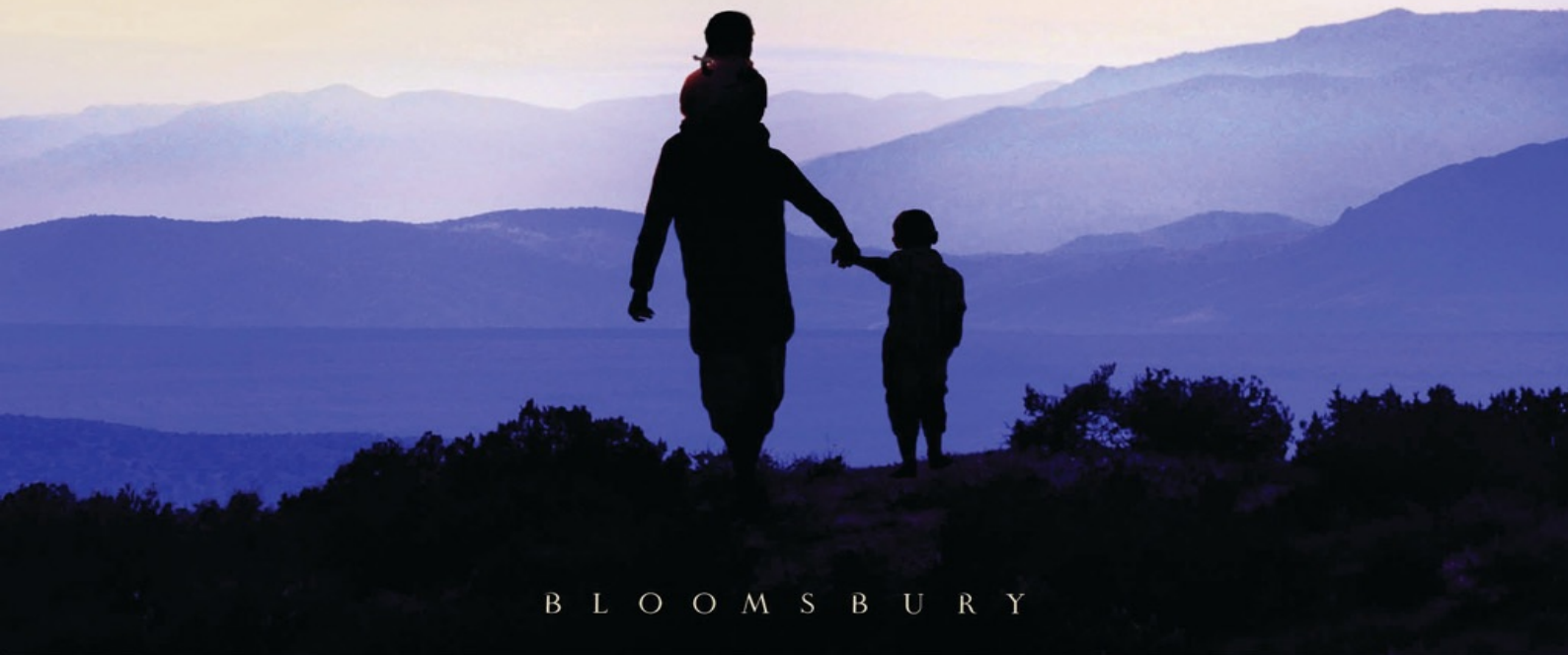
KHALED HOSSEINI

THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *The Kite Runner*
AND *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

And the Mountains Echoed



BLOOMSBURY

And the Mountains Echoed

KHALED HOSSEINI

BLOOMSBURY
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This book is dedicated to Haris and Farah,
both the noor *of my eyes, and to my father,*
who would have been proud

For Elaine

Out beyond ideas

of wrongdoing and rightdoing,

there is a field.

I'll meet you there.

—JELALUDDIN RUMI, 13th century

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Fall 1952

So, then. You want a story and I will tell you one. But just the one. Don't either of you ask me for more. It's late, and we have a long day of travel ahead of us, Pari, you and I. You will need your sleep tonight. And you too, Abdullah. I am counting on you, boy, while your sister and I are away. So is your mother. Now. One story, then. Listen, both of you, listen well. And don't interrupt.

Once upon a time, in the days when *div*s and *jinn*s and giants roamed the land, there lived a farmer named Baba Ayub. He lived with his family in a little village by the name of Maidan Sabz. Because he had a large family to feed, Baba Ayub saw his days consumed by hard work. Every day, he labored from dawn to sundown, plowing his field and turning the soil and tending to his meager pistachio trees. At any given moment you could spot him in his field, bent at the waist, back as curved as the scythe he swung all day. His hands were always callused, and they often bled, and every night sleep stole him away no sooner than his cheek met the pillow.

I will say that, in this regard, he was hardly alone. Life in Maidan Sabz was hard for all its inhabitants. There were other, more fortunate villages to the north, in the valleys, with fruit trees and flowers and pleasant air, and streams that ran with cold, clear water. But Maidan Sabz was a desolate place, and it didn't resemble in the slightest the image that its name, Field of Green, would have you picture. It sat in a flat, dusty plain ringed by a chain of craggy mountains. The wind was hot, and blew dust in the eyes. Finding water was a daily struggle because the village wells, even the deep ones, often ran low. Yes, there was a river, but the villagers had to endure a half-day walk to reach it, and even then its waters flowed muddy all year round. Now, after ten years of drought, the river too ran shallow. Let's just say that people in Maidan Sabz worked twice as hard to eke out half the living.

Still, Baba Ayub counted himself among the fortunate because he had a family that he cherished above all things. He loved his wife and never raised his voice to her, much less his hand. He valued her counsel and found genuine pleasure in her companionship. As for children, he was blessed with as many as a hand has fingers, three sons and two daughters, each of whom he loved dearly. His daughters were dutiful and kind and of good character and repute. To his sons he had taught already the value of honesty, courage, friendship, and hard work without complaint. They obeyed him, as good sons must, and

helped their father with his crops.

Though he loved all of his children, Baba Ayub privately had a unique fondness for one among them, his youngest, Qais, who was three years old. Qais was a little boy with dark blue eyes. He charmed anyone who met him with his devilish laughter. He was also one of those boys so bursting with energy that he drained others of theirs. When he learned to walk, he took such delight in it that he did it all day while he was awake, and then, troublingly, even at night in his sleep. He would sleepwalk out of the family's mud house and wander off into the moonlit darkness. Naturally, his parents worried. What if he fell into a well, or got lost, or, worst of all, was attacked by one of the creatures lurking the plains at night? They took stabs at many remedies, none of which worked. In the end, the solution Baba Ayub found was a simple one, as the best solutions often are: He removed a tiny bell from around the neck of one of his goats and hung it instead around Qais's neck. This way, the bell would wake someone if Qais were to rise in the middle of the night. The sleepwalking stopped after a time, but Qais grew attached to the bell and refused to part with it. And so, even though it didn't serve its original use, the bell remained fastened to the string around the boy's neck. When Baba Ayub came home after a long day's work, Qais would run from the house face-first into his father's belly, the bell jingling with each of his tiny steps. Baba Ayub would lift him up and take him into the house, and Qais would watch with great attention as his father washed up, and then he would sit beside Baba Ayub at suppertime. After they had eaten, Baba Ayub would sip his tea, watching his family, picturing a day when all of his children married and gave him children of their own, when he would be proud patriarch to an even greater brood.

Alas, Abdullah and Pari, Baba Ayub's days of happiness came to an end.

It happened one day that a *div* came to Maidan Sabz. As it approached the village from the direction of the mountains, the earth shook with each of its footfalls. The villagers dropped their shovels and hoes and axes and scattered. They locked themselves in their homes and huddled with one another. When the deafening sounds of the *div*'s footsteps stopped, the skies over Maidan Sabz darkened with its shadow. It was said that curved horns sprouted from its head and that coarse black hair covered its shoulders and powerful tail. They said its eyes shone red. No one knew for sure, you understand, at least no one living: The *div* ate on the spot those who dared steal so much as a single glance. Knowing this, the villagers wisely kept their eyes glued to the ground.

Everyone at the village knew why the *div* had come. They had heard the tales of its visits to other villages and they could only marvel at how Maidan Sabz had managed to escape its attention for so long. Perhaps, they reasoned,

the poor, stringent lives they led in Maidan Sabz had worked in their favor, as their children weren't as well fed and didn't have as much meat on their bones. Even so, their luck had run out at last.

Maidan Sabz trembled and held its breath. Families prayed that the *div* would bypass their home for they knew that if the *div* tapped on their roof, they would have to give it one child. The *div* would then toss the child into a sack, sling the sack over its shoulder, and go back the way it had come. No one would ever see the poor child again. And if a household refused, the *div* would take all of its children.

So where did the *div* take the children to? To its fort, which sat atop a steep mountain. The *div*'s fort was very far from Maidan Sabz. Valleys, several deserts, and two mountain chains had to be cleared before you could reach it. And what sane person would, only to meet death? They said the fort was full of dungeons where cleavers hung from walls. Meat hooks dangled from ceilings. They said there were giant skewers and fire pits. They said that if it caught a trespasser, the *div* was known to overcome its aversion to adult meat.

I guess you know which rooftop received the *div*'s dreaded tap. Upon hearing it, Baba Ayub let an agonized cry escape from his lips, and his wife fainted cold. The children wept with terror, and also sorrow, because they knew that the loss of one among them was now assured. The family had until the next dawn to make its offering.

What can I say to you of the anguish that Baba Ayub and his wife suffered that night? No parent should have to make a choice such as this. Out of the children's earshot, Baba Ayub and his wife debated what they should do. They talked and wept and talked and wept. All night, they went back and forth, and, as dawn neared, they had yet to reach a decision—which was perhaps what the *div* wanted, as their indecision would allow it to take five children instead of one. In the end, Baba Ayub collected from just outside the house five rocks of identical size and shape. On the face of each he scribbled the name of one child, and when he was done he tossed the rocks into a burlap sack. When he offered the bag to his wife, she recoiled as though it held a venomous snake.

"I can't do it," she said to her husband, shaking her head. "I cannot be the one to choose. I couldn't bear it."

"Neither could I," Baba Ayub began to say, but he saw through the window that the sun was only moments away from peeking over the eastern hills. Time was running short. He gazed miserably at his five children. A finger had to be cut, to save the hand. He shut his eyes and withdrew a rock from the sack.

I suppose you also know which rock Baba Ayub happened to pick. When he saw the name on it, he turned his face heavenward and let out a scream.

With a broken heart, he lifted his youngest son into his arms, and Qais, who had blind trust in his father, happily wrapped his arms around Baba Ayub's neck. It wasn't until Baba Ayub deposited him outside the house and shut the door that the boy realized what was amiss, and there stood Baba Ayub, eyes squeezed shut, tears leaking from both, back against the door, as his beloved Qais pounded his small fists on it, crying for Baba to let him back in, and Baba Ayub stood there, muttering, "Forgive me, forgive me," as the ground shook with the *div*'s footsteps, and his son screeched, and the earth trembled again and again as the *div* took its leave from Maidan Sabz, until at last it was gone, and the earth was still, and all was silence but for Baba Ayub, still weeping and asking Qais for forgiveness.

Abdullah. Your sister has fallen asleep. Cover her feet with the blanket. There. Good. Maybe I should stop now. No? You want me to go on? Are you sure, boy? All right.

Where was I? Ah yes. There followed a forty-day mourning period. Every day, neighbors cooked meals for the family and kept vigil with them. People brought over what offerings they could—tea, candy, bread, almonds—and they brought as well their condolences and sympathies. Baba Ayub could hardly bring himself to say so much as a word of thanks. He sat in a corner, weeping, streams of tears pouring from both eyes as though he meant to end the village's streak of droughts with them. You wouldn't wish his torment and suffering on the vilest of men.

Several years passed. The droughts continued, and Maidan Sabz fell into even worse poverty. Several babies died of thirst in their cribs. The wells ran even lower and the river dried, unlike Baba Ayub's anguish, a river that swelled and swelled with each passing day. He was of no use to his family any longer. He didn't work, didn't pray, hardly ate. His wife and children pleaded with him, but it was no good. His remaining sons had to take over his work, for every day Baba Ayub did nothing but sit at the edge of his field, a lone, wretched figure gazing toward the mountains. He stopped speaking to the villagers, for he believed they muttered things behind his back. They said he was a coward for willingly giving away his son. That he was an unfit father. A real father would have fought the *div*. He would have died defending his family.

He mentioned this to his wife one night.

"They say no such things," his wife replied. "No one thinks you are a coward."

"I can hear them," he said.

"It is your own voice you are hearing, husband," she said. She, however, did not tell him that the villagers *did* whisper behind his back. And what they whispered was that he'd perhaps gone mad.