



**Svenja Leiber**

**Dust**

**Novel**

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## Chapter 2 (pp. 18-20)

*Wenden, Germany, 1984*

I remember Semyon's silence. At three and a half years old, his first word: "Whea-  
" without the "t." Then back to nothing, for weeks.

In my memory he had a big head, nearly the width of a halo larger than other heads, and it used to tilt along with the rest of his body as he slowly fell asleep. There is a deep fatigue around him, which perhaps can be explained. Because the fact of the matter is that when it comes to my little brother there's also a little sister, who had appointed herself king, name: Semyon. She demanded the right to the same haircut her brothers enjoyed, already wore our old clothes anyway, and, well, had to start early in life with the work of creation, which is well-known to be exhausting. Because when it comes to creation, the outside world tends to be more intransigent and exacting than encouraging. At least the family had one another, after the loaded questions and gasps. And for me, recognizing Semyon as what he wanted to be was completely natural. It could be that the others may have counted on the possibility that this was a childish role-playing phase, as mother called it, and the role and the game would be forgotten one morning—but personally, I never thought so. I also didn't find the situation to be unfortunate—precisely the opposite.

On that day, the day when it all perhaps began, Semyon is sitting next to me in the back seat of the van, an old dark brown Mazda with cushions so soft that we can hardly see out of the windows.

It's not easy to sit in the back seat, because between Semyon and me a herd of sheep is sheltering. Semyon brought them into the van with him. They're not only between us—they're everywhere, where Semyon has gathered or driven them. Every sheep has its place, and woe to anyone who sits on an animal or even gives one a nudge. He harvests a gaze of great seriousness, in which wakefulness, dream, and deep sleep lie together like three brothers under a blanket.

I've given up the armrest between us, too, after he asked me beseechingly for it once. And in turn the armrest becomes his acre, his field of eternity. On it, he grows the winter grain. When the herd is ready to be fed, with an index finger Semyon slowly strokes the golden brown velvet in one direction, his finger following the humming of his voice, his finger slightly changing the pressure and tempo along with the shifts in his tune. Once he reaches the end of the velvet field, he slowly makes his way back again.

Semyon plows with the patience of Abel, until his herd is finished with the acre. Then he strokes the whole armrest with his forearm and starts again from the beginning.

My big brother, David, lacks such calm entirely. Hardly born before he was grown, people liked to say. A person in double-time. Instead of gentleness, there was anger. He stormed around with it, his fists balled in front of his body like a battering ram. About Semyon, he only says—with no detectable warmth in his voice—*it* had just been pushed out of place. He says this perhaps because he'll soon be a man himself. More yes and more no, more one and more zero—so goes his philosophy. A valuable if also isolating state of mind, that made up the second pole of my childhood.

Thus I grow up between Cain and Abel.

[...]

## Chapter 6 (pp. 46-48)

*Riyadh, 1984*

We live in a cooing concrete house. At the very top: Sheik Talam with his wife and four children and passports in the safe. For security. Below, the extended family spread out, with us in the apartment on the left on the mezzanine floor. The stories of Scheherazade prove to be a gigantic deception. On the very first evening, with Semyon and me, David establishes the *Brotherhood*, which, he stresses, is to be taken more seriously than Orwell's *Goldstein*—essentially, actually seriously. Furthermore, he would like Semyon to assume the role of *Julia*, at which point in the same evening Semyon departs the brotherhood and establishes a small farm on the sand-covered balcony. For a long time, he works outside on his dusty acreage. Then he walks around nervously, as if looking for something. Later that night, I hear him counting in bed. One, two, seven. Something doesn't seem right with his herd.

We stay in the house for the first few days, until I feel totally warped by boredom. A high wall with an iron gate separates the front yard from the street. All kinds of things can be heard, but nothing can be seen. We're at least allowed on the roof. But from the roof we can only see a wailing state convoy now and then on the distant expressway.

Sometimes doves stop by. White ones, and they do somersaults. David tries to tame them. He used to have doves in Wenden. Almost every farm had a few. The doves here are different. More beautiful, and smaller. A dove breeder must live in the neighborhood.

Bit by bit, mother begins to trust herself with us on the street, where she holds Semyon's hand in a tight grip. All of her attempts to convince him to put on different clothes have failed. And so she seems to have put her hopes on Semyon's appearance not being misconstrued, or, better yet, not noticed at all.

I think that at first, the country's customs brought her a kind of pleasure. A pleasure that was close to fear. A light adrenaline rush when she, with a faithless glance and swaying skirt, sweats from street to street. This skirt, printed over and over again with flowers, as if she'd wanted to wear her perennial borders in the desert. With every step, her limbs show through the fabric. The long arms slip dangerously far out of the too-short abaya, although it was the biggest that she could find. Anxiously, I look over and over at these protruding white forearms, because I'd heard that the religious guardians paint over women's skin. Mother seems to almost hope for an artistic deed from the religious police. An unexpected energy seems to grip her. She even secretly shoots photos from her hip; they come out later all out of focus. She smiles when she sees that the women in Western magazines are all scribbled over with black. She says, contemplatively, that there's something truthful there: the right to concealment, in place of the exhibited woman. Then she suddenly tosses all the magazines in the bin.

We'd be separated on the bus. Mother had to squeeze herself in the tiny space behind the wooden partition at the back of the bus, while her sons, including Semyon, sit up front with the men.

"At least they don't inspect your ticket here," she says, and travels without a ticket.

The tailor was monitored more closely. She once sought out a tailor to sew her a caftan, which was less pricey than purchasing all the material herself. Inside the tailor's workshop, which was clogged with bales of fabric, numerous journeymen treaded and hunched over sewing machines. The tailor stretched a hand towards her through a hole in the windowpane above the sidewalk, like a lab technician who worked with poisonous substances, and groped at mother's slender body while taking her measurements.

Because she loves to talk, she quickly makes contact with the other women in our building. All doors are open for her. The building is her village, her dovecote. Laughter and cooing in the stairwells. She is invited over for tea and pastries until evening. Later she tells us about the people. The woman in the apartment above us, an older sister of the sheik, speaks French, even with her five servants. The one across the hall, someone's daughter-in-law, English. Both had studied abroad.

“They know more about the world than the world knows about them,” mother says. “Still, they came back to this golden cage.” Mother sounds almost amazed. She shrugs. “They just wanted to come home.”

“Me too,” says Semyon, quietly.

## Chapter 7 (pp. 52-54)

*Riyadh, 1984*

Originally, the plan had been for Sheik Talam to build a big hospital that would serve anyone in need. From 4500 kilometers away, father’s description had seemed almost socialist. A system of free healthcare for all. A first step in the right direction, and a foot in the door for him and his attempts at healing in capital matters.

But it turned out that for this enormous project, apparently a large sum had only been requested from the king and then invested in America. Later, when it seemed plausible that nothing could come of the hospital—because the beginning construction, for goodness sake, had incidentally and unfortunately been erected in the middle of the planned route of the highway—the money was simply repaid. Until then, Talam lived from the superlative interest. Many do this. Allegedly. Perhaps. The German doctors here are thus something akin to decoration. Father was accordingly gloomy decoration, decoration that leafed tiredly through photocopies of Marxist texts. Of course, he still had to work. His favorites were the little offspring of the royal family. However, some colleagues have heard that in the event of malpractice the most horrible punishments for a doctor await—the hands, and so on. Rumors. Reports. Anyway, it doesn’t matter what happens, the experience is what’s important. Accident or no accident, touch or no touch, death or no death. One is Christ, even without the precise concept and awareness of it, and as Christ one is guilty in every case, because if one were not, nothing would have been experienced. A crushing, conjunctive logic.

“But it’ll be the hands, soon,” father says at dinner, thoughtfully considering the delicate fingers of his wife.

“Oh, well,” is all mother answers.

All of this explains father’s paleness, which he’s gained here in the desert.

At the beginning he still writes letters to the embassy, elegant letters in beautiful cursive, for under these circumstances and so on, one would rather return home... But such a small working doctor, who traveled on his own to the kingdom of black splendor, seems of minimal interest, particularly when it comes to contracts that are, on the whole, common for the country.

And because he quickly comes to see that in Saudi Arabia, nothing happens quickly, father ultimately counts on patience. From now on, he says “*shway*, *shway*”—by which he means something like “be calm”—soothingly, to himself and at every opportunity. To his driver, at meals, to his reflection, to his razor, to weather, to cashiers and perhaps under his breath at night to mother: “*Shway, shway.*” He becomes the embodiment of soothing and calming, always with a melancholy smile,

as if dissolving himself in the mild clarity of his favorite autumn poem, and accepting existence and all of its destruction without resistance. And it's inevitable that mother no longer knows what to with her knuckling-down and can-do attitude. Nothing is stranger to her than this condition of a peach slowly ripening to death on some imaginary rusty fence, as she quickly comes to see her husband. This husband who seems to have suddenly become futureless, and poetizes himself into yesterday in his distress. And because we children in the current day are threatening to grow fat from liter after liter of Mirinda, she begins to walk through the city with us each day, through the city that isn't built for pedestrians at all. Worth noting, however, is that her pedestrians were some of the best on earth.

[...]

## Chapter 8 (pp. 67-71)

*Amman, 2014*

[...]

Bas first mentioned Ibrahim three days ago. In the middle of a totally different conversation, in the middle of a market, between people, wares, and sun. The things alternated their owners, a touching and grasping, the appetite with which people grip onto the world and their trinkets so beautiful one could cry. Everything was constantly in the way. Everyone was also a bit irritable, but pleasantly irritable. Hunger, thirst, desire. Squinting, I slid behind Bas. Sometimes I paid better attention opposite the pressure of a shoulder or a hip than opposite Bassan's words. I don't know why it was right there. I only repeatedly heard the name. In a teahouse I heard the rest: They work together, Ibrahim is a physicist from Afghanistan, employed for some kind of calculation, also somewhat for a job creation scheme, I intend to find out, and he needs help.

Bas stirred his glass of tea for far too long, and scooped in much too much sugar.

"You want to become something different?" he asked then. "I don't really know what you mean by that, but give him a visit. I only know a part of his story. It ends shortly before his arrest nearly 30 years ago. This arrest sounds like he got himself into debt, which isn't the case. Very few who get into debt are arrested. He must have been political. Or not even that. As far as I know, his memory only reappears in Dhahran. That the years in between must exist—he doesn't seem to want to admit it. In any case, he gained a good understanding of the Western way of life under the Americans, when they were stationed in Kuwait a good twenty years ago. Visit him, you'll like him."

I ask Ibrahim to show me his back. It radiates out from his shoulder, he tells me, and it's contorted everything. There is no counterweight there anymore. And the man seemed, by and large, an outwardly symmetrical creature. But apparently in his case

there was no transformation of symmetry, or he would look different now. He laughs softly. "If only everything were physics..."

He bares his thin upper body. Stands relaxed in front of me.

"Yes—they wanted me." Again, this smile. "They wanted to spend a lot of time with me..."

For a long moment, I fight against vertigo. My imagination is too vividly playing me scenes, sounds, scents.

"You've probably never been in prison. There is no such thing as *the* prison, either. And there are many different guardians of your time in prison," he says quietly, turning his head to the side and looking out the window.

"One the one hand, there were those who wanted to get something from me. At least they had a purpose. With them, teatime had a certain meaning. As did those times when the tea was a bit hot. One had something to react to, one could give in, one could think things through, one could cry, one could scream. It was in its own way a kind of conversation.

"The others, the ones without purpose, were more complicated. They delivered their monologues. Drink tea with someone who takes your complaint as proof of your stupidity. Just hold your tea glass when it should be extinguished. Ultimately, they needed proof that we were nothing. Nothing. So hold your glass in the air, without continuing to exist."

I can't help but think of Paul Valéry. Or was it René Leriche? *Health is life lived in the silence of organs*. My whole career, I have paced back and forth with this phrase. And I will for longer, still. You've heard the phrase from father, mother. When he was tired of your speeches. He loved to misuse pearls of wisdom to your disadvantage. I saw the phrase for the first time on paper during my studies. Since then, it's been an eternal circuit. With this edict of grace. At this point, I find the term appropriate: a grace, that we don't permanently experience the mining of the body. If our mind were aware of the processes, if it consciously witnessed the conversion of nutrients into energy and the transfer of energy into blood, we would go mad with pain. That would mean becoming unglued over just a piece of buttered toast. What you're saying here, Ibrahim, speaks to the heart of the problem. The problem—and I'm referring here to being—is pain. To have a body, this so-called incarnation, is, from a certain perspective, an affair of pure pain. That's right. Physical torture, the screaming of organs—just another awakening in the flesh. Is any other torturer needed?

I know I'm no philosopher, but as I go on and on trying to explain this to Ibrahim, he nods.

"One of your mystics called pain but a horse on the path to God," he says. "Depending on which god one wants to ride to, one seeks his own or a foreign pain."

"The way I see it, it's more like my task is to eliminate pain," I say. "Perhaps that's why my relationship with God is so lacking."

"Is that so?" Ibrahim asks. "But you're familiar with pain."

What do I know, Ibrahim. I won't tell you anything.

Ibrahim grabs his shirt and nods, as if he's heard my thoughts.

Than he puts his shirt back on, opens a drawer beneath the tabletop and takes out a crisply folded piece of aluminum foil.

"Sometimes the pain is well-hidden. With me, the thing was even eliminated, but the pain is still there despite that." Ibrahim laughs very softly. "Let's go to Kabul and look for the arm, when it suits you." He lights the stump of a candle, which he'd also taken out of the drawer and put on the table. And then he begins, very calmly and before my eyes, to smoke. So much for his discolored fingers. Ibrahim smokes something brown. Heroin. So easily. In fact, I knew it from the first second. And Bas surely gets one in afterward. I'm through with this. I won't touch this again. I've pulled shut an iron curtain, with guard towers, between me and the stuff. The Berlin wall was nothing in comparison.

Ibrahim leans back and looks at me with narrow pupils. Free from all the pain in this world.

"Has it been an hour?"

"The spinal cord can be stimulated, medicine can be prescribed," I deflect. I would have much rather said other things. A thousand things wanted to jump from my disconcerted visage. Here, where you are, there's nothing for me, nothing for you, this alliance you've forged with me, Ibrahim. Or does addiction not feel like an alliance to you?

"I've already done everything," is all Ibrahim says. "And I know your medicine all too well, I think. It's worse than this."

I stand up in order to leave.

"Let's go for a walk through the city soon, and talk."

I am shaking. Ibrahim nods.

"I understand now what Bassan meant when he said I shouldn't be surprised that you're a very good doctor."