then interrogates Hadi, telling him that he cannot believe the story of the Whatsitsname is true without concrete evidence. However, Hadi refuses to let Mahmoud meet the creature. The Whatsitsname, Hadi argues, would kill him whoever tried to take his picture. Overall, Mahmoud is surprised by this turn of events. The night before, the journalist had made an appointment with the junk dealer, but he did not expect for the story to be so intricate. In between their first meeting and their appointment, the disaster on the Imams Bridge took place, and Mahmoud spent the day reporting on it. When he reached the magazine's office, he saw that Saidi's cell phone had seven missed calls from the number 666.

In contrast to Hadi's storytelling for entertainment purposes, Mahmoud's job as a journalist leads him to verify his sources carefully. Mahmoud understands that, if Hadi's story is true, it could have serious journalistic value. However, Hadi's fear of the Whatsitsname's reaction suggests that Hadi is the one putting his life in danger to tell this story. Mahmoud, by contrast, is focused less on the junk dealer's well-being than on the details of the story—a trend that will become all the more prominent in future events.

Mahmoud debated whether or not he should call the number, because he longed to tell Nawal al-Wazir how he felt for her. Finally, he decided to call. He soon heard Nawal's voice and was frozen on the spot. Then, he heard her address Saidi himself, who was in the same room as her. Saidi picked up the phone, asking if he was talking to Abu Jouni, the janitor. Terrified by this unexpected exchange, Mahmoud hung up abruptly. Saidi had told Mahmoud he would be away at a conference, and Mahmoud is shocked to realize that his editor has lied.

This phone call is a concrete indication of Saidi's possible unreliability. Mahmoud is shocked to realize that his editor, in whom he places so much trust, does not reciprocate this trust by telling him the truth. As in many of Saidi's actions, it is unclear why the editor would have chosen to lie. In any case, it suggests that Saidi has an ambiguous relationship to the truth: although he promotes good journalism, he does not necessarily apply the values of truth-telling to his personal life.

Desperate to forget about this conversation, Mahmoud went to Aziz's coffee shop. There, Hadi reminded him of their appointment. Grateful for the opportunity to forget about his day, Mahmoud eagerly listened to Hadi discuss the Whatsitsname. However, Hadi's attitude intrigued the young journalist, who realized that the junk dealer was serious and secretive, as opposed to his usual lighthearted behavior. Hadi preferred to tell the story in his house so that no one would overhear them. Finally, after hearing the story Mahmoud stayed in silence, shocked by what he Hadi told him. He realized that Hadi could not have invented such a complicated story on his own.

Hadi's serious tone suggests that he is not as frivolous as he may appear: he, too, understands the emotional weight of death and violence. In addition, Hadi also understands the danger of telling stories about the sources of violence in such an unstable context: he knows that possessing sensitive importance can lead to dangerous consequences for the person recounting these events. Mahmoud's doubts about Hadi's intelligence adds another layer of uncertainty, as it is unclear to what extent Hadi is manipulating the story.

Mahmoud decides to record Hadi's story on his **digital recorder**, so that he will not forget any of the details. He bought the Panasonic recorder months ago, in order to avoid using notebooks. This led him to recall his father's diaries, composed of 27 notebooks, which Mahmoud sometimes perused. However, after his father's death, his mother burned all of the notebooks, baking 27 loaves of bread over the ashes.

Mahmoud's mother's decision to burn her husband's diaries suggests that telling the truth—which her husband did in these notebooks—can be seen as harmful. Engaging in censorship (and, specifically, destroying these notebooks) allows Mahmoud's mother to stay in control of her family's narrative, instead of having to accept uncomfortable truths.

Mahmoud knows that his father told the full truth of his life in these diaries, including scenes of masturbation and his sexual fantasies concerning women in the neighborhood. These episodes contrasted with his reputation as a respectable gentleman. Mahmoud concludes that the only way his father could accept this polished external image was by documenting the truth in his diaries.

Mahmoud's father's diaries reveal an additional purpose of writing: to reveal truths that cannot easily be communicated in social life. Such writing serves a private purpose—for example, to remain true to one's secret emotions—but also highlights the constraints of society, which forces people to behave in a way that does not necessarily reflect their sincere thoughts and desires.

Before the notebooks were burned, Mahmoud heard his family members discuss events concerning the family's origins and religious conversion. Although he only gathered bits of information, he understood that his father invented their last name, Sawadi, to replace their original tribal name. After their father's death, Mahmoud's brothers reverted to their tribal name. However, indignant about the family's brutal treatment of his father's life narrative, Mahmoud decided to keep the Sawadi name and to become known as a journalist with it.

Mahmoud's family's debates about their last name and tribal affiliation shows how social divisions impact people's personal lives. Belonging to a given ethnic and religious group impacts one's sense of personal and social identity. In Iraq, the tribal system can clash with the notion of a centralized government: it suggests that people can feel more strongly affiliated to their tribal origins than to the current way in which the political system is organized.

After talking with Hadi, Mahmoud tells him that he will only believe the junk dealer's story if he interviews the Whatsitsname. He hands Hadi his **digital recorder** and explains to him how to use it, noting that the batteries die out fast. After leaving, he wonders if he would actually believe any evidence that Hadi was able to provide.

Mahmoud's request for the junk dealer to record the Whatsitsname's story demonstrates the journalist's interest in Hadi's story, but also suggests that Hadi will be the one taking risks—specifically, facing the creature—to prove that he is telling the truth.

Mahmoud returns to his hotel. There, he sees the hotel guests watching television, where his friend Farid Shawwaf, elegantly dressed, is discussing the events of the day. A government representative appears on TV, cheerfully saying that the government has succeeded in preventing a suicide bombing on the bridge, although the criminal escaped.

Throughout the novel, it is unclear whether the government is telling the truth or simply attempting to reassure the population and pretend to be in control of a violent situation. The representative's mention of a suicide bomber is doubtful: from what Brigadier Majid had heard, people died only because the rumor *of a suicide bomber was spread around, regardless of whether there actually was a criminal on the bridge.*

Farid Shawwaf is later interviewed. He argues that the government is responsible for this disaster, because it did not search anyone who entered the bridge and allowed the bridge to become too crowded. Another man on the show argues that al-Qaeda is responsible for this. Even if the terrorist group is not personally involved in this tragedy, he argues, the fear they have instilled in people is responsible for that day's death toll.

These speakers' debates about the root causes of this tragic event mirror the Whatsitsname's interrogations about justice. Who is truly responsible for the violence affecting people's lives? Is it the armed groups intent on murdering others, or the government—which, because of possible incompetence, is incapable of protecting its own citizens?

Finally, Farid concludes that everyone is responsible, because everyone in the country is constantly terrified. It is the fear of dying that led people on the bridge to jump to their death. Similarly, people who fear armed groups support al-Qaeda. This, in turn, only leads to more insecurity, as new militias are created, to protect themselves from al-Qaeda. This vicious cycle of violence leads everyone to be afraid of "the Other." Farid concludes that the government and the occupation forces must put an end to fear if they want to avoid more deaths in the future.

In line with Brigadier Majid's previous confrontation of his "familiars of fear," Farid suggests that people's intense emotions of fear can have devastating consequences. Fear, he argues, leads people to engage in more violence, because armed groups can be both a threat and a promise of protection. People's fear leads them to trust only in a narrow set of familiar social contacts and to reject people outside of their social group, who can be perceived as threats. This generates a vicious cycle: violence based on social divisions leads to even greater violence and divisions.

In another part of Baghdad, Brigadier Majid watches the talk show but is not convinced by any of the interventions, because he believes that the true criminal has not yet been caught. He has planned his "big coup" to take place that night, in order to catch "the One Who Has No Name." He trusts that the success of this operation will finally bring him public recognition. At the same time, he wonders what this horrific criminal looks like. He has heard that the man cannot be harmed by bullets and that he has unique powers, such as breathing fire and flying with wings.

It remains unclear whether the Whatsitsname was ever implicated in the events on the Imams Bridge or if people's deaths were simply the result of a movement of panic, independent of a criminal's actual presence on the bridge. The novel also highlights how rumors can spread and blur the boundaries between truth and fiction: although the Whatsitsname certainly has some superhuman powers, he has no wings and cannot fly away.

CHAPTER 9: THE RECORDINGS

Mahmoud opens the window in his new room in the Dilshad Hotel. Saidi has told him to move to this nicer hotel, which has air conditioning, so that the young journalist can be better equipped for complicated assignments.

Saidi's encouragement for Mahmoud to switch hotels serves as a symbol of the young journalist's professional advancement: he is gradually rising in his career and in society. His new lodgings reflect this upward trend.

Mahmoud begins to record his thoughts on his **digital recorder**, as he has seen in American movies before. He recalls the events of these past few days. During their chat, Hadi told Mahmoud that the Whatsitsname came to his house after multiple murders were perpetrated in the neighborhood. Hadi initially thought the creature was a dream, but when he realized this was not so, he concluded that the Whatsitsname intended to kill him.

Despite being the Whatsitsname's creator, Hadi understands that the creature's intentions aren't pure. This suggests that, despite Hadi's noble goal in composing the Whatsitsname's body out of the body parts of victims, evil might have a mind of its own: one's good intentions do not determine the actual outcome of the situation.

The Whatsitsname confirmed this interpretation. He told Hadi that the junk dealer was responsible for hotel guard Hasib Mohamed Jaafar's death: it was only because Hadi walked by the hotel that the guard was forced to leave his position. The guard could have stayed in his sentry box and would then have killed the driver from afar, instead of putting his own life at risk. Hadi, in turn, tried to convince the Whatsitsname not to kill him.

The Whatsitsname's efforts to find a culprit for the hotel guard's death suggests that searching for a human culprit for every act of violence in the city is a futile enterprise. Indeed, Hadi never had any intention to kill anyone, and it would be unreasonable to punish him for involuntarily contributing to someone else's death.

When looking around the room, the Whatsitsname saw the image of the Throne Verse on Hadi's wall and tore it off, because part of it had come undone. The entire frame broke, leaving a large hole in the wall. Hadi later discovered what it hid.

The Whatsitsname's seemingly careless action of removing the Throne Verse signals his impatience with human symbols of religious belonging—one of the factors responsible for sectarian violence in the country.

Finally, the Whatsitsname admitted that he must kill the person responsible for Hasib's death but that he was not sure how to proceed. Hadi argued that the culprit was the suicide bomber, to which the Whatsitsname replies that this person was already dead. Hadi mentioned the hotel management; the Whatsitsname, however, felt uncertain. He knew he must find the true killer so that Hasib's soul could be at peace.

This scene highlights the absurdity of the Whatsitsname's obsession with murderous justice: it is not always possible to pinpoint a single culprit for evil deeds. The Whatsitsname's confusion suggests that, in such complex political circumstances, multiple groups might be directly or indirectly responsible for the violence in the city.

The Whatsitsname then recounted what happened on the night of the four beggars' deaths. He said that these men attacked him out of hatred, because they found his face horrifying. In the confusion of the night, two of the beggars attacked and killed fellow beggars. The Whatsitsname concluded that the two surviving men were criminals. As a result, he killed them in retaliation for the deaths they caused. He was convinced that these men were planning their own suicide anyway. In this sense, he considers that he gave them the death they contemplated every night after getting drunk.

The Whatsitsname presents himself as a victim of unjustified hatred. In this sense, his argument mirrors Farid Shawwaf's previous identification of fear as a source of violence: these beggars' fear of the Whatsitsname launched a cycle of violence that resulted in their own death. At the same time, this leads the Whatsitsname to justify his own violent deeds. Instead of realizing that he contributes to this climate of hatred and fear, he convinces himself that his cruelty serves a positive purpose.

After the murder of the four beggars and an encounter with the police, the Whatsitsname, who never sought to scare or harm people, decided to avoid people. He did not want to be perceived as a violent person. He believed in the nobility of his mission. He argued that he killed Abu Zaidoun as retaliation for Daniel Tadros's death.

Despite the Whatsitsname's tendency toward violence, he is also capable of empathy. For example, he considers that the murder of Abu Zaidoun places him on the side of vulnerable people such as Elishva, who would never have been able to seek justice for her son's death.

At the time Hadi was recounting this story, Mahmoud asked the junk dealer when these killings would stop. Hadi said that the Whatsitsname would kill everyone who had committed crimes against the people who composed his body. After this, he would die, dissolving into individual body parts.

The Whatsitsname's acts of retaliation are arbitrary: they rely on a random assortment of crimes and body parts. In this sense, the Whatsitsname is not actually interested in reforming society: like any other armed group, he seeks retaliation for personal harm.

The day after his conversation with the Whatsitsname, Hadi told Mahmoud he gave the creature the **digital recorder**. Although Mahmoud initially believed that Hadi must have sold it, Hadi later gave him the recorder back, 10 days later. Back in his hotel room, Mahmoud noticed that the memory was full.

Despite his reputation as a liar and a manipulator, Hadi proves reliable in his interactions with Hadi. He does not try to make money out of Mahmoud but, rather, honors his promise. This emphasizes the nobility of the character's behavior and intentions.

In the meantime, gunfire erupted as a result of a mistake made by the Tracking and Pursuit Department. The group succeeded in catching the Whatsitsname but forgot that the man was immune to bullets. Fighting off one of the officers, the Whatsitsname slammed his head against the wall, causing the man to lose consciousness. After this event, the Whatsitsname found refuge in Hadi's house. Hadi found his "friend" the Whatsitsname sitting on his bed.

Calling the Whatsitsname Hadi's friend has an ironic undertone, given that the creature previously reflected on whether or not to kill the junk dealer. In this context, it is possible to understand the term as an equivalent of "ally": in such unstable political circumstance, friendship can be based on a utilitarian, self-serving exchange of protection.

Although Hadi believed the Whatsitsname had come to kill him, the creature told him that he would hide at Hadi's house while the police and secret services were in the area. He revealed to Hadi that the body parts whose death he did not avenge in time were falling off. Hadi was not disturbed by the Whatsitsname's smell of putrefaction and sat next to him on the bed. Although Hadi agreed to help the Whatsitsname find new body parts to replace the old ones, he secretly wished that the Whatsitsname would die and put an end to so much horror.

The mention of the Whatsitsname's putrefaction adds elements of horror and dark humor to the story. Indeed, the decomposition of the Whatsitsname's body parts serves as an illustration of the greater horrors affecting Iraqi society: the constant deaths and suicide attacks, which leave so many people helpless. The physical and emotional abhorrence of this situation—which people usually try not to think about, in order to stay sane—is entirely visible in the Whatsitsname's personal plight.

When the Whatsitsname complained about his bad reputation, Hadi gave him the **recorder**, telling him that he should record an interview to change people's minds. The Whatsitsname concluded that he would interview his own self. Then, he stepped into Elishva's house through the hole in the wall.

In line with Mahmoud's father's diary-writing, the Whatsitsname seizes the opportunity to record his own life in order to reveal the truth that lies behind his public reputation. Storytelling, in this sense, can be a means to reveal one's deepest thoughts.

The next morning, the neighborhood was surrounded by National Guard and U.S. military police. When Mahmoud tried to leave the Orouba Hotel, saying that he was a journalist, a soldier pointed his gun at him and forced him to step back inside. Through Abu Anmar, Mahmoud learned that some houses had been raided that night. Although some men were arrested, the soldiers did not find the criminal.

These developments suggest that the government is actively trying to catch the criminal. They also indicate that their own authority is based on fear and domination—as is evident in Mahmoud's retreat into the hotel. The local population is at the mercy of foreign forces they have not elected, and who rule local neighborhoods as best they please.

Mahmoud called Saidi, who told him to gather as much information as possible about what was happening. In the end, all Mahmoud succeeded in learning was that an officer had been sent to the hospital for a head injury after fighting against a terrorist the night before. Later, Mahmoud saw a group of arrested men, with their hands tied, forced into trucks. They all shared one common characteristic: ugliness. Some of them were genetically deformed, others severely burned, and others, mentally ill. This was evident because they were the only ones who seemed perfectly at peace, not scared in the least bit.

The mention of a wounded officer suggests that of the government's efforts to catch this criminal might stem from a desire for retaliation—for example, to punish whoever is responsible for the officer's injury. The arrest of ugly men brings these repressive actions to the height of absurdity: these men have done nothing wrong besides having a certain appearance. The presence of mentally ill people among the arrested highlights the injustice of this operation, which targets vulnerable people in an effort to find a single culprit.

Too hot to stay in his room at the Orouba Hotel, Mahmoud headed to Aziz's coffee shop. There, he met Hadi, who told him that the Whatsitsname was planning on interviewing his own self. When Hadi later returned him the **recorder**, Mahmoud was shocked to listen to the Whatsitsname speak. He found the recording disturbing. He noted that this person sounded human, and not like the extravagant being whom Hadi had described in his stories.

Mahmoud's shock at hearing the Whatsitsname suggests that he is beginning to believe in this story: he trusts that Hadi would not have been capable to invent such a complex character. The "human" quality of the Whatsitsname's voice suggests that, however cruel his actions might be, he is capable of reason and of expressing his thoughts in a convincing way.

Mahmoud spent an entire day listening to the **recording**. Later, when Saidi saw Mahmoud's disheveled state, he told him to move to the Dilshad Hotel. Mahmoud accepted. Although he assumed that Abu Anmar must have felt appalled by the departure of such a precious guest, the hotel owner behaved in a professional manner, cordially allowing the journalist to close his account. At the Dilshad Hotel, Mahmoud records his thoughts on this long series of stories related to Hadi and the Whatsitsname.

The accumulation of voices on Mahmoud's recorder signal the increasing difficulty to separate the characters' intertwined stories. Although the Whatsitsname recounts his story in first person, Mahmoud later records his own thoughts on the issue. This creates a layering of interpretations: each character attempts to make sense of their own reality and to understand their position in this series of events.

Later in the day, Mahmoud recounts the story of the Whatsitsname to Saidi. The editor tells him to write an article about this, which Mahmoud chooses to call "Urban Legends from the Streets of Iraq." Enthusiastic, Saidi publishes the article with a modern illustration: the picture of Robert De Niro's movie on Mary Shelley's novel **Frankenstein**. Saidi also changes Mahmoud's title to "Frankenstein in Baghdad." Mahmoud is annoyed that his editor has turned a serious, investigative story into an extravagant, sensational issue. Later, Mahmoud wonders if the Whatsitsname and Hadi will be upset by this article or if, on the contrary, they will be grateful for his reporting.

This series of publications further blurs the distinction between fact and fiction. Mary Shelley's 19th-century novel Frankenstein serves as the basis for a series of stories: a 20th-century Robert de Niro movie, Mahmoud's article and, given the title that Saidi gives this article, the very novel in which these stories are recounted: Frankenstein in Baghdad. *This suggests that fiction can serve as a useful foundation from which to reflect on real-life events: for example, the horrors of sectarian violence in Baghdad. Modifying or exaggerating reality through fiction can distort history, but it can also shed light on the full extent of its horror.*

In the meantime, in his office, Brigadier Majid carefully reads the articles in *al-Haqiqa* about the Whatsitsname. Angry, he believes that Saidi has revealed confidential information, but he feels helpless given the free press that is currently allowed in the country. He calls Saidi to complain. However, the editor, cheerful as always, tells him that this is nothing but an invented story, and that Hadi is a known liar. Brigadier Majid refuses to believe that this is fiction. He asks Saidi for Mahmoud's address and, after Saidi gives it to him, tells one of the soldiers at his service to bring Mahmoud to him.

Brigadier Majid's complaint about the freedom of the press underlines his authoritarian tendencies: he does not want people to be too informed about the causes of the violence that affects their lives. Saidi's willingness to give the Brigadier Mahmoud's address signals his negligence in protecting his staff members but also, possibly, his trust that the Brigadier will not harm the journalist. However, this episode reveals the danger of revealing sensitive information through journalism—and the repressive consequences such a courageous decision can have.

CHAPTER 10: THE WHATSITSNAME

While in possession of the **digital recorder**, the Whatsitsname recorded his story. When introducing himself, he compared himself to the batteries in the recorder, which had very little time left. He described himself as a savior for poor people such as Elishva, waiting for an opportunity seek revenge. His goal, he declared, was to punish criminals and allow justice to reign on earth.

Even though storytelling can be an opportunity to reveal one's deepest thoughts, it is also a platform for self-presentation: it allows people to present themselves in a positive light, even if this image does not perfectly align with reality. In the case of the Whatsitsname, it remains unclear to what extent he is truly committed to justice, and to what extent he simply seeks to take revenge on those who have personally harmed him.

The Whatsitsname claimed that that representing him in the press as a dangerous monster was unfair, because his goal was actually to put an end to evil attitudes prevalent in the country, such as greed and a thirst for violence. As he was recounting these objectives, someone told him the batteries had died. This interlocutor, who called the Whatsitsname his "lord and master," agreed to go buy batteries for him.

Although the Whatsitsname might be correct in identifying people's harmful behaviors, it is uncertain whether the creature's actions make the situation better—or, as is more likely, contribute to cycles of violence. The interlocutor's deference toward the Whatsitsname signals that, like the leaders he so strongly criticizes, the Whatsitsname might also enjoy a certain degree of power and authority over others.

The Whatsitsname explained that he was currently living in a half-destroyed building in the neighborhood of Dora, where three groups were fighting each other: the Iraqi National Guard, allied with the American military, against Sunni and Shiite militias. The Whatsitsname used holes in the houses to walk around the city without being seen, traveling through a complex series of paths to avoid running into armed groups.

The fact that the Whatsitsname uses the destruction in the city to stay hidden suggests that his very existence derives from the conflicts that humans have created amongst each other. The opposition of different branches of Islam—Sunni and Shiite—in armed conflict shows that, in certain contexts, religious affiliations can lead to violence instead of peaceful cooperation.

The Whatsitsname explained that he was living with a series of assistants. The most important was the Magician, who claimed to have worked for the old regime. He had been employed to use his powers to keep the Americans from entering Baghdad, but the Americans had too many djinns (supernatural spirits), which were able to crush the Magicians' djinns. The Magician was then evicted from his former apartment because of atrocities that the former regime committed. Now dedicated to the Whatsitsname's cause, he was in charge of designing secret routes for the creature to move around the city.

The Magician's interpretation of the U.S. invasion of Iraq places emphasis on supernatural occurrences: a fight between different kinds of spirits. This interpretation gives an aura of fatality to events that were in fact the result of human operations—for example, the strength of one military power over another. The Magician's involvement in war crimes suggests that the Whatsitsname is already veering away from a fight for justice, as he enlists former criminals in his team.

The second most important assistant was the Sophist, a specialist at making any idea, good or bad, extremely convincing. The Sophist, who did not have convictions of his own, was effective at reassuring people around him, because he found convincing arguments for whatever creed they believed in. He was devoted to the Whatsitsname precisely because so many others in the city did not believe in him.

The Sophist's attitude toward belief is marked by a cynical, nihilist attitude. He considers that no ideas are inherently bad or good. Rather, the success of an argument is the result of persuasion, not moral worth. The Sophist's lack of moral convictions discredits the Whatsitsname's invocation of lofty concepts such as justice: it suggests that the Whatsitsname's actions might actually have no moral foundation.

The third assistant was the Enemy, the current member of a counterterrorism unit. Given his position as an insider in government activities, he was able to provide important information to help the Whatsitsname in his activities. The Enemy decided to join the Whatsitsname out of frustration, because he no longer believed that the government was capable of bringing justice to the people.

The Enemy's frustration with the government's actions suggests that there is no high moral authority reigning in Iraq: rather, individuals must decide which group to support, in the hope that they might bring about positive change. However, it is doubtful that any one group is truly capable of achieving justice—let alone in setting up a stable rule of law—in a context of such widespread violence.

The Whatsitsname also mentioned three additional participants: the young madman, the old madman, and the eldest madman. The young madman was the one who interrupted the Whatsitsname as he was recording his story. He was convinced that the Whatsitsname represented the model Iraqi citizen: a combination of various ethnical, racial, tribal, and class affiliations, created through the diversity of backgrounds of his body parts. In this sense, the Whatsitsname represented a multicultural mix, a "true" Iraqi citizen, that had never before been realized.

The madmen's interpretations of the Whatsitsname's purpose on earth adds an element of humor to the narrative, but it also indicates underlying political dynamics. The fact that three madmen are in charge of determining the Whatsitsname's role signals that their discourse might be pure delusions. At the same time, the conflict between the three madmen mirrors the armed conflict between three groups in Iraq, all vying for power. Through this analogy, the novel suggests that these armed groups might be, in a sense, "mad": convinced of a reality they seek to impose on others, regardless of the actual validity of their beliefs.

The old madman, by contrast, believed that the Whatsitsname foreshadowed the arrival of the savior that all religions believe in. The Whatsitsname would bring destruction to the earth in order to clear the way for the true savior. But the eldest madman trusted that the Whatsitsname was the savior itself, and that he would play an important role in shaping the history of the world. The Sophist concluded that, because of his extreme insanity, the eldest madman's mind was comparable to a blank page and thus most capable of reflecting the truth, beyond the abstraction of reason.

The divergence in opinion between the old and the eldest madmen mirrors the religious conflict between Sunni and Shia Islam, which is over 1,000 years old. The main difference between these two branches of Islam stems from their interpretation of the successor of Muhammad, the founder of Islam. In the novel, the two madmen's disagreement about the role of the Whatsitsname on earth mirrors this theological disagreement over the purpose and succession of the prophet Muhammad.

The Whatsitsname would leave his hiding at night. He wore special clothing and makeup to hide his appearance. He explained that he only had two targets left: an al-Qaeda member and a Venezuelan mercenary. He recalled some of his past difficulties: although bullets did not harm him, he noticed that his flesh started melting once he had succeeded in exacting revenge on the people responsible for those body parts.

The mention of an al-Qaeda member and a mercenary confirm that most—if not all—of the Whatsitsname's victims engage in harmful, violent deeds against the population. However, it remains unclear whether the Whatsitsname's actions actually reduce violence in the city, or simply punish relatively arbitrarily chosen targets.

The Whatsitsname felt that his body was disintegrating into fetid, sticky liquids that were oozing out of his body. Aware that this might cause him to melt away entirely, he concluded that he needed new body parts. A fight then broke out in the neighborhood. An armed group captured two men from an enemy faction and executed them in the street. When the Whatsitsname started losing some of his fingers, the Magician encouraged the assistants to use body parts from these recent victims—whose bodies were left in the street—to replace their creature's melting flesh.

The fact that the Whatsitsname has such little trouble finding spare body parts suggests that, in the same way he benefits from the holes left in destroyed houses, he also benefits from the savage, sectarian violence taking place in the streets of Baghdad. In this sense, the Whatsitsname can be seen as a product of human divisions: were there no armed fights taking place in the city, the creature would run out of body parts to keep him alive.

After they stitched these new parts onto the Whatsitsname's body, the creature woke up reinvigorated the next day. Enthusiastic about his renewed energy, he left the building to exact revenge on the gang that murdered the two people the day before. He succeeded in entering the group's hiding spot. There, he killed all but one man who, after seeing his companions ferociously murdered, looked terrified. According to the Whatsitsname, this man knew that God's justice had come to punish them: it is because of the man's guilt that he submitted to his brutal death without trying to resist, as his companions had done.

The Whatsitsname's conviction that he is a conduit for divine justice gives him a sense of impunity and keeps him from critically examining the moral worth of his actions. In this sense, his violent deeds—particularly cruel in this episode, where he shows no mercy for a scared, vulnerable victim—mirror those of religious armed groups, who act in the name of a certain interpretation of their creed. In other words, the Whatsitsname's confidence makes him just as intolerant as the groups responsible for the sectarian violence in the city.

In the next few days, the Whatsitsname killed his two previous targets: the Venezuelan mercenary, who had been in charge of recruiting suicide bombers such as the one who organized the Sadeer Novotel attack, and an al-Qaeda leader responsible for the bomb in Tayaran Square. However, as old body parts were replaced by those of new victims, the Whatsitsname realized that he would never have a finalized list of targets to assassinate: the list simply filled with new names. Secretly, he hoped that no more victims would appear in the streets, so that he could finally melt into nothingness. However, the fighting in the streets only intensified, leaving dead bodies all over.

The Whatsitsname's actions are, to a certain degree, rational: he wants to punish people responsible for the deaths of innocent victims. At the same time, the Whatsitsname realizes that the fighting in the country is beyond his control: however many people he might succeed in killing, new conflicts are bound to sprout on the streets anyway. This discouraging conclusion highlights the apparent inevitability of the city's descent into chaos and the ineffective nature of the Whatsitsname's actions, as killing a few leaders does not actually eradicate the roots of violence in the country.

In this context, the Whatsitsname's group of followers kept on increasing, divided into the three groups led by each madman. Each leader lived on a different floor. Their followers abided scrupulously to the madman leader's interpretation of the Whatsitsname's role on earth. The eldest madman's followers, who believed that the Whatsitsname was a representation of God, which they were not allowed to see, always bowed and covered their eyes when they ran into him.

The evolution of the groups of the Whatsitsname's followers shows that, instead of finding unity in their common leader, the groups become even more detached. This mirrors the processes taking place at a societal level, where the growth of sectarian groups only causes more conflict. The eldest madman's followers' behavior reflects a rule common to many branches of Islam: the avoidance or prohibition of visual representations of the prophet Muhammad.

The Magician found these developments worrisome. He argued they made the group much more visible and, therefore, easier for the authorities to catch. The Sophist disagreed with the Magician, because he believed the Magician sought to control the Whatsitsname. In the meantime, the Enemy warned the Whatsitsname that an internal investigation was taking place in his department. The Americans held serious accusations against him, such as associating with terrorist groups. This was the last time the Whatsitsname heard from him.

The internal disagreements between the Magician and the Sophist shows how difficult it is to keep a large group—religious, political, or otherwise—united, as it is likely that some leaders are going to compete for power. The Enemy's disappearance reveals that government authorities are increasingly becoming aware of activities related to the Whatsitsname—which seemingly confirms the Magician's worries about the group's visibility.

Over time, the Magician began to wonder whether the body parts that composed the Whatsitsname were truly innocent. He argued that everyone was at least partially criminal: someone who became the victim of violence might have engaged in violence themselves at another moment in their life. Although the Sophist disagreed with the Magician, the Whatsitsname had already wondered the same thing himself, because he sensed that some of his body parts came from criminals. He attributed some of his feelings of anger and confusion, as well as his occasional loss of eyesight, to this phenomenon.

The Magician's reflections on the fragile boundaries between innocence and criminality create a central dilemma for the Whatsitsname. Indeed, the supposed moral validity of the creature's murders depends on the notion that the people he kills deserve it—because they have engaged in violent deeds and because they have killed innocent people. As soon as these criminals are considered partially innocent, and the innocent as partially criminal, the Whatsitsname's actions lose any pretense of moral worth.

The Whatsitsname discussed the matter with the Magician, who told him that there was no doubt he was made up of the body parts of criminals: anyone who carries a weapon was a criminal, the Magician argued, even if he was the victim in a battle. Angered by this discourse, the Sophist concluded that, if the Whatsitsname was made of criminal parts, he would become a "supercriminal," the most powerful of all. This discussion left the Sophist furious, and he became the Magician's enemy.

Beyond aiming to determine the validity of the Whatsitsname's actions, the conversation between the Magician and the Whatsitsname identifies a central problem to the political situation in Iraq: in a country ravaged by violence, does engaging in violence oneself make one a criminal? Where is it possible to draw a line between aggression and self-defense? This moral dilemma questions different levels of complicity in criminal activities.

In the meantime, the Whatsitsname was amazed to note that the eldest madman's followers converted him into the prophet of a new religion. The young madman's followers, by contrast, considered entering politics.

The increasing efforts to turn the Whatsitsname into the leader of an organized, visible movement mirrors the development of many armed groups in Iraq, which evolve from grassroots organizations to active political and religious forces.

One day, after killing a militia leader in his home, where the man's mother, wife, and sisters loudly expressed their grief, the Whatsitsname returned to Dora and heard the sound of gunfights. While walking in pre-established routes among half destroyed buildings, he noticed his eyesight suddenly deteriorate. When he touched his right eye, he felt a dough-like substance, which he removed, thus detaching the entire eye.

Despite engaging in brutal acts, the Whatsitsname never expresses empathy for his victims. This emotional void reflects his conviction that he is acting in the name of justice, but also a certain lack of humanity: he does not seem to care that his actions also affect innocent people—such as, in this case, the militia leader's family.

Worried of losing both of his eyes, the Whatsitsname then noticed a man who was walking toward him in the distance. This man, in his 60s, was carrying bags that later revealed to contain only bread and fruit. It was unusual for someone like him to be in this area. After following him, the Whatsitsname, convinced of the man's innocence, decided to shoot him.

This murder marks a turning point in the Whatsitsname's killings. However brutal they might have seemed until now, they have always been aimed at a notion of justice. Here, the Whatsitsname's actions are gratuitous: they are aimed at his own survival rather than upholding justice.

In that moment, the Whatsitsname lost eyesight in his other eye and, with his knife, removed the dead man's eyes. He wondered what his assistants would say about this. The Sophist, he concluded, would argue that, as the Magician had predicted, the Whatsitsname had indeed turned into a murderer, killing innocent people. The Magician, by contrast, would say that the Whatsitsname was simply following the desires of the criminal parts of his body.

The possibility of interpreting this murder in multiple ways reflects a certain moral cynicism concerning human actions. Indeed, it is always possible for the Whatsitsname to convince himself of his own innocence, however savage his actions might be. Depending on how much control he is considered to have over his own body, the distinction between criminality and innocence becomes largely a matter of perspective.

After placing these new eyes in their sockets, the Whatsitsname looked at the dead man's body and concluded that he was a "sacrificial lamb." The man would have died anyway, he argued, given the violent fighting taking place around him. By contrast, killing the man in these circumstances had a positive outcome: it allowed the Whatsitsname to be certain of his victim's innocence, which would have been more difficult had the man died among criminals. The Whatsitsname thus concluded that he was not actually a murderer: he simply hastened death for this person.

The Whatsitsname's justification for this murder mirrors his previous description of the four beggars' deaths, where he considered that these men had been contemplating suicide anyway. The Whatsitsname's conclusions are self-serving: he prefers to believe that these people's deaths were inevitable, instead of considering that he deprived them of precious moments of life.

When the Whatsitsname reached his building, he realized that the fighting did not come from the armed groups in the area, as he had anticipated, but from his own followers. As the Magician had predicted, disagreements among the three madmen's groups caused violence to erupt. The Whatsitsname found the Magician's dead body, with a bullet hole in his head, in front of the building. After walking up the balcony and seeing the Magician's body right underneath it, he realized that someone must have pushed the Magician off the balcony after murdering him.

The fact that violence erupted among the Whatsitsname's followers instead of between pre-existing armed groups is deeply ironic. It suggests that, instead of curtailing violence in the city, the Whatsitsname has only added a new form of violence, based on new divisions. These events confirm that creating new political or religious does not lead the country toward peace: rather, what Iraq needs is more unity, not more sectarian divisions.

The next day, the Whatsitsname realized that the young madman was the only person still in the building. The young madman confirmed the Whatsitsname's suspicions: it was indeed the Sophist who had killed the Magician and, later, escaped. With his new, innocent eyes, the Whatsitsname saw the young madman as a murderer and a criminal. The only reason the young madman survived such vicious fighting, the Whatsitsname concluded, was because he was even more evil than the others.

The shift in the Whatsitsname's perspective concerning his own followers—in this case, the young madman—shows that, until now, he's been unable to understand the violent nature of these groups' actions. The Whatsitsname realizes that it is not a common fight for justice but a mere struggle for power that has led to the growth of his group: those who survive are not morally worthy but, on the contrary, morally corrupt.

The batteries in the **digital recorder** then died again, and the young madman told the Whatsitsname that they had none left. When noticing the Whatsitsname's behavior, the young madman suddenly begged for his life, saying that he was his master's "slave" and "servant." His voice then died out, and the Whatsitsname now spoke alone in the recorder. Impatiently, he noted that he was now running out of time.

Despite criticizing the young madman for being more evil than others, the Whatsitsname does not realize that he behaves in exactly the same way: the only reason he is still alive is because he is able to feed off of the violence around him. His sudden murder of the young madman, for no apparent reason, shows that he, too, survives because he is even crueler than those around him.

CHAPTER 11: THE INVESTIGATION

In his hotel room in the Dishad Hotel, Mahmoud listens to the Whatsitsname's **recordings** multiple times. He is shocked by the tranquil tone in which the man recounts such a turbulent story. After copying the files on a flash drive, Mahmoud falls asleep in his hotel room, giving in to the intense August heat. He is woken up by the receptionist, who tells him that some visitors are waiting for him. Mahmoud goes down to the lobby, where he sees four men dressed in civilian clothing. One of them takes him aside and tells him that Brigadier Majid wants to see him urgently.

Mahmoud's shock at hearing the Whatsitsname's mirrors the Whatsitsname's surprise at realizing that his followers are evil. Immersed in his own story, the Whatsitsname does not realize how abnormally brutal his own life is: in this sense, he is incapable of self-examination. Mahmoud, by contrast, understands that the Whatsitsname's tranquility is potentially worrisome, in the sense that it indicates a lack of humane, emotional awareness.

Mahmoud wants to call Saidi to ask him about this strange invitation, but he realizes that he has left his phone and his identity card in his room. Giving him no time to do so, one of the men tells Mahmoud, in a threatening tone, that he must come with them immediately. Mahmoud tries to attract the receptionist's attention, so that the man could remember this event if ever Mahmoud disappeared. However, the receptionist is distracted and Mahmoud realizes, despondently, that it is unlikely that the receptionist will remember this event.

Mahmoud's fear of disappearing reveals how common it is for people to suddenly vanish in the current Iraqi political context. Authorities, in this sense, are not seen as protective forces, but as a repressive entity that harms people in seemingly arbitrary ways. Saidi's absence from this scene reveals the editor's unawareness of his role in these events, he is the one who gave Brigadier Majid Mahmoud's contact information. This is a sign of Saidi's possible unreliability, as he seems uninterested in what might happen to his journalist.

The men then enter a truck with government license plates. This does not reassure Mahmoud, who knows that this is no guarantee against an abduction. After driving through the city, they reach the Tracking and Pursuit Department headquarters, and Mahmoud is taken into Brigadier Majid's office. There, he is served some weak tea. During the conversation, he soon realizes that Brigadier Majid's friendship with Saidi will not protect him. The Brigadier, Mahmoud analyzes, will serve whoever is in power: Saddam Hussein's Baathist government, the current American occupation forces, or the future Iraqi government.

Once again, Mahmoud's fears show that citizens do not feel protected by their government: rather, they see it as an oppressive force that can harm them for no valid reason. Mahmoud's reflections on the Brigadier's shifting loyalties underlines the role of sheer power and authority in guiding the country: despite their elevated position, people like Brigadier Majid only care about securing their own professional advancement, not about stable moral or ideological principles.

Mahmoud realizes that Brigadier Majid wants to scare him into revealing information, as though he were a criminal. Indeed, the Brigadier tells Mahmoud that this tea is a special concoction made with different animals' tongues. It is meant to "loosen" tongues, so that people reveal their secrets. The Brigadier notes that he has also drunk it, in order to honor their friendship. Mahmoud does not understand how he should interpret Brigadier Majid's alternatingly threatening and friendly attitudes.

The Brigadier's mention of "friendship" mirrors Hadi's own supposed "friendship" with the Whatsitsname. Both relationships signal that these are not true friendships but, rather, temporary alliances based on an imbalance of power. In this case, the Brigadier only mentions friendship in order to manipulate Mahmoud into trusting him, not because he feels a sincere desire to protect the journalist.

In line with his decision to drink the weak tea, Brigadier Majid offers some secret information to Mahmoud. He tells the journalist that he knows about the complaint that an important man in Amara lodged against Mahmoud one year ago. Mahmoud is shocked to hear this but realizes that the Brigadier does not know any more about this event. Mahmoud recalls being accused of inciting murder because of a story he had written for a local newspaper in Amara. This had not led to any legal proceeding against the journalist.

Brigadier Majid's secret mirrors another exchange of secrets that took place earlier in the book: the secret that Mahmoud shared with Hadi after hearing his story about the Whatsitsname. This signals that stories have true value—in this case, political and judiciary worth—and can be exchanged against other objects of value: more stories. In this case, the information the Brigadier shares serves as a kind of blackmail, meant to pretend that he already knows Mahmoud's secrets.

Brigadier Majid then tells Mahmoud that the real problem he wishes to address is the current issue of *al-Haqiqa*. He interrogates Mahmoud about the story of the Whatsitsname. Mahmoud explains that it is nothing but a fictional tale. The Brigadier, however, does not want to reveal that he has actually been pursuing this mysterious criminal for months. To satisfy the Brigadier's requests for information, Mahmoud tells him that he can find Hadi at the "Jewish ruin" in Bataween. In order to secure the Brigadier's trust, he hands him his **digital recorder**, which contains the entire story of the Whatsitsname.

The casualness with which Mahmoud shares Hadi's private information mirrors Saidi's own decision to share Mahmoud's address with Brigadier Majid. In Mahmoud's case, this gesture violates common understandings of journalistic ethics, which require journalists to protect their witnesses. This betrayal thus signals Mahmoud's lack of concern about the possible dangers to which he is exposing the junk dealer.

Satisfied with this outcome, the Brigadier asks an assistant to make a copy of the files on the **recorder** and chats amiably with Mahmoud. The journalist, however, no longer pays much attention to the Brigadier's words. He is not troubled by his own decision to reveal Hadi's location. Rather, he reflects to himself that the Brigadier is evil and cannot be trusted.

Although Mahmoud is worried about the Brigadier's unreliability, he does not realize that his own actions concerning Hadi also define him in a negative way: he is more focused on saving himself—specifically, on escaping the Brigadier's interrogation—than in protecting a vulnerable witness.

Then, the Brigadier gets up to dismiss Mahmoud, making jokes in order to restore a friendly atmosphere. He tells Mahmoud that the weak tea was not actually a "tongue loosener": it contains a special ingredient meant to prevent heart attacks, which sometimes occur when people are interrogated. This protects the department from the accusation of killing suspects. Although the two men laugh, Mahmoud understands that the Brigadier has just admitted to treating him as a suspect. Suspicious of the man's intentions, he concludes that this comment about preventing heart attacks must also be a joke.

The ambiguity concerning the actual ingredients in the weak tea Mahmoud was served reflects a greater ambiguity: the difficulty of determining Brigadier Majid's true intentions. It is possible that the tea contains nothing but tea: in this case, the Brigadier's descriptions of the tea simply serve to manipulate Mahmoud's emotions. The mention of suspects who have heart attacks during interrogations serves as a veiled threat, suggesting that Mahmoud was lucky not to be subjected to harsh treatment.

After this event, Mahmoud reflects on the episode in Amara that Brigadier Majid mentioned. When Mahmoud was living in his hometown of Amara, the police arrested leader of a criminal gang. Mirroring the people's enthusiasm, Mahmoud wrote an article celebrating this arrest. He theorized about three types of justice: "legal justice, divine justice, and street justice," which, he believed, caught up with criminals sooner or later. This article demonstrated Mahmoud's commitment to courageous journalism, meant to serve the common good. However, to Mahmoud's profound shock, the criminal was released a few days later.

The population's vulnerability to criminal activity is, as this anecdote suggests, partially the fault of the legal system: the law failed to punish a well-known criminal adequately. This makes Mahmoud's job as a journalist particularly dangerous, as he risks provoking the anger of the criminal in question. In this sense, Mahmoud's commitment to his profession can be seen as a noble task, participating in democracy and the defense of elevated values, such as justice.

A couple of days after that, two masked men killed the criminal outside of his house. Surprisingly, this new event confirmed Mahmoud's theory concerning one type of justice: street justice. In the meantime, Mahmoud learned that a tall man nicknamed the Mantis, the brother of this murdered criminal, was accusing him of inciting violence against his brother. Mahmoud's theory concerning the three types of justice, the Mantis argued, implicitly justified his brother's murder. Given the threats against him, Mahmoud promised that he would stop working as a journalist in the area. However, the Mantis accused Mahmoud of being a Baathist and threatened him personally. This ultimately forced Mahmoud to leave the province.

The need for Mahmoud to leave Amara due to a criminal's threats signals the inadequacy of the justice system, which fails to protect journalists. This underlines the difficult reality that so many Iraqis face in this period of political instability: the absence of an effective rule of law, which leads criminal groups to rule a given territory. This episode also highlights the dangers of journalism in such a context, where writing an article can be perceived as a threat to those currently in power and, therefore, can have violent consequences.

Mahmoud does not like to recall these events, because they remind him that he has acted foolishly in the past. Reflecting on this episode in his life, he calls his brother Abdullah, with whom he chats from time to time. Abdullah reveals to Mahmoud that the Mantis has become an important local politician. Mahmoud is shocked to hear that the Mantis has not forgotten about his brother's death: in fact, he wants to build a statue in his honor. Abdullah tells his brother to stay in Baghdad, for his own safety. He adds that the Mantis has now appropriated the journalist's concept of the three types of justice, and frequently mentions this theory in his speeches.

Mahmoud's regret at writing this article signals that, although he once wrote in defense of noble ideals, he is no longer sure whether such ideals warrant self-sacrifice: he might no longer want to put himself in danger in order to defend the truth. In turn, the Mantis's use of Mahmoud's concept of justice shows that ideas can be instrumentalized and used to support one's own interests: although Mahmoud meant to denounce criminal activity, powerful people such as the Mantis can use it as a form of threat, meant to intimidate possible rivals.

Later in the day, when Mahmoud recounts his meeting with Brigadier Majid to Saidi, the editor laughs it off. He finds the story about the weak tea particularly hilarious. More seriously, then, Saidi later tells Mahmoud that they must all learn to interact with people like Brigadier Majid. He provides new, shocking information: he claims that the Brigadier is part of an assassination squad organized by the American Coalition Provisional Authority. The Brigadier's goal, according to Saidi, is to follow the Americans' strategy of creating an "equilibrium of violence" between the Sunni and Shiite factions. Violent tensions in the streets help Americans maintain enough military and political clout to take part in negotiating Iraq's political future.

In the same way that Mahmoud no longer knows whether to trust Brigadier Majid, it becomes unclear whether Mahmoud should also trust Saidi. After all, Saidi was responsible for giving the journalist's information to the Brigadier, and who seems unfazed by Mahmoud's fear. Saidi's argument concerning this "equilibrium of violence" suggests that no authorities or armed groups actually care about the well-being of the population: what they are focused on is maintaining a certain level of power and authority, regardless of the violent consequences this may have.

Mahmoud is shocked to think of Brigadier Majid as a criminal, but Saidi says that staying close to evil is the best way to be protected from it. Collaborating with the Brigadier, Saidi notes, allows him to pursue his political objectives and keeps the Brigadier from following some American order to kill the editor. Although worried about his boss's confession, Mahmoud nevertheless realizes that he does not fully believe Saidi. This story, Mahmoud believes, could be meant to challenge or scare him, following secret intentions that only Saidi knows. An elegant woman then enters Saidi's office, interrupting this conversation. She kisses Saidi on both cheeks and the two of them leave the office together.

Mahmoud's suspicions about his boss's true intentions shows that he is becoming aware of the power of personal stories. Saidi might be manipulating the truth—telling a possibly fanciful version of the story—in order to have a certain impact on Mahmoud and thus manipulate his employee's reactions. At the same time, Saidi's mention of the importance of staying close to evil could justify Mahmoud's own actions: however unreliable Saidi might be, he is an invaluable resource in the political and journalistic world, capable of shaping Mahmoud's career in positive ways.

The next week, Saidi goes to Beirut for a conference, and Mahmoud supposes he is with one of his lovers. Despite being overwhelmed with work and suspicious of the true nature of the relationship between Saidi and Brigadier Majid, Mahmoud still admires his boss immensely. In fact, the young journalist has begun to physically resemble his editor. He now pays much attention to his appearance. Although he used to make fun of men in suits, which he associated with civil servants or militiamen who abduct people in the street, he now wears suits himself.

Mahmoud realizes that Saidi probably has relationships with other women besides Nawal—which consequently raises questions about the nature of the relationship between Saidi and Nawal. Mahmoud's transformation into a suit-wearing journalist symbolizes his social and professional ascent. Although this is a positive development in Mahmoud's life, it also signals his closeness to potentially harmful circles of power: other suit-wearing people who can take part in criminal deeds.

One day, Mahmoud sees the number 666 appear on Saidi's phone. When Mahmoud answers the phone, Nawal al-Wazir tells him that she knows who he is, and that his boss is currently in Beirut.

Nawal's knowledge about the fact that Mahmoud is answering his editor's phone suggests that she might be aware of Mahmoud's feelings toward her. It is unclear what she intends to do with this information.

CHAPTER 12: IN LANE 7

In the meantime, in Bataween, Abu Anmar realizes that his hotel is experiencing severe financial difficulties and that he must find a solution to this situation. He now only has two permanent guests. This situation has forced him to sell his furniture to Hadi, a man he despises, in order to survive.

Abu Anmar's economic problems suggest that years of success in a booming city—Baghdad a few decades ago—does not guarantee a safe future. Instead, one's personal and professional course follow the whims of external circumstances, such as political fluctuations.

Meanwhile, since the Whatsitsname has not visited Hadi in a while, the junk dealer has returned to his usual cheer. Although people laugh at Hadi's stories in Aziz's coffee shop, the junk dealer also knows that they can become distorted. Weeks ago, someone showed him the cover of *al-Haqiqa* with **Frankenstein**'s face on the cover. Hadi was angry about the way in which Mahmoud recounted the events, some of which were fabricated.

Hadi's frustration with Mahmoud's narrative is partially justified, but also reflects Saidi's manipulation of Mahmoud's story. In this sense, stories go through layers of interpretation and marketing before reaching the public, in order to seem as appealing as possible. In the case of a story based on true events, however, this can cause a sense of personal harm, as Hadi's frustration reflects.

A couple of days after the publication of that issue of *al-Haqiqa*, the Whatsitsname came to Hadi's house. Annoyed to be described as a fictional creature, he noted that he was now exacting justice on the people who insulted him, not only one those responsible for physical violence. He said that Hadi could warn Mahmoud about this, so that the young journalist would not insult him again. Hadi has not seen the Whatsitsname since then.

The Whatsitsname's decision to seek revenge on those who insult him confirms that he is no longer exclusively concerned with broad notions of justice: he is now more focused on protecting himself and in tending to his reputation. This reaction highlights the danger of journalistic writing, which can offend those currently in power.

One day, Faraj the realtor calls Abu Anmar into his office. Earlier that morning, Faraj slapped a man who visited Elishva on behalf of the Association for the Protection of Historical Houses, in order to punish him for trying to buy the house. When Abu Anmar enters Faraj's office, he is impressed by the grandeur of the space. Adopting a confidential tone, Faraj asks him about the deteriorating state of his hotel. Although Abu Anmar says that he has plans to renovate it, Faraj—aware of the hotel owner's financial difficulties—offers him to become his business partner: Faraj would pay for the renovation of the hotel and the two of them would then share profits. He asks Abu Anmar what he thinks about this.

Faraj's behavior toward Abu Anmar does not stem from empathy or generosity. Rather, Faraj seeks to take advantage of his neighbor's problems in order to expand his business, as he has done throughout the city. His behavior with the employee who visited Elishva's house confirms this: Faraj is more interested in defending and expanding his territory than in securing the well-being of his neighbors. At the same time, the deal he proposes Abu Anmar is fair, and reveals that neighborly affinities can benefit everyone: Abu Anmar will escape bankruptcy, while Faraj will expand his commercial enterprise.

Later that day, officers sent by Brigadier Majid raid Hadi's house. One officer—whom the Whatsitsname once tried to strangle, leaving him with a bandaged neck—attempts to determine whether Hadi could be his aggressor, even though Hadi looks too weak and thin. The officers accuse Hadi of undercutting the Americans' work and collaborating with terrorists. However, Hadi points to his belongings to prove that he is nothing but a junk dealer. Although the officers note the heterogeneous accumulation of smelly, dirty objects in Hadi's house, they continue to interrogate him about crimes that have occurred in Baghdad.

This event confirms that Mahmoud's decision to share Hadi's information with Brigadier Majid can bring the junk dealer serious problems. Paradoxically, in the same way Mahmoud feared being interrogated by Brigadier Majid's department, he exposes another person to the same ordeal. Although Hadi is not entirely innocent—he is initially responsible for creating the Whatsitsname—he has never actually taken part in violent deeds, and does not trust the authorities enough to share secret information with them.

Looking around the room, one of the officers notices a statue of the Virgin Mary and threateningly asks Hadi if he is Christian, to which the junk dealer replies that he is Muslim, and that the statue was covered by the Throne Verse on the wall. When the officers interrogate Hadi about the Whatsitsname, the junk dealer mocks them for believing a made-up story. Angered by Hadi's mocking attitude, the officers start hitting him. This does not surprise Hadi, who has heard that many interrogations in Iraqi police stations end this way. The officers punch Hadi in the stomach for two minutes, causing him to throw up his food.

The officers' aggressive behavior toward Hadi takes the form of religious intolerance, as being a Christian could be held against Hadi. This behavior underlines the degree of sectarian divisions in the city, where belonging to a certain religious group can mark one as an enemy. Hadi's lack of surprise at being treated so violently reveals the oppressive nature of the state, which does not even guarantee its citizens fair, respectful treatment.

An hour later, after beating the drunk dealer, one of the officers concludes that Hadi is nothing but an old madman and that taking him to the police station will solve nothing. With Hadi on the floor, unable to stand up, the officers return to searching the apartment. They steal the little money Hadi has saved from selling some of Abu Anmar's furniture, along with other pieces of furniture. The officers call the statue of the Virgin Mary *haram*, forbidden by Islamic law, and one of them attacks it with the butt of his pistol. However, he only succeeds in destroying the statue's head and finds the newly headless statue scary.

The officers' realization that Hadi cannot provide them with useful information does not lead them to treat him with greater respect. Rather, they behave in a criminal way, thus inverting the expected dynamics between suspects and the police: the state paradoxically proves more criminal than the people it claims to interrogate. The officer's fear at seeing the headless Virgin Mary suggests that destroying an object of devotion—even from another religion—might be unjust and reprehensible.

The officers then subject Hadi to an experiment, which they used against 11 ugly men whom they arrested earlier. They cut into various sections of Hadi's body with a knife, in order to check that the man does indeed release blood. One of the officers is disgusted by this scene. He does not understand why they are stabbing someone from which they simply wanted to extract information. Writhing on the floor in pain, Hadi trusts that, as in American movies, a superhero will soon arrive to save him from his enemies. However, the officers simply leave Hadi's house, taking the stolen belongings with them.

The officers' behavior toward Hadi proves gratuitously cruel: they seem to enjoy harming this defenseless, vulnerable man, instead of limiting their actions to what is strictly necessary in order to interrogate him. Hadi's reflection on American movies underlines the role that fiction can play in structuring reality: it can give people a sense of hope even in the direst of circumstances. At the same time, the absence of a superhero suggests that reality is more disappointing: people can behave in criminal ways and never be punished.

In the meantime, Abu Anmar reflects on Faraj's offer. Hazem Abboud encourages the hotel owner to accept Faraj's offer, so that he can renovate the hotel and find some economic stability. However, Abu Anmar—who recalls both his hometown and the powerful economic position he once had in this neighborhood before Faraj arrived—decides that he is ready to do something even more radical: he will sell Faraj the entire hotel.

Abu Anmar's decision to sell the entire hotel suggests that he does not feel rooted to this particular business or geographic area. What motivates him in life is the memory of his past success, which gives him a desire for independence and power beyond what a mere partnership with Faraj might offer.

CHAPTER 13: THE JEWISH RUIN

In her house, Elishva reflects on the day's events. After Faraj slapped the worker in front of her house, Umm Salim told the old lady that Faraj was capable of anything to put his hands on this house. She offered for Elishva to move in with her, suggesting they could rent out rooms in the old lady's house. This would bring Elishva some money and would give all of those who want to possess her house the impression that she is protected. However, Elishva is suspicious of Umm Salim's intentions. She wonders if, like Faraj, the woman simply wants to take control of her house. As Elishva concludes that she will never sell her house, she sees Daniel's ghost in the doorway.

Elishva's lack of trust in her neighbor Umm Salim's intentions reveals that the problems throughout the city have perverted people's relationships. In the midst of such stark divisions and instability, it is now difficult to believe in people's selfless generosity and solidarity. It becomes unclear whether doubting people's intentions leads to an unfair understanding of their character or, on the contrary, effectively allows one to defend oneself against external manipulation.

In the meantime, in Hadi's house, where the junk dealer is agonizing, powerful arms carry him from the floor to his bed. The anonymous helper tells Hadi that he will not die, but that he deserved this beating. Shortly after, Hadi is blinded by flashlights and believes his interrogators have returned. However, these are friendly faces: after Abu Salim saw officers leave Hadi's house with stolen objects, he called people in the neighborhood to help the drunk dealer. The men buy disinfectant and bandages to cover Hadi's wounds. They ask the man many questions, but Hadi turns aggressive, saying he cannot undergo two interrogations in a single day.

Although Hadi initially believed his trust in American movies' superheroes, he actually does benefit from the help of a mysterious superhero: the Whatsitsname. In addition, Hadi realizes that his neighbors are superheroes of sorts: good people willing to stand up for him and protect each other from external harm. Abu Salim's kind actions show that some people are still moved by noble intentions in this difficult context: the desire to help a neighbor in a context of unjust brutality.

After accepting medicine from Abu Salim, Hadi lies in bed, wondering if the officers will return. He also wonders who gave them information about his whereabouts. Overall, though, this terrifying event has a positive effect on him: it encourages him to work hard to change his life. He makes plans to modify his appearance, to shave and dress elegantly, and to rent a room in Faraj's houses. He wants to buy a shop to sell and repair objects and, later, to find a wife. He plans on doing all of this if he is able to wake up alive the next day.

Hadi's ordeal emphasizes the seriousness of Mahmoud's negligence with regard to his witness: by not protecting Hadi's privacy, he exposed the junk dealer to severe consequences, which could have gotten him killed. In this sense, Mahmoud appears in a more negative light: he's focused on profiting from the stories Hadi has told him, without realizing that he should reciprocate the junk dealer's trust by protecting him from harm.

Earlier, after entering Hadi's house and seeing the junk dealer's state, the Whatsitsname reflected that Hadi had been justly punished for his depraved life. He carried the wounded man onto his bed and quickly left the house when he heard Abu Salim and his helpers approach. Then, he climbed to Elishva's house. The old woman welcomed him with perfect calm. The Whatsitsname reflects that he now only has Hadi and Elishva left in the world. Although he considers taking revenge on the officers responsible for Hadi's beating, he realizes that Hadi would be accused of this crime, and that the best way for him to help the junk dealer is to stay away from him.

This is one of the few instances in which the Whatsitsname shows empathy for a human being. In the same way he had killed Abu Zaidoun to take revenge on someone who had harmed Elishva, he now considers punishing those who harmed Hadi. His realization that this would only cause the junk dealer more problems shows great lucidity on his part: he realizes that, however noble his intentions might be, his actions can indeed have unintended negative consequences.

Overall, the Whatsitsname feels confused. He no longer knows who he is supposed to kill, and why he is even doing it. He knows that his current body is made of the parts of both innocent and criminal people. Although he is aware that he will melt away if he does not kill people fast enough, he also considers that dying would liberate him from this dreadful existence. At the same time, he argues that it is his duty to use his special abilities as a killer in the name of justice. His goal, he concludes, should be to keep on surviving until he reaches a firm plan of action.

The Whatsitsname's moral dilemma shows greater awareness of the moral ambivalence of many of his actions, as well as their limited political effectiveness: he has not succeeded at all in curbing violence in Baghdad. However, instead of accepting self-sacrifice in order to defend a pure notion of justice, the Whatsitsname reverts to weakness and self-interest: he prioritizes his own survival over the defense of the common good—in which he has now lost faith.

The Whatsitsname shares all of these problems with Elishva, who does not seem to understand him. He tells the woman about running into some of the three madmen's followers a while ago, and realizing they were still equally devoted to him. For example, one night, a follower lamented that the Whatsitsname was rotting away. Therefore, he told the creature to kill him in order to take some of his fresh body parts. The Whatsitsname killed the man by slashing his wrists. This, he reflected, would prevent a brutal death, since violence could lead the devoted follower to fight back, following a basic survival instinct.

Despite his awareness of the moral ambivalence of many of his actions, the Whatsitsname still cannot renounce his authority and power: he accepts that people die for him, even though he is no longer convinced that he is truly acting in the name of justice. His strategic murder of this man—meant to provoke as little resistance as possible—reveals his long experience with brutal acts of this kind, through which he has succeeded in crushing other human beings.

Elishva, who does not seem to have understood the Whatsitsname's story, tells the ghost of her son, Daniel, to spend some time in her house resting. Later, when she looks at the **picture of Saint George**, she feels annoyed that the saint has not yet succeeded in killing the dragon, despite having his sword lifted for years. She realizes that, like the saint, she is in a state of limbo: not quite living, but not quite dead. When she asks the saint why he has not yet killed the dragon, he replies that everything will end one day, but that there is no need to hurry.

Elishva's annoyance with the picture of Saint George reveals a new understanding of the situation: instead of seeing the saint as a magical force truly capable of warding off evil, she now realizes that the saint, too, might be weaker than she thought. Her description also serves as a symbolic comment on the situation in her city and country: humans might eternally fight for justice and peace, without ever fully achieving it.

Hadi wakes up the next day on his bed and hears the explosion of a car bomb some miles away. Aziz the Egyptian then enters the house, accompanied by two neighbors. Aziz expresses his relief at knowing that Hadi is doing well. After a while, he tells Hadi to examine his house to see if anything is missing. Hadi is soon appalled to discover that the interrogators have stolen some of his belongings. When Aziz sees the destroyed statue of the Virgin Mary, he asks, indignantly, why anyone would behave in such a brutal way and attack the mother of Jesus.

The car bomb that explodes near Bataween once again highlights the frequency of these attacks. It suggests that, even though Hadi has escaped one violent event—the officers' interrogation—he remains at the mercy of unpredictable brutality. Aziz's indignation at seeing a religious symbol destroyed in this way suggests that he believes in the necessity of peaceful religious pluralism, respecting other creeds without attacking them.

In the meantime, Hadi is deeply distraught to think of all the money he has lost. However, he reacts in a positive manner: he asks his assistant to buy products necessary for the renovation of old furniture. After everyone has left, Hadi examines the statue of the Virgin. He removes the broken pieces and discovers that a large wooden plank, with the engraving of a large candelabra on it, surrounded by writing in Hebrew, is hidden in the hole. Hadi realizes that he can probably sell this, but decides to keep it hidden for the time being.

Hadi's decision to restore furniture suggests that he might actually be motivated to turn his life around and work his way out of his precarious circumstances. His discovery of the candelabra finally gives meaning to the term "the Jewish ruin" that designates his house. On a symbolic level, this discovery also signals that—just like Hadi's house—Iraq is comprised of a variety of religious beliefs. Violence is responsible for impeding peaceful coexistence, as each religious group fights for power and control.

On his way to Elishva's house, the deacon of Elishva's church, Nader Shamouni, comes across various roadblocks because of different car bombs that have exploded in the area. Nader considers turning back, but he realizes that he needs to complete his mission, since he will be leaving the city soon.

The roadblocks Nader comes across serve as yet another proof of how widespread violence in the city, as it affects not only specific targets but also ordinary citizens trying to get along with their lives and to stay away from violence.

Nader's decision to leave the city is recent. During the course of a couple of weeks, someone left a glue-like substance on the keyholes in his home, thus proving that they were capable of entering his house secretly. Given the widespread insecurity in the city, Nader received no help from the authorities concerning this issue. Nader's fears became even more acute after a congregation member's relative was kidnapped for a ransom. This last event convinced Nader to leave the city for a while. However, he did not realize that this could easily become a permanent decision.

The presence of a glue-like substance seemingly indicates the Whatsitsname's involvement, given that the creature often has fetid liquids oozing out of his body. Either way, Nader's decision to leave mirrors many other people's resolutions: living in Baghdad now involves putting one's own life and one's family's life in danger. In these circumstances, not even people's homes are safe: they are encouraged to move away to make a new home for themselves.

Nader finally reaches Elishva's house. The old lady hasn't been to church in a month, and Nader tells her that her daughter Matilda is planning to come to Iraq to take her to Melbourne with her. Elishva argues that she will never leave her house, but Nader evokes the terror and violence that is taking over the city, encouraging the old lady to consider this option. Elishva replies with a biblical quote indicating that she is not worried about physical harm, because she knows that her soul cannot be killed.

Given the fact that Matilda and Hilda have spent years warning Elishva that they will come to Iraq to take her away, it is unclear whether they will actually do so. Despite Elishva's tendency to retreat into her own memories and delusions, she proves lucid in debating with Nader. She does not deny the danger around her, but, rather, decides to value other aspects of life: her spiritual well-being, which being in this house—filled with memories of her son—preserves.

Nader encourages Elishva to come to church next Sunday. He offers to pick her up and she agrees to go with him. However, he will later be so busy with his move that he will forget about Elishva. Both Elishva and Nader believe that they will never see each other again, although they are later proven wrong.

The novel creates suspense by mysteriously anticipating future events. In this way, it also suggests that people's interpretation of their own reality, especially regarding the future, is often wrong: life can provide unexpected twists and turns, capable of bringing people together despite apparent obstacles.

CHAPTER 14: TRACKING AND PURSUIT

In his office, Brigadier Majid watches Farid Shawwaf discuss a man called "Criminal X," whom the Brigadier knows as "the One Who Has No Name." The Brigadier realizes that if he catches this criminal, which so many TV stations are talking about, he will become famous himself.

Once again, Brigadier Majid's concern for public security cannot be easily separated from his desire for personal advancement: he is pursuing the Whatsitsname in part because he hopes that it will bring him personal gain.

Brigadier Majid reflects on his past and current activities. He is frustrated by the fact that many authorities ignore his advice concerning security dangers, but that, at the same time, important politicians call him in the middle in the night asking him to interpret their dreams. In the past, politicians would also visit him, worried by the same question: finding out the time and circumstances of their death. Although Brigadier Majid could have used these intimate relationships with politicians to ask for a promotion, he preferred to focus on actually catching criminals.

Politicians' concern for their own safety highlights the dangerously unstable circumstances in the country, in which being a politician can lead one to be killed. In this sense, the violence in Baghdad encourages selfishness: it drives political leaders to think primarily of themselves, before reflecting on the common good. Brigadier Majid's focus on catching criminals suggests that not all of his actions are aimed at personal advancement: he also values working for the common good.

While watching the television, Brigadier Majid then reflects on a terrifying thought: the possibility that the mysterious criminal could find his team before they do and kill everyone in the Tracking and Pursuit Department.

Brigadier Majid's reflection on his own vulnerability suggests that he does not believe that justice will necessarily triumph in the end: he knows that both his team and the criminal—along with so many other armed groups in the country—are simply fighting for power, and that it is possible for anyone to win, regardless of their moral worth.

In his own room, the senior astrologer reflects on this same danger. He examines his playing cards. This allows him to get a sense of the Whatsitsname's whereabouts. However, the creature is so fast that he never stays in the same place long enough to be caught. The junior astrologer, who is watching his superior's actions, asks what the purpose of their work is, since they know they cannot stop the criminal. The senior astrologer replies that accumulating information gives them the power, with God's help, to change fate. However, the junior astrologer has heard this answer before and finds it unconvincing.

The astrologers' actions and debate raise important questions concerning the limits of human actions: namely, to what extent are people able to modify the course of fate? This question identifies a tension between a notion of life as pre-ordained, determined by a superior power (such as God), and life as the product of human actions. Given the impossibility of anticipating all the possible consequences of one's actions, it is difficult to tell whether human beings are actually free to act or whether their actions will ultimately lead them to a predetermined fate.

When the senior astrologer leaves the room, the junior astrologer sits at the table with some magical sand. He wants to see into the One Who Has No Name's soul. The senior astrologer, by contrast, is focused on identifying the man's face. That night, the junior astrologer succeeds in connecting with Whatsitsname's spirit and making him stop in his tracks. Although no one is there to witness this feat, the junior astrologer realizes that his talents now surpass those of his superior.

The junior astrologer's ability to connect with the Whatsitsname's mind adds an unexpected twist to the story: it suggests that some of the Whatsitsname's actions might actually be the product of external manipulation. More broadly, it hints at the difficulty of interpreting the Whatsitsname's—or any person's—true motives: even the person in question might ignore what drew them to behave in a certain way.

In a street in Baghdad, the Whatsitsname stops in his tracks, suddenly confused about where he is going. He has a long list of people to murder. He does not know if the list will keep on growing indefinitely or if the list will one day be completely blank. This would indicate that the innocent and the criminal elements in the city are so intricately linked that they can no longer be separated. As he reviews these thoughts, the Whatsitsname recalls the Magician's comment about the fact that no one is ever completely innocent and criminal. He realizes that he might now be made of more criminal parts than innocent ones. A car drives toward him but, after seeing a suspicious scene ahead, turns back onto the side street.

The extension of the Whatsitsname's list confirms that violence only breeds more violence. As conflict spreads throughout the city, more people become involved in brutality, either as victims or as perpetrators. The Whatsitsname's body reflects this: he is now an example of the transformation of innocence into criminality. Although a seemingly trivial detail, this car—which turns away from the Whatsitsname at the last moment—will play an important role in the story's future developments.

The next morning, the senior astrologer gives Brigadier a document in which he predicts that a car bomb will explode that morning in front of the Ministry of Finance. The Brigadier gives a brief phone call to relay this information. Although he used to feel frustrated that the authorities did not treat these predictions seriously enough, he now realizes that there are also some incidents his team does not succeed in predicting.

Brigadier Majid admits not only that his team has limitations, but also that violence is, to a certain extent, impossible to predict: neither the government nor the Department of Tracking and Pursuit is capable of gathering enough information to anticipate every single violent event. In this sense, authorities might be somewhat negligent or incompetent, but they might also be faced with an inherently intractable situation, beyond their control.

CHAPTER 15: A LOST SOUL

In his hotel room, Mahmoud wakes up feeling despondent after dreaming of holding the hand of a woman he loves. At noon, he calls for a prostitute to come to his room. When Zeina arrives in the evening, he tells her that her name is in fact Nawal al-Wazir. The woman laughs at this comment, but Mahmoud keeps on calling her Nawal. With intense passion, he embraces and kisses her before taking her to his bed. Then, while they are having sex, he tells her to "shut up" and brutally presses his hand against her mouth. Afterwards, the woman angrily goes to the balcony to smoke. When Mahmoud calls her, she replies, furious, that her name is Zeina, not Nawal.

Mahmoud's obsession with Nawal provides him with a kind of fanciful escape: he prefers to pretend that Nawal is with him rather than accept his solitary reality. This episode brings to light Mahmoud's self-absorbed, domineering side: he behaves brutally with a prostitute in order to indulge in a fantasy world of his own making. He does not seem interested in treating Zeina in a respectful way, treating her instead like an object meant to abide by his every desire.

Mahmoud reflects on other issues. He recalls going to Aziz's coffee shop earlier to look for Hadi. There, Aziz told the journalist to leave the junk dealer alone, in an unusually solemn voice. He told Mahmoud that the Whatsitsname was none other than Hadi's former friend Nahem Abdaki. After Nahem's death, Hadi went to collect his friend's body. However, all the victims' body parts—caused by that day's explosion—were mixed up. As a result, a worker told Hadi to gather any pieces he could find to reconstitute a body. This, Aziz explained, changed Hadi forever. Mahmoud objected to Aziz's theory by evoking the Whatsitsname's **recording**, but Aziz simply said that Hadi must have asked a friend to do so.

Right after an episode in which Mahmoud treats another human being aggressively, the reader is reminded of another one of Mahmoud's misdeeds, which had serious consequences on another person: Hadi's savage beating by the authorities. Aziz's recounting of Hadi's experience salvaging parts of Nahem Abdaki's body might be accurate. However, it is likely that Aziz is combining this story with that of the Whatsitsname as a protective measure: he wants to keep Mahmoud away from Hadi, so that the journalist might not cause the junk dealer more harm than he already has.

Although Mahmoud believed Aziz, he also thought that the stories on his **recorder** were too complex to have been invented by someone like Hadi. To solve these contradictions, Mahmoud considered knocking on Hadi's door, but he realized that Hadi might in fact be more intelligent than he previously thought. Not wanting to become involved in another complicated story, Mahmoud decides to leave him alone.

Aziz's story is effective at making Mahmoud doubt the fabric of reality: he no longer knows who to trust. In this way, Aziz demonstrates his love for his friend: he wants to keep him from harm, even if this involves telling lies. The proliferation of contradictory stories keeps the truth from coming to light but, in so doing, actually protects those who might be most affected by its disclosing.

A few days later, after Saidi has been gone for multiple days, a group of official-looking men enter the *al-Haqiqa* offices and ask Mahmoud about Saidi's location, family, and economic activities. They leave the office angry at not obtaining the information they wanted. Nervous about this event, Mahmoud calls his boss multiple times. When Saidi finally answers, he tells the journalist to give true information to no one. In these chaotic circumstances, Nawal al-Wazir calls Saidi's phone. Mahmoud picks up but hears no voice on the other side.

In the same way that Mahmoud concludes he cannot know Hadi's true nature, he also discovers that his editor might be involved in suspicious activities. Although Saidi reassures Mahmoud, he also fails to give him an explanation about what is going on. In this sense, Saidi reveals that his friendship and loyalty to Mahmoud is limited: he gives the journalist enough information to know how to behave, but not enough to forge a relationship of trust.

Two days later, Nawal al-Wazir comes to the office. She tells Mahmoud that Saidi has tricked him into believing that he is at a conference in Beirut. For her, Saidi is a serial liar. After mentioning that all they did together was collaborate on a movie plot, Nawal opens one of Saidi's drawers with a special key and places all of its contents in a plastic bag. She reassures Mahmoud by telling him that Saidi gave her a key to recuperate her possessions, documents concerning her movie.

Given that Mahmoud knows so little about Nawal, it is unclear whether she is trying to taint Saidi's image by accusing him of being a liar, or whether what she says is actually true. Her mention of her relationship with Saidi is meant to quell rumors about their possible affair. However, Nawal's actions are impossible to interpret in a perfectly cogent way, given that so little is known about her motives.

Nawal tells Mahmoud that she is taking her documents because "everything's over" and that Mahmoud should be careful. Mahmoud does not understand what she is referring to. Finally, on her behest, he accompanies her to a more private place to discuss this mysterious matter further. On their way, they run into Sultan, Saidi's driver, who gives Mahmoud a disapproving look.

Nawal behaves very much like Saidi: her comment that "everything's over" fails to give enough details for Mahmoud to understand her. Instead, it cultivate suspense, drawing Mahmoud in and making him curious to discover more. These techniques recall Saidi's own manipulative modes of expression.

At a fancy hotel cafeteria, Nawal tells Mahmoud that Saidi is evil. She met him through mutual acquaintances, and he offered to finance her first movie, which they worked on together. Saidi wanted to make a movie about the criminal elements inherent in everyone. Through these evil impulses, Saidi believed, humans have contributed to the creation of a monster that is now destroying them. Nawal mentions that she always rejected Saidi's advances. Ultimately, when their movie project stalled, she decided to come pick up her belongings.

Although Saidi is describing a metaphorical "monster," his comments can be understood in the context of this novel as a reference to the Whatsitsname: a concrete "monster" that aims to destroy human life. Humans are, indeed, responsible for the creation of the Whatsitsname, since he would not exist without the body parts of victims of terrorist attacks—without, that is, the results of human hatred and brutality.

Nawal praises Mahmoud for his writing. Mahmoud, in the meantime, is obsessed with the idea of having sex with Nawal. This, he argues, will allow him to possess Nawal as Saidi once did—or, if what Nawal said was true, to surpass his boss. Mahmoud accepts to finish her screenplay—"just for you," he says—and then holds her hand. Initially, Nawal does not react, although she asks the journalist to focus his attention on the screenplay. After Mahmoud leaves his hand on hers, she finally removes her hand and asks him why he is behaving in this way, after all she has told him about Saidi.

Mahmoud's behavior toward Nawal suggests that he does not take her words at face-value: he does not believe that she is truly uninterested in his advances. At the same time, Mahmoud's behavior toward her reflects a kind of competition with his superior: if Mahmoud cannot actually reach his boss's wealth and authority, he can at least compete with him in sentimental matters. To a certain extent, then, Nawal becomes a tool through which Mahmoud hopes to achieve greater power, a person on whom to assert his dominance.

Mahmoud is confused by Nawal's attitude. He does not understand why she wanted to discuss these issues in a private location. Overall, he finds that she sounds more like a businesswoman than a movie director. Confused by her secretive behavior, he concludes that she must be looking to turn him into a lover.

Mahmoud's conclusions concerning Nawal likely reflect less the truth than Mahmoud's own desires: when faced with a situation he does not comprehend, he prefers to assume that Nawal feels the same way he does. Given the lack of information concerning Nawal's actual motives, it is impossible to determine whether this might be true or mere wishful thinking.

Hours later, Mahmoud gets drunk in a bar in order to forget about his meeting with Nawal. Earlier, as they were leaving the hotel, Mahmoud kissed Nawal in the elevator. Although she initially gave in to his embrace, she finally pushed him back when the elevator door opened. Before heading off, she angrily told him that she did not approve of his behavior and asked him to respect her. Mahmoud found her behavior confusing. He believed that she would have rejected him more aggressively if she hadn't actually wanted him to kiss her.

Mahmoud's understanding of romantic relationships is based not on notions of consent, but on submission to his own desire. He assumes that Nawal's delayed physical rejection—after a series of verbal warnings—reflects desire. But instead, it could reveal a variety of other emotional states, like shock, fear, or annoyance. Given the similarities between Saidi and Nawal's behavior, it is possible she is trying to manipulate Mahmoud, but it is equally possible she is simply angered by the fact that he does not take her words seriously.

Mahmoud leaves the bar and calls Sultan, Saidi's driver, to take him home. Sultan, who is also drunk, apologizes in advance for intruding in Mahmoud's life, but tells him that he must say something to him now because he is leaving the next day. He refers to seeing Mahmoud and Nawal together in the same car, as they were leaving the office. He tells Mahmoud that Nawal used to be Saidi's lover and even wanted to marry him. He considers Nawal responsible for the current accusations against Saidi, saying that she used her political connections against the editor.

Sultan's interpretation of the situation gives credence to Mahmoud's belief that Nawal might be manipulating him. Unlike other characters, Sultan does not have any interest in lying to Mahmoud, and his assessment might thus be more objective than others'. At the same time, this proliferation of stories and contradictory information sheds doubt on both Nawal and Saidi's characters, leaving much ambiguity regarding whom to believe.

Finally, Sultan reveals that Saidi has actually left Baghdad to avoid Nawal, whom Sultan calls a "whore." Sultan tells Mahmoud that Saidi is staying away from Baghdad while there is a legal case against him. The editor himself is currently in Amman, the capital of Jordan, waiting for Sultan to bring his mother and sisters there, because Saidi's mother is seriously ill. When Mahmoud reaches his hotel room, he calls Saidi's number in Beirut only to discover that the number is out of service.

Sultan's mention of a legal case against Saidi is new information for Mahmoud, who did not know of Saidi's possible problems with the law. At the same time, Sultan's insult against Nawal suggests that he might not be a neutral observer but, rather, one moved in part by loyalty to his boss and by prejudice. Mahmoud's inability to reach Saidi by phone once again demonstrates that Saidi does not give Mahmoud much information, leaving him clueless as to his true motivations.

CHAPTER 16: DANIEL

The next day, Sultan drives Saidi's mother and sisters to Amman, where Saidi is waiting for them. However, the car never makes it to its destination. Apparently, armed gangs are killing people on the road because of their religion. Although Saidi calls many times, he remains able to reach Sultan by telephone.

The tragic disappearance—and probable murder—of Saidi's family highlights the horrific circumstances in which these characters are living. Political power does not shield Saidi from the senseless sectarian conflict affecting the entire population.

The day before, Abu Anmar left Baghdad permanently, after 23 years of living there. He bought a new truck with the money he received from selling the Orouba Hotel to Faraj. On his way out, felt glad to leave a city that had become so chaotically violent.

After the mention of the tragedy afflicting Saidi's family, Abu Anmar's decision to leave Baghdad appears entirely understandable: chaos and horror have now reached new heights, affecting all aspects of people's lives, and one simple solution is to flee violence as best one can.

Faraj, in the meantime, is ecstatic about the hotel deal. He trusts that he will be able to bring the hotel to life again, because he is successful at taking advantage of difficult situations. Although Faraj has never killed anyone, some people consider him the leader of a criminal gang focused on appropriating the properties of people fleeing the violence in different parts of the city. As Faraj is watching workers remove all the furniture from Abu Anmar's hotel, a violent explosion—the largest one so far in Bataween—cuts these activities short.

Although Faraj is known to take advantage of the armed conflict in the city to expand his own business, on this occasion he becomes the victim of this violence. This episode demonstrates that, regardless of one's business savvy or one's capacity to turn catastrophes into positive events, the ability to survive ultimately depends largely on luck: for example, avoiding being hit by one of the many explosions taking place in the city every day.

One week earlier, Faraj had struck a deal with Elishva to buy her house. The old lady agreed to do so because Daniel had returned. Although the old woman's neighbors had spent the last months trying to see the man Elishva call her son, one day Daniel truly appeared on her doorstep. Followed by the deacon, Nader Shamouni, the 20-year-old boy walked timidly toward Elishva's door, unsure of his surroundings. People immediately wondered if the old lady had, in fact, been telling the truth all this time. So many people had returned from war in strange circumstances, they argued, that it was possible for Daniel Tadros Moshe to come home after so long.

Given Elishva's reluctance to leave her home in Baghdad, as well as her contempt for Faraj, her decision to sell her house is shocking. It reflects not only a possibly surreal event—the return of Elishva's lost son, Daniel—but also the unbearable heights that violence has reached in the city. Nader's reappearance in Elishva's life, despite the fact that neither character expected to see each other again, suggests that life is full of surprises and, more specifically, that humans are not very good at anticipating future events.

When Elishva opened her door, she recognized the same face and smile as those of the boy—her son Daniel—in the picture in her living room. She realized that **Saint George the Martyr**'s promise had finally come true. She noticed some neighbors looking in and wanted everyone to celebrate with her that a miracle had taken place. After Elishva hugged the boy with surprising strength, Nader confirmed to her that this was Daniel. Umm Salim touched Daniel to check that the boy was not a ghost.

This moment of joy and gratitude brings a sense of relief to the story: Elishva can finally access the alternative reality—the return of her son, Daniel—she has dreamed of for so long. This episode also blurs the distinction between fiction and reality, superstition and facts: given that it is impossible for Daniel to return from war as a 20-year-old boy, this person's presence is interpreted as a miracle by all those present.

Daniel greeted Elishva in Assyrian, and Elishva tenderly took him inside. When Nader entered the old lady's home, he told her that her daughters, Matilda and Hilda, were currently in Ankawa. He added that Daniel was Hilda's son—and, therefore, Elishva's grandson. The family's goal was to take the old lady to Melbourne. Matilda and Father Josiah had planned this event carefully. They had decided to use the resemblance between Elishva's son and grandson as an emotional mechanism, in order to convince the old lady to follow them to Melbourne.

Elishva's daughters' presence in Ankawa, an Assyrian suburb near the airport in northern Iraq, shows that they have indeed returned to take their mother to Melbourne, as they threatened to do many times on the phone. At the same time, their use of Elishva's grandson in this stratagem also shows that, instead of convincing Elishva that her son is dead, they have taken the old lady's belief seriously. Knowing how important it is for Elishva to see her son again, they decided to satisfy their mother's yearning, even if it means tricking her for a brief moment.

In line with this plan, Daniel told Elishva that she should sell her house and go live with him. The two of them talked for hours. Although Elishva knew that this boy was not her son, she was still moved by the physical contact with her grandson, which reminded her of the boy she lost. She resolved to protect their family bond at all costs and concluded that she would abide by his demands. As a celebration of this happy event, she brought Daniel in front of the **picture of Saint George**. However, the saint did not give any answer to the woman's heartfelt words of gratitude.

Elishva's ability to understand that this boy is not her son shows that she is more lucid—and more capable of facing the concrete details of reality—than many people give her credit for. Her decision to nurture this special relationship reveals her ability to adapt to changing circumstances: she accepts to give up her dream of seeing her son again in order to take care of something that exists in the present. This shift in mentality underlines the power of family bonds and the role of love in giving people such as Elishva a sense of community and stability.

Following Daniel's advice, Elishva accepted to sell her house. In these circumstances, she could only revert to Faraj. Faraj did not know what exactly had happened to Elishva's son, and why he had returned, but he was confused by the fact that the boy was 20 years too young for the story to make sense. When one of Faraj's children suggested that Daniel might have been kept in a freezer for 20 years, Faraj slapped him, surprising everyone.

Faraj's violent reaction toward his son underscores the realtor's tendency toward violence, a tendency that he also reveals in his business activities. At the same time, it could also signal a certain vulnerability on his part: he might actually be moved by the apparently miraculous return of Elishva's son. In this sense, his reaction to his son's imaginative—but completely unrealistic—answer could reflect the fact that, to Faraj, this is a serious issue, indicative of the deep effects on recent history on Iraqis' lives.

At the same time as Faraj examined Elishva's house, Hadi learned that the old lady wanted to sell him her furniture. Although he did not understand why Elishva was being so kind to him after hating him for so long, he decided that he would borrow money from his friends to buy all the furniture at once, because this was a priceless opportunity for him. Elishva asked that he remove the furniture only once she had left, so that she could preserve an intact memory of her home.

Elishva's commercial interactions with her neighbors suggests that proximity can foster economic exchange and feelings of solidarity. Elishva turns to Faraj and Hadi because they are close to her house. In so doing, she chooses what is most convenient for her but also contributes to the economic well-being of the neighborhood. Her desire to keep her memory of her home intact underscores the important role that memories play in her life, as they preserve a possibly idealized past.

The night before moving out, Elishva talked to **Saint George**, who did not respond to her. She concluded that the saint had fulfilled his promise and no longer had anything to say. Instead of carrying the heavy picture with her, Elishva removed the picture from its frame and cut the Saint's face in a circle, keeping it with her. When she observed the faceless picture left in the house, she now saw the image with emotional distance, realizing that it was no longer familiar to her.

Although Elishva is able to observe the picture of Saint George with some emotional distance, she also seeks to preserve an image of the saint—and, perhaps, of his power. It is unclear whether Elishva plans to keep it as a mere souvenir, or whether she believes the saint's face will be sufficient to bring about new miracles. Either way, she seems to have accepted the end of this relationship, perhaps coming to terms with the fact that meeting her grandson Daniel is the closest she will ever get to seeing her son again.

The next day, Umm Salim and other neighbors wept in a performative manner to honor Elishva's move. On her way out, Elishva called Nabu, but the cat ran away, looking her with what Elishva understood as a defiant look, confirming that the cat was intent on staying even if its owner cowardly left. Umm Salim made a prediction that Elishva's departure would bring bad luck to the neighborhood. In the meantime, Hadi spent the entire day removing the old lady's furniture and selling half of it to locals, thus earning a good amount of money.

Elishva's interpretation of the cat's look could reveal a sense of guilt on her part: she knows that she is leaving a dangerous city for relatively selfish reasons: to protect her life and spend time with her family. The cat's reaction mirrors Father Josiah's belief: that people should stay in Baghdad for the well-being of their community. At the same time, Elishva does indirectly contribute to this goal by providing Hadi with a lucrative business activity.

At the end of the day, a creature jumped onto Elishva's roof and walked around the empty apartment. The creature was sad because Elishva had played a crucial part in giving him his identity as her son, Daniel. The Whatsitsname reflected that he, in turn, had played a role in preserving Elishva's son's memory. As a result, her departure made him doubt the purpose of his existence. Ultimately, the creature called Nabu, sat down, and stayed sitting with the cat the entire night.

Despite the Whatsitsname's cruel deeds, this episode highlights his humanity: namely, his attachment to social bonds of affection and belonging. His sadness at seeing the old lady leave highlights the creature's isolation, suggesting that he suffers from not being part of a community. This suggests that, despite the Whatsitsname's apparent callousness, he might actually have more feelings than he usually expresses.

CHAPTER 17: THE EXPLOSION

Early the next morning, the senior astrologer woke Brigadier Majid to tell him that the creature was currently sleeping in a house in Bataween. Excited about finally arresting this mysterious criminal, the two men drove up to Bataween together but ran into a roadblock, because the police and military were surrounding the car of a suspected car bomber parked next to Elishva's house. Abu Salim was watching the scene and Faraj the realtor was observing his new hotel when the bomb exploded.

This explosion in Bataween mirrors the explosion in Tayaran Square at the beginning of the novel. However, the difference is that, at this stage in the story, the effects of this bombing are now personal. Acquainted with the characters affected by the blast, the reader understands that the victims of these attacks are not anonymous crowds but, rather, full individuals with complex lives.

The explosion seriously damaged the entire neighborhood: Elishva and Hadi's houses were completely destroyed, and Hadi, who had been sleeping in his bed while his house caught fire, narrowly escaped being burned alive. Faraj was wounded in the face. Although Umm Salim's house was severely damaged, her entire family survived, including Abu Salim, who fell from his balcony.

The different effects of the explosion on these characters' bodies and homes suggest, once again, that survival is primarily a matter of luck. Indeed, it is impossible to predict how serious the consequences of a terrorist attack will be on each person present. No matter of authority can keep one safe from such unpredictable disasters.

Abu Salim spent the next days in the hospital telling everyone about all the scenes he had witnessed from his balcony over the decades. A week later, a visitor with a **digital recorder** came to visit him, telling him that he was "the writer." The man wanted to hear Abu Salim's stories.

The introduction of a new character, "the writer," refers back to the introductory chapter of the novel, which recounted the arrest of a mysterious author. The man's objectives remain unexplained, although his possession of a digital recorder is reminiscent of Mahmoud's journalistic investigations.

When the Brigadier and the senior astrologer reached Bataween, the senior astrologer drew his cards and examined them. This allowed him to realize that the One Who Has No Name was no longer in the house where they planned on arresting him. The senior astrologer also told Brigadier Majid that their team was responsible for this car bomb. The junior astrologer, he explained, moved the car bomber to this neighborhood in order to kill the mysterious criminal as he slept. As the senior astrologer insisted that they return to the office to solve this problem, the car bomb went off.

This episode suggests that the activities the astrologers take part in do not only seek to predict future events: they also orchestrate them. The junior astrologer's efforts to kill the Whatsitsname might have been well intentioned, but they could not take into account unpredictable events, such as the fact that the Whatsitsname has left the house where he was previously sleeping. In this sense, the failure of the junior astrologer's actions highlights the impossibility to accurate anticipate every detail of the future. At the same time, it also puts the astrologers' actions in the same category as those of the criminal they are trying to catch: adding unnecessary fear and violence to a conflict-ridden city.

Emerging unharmed, Brigadier Majid and the senior astrologer hurried back to their office. When the Brigadier realized that the junior astrologer was indeed responsible for moving the car bomber—who had planned to attack another area—to Bataween, he decided to close down this section of the department in order to avoid future problems. Two weeks later, a special Committee interrogates Brigadier Majid about the department's activities. He realizes that, instead of receiving a promotion, his job is now seriously at risk.

The junior astrologer did not create a suicide bomber out of the blue, but simply moved the attack from one neighborhood to another. However, his involvement in this violent event reflects an extreme attitude: the willingness to put innocent people's lives in danger to kill a single criminal. Brigadier Majid's decision to shut down the department shows that he understands the gravity of the situation, and is not willing to take part in such criminal activities.

After hearing of the explosion in Bataween, Mahmoud calls his friend Hazem Abboud, who tells him that both he and Abu Anmar are safe: the hotel owner has returned to his hometown, whereas Hazem is currently away from the city, taking pictures of the war for an American news organization. Mahmoud is relieved to learn that no one he knows has been killed.

Hazem's collaboration with an American journalistic outlet is paradoxical: although the U.S. is occupying Iraq—and thus actively contributing to the country's internal conflicts—it is also willing to publish images of this devastation. This combination of democratic (protecting a free press) and undemocratic (occupying a foreign country by force) activities build a morally complex situation.

Mahmoud then heads toward the magazine's office. He plans to tell Saidi, when the editor returns, that he wants his former job back, with fewer responsibilities. Some staff members have not yet been paid, and Mahmoud does not want to handle so much stress. However, when he reaches the offices, he notices government cars parked in front of the building. After being stopped by armed guards, Saidi is let into the empty offices. Everyone, he realizes, has left, perhaps because they are aware of something Mahmoud does not yet know.

Mahmoud's desire to return to his former job shows that he is not ready to sacrifice his well-being for social and professional advancement, in the way someone like Saidi might. This suggests that Mahmoud is ultimately less interested in having a position of authority over others than in being a good journalist. This highlights some of Mahmoud's positive qualities: his dedication to his job and his desire for people to be treated fairly—for example, to be paid on time.

In Saidi's office, Mahmoud meets four men in suits who tell him that they are closing down the magazine because Saidi has stolen "13 million dollars of U.S. aid money." In complete shock, Mahmoud hands them the key to the safe. He tries calling Saidi multiple times but receives no answer. The janitor Abu Jouni leaves the building without glancing at Mahmoud. In the meantime, Mahmoud calls accountants and colleagues who claim that they cannot help him in any way. The men in suits then tell Mahmoud to follow them for questioning. Terrified, Mahmoud expects to be tortured, a technique he knows is typical in Iraqi security agencies.

This shocking accusation against Saidi brings the editor's secret activities to criminal heights, suggesting, that Saidi is less interested in journalism than in making money. Certainly, whether or not he is actually guilty, his willingness to let Mahmoud suffer some of the consequences of this shocking event reveals his callousness: he prefers to stay hidden and safeguard his own secrets than to protect his faithful employee, who has put all of his trust in the editor.

In the meantime, a Committee interrogates Brigadier Majid at length. Afterward, the Brigadier fires all of his staff members, because he realizes that disputes among his staff members are responsible for this disaster. The senior astrologer admits that the junior astrologer's adversarial behavior toward him jeopardized the entire operation. Taken aback by his staff's lack of surprise at being fired, the Brigadier realizes that, having consulted their special tools, the astrologers already knew this would happen. Depressed by this miserable ending to their operations, the Brigadier feels abandoned by his team.

Brigadier Majid's vulnerability to external interrogation reveals that even having as much political power as the Brigadier does not serve as protection against higher authorities: ultimately, the Brigadier is just as likely as any other employee to be punished for his mistakes. However, the fact that such an important operation fails due to some astrologers' internal squabbles gives this story an ironic, quasi-humorous tinge, suggesting that humans are not able to put their personal frustrations aside to focus on a larger goal.

Before heading out of the office, the senior astrologer cuts off his beard to look like an ordinary "religious man." He changes into civilian clothes. When he runs into the junior astrologer, the two men share looks of anger but separate without a word. The senior astrologer takes a taxi home, but the driver soon gets lost. Apologetically, he tells the senior astrologer to get out, claiming that this street is not dangerous.

The mention of the senior astrologer's beard highlights the role of external appearances in determining one's status and religious belonging in society. This underlines the arbitrary nature of sectarian tension, which can target people based on their appearance instead of their actual beliefs.

The senior astrologer leaves the car and enters a long, dark side street. Filled with gloom, he has the feeling that he can already anticipate what is going to happen. This feeling is confirmed when he sees the mysterious shape of a man ahead of him. He realizes that the meeting he has been waiting for is about to take place. He does not want to appear weak and afraid. When the Whatsitsname begins to talk to him, all the senior astrologer wants is to see the criminal's face.

The senior astrologer's feeling that he can predict what is going to take place suggests that he does indeed have special powers. However, his obsession with the Whatsitsname's face reveals his frustration at not being able to understand the full complexity of reality: he might be able to anticipate some events, but others remain out of his reach.

The senior astrologer tells the Whatsitsname that the junior astrologer is responsible for all of these events, since he was the one who tried to kill the criminal earlier this morning with a car bomb. The senior astrologer argues that his own goal, by contrast, was simply to arrest the criminal, because he was so desperate to see his face.

The senior astrologer aims to divert what he perceives to be the Whatsitsname's murderous intentions by accusing his colleague. This highlights the man's desperation before what he anticipates to be his brutal death—one of the many murders the Whatsitsname has perpetrated.

The senior astrologer insists that he is no longer interested in arresting the criminal. However, the "Criminal Who Has No Name" asks to see the man's hands, which are responsible for dealing the cards that formed part of his astrological work. The Whatsitsname grabs holds of them and squeezes them hard, depleting the astrologer's strength. He then explains that his face changes constantly. However, he allows the astrologer to see it. The astrologer feels as though he recognizes this face, which he concludes must be the face of his own past. A car passes by, but soon turns around after noting suspicious activity on the street. The Whatsitsname then raises an ax to the arms of the astrologer lying on the street.

The detail of a car turning around after noticing the Whatsitsname's figure in the street mirrors the junior astrologer's previous manipulations of magic sand, in which he was able to control the Whatsitsname's mind. As a result, it is unclear whether the Whatsitsname is acting out of his own volition, or whether he is secretly following the junior astrologer's external manipulation—meant to kill a colleague whom he hates. Suspicious circumstances such as the taxi driver's confusion could corroborate the interpretation that these events are not random, but manipulated from the outside.

CHAPTER 18: THE WRITER

The writer recalls meeting Mahmoud in a café in Baghdad full of intellectuals and artists. Mahmoud, in an unkempt state, was selling his Rolex and his laptop, while a **digital recorder** hung around his neck. Mahmoud then approached the writer and offered to sell him his recorder for 400 dollars, because the story that came with it was worth 300 dollars.

The narrative shifts to the first person. In line with the novel's introductory chapter, which presents an official document according to which this mysterious "writer" had composed 17 chapters at the moment of his arrest, it appears that the narrative now picks up where these 17 chapters left off—allowing the writer to recount his own version of the story.

Curious about Mahmoud's story, the writer listened to the former journalist recount the difficulties at the magazine. Mahmoud was currently gathering money to pay off workers' salaries. Determined not to be compared to someone like Saidi, Mahmoud had resolved to pay the disgruntled workers. After the two men had dinner together and the writer listened to the beginning of the recording, he agreed to buy the **recorder**. After paying 400 dollars, the writer concluded that Mahmoud had manipulated him into buying the recorder. However, he accepted that everyone did this to each other out of personal interest, and that it was an ordinary part of life.

Mahmoud's desire to use his authority for positive purposes—in this case, paying the magazine's workers—highlights his commitment to treating others with transparency and respect, unlike his boss Saidi. At the same time, Mahmoud's capacity to craft a compelling story, capable of convincing the writer to buy his digital recorder, recalls Saidi's persuasiveness. This suggests that the same strategy—eloquence and effective storytelling—can be used for a variety of purposes, both positive and negative.

One day, the writer received an e-mail from the "second assistant," who sent him confidential documents from the Tracking and Pursuit Department. Ecstatic to realize that these documents matched Mahmoud's story, the writer listened one more time to Mahmoud's confessions on the **recorder**.

Although Mahmoud seeks to present his story in a positive light, in order to sell his recorder, he does not lie to the writer about the substance of his story. In this sense, he proves committed to values of transparency and honesty.

In the **recorder**, Mahmoud narrated his story. After being interrogated—without any violence, unlike what he had expected—he was released. The interrogators trusted that he had no important information to relay concerning Saidi's activities. Mahmoud realized that his current problems were the result of the excessive trust he put in Saidi.

The lack of violence in Mahmoud's interrogation suggests that not all subjects are treated the same way. This might be the result of sheer luck, but it could also be a matter of social status: someone as poor and vulnerable as Hadi lacks any kind of external protection, whereas someone like Mahmoud could potentially complain about such behavior.

Afterwards, Mahmoud decided to sell all of his belongings. He made plans to return to his hometown, explaining to his brother Abdullah that a civil war was bound to erupt in Baghdad. When he tried to call the number 666, convinced that Saidi and Sultan lied about Nawal al-Wazir, he reached an automatic message telling him that the number was out of service. This left him bitterly disappointed, as he hoped that Nawal would bring some hope and positivity to his current situation.

Once again, Nawal's behavior likens her to Saidi, who also disappears from Mahmoud's life without a word. In this context, it becomes difficult to believe either of them, since they both seem involved in possibly intertwined secrets. Mahmoud's decision to go home mirrors that of so many other characters, forced to find greater stability—in particular, through family—than what the city can currently offer them.

The writer notes that, although he initially doubted the story that Mahmoud told him over the course of two days, he later recognized the voice of the **Frankenstein**'s confessions—which he listened to on the **recorder**—when he met Abu Salim. The writer was not certain the voices were exactly the same, but he remained curious about this story.

The writer's belief that Abu Salim might be involved in the story of the Whatsitsname would confirm Aziz's argument that Hadi has made the story up—for example, asking Abu Salim to play a part in the recording. However, this does not fit other aspects of the story, such as people's descriptions of the Whatsitsname's appearance. These interpretations open different paths toward the identification of the creature's true identity.

In Bataween, the explosion unveiled an ancient wall that was considered to be an immensely valuable finding in Islamic archeology, leading some commentators to comment on the potential positive effects of terrorism. However, the Baghdad authorities covered the ground with earth. They argued that their goal was to protect these archeological artefacts for the future but that, in the meantime, they had to repair the street in Bataween.

The government's actions are perfectly understandable in the context of the city's devastation: their priority is their citizens' well-being. At the same time, the identification of such an ancient artefact in times of political turmoil can provide a sense of unity, suggesting that beneath current social divisions lies a greater, more profound unity.

If Abu Salim soon left the hospital, Hadi, heavily burned in the fire caused by the explosion, stayed on much longer. He wondered if his house still existed and if Faraj had already taken over the territory. One night, when Hadi went to the bathroom, he saw his burned face and, in deep shock, realized that he now had the face of the Whatsitsname. When he noticed this, he screamed out in horror. Because of his sudden movements and his leg still in a cast, Hadi fell down and fainted after hitting his head against the toilet seat.

Hadi's fear of becoming the Whatsitsname suggests that he sees the creature as an evil being, with which he does not want to be associated. At the same time, it also suggests that people's lies can actually come true, as Hadi has suggested all along: it is possible for him to turn into the creature whom the authorities have accused him of helping. However, this is all the product of Hadi's imagination: he is not actually an evil monster but, simply, the victim of cruel burns. His own fears render this reality all the more unbearable.

In the meantime, the Whatsitsname fought hard to survive. Worried about what would happen to him after death, he believed that he was more deserving of life than the victims who abandoned their body parts to him out of sheer terror. Each political group considered him the enemy: for the Iraqis, he collaborated with foreign groups, whereas for the Americans, he was an anti-American terrorist. Rumors concerning the Whatsitsname's murders and special powers spread throughout the city. As a result, even the writer, who has been exploring this story for a long time, began to feel frightened.

Although the Whatsitsname's actions do not actually target any specific group, the political groups' use of the creature's murders serves their own purpose. These groups aim to assert dominance and control through fear. Indeed, by teaching the population that the Whatsitsname is against their particular faction, they encourage people to join their own forces, in order to find protection against such a cruel monster. This reveals each group's attempts to depict their enemies as monsters, for political purposes.

Although Brigadier Majid was asked to retire, he succeeded in joining police headquarters outside Baghdad. The writer visited Aziz's coffee shop multiple times to receive news of Hadi. The last he heard was that Hadi had left the hospital without telling anyone. Later, when the writer saw a picture of Saidi, he realized that he met him once and had found him extraordinarily intelligent. In fact, he had had high hopes for people like Saidi to become politicians, in order to raise the level of political debate.

Brigadier Majid's ability to keep on working, albeit outside of Baghdad, highlights his capacity to make the best of difficult circumstances: in the same way he avoided being punished for taking part in Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime, he now avoids being fully ostracized by the government. The writer's admiration of Saidi suggests that intelligence does not necessarily correlate to moral worth. Indeed, Saidi's behavior suggests that, instead of using his intelligence for the common good, he has focused primarily on securing his own interests.

The writer kept on receiving messages from the anonymous "second assistant." The last document he received was a confession from the junior astrologer. The man admitted to controlling the mind of the Criminal Who Has No Name from afar in order to kill the senior astrologer. However, the junior astrologer emphasized that all he did was control the criminal, not create him. The senior astrologer's refusal to assassinate the Whatsitsname caused the feud between the two astrologers.

The junior astrologer's criminal activities again suggest that the division between criminal and innocent people is not as straightforward as it may seem. Although he was previously working to prevent crimes in the city, he has now taken part in murders himself. This suggests that evil behavior can be found on both sides of justice: within the groups in charge of policing as well as in the behavior of individual citizens.

Ultimately, the writer was arrested for penning this story, composed, at the time of his arrest, of 17 chapters. Although he was treated amiably by a committee of Iraqi and American officers, they ultimately prohibited him from rewriting his novel. The writer handed them a fake identity card, one of the many he used to pass through sectarian roadblocks in Baghdad. The writer decided to keep on writing his story. However, he received a final message from the second assistant, who warned him that the committee was planning to arrest him again. Anticipating that he would likely be treated more brutally this time, the writer quickly left his hotel room, trusting that he would never get arrested again.

Although supposedly in charge of recounting this story, the writer also exhibits some signs of duplicity, along with many other characters. Indeed, he decides to rebel against the authorities' prohibition to write his novel. He also uses different identities in his daily life around the city. This suggests that ordinary citizens are forced to use storytelling and lies for survival, even if this involves opposing the authorities: without such precious aides as a fake identity card, the writer could have been killed for belonging to the wrong ethnic or religious group.

CHAPTER 19: THE CRIMINAL

One day, in Amara, Mahmoud's brother Abdullah suddenly announces that the Mantis has been murdered. Mahmoud has spent the past two and a half months in his mother's house, avoiding going outdoors in order to keep the Mantis from noticing him. Although the Mantis's assassination reminds Mahmoud of his theory concerning the three types of justice, he no longer considers this theory relevant: the only reality, he concludes, is the absurdity of senseless violence.

Although the situation in Amara is not necessarily less dangerous for Mahmoud than it was in Baghdad, the journalist does benefit from the protection of his home, which brings him a degree of stability. Mahmoud's resignation to the senselessness of violence reflects the shock of living in such a chaotic environment as Baghdad, where terrorist attacks kill so many innocent people every day.

Relieved by the Mantis's death, Mahmoud finally leaves the house and checks his e-mail at an internet café. There, he finds a message from his friend Hazem Abboud, who has been taking pictures with the U.S. military and will be granted a green card for his sensitive activities, which could lead to retaliations in Iraq. Mahmoud does not believe that his friend is truly in danger but concludes that Hazem is fulfilling his long-standing desire to move to the U.S.

Hazem Abboud's situation mirrors Mahmoud's previous problems in Amara: both reporters face possible retaliation for simply relaying truthful information about what is taking place around them. These considerations reveal journalism's far-reaching political power: something as seemingly benign as a true story can threaten those in power, who rely on a carefully crafted version of events to ensure their domination.

Mahmoud then sees a message from Nawal al-Wazir, in which she tells him to call her. Although Mahmoud intends to do so, he soon becomes engrossed in an elegantly crafted message from Saidi. In this e-mail, Mahmoud's former boss says that he is worried about Mahmoud and swears that he was not involved in any theft. He argues that his enemies have launched a conspiracy against him because they knew that he, unlike other politicians who bow to foreign powers, has great ambitions for Iraq.

In a chaotic political context marked by fear and greed, it is possible that Saidi is telling the truth: he might actually be the victim of an external conspiracy. At the same time, Saidi's secrets and lack of transparency suggest that he could be inventing this story for his own benefit, in order to manipulate Mahmoud into trusting him again.

Saidi admits that he knows Mahmoud might doubt his words, but that he also admires Mahmoud greatly. Mahmoud's opinion, he claims, is more important than any other. Saidi then tells Mahmoud that the true reason for their visit to Brigadier Majid's office was to investigate Mahmoud's future. On this occasion, the senior astrologer revealed that, after effective training, the young journalist would become prime minister of Iraq in 15 years. This, Saidi argues, is why he took Mahmoud under his wing. Saidi promises to return to Baghdad soon and to prove that all the claims against him are wrong.

Saidi seeks to regain Mahmoud's trust through flattery—a technique that might be sincere, but might also be aimed at tricking Mahmoud once more. Saidi's comments about Mahmoud's supposedly bright future helps explain a previous event: Saidi's professed admiration for Mahmoud in a nightclub, where Saidi told the journalist he wished he were in his employee's shoes. Out of context, this statement made little sense, given Saidi's own authority. However, it becomes more appropriate if Saidi actually believes that his employee will one day become more powerful than him.

This e-mail reminds Mahmoud of Saidi's eloquence and persuasiveness. Deeply conflicted, Mahmoud knows that he owes much of his experience and knowledge to his former editor. As he is about to send an apologetic message to his former boss, he suddenly remembers being interrogated and having to argue convincingly that he was not involved in stealing millions of dollars with Saidi. This traumatic event leads him to realize that Saidi has contradicted himself many times.

Although it is unclear which aspects of Saidi's story might be true, Mahmoud's final reaction relies on one event he knows is absolutely true, since he experienced it himself: his interrogation. This indisputable fact helps Mahmoud focus on the ethical aspects of this situation: Saidi has treated him poorly, letting him bear the brunt of his editor's problems. This reveals Saidi's callousness, even if some aspects of his story are true.

Ultimately, Mahmoud realizes that he cannot form a coherent mental image of his former editor. He concludes that Saidi is manipulating him once more. Although Mahmoud wants to send Saidi an insulting message, in the end he decides to send neither an apologetic e-mail nor an insult. Instead, he forwards Saidi's message to the writer and leaves the internet café.

Mahmoud's inability to piece together different aspects of his editor's personality shows that Saidi's motives still remain opaque: it is unclear whether his intentions are noble or self-interested. Mahmoud's decision not to answer reveals self-control: he is detaching himself from Saidi's influence.

Mahmoud later tells the writer that he decided not to answer Saidi because it was possible that Saidi's message was full of lies, but it was also possible that part of it was true. Using Saidi's own methods of ambiguity, Mahmoud decided not to answer, in order to sustain this uncertainty.

Mahmoud's decision not to answer Saidi is also a form of domination. In the same way that Saidi's silences played a role in building Mahmoud's fascination for his editor, Mahmoud now wants to keep some of his reactions secret, in order to be less easy to manipulate. This uncertainty is also more honest, to a certain extent, since Mahmoud is not actually sure how he feels after reading his former boss's message.

In February 2006, the security forces in Baghdad claim to have arrested Criminal X, known by the people as the Whatsitsname. They show his picture on television and announce him as Hadi Hassani Aidros. Hadi, they claim, has confessed to all of his accusations, from the explosion at the Sadeer Novotel, to the car bombing in Bataween, along with a variety of other killings.

This series of events suggests that stories, however fictional or deformed, have political power because of who believes them, not necessarily because of their truth value. Indeed, Hadi's resemblance to the Whatsitsname—the result or arbitrary circumstances, namely the burning of his house—is now used against him, seemingly confirming the authorities' previous suspicions of Hadi's complicity with this creature.

Aziz and members of the Bataween neighborhood do not recognize Hadi's face on TV, although they do find that the voice confessing to these crimes resembles Hadi's. No one understands how Hadi could be a killer. Mahmoud concludes that this is yet another mistake, promoted by a government that has not succeeding in catching the actual Whatsitsname. He believes that Hadi is not intelligent enough to compose a story as complex as the Whatsitsname's original recordings.

This surprising turn of events adds yet another layer of complexity and confusion in the Whatsitsname's story, making it unlikely for people to ever discover the truth about the Whatsitsname's identity. Rather, the government seeks to use this operation for its own purposes: not to actually uncover the truth, but to reassure the population by catching a notorious criminal. In this sense, truth serves the government less than a strategic manipulation of possibly incorrect facts.

Despite this uncertainty, when the news of this arrest is announced, everyone in Baghdad erupts in joyful celebrations in the street. Although Aziz does not believe that Hadi is truly guilty, he still celebrates this event alongside the others. In the meantime, a mysterious creature observes these celebrations from a window in the Orouba Hotel, left in ruins from the explosion. Faraj did not have enough money to repair the building and left it as it was, moving on to other activities. Accompanied by Nabu, the mysterious man observes the party in the streets. When it begins to rain and people return home, the man bows to pet the cat, which has now become his close friend.

Aziz's celebration of Hadi's arrest is not a sign of disloyalty toward his friend but, rather, a signal that Aziz, like everyone else, is desperate for positivity and joy—the kind of euphoria that collective celebrations can bring. Given the mysterious being's ominous presence in the dilapidated hotel—a being whom the reader is encouraged to identify with the Whatsitsname—it is unlikely these celebrations will lead to long-term progress in people's lives. However, it highlights the population's desire to hold on to a glimmer of hope in the midst of such bleak political conditions, a heavy burden they have been bearing for so long.

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