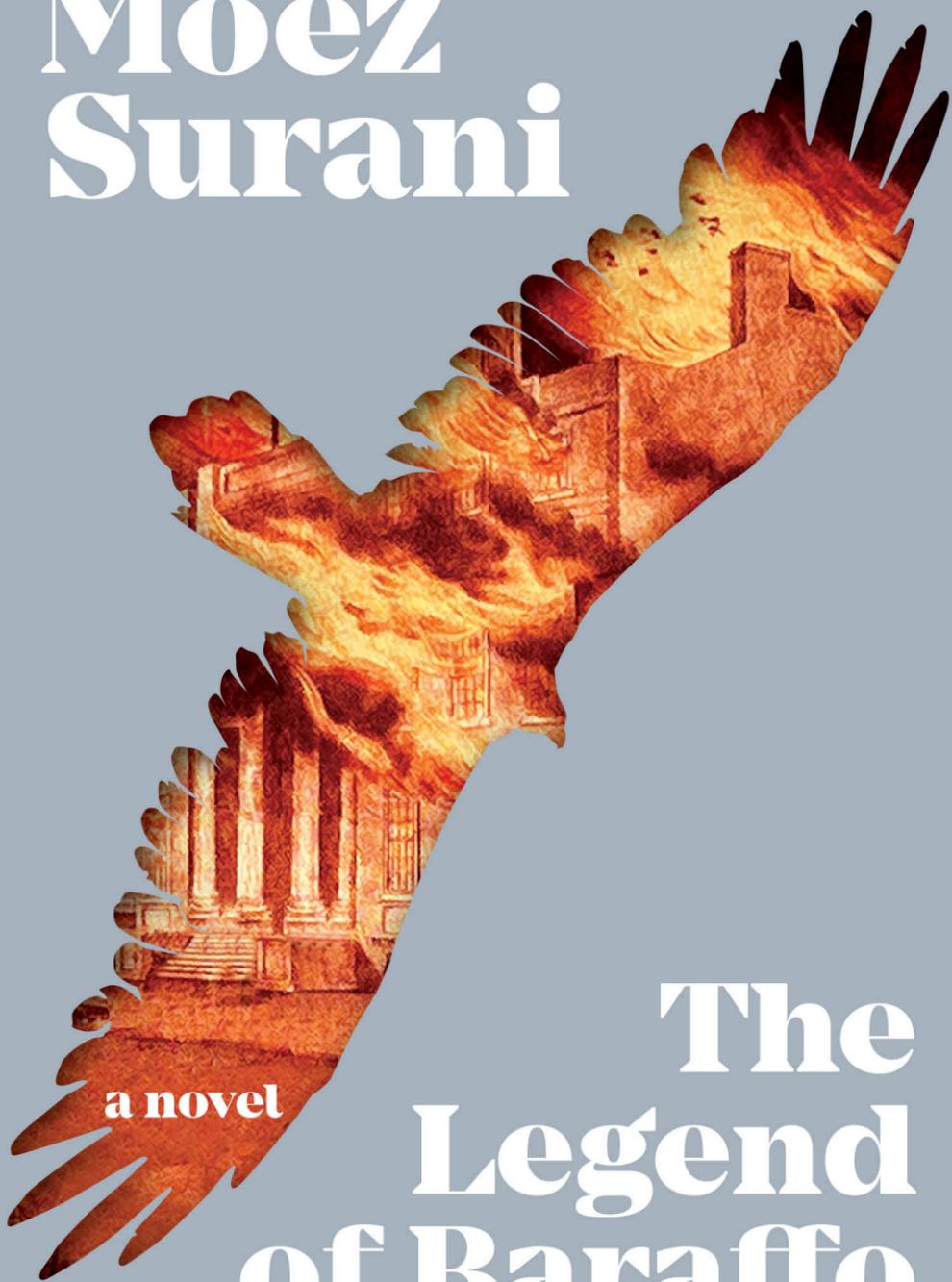


**Moez
Surani**



a novel

**The
Legend
of Baraffo**

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LEGEND
OF
BARAFFO**

MOEZ SURANI



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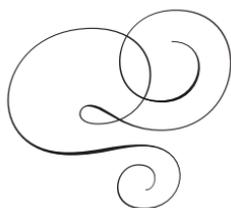


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*For Zara and Laiq,
should they find this worthy.*

PROLOGUE



There is, of course, the legend of Baraffo with which we are all familiar. That day, hundreds of years ago, when Isabella accepted a proposal, causing a generation of men to throw themselves from bridges, second-storey windows, and rooftops. So many men lined up to jump from the mayor's roof that they had to wait hours, trading jokes and gossip, for the honour of dying before her. The pile of dead suitors mounted so high that those who were late in lining up had to step carefully from the roof onto the stack of bodies, then jump to their death. Their bodies angled down from the mayor's hilltop home—a crude staircase of affection.

It is said they met in a garden, Isabella seated on the fountain's ledge with a sheet of water behind her, and that after this meeting his love rainbowed to her over the distances of banishment and exile. But such exaggerations are often history's flourishes. The truth is buried below layers of exuberant storytelling, competing reports from the rival newspapers, and Baraffo's buoyant habit of forgetting. Averse to anything that suppresses their spirits, the people of Baraffo deny

sombre thoughts, recollecting instead what is jubilant, beautiful, or readily useful. Through this forgetting, the truths of Isabella's adoration, engagement, and illness, are dormant beneath the years of speculation and retellings that weave into a generalized, piecemeal fable.

The people of Baraffo often pause in the tumult of their unlikely lives and consider that couple's example, and from time to time the people of the town swing their arms out wide to show the magnitude of Isabella's beauty. "This much," they cry.

Their lives blossom in the shade of their people's epic.

In Isabella's Square, at the centre of Baraffo, water rises through a spring-fed fountain, falls in a mist off the top tier, collects in a middle bowl, and becomes mist again in its final descent. The crucial scenes of her life are inscribed in the stone.

A woman sits on the fountain's ledge, the curtain of water behind her while the man waves his arms, the camera that hangs from his neck banging against his chest as he tries to part the crowds and catch his beloved in a dignified pose.

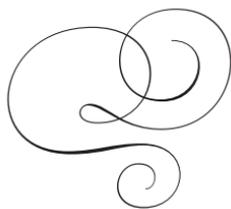
When a new mayor took office a generation or two ago, he declared the first day of summer a holiday to commemorate Isabella's engagement. He ordered sofas, pillows, carpets, and mattresses be pushed below windows so the town's bachelors could safely display their honour by jumping from their roofs and windows. After this proof of gallantry, the streets fill with music and food and everyone drinks through the summer's first week. The town having become a giant living room, people pass out on some mattress or cushion, only to wake later, rub their faces and rejoin the festivity. By declaring this anniversary a holiday, that mayor flipped tragedy into celebration and

pushed Baraffo's reputation for extravagance beyond its natural borders—the sea to the east and the mountains to the west.

§

Unable to sleep, a girl steps barefoot from her bed and rewinds her music box. The tune clinks out, the couple on top of her music box turning together in a rigid dance. She climbs back into bed as the hollow tune clinks and sings and that legendary couple, moved by hidden gears and devices, turn together in the darkness of her room.

PART 1



1

In the morning, the smell of roasted coffee roams the streets of Baraffo. The coffee merchants, situated at strategic intersections, ladle out helpings. Some of them discuss politics, others rumours or theological paradoxes. As long as the talk intrigues, people stay and drink more helpings. The coffee stand nearest the coast is dominated by talk of Zuraffi, the poet who was rising in influence throughout the town, the poet who had filled her pages and taken her expression to the streets, writing on stones or a leaf, a shell of a ravaged melon, along a fence, down the length of a stranger's arm, the ink tumbling through pores. The inscribed stones pass between people's hands and the leaves are plucked from the wind and shelved back into a subsequent gust. Sipping coffee, one dedicated merchant gestures directions and whispers what he knows about the whereabouts of the poet's latest offering. His customers converge upon the fragments. They debate their likely sequence and argue over merit and sincerity. Some copy the verse onto their hands or a leg of their pants so they can reread it later.

Zuraffi was writing before Papa became mayor—before Papa, the plump, dark-haired woman whose monumental term of office sprawled across generations, became known by the people of the town as Papa. Even at the outset of her lengthy term, Papa gave the impression that she bathed in some separate, exquisite water. With her diplomacy and warmth, she ran uncontested. Term after term, even with the town's unorthodox open-election procedure, she was marked down as Baraffo's sole candidate.

As she aged, and as her habits and tastes altered, one unchanged aspect of Papa's routine was her afternoon walks, which later mayors would emulate. On these walks, she consumed innumerable glasses of juice, tea, and water, and pried into all the town's happenings: the rivalries and complaints, recipes, ambitions, dissent, the wagers, the novel chess openings, the favoured games of the town's infants, variations in mores and health and remedies, all of the previous night's quarrels, as well as the daily confessions of sin, irritability, and love. The mayor listened to these outpourings with equanimity, nodding while townspeople spoke, with her hands clasped over her stomach while her thumbs circled one another. Papa was emotional about all matters of the town, but strictly rational in her personal affairs. Her great leap occurred late in her life when, with her long hair white and braided back, she adopted a boy whose parents had died in a fire. "I have an empty room," Papa simply said, after so many years of living alone. Because of the mayor's nature, which made her cagey when she was asked about things closest to her heart, Papa never confessed to the softness she felt for the inquiring boy she would meet in the midst of her walks.

§

In the darkness, the boy stands on the sloped roof of his best friend's house. Mazzu rolls his shirtsleeve up and begins windmilling his arm. Wind blows against his shirt and the leaves above. "Vullie, you are my best friend, but I will hit you if you don't come to help me tonight. I don't want to; you are like a brother to me, but I will."

"Come, Mazzu, you don't want to hit me. I am twice your size."

"But I'm wild, Vullie! I'm wild like a monkey! You won't even see it coming. You'll remember tomorrow, though. You'll wake tomorrow and remember that Mazzu, wild like a monkey, had hit you."

Vullie leans over his meal. Rows of houses stretch before him, and Zuraffi's red-brick tower rises to his left. Far ahead of him, the mayor's home sits atop a bluff and overlooks the town. He can discern the sea only as a darkness in the distance. "No, Mazzu, you don't want to hit me. I may hit back."

"I'll remember this. I'll remember who it was that would rather eat second dinner than help their lifelong friend."

"Forget about Giulietta. You've visited her the last four nights. Each night we carried the ladder across town. Each night you climbed to her room, and each night you gave her a fruit I would have gladly eaten. And for what?"

"Very well, then. If this is the way you feel, what I'll do is learn to walk on stilts. Then I'll be able to bring her a mango each day—as I have promised—without the help of my best friend. People will see my shadow cross the moon. "There goes

Mazzu the stilt walker,' they will say. Each night I'll strap a mango to my head and walk to her house. I'll walk on my stilts above the lights of windows, above the trees, to deliver her my fruit. But remember this, Vullie, when I am mayor one day, as Papa is training me for—"

"Come, let's go," Vullie says, setting aside the empty plate.

They walk to the edge of the roof with Mazzu's arm around Vullie's shoulder. "You know what the people will all say? They will say, 'There goes Vullie, the man so tall his friend had no need for stilts!'"

The two boys step into the arms of a tree. They climb through the branches and thump into the grass. With a ladder under their right arms and Vullie yelling their way through crowds, they march to Giulietta's.

§

Behind Giulietta's home, Vullie braces the ladder that angles all the way to her window. High atop the rungs, Mazzu taps on the window. He waits for her to turn then pulls her bedroom window open. "Giulietta, you grow more beautiful every day. You know, even if your lips were lemons and your tongue like a pickle, still I would cross town to bring you a mango," he says, pulling the gift from his bag.

"Mazzu, even if I had a sailor's portion of wine and you had muscles of an entire army, still I would cross oceans to escape you."

Stretching from the window, Mazzu sets the fruit on her desk. It rolls over onto its side. "You know, I was thinking of you today. I was thinking of our great luck: to have found each

other so early in life. And then also thinking of your denial of this fine coincidence.”

Giulietta turns from him and faces her mirror. She tilts her head and pulls out her earrings, sets them in a box, and snaps the lid shut.

With his elbows on the windowsill, the boy watches the ceremony she makes each night of brushing her hair. First she brushes it to her left, then she tilts her head the other way and brushes it in long strokes over her right shoulder. On his first visit, he noticed patterns on her furniture. Carved vines and blossoms smother the legs of her bed and wind over the drawers of her dresser. The embroidered rug is intricate too, and the mirror she looks into could encompass his spread arms. The mirror is clouded in places, and its edge holds drawings and notes she’s tucked into the frame. Her chair is in front of a clearing in the glass that gives an exact, though amber, image. While she brushes her hair, she raises her eyes and glances at the reflection of the boy, who takes in the bedroom’s details. “My sister started playing the trumpet,” she whispers, with her family down the hall and oblivious of her visitor. “She’s silly. She’s still dreaming of...”

§

Vullie sits in the bottom rung. He claps his hands as the window shuts and the ladder shakes.

“So, did it go well? Did she fall in love today?”

The boy jumps down the last couple of rungs. From the dark yard, the window above them glows. Mazzu looks up at it and shakes his head. “No, not tonight.”