

The Papermaker's Son

The first sheet of the morning was always Baba's. Yusuf watched him lift the mould from the vat, water streaming from its wooden edges. The fibres settled evenly across the screen. Baba hardly seemed to move his hands.

Then it was Yusuf's turn.

He dipped the mould, lifted it and gave it a shake. Water ran over his wrist. A pale ridge of fibre collected along one side.

"Less," Baba said.

Yusuf tried to shake the ridge away.

"Less, Yusuf. Here."

Baba put his hands over Yusuf's and steadied the frame. They stood like that while the water drained. Close up, the sheet looked worse: thick at one edge, thin enough to see through at the other. Yusuf lowered it into the vat again.

"It looked right when you did it."

"I've had longer to practise."

“How much longer?”

Baba glanced at him. Yusuf knew perfectly well how much longer. He gripped the frame and tried again.

The workshop smelled of wet linen and starch. Behind them, one of the apprentices shifted a board, careful not to knock the drying sheets. Yusuf kept his eyes on the vat. He wanted one good sheet before they left for the market. Last time Baba had taken an apprentice on the delivery round instead, and Yusuf had spent the morning hearing all about it afterwards.

This time he let the mould rise slowly. A drip gathered beneath his elbow and fell into his sandal. He ignored it.

“There,” Baba said.

One corner was still thin, but the rest was even. Yusuf tipped his head to inspect it.



"Don't tilt it now!"

He straightened the frame. Baba caught the other edge, and between them they carried it to the workbench.

By midmorning, Yusuf's sleeves were drying stiffly on his arms. He had counted Hasan's bundle twice and was halfway through counting it again when Baba set two clean boards beside him.

"That's enough. Pack it."

There were three deliveries: a bundle for Hasan the bookseller, another for the scribe by the river, and a small packet of smooth letter paper for a merchant. Yusuf laid Hasan's sheets between the boards and pulled the cord tight. Baba tested the knot.

"May I carry that one?"

"Yes. Both hands when the lane is crowded."

Yusuf reached for it, but Baba held out the account board first.



For a moment he did not take it. The little waxed board had a worn corner and a mark on the back where somebody had pressed too hard. It went with Baba on every round. Yusuf had held it before, usually while his father retied a bundle or adjusted his sandal. He had never been allowed to make the entries.

"You count what we're paid," Baba said. "I'll check before it goes in the bag."

"And the orders?"

"Those too. Ask if you haven't heard properly."

Yusuf tucked the board against his side and took up Hasan's bundle. He had thought being trusted with it would feel different. Mostly, he discovered, it meant having nowhere to put his elbow.

At the door, Baba waited while he rearranged everything.

"Ready?"

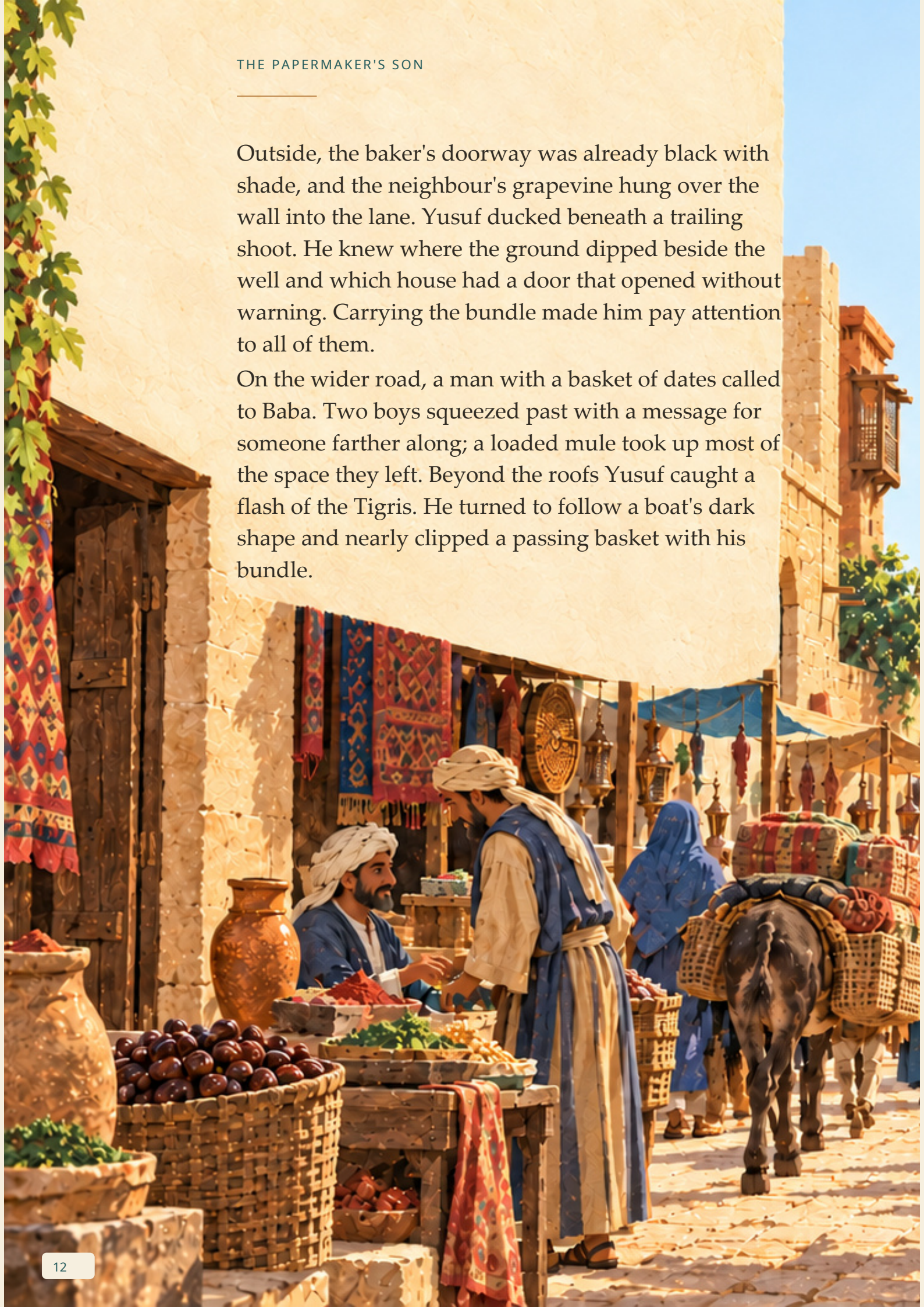
"Yes."

"You've left the stylus."

Yusuf went back for it.

Outside, the baker's doorway was already black with shade, and the neighbour's grapevine hung over the wall into the lane. Yusuf ducked beneath a trailing shoot. He knew where the ground dipped beside the well and which house had a door that opened without warning. Carrying the bundle made him pay attention to all of them.

On the wider road, a man with a basket of dates called to Baba. Two boys squeezed past with a message for someone farther along; a loaded mule took up most of the space they left. Beyond the roofs Yusuf caught a flash of the Tigris. He turned to follow a boat's dark shape and nearly clipped a passing basket with his bundle.



“Yusuf.”

“I saw it.”

He shifted the paper closer to his chest. From somewhere ahead came the rapid tapping of a coppersmith's hammer, and a man shouting at the mule to move.

Yusuf hoped they were going that way.

