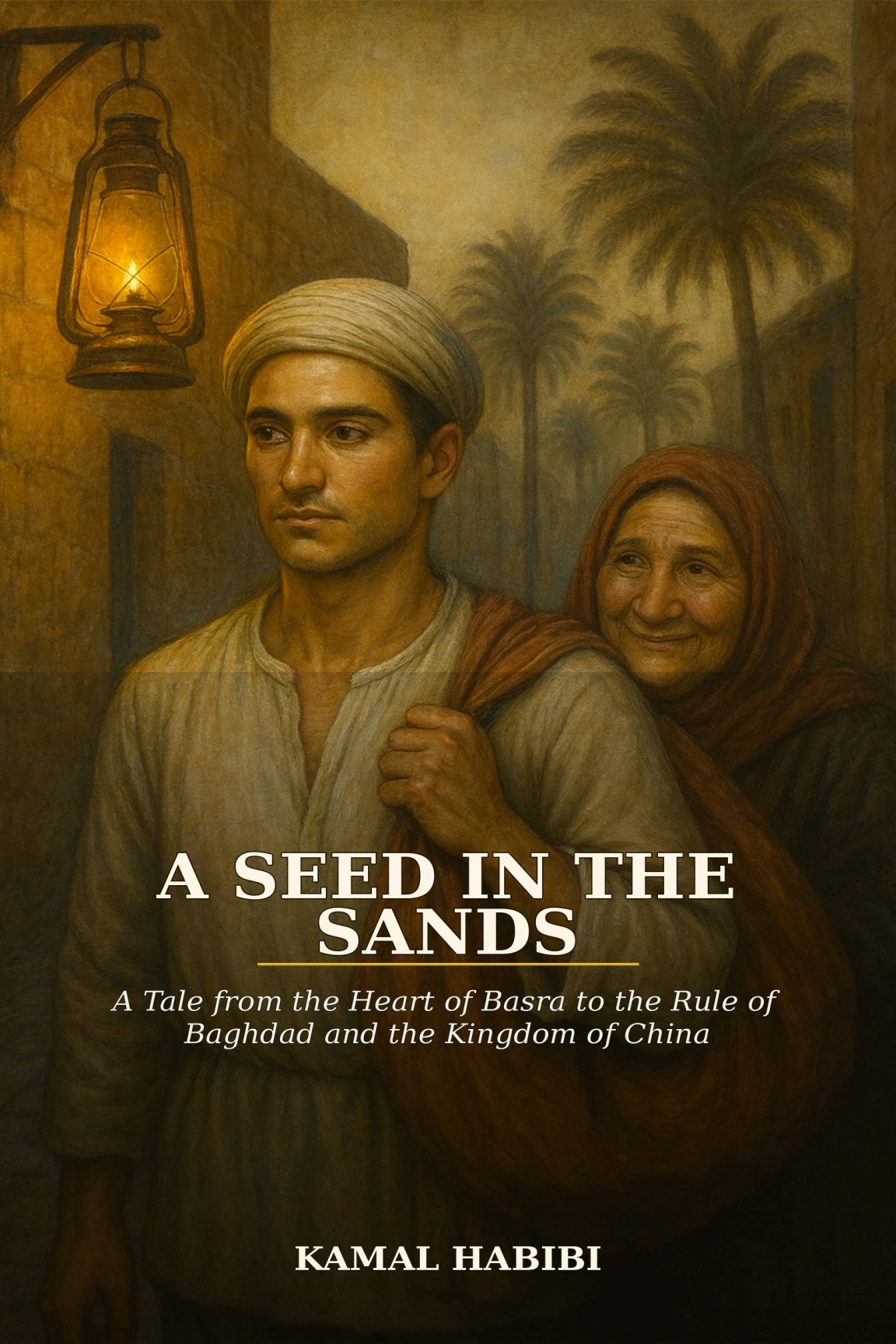




A SEED IN THE SANDS

*A Tale from the Heart of Basra to the Rule of
Baghdad and the Kingdom of China*

KAMAL HABIBI

A Seed in the Sands

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Kamal Habibi

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Preface

This book grew from a story my grandfather told us on a cold winter night, in the shadow of war, while all the guests sat gathered around a kerosene heater. He told it through a game of “Mouse and Cat”: the mouse was the storyteller, and the cat a curious listener. Yet behind that simple game lay a much larger tale - the story of Ahmad, a young man searching for his path, and a queen whose fate was woven into the tangled threads of destiny and deception. My grandfather used to say, “Stories are like seeds; if they are planted well, they will grow even in the sands.” This story was one of those seeds. It passed from his lips into our hearts, found a home on a cassette tape, and has now made its way onto paper so that it may live on. The mouse and the cat in this book are more than a game; they are a curtain drawn across another story. Behind them flow love, betrayal, journeys, and hope - a story handed down through generations. This book is an attempt to preserve those memories, so that the stories and laughter of the past will not disappear beneath the dust of forgetting. The writing may at times be simple and unadorned, but it comes from the heart - from nights when old stories brought warmth and comfort into our homes even amid the thunder of artillery and the fear of war. I am not a professional writer. If these pages sometimes seem plain, or if literary conventions are not always followed precisely, it is because I wanted the story to reach the page as I heard it: intimate, unpretentious, and straight from the heart.

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A Morning Full of Doubt

That morning, as I was getting ready for work as usual, my mind was crowded with uncertainty. I kept asking myself, “Should I really start this at all? And if I do, where am I supposed to begin?”

I wandered aimlessly around the living room, arranging ideas one after another in my head. Should I write this part first, or that one? Yet every route led me back to the same point of hesitation, and I would tell myself, “What business do I have doing something like this?”

I opened and closed the refrigerator several times without taking anything out. I pretended I was preparing breakfast, but in truth my attention was somewhere else entirely. The same thoughts kept circling in my head: "I have to start... No, first I should write this section... or perhaps that other part..."

I kept telling myself, "I have never written a book in my life. I have only written a few articles about IT. Why should I write a book? What does writing a book have to do with someone like me?"

An old saying came to mind: "Little ant, what are you yourself that you want to wrestle?" The thought turned over and over in my mind like a thorn that would not come loose.

Time was passing and I was getting late. I hurriedly pulled a shirt from the wardrobe and began ironing it. When I was done, I laid it over a chair to put on later. As usual, I packed my breakfast and lunch into containers and placed them on the shoe cabinet so I could pick them up after putting on my shoes.

But while I was tying my shoes, the thoughts rushed back again. I closed the door behind me and stepped outside, only then realizing that I had taken neither the food, nor my keys, nor even my mobile phone. Worse still, the shirt I was wearing was not the one I had just ironed - I had put on another one entirely.

I thought, "Well, what am I supposed to do now? How am I going to get to work?"

At that moment an idea occurred to me. I went to the little grocery store at the end of the street and borrowed some money. I told the shopkeeper, "I'll definitely pay you back when I return this evening." With the money in hand, I set off.

The September air was heavy and dusty. The sun had only just risen, and a mild breeze drifted through the streets. With the money I had borrowed from the grocer, I managed to hire a modest car. Its paint had faded somewhat and the seats smelled old, but it was enough for me.

I sat in the passenger seat beside the driver and took a deep breath. The smell of worn leather mixed with the woody scent of the dashboard in the breeze flowing through the window. The driver was a middle-aged man with a tilted cap and an unlit cigarette tucked into the corner of his mouth. Without saying a word, he drove on. The road twisted before my eyes like a gray ribbon, as if inviting me on a journey whose destination was still unknown.

I rolled down the window and the cool breeze brushed my face like a gentle hand. The smell of damp earth from the roadside blended with the scent of the trees. In the distance came the occasional horn of a passing car. And in the middle of all that movement, my thoughts crashed against the shore of my mind like restless waves: Why should I write a book? I was the man who, in a fit of distraction that very morning, had forgotten his breakfast and his house key, and even the wrinkled white shirt I had thrown on seemed to announce that I had dressed in a hurry. How could I possibly accomplish something as large as writing a book?

Yet something kept tugging at the back of my mind. September had always smelled of change to me; the end of summer and the approach of autumn seemed to offer another chance for a fresh beginning. I looked at the road and thought, "Maybe writing a book is like hiring this car. At first it is difficult, full of uncertainty and expense. But once you start moving, the road itself begins to carry you forward."

The car suddenly dropped into a pothole and jolted violently, pulling me out of my thoughts. The driver grumbled, "These roads are full of bumps, sir!" I smiled and rested my head against the window. Inside, I thought, "Maybe writing is the same - a road full of potholes and rough patches. But if I keep going, sooner or later I will reach the destination." That thought lit up among my doubts like a tiny spark - a spark called "beginning."

Two days earlier, I had finished reading *The Alchemist*, a book I found both interesting and instructive. When I closed its final page, I kept thinking, “Perhaps I, too, have a story like that young man’s - a story that, if written down, might inspire someone else.”

It was not a passing thought. For years, before going to sleep at night, I have listened to a story that has always stayed with me, simply to quiet my mind. Almost every night, when I am exhausted by the day’s work and worries and thoughts begin to fall over me like heavy chains, I return to that same story.

The moment I hear the voice, a soft calm seems to arrive with it. Many times my eyes have closed and I have slipped into a deep sleep before the story even reached its end. By now I may have listened to it more than a thousand times, yet hearing it again still gives me pleasure.

The story not only calms my mind; it also brings distant memories back to life - memories of my childhood in the 1980s. They were simple days, filled with longing and small joys: days when the shine of a rusty bicycle, the sound of a plastic ball bouncing in the alley, or an ice pop from the neighborhood shop could make up our entire world.

When I think of those memories, I realize that stories are not merely tales told for entertainment. They are bridges between past and present; between the child still living inside me and the man I am today, searching for something greater. Just as *The Alchemist* became a bridge between dream and reality for the young man in its story, perhaps this story could become a bridge for me as well... a bridge toward writing.

The moment I arrived at the office, I quickly picked up the annual planner I always used for my daily work. It was already a year out of date, but that did not matter to me; by then it served more as a notebook than a calendar.

I opened it somewhere in the middle and hurriedly put pen to paper. Thoughts spun through my head like a whirlwind, arriving and disappearing one after another. Whenever I found a moment, I seized one of them and put it down on the page. I knew the notes were scattered and had not yet found their proper places, but I did not care. All I wanted was to capture the stream of thoughts flowing through my mind.

I wrote hungrily, so fast that the pen could barely keep up. My handwriting was poor and untidy, but that did not matter either. The only thing that mattered was “writing.” Writing and writing and writing...

Suddenly, a calm and friendly voice pulled me out of my writing trance.

“I’ve just made fresh tea. Would you like some?”

It was the office attendant. I looked up, gave him a faint smile, and, still feeling as though my hand were glued to the paper, said:

“Thank you. I’d appreciate that.”

Then I lowered my head again and set the pen moving. When I finally came back to myself, I had written six pages. It was a lot for a beginning, yet my mind was still crowded with sentences waiting in line to come out.

Reality, however, soon made itself known. I had office work to do. I sighed, closed the planner, turned on my computer, and opened my email as I did every day. The inbox was full of work messages, but I sat there behind my desk with my mind still full of unfinished sentences.



Shadows of War over Childhood Memories

And at last, I wrote and wrote...

It was 1985. The war was still going on, and I was only six years old. In those days my family and I lived in the city of Bukan. Every morning I went to school carrying a small bag that seemed almost bigger than I was. Yet no day passed in complete peace, because every so often the air-raid sirens would blare from loudspeakers around the city. The sound was sharp and drawn out, enough to shake our little hearts, warning that warplanes were approaching.

The moment the siren sounded, the teachers would shout through the classrooms, “Children, quickly! Get to the shelter!” We would pour out of the room in a rush of noise and running feet. The school shelter stood in a corner of the courtyard, a half-dark concrete space. One side had steps, while the other was a sloping surface built almost like a slide. On ordinary days we children used that slope exactly that way, laughing as we slid from the top to the bottom. But when the air-raid alarm rang, the very same “slide” became our refuge from the fear in the sky.

At that age we still did not understand that the aircraft roaring above us had come from Iraq and might drop deadly bombs on our towns. To us it felt more like a game: the deafening noise of the planes, racing toward the shelter, and the frightened but still childish whispers among us.

Once, when the siren sounded, word spread that our city was about to be bombed. My father loaded all of us into his old Peykan, whose once-blue paint was gradually fading toward yellow: my mother, my brothers and sisters, and me. We hurried out of the city toward a field that seemed safer. There my father let us out and said, “Stay here. I’m going back to bring the other neighbors.” He made several trips in that same car, taking more families away from danger. In that field I felt something strange, a mixture of happiness and fear. On one hand there were no planes overhead, and in the open field we felt free. We could run, play, and shout, and that made me happy. On the other hand, fear had settled inside me, though I could not have explained why. More than anything, I was frightened because I could see that the adults were frightened. My mother whispered prayers under her breath; the neighbors looked anxiously at the sky; and their fear passed into us. As a child, I did not truly fear death because I did not yet understand what death meant. But when I saw the worried faces of my parents and heard the trembling voices of people praying, anxiety entered me too. That moment was a world of contradictions: part short excursion and playtime

in a field, part waiting for something unknown and terrifying. In those days people followed most war news on the radio. I remember when word came that Khorramshahr had been liberated. One of our neighbors burst into our home full of excitement and, still out of breath, told my mother, "Khorramshahr is free!" The whole house filled with joy. I had no real idea what the liberation of Khorramshahr meant, but when I saw tears of happiness in the adults' eyes and smiles on every face, I became happy too. I was only a child and did not know why, but the shared joy swept me along like a wave.

Very few people owned televisions in those years. Among the many houses around us, ours was the only one with a TV - a large set kept inside a lockable wooden cabinet. Opening it felt to us children like opening a window onto another world. Even now I can still picture the polished wooden frame and remember the smell of its old wood.

Popular television series such as Soltan-o Shaban and Years Away from Home - which everyone simply called Oshin - were broadcast during that period. My father loved them. I, however, always hoped Soltan-o Shaban would be on. Not because I understood its story at the time, but because of the sweet little ritual that had grown around it in our home. My mother would spread a large white cloth over the carpet, then come out of her room carrying a bowl full of walnuts. To me, the sound of the walnuts knocking together was more beautiful than any music; it promised a night full of treats and excitement. We children would sit eagerly around the cloth, take our share, and use an old clothespin to pry the walnut kernels from their hard shells. Sometimes one of us would cry proudly, "Look! I got it out whole!" and everyone would laugh.

Nights when Oshin was due to air had a mood all their own. In the evening, people would watch the light on the utility pole. If it came on, everyone breathed more easily, happy that the electricity might stay on that night. Soon children's voices would

rise through the alleys: “There’s power! Oshin is on tonight!” Neighbors who did not have a television would come to our house, and the rooms filled with people. Children sat on the floor in front of the television while the adults leaned against the red cushions lined along the wall. Even after the episode ended, no one was eager to leave. Conversation carried on - about the war, the price of rice and sugar, and memories from long ago. We children had to serve the guests, carrying trays of tea glasses and sugar, and sometimes plates piled with apples and oranges. I remember having to bend low so everyone could reach easily. It was tiring for us, but the sweetness of everyone being together washed the tiredness away.

Sometimes the electricity went out in the middle of an episode. Suddenly the whole house would fall into darkness, filled only with disappointed cries of “Oh!” and nervous laughter. My father would light the kerosene lamp, and the children gathered excitedly around its glow. In moments like those, Oshin was really only an excuse for being together - even when the episode was left unfinished.



The Red Record Button: The Tale of Agha Salim

The days went on much the same until one day my father came home carrying a cardboard box. From the picture printed on it, we could guess that there was a cassette recorder inside. At the time I had no idea what model it was or what it could do, but the sparkle in my father's eyes told me he had bought something valuable.

He carefully placed the box on top of our large wooden cabinet and said, "Nobody is allowed to touch it until I come back." That one sentence was enough to multiply our curiosity a thousandfold. Several times we tried dragging over a chair or stool so we could bring the box down and steal a quick look, but the fear of being punished - and probably beaten - always made us give up.

At last evening came, and my father returned home with my uncle Sa'dun. We all waited eagerly for the moment the box would be opened. After dinner, Father brought it down and handed it to my uncle. My uncle, who was a few years older than my father, studied the box closely and said, "This is a good cassette recorder! It has two decks and two speakers."

I had no idea what "two decks" meant. I simply stared at him, hanging on every word.

We children gathered around my uncle like spectators waiting for a show to begin, never taking our eyes off his hands. Every few minutes Father warned us, "Move back! Don't get so close!" We would retreat a little, only to creep forward again step by step.

My uncle had experience buying and selling cassette players and radios, so he went to work like a specialist. He connected the speakers and cables, checked the buttons, and finally prepared the machine to be switched on. In a serious, commanding voice he said, "Bring me a cassette tape."

My brother sprang up and fetched one. With the confidence of an expert, my uncle blew on the tape a few times, placed it in deck number one, murmured "In the name of God," and pressed Play. Suddenly music filled the room from both speakers. To us children, it sounded like magic.

My uncle immediately warned us, "Never put a tape in deck number two. You'll damage both the machine and the cassette." I did not understand what he meant then, but later I learned that

the second deck was used for recording sound and had a red button that had to be pressed to record.

The cassette recorder also came with a wired microphone, attached to a cable about two meters long. When you plugged it in and pressed Record, the voice of the person speaking into the microphone came through the two speakers. Before long, that microphone became our secret toy. Whenever our parents were away, we took turns standing in front of it, reciting poems or making ridiculous noises, thrilled to hear our own voices echo back at us.

But we were always in danger of being caught. If our parents found out, there would certainly be a great scolding: "Didn't your uncle tell you not to use that? You'll break it!" And we knew a proper beating might be waiting for us as well.

Within a few days the cassette recorder had found its place in our household. In the evenings, when Father came home from work, he would put his favorite tape into the machine before even changing his clothes, then sit peacefully on the carpet. Most of the time the speakers carried either the radio or Kurdish and local songs. For us children those sounds were something new. Some songs were sad and seemed to fill the silence of the house; others had such cheerful rhythms that our feet began tapping to the beat without our even noticing.

Yet the most fascinating part for us was still the wired microphone. On days when we were sure our parents were not home, we launched our secret operation. First we closed the doors. Then one of us stood guard, ready to warn the others if we heard Father's or Mother's footsteps on the stairs. After that we took turns at the microphone. My brother sang children's songs, I tried to imitate the voice of my schoolteacher, and my sister Leila - Shler - dissolved the whole gathering into laughter with her giggles. When our voices came out of the speakers, we were delighted, as though we were performing on the stage of a real concert.

Once, during one of those games, we nearly got caught. I was loudly reciting the morning poem from school when suddenly we heard the door. We all leapt up as if struck by lightning. My brother hit Stop, my sister shoved the microphone under a blanket, and I pretended to be doing my homework. When Father came in, he first looked around suspiciously, then asked, “Was I hearing music? You haven’t been touching the recorder, have you?” All of us answered together, “No, Dad!” and lowered our heads. My heart was pounding so hard I thought we would be exposed at any moment, but fortunately Father noticed nothing and went about his business. That night we laughed for a long time over how close our great secret had come to being discovered.

For our family, the cassette recorder became more than a machine for playing music; it became part of our shared memories. On nights when the electricity failed, instead of watching television we gathered around the recorder, which could even run on eight batteries. Father would put on a tape of old stories or traditional music, and we would fall asleep listening to those sounds. Sometimes Mother let us use the microphone on special occasions, such as the eve of Nowruz, and we would recite poems. On those nights our home felt like a little radio station whose programs we produced ourselves.

On one cold winter day, the doorbell suddenly rang. Mother said, “Open the door. It’s probably your grandfather.”

Excited and in a hurry, I ran down the old stairs of the house. They were tall and steep enough to leave even an adult a little breathless. We children were always racing down them to see who could set the fastest record, and that day the spirit of competition seemed to return at once.

When I opened the door, a large elderly man stood before me, nearly two meters tall. He wore neat traditional clothing and had thrown a heavy overcoat over his shoulders against the winter cold. A local-style cap covered his head, and his bright, gentle

face seemed warm enough to comfort anyone who looked at him. In Kurdish, garments like his are called kewa-o-patol, while the headwear is known as pich-o-kolah.

He was my grandfather, Agha Salim. Once, in the village of Harmileh, he had been known for his particular customs and refined manners, though some time earlier he had moved to the city of Saqqez. With a warm smile and a voice full of affection, he said, "Hello, Kawa!"

My name is Kamal, but with his own special tenderness he always called me "Kawa." He took my hand and came inside. My mother welcomed him and respectfully guided him upstairs so he could rest after his long journey.

We took him to the guest room - the room we children were ordinarily forbidden to enter and whose door usually stayed locked. Mother had lit the kerosene heater, which had not been used for several weeks. Now the smell of burning kerosene and its gentle warmth filled the room. Everything was prepared to receive a guest. Mother led Grandfather beside the heater and folded a blanket several times to make a comfortable seat for him.

Grandfather removed his overcoat, sat beside the heater, took a deep breath, and said, "How warm and comfortable it is."

We children gathered around him, delighted to have an excuse to laugh and listen to his sweet little stories. The smell of the food Mother was preparing, and the large amount cooking on the stove, made it clear that we would have guests that evening. Kindly, Mother told us, "Children, we have guests tonight. Be careful not to make a mess of the room."

A few hours passed, and Grandfather told us short, delightful stories in that same warm, intimate voice. Every sentence seemed full of memories, life, and the freshness of earlier days. Eventually Mother said, "Children, come out now. Grandfather wants to rest."

As we left the room, we saw him lying beside the heater in his neat clothes, resting peacefully. The soft warmth of the heater fell across his face and gave the room a feeling of safety and comfort - a feeling that settled over us children as well.

Night arrived, and the guests came one by one. After dinner the gathering quieted into conversation. They revisited old memories, and every exchange brought smiles and laughter into the room. I was still too young to understand much of what they remembered. I mostly watched, trying to figure out what their laughter and stories were about, though at that age they held little interest for me.

In the middle of all this, Grandfather noticed the new cassette recorder and said with a warm smile, "Congratulations! You bought a new one."

"Yes," Father answered proudly, and began describing the recorder, repeating much of what my uncle had said earlier, though in his own voice and with even more enthusiasm and pride.

Suddenly my older brother Amir said excitedly, "Grandfather, it has a microphone too!"

Grandfather looked surprised. "Really?"

Amir laughed. "Yes. Do you want to try it?"

Grandfather smiled gently, his eyes full of kindness. "Yes, I'll try it."

Amir hurried away, returned with the microphone, connected it to the recorder, and handed it to Grandfather. Grandfather spoke a few words into it. When his own voice came through the speakers, all of us children burst out laughing and excitement swept through the room. At that moment Mother said gently, "Why don't you tell us a story, or sing something for us?"

Grandfather paused for a moment. "I'm not really in the mood."

But Father insisted. "Tell us one of your stories."

After a little persuasion and refusal back and forth, Grandfather smiled and said, "I'll tell you only the story of the Mouse and the Cat." We all agreed eagerly, our eyes shining.

Amir said, "Let me get the cassette ready."

He rewound the tape to the beginning and placed it in deck number two - the very "dangerous" deck my uncle had always warned us not to use. As Amir prepared the recorder, my uncle watched him carefully, ready to correct him if he put the cassette in the wrong way. Then, with a voice carrying both excitement and a touch of humor, Amir asked Grandfather, "Ready?"

Grandfather cleared his throat, settled himself more comfortably on the folded blanket, and calmly said, "Yes."

Amir counted slowly, "One, two, three..." and pressed the red button.

The room fell silent. Only Grandfather's warm voice flowed from the speakers, and we, our hearts beating fast, disappeared into the story - a story being preserved not only in the air around us, but forever on tape. In a calm voice filled with kindness, Grandfather began: "Once upon a time, in an old village far away..."

End of Free Sample

The story continues with:

***The Mouse and the Cat:
A Legend Begins in a Dark Burrow***

Thank you for reading the opening chapters of
A Seed in the Sands.

Kamal Habibi