

BOWL
OF
CHERRIES

—A NOVEL—

by
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This is the novel's first chapter.
The full book will contain forty more.

ONE
THE LAST MILE

If you look closely at a detailed map of Iraq, you'll find somewhere to the south, between the western shelf and the equally monotonous eastern plain, the province of Assama, a flat depression in the shape of a chicken.

The more ironic of Middle East scholars have for years hypothecated that the name comes from some sour old joke, lost in antiquity, because *Assama* is Arabic for "Paradise," and this place isn't even close to the minimal consolations we might expect on earth, much less heaven. There are in Assama geographical nooks that are yet to be charted, chronicled, demarked, but unless they turn out to be a decided improvement from what we've seen so far, you might conclude from Assama that the earth is a very grotesque and tacky planet.

Even remotely, Assama has never reflected the exotic Araby of the Europeans who romanced about it more or less convincingly in the nineteenth century, managing to assure their armchair readers that they, the tale-spinners, were living in the middle of a travel poster chock-full of exotic flora and fauna. Lions and panthers (much bigger than presently existing species) did at one time, according to no less an authority than H. G. Wells, roam the wasteland, which is to say the entire province. These days there's nothing

to kill around here but humans and gerbils, the sand rats of the desert, and a few other wee beasties that manage to survive the desolation of the Rub al-Khali, the Empty Quarter of Mesopotamia, as the region between the lower Tigris and Euphrates was called for millennia.

A rumor persists among a minority of the locals—the majority are skeptical and secular—that Qurna, where the rivers converge, was the biblical Garden of Eden (perhaps the source, however dubious, of Assama's name). Down through the centuries, the province has never achieved anything to match its mythic eminence. Triumphs are rare; history has behaved disruptively with the place. With the oldest cities on earth, Mesopotamia is often called the cradle of civilization. It might with equal certainty be called the birthplace of sustained barbarism. There were clashes from 4500 BC on, hot spots, flare-ups, skirmishes, even pitched battles among Arabs, Persians, Mesopots, Assyrians, Babylonians, Berbers, but manhood didn't show signs of deep, irreversible impairment until warfare on a grand, gangrenous scale was introduced around 2076 BC, when the first big parade of bullies and kleptocrats stormed into Assama.

Assama was the jumping-off place for invasion because an east-west road spills irregularly across the Rub al-Khali, from the beak of the chicken to its tail. But the legionaries from Europe or Asia spent little time in the Empty Zone. Didn't take them long to determine that the southerly wasteland, scalding by day, freezing by night, had little to offer. There were no beads or bangles to snatch, no fields of bright minerals to pluck. Nothing to fossick for or fight over. Consequently, Assama achieved neither fame nor notoriety as a battlefield; rather it supplied a warpath to an access road running north, along the chicken's midsection. It led to the flush and fabled cities of antiquity—Baghdad, Babylon, Ur, Urik, Nineveh, Samara. The intruders plundered one or another of them or as many as they could.

King Rim-sin of Larsa (Ellasar in the Old Testament) defeated Babylonia in 2076 BC. His successors were decimated by Hammurabi around 1770 BC. Tiglath-pileser I, ruler of the Elamites, took Babylon in 1110 BC, calling himself "King of the World." Shortly thereafter he lost the world title, along with the city-state, to the Assyrians. Doggedly the Elamites tried to retake it, finally succeeding under Tiglath III in 728 BC. Then came Sennacherib, King of Assyria, who spent most of his reign (705–681) warring against Babylonia.

In 586 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar of the Chaldeans took Babylon; Cyrus the Great took it from the Chaldeans in 539 and founded the Persian empire. King Xerxes of Persia took the road west, leading an expedition against the Greeks. He was slaughtered at Salamis in 480.

Alexander of Macedon took Babylon in 381 BC, defeating Darius III of Persia. The Persians took another dreadful beating by a Roman army invading Mesopotamia in 242 AD. A raggedy-assed swarm of Arabs conquered southern Mesopotamia (at the site of present-day Iraq) in 640 AD. The Saracens crossed the road and got as far as Tours before the Franks, led by Charles Martel, Charlemagne's grandfather, crushed them in 732 AD.

Saladin defeated Saif ud-Din to take Mosul in 1176 AD. Hulagu Khan, grandson of Jenghiz, sacked and burned Baghdad in 1258. The mongul Tamerlane, who hated jokes and was said to have been born with bloody clenched fists, took Baghdad in 1400.

The British arrived in 1915 and took over the territory six years later when they invented Iraq by gerrymandering a large, irregular cut—as much as they could grab—of Mesopotamia, which is why Assama looks like a chicken. Cartography was determined by oil; it was known that just about all the rest of Iraq gushed with the stuff, but somehow it had given Assama the slip. Damn place was indeed a desert eccentrically surrounded by a vast oasis of oil.

Nobody knows what tomorrow will bring. Assama's boundaries may zig or zag once more, to the degree that it no longer resembles a chicken but perhaps a kangaroo or a porcupine, or it might be gobbled up by a neighbor, even by a neighbor on the other side of the world, and disappear, as it once nonexisted, like a guppy ingested by a piranha.

It's in the air—the air once redolent of myrrh, spiceberries, and frankincense, the kind of balm associated with Omar Khayyám. There were palm plantations and marshlands festooned with moss until 1991, when Saddam destroyed them to clear his fields of fire.

Now the air is troubled by an infinitude of invisible mites combining gunpowder, cordite, and corpse-rot, and churned up by Humvees and tanks and the decay of young people torn limbless by land mines. The devastation is eerily illuminated by the combustible blight of burn-off from the oil fields. Dysfunction and instability as far as your red eyes can see.

Midway across the chicken road at about the fowl's navel (designated for geographic, not anatomical orientation) it is bisected by an offshoot to the

north. Where the two arteries converge is the provincial capital, a dilapidated town called Coproliabad, christened by the Romans when they passed this way to consolidate the eastern reaches of the empire in 242 BC. At the center of Coproliabad is the jail. I am in the jail, which proves that despite the more heralded hazards of war and mountaineering, deep-sea diving, and space probes, man's ancient and honorable pursuit of tight corners can still be satisfied in the most disreputable places.

I've never had a tendency to feel sorry for myself but this time I think I might justifiably yield to it. Incarceration even in polite societies is, I'm beginning to suspect, a galling experience. *Languishing* is not the word for it. There's no chance of busting out, and I'm tired. My stomach is deranged from Assamic cooking. Worms and wavy arrows, pinwheels and hieroglyphs dart and wheel and collide across my peripheral vision. I suffer from the clanks, which I suppose is not unusual for a man charged with murder and condemned to die by a provincial mandate. I've tried suicide by the only means available, which is by eating the food they serve me. That accounts for the diarrhea, a fate certainly not worse than death, but it'll serve till the real thing comes along.

The jail is a shithouse, and that's not a metaphor. It is fashioned, like all the public buildings and private dwellings in the capital, of human excrement, well salted with sand, an additive of shale, and, most important, an agglutinate, marvelous but unidentifiable, to solidify it in a state as costive as concrete.

The Mesopots have a tradition of urban ingenuity that goes back 6,000 years to Ur and Kish. They built fantastical structures—towers and ziggurats, buildings seven stories tall of sun-broiled bricks painted in unexpected combos: pastels of green, blue, pink, and yellow.

But the buildings of Assama are unique. Nobody else in our planet's freaky past has ever constructed works of art and architecture whose chief ingredient was excrement. It is not only feces that the Assamans make practical use of; they are a relentlessly retentive people who hate to part with anything of themselves. They preserve toenails (ground) for curatives, hairballs (plaited) for amulets, and urine for use as a skin conditioner.

Pondering such eccentricities as well as my own predicament, small wonder I can't sleep. I pace my cell in the hot, dead-aired dawn, which holds the fierce stench not of my surroundings—in Coproliabad one grows used to that in about two weeks—but of death.

My death, of course. It's in the blue-black air, a raw, acrid chemical stink. It's in the dirgy music strummed on a two-stringed gourd of a guitar and plunked with a jagged shard of coconut to the beat of two coconut shells bouncing off each other like cymbals, while a discord of rickety voices sings my disaster, in the process rattling my fillings and scaring off the bustards poking through the garbage.

I glance at my watch, a gift of our Assamic sovereign, in fond commemoration of our eternal friendship (ha ha), sealed when he and I were young, just two years ago; it is 4:18. In precisely twenty-three seconds the dawn's first flash of lightning will send me reeling, and I steel myself for the thunderclap to follow, and then the blessed rain that washes away if only for a short while the smell of death, the plink of gourds, the eldritch keening.

Now don't get the idea that I'm taking literary license, invoking the pathetic fallacy so dear to John Ruskin and the lesser Romantics, to distort all nature into harmony with my plight. It is a fact that every day this time of year, at twenty-three seconds after 4:18, the entire Parthenon of animistic godlings and demons, trolls and sprites and the spirits of dead chiefs that predated Muhammad, flex their bronzy thews and proceed to gang-piss on Assama. The earliest invaders clocked their movements by it; the lightning, the thunder, and the rain are the sole consistencies of this drowsy, turbulent land, ceaselessly full of surprises, none of them pleasant, all of them keeping you from ever feeling at home.

A great bolt of fire tears a white tunnel through the sky and turns the square outside my window a sullen violet-red. The thunder explodes and the square reappears, like the afterimage on a defective retina, flat, blank, and grayish. The shit-buildings across the street take shape, impossible buildings beyond the madness of Maurits Escher, separated from my jail by a wide brown dappled river.

The rain falls, the wind shrills, rising, fading, and, in fifteen minutes, dies. The brown river subsides, and the painted statues in the square are fresh and gaudy after their bath. They are carved, of course, of mud and shit, but, I must say, skillfully. Slim, elongated figures with a hint of caricature, the illustrated index of Who's Who in Assama.

Just as some books are best read, I've been told, by candlelight, so Coprolabad's gallery of the great is best viewed at dawn, after the rain. In less than an hour its paint will be cracked and cobwebbed by the sun, and our

newly minted sheikh and the woman we both loved, his ministers and his General, all will be afflicted by a new day's scruffy assortment of botanical growths, more distorting than leprosy. But now they are astonishing as they stand uncertainly, that is, lifelike, with an abstracted air, solitary ghosts and strangers to each other, rich in irony as if they were not statues at all but flesh and blood transfixed into stillness by some capricious spell.

The young sheikh, Abdul al Sadr, is something of a jumped-up tribal chief who inherited the hefty title from his father, Saeed, a shrewd but otherwise ungifted warlord. When the Americans arrived in 2003, they paid little attention to him or to his wasteland people in the south. They concentrated their forces in the north, on the opposition and the oil.

Being ignored was an asset the old man made the most of. He lived quite well on a sandy flat above the muddy Shatt El Arab, at the confluence of the Tigris and the Euphrates. Switching a few channel lights and buoys, he lured boats to the sandbars on the banks of both rivers. Then, in America's disregard, Saeed sniffed a prodigious opportunity. He declared Assama a kind of independency within Iraq and installed himself as boss.

Nobody, least of all the intruders, saw any point in contradicting him. The U.S. Army was groveling to get the cooperation of the region's assorted bandetti and to press swag on anybody who didn't shoot at them and whose fealty they could buy. It took Saeed about ten minutes to realize that by declaring his rebelliousness he could benefit from American perks and pork-barrel diplomacy. He became an eager recipient of anything they offered—handouts now, electricity later. He died before the grid's installation, leaving his statue to stare sightlessly from the square with a mien of silent, cunning, stationary greed. There is a hint of wiliness on the face of his son, who stands next to him, but Abdul's is a magnetic face, holding the symmetry and the luster of an iron door-knocker, the handsome features attesting to his Arab-Persian roots. His sculpted body seems to have less poise and assurance, perhaps, than he actually possesses. (Or had the sculptor fathomed something I didn't?) The undecipherable eyes (seeing what new reform, what next outrageous improvement?) stare into my cell window with imperial aloofness and no understanding whatever.

Not like the eyes of General Kalid Qazwini at the right of the young overlord. Qazwini's ashy eyes are cold, the eyes of an interstellar hit-beast. He stands like an army with banners...

But wait a minute. Why should I be wasting whatever time I have drawing word-pictures of the notables in Assama's Parthenon? Hell with them, with all of them—the General and the Reverend Doctor Lipgloss and Shakir bin Zaki, the asshole intellectual, and squashy, pear-shaped Hashim Pachachi, captain of nonexistent industry. Maybe I'll get around to them—frankly, I doubt it. In the meantime...

Look out! Here comes the sun! It does not rise or simply appear in Coproliabad. White-hot and unruly, it slams down like a sledge on an anvil and bounces off your skull with such force that dust devils whirl around the streets and the very air goes tremulous, and things you'd swear were immobile begin to dance behind a curtain of Vaseline—the schizoid buildings, the spavined tower on the right, the statues in the square. Mesmerized by the glinty eye of the sun, they undulate like a company of cobras standing on their tails.

My stomach rumbles, not in sympathy with the now distant thunder, but in protest of last night's dinner: fish rot and scorpion salad, the jail's blue-plate special. I hardly have the strength to wave at a buzzing fly. Soon, I console myself, it will be over. My eyes stray to that tower on my right.

It has a sort of sinister gaiety, rising like a vast untidy beehive, and surrounded at its base by bamboo stakes, repetitive as files on parade, their butts driven into the earth, their razor-sharp spikes pointing to the belvedere five stories above.

What we have here is the topography for ganching. Perhaps a few words on the subject are in order; fortunately, not too many nice people are familiar with the process. Unhappily, I know more about it than I care to.

It was practiced, according to the best authorities on grisly behavior, by both the Ottomans and the Mongols of Hulagu Khan. Who introduced the procedure in Mesopotamia is a point of some disagreement, but the experts concur that the Mesopots, particularly the Assamans, were quick to appropriate certain foreign ideas and instruments that appealed to them. They took to the ganch, it appears, with enthusiasm, executing some poor bastard by flinging him off the rooftop onto the stakes below.

In this case, I'm the poor bastard. I'm having trouble avoiding another wallow in self-pity and a burst of bromides like "I'm too young to die" and so forth. What I need is distraction, not constant meditation on my predicament. I grab at straws. It takes all the resolve I can muster to concentrate on a yellow mongrel skulking out of the jungle. He shifts uneasily through

the caked mud, delicately raising and lowering his paws as if with each step he expects the earth to cave in under him. He sneaks past three or four statues—obviously they hold no interest for him—until he arrives, with some sense of achievement, at the foot of Hashim Pachachi, Assama's leading and remarkably inept industrialist. He raises a leg and, with a sly grin of ecstasy, pees. Is the beast aware that the man is an infidel and a glutton eats a puppy for lunch whenever he can trap one?

Assamans are aware of it; Hashim isn't the only dog-eater in town. Nobody gives much of a damn about the contents of a fricassee; Assamans are essentially secular, with few if any dietary prohibitions, and Islam's habits and customs are rich and varied. Cultures thrive within cultures, with sub-cultures bubbling beneath every sect and deviation.

I wondered how long the dog with the sly grin, happily pissing away, would press his luck. Long enough to get laid: another yellow dog walks prowlingly down the mucky pike, and, ignoring all the best manuals about foreplay, my friend with the sly grin mounts her.

I watch.

Now what, you might ask, am I doing, an intricately calibrated man like me, watching a pair of decrepit beasts fuck in broad daylight? And what, I counter, what else is there to do? Coproliabad lacks even the homely slob diversions afforded by the most destitute of towns, like watching the streetlights go on (there are no streetlights) or listening to the plumbing (there is no plumbing) or peering at a sitcom (no TV).

And so I watch, a little enviously, the dogs with their eyes of molten wax, the yellow arch of lust, the throbbing, thrusting, connecting rod, red-flaked and marbled white and veiny blue. The colors of the mammal race. I yearn, I yearn for one more day, one more hour of love and lazy exertion in that slow, unstately dance, ancient, eternal, that primal nepenthe beyond drink and drugs.

That's what pleased me in Coproliabad, why I had come here in the first place, why I remained, and, ironic joke, why I would die. I look out at her now, eyes damp, throat dry. She stands there, pedestaled in the square, more of an idealization than a woman, extravagantly remote, faintly smiling. Oh, the prodigies we performed, in essence nothing more or less than what those yellow dogs were doing, dancing beast to beast, but with certain nuances, certain eerie refinements, breathtaking explorations.

There is about her a curious quality: no matter what she wears she appears to be undressed. It is the kind of nakedness from which the beholder cannot unglue his eyes. Her face in a ring of shining hair, the freckled button of a nose, the upswept breasts with the chiseled nipples pointing at you, tracking you like the eyes of a Rembrandt. The legs so long they look skinny, the perfect scut. There! Now maybe you have some idea of what Valerie is to me.

And she is somehow greater than the sum of her parts. Indeed, each part has its own summation, and this I find disturbing. The oval eyes are blue-green and deep as a sunless sea, but the total effect is of an oceanic vacancy. The brows so smooth and pale are unwary; what seems to emerge is a kind of unobtrusive numb inertia, as though she were beyond all worldly contest, or ran a subnormal temperature, or didn't give a damn about anything.

She didn't give a damn about much. Early in our relationship (shallow, aseptic term), indeed before we had one, her slackness led me to believe that she was kind of dumb.

I was mistaken, having somehow overlooked what was spectacularly obvious: that her air of dopiness derived from her beauty. She didn't do anything; she didn't have to. Beauty's coign of vantage and its perks she accepted without question or analysis or the least expenditure of effort.

I on the other hand have always been striving. That's what got me into this mess that can only get messier. I've always tripped and floundered—it is it any wonder I trip and flounder across these pages?

And romanticize. But lest you confuse me with some love-swacked swain in an Elizabethan madrigal mooning after a buxom shepherdess, let me scrawl a compensatory note. If I were lured to Coproliabad by Valerie, it is equally true that I was driven there by greed or its euphemism, enlightened self-interest. Dr. Joseph Grady, that cunning gray eminence of UGH, had fanned the flames of my insolvency with tales of untold wealth. It was he who had discovered that riches were waiting to be snared in this unpromising, scorched chicken of a place, and from the most unlikely source. It was the secret formula of the shit bricks he was after, to isolate that mysterious elixir which would transmute dross into gold for the two of us by supplying an eager, overpopulated world with an endless, inexpensive supply of the most workable building material ever stumbled upon by man. The multinational consortium, Ultra Global Husbandry, would, through its subsidiary, Resource Analysis and Technology, finance the launch of our magic upon a receptive world. And launched we were.

For a brief and splendid moment we soared across the financial heavens, Grady a comet and I his tail, his instrument and ambassador.

Only to come to this. I hardly need a reminder of my plight but there it is: the caretakers of the tower are reporting for work, like groundskeepers of the college green tidying up for class-day japes. They manicure, pluck, and sharpen the pickets to receive my ventilated body. What a vulgar way to die.

When my jailers graciously complied with my strange—to them—request for a ballpoint pen and a clutch of legal pads brought from home, it was, I told them, to keep me from going mad. This may be true, if I could only limit my meanderings to the soothing fellowship of the past, thereby obliterating the perilous present. But how can I write of the past without evoking my father's disappearance, which defeats my very reason for writing? It tends naggingly to remind me of my own impending departure.

I find nothing soothing in thoughts of death, particularly my own. But to die in compliance with the penal code of Assama—what a way to go. What they do—what they intend to do to *me*—I'm going to be prodded at spearpoint off a tower of shit and mud onto those impaling stakes a hundred feet below, and soon. But exactly when I haven't an idea. When the British, the last of the Europeans, departed in '48, leaving only the legacy of their language behind, the Assamans reverted to precolonial customs and institutions, which they found infinitely more appealing than those imposed by their Western rulers. They revived the stone-tipped whip for all manner of misdemeanors—that is, behavior that the sheikh did not condone. For serious offenses they preferred ganching to the British noose, possibly because a stout rope was difficult to come by, and in that climate prone to swift decay. The sentence carried with it a fiendishly cruel corollary: for a capital crime, an unspecified time of execution.

I am due to appear at the top of the tower sometime in the month of May. Today is the twelfth or maybe the fourteenth. Under these suspenseful circumstances, precise dates grow furtive. I can be fed to the stakes any time now; it is this lack of specificity—I wouldn't wish it on a steer in a slaughterhouse—that scrambles the circuitry, sunders my peace of mind, and plays hob with my nervous system.

And now I hear the flat resonance of calloused feet padding down the corridor, each footstep falling like cowflop in a pasture. I listen in a trance

of anxiety, straining to hear above the pounding of my heart. I have already been served my scummy breakfast bowl. It is too early for my scummy lunch. A sharp searing pain ricochets off my chest and tears like a raging Skilsaw through my shoulder and settles high in my left arm. Are those footsteps coming to get me? Is this the end of my muddle of a life, as short and unpredictable and insignificant as a sneeze?

The cowflop footsteps come closer. I cradle the agony in my arm close to my body. I turn my eyes, the pain prowling behind them, back to the window, to the statue of Valerie. I drink in her slow, assured beauty, those gently flaring hips—I can feel, I swear, the heat of her thighs.

She is, I suppose, all I ever wanted. All else is trumpery.