

You loved your last book...but what  
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

---

**Opening Extract from...**

# **The House of the Mosque**

Written by Kader Abdolah

Translated from the Dutch by Susan Massotty

Published by Canongate

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.  
Please print off and read at your leisure.

---

# *THE HOUSE OF THE MOSQUE*

Kader Abdolah

Translated from the Dutch by Susan Massotty



CANONGATE

*Edinburgh • London • New York • Melbourne*

This paperback edition published in 2011 by Canongate Books

1

Copyright © Kader Abdolah, 2005  
English translation copyright © Susan Massotty, 2010

Family tree copyright © Masoud Gharibi, 2005.  
Reproduced with permission of De Geus BV.

The moral rights of the author and translator have been asserted

First published in The Netherlands in 2005 by De Geus BV, Postbus 1878,  
4801 BW Breda

First published in Great Britain in 2010 by Canongate Books Ltd, 14 High  
Street, Edinburgh EH1 1TE

[www.meetatthegate.com](http://www.meetatthegate.com)

Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders and obtain their permission for the use of copyright material. The publisher apologises for any errors or omissions and would be grateful if notified of any corrections that should be incorporated in future reprints or editions of this book.

The publishers gratefully acknowledge generous subsidy from the  
Foundation for the Production and Translation of Dutch Literature.

*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available on request from the British  
Library

ISBN 978 1 84767 241 4  
Export ISBN 978 1 84767 928 4

Typeset in Sabon by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd,  
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

*To Aqa Jaan,  
so I can let him go*

*Nun, wa alqalame wa ma yastorun.*  
By the pen and by what you write.

The Pen surah

## *The Ants*

*Alef Lam Mim.* There was once a house, an old house, which was known as ‘the house of the mosque’. It was a large house with thirty-five rooms. For centuries the house had been occupied by successive generations of the family who served the mosque.

Each room had been named according to its function: the Dome Room, for example, or the Opium Room, the Storytelling Room, the Carpet Room, the Sick Room, the Grandmother’s Room, the Library and the Crow’s Room.

The house lay behind the mosque and had actually been built onto it. In one corner of the courtyard was a set of stone steps leading up to a flat roof, which was connected to the mosque.

In the middle of the courtyard was a *hauz*,\* a hexagonal basin of water in which people washed their hands and face before prayers.

The house was now occupied by the families of three cousins: Aqa Jaan, the merchant who presided over the city’s bazaar, Alsaberi, the imam of the house and spiritual leader of the mosque, and Aqa Shoja, the mosque’s muezzin.

It was a Friday morning in early spring. The sun felt

\*For an explanation of foreign words see the glossary at the back.

warm, the air was filled with the rich smell of earth, the trees were in leaf, and the plants were beginning to bud. Birds flew from branch to branch, serenading the garden. The two grandmothers were pulling out the plants that had died in the winter, while the children chased each other and hid behind the thick tree trunks.

An army of ants crawled out from under one of the ancient walls and covered the path by the old cedar tree like a moving brown carpet. Thousands of young ants, seeing the sun for the first time and feeling its warmth on their backs, surged down the path.

The house's cats, stretched out by the *hauz*, looked in surprise at the teeming mass. The children stopped playing to stare at the wondrous sight. The birds fell silent and perched in the pomegranate tree, craning their necks to follow the ants' progress.

'Grandmother,' the children cried, 'come and look!'

The grandmothers, who were working on the other side of the garden, went on with their digging.

'Come and look!' one of the girls repeated. 'There are millions of ants!'

The grandmothers came over to investigate. 'I've never seen anything like it!' exclaimed one.

'I've never even heard of such a thing!' exclaimed the other. Their hands flew to their mouths in astonishment.

The mass of ants was growing larger every second, making it impossible to get to the front gate.

The children raced over to Aqa Jaan's study, on the other side of the courtyard.

'Aqa Jaan! Help! We have ants!'

Aqa Jaan parted the curtains and looked outside.

'What's wrong?'

'Please come! Soon we won't be able to reach the door.'

There are millions of ants crawling towards the house. Millions!’

‘I’m coming.’

He threw his long *aba* around his shoulders, put on his hat and went into the courtyard. Aqa Jaan had witnessed a lot in the house, but never anything like this.

‘It reminds me of the Prophet Solomon,’ he said to the children. ‘Something must have set them off or they wouldn’t be swarming in such numbers. If you listen hard enough, you can hear them talking to each other. Unfortunately we don’t speak their language. Solomon could talk to ants. I can’t. I think they must be performing some kind of ritual, or perhaps spring has triggered a change in their nest.’

‘Do something!’ said Golebeh, the younger of the two grandmothers. ‘Make them go back to their nest before they get into the house!’

Aqa Jaan knelt, put on his glasses and examined the ants up close.

Then Golbanu, the older grandmother, made a suggestion. ‘Recite the surah about Solomon talking to the ants – the swarms of ants that covered the valley and brought Solomon’s army to a halt. Or read the Al-Naml surah, the part where Solomon talks to the hoopoe bird that brings him a love letter from the queen of Sheba.’

The children waited, curious to see what Aqa Jaan would do.

‘Read Al-Naml before it’s too late!’ Golbanu insisted. ‘Tell the ants to go back to their nest!’

The children looked expectantly at Aqa Jaan.

‘At least read the love letter,’ she pleaded. ‘If you don’t, the ants will take over the house!’

There was a long pause.

‘Bring me the Koran,’ Aqa Jaan said at last.

Shahbal, one of the boys, ran over to the *hauz*, washed his hands, dried them on a towel that was hanging on the clothes-line and hurried into Aqa Jaan’s study. He returned with a very old Koran and handed it to Aqa Jaan.

Aqa Jaan leafed through it in search of the Al-Naml surah and stopped at page 377. Bowing slightly, he began to chant softly, ‘*Hattaa, edha ataa ‘ala wade an-namle, qalat namlaton: “ya ayyoha an-namlo ‘od khola masaaakenakum, la yahtemannakom solaymano wa jonuudoho, wahum la yash‘oruun”.*’

They all watched in silence, waiting to see what the ants would do.

Aqa Jaan chanted some more and blew on the ants. The grandmothers fetched two braziers and threw a handful of *esfandi* seeds on the freshly laid fires, so that clouds of scented smoke billowed into the air. They knelt on the ground beside Aqa Jaan and blew the smoke towards the ants, chanting, ‘Solomon, Solomon, Solomon, ants, ants, ants, the valley, the hoopoe, the queen of Sheba. Sheba, Sheba, Sheba, Solomon, Solomon, Solomon, the hoopoe, the hoopoe, ants, ants, ants.’

The children waited anxiously to see what would happen.

Suddenly the creatures stopped. They seemed to be listening, as if they wanted to know who was chanting and blowing that fragrant *esfandi* smoke at them.

‘Clear the courtyard, children!’ said Golbanu. ‘The ants are turning back! We don’t want to upset them!’

The children trooped upstairs and stared out of the windows to see if the ants had really turned back.

Years later, after Shahbal had left the country and was living in a foreign land, he shared his memory of that day

with his friends. After the surah had been read, he told them, he had seen with his own eyes how the ants had crawled like long brown ropes back into the crevices in the ancient wall.

## *The House of the Mosque*

*Alef Lam Ra.* Years went by, but never again had the ants crept out from under the ancient walls in such numbers. The event had become a distant memory. Inside the tradition-bound house life went on as usual.

In the evenings the grandmothers busied themselves in the kitchen until Alsaberi, the imam of the mosque, came home and they had to get him ready for the evening prayer at the mosque.

The old crow flew over the house and cawed. A carriage pulled up outside, and Golbanu rushed over to open the gate for Imam Alsaberi.

The ageing coachman greeted her and drove off. He was the last of his kind, because horses had been banned from the city streets. Any coachman who managed to get his driving licence was given a subsidised taxi, but there was one old coachman who repeatedly failed the test. At Aqa Jaan's request, the man was finally given permission to work as the mosque's coachman. Alsaberi considered taxis unclean, and he also felt that it was unseemly for an imam to have himself driven around in a taxi like an ordinary person.

Alsaberi was wearing a black turban – a sign that he was a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad – and a cleric's long brown *aba*. He was just coming home, after

performing a wedding ceremony for one of the city's foremost families.

The children knew they weren't supposed to come too close to him. Every evening he led the prayer for hundreds of worshippers, and no one was allowed to touch him beforehand.

'*Salaam!*' the children called out to him.

'*Salaam!*' the imam answered with a smile.

When the children were small, he used to bring them a bag of sweets and hand it to one of the girls. The children would scamper off and leave him to walk to his library undisturbed. Now that they were older, however, they no longer ran up to him, so he gave the bag to the grandmothers, who later divided up the sweets among the children.

As soon as Imam Alsaberi entered the house, the grandmothers washed their hands in the *hauz*, dried them and went to the library to help the imam with his bath. They undressed him in silence. One of the grandmothers carefully removed his turban and laid it on the table. The other helped him out of his prayer robe and hung it up. The imam himself did nothing. He avoided touching his clothes.

The grandmothers had often complained to Aqa Jaan. 'You need to talk to him. It's not normal or healthy, what he does, what he demands of others. We've never had an imam in this house who's been so fanatical about cleanliness. Wanting to be clean is fine, but he goes to extremes. He doesn't even touch his own children. And he only eats with a spoon that he carries around in his pocket. It's wearing him out. He can't go on like this.'

The grandmothers told Aqa Jaan everything that went

on in the house, including the secrets no one else was supposed to know.

The grandmothers weren't actually grandmothers, but servants who'd lived in the house for more than fifty years. Aqa Jaan's father had brought them to the house when they were young, and they had never left. Everyone had long forgotten where they came from. The grandmothers never talked about their past. They had never married, though the whole family knew that both of them carried on in secret with Aqa Jaan's uncle. Whenever he came for a visit, they were his.

The grandmothers belonged to the house, much like the crow, the cedar tree and the cellars. One of the grandmothers had raised Alsaberi and the other had raised Aqa Jaan. Aqa Jaan confided in them, and they saw to it that the traditions of the house were maintained.

Aqa Jaan was a carpet merchant and owner of the oldest establishment in the bazaar in the city of Senejan. He had more than a hundred men working for him, including seven draughtsmen who designed the patterns in the carpets.

The bazaar is a city within a city. You can enter it through several gates. Its maze-like streets, covered with domed roofs, are lined with hundreds of shops.

In the course of several centuries, the bazaars had evolved into the most important financial institutions in the country. Thousands of merchants – dealing mainly in gold, textiles, grain, brassware and carpets – operated out of the bazaars.

The carpet merchants in particular had always played a crucial role in the history of the country. Thanks to his unique position, Aqa Jaan presided over both the bazaar and the mosque.

\* \* \*

The rugs produced by Aqa Jaan's company were known for their extraordinary colours and startling motifs. Any rug that bore his label was worth its weight in gold. Of course his rugs were not intended for ordinary buyers. Special dealers ordered them long in advance for customers in Europe and America.

Nobody knew how the designers came up with such original motifs or such a superb blend of colours. It was the company's greatest asset and the family's most closely guarded secret.

The era of private bathrooms had not yet dawned. There were several large bathhouses in Senejan. The men of the house had always gone to the oldest one, where a special place was reserved for the imam. But Imam Alsaberi had broken with tradition. He refused to set foot in a bathhouse used by dozens of other people. Even the thought of being naked in front of all those men made him sick.

So Aqa Jaan had asked a bricklayer to add on a bathroom. Since the only bathing facilities the bricklayer was familiar with were the bathhouses, the man had dug a hole in the room behind the library and built the imam a mini-bathhouse.

That evening Alsaberi sat down as usual on the stone floor in his long white undergarment. One of the grandmothers poured a jug of warm water over his head. 'It's cold,' he shrieked. 'Cold!'

The grandmothers ignored his cries. Golebeh washed his back with soap, then Golbanu gently poured water over his shoulders, making sure not to splatter.

After rinsing off the soap, they helped him into the bathtub, which was not very deep. He lay down and plunged his head under the water for a fairly long time.

When he resurfaced, his face was ashen. The grandmothers helped him up, then hurriedly draped a towel around his shoulders and another one around his waist and led him over to the stove. Frowning with distaste, he wriggled out of his wet drawers and quickly put on a clean pair. They dried his hair and pulled a shirt over his head, sticking his hands in the sleeves. Then they walked him back to the library, where they sat him down in his chair and inspected his nails under a lamp. One of the grandmothers clipped a ragged edge off the nail on his forefinger.

They helped him into the rest of his clothes, placed his turban on his head, put his glasses on his nose and polished his shoes with a rag. The imam was now ready for the mosque.

Golbanu went outside and rang the bell hanging from the old cedar tree to call the mosque's caretaker. When he heard it ring, he went up to the roof, climbed down the stone steps and walked past the guest room to the library.

He never saw the grandmothers. Just before he came into the library, they would slip modestly behind one of the bookcases. He always greeted them, though, and they always returned his greeting from behind the shelves. Tonight he scooped up the books that had been laid in readiness on the table and escorted the imam to the mosque.

The caretaker walked ahead to fend off any dogs that might unexpectedly come up to the imam. He was the imam's trusted aide – the only person besides the grandmothers who was allowed to touch him, hand him anything or take anything from him. The caretaker was as fanatical about cleanliness as the imam himself. He never went to the municipal bathhouse, but had his wife scrub him at home in a copper tub.

\* \* \*

Outside the mosque a group of men waited to escort the imam to the prayer room. These same men always stood in the first row behind the imam during the prayer. As soon as they caught sight of the imam, they called, '*Salawat bar Mohammad!* Blessings on the Prophet Muhammad!'

Hundreds of worshippers had come to the mosque for the evening prayer. They stood up when he entered and made way for him. He sat down in his usual spot, and the caretaker placed his books on the table beside him.

All eyes then turned to the muezzin, who called out from the top of the centuries-old Islamic pulpit, '*Allahu akbar! Hayye ale as-salat!* God is great! Hasten to the prayer!' The moment he mounted the stairs, the prayer had officially begun.

The muezzin was Aqa Jaan's cousin, Aqa Shoja, who had been born blind. Aqa Shoja had a beautiful voice. Three times a day – just before sunrise, at noon and just before sunset – he climbed to the top of one of the mosque's twin minarets and cried, '*Hayye ale as-salat!*'

No one ever used his name. Instead, he was known by his title: Muezzin. Even his own family called him Muezzin. '*Allahu akbar!*' he thundered.

The worshippers stood and turned to face Mecca.

Normally it was impossible for a blind man to become a muezzin. He had to be able to see when the imam bent down, when he touched the ground with his forehead and when he got up again. But in Aqa Shoja's case the imam simply raised his voice a bit to let him know he was about to bend down or touch the ground with his forehead.

Muezzin had a married daughter named Shahin and a fourteen-year-old son named Shahbal. His wife had died of a serious illness. Muezzin had no desire to remarry.

Instead, he slipped off every once in a while to the mountains to visit a couple of women. At such times he donned his best suit, put on his hat, grabbed his walking stick and disappeared for days at a time. While he was away, his son Shahbal took over his duties and climbed into the minaret to call the faithful to prayer.

After the evening prayer Imam Alsaberi was escorted back to the house by a group of men. Aqa Jaan always stayed a bit longer to talk to people. He was usually the last to leave the mosque.

Tonight he had a quick word with the caretaker about some repairs that needed to be made to the dome. As he was heading home, he heard his nephew Shahbal call his name.

‘Aqa Jaan! May I have a word with you?’

‘Of course, my boy!’

‘Do you have time to walk down to the river with me?’

‘To the river? But they’re expecting us at home. It’s almost dinnertime.’

‘I know, but it’s important.’

So they walked down to the gently flowing Sefidgani, which was not far from the house.

‘Actually, I don’t know how to say this. You don’t have to give me an immediate answer.’

‘Spit it out, my boy!’

‘It’s about the moon.’

‘The moon?’

‘No, not about the moon, but about television. And about the imam.’

‘Television? The moon? The imam? What are you trying to say?’

‘We . . . er, I mean, the imam needs to know what’s going on. He has to keep up with current events. Alsaberi

only reads the books in his library, and they're old, written centuries ago. He doesn't read newspapers. He knows nothing about . . . well, about the moon, for example.'

'Make yourself clear, for goodness' sake! What is it that Alsaberi needs to know about the moon?'

'Everybody's talking about the moon these days. At school, in the bazaar, in the street. But we don't discuss things like that at our house. Do you know what's going to happen tonight?'

'No, what?'

'Two men are going to land on the moon tonight, and you don't even know it! Maybe it's not important to you or Alsaberi. But the Americans are going to plant their flag on the moon, and the city's imam isn't even aware of it. He didn't make a single reference to it in his sermon. He should have mentioned it tonight, but he doesn't even know it's happening. And that's not good for our mosque. The mosque is where people should hear about things that affect their lives.'

Aqa Jaan waited.

'I tried to bring it up with Alsaberi,' Shahbal went on, 'but he didn't want to hear it. He doesn't believe in such things.'

'What do you want us to do?'

'The moon landing is being broadcast on television tonight. I'd like you and the imam to witness this historic event.'

'How?'

'On television!'

'You expect us to watch television?' Aqa Jaan was astounded. 'You expect the city's imam to watch television? Do you understand what you're asking, my boy? Ever since television came to this town, the mosque has been warning people of its evils, urging them not to listen

to the corrupt shah, not to watch the Americans. And now you're suggesting that we sit and stare at the American flag! You know that we're opposed to the shah and to the Americans who put him on his throne. We don't need to bring the shah's face and the American flag into our home. Why on earth do you want us to watch television? It's a weapon used by the Americans to undermine our culture and religion! All kinds of strange things are being said about television. It's full of disgusting shows that poison people's minds.'

'That's not true! Or at any rate not entirely. They also broadcast serious programmes, like tonight. You ought to watch! The imam ought to watch! If we're opposed to the shah and to the Americans, that's all the more reason to watch it. Tonight the Americans are going to set foot on the moon. You're the most important man in the city, and you should see it. I can rig up an aerial on the roof.'

'You want to put an aerial on our roof? You'll make us the laughing stock of the town. Tomorrow everyone will be saying, "Did you see the aerial on the roof of the house of the mosque?"'

'I'll fix it so that nobody will be able to see it.'

Shahbal's request had taken Aqa Jaan by surprise. The boy knew what their position was on certain issues, but he dared to stand up for what he thought was right. It was a trait that Aqa Jaan had noted earlier in Shahbal. He admired his nephew for it.

Aqa Jaan had two daughters and a son, who was five years younger than Shahbal. And yet when he looked at Shahbal, he saw in him the man who would later take his place at the bazaar.

He tried to involve Shahbal in the important affairs of

the house. He loved him like a son and was raising him to follow in his footsteps.

After school Shahbal always went directly to his uncle's office, where Aqa Jaan told him about the latest developments in the bazaar and discussed the decisions he had taken or was about to take and asked him for advice.

Now, though, Shahbal had broached the subject of the television and the moon. Aqa Jaan suspected that the idea had been planted in his mind by Nosrat, Aqa Jaan's youngest brother, who lived in Tehran.

After Aqa Jaan and Shahbal got back to the house, Aqa Jaan said to the grandmothers, 'I'll have my dinner in the library with the imam. I need to talk to him. Make sure we're not disturbed.'

He went to the library and found the imam on the floor, sitting on his carpet and reading a book. Aqa Jaan sat down beside him and asked him what he was reading.

'A book about Khadijah, the wife of Muhammad. She owned three thousand camels – the equivalent of three thousand delivery vans in today's terms. Undreamt-of wealth. It makes sense to me now: Muhammad was young and poor, Khadijah was old and rich. Muhammad needed her camels – her vans – to launch his mission,' said the imam, smiling.

'That's no way to talk about the Prophet!' Aqa Jaan said.

'Why not? Women were attracted to him, so why did he choose the widow Khadijah? She was nearly twenty years older than he was.'

The grandmothers came in with two round trays, set them down on the floor in front of the men and went out again.

‘Shahbal has been talking to me about the moon,’ Aqa Jaan said as they ate. ‘He thinks you ought to look at it.’

‘At the moon?’ said the imam.

‘He says that the imam of this city ought to be aware of the developments in this country and around the world. He objects to the fact that you don’t read a newspaper, that you read nothing but the old books in your library.’

The imam took off his glasses and wiped them casually on the tail of his long white shirt. ‘Shahbal has already told me all of this,’ he said.

‘Listen, his criticism is directed at me as well as you. In recent years we’ve focused entirely on religion. The mosque should introduce other topics as well, such as the men who will be walking on the moon tonight.’

‘That’s a lot of rubbish,’ the imam said.

‘Shahbal thinks you ought to watch. He wants to bring a television in here.’

‘Have you taken leave of your senses, Aqa Jaan?’

‘He’s bright, and I trust him. As you know, he’s a good boy. It’ll be our little secret. It won’t take long. He’ll remove the television the moment the programme is over.’

‘But if the ayatollahs in Qom find out we had a television in our house, they’ll—’

‘Nobody’s going to find out. It’s our house and our city. We can decide how we do things here. The boy’s right: almost everyone who comes to our mosque has a television. And although it’s taboo in this house, we mustn’t lock ourselves inside and close our eyes to what’s happening in the world.’

The grandmothers watched from behind the kitchen curtains as Shahbal stole through the darkness and carried a box into the library.

Shahbal greeted the imam and Aqa Jaan. Then, ignoring

their curious stares, he took a portable television out of the box and placed it on a table by the wall. Next he took out a long cable, plugged one end of it into the back of the television, carried the other end outside and climbed up a ladder to the roof, where he'd already rigged up a temporary aerial. He attached the cable to the aerial, made sure it couldn't be seen and went back to the library.

First he locked the door behind him, then he placed two chairs in front of the television. 'You might want to sit here,' he said.

After the imam and Aqa Jaan had taken their seats, he turned on the television and switched off the lights. Then he lowered the sound and gave a brief introduction: 'What we're about to see is actually taking place right now in outer space. Apollo 11 is orbiting the moon. The lunar module will be landing soon. It's a historic moment. Look, there it is! Oh, my God!'

Aqa Jaan and the imam leaned forward in their seats and stared at the vehicle as it touched down on the lunar surface. There was a hushed silence.

'Something's going on in the library,' Golbanu said to Golebeh. 'Something important that even we aren't supposed to know about.'

'The boy climbed the ladder to the roof, hid something there and hurried back down,' Golebeh said. 'Then the lights in the library went out. What are they doing there in the dark?'

'Let's go and see.'

They crept through the darkness and stopped by the library.

'Look! There's an electrical cord running down from the roof and into the library.'

'An electrical cord?'

They tiptoed over to the window, but the curtains were closed. They walked softly past the window and stopped at the door. A mysterious silver glow was shining through the crack.

They put their ears to the door.

‘Impossible!’ they heard the imam exclaim.

‘Incredible!’ they heard Aqa Jaan exclaim.

They looked through the keyhole, but all they could see was an eerie glow.

Frustrated, they tiptoed away and vanished into the darkness of the courtyard.