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books

'An immersive and bracing exploration of one woman's search for freedom amid repression...Gin is a delightful heroine whose tenacity animates those around her, a quality that lays the groundwork for an extraordinary adventure and unsettling conclusion. Barnes deftly teases humanity out of corruption and hypocrisy, and her language is finely wrought and her pacing masterful — Gin's story develops languidly, then draws taut as the stakes rise.'

Publishers Weekly (starred review)

'This is a mesmerizing novel, set in the American heartland and Saudi Arabia — two locations that on the face of it couldn't be more different. But from the point of view of a woman not allowed to be herself, the two places have startling similarities. We read, in part, to be taken elsewhere. *In the Kingdom of Men* succeeds mightily in this. We also read because we enjoy good writing. You'll find that in abundance here.'

Elizabeth Berg, author of *Once Upon a Time, There Was You*

'A swashbuckling, thrilling ride of a book, *In the Kingdom of Men* transports readers to the sands of Arabia and the recesses of the human heart. Ginny McPhee is a heroine unlike any other, negotiating love, politics, the intricacies of marriage, and the journey to selfhood. A vivid and compelling tale.'

Diana Abu-Jaber, author of *Birds of Paradise*

'This novel has it all: an intriguing story that thunders to a thrilling climax, characters who grab our hearts, gorgeous prose and a setting that stuns the reader at every turn. Arabia!'

Ellen Sussman, author of *French Lessons*

In the Kingdom of Men

KIM BARNES

 WINDMILL BOOKS

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Rome, Italy

Here is the first thing you need to know about me: I'm a bare-foot girl from red-dirt Oklahoma, and all the marble floors in the world will never change that.

Here is the second thing: that young woman they pulled from the Arabian shore, her hair tangled with mangrove—my husband didn't kill her, not the way they say he did.

There is so much, now, that you will want to know, that you believe I will be able to tell you. If not, why even begin?

Because I can't stop thinking of her, not yet eighteen, perfectly, immutably silent, just as they wanted her to be. It is the dream of her face shining up from the sea like a watery moon that still haunts me. Not even her mother will speak her name.

Because, among these Roman people whose language flows like a river over rocks, my own name drops heavy as a stone, no husband, no father, no family or tribe to tether me.

Because I don't know who I am anymore and have forgotten who it was I meant to be.

Let me tell it from the beginning, then, remember the truths of my own story so that I might better bear witness to hers, trace the threads to that place where our lives intertwined—one of us birthed to iron-steeped clay, the other to fallow sand, each of us brought to this place by men born of oil.

Chapter One

In the beginning—these three words my daily bread, recited at the kitchen table in our shack in Shawnee, the Bible open in front of me. Before then, just as the Korean War was beginning, I remember my mother humming honky-tonk as she fried spuds for our dinner, two-stepping to the table in an imaginary waltz. She was the daughter of a Methodist circuit preacher who extolled separation from the world, and his wife, who bowed her head in submission and held her tongue even as she secreted away the money she made selling eggs, a penny at a time added to the sock hidden beneath the nest of her beloved Rhode Island Red, a hen so fierce and prone to peck that my grandfather gave it wide berth.

My mother loved to tell the story: how my grandmother scraped and saved until she had enough for a train ticket back to her family in Pawhuska, then rose one morning, fixed her husband a big pot of pork hocks and brown beans—enough to last him a week—made bacon and extra biscuits so he wouldn't have to go without breakfast, ironed his handkerchiefs and starched his shirts, then told him that one of the ladies of the church was

having female troubles and needed her care. My grandmother walked out the door with a bundle of biscuits under one arm, her infant daughter in the other, went straight to the train station, didn't even leave a note. My grandfather refused to divorce her, would never forgive the way she had deceived him, but maybe he should have known—the way that women have always lied, risking their souls to save their sorry lives.

It was eighteen years later when my father, two weeks hitchhiking Route 66 and still no job, came looking for work at the Osage County Fair and first laid eyes on my mother—a rodeo princess pitching cow chips for charity. He must have fallen in love with her right then—the way she could clean up pretty as a new nickel or muck down on her knees in manure, that sunshine smile never breaking. She brought him home to meet her mother, and I like to imagine that moment: the three of them at the table, the late light warm through the window, and all of them laughing at their good fortune—to have found one another, to share the sweet fruit of that pie.

My parents were married that winter, and the next winter, I was born. When my father was drafted, my mother and I moved in with my grandmother to wait out the war. Two years later, the official from the State Department arrived, telling how my father had died in the Home-by-Christmas Offensive, that the president was sorry, as was the nation. My only memories of him reside in the stories my mother told.

And then, that summer I turned seven, the cancer came up through my mother's bones like it had been biding its time, took what smile was left, took her teeth and blanched her skin to parchment. I would lie in our bed and cradle my dolly in a tea towel while my mother wept and prayed that God would take her and my grandmother offered another spoonful of laudanum. When, finally, God answered my mother's prayers, and then, only a few months later, my grandmother was felled by a blood clot that the

doctor said had bubbled up from her broken heart, I was ordered into my grandfather's custody.

He came to the city orphanage in his old Ford pickup, and I watched from the doorway as he approached, a lean man, sinewy and straight, with a strong way of moving forward, like he was forcing his way through water. Pinched felt hat, starched white shirt, black tie and trousers—only the seams of his brogans, caked with mud, gave him away for the scabland farmer he was when not in the pulpit.

My nurse had dressed me in a modest blouse and jumper, but I refused the hard shoes she offered and wore instead my mother's old riding boots, an extra sock stuffed in each toe. The first thing my grandfather did was have me open my suitcase. My doll, my mother's rhinestone tiara, her wedding ring—all worldly, my grandfather said, the devil's tricks and trinkets, and he left them with the orphanage to pawn.

I wailed all the way to Shawnee, but my grandfather didn't speak a word. By the time we took the road south that led to the flat edge of town—that marginal land where the poorest whites and poorer blacks scraped out a living—I had cried myself into a snubbing stupor. He held my door, waited patiently as I climbed down and stood facing the narrow two-room shack with its broken foundation and sagging roof, the outhouse in back a haphazard construction of split pine. I trailed him through the kitchen, its walls papered with newsprint, pasted with flour and water, stained dark with soot, and into the bedroom, where he placed my suitcase on the horsehair mattress. He peered down at me, laid his hand on top of my head. "God will keep us," he said, pulled the door shut, and left me alone.

From the room's single window, I saw that he had changed into his patched work clothes, and I watched as he hitched the jenny mule, threw the reins over his shoulders, and returned to the plot he'd been plowing. What I found in that house was lit-

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 tle: tenpenny nails in the wall, hung with my grandfather's good hat and suit; a two-door cupboard that held Karo, flour, sugar, a salted ham hock; an oilcloth-covered table and two weak chairs; a short-wicked kerosene lantern; a potbellied stove streaked with creosote; the cot that my grandfather had set in the kitchen and covered with an old wool blanket so that I might have the bed. I moved to the porch, found the washbasin, the straight razor, the leather strop, and a cropped piece of flannel that he used for a towel. I sat on the single-plank step and watched him chuck the mule up one row and down another until he put the plow away, came and stood in front of me, wiping the sweat from his brow.

"Where's my dinner, sister?" he asked gently. I hadn't thought to feed him, didn't know how. He led me back to the cupboard, showed me the cast-iron skillet, the knife, how to make red-eye gravy with the ham drippings, flour, and salt. Over the next week, we would eat that ham right down to the bone, boil it for soup on Saturday, crack it for marrow. I learned what it meant to be hungry, learned that Sundays meant more food and a healthy helping of God's word.

Because he now had a child to care for, my grandfather left the circuit, and he counted it as God's goodwill that a small congregation east of the city was in need of a pastor. The parishioners, some white, most black, folded us in, and though I had no siblings, they called me Sister Gin. I wasn't yet old enough to understand what the townspeople might think—that poor little white girl—and spent the Sabbath wedged in a hard oak pew between skin that ran from pale pink to sallow, dusky to dark. My grandfather's dictates were absolute, but in his eyes, all of God's children, *red and yellow, black and white*, were bound by the same mortal sin, given the same chance at redemption. I sat in fascinated horror, the sanctified moaning around me, as I listened to my grandfather's hellfire sermons that foretold the woe of every unsaved soul. Blood to the horse's bridle, flames licking the flesh—the punishment that

would come my way if I didn't repent, but no matter how hard I considered my deeds, I didn't yet know what sins to confess.

After the hymns had been sung—*happy are the faithful dead!*—the churchwomen prepared a fellowship meal at one shack or another. Your color didn't matter when it came to who was served and where, but whether you were male or female did. The men were fed where they sat, their wives fixing their plates before their own, wise to their husbands' predilections: Brother Fink ate only the chicken's legs, thighs, and the tail he called the pope's nose; Brother Jackson required that his food be layered—a mound of potatoes topped with meat and smothered with a generosity of gravy. The boys not old enough to be in the men's circle and the girls too young for kitchen help were called in next, made to scrub their faces, and put to the table. Only after the men and the children were served did the women eat: bread heels, chicken backs, the wateriest remains of corn pudding. They ate with babies nursing at their breasts and whispered their hushed stories of hard births and tumorous wombs, jumping up when called to bring another biscuit or glass of sweet tea to the men, whose talk was of dropping wheat prices, Nazi spies, and the local criminal element that ran bootleg out of the bottoms and carried razor-sharp knives. I sat quiet in whatever corner I could find, acting like I wasn't listening, but what I heard told me all that I needed to know: that the world was fallen, that my only hope lay in the grace and glory of God, that Satan was waiting for me to falter at every turn, that he might appear to me as the Angel of Light, deceive me with his wicked tongue, and lead me to hell as his bride.

How many times did I rouse from some nightmare, call out for my mother to save me? I might have left the trappings of my old life behind, but my grief had packed up and moved right along with me, shaped and weighted as though it had a life of its own. I woke one night so sure that the devil had found me that I ran to the cot in the kitchen, told my grandfather that I could feel

that grief lying right there beside me like a panting black dog. He lit a candle, took a vial of oil from the corner of the cupboard, made the sign of the cross on my forehead, and pressed his palms to my ears. "Demon, by the authority given to me by the Lord Jesus Christ, I command that you leave this child!" He gripped my head tighter, shook it like a gourd. "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, come out of her, I command you!" He drew his hands away so quickly that the suction nearly deafened me. When I opened my eyes, I saw the tears pooling in the dark shallows of his face, his mouth arched as though that demon had leaped right out of me and into him. I went back to my bed, now cold, and wished I had never left it, had kept my hurt to myself. Silence was a lesson I learned well—how to mute my body, my voice, my heart.

That fall, my first day of school, my grandfather rode me to town on the mule because the pickup had broken down and no amount of prayer would fix it. As we approached the playground, I saw all the white children pointing and laughing until the pretty young teacher came out to scold them. If I hadn't understood it before, I knew it then: we were different, *I* was different, not only a member of the Holy Roller church but an orphan from the south edge of town who lived where most whites wouldn't. I slid from the mule's broad back, kept my head down, and followed the teacher into the room, where she showed me my desk and placed a picture book in my hands. "You can read for a while," she said kindly, and left me to lose myself in the pages even as the other students filed in and began reciting their numbers. From that point on, books became my solace, my escape. I brought them home from the library, hid them from the eyes of my grandfather, who believed that only the word of God had a place in his house, that stories outside of the scripture might lead me astray.

I completed elementary, kept growing, went with the junior high nurse to buy what my grandfather called my unmentionables—soft-cupped brassieres, panties, sanitary belts

and napkins—then stood in my bedroom, confounded by the hooks and straps, ashamed that my grandfather would no longer meet my eyes when I came in from the outhouse. From him, I learned that I was the daughter of Eve, a danger to myself, a temptation to those around me. Couldn't wear pants, only skirts that covered my knees. Couldn't wear makeup or jewelry to draw the attention of men. Couldn't cut my hair, which was my veil of modesty. Couldn't preach because Paul said so. Suffer not as a woman. When revival came and the Spirit descended, the sisters who were slain fell flat on their backs, arms raised to heaven, ecstatic in their possession, and I was the one whose charge it was to hasten forward and cover their legs with the lap cloths that they themselves had sewn so that their modesty might be maintained. What would it feel like, I wondered, to give myself over so completely, to fall under such a spell? But not even the fear that I would spend my eternal life in hell brought the call that would lead me to kneel at the altar, lay myself at the feet of the Lord, and the church people noticed. I learned to pretend the conviction I did not feel, to pray with my mouth open, my eyes closed, my hands raised to heaven. I was saved—couldn't they see? Born again. It was a lie I didn't realize I was living, a way to survive the surly dictates of that thing called faith.

Who knows what gives rise to our sensibilities? Maybe it was some seed of resistance sown in me by my grandmother that allowed me to keep my soul to myself. Maybe it was just the way I was—*turned funny*, I heard them say. They didn't even bother to hide their mouths. No matter the color of my skin, I was the kind of girl they watched from the corners of their eyes, the kind of girl that brought them to predictions—headed to ruin if I didn't get my head straight, my heart right with God. I wasn't like them, wasn't like anybody I knew.

It was the characters in books who spoke to me, reflected some secret part of myself. When the librarian handed me *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I read it straight through, then hid it beneath my bed.