

PROLOGUE

Baghdad, Iraq
Saturday, Sept. 7, 2002

The sandstorm began in the early morning. For hours it had besieged the city, the final, in-your-face affront of an uncommonly brutish summer. From the west it came, out of the Syrian desert—the earth itself wafting skyward in great swaths, in huge diaphanous clouds, the hot, swirling wind whipping itself into a mad frenzy, driving the freighted air across the sky. Its coarse, particled cargo now had fallen upon every house and shop and café in Baghdad, and, in spite of the ramparts erected by man against it, the laden wind had found its way through infinitesimal cracks in window frames, through minute fissures in tiled walls, and through tiny breaches in wooden doors in every building around the city.

Over all Allah's faithful alike, from the high and mighty to the humblest of beggars—mattering not whether they resided in grand palaces, in mud abodes, or out on the street itself—the dust and dirt and sand had sifted down and down upon them, veiling them all with a sparkling sediment that soon became a suffocating chokehold. There was simply no escaping it; the wind would only pause now and then to gather up yet more of its grimy consignment. It seemed to do so now as the first light brightened the sky in the east, suffusing it with an alien glow. A strange hush had descended on the entombed city. In the amber air, mists of grit still drifted, curling lazily around the city, a yellow dog that no stick, no curse, could chase away.

Excerpt from A THOUSAND VEILS by D.J. Murphy
©2007 D.J.Murphy. All rights reserved.

From somewhere in the souk, the raucous chant of a muezzin, calling the faithful to prayer, broke the sepulchral stillness. Almost at once, a cat in the courtyard, as if by design, countered with a falsetto wail. The two cries became one, a dissonant duet of man and beast—each, in its own way, praising Allah.

Fatima Shihabi blinked open her eyes, dry from the dust that had infiltrated her bedroom, that now filled her nostrils with its gritty pungency. Outside, the chorus grew even more strident. Then, suddenly, the muezzin stopped, and, as if on cue, so did the cat, leaving a stunning silence. Only then did she hear the ring of the phone on her writing table, on the other side of the room. She sat up, threw her legs over the side of the bed, and ran to the desk. Who would be calling her, she wondered, at such an early hour? With a heart full of premonition, she picked up the phone. “Hello,” she said softly. There was no sound. “Hello . . . hello,” she repeated. “Is anyone there? Hello?”

The phone clicked dead at the other end. She stood on the tile floor, feeling the grit of the storm on the soles of her feet, and waited. After a moment, the phone rang again. Just once. Her premonition was even stronger now, and she didn’t answer. Another pause, and it rang a third time, but this time twice. Then it stopped.

A sudden hiss of sand drew her eyes to the window facing on the street. A menacing hiss, as if a viper lay seething somewhere in the haze, taunting her to venture outside. Along the sill the wind had piled a ridge of sand in a miniature dune. And now, it seemed, the wind was picking up again, relentless in its mindless mission to desertify the city. The air was so thick with dust she could barely see the front gate. Beyond, a rusty beige blanked the walled houses on the other side of Zankat al Hudh. The headlights of a passing car glimmered dimly through the dust. It would be a hard day for going about, for travel, she reflected. No, the entire city would be shut down. It could be an advantage.

She turned back to the phone. The calls had been a code. It meant that Ibrahim had been picked up by Mukhabarat. It would be just hours, a day or two at the most, until torture would work its charms. He would reveal her name. And he would tell them how much she knew. Then they would come for her. She knew them well. They would wait for another pause in the storm, but by then she would be long gone. For over two years she had expected this day to come. She had prepared for it. She had steeled herself for it.

Two years ago it had been “Sami,” then “Massoud,” and finally, a month ago, “Khalid” who was her designated escort, their names no doubt among the many *noms de guerre* of the makeshift corps of the Iraqi underground. “One hour, no more no less, after you get the call,” Ibrahim had told her, she was to rendezvous with “Khalid.” It would be the first step on the journey that would lead her to the West, to her brother Omar, and to freedom. She would travel on a Canadian passport her escort was to give her, since her Iraqi passport had been taken. Their route wouldn’t be easy. It would pass through desert country she knew in the south, across the Saudi border, then on to Riyadh, by plane to Munich, connecting to Montreal. There she would work and wait until this stupefying repression ended. It wouldn’t be long, she told herself. The UN inspectors would know. It was only a matter of time before they learned the truth—in spite of Saddam’s diabolical stratagem to hide the facts. And then the American planes would come back. In the meantime, her writing, the wellspring of her life, was being choked off. She was suffocating. And now she had no choice but to run for her life.

The back of her tongue felt gritty. She went into the bathroom and bent over the sink. She made herself cough, and spat a dirty brown mass into the bowl. Hurrying back into the bedroom, she threw on a loose-fitting, black cotton dress, with flowing sleeves that came down to her wrists, then put a few things into a small cloth satchel. Ibrahim had cautioned her to travel light, so she packed only a few clothes—a black silk dress with long sleeves, similar in style to the one she wore, a

**Excerpt from *A THOUSAND VEILS* by D.J. Murphy
©2007 D.J.Murphy. All rights reserved.**

change of undergarments, a small black head scarf, and a cotton sweater in case it got cool in Montreal before she could get to a shop. And since her sandals surely would be roughed up on the way to Riyadh, at the last minute she decided to add a sturdy pair of black oxfords. After these items, it wasn't hard to decide what else to bring or leave behind. For most of her life she had lived simply, with only a few possessions besides her clothing—several books, including her father's well-fingered copy of the Holy Koran, a gilt comb her grandmother had given her, a strip of brown ribbon, once ochre red, that had bound her mother's silky raven hair. The last was the only thing she still had from her mother, who had died of cholera long ago, when they were all living in Kassim, in the desert, an almost forgotten time before the Great War, before Saddam's treachery and American weaponry had devastated their lives.

She drew her father's Holy Koran from its place on her bookcase and, for several minutes, cradled it in her hands. Then she went over to her writing table and set the book down. From the drawer she took her mother's ribbon and her grandmother's comb and placed them in the book, just inside the front cover. Then she slowly closed the book, and left it in the center of the table. She picked up the satchel, pulled its strap over her left shoulder, and draped the large black fabric of the abayah over her head and shoulders, letting it fall around her. As she left her bedroom, she spotted a small Arabic-English dictionary on the bookcase and tucked it into her things. She then closed the door behind her and headed for the stairs.

Soon Iraq would be but a memory. She would free herself from this place of unspeakable fear, of unimaginable acts, of unbearable repression. Her life was now taking a turn, she believed, down a path leading only Fate could know where. And, as at the outset of all journeys, she calmed herself with the thought that, no matter what might happen, no matter what risks she would face, she would be the better for it in the end. And in the end she would survive, and, at the very least, she would be able to write.

**Excerpt from *A THOUSAND VEILS* by D.J. Murphy
©2007 D.J.Murphy. All rights reserved.**

The hardest thing of all was leaving her daughter Latifa behind. As she passed her daughter's chamber, she paused and gazed at her treasure, whose spidery limbs were splayed across the bed. She had wanted to bring Latifa with her, but her brother Abdeljelil considered the trip too long and dangerous, especially across the desert, and insisted that it would be better if Latifa stayed with him for a time. "You can always send for her once you're settled," he told Fatima. Children were often arrested and tortured when their parents fled abroad, but Latifa would remain in his household, directly under his protection, and safe by virtue of his position in the ministry and the party, not to mention the prominence of the Azizes, his wife's family. His wife, Zhaleh, the only Christian Fatima had ever known, had taken a particular interest in Latifa. Nevertheless, it would be no small chore for Abdeljelil and his wife to look after a twelve-year-old, whose nerves seemed wound even more tightly than her mother's.

It wouldn't be all that long, Fatima consoled herself, before she would see her daughter again. Meanwhile, she would miss her daughter like nothing else, she thought, no less than the blind beggar at the entrance to the souk missed her sight or the gnarled cripple who lived at the end of Zankat al Hudh missed his good leg. For a few moments she wavered, then went on down the stairs. Better to let her dear child sleep.

She tightened the abayah around her head, leaving only a slit for her eyes. Then, with her right shoulder, she leaned against the front door, heavy with the sand that had piled against it during the night, forcing it open. She emerged onto the portico, into a storm once again in full fury, and pushed the door closed behind her.

Hesitating momentarily, as if to summon her resolve, she stood tall and erect, a black-shrouded shadow at the top of the staircase. The wind tugged insistently at her abayah and the hot desert sand stung her eyelids as she took a deep breath behind the folds of her veil. Then she went down the cement steps and out the front gate, into the maelstrom.

**Excerpt from *A THOUSAND VEILS* by D.J. Murphy
©2007 D.J.Murphy. All rights reserved.**

