

A Cave in the Clouds

A Young Woman's Escape from ISIS

BADEEAH HASSAN AHMED

with **SUSAN ELIZABETH MCCLELLAND**



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The spelling of Ezidi words in this book are based on transliterations of the Shingali, Kurdish, and Arabic languages. Badeeah's own name is a transliteration, and in previous media reports has also been spelled "Badia." We tried to remain as authentic to the transliteration into English of the Shingali language as possible.

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A Note from the Authors

Badeeah Hassan Ahmed and writer Susan Elizabeth McClelland first met in the summer of 2016. At that time, Susan was asked by the magazine Marie Claire UK to write a story on a female survivor of the Ezidi genocide. Susan worked with translator Sozan Fahmi to research potential subjects. Badeeah's story stood out from every other account that had been in the press. Among other things, Badeeah's story spoke to the sacrifices so many Ezidi women and girls had made to help others at the risk of their own deaths. And her abduction shed light on a startling fact: in Syria, it is estimated that the majority of Daesh fighters (otherwise known as ISIS) are in fact foreign born and/or citizens of Western countries.

When Badeeah first escaped Aleppo and it was discovered that it was an American, possibly a commander, who had taken her, she was flown to the United States. There, she gave talks at conferences about the genocide and worked with the US State Department to try and identify her captor. It was hard for Badeeah to relive her trauma at the hands of Daesh. But Badeeah realized that her story could bring international attention to the crisis

experienced by the Ezidi people. She agreed to turn her story into a book in the hopes of reaching an even wider audience, so more people could know the truth of what is still happening in Syria.

Over the course of a year, Badeeah, Sozan, and Susan worked together to re-tell Badeeah's story. They consulted closely with members of the Ezidi community, including Dakhil Shammo, Nasir Kiret, and Imad and Fawaz Farhan, to accurately and sensitively reflect Ezidi culture and spirituality. It was very important to them not only tell a story of captivity and of war and survival, but also to highlight the resilience of a culture unknown to many around the world.

But Badeeah's is also a difficult story to tell. Because so much happened during the course of Badeeah's captivity, it was impossible to chronicle every detail. In writing this book for young readers, some creative licenses have been taken to compensate for this, including reconstructing the order of events, combining some characters, and recreating dialogue where necessary.

Today Badeeah and Eivan and his mother live in Germany. Badeeah is determined to become a nurse and give back to her people. *A Cave in the Clouds* is Badeeah's story: it is not just about war and what it does to women and girls; it is about the restorative power of storytelling and the remarkable human ability to find meaning even in the darkest of times.

August 15, 2014

The walls of our house shook.

Trucks roared down the road. Some were sparkling white, with missile launchers in the cargo beds. Some were armored trucks with long gun barrels.

I ran.

Suddenly, I wasn't in Kocho anymore, but in a thick forest of Zagros oak trees. I seemed to be in the hills near the Turkish border. A man was chasing me, calling out in a language I recognized from news reports as English.

Then it was no longer day, but night. The only light came from a half-moon behind a thin veil of clouds. I tripped and fell, hitting my head on a rock. My head throbbed with pain, but I scrambled to get up. The man was approaching fast.

I called out for help, but all that came back to me was my own voice bouncing off the rocks.

Soon I was running again, until I spotted Eivan. He was slumped beside a stream, as if leaning into the water to play. I was so happy to see him. But as I neared, I realized that he wasn't playing at all, but, asleep, with one hand in the stream. The other was twisted behind his back, as if it was broken. I screamed.

Chapter One

August 2001

The Purpose of Life

It was August, near the end of summer holidays in our village of Kocho. My father and my older brothers and sisters were all on vacation. The Forty Days of Heat we call *Chilé Haviné*, which starts on the June 24 and stretches until August 2, had ended. During *Chilé Haviné*, daytime temperatures in Iraq can soar to over 50 degrees Celsius (122 degrees Fahrenheit). After that, the cooler temperatures roll in.

That morning, my sisters Hadil and Majida awoke while it was still dark, curled and pinned up their hair, and put on their good dresses. They'd washed and mended them the day before with the help of our *dake*, our

grandmother. My sisters were going to the market with our father, Hassan, in a rusty pickup truck he had borrowed from his brother.

It was 2003. The Americans had been in our country for just a few months, and Iraq's former president, the dictator Saddam Hussein, was in hiding. We Ezidi people were freer than we had been in generations. Under Saddam, there had been no national elections. He and his party, called Ba'ath, had appointed whomever they wanted to hold important positions. Those positions were mostly given to men of the same religion as Saddam, Sunni Muslims, and rarely to Shi'ite Muslims or any minority group, including the Ezidi. Now our country was moving toward democracy and having people vote in their leaders. My father, Hassan, was running to be the local representative for the Kurdistan Democratic Party.

But on this day, as he prepared to go to market, he was Hassan, the farmer.

I watched as he loaded my neighbor's truck with boxes of eggplant, green peppers, tomatoes, onions, and zucchinis we'd grown on our nearby farm. Hassan sold our fruits and vegetables in Shingal, about a 20-kilometer (12-mile) drive away. Kocho, which had a population of 1,785, was an entirely Ezidi village. Shingal was a mix of Ezidi, Kurds, and Arabs. The Ezidi have lived in northwestern Iraq for thousands of years, stretching all the way back to the ancient civilizations there, including the Sumerians. Christian and Jewish populations lived here,

too. But under Saddam Hussein, our region was becoming increasingly Arab. Saddam's army had invaded many Ezidi villages, forcing the inhabitants out and moving the Arabs, his own people, in.

Hadil and Majida hopped into the truck and closed the passenger door. My heart exploded. I was desperate to go with them. They weren't just going to the Shingal market. Hadil had turned six that year, so they were also going to the city to collect her Jinsiya, or identity papers, so she could start school. Majida, who was ten, already attended. Kocho only had a primary school. Many Ezidi families in Iraq didn't send their children to school because the history and religion taught there was Islamic and the classes were in Arabic. The Ezidi feared losing our culture. But my parents believed in education.

Hadil and Majida, chattering like cockatiels, had taunted me the night before, saying they both would be at school soon while I was home caring for our baby brother, Khudher. Khudher, three years younger than me, was hard work. When my mother, Adlan, came to the farm with us, I was put in charge of him while she tended the crops. Khudher wouldn't sit still, not ever. The moment I turned my back on him, he'd scamper off, hiding in the plants and bushes. Hadil teased that while she was with our cousins at school every day, I would be learning to bake bread, cook *dolma* (wrapped chard leaves with rice and meat stuffing), and *kubbeh* (a meat dish made with spice and wheat). I hated cooking.

A breeze blew around me, carrying sweet perfume from the blossoms of our dake's orange trees in her yard next door. As with most Ezidi families in Kocho, my father had built his house next to his parents'.

That morning, the scented air didn't comfort me like it usually did.

I scowled and tapped my foot.

My mother pushed her way past me, the hem of her white dress sweeping the ground. As usual, locks of her gray hair slipped out from underneath her *kufi*, the white cap older women wear. She marched up to the truck and poked her head through the open window, reminding my sisters to bring back some black pepper and cumin for soups. "You forgot last time you went to Shingal, interested only in buying fabric for dresses," she scolded.

Majida brushed our mother away. Adlan clicked her tongue and shook her head. Majida was defiant. One of our older brothers, Fallah, said Majida was political, which was dangerous for this part of the world and especially dangerous for a ten-year old Ezidi girl. Hadil, on the other hand, was carefree. She reminded me of a bird, one of the nightingales that nested in an olive tree outside our house. Fallah said I wasn't like Hadil. I was responsible and careful. I talked little, but when I did, my words really meant something. Fallah said I wasn't like Majida, either. She was sullen.

Fallah had taken me aside on Charshama Sorr or Red Wednesday, the Ezidi New Year, which occurs on

the first day of the Ezidi calendar: the first Wednesday between April 14 and 21. “You see beauty where others don’t,” he told me. We were celebrating New Year at Sharfabeen, a temple on the south side of the Shingal Mountains. Sharfabeen and Lalish, a village in the rolling hills near the border of Kurdistan, are Ezidi holy places. We Ezidi believe Lalish is the center of the earth, where earth itself was formed, and we walk barefoot through the village to absorb its spiritual energy. Lalish, some say, is half a million years old.

That particular night, as we celebrated the New Year at Sharfabeen, people were gathered around fires, eating goat and gossiping. The young people were dancing. Dake, wrinkled like the sand at ninety-five, was barely able to move, her bones hardened like cement, but she sat on a cushion and watched. Many people approached her to kiss her hands, to honor her strength and wisdom. When the fires were at their brightest, I told Fallah that in Dake’s eyes, inky as a moonless night, I could see her dancing, as if she was enjoying an inner world of stars and music.

Fallah smiled at me. He said I was bold, too, when I wanted to be.

That morning, watching Majida and Hadil waiting to go to Shingal, was one of those times.

I crept toward the truck and peered in. Majida and Hadil were fussing with each other’s hair. They both had long, dark-brown hair, like mine, which they brushed sometimes a hundred times a night, so it was silky and

straight. I spied an opening in the back seat between the boxes of fruits, a space big enough for tiny me, I thought.

I slipped over to the driver's side. I reached for the handle and pulled. But as I pried open the door, it squeaked, startling Hassan, who was now loading okra from his brother Khalil's farm into the truck's cargo bed.

"What are you doing, Badeeah?" he called. Our mother's voice was bright and full, reminding me of the marigolds that danced in Dake's garden. Hassan's voice was deep and throaty. It made me think of the wild water buffalo that used to live in the marshes of Iraq before Saddam Hussein had the marshes drained to punish those who sought to overthrow him.

"I want to come," I said nervously. My father walked up until he was standing right in front of me. I had to crane my neck to see his face. When he was on holidays or working at the farm, Hassan wore clothes similar to those of our Muslim or Arab neighbors in nearby villages: *dishdashas* and *khaftans*. But when he was out canvassing to be a politician, he wore a traditional Ezidi costume, with a checkered red-and-white turban called a Jamadani. Hassan's hands, leathered and calloused, were on his hips. His trim beard was more salt than pepper.

I liked being close to my father, which I often wasn't. I shared him with my four older brothers, my younger brother, Khudher, my five older sisters, and also all of Kocho, it seemed. Adlan said that while our family was from the lowest caste, the Merids, our father did such

important work that he was well respected even among the high castes, the Sheikhs and the Pirs. Castes mattered, especially in marriages. In the late afternoons, Hassan would sit in the room of our home reserved for male guests, his legs tucked underneath him, as the other men from the village dropped in to talk politics. My father would smoke hand-rolled cigars and cigarettes while his visitors smoked the *shisha* pipe. Adlan had long, thin hands that glided in the air when she spoke, like the outstretched wings of a hawk. With those hands, she would shoo me away from listening to Hassan and the village men. “They talk of violence and blood,” she would tell me, pushing me toward the kitchen.

The candies and chocolate biscuits Adlan gave me, along with the stories she told, made me soon forget Hassan and his guests. Most of the time, I felt unworthy of my father’s attention.

But not this time.

On this day, I stood like an ant in front of my father’s dusty, black boots, my heart racing. I crossed my arms and looked up at him. “I want to come,” I repeated, my voice croaking from nerves. “I want to go to school.”

“You have to be six to go to school,” Hassan said, bending down. “You’re only five, Badeeah.” I could smell him now, cigarette smoke and the outdoors, dry earth after rain.

“But I want to go now,” I said. “And I want to see Shingal. Everyone has been there but me. I want to learn things.” A tear dropped down my cheek. Images of myself

doing math equations and learning Arabic, the language most widely spoken in Iraq, were starting to fade. I knew in my heart I was meant to start school, but I didn't have the words to convince Hassan. I watched a real ant scurry along the ground. The little ant seemed much stronger than me.

"Ok," my father said, stretching himself up.

I jumped with surprise.

"The teacher at the school in Kocho may not accept you for another year or two, but we'll get your identity card and try. Majida and Hadil," he bellowed, "move over. Badeeah is coming with us."



We bumped along the desert highway, swerving around the potholes Hassan spotted, flying over the others that had crept up on him too fast. Majida and Hadil were discussing the store in the market that sold fresh juices. Orange was Hadil's favorite. Coconut was Majida's. I knew my sisters were rubbing it in that they had visited Shingal and I hadn't.

I ignored them.

My father talked, to no one in particular, about how at least now our identity cards said we were Ezidi. When Saddam led the country, many families refused to get identification cards because their nationality was listed

as Arab. And since many Ezidi women gave birth to their babies at home, children also didn't have birth certificates. That was how Adil, my eldest brother, landed on the frontlines of the first American invasion of my country in 1991 at the age of sixteen. The Iraqi army thought he was older than he was, and since he didn't have any identification to prove otherwise, they forced him into battle.

I watched with excitement as the Shingal mountain range rose up around us, the weeds tumbling along the desert floor and birds flying alongside. Hassan put a Kurdish radio station on, as the only news available now was coming to the area by satellite from Kurdistan. Majida and Hadil sang along to the songs they recognized.

As our truck rolled into the city and joined what seemed like a thousand cars and trucks all honking at the same time, Hassan turned off the radio and my sisters finally fell quiet. I had never seen so many people before: young men on motorbikes that farted thick, black smoke, older men driving rusty trucks, vendors hawking newspapers and electronics, women with their heads covered by long scarves that flapped in the air like flags.

“Muslim women wear *hijabs*, head coverings, or *khimars*, that cover not only the head but also most of the body,” Majida informed me in a haughty voice. “We don't.” What a know-it-all. I rolled my eyes and looked out the window.

Our truck stopped, stuck in traffic, beside a woman sitting on a tattered blue blanket on the edge of the road. She was covered in black in what Majida said was a khimar and *niqab* set. The woman held a sign in Arabic, which I asked Hassan to translate:

I am poor. I am a war widow. My husband was martyr, a shahid. I have two small children to care for and no family to take me in. Please help.

With her other hand, the woman shook a tin can. I could hear the rattle of *dinar*, Iraqi currency, and so I reached into the little shelf underneath the radio and grabbed some coins. I was opening the door to give them to her when Hassan stepped on the gas.

“Why did you do that?” I yelled, slamming the door closed. “She needs money. Her husband was a martyr.”

“It’s not safe,” he said quietly as we sped by some serious-looking men walking in twos along the side of the road. I knew they were soldiers. I recognized the blue-and-black uniform of the new Iraqi government army, who were fighting the guerilla groups opposing the Americans. The Kurds also had an army, called Peshmerga, who protected Shingal and our villages now.

Majida and Hadil lowered their heads, nervously tying and untying the ends of the scarves they had wrapped around their shoulders. Their actions reminded me of a ritual we did when we visited Lalish. The tomb of one of the Ezidi saints, the twelfth-century mystic Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir, is located in one of the three main buildings

at Lalish. Whenever we visited, we would tie knots in the fabric draped over his tomb. As we did so, we would pray.

But I didn't think Majida and Hadil were praying on this day. I thought they were scared.

"Are we going to have another war?" I asked my father.

"There is always war," Hassan said, wiping his perspiring forehead with the back of his hand. He, too, seemed anxious, which wasn't like him. "Right now, the enemies are terrorists, including the group al-Qaeda. They hate that the Americans are here."

"Adlan says we Ezidi are special," I continued, ignoring Hadil, who was slapping my thigh to get me to be quiet. She didn't like it when I was the center of attention. "Adlan says we're one of the oldest peoples in the world. She says our enemies are afraid of the knowledge that we bring with us from the beginning of time."

Hassan steered the truck to the side of the road. He sat looking forward for what felt like ages, then turned off the ignition.

"If we're so special, why do people want to hurt us?" I pressed on.

"Everyone is special," Hassan said. The color that had drained from his face was returning.

"Adlan says that everyone has light inside of them. Is that what it means to be special?"

"I guess so." Hassan leaned over to look at me and smiled.

“But I don’t know what this light is,” I said. “I’ve never seen it.”

I could tell from my father’s wrinkled forehead that he was thinking hard about his answer. “The light we’re talking about isn’t a color,” he said finally. “It is like a feeling, like love. Not just the love of your family or even of yourself. That’s almost a selfish love. But love that abounds and never ends and brings us together. In the dead of night, love is your compass. Many people’s minds become deluded. They go crazy and forget about love, but it’s always there, even in the darkest corners. Our purpose in life is to hold onto love, so that darkness will eventually be succeeded by morning.”

Hassan hopped out of the truck and motioned for Majida, Hadil, and me to follow him. The city wasn’t what I had expected. Gasoline fumes hung over it like a tent. And the dust! Country dust just made our dresses dirty. City dust was thick, coarse, and oily. It clogged my nose and throat and stung my eyes.

As I coughed, I thought about what Hassan had said. It sounded a bit like a riddle. Eleven years later, I would discover the reality of what my father had told me that day in Shingal. Light would guide me home after I became one of the Islamic State’s sabaya, a prisoner of war.