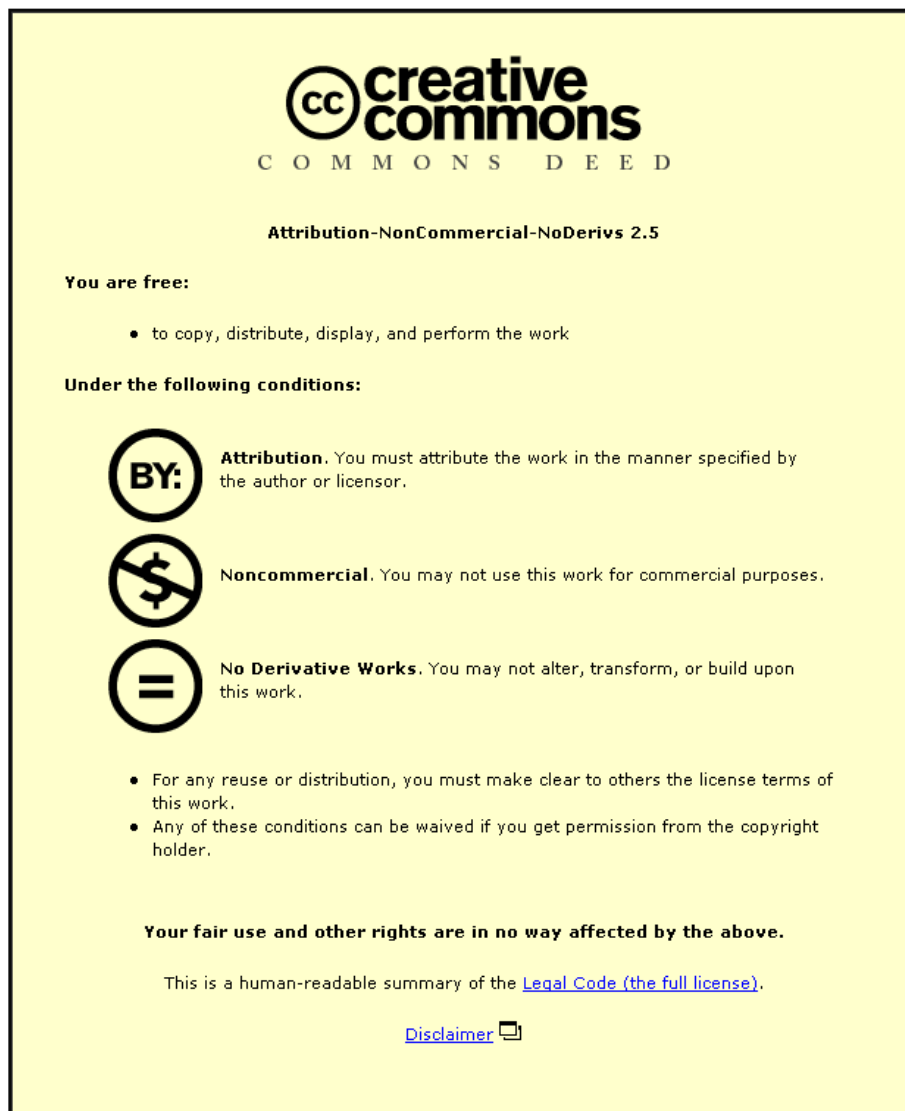




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
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**Changing Seasons:  
Examining Three Decades of Women's Writing in Greater Syria and Egypt**

A Doctoral Thesis

By

Suzanne Elayan

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the award of  
Doctor of Philosophy of Loughborough University

March 2012

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINALITY

This is to certify that I am responsible for the work submitted in this thesis, that the original work is my own except as specified in acknowledgments or in endnotes, and that neither the thesis nor the original work contained therein has been submitted to this or any other institution for a degree.

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## Abstract

Throughout the last three decades, the Arab region has attracted the unwanted attention of the rest of the world because of its spiralling political upheaval. This unrest has caused migration, economic and cultural changes, and eventually a spring of revolutions and protests in demand of reform. Arab countries are now in the spotlight of global current affairs, and all the imperfections regarding their cultural, social, and gender inequalities have surfaced to the foreground.

Arab women novelists have been addressing feminist issues for centuries, chipping away at the stereotypical image of the meek and voiceless Arab woman that comes hand in hand with Orientalism. Through their fiction, writers such as Nawal El Saadawi, Hanan Al-Shaykh and Fadia Faqir have promulgated a bold brand of Arab feminist thought.

This interdisciplinary thesis explores the Greater Syrian and Egyptian woman's novel written between 1975 and 2007. Through the in-depth analysis of Arab women's novels available in English, I attempt to uncover the many reasons behind today's gender inequality in Greater Syria and Egypt. By examining contemporary Arabic narrative styles and cultivating traditional Arab story-telling methods, the creative element of this thesis uses fiction to expose social and political injustice. The novel within this thesis challenges different forms of patriarchy that are dominant in the region, and endeavours to document a historical, on-going revolution.

Key words: Arab Feminism, Arab Spring, Arab women, family, alienation, sexuality, Nawal El Saadawi, Hanan Al-Shaykh, mother-daughter relationships, Arabic novels.

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## Introduction

*Women are largely to thank for the development of the Arabic novel*, thought Suzanne, as she browsed the burnt shelves of the ancient library in Alexandria. She picked up a burnt book, *of course*, she squinted at the barely readable title, *not written by a woman!* She picked up another book from the shelf, Mohammed Hussein Haikal's *Zaynab*. "1913," she turned the book over and read the blurb aloud, "The first Arabic novel ever written." Suzanne placed the book back on the shelf—she knew better.

She pulled out two new books from her backpack, Buthaina Shaaban's *One Hundred Years of Arab Woman's Fiction* and Joseph T. Zeidan's *Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years and Beyond*. Suzanne knew that the first modern Arabic novels were, in fact, written by women. An Egyptian woman, Aishah Taymur, an aristocrat with Kurdish and Turkish origins is classified as "the most outstanding female Arab writer to emerge in the second half of the nineteenth century."<sup>1</sup> Taymur produced poetry as well as fiction, and in 1888 she published a book called *Nata'ij al-Ahwal fe al-Aqwal wa al-Afal* (*Consequences of Matters Regarding Speech and Actions*) which used the old Arabic traditional storytelling style of *A Thousand and One Nights*.<sup>2</sup> This book has been ignored by most Arab critics. *Why?* Suzanne wondered.

Suzanne continued to walk aimlessly around the gigantic library, thumbing through a surviving book every now and then. None of them were written by women. She pulled out Shaaban's book from her backpack again. She lovingly gazed at the glossy cover. She absentmindedly rubbed it, as if she were petting her cat. "Why?" asked Suzanne, her voice echoing in the abandoned remains of a once grandiose place.

"Why?" repeated a woman dressed in black, with a purple bruise circling her neck, "I'll tell you why! It's because men built this library, filled it up with plundered books, and then burned it. This was a long time ago, before women wrote."

"Who are you?" asked Suzanne, startled.

"Sabriya," she replied with a warm smile, "chapter four of your thesis."

Suzanne stared at her purple noose-mark, unable to speak.

"Other early works by women have also gone unacknowledged, you know," said Sabriya, linking Suzanne's arm in hers in an old-fashioned manner that made Suzanne

uncomfortable. She led Suzanne to an empty bookshelf. “All written by Lebanese women: Alice Butrus Al Bustani wrote her novel *Sa’ibah*, (*Struggle*) in 1891. In 1899 Zainab Fawaz’s book *Husn al Awaqeb* (*Good Outcomes*) was published, followed in 1904 by *Qalb al Rajul* (*Man’s Heart*) by Labiba Hashem. I read them all—loved them!”

“Really? I couldn’t find any of them,” complained Suzanne, still looking at the empty bookshelf, as if expecting them to magically appear.

“Yes, my brother was able to get me these books. In my time—in the early twentieth century—you could find these books written by women, but you had to know where to look.”

“It’s a shame they can’t be found easily today,” Suzanne sighed, “Taha Hussein’s work is always available.” Suzanne flipped through Shaaban’s book. “Shaaban argues that the works of Arab women have been marginalised and accused of being ‘too emotional and weak in comparison to men’s stronger writing.’<sup>3</sup> Shaaban explains that this had a negative impact on women writers in that they began referring to themselves as ‘writers’ rather than women writers in the hopes that this rebranding would make their male counterparts view their work with more ‘seriousness and objectivity.’<sup>4</sup>”

“Shaaban?” asked Sabriya, reaching for the glossy paperback book.

“Oh, that’s right, you wouldn’t know her. You were written about in the eighties. And your story was set a hundred years ago,” Suzanne explained, trying to avoid staring at Sabriya’s bruise. “You’re used as an example in this book, by the way,” she said tapping Shaaban’s book of literary criticism. “Well, not *you*, your author,” Suzanne cleared her throat. “Buthaina Shaaban is a Syrian critical thinker, a supporter of the Arab women’s movement. However, she doesn’t support the current Syrian uprising. In fact, she says that the people out there demonstrating are fundamentalists and ex-cons.”<sup>5</sup>

“Syrian uprising?!” Sabriya exclaimed, “Is it similar to the one we had in 1919?”

“Oh yes! I mention that demonstration—the first woman’s demonstration—in chapter four of my thesis. It’s not exactly similar, that previous struggle was against colonial powers. This uprising is all about democracy, people don’t want to live in fear and poverty anymore. But the government’s response has been brutal. This conflict in Syria has really darkened the face of the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring has turned into winter because some of the men in power simply have no respect for human life!”

“The Arab Spring?” echoed Sabriya in awe. “It doesn’t make sense, though, for a woman to support the woman’s movement, and not support such an uprising,” said Sabriya after a long silence.

“Dr. Nawal El Saadawi, an Egyptian writer and activist, is the exact opposite though,” said Suzanne in an attempt to console Sabriya. “In fact, El Saadawi says ‘there is no democracy without women<sup>6</sup>.’ El Saadawi believes that the recent revolutions in the Arab world have proven that women and men can work side by side to overthrow oppressive regimes. It happened in Tunisia and Egypt!”

Sabriya looked confused. “Look, I’ll show you,” said Suzanne, taking her laptop out of the backpack. Sabriya was surprisingly not surprised by the image of a big grey cat welcoming them on the screen as the laptop struggled to boot up.

“Interesting device,” commented Sabriya.

Suzanne played a Youtube video for Sabriya. It was an AlJazeera English interview with El Saadawi during the Egyptian revolution of 2011. Suzanne worried that Sabriya would not understand English, and there was no Arabic equivalent for that interview. *Why?* she wondered.

Luckily Sabriya understood. She listened intently as El Saadawi explained:

All differences between Egyptians evaporated because of the revolution. Christians and Muslims were together. Men and women were together. There was equality between all; so the revolution washed away all the discriminations[...].<sup>7</sup>

Suzanne paused the video, “While working on my thesis, I found that Greater Syrian and Egyptian women’s writing is almost always focused on current political affairs, or at least historical ones. Like El Saadawi says, revolutions wash away differences. The common struggle unites everybody, and these moments shape a country and are worth documenting. That’s what I think Ulfat Idilbi did when she wrote about you, Sabriya. She focused on a key moment in history when men and women stood together in order to bring about justice, showing that women are a fundamental part of a just society. I discuss this in great detail in chapter four of my thesis. I was writing that chapter as the revolutions were actually happening.

Suzanne clicked the ‘play’ button, continuing the interview. The interviewer asked El Saadawi if she was a radical feminist. Sabriya looked at Suzanne in confusion.

“Radical feminism is a Western feminist stream of thought. I think what the interviewer was trying to do here is show that El Saadawi’s beliefs are Western and not applicable to us women of the Middle East. Check out her answer,” Suzanne said enthusiastically,

We don’t use the word ‘feminist’ here in Arabic. We say *tahrir al mara’a*— [which] means [the] liberation of women. Because there is not one feminism, there are many feminisms all over the world. [...] Our feminism in Egypt and in the Arab world is to change everything—that’s why I mean radical—to change the constitution so that it becomes secular and all Egyptians are equal, to change the family code so that men and women are equal in all rights, to change the culture, to change the economy [...]. So our feminism is broader: it’s political, it’s economic, it is social, it is cultural, it is also against American neo colonialism and Israeli invasion of Palestine.<sup>8</sup>

“Again,” said Suzanne, “this explains why women’s fiction— my own included— is so embedded in current affairs. It’s our feminism, we don’t just have to deal with patriarchy and inequality, we have so many other factors to struggle against that add to our oppression.”

Sabriya nodded her approval. “So this word, ‘feminism’,” she asked, “what is it in Arabic?”

“Ah,” said Suzanne raising her index finger, “if you type the word ‘feminism’ into any online translation website, the Arabic translation would be ‘gender equality’. Like El Saadawi says, the movement itself is called the woman’s liberation movement. As a genre of writing, it’s referred to as *Nasaweyah*.”

“Oh I’ve read a lot of those books,” smiled Sabriya, “books written by women.”

“Classifying all novels written by women as *Nasaweyah* is problematic,” said Suzanne.

“Problematic? Why?” asked Sabriya, her fingers stroking her purple noose-bruise.

“Because!” exclaimed Suzanne, “it reinforces the notion that men’s writing is the norm and women’s writing is the deviation from the norm. Women’s writing becomes the Other, hence kept separate from men’s writing, causing women to reject writing as women like Shaaban states. Again, to refer to all Arab women writing as feminist is also ambiguous, since different writers have different beliefs and theories.”

“But what about all the feminist issues discussed in Arab women’s writing?” asked Sabriya.

“Well,” Suzanne replied, “Zeidan argues that feminist theories are not necessarily universal but are adaptable, which confirms El Saadawi’s statement in the video. Zeidan explains that in Arab culture ‘collective ethnic and religious identity-conformity [behaviours] are highly valued by the power structure, and therefore sexism is [institutionalised] through those values.’<sup>9</sup> The women whose writing I have explored attempt to defeat sexism by exposing it. They’re all either from Greater Syria or Egypt—I use the term Greater Syria to refer to Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon and Syria, which were known as Greater Syria before they were colonised. These four countries are linked through dialect, culture, and traditions. The contemporary writers of Greater Syria and Egypt typically use realist narrative forms and styles of writing, focusing on controversial and taboo issues such as homosexuality, rape, premarital sex, abortions, ‘illegitimate’ children, and even prostitution, all the while tackling questions of class, race, national identity, war, and colonialism.”

“You’re right,” nodded Sabriya, “the Arab women writers I’ve come across do use realist narrative styles.”

Sabriya and Suzanne turned their heads to look at the once-real Library of Alexandria. Now it lay in a bubble under the Mediterranean Sea. Their eyes met, and they both laughed.

Sabriya reached for Suzanne’s backpack and rummaged through it. “All these novels are in English,” she pulled out El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero*.

“I know,” replied Suzanne apologetically. “I couldn’t find Arabic copies of them in Jordan.”

“That’s so strange,” said Sabriya, “back in my day all the books would be in Arabic. Some were translated from French or English.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” said Suzanne, “you can find Arabic books written by men, even women. But it isn’t easy to find Arabic versions of these confrontational, controversial novels in mainstream bookshops in Jordan, Egypt or Syria.”

“Why?” asked Sabriya.

“Well, women who write about women’s issues are unpopular. Fadia Faqir, a Jordanian writer, says: ‘[to] cross the defined border and encroach into traditionally

male space is to risk being accused of being a loose woman, a whore, a belly-dancer.”<sup>10</sup>

Suzanne glanced at El Saadawi’s autographed novel. She rubbed it lovingly. *Why are women writers who confront gender inequality dubbed as loose?* she thought.

“It’s not just the writer who’s a loose woman, creamy honey girl,” said a tall beautiful black-eyed woman clad in prison clothes. Her neck cracked as she jerked it. She rubbed it with her dark slim fingers and Suzanne saw that she had a dark purple mark encircling her neck similar to Sabriya’s. “It’s all women.”

“Firdaus?” asked Suzanne.

“Suicide?” asked Sabriya.

“Hanging.” Firdaus smiled smugly, “I murdered my pimp.”

“I wrote all about you in the first and second chapters of my thesis!” Suzanne said with enthusiasm, “The first one was about women’s obedience to their families. You know what you have to say about that, Firdaus!”

“You wrote about me and obedience to my family, sugar girl?” chuckled Firdaus, “Don’t you know that I’m a prostitute with no family?”

“Well, I used you to show examples of double standards, although you tried not to be a prostitute and got a respectable job. It wasn’t because you were a prostitute that you weren’t getting any respect. When you worked at an office you weren’t respected either. It was your economic circumstances as well as your gender—that’s why you were treated unfairly. Also, because you had no family protection. The men around you actually respected you more when you made them pay for sex!”

“Blindness!” Sabriya turned away, her face red. She covered her hair with the black veil that had previously hung loosely around her shoulders.

“You think you’re better than me, Syrian?” challenged Firdaus. “You have noose-marks around your neck too. Tell me honestly, misled saint, have you never slaved day and night for a man? Have you never felt that your own right to live was taken away by a man? At least I had the courage to finally lift my hand! I took my life into my own hands! Did you, mistress of them all? Did you have control over your own fate?”

“Ladies, please,” Suzanne grabbed Firdaus’ arm, amazed that Egyptian women in the seventies were just as articulate as Egyptian women in 2012. “Sabriya is from

the early twentieth century. She comes from a very sheltered background. I'm sure she wouldn't judge you if she read the first chapters of my thesis."

Sabriya had tears in her eyes, "You're right," she said, her hand going up to her noose mark, "I spent my entire life looking after my father and brothers. But then when the time came, they wouldn't look after me, although it was their duty to do so." Sabriya took a deep breath and continued with a firmer voice, "But I did take my life into my own hands." She pointed to her neck and then wiped away her tears.

Firdaus' eyes softened. "So sugar and cream, what's in chapter two of this thesis of yours?"

"Well," Suzanne cleared her throat, "it's about the mother-daughter relationship in Greater Syrian and Egyptian women's novels. The time-span I chose for the thesis itself is relatively unexplored in terms of literary criticism, from 1975 till now. I didn't cover all novels written by women in that region. I chose the ones that were available in English—those that were available to the English reader—because my own novel is in English, and also I didn't want to translate too much. Some novels were translated from Arabic, and others were actually written in English like my own."

"So what's the second chapter about? What about the mother-daughter relationship?" asked Firdaus.

"The mother in a lot of Arabic novels is usually either silent, absent, helpless, or dead." Suzanne unconsciously slid her fingers across her neck to mimic a beheading motion. She immediately regretted the motion after remembering that both women had died with a noose around their necks. She searched their faces for traces of indignation, found none, and continued, "So I examine the relationship in detail and look at it from a psychoanalytical perspective. Blaming the mother is a common feature I found in novels from our region, even if it's inadvertent. It's counterproductive, and, of course in our culture, women carry the burden of everything, and this does not exclude mothers. Women are being misogynists against themselves really. Instead of tackling the problem head on, blaming their mothers seems rather passive-aggressive to me. The vicious cycle continues; they themselves end up being silent, absent, helpless, or dead mothers."

Firdaus was half listening, half looking at the burnt library. "Cleopatra loved this library, you know. She saw the library being burned down by Roman men, and then

she prepared her tomb and committed suicide by letting a snake bite her. It was the only way to escape being humiliated by men after the Romans conquered Egypt.”

Sabriya looked at Firdaus in surprise. “I didn’t expect a woman of…” she cleared her throat, “of your profession to know such things.”

With another loud crack, Firdaus jerked her neck. Thick black hair flew around her face. “I loved books,” she looked at Suzanne, “so who did you use as an example, duckling?” she asked.

Suzanne looked lost for a few seconds, and then realised that Firdaus was asking about her second chapter. “I discussed Egyptian, Jordanian, and Palestinian female characters.”

“Bring the Palestinian,” commanded Firdaus.

“I don’t know how,” mumbled Suzanne, shoving her hands in her pockets.

Sabriya rummaged through Suzanne’s backpack and pulled out a book that had a ‘Palestine’ stamp on the cover. “Here,” she said, handing it over to Suzanne, “rub it like you did with Firdaus’ book.”

Suzanne stared at the book nervously. She identified herself as a displaced Palestinian, in spite of being born in Jordan. Often Palestinians who still lived in Palestine did not acknowledge her as a Palestinian because she was not born there. She tried to think of Mariam in Sahar Khalifeh's *The Image, the Icon, and the Covenant*. Suzanne began rubbing the book, *would Mariam be judgmental?* She reluctantly rubbed the novel.

To their surprise, a middle-aged man with a moustache appeared. Firdaus immediately began gathering phlegm and saliva in her mouth in order to spit on him.

“Mariam would not judge you for not being born in Palestine,” said Ibrahim, “I myself left for a while, but I returned to find my love and my son.”

“That’s right,” said Suzanne snapping her fingers. “The story of Mariam was narrated by you.”

Firdaus, satisfied with the amount of mucus she had gathered, spat in Ibrahim’s direction. It was such a big ball of spit, however, that it did not fly far enough and landed heavily just millimetres away from his shiny black shoes.

He stared at Firdaus in shock. Suzanne noticed that Firdaus had her lips pursed again, *gathering more spit, no doubt*, thought Suzanne. “Firdaus! I thought you only spat on pictures of men! Stop that!” Suzanne tried to avoid looking at the puddle of



spit near Ibrahim's shoes, but she felt bile fill her throat anyway. She swallowed it down forcefully.

Firdaus gulped. "So what's your story with Mariam, man?" She spat out the last word with an icy expression on her face.

Ibrahim was unsure of how to behave, he was unused to women behaving in this manner, but he was outnumbered in an unfamiliar setting. "Mariam is a nun in a convent now."

"At least she's alive," said Sabriya with relief.

"What made her go there?" asked Firdaus.

Ibrahim cleared his throat, "She was disowned by her family because of giving birth to an illegitimate baby boy."

"He impregnated her," Suzanne raised an eyebrow at him. "He pursued her, knowing full well that she was Christian and that they couldn't have a future together. And after she got pregnant she asked for his help but he ignored her. And she ended up running through streets of Jerusalem dodging her brother's bullets!"

Sabriya gasped. Firdaus had fists clenched.

"Blindness on his heart!" barked Sabriya. "Send him back!"

Suzanne grabbed Khalifeh's novel and opened it in front of Ibrahim. He disappeared. She hoped Firdaus would never read Khalifeh's novel, she feared that if she knew the rest of what Ibrahim did, she would bring him back and murder him the way she murdered her pimp.

"Why would this Palestinian writer let a man narrate the story?" asked Firdaus furiously.

Suzanne remembered a conversation with the older generation of some of her female relatives. They used harsh words against El Saadawi's morals because of the issues she chose to tackle in her novels. However, they all celebrated Khalifeh's writing, and encouraged Suzanne to use her in her thesis rather than El Saadawi or Hanan Al Shaykh. Khalifeh's character Mariam, though not a prostitute by trade as El Saadawi's character Firdaus was, had not only fornicated with a Muslim, but had also had an illegitimate child. *Was that more acceptable because she was Christian?* Christian women were subject to the same honour code as Muslim ones in the region. Mariam's life was only spared because she hid in a church. Did her relatives respect Khalifeh because she wrote as a man?

Suzanne thought about the third chapter of the literary criticism section of her thesis. She had examined the displacement and national identity of fictional female characters who have had to emigrate because of war or social persecution. She thought of Nadia, a woman in exile in Leila Al-Atrash's *A Woman of Five Seasons*. Her story was mostly narrated by her husband. Even Zahra's story in Hanan Al Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* was partly narrated by her uncle. *Are these Arab women writers continuing the tradition of men speaking on their behalf?*

Firdaus was watching Suzanne, waiting for an answer. "Perhaps," began Suzanne tentatively, "these writers aim to adopt a more traditional style of storytelling."

"What tradition are you talking about?" asked Firdaus. "Have you forgotten *Alf Leila wa Leila?*"

"Yes, *A Thousand and One Nights*," Suzanne repeated. "What about it?"

Sabriya tilted her neck at Suzanne, "It's narrated by a woman, Shahrazad."

"So, it's not necessarily a tradition for men to speak on women's behalf, goose" said Firdaus.

"There was this Sultan, Shahrayar," said Sabriya, "and he was betrayed by his wife. So he was convinced that all women were like that, and began marrying virgins and having them executed the next day. So after all the virgins had been killed, Shahrazad volunteered."

"She began telling him stories," continued Firdaus, "making him so intrigued he eventually pardoned her after a thousand nights of storytelling."

"So she didn't end up dead or in a convent or banished or in a mental hospital!" marvelled Suzanne.

"Well, she wasn't confrontational about women's issues, she mostly told fairy-tales where women played a fundamental role," explained Sabriya. "The fact that she told stories to save herself from a fate similar to ours," she pointed her thumb at Firdaus, who was standing behind her, "that's the liberation of woman, isn't it? Think of the girls who would have continued to die at the hands of that Sultan."

"She saved a thousand girls," nodded Firdaus.

Suzanne clenched her fists in frustration, "But my main problem is that in an Arabic fairy-tale it's acceptable for a Sultan to marry a virgin every night and then have her killed after she's served her purpose. In Arabic women's realist novels

women also end up dead because of a man. And in Jordanian newspapers there's always an article about a girl who has been killed by a brother or a father. When will it become horrific? When will it become unacceptable?"

Suzanne took out Faqir's *My Name is Salma* and rubbed it.

A woman with a bloody hole in her back stood among them. "Where's my daughter? Is this the well?"

"No, I'm sorry," said Suzanne, "that well is in the desert in Jordan, we're in Alexandria."

"Who shot you?" asked Firdaus.

Salma fell to the ground, sobbing and tearing at her black hair.

"Her brother," answered Suzanne. "He also threw her daughter in a well."

"Blindness on his heart!" Sabriya cried.

"She had a baby out of wedlock like Mariam," said Suzanne. "Mariam's Christian and could hide in a church, but for a Muslim girl from the deserts of Jordan, prison was her only haven until French nuns rescued her."

"Suzanne, send her back, there's no consoling her," Firdaus said softly.

Suzanne flipped through the pages of *My Name is Salma*, and the sobbing woman disappeared.

The three women sat in melancholy silence on the pink alabaster and granite tiles on the library floor.

"You said she was rescued by French nuns?" Sabriya broke the silence.

"Yes, but she returned to find her daughter," answered Suzanne.

"Look at us," said Firdaus, "the two of us ended up with a noose around our necks, and she's walking around in a no-longer-existing library conversing with a bunch of dead fictional characters."

"Did you notice that the only one alive was this Ibrahim fellow?" asked Sabriya,

"May He send him a fever."

"The man lives his life unpunished," Firdaus shook her head.

"Not really though," protested Suzanne, "Mariam finds peace as a servant of God, but Ibrahim lives his life alone and exiled from his country. Isn't that punishment enough? And your pimp didn't get away with it either, Firdaus, you killed him."

“Mariam's country was taken just as Ibrahim's was,” Firdaus snapped. “She had to deal with being disowned by her family. You wouldn't know what it's like to be without the protection of a family; you're treated like an insect, light of my eye. Mariam had a baby out of wedlock; can you imagine how she must have been treated in her community? You can't, because the narrator was a man and he was away. Mariam wasn't given a voice. Ibrahim was able to come back to his community as if nothing had happened, but Mariam had to hide in a convent. And Salma's brother, I bet you he didn't even go to prison for murdering his sister or her child.”

“Well, activists are trying to change the laws in Jordan,” said Suzanne, embarrassed. “One recent development is that now a woman can obtain a passport without her husband's permission.”

“Bury me, Suzanne,” said Sabriya, “this talk is depressing. Tell us more about your thesis. Tell Firdaus what chapter four is about, the one I'm in.”

“Chapter four is about Arab women's alienation not only while they're outside the home, but also within the domestic sphere. You know how the setting of the Arab female plot is usually in closed spaces and rarely in open or public spaces. I look at how men dominate these spaces and liken the household to a capitalistic feudal system, which then led me to examine the texts from a Marxist perspective.”

“But Marx is a Western philosopher;” protested Sabriya, “why try to apply his theories on us?”

“Well, I hadn't intentionally set out to do that,” answered Suzanne apologetically, “but while reading contemporary novels written by Arab women, I came across this recurring theme: homelessness at home. I couldn't find much writing about alienation done by Arab thinkers, so I had to adapt a Western theory to fit a Middle Eastern reading. I also substituted and adapted other Western theories when there wasn't an Eastern one to apply and build on.”

“I see why you used Sabriya as an example,” said Firdaus with a grin, “she spent her whole life serving her family, and look how she ended up. And, look at me, I spent most of my life without a family and I ended up the same. With or without a family, you're alienated, with or without a job you're alienated. Simply being female in our culture is alienating!”

Suzanne laughed, “Tell me about it, English speakers even call me Alien instead of Elayan!”

Suzanne considered bringing in Zahra but worried she would be as hysterical as Salma had been. Suzanne thought a pregnant woman with a bleeding bullet-wound might be too traumatic for them. Salma had been shot by her brother, *It's bad*, thought Suzanne, *but it's happened so many times that it's actually become normal news for me. Zahra was shot by her own lover.*

“You know, Firdaus,” said Suzanne, “Zahra saved lives too. She distracted the sniper for a few hours every day and stopped him from shooting passersby. She's kind of like Shahrazad.”

Sabriya grimaced, “Shahrazad used her words, Zahra used her body!”

Firdaus glared at Sabriya.

“Well, we can't know if Shahrazad actually enjoyed the storytelling. We know that Zahra enjoyed being with the sniper. But I suppose the comforting thing is that both women chose to do what they did. And you, Firdaus, you chose to become a prostitute that second time when you could have stayed married to that awful man who beat you. And, you Sabriya, you chose to hang yourself. You could have lived in the horrible room your brothers were going to rent for you after they kicked you out of your father's home. Isn't women's liberation all about giving women the option of choice?”

“So, honey girl, what's in chapter five of your thesis?” asked Firdaus after a long silence.

“Ah,” said Suzanne, her face brightening, “that's about female sexuality in Greater Syrian and Egyptian writing. I do a close reading of Al Shaykh's novel *Women of Sand and Myrrh*. I also look at lesbianism among women in that region.”

“Blindness!” protested Sabriya, “Do you want to get yourself in trouble?”

“Well, it is 2012,” explained Suzanne, “and I'm just analysing another woman's writing! I hope I won't get into too much trouble.”

“So is there a chapter six, bold girl?” asked Firdaus.

“Then there's the creative writing section, which is the main part of my thesis.”

“So what is your own novel about?” asked Sabriya.

“My novel explores all the themes I've discussed in the literary criticism part of the thesis. I look at the family and its positive and negative influences and I examine female alienation within the home and the workplace. I explore arranged marriages, honour crimes, and Palestinians in diaspora. I portray my own confusion about my

national identity through some scenes in the novel. I also document the beginning of the Arab spring; what life was like before it, and how social conventions began to change because of it. The only thing I didn't do—in order to 'fill the gap' as Edward Said puts it—I didn't let any of my female characters die. I had planned to follow the pattern of having one girl die as a sacrifice for the others, but then thought, no, no sacrifices, not that way. This pattern should stop.

“I just wanted to use the power of storytelling to represent Palestinian women in diaspora because I feel that they are under-represented. I also focused on female solidarity all the while highlighting social issues such as sexual harassment, sexism, inequality in the workplace, the family's importance in an individual's life, and I also demonstrated how flippant use of language can often be harmful because it enforces the binary opposites—that men are active and women are passive and that women are in need of protecting.

“The narrative is written in English because we don't use Classical Arabic in our everyday life. I felt I can play around with the language more in English because many of the things I wanted to say can easily be translated into other languages while giving a humorous affect, but simply not into Classical Arabic. Imagine saying something like 'brother of a fucked [woman]' in Classical Arabic?”

Firdaus joined Suzanne in laughter while Sabriya flushed.

“What do you wish to achieve in this thesis?” asked Sabriya asked sternly.

“Well,” said Suzanne, “I know that quite a few critics have begun paying attention to Arab women writers; Al-Shaykh, El Saadawi, and Idilbi's work have been critically acknowledged. Even banning a book is acknowledgement, you know. But my contemporaries are not getting the critical reception they deserve. And through examining other works on Arab women novelists, I haven't found much in-depth readings of their fiction and certainly not in the interdisciplinary methods that I have used in examining them.”

“What do you mean?” asked Firdaus.

“I examine the novels by applying Western and Eastern feminist discourse, psychology, sociology, cultural studies, philosophy and I take religious and political issues into account. I'm basically showing how women use literature to reflect their reality. I'm showing how women are using storytelling to promote change in the region.”

“Some reality they're reflecting,” muttered Firdaus.

“My main argument is, my love,” said Suzanne patiently, “that women from our region are oppressed and live in discrimination. We're oppressed if we're rich, we're oppressed even more if we're poor, we're oppressed in our homes, we're oppressed when we're in public spaces, we're oppressed in the work place, and we even oppress our own bodies! That's why in my thesis I begin by discussing the family in general, and then focus on the mother in particular. I look at women who try to escape from this oppression, and then examine women who are trapped within patriarchy, and finally I explore women and their connection to their own selves. That's all theory, and my novel is the practical bit where I apply all the theories.”

“So what's so special about your novel,” asked Sabriya, “you said that you didn't follow the pattern set by your predecessors or your contemporaries.”

“Other Palestinian women's work is often written from the male perspective. In my novel, I've only given voices to women. I've silenced the man because I think it's about time that Palestinian women speak for themselves. I also avoided the traditional tragic ending, and not all my male characters are patriarchal. I show that in this age of the Arab Spring there are some men out there who are ready for women's liberation.”

Firdaus got up and dusted off her prison clothes. She extended her hand to Sabriya, who hesitated before taking it.

“We should get going, and let this woman get back to her fantasy world,” Firdaus said.

“It was great talking to you, my life,” said Suzanne, embracing Firdaus. “And you too, my heart,” she said to Sabriya, who joined in the embrace.

Suzanne rubbed Idilbi's *Sabriya: Damascus Bittersweet* and El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* and the two women vanished.

The abandoned library suddenly seemed menacing to Suzanne. She decided that it was time to go home. As she began walking towards the exit, she passed the empty bookcase that brought her there in the first place. She unzipped her heavy backpack and took out half a dozen books and her soft-bound manuscript. She lovingly began arranging the books on the shelf, *Woman at Point Zero* first, then *Sabriya: Damascus Bittersweet*, *Searching*, *The Cairo House*, *My Name is Salma*, *Pillars of Salt*, *Dreams of Water*, *The Story of Zahra*, *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, *The Image*, *the Icon* and

*the Covenant*. Finally, she placed her own novel, *Spring Began on Friday*. She smiled at the shelf, lightly touching her neck with her fingers.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph T. Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years and Beyond* (New York: State University Of New York Press, 1995) p. 59.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>3</sup> Buthaina Shaban, *One Hundred Years of Arab Women Fiction* (Beirut: Dar il Adab, 1999) p.13.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Shadid, "Syria Proclaims It Now Has Upper Hand Over Uprising", *The New York Times*, May 9, 2011

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/10/world/middleeast/10syria.html?pagewanted=all>> [accessed 29.11.2011].

<sup>6</sup> AlJazeera English, "Riz Khan - Mother of the Revolution", (2011) <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-tG7iJo0M&feature=relmfu>> [accessed 29.11.2011]

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Zeidan, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Fadia Faqir, *In the House of Silence* (Lebanon: Garnet Publishing, 1999) p. 12.



*The ground began rumbling. Suzanne turned away from the shelf in a panic and tried to maintain her balance.*

*A large pink Sphinx with a man's face and a lion's body appeared before her. "Who dares to place books written by women on the shelves of this library?" asked the Sphinx with a lion's roar. Suzanne ignored her trembling legs and tried to focus on the Sphinx's granite face. She recognised him as the Sphinx of Alexandria. His face was that of Cleopatra's father who was known to love alcohol, women, and music. Cleopatra's father has to be a nice fellow, thought Suzanne.*

*"I did," she said, mustering as much confidence as she could.*

*"Then you will be punished," replied the Sphinx, lifting his paw.*

*"Wait!" shouted Suzanne, "Aren't you the Pharaoh Ptolemy XII?"*

*"I'm not the Pharaoh, I am his sphinx. Now it is time for your punishment."*

*"I thought you were the pet of the Goddess Astarte?"*

*"I'm not a pet!" roared the Sphinx slamming his paw. Suzanne managed to roll away just in time. The ground trembled.*

*"But why do you want to punish me?"*

*"Because you dared to add stories written by women to the shelves of this library."*

*"Why don't you like stories written by women?" asked Suzanne, stealthily slipping her hand into her pocket.*

*The Sphinx frowned in uncertainty.*

*"If you don't know anything about women's writing," began Suzanne coyly, "how can you punish me for believing it belongs here?" She quickly pressed the keys on her mobile and texted her sister: CALL ME NOW. Ask me to tell you stories and theories about Arab women's writing. My life depends on it!*

*The claw of the Sphinx's index finger slowly came out of his granite paw, and reached towards Suzanne's T-shirt. He lifted her high off the ground so her eyes were level with his. His breath smelt like rust and dirt. Sweat dripped off Suzanne's forehead.*

*At that moment Suzanne's mobile phone rang.*

*She gulped, cleared her throat and answered the call and put it on loud speaker. "Hey sister!"*

*"Can you tell me stories and theories about Arab women's writing?" asked her sister, her voice echoing in the library.*

*"Of course," answered Suzanne confidently, "I can tell you all about Arab women's writing, if this Sphinx allows me."*

*"I'm listening," said the Sphinx. "But do not think that it will spare you."*

*"Let's start with the family. Obedience to the family is every Arab's duty, you know, even in fiction..."*

## I

### Obedience is Duty?

#### The Family in Greater Syrian and Egyptian Contemporary Women's Novels

Denys Johnson-Davies, in his book *The Anchor book of Modern Arabic Fiction*, explains that “[for] the reader coming to Arabic literature for the first time, several hurdles present themselves”.<sup>1</sup> The unfamiliar social background, the difficult names, and the unknown traditions are some examples of the “hurdles” Johnson-Davis mentions. The Arabic novel portrays the culture assuming that the reader is aware of the general ambience. Although each Arab country is different in its laws, traditions, dialects and customs, there are similarities that bind Arab countries together.

There are over twenty Arab countries, and they all share a tradition of strong connection to their kindred. The family plays a fundamental role in most Arabs' lives. The general colloquial use of the word “family” in an Arabic context does not merely refer to the nuclear family consisting of mother, father and children. It includes all the aunts, uncles, and cousins with the addition of the father and mother's aunts, uncles and cousins. Nawal El Saadawi discusses the family's initial function and why families became so important in the Arab world.

[Children were] cared for and looked after by members of the extended family whenever work called their mothers to the fields or elsewhere. Social, psychological and even financial support was forthcoming, and numerous tasks were undertaken in common so as to alleviate the burdens of every day life.<sup>2</sup>

It is still the case today. Families in Arab cultures still play a role in helping their members. In Greater Syria and Egypt they have, however, assumed a more overbearing function by constantly monitoring the behaviour of their members and helping out less. The reason for this surveillance is that each member of society represents his or her family. The misbehaviour of one family-member reflects on the reputation of the entire family. The Arab culture holds honour in the highest value, so it is in each family's best interest, at least in Arab tradition, for its reputation to be

untarnished. A family's good social standing affects businesses, job opportunities, marriage prospects, and can even aid in legal matters.

Ramadan A. Ahmed explains the importance of the family in the Arab world;

the family constitutes the basic framework in which the life of the individual unfolds. One's first loyalty is to the family, on which reputation, well-being, and wealth depend. Family members exert considerable influence on the individual concerning education, employment, marriage, religious obligations, family [honour], and to a certain extent, the management of family property.<sup>3</sup>

The security of family is essential for every Arab; even more so for women. In this chapter I will look at relationships within the family in the contemporary Greater Syrian and Egyptian feminist novel. I will use the term "family" here to refer to the wider concept (mother, father, children, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins). Where does individuality come into such a large family unit? Are the family members able to see themselves as independent members of society outside the family? These questions relate to both men and women; I shall, however, focus more particularly on how the family affects females.

The possibilities for individuality and independence differ according to gender. Both genders are differently stifled by their families' unwavering hold. For the male member of the family, there is always the knowledge that he will one day be in charge of his own family. The female member of the family is brought up with the knowledge that this grip will never loosen.

The obstacles that girls face while growing up are very different than what boys face. Ahmed's study focuses particularly on Egyptian families. He offers an explanation as to why boys are encouraged to carry on with education while girls' education may be neglected,

According to old Arab family traditions, the son is expected to take on the responsibilities of the head of the family upon his father's death or his own marriage. This could explain why education is considered worthwhile and necessary for boys, but somewhat less necessary or even positively harmful for girls.<sup>4</sup>

Privileges such as education, travel, employment, even mingling with society and running day to day errands are automatically given to boys, but need to be earned by girls. This is one of the main obstacles that an Arab woman writer faces. Writing, for Arab women has gone through many stages, and now it has become less about art and more about promoting social change.<sup>5</sup> Joseph T. Zeidan explains that because of this gender inequality, in the last three decades Arab feminist writers have developed their own realist style, and their main mission is “to expose patriarchy and its effects on women as individuals and [to declare] the right for self-determination for their heroines.”<sup>6</sup>

El Saadawi writes about what a girl faces from the moment of her birth, “The education that a female child receives in Arab society is a series of continuous warnings about things that are supposed to be harmful, forbidden, shameful or outlawed by religion.”<sup>7</sup> It is the family who gives these warnings, and they who enforce them. Boys grow up hearing these warnings being told to their sisters, and that aids in continuing the Arab tradition which encourages the punishment of females for the same actions that males do not get punished for.

El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero* (1975) is a semi-fictional novel portraying a woman’s struggle in a patriarchal society. The narrator, Firdaus, learns at a very young age about patriotism and religion. The lesson of obedience to a “ruler” be it a god, president, or father, is a patriarchal one taught to every child, “who could deny that to be obedient was a duty, and to love one’s country too. That love of the ruler and love of Allah were one and indivisible.”<sup>8</sup> To Firdaus, the ruler of her home is her father, and so love and obedience for him are her duty. Although Firdaus is aware of that, she unknowingly rebels by her inability to recognise her father among his friends. “Sometimes I could not distinguish which one of them was my father. He resembled them so closely that it was difficult to tell.”<sup>9</sup> Firdaus’ inability to distinguish who among the men is her father is symbolic; her father is like every other man. They are all the same; they pray on Fridays then they go home and beat their wives. Firdaus questions religion through her father’s actions;

My father, a poor peasant farmer, who could neither read, nor write, knew very few things in life. [...] [H]ow to exchange a virgin daughter for a dowry when there was still time, [...] how to beat his wife and make her bite the dust each night.

[...] [W]as it not verily true that [...] beating another human being was a sin?<sup>10</sup>

As Firdaus points out, her father's public religiousness is not reflected through his behaviour at home. This contradiction in her father's demeanour creates a disregard towards religion and men in Firdaus. Shelley Phillips examines how a father's attitude affects his daughter; she explains that "a daughter's relationship with her father affects many aspects of her adult life: her choice of friends and lovers, how she feels about herself as a person and how she values women".<sup>11</sup> In Firdaus' case, she has no relationship with her father and makes few friends. Her choice of career is prostitution. As for her valuing of women, Firdaus believes that, "[a] successful prostitute was better than a misled saint. All women are victims of deception."<sup>12</sup>

Firdaus' conviction that a successful prostitute, the lowest specimen on a religious scale, is better than a misled saint, illustrates an imperative point. While prostitution may be condemned by religion and society, it is still, as Lena Edlund and Evelyn Korn describe it, "female dominated." It has the "unusual feature" of being "well paid despite being low-skill [and] [labour] intensive".<sup>13</sup> While Firdaus acknowledges that a female prostitute is also a victim of male deception; Firdaus' inclination to respect a prostitute more than a saint comes from her belief that religion is male dominated, hence another deception that victimises women. A female "misled saint" is, similar to her father: "poor" and knows "very few things in life." Firdaus' experiences with her family, first her father and, later on, her uncle, account for her negative views regarding religion.

Since the family is the window from which a child gets her first glimpse of society, Firdaus' parents are the first two representatives of the whole of society to her. Her mother is feeble and slaves for her father's needs. Her father has a warm bed, good food, and all the authority in the household. Firdaus' siblings are of little importance, she merely mentions them in passing, "like most people, I had many brothers and sisters. They were like chicks that multiply [...] one by one they creep into a corner and die."<sup>14</sup> With a violent father, a helpless mother and dispensable siblings, she turns to her uncle for guidance. Her uncle, who, we are told, "was not young," waits for the house to be empty so he can touch his niece inappropriately. He does "even more"<sup>15</sup> assumedly molesting her. He is the only other male figure in her life, which explains Firdaus' future violent behaviour with the pimp.

After her parents' death, Firdaus leaves the village and accompanies her uncle to Cairo. There she is exposed to a different social background. He sends her to school, reads to her and after explaining to her that "dancing was a sin, and that kissing a man, too, was a sin,"<sup>16</sup> he stops molesting her.

After her uncle's marriage to a woman of a higher social class, Firdaus is in awe to find that her uncle's wife "never washed [her] uncle's feet, and he never beat her or spoke to her with a loud voice."<sup>17</sup> Finally, Firdaus experiences a different kind of family life than that of her early childhood: women with money are better treated.

Firdaus' uncle ignores his own aunt whenever she comes to visit. Firdaus recalls,

His aunt would sit [...] on the bed weeping silently, and mentioning how she regretted having sold her golden necklace in order to pay for his studies in El Azhar [University].<sup>18</sup>

An aunt giving her nephew her only gold necklace to fund his studies is a classic example of how members of the family come together in order to offer better opportunities for the younger generation. This offering does not come cost-free. In return the family member who has been given help becomes forever indebted to his or her beneficiary and must always show exaggerated gratitude. Gratitude can be shown by constantly mentioning, thanking and obeying the benefactor. If, like Firdaus' uncle, the family member who has received aid does not show gratitude he or she is seen as ungrateful and shunned by the rest of the family. Firdaus's uncle offers his niece the same generosity by taking her in after her parents' death, but this comes at a cost: heavy labour, cooking, cleaning and occasional secret sexual favours. Eventually his wife declares that Firdaus eats too much and must, at eighteen, be married off to a sixty-something-year-old widower. After continuous rape, starvation, and beatings, Firdaus is able to run away. Her uncle, however, sends her back to her violent husband, which is why, the next time Firdaus escapes, she becomes a prostitute.

Through Firdaus, El Saadawi bleakly describes a working class woman's situation in Egypt. From birth, Firdaus is subjected to starvation as well as physical, psychological and sexual abuse from different family members. In Firdaus' case, the family is the reason she finds herself in a constant battle against society; which has no respect for her because she is without the protection of a family. El Saadawi verbalises the patriarchal ideology that many women in Greater Syria and Egypt are still fighting to change.

Samia Serageldin's *The Cairo House* (2000) shows a different side of Egyptian families. Gigi comes from a privileged background and her relationship with her father is warm and loving. She respects him immensely and looks up to him, which creates an opposite kind of fear than Firdaus's; Gigi is afraid of losing her father's approval.

Even in the twenty-first century, as long as a woman is unmarried, she remains in the custody of her father. It is still inconceivable for an unmarried Arab woman to live on her own in Greater Syria and Egypt. Her father is “responsible” for her, whether she is fourteen or forty. In the event of her father’s death, the responsibility falls on the girl’s brother, uncle, or grandfather, the first immediate male family member. An Arab girl will only stop being her family’s responsibility upon her marriage; in which case, she then becomes the responsibility of her husband. In the event of her husband’s death, his immediate male relatives would assume guardianship for her and her children.

The unmarried girl awaits that unknown freedom which she thinks will arrive after marriage. This phenomenon causes many a young woman to plunge into marriage with an unknown partner. An example of that is Gigi, who waits “patiently for life to begin.”<sup>19</sup> She then marries a man she does not love because her father and aunt choose him for her.

At eighteen, Gigi overhears a conversation between her father and her aunt. Her aunt persuades her father to marry her off so that he would have “peace of mind” meaning that once his daughter is safely married off, he will not need to worry that she might stray and dishonour the family. The man chosen is a man in his late twenties, the son of a rich “hard” businessman who is well known for his fortune and for his unkindness towards his wives. Gigi's father voices his doubt about “handing his only child to a son of his” but Gigi's aunt silences him by saying “it's not always like father like son. Besides, do you want her to marry one of those pious young men who've never been with a woman before?” Gigi's father's offended reply is, “and have him experiment on my daughter? Allah forbid!”<sup>20</sup>

In the Arab world, an unmarried woman must be a virgin. An unmarried man, however, is expected and encouraged to have “experience.” This is highly contradictory of the religious nature of people in Greater Syria and Egypt, as two main faiths of the region, Islam and Christianity, advocate abstinence from sexual activity

before marriage. The importance of a woman's virtue, however, has little to do with religion, and everything to do with tradition.

Honour (*Sharaf*) in Arabic derives from the root (*Shurfa*), which means the highest point of something, such as a mountain or hill. The highest point of a man is his honour; and, in an Arabic meaning, honour is that the family be untouched by scandal. In a study about family and social order, Sylvie Fogiel-Bijaoui writes about the Palestinian culture regarding family honour. The following passage sheds some light on the importance of virginity in Palestinian culture in particular, and more generally, Arab culture:

[Virginity] constitutes the highest value. Under the best of circumstances, the loss of virginity means the loss of the opportunity to marry [...]. Under less propitious circumstances, her loss of virginity leads the 'deviant woman' to be killed by the men in her family, usually her father and brothers, with the cooperation of her mother.<sup>21</sup>

Because Gigi is female she is a threat to her family's honour. Therefore, she is married off to the "experienced" man and suffers in a loveless marriage.

Gigi does not ask for a divorce until after her father's death. She is only ready to admit that the marriage which her father arranged for her is a failed one once she does not have to face her father's disappointment. She goes to her uncle and tells him that she wants a divorce. She says: "we never had a real marriage. But I kept trying because of [my son]. And because of Papa. Now that he's gone, there's no point in going on any longer. Uncle, I want a divorce."<sup>22</sup> Gigi's uncle, who is now in the place of her father, tries to negotiate a divorce but her husband refuses. As a result, Gigi leaves her son behind and escapes to Paris. Usually in these circumstances, a woman's male family members are able to support her by coaxing the in-laws into persuading the husband to divorce his wife. In such situations, the woman is expected to give up her financial rights in exchange for a divorce. In *The Cairo House*, because Gigi's father dies and her uncle the Pasha is imprisoned for his political beliefs, leaving her completely under her husband's mercy; "there [is] no one who could shame [her husband] into doing the right thing by her."<sup>23</sup> Luckily, Gigi's husband meets another woman and eventually divorces Gigi.

Gigi marries a Frenchman. Because of the Pasha's imprisonment, none of Gigi's family members can openly oppose the marriage. However, Gigi's husband is never



accepted as a member of the family. He and Gigi live together in the United States, and whenever Gigi visits her family in Cairo, none of her family members mention her husband or ask about him. Because Gigi refuses to succumb to the tradition of allowing her family to control her life, she lives the remainder of her life as an outcast. She is only casually accepted back in the family under the unspoken understanding that everyone behaves as if her husband does not exist. Because of Gigi's social and economic advantage over Firdaus, the circumstances of her deviance are less dire.

Another dire family situation is presented in Sahar Khalifeh's *The Image, the Icon, and the Covenant* (2007). The novel is narrated from a male perspective, unlike the previous two novels. Ibrahim, the narrator, portrays the double standards of the patriarchal Palestinian society. Ibrahim's uncle tries to force him into marrying his cousin. Ibrahim's refusal insults his uncle and Ibrahim flees from Jerusalem to a nearby village to escape the family's wrath. Because he is male, he easily escapes an arranged marriage; his sister Sarah, however is not as fortunate. Ibrahim's father arranges her marriage while on a business trip. He meets a man with three children and no wife. Ibrahim's father offers him his daughter by saying:

She is a good girl, a little old, she is thirty-five years old, but mature. She would be ideal to raise three children and take care of you. She has everything and comes from a good family, a respectable family. She is an accomplished housewife; she sews and cooks very well.<sup>24</sup>

The father shows the suitor a photograph of Sarah and shows her a photograph of the suitor. Sarah tries to object but her father insists and so her fate is sealed. El Saadawi explains;

Parental authority is shamefully misused when the matter concerns daughters. The Arab family being highly patriarchal, both socially and legally, the authority of the father over his daughters is absolute.<sup>25</sup>

When Ibrahim attempts to sway Sarah's decision, she replies: "who among us is living his life?"<sup>26</sup> The representation of the family in contemporary fiction is that the young are heirs to their elders' fate. It is their duty to yield to the interference of their elders. Layla Balbaki, one of the pioneers of the Arab women's struggle for emancipation, discusses the negative effects of parents on their children,

a constant anxiety has undoubtedly surrounded our childhood, for all of us live in this East and all of us are victims of our forefathers and parents, who cling to everything that has been passed on to them, without adapting their own lives or ours to the conditions and requirements of the age.<sup>27</sup>

The three novels illustrate Balbaki's argument, Khalifeh's novel shows that young males are able to avoid their family's control, while young females find themselves trapped in old-fashioned conditions in contemporary times.

Ibrahim, being male, can dodge an arranged marriage. The outcome of his disobedience towards his family's wishes, however, is grim. He impregnates a Christian woman, Mariam, abandons her and leads a life of emptiness. He lives the remainder of his life alone and longing for the woman and the son he abandons. Here is an example of the hopeless situation which Arab feminist writers often give their protagonists. If Ibrahim had allowed his uncle to force him into a loveless marriage he would have spent the rest of his life in misery, surrounded, however, by the warmth and solidarity of family. He chooses the other path and finds himself in solitary misery. Ibrahim, has the advantage of being male, unlike Firdaus and Gigi, who both must submit to their arranged marriages. They both try to live up to their families' expectations and try to make the best of a loveless, arranged marriage. When they find it unbearable, they both escape. Mariam, unlike Gigi and Firdaus, never yields to her family's expectations despite her fear of her brothers. She, like Gigi, ends up abandoning her child in order to live freely.

After Ibrahim abandons Mariam, pregnant and unmarried, her brothers come to kill her for disgracing the family. She does the unthinkable by taking a Muslim lover, but worse, she gets pregnant. Mariam's conduct is dishonourable in Arab tradition, and so she is liable to severe punishment. Mariam hides in a Church and eventually abandons her child and lives as a nun in a convent. Mariam's family, unable to control her body or her life, ends up behaving as if she never existed. When Ibrahim visits her house decades later he finds that all photographs of her are destroyed. Mariam, like Firdaus, takes control of her body and life, but at the expense of losing her son and her family.

All four protagonists break away from convention, in one way or another, yet they all find that their situations are not improved. The three female heroines battle to find their individuality. They try to emancipate themselves from the confines of their families, societies, and especially from the traditional Greater Syrian and Egyptian

female plot of marriage, children and housekeeping. All the protagonists come to the realisation that girls are regarded as less than boys. The protagonists resent this Arab fact and they attempt to break the tradition of female helplessness. In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus kills her rapist pimp. Firdaus starts her narration by telling the reader, “because I am a woman I have never had the courage to lift my hand.”<sup>28</sup> The heroines take action to fight the social and familial conventions that hold them back. However, in each of these examples, the heroine’s efforts of self-emancipation and facing their oppressors (be it their husbands, their brothers, or their societies’ expectancy of a woman’s behaviour) lead to one and the same result; their downfall. Firdaus is imprisoned then executed. Gigi lives the remainder of her life in an unhappy marriage in America, far away from her son and family. Mariam lives in a convent a few roads away from her family. Her son has no relationship with her family. Is the message in the fate of these women that a woman must not try to fight her family’s wishes even at the expense of their own happiness? Or is it that a woman should indeed attempt to act out and experience a whiff of freedom from her family rather than a life of captivity by them at any price?

Zeidan discusses the outcome of women fighting against the current of patriarchy in his book *Arab Women Novelists*,

The new generation of women was alienated not only spiritually but also physically. Any attempt by women to gain control of their own bodies was doomed to end in tragedy. The overprotection of women’s chastity, especially before marriage, by the social norms led them to feel that they did not own their own bodies.<sup>29</sup>

Firdaus, Gigi, and Mariam’s attempts to own to their own bodies end in tragedy, as Zeidan confirms. Aristotle famously said that a man cannot be a true hero until he can find the root of his own downfall.<sup>30</sup> The same goes for a woman. The Arab woman in the Greater Syrian and Egyptian literature of the last three decades only becomes a true tragic heroine once she rejects the role imposed upon her by her society and endures the consequences.

The commonality between all the texts illustrates that the characters are faced with two options, but no matter which option is chosen, the outcome is the same. Whether they choose to follow their families’ expectations or whether they choose to break the tradition, they end up alone, miserable or killed. I believe that the message that

feminist writers are trying to convey is that one woman alone cannot change society. The mutual message is that it is about time that male and female family members evolve and learn from past mistakes rather than continue with the same tragic, unhappy patterns that their forefathers have set.

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<sup>1</sup>Denys Johnson-Davies, *The Anchor Book of Modern Arabic Fiction* (New York: Random House, 2006) p. xix.

<sup>2</sup>Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, ed. by Hatatah, Sarif (London: Zed Press, 1980) p. xii.

<sup>3</sup>Jaipaul L. Roopnarine, *Families in Global Perspective* (Boston, MA: Pearson / Allyn & Bacon, 2005) p.153.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p154.

<sup>5</sup>Zeidan, p. 231.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 235.

<sup>7</sup>El Saadawi, (1980) p.13.

<sup>8</sup>Nawal El Sadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* (London: Zed Books, 2001) p.12.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p.12.

<sup>11</sup>Shelley Phillips, *Beyond the Myths: Mother-Daughter Relationships in Psychology, History, Literature and Everyday Life* (London: Penguin Books 1991) p. 88.

<sup>12</sup>El Sadawi (2001) p.86.

<sup>13</sup>Lena Edlund, Lena and Evelyn Korn, "A Theory of Prostitution", *Journal of Political Economy*, 110, (2002), pp. 181-214.

<sup>14</sup>El Sadawi, (2001) p. 18.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Samia Serageldin, *The Cairo House* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004) p. 59.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>21</sup>Sylvie Fogiel-Bijaoui, "Familism, Post-modernity, and the State: The Case of Israel", in, *Families in Global Perspective* ed. by Jaipaul L. Roopnarine (Boston, MA: Pearson / Allyn & Bacon, 2005) p. 190.

<sup>22</sup>Serageldin, p. 137.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 170.

<sup>24</sup>Sahar Khalifeh, *The Image, the Icon, and the Covenant* (Cairo: Interlink World Fiction, 2007) p. 23.

<sup>25</sup>El Saadawi, (1980) p. 47.

<sup>26</sup>Khalifeh p.25.

<sup>27</sup>Zeidan, p. 101.

<sup>28</sup>El Sadawi, ( 2001) p.11.

<sup>29</sup>Zeidan, p. 101.

<sup>30</sup>Aristotle, *Poetics* (Newburyport, MA: Penguin Classics, 1996)

*“See?” said Suzanne to the Sphinx, who still had his claw hooked to her T-shirt. “Arab women writers are promoting change, and change must begin from the family. By exposing the flaw in our system, they're hoping it'll change.” Her sister had fallen asleep. Suzanne was uncertain whether she could deal with the Sphinx alone or if she should ask her sister to call again.*

*“Yes, I see,” nodded the Sphinx. “But where are the mothers in all of this?”*

*“My feet are getting numb,” said Suzanne. “If you let me down, I can tell you all about the mother's role in Greater Syrian and Egyptian fiction.”*

*The Sphinx let her down with a purr. Suzanne began walking towards one of the shelves. His purr turned into a growl, “Give me a second,” she said.*

*Suzanne reached for A Thousand and One Nights. “Magic carpet,” she whispered, as she rubbed it. A magic carpet appeared. She sat on it and it began to float towards the Sphinx.*

*“OK,” said Suzanne, “I'm more comfortable now. Let's talk about the mother. Have you noticed that in all the three texts, the mother tends to be either absent, silent, helpless, or dead...”*

## II

### The Arab Mother: Friend or Foe?

#### The Mother-Daughter Relationship in the Contemporary Greater Syrian and Egyptian Women's Novel

“Novels,” as Edward Said writes, may be considered “objects that fill gaps in an incomplete world”.<sup>1</sup> The novel, when it reflects reality, is a contributing tool for a writer to reflect his or her own views on the strengths and shortcomings of a society, be they social or political. The writer can also “fill gaps” and show alternatives to the reality in which they live. Arab societies are family-oriented. The same goes for Arabic fiction. The emancipation of the female protagonist from the patriarchal restrictions of the family is a common theme that Arab feminist writers use to reflect the imperfect image of their male-dominated societies. In this chapter, I will discuss the role of the Arab mother in contemporary Greater Syrian and Egyptian women's novels.

Generally, not enough background information is given about the character of the mother. The mother is typically silent, absent, helpless or dead. The mother is only seen from the protagonist's point of view, so the reader needs to keep in mind that it is a subjective viewpoint of the female struggling to overcome the obstacles she faces in a patriarchal society. In order to understand the role of the Arab mother in fiction, one must imagine her role as a daughter brought up in a patriarchal household. When a girl is born into a family, she grows up feeling inferior and even, in more extreme cases, embarrassed because she was not born a boy. She grows up hearing well-known expressions such as “[t]he burden of girls is from cot to coffin,”<sup>2</sup> and “[g]irls are a worry until you are in your grave”.<sup>3</sup> She ends up believing these sayings, hence developing an inferiority complex that she carries with her into marriage.

The origin of these beliefs can be traced back as early as 2500 B.C.E. Between 3000 and 2500 B.C.E the Semitic nomads that inhabited the region with the assistance of the Sumerians, who had come from the east, developed male dominated societies. Trading and farming were essential for the society's survival. In order to guarantee the paternity of property heirs women's sexuality needed to be controlled by men.<sup>4</sup> Leila Ahmed writes, “Women's sexuality was designated the property of men, first of the woman's father, then of her husband, and female sexual purity (virginity in particular) became negotiable, economically valuable property.”<sup>5</sup> Many of the pagan traditions of

that era have been abandoned. The matter of virginity, however, has been transformed into a matter of honour and potential scandal.

As previously mentioned, women in Arab cultures have the power to single-handedly bring about an entire family's social demise. This is why an unmarried girl must be held under tight control since, in Arabic traditions, a man has nothing if he has no honour. This negative power that every woman holds is part of her victimisation: if this power were to be exercised the consequences would be tragic for her. An unmarried girl, who has little say in most family affairs, can be the cause of her family's social abasement. This fear of losing face in front of friends, neighbours and all members of society make the Arab mother's job of watching over her daughter considerably harder. This threat of scandal is born with a baby girl; which is in part the reason why married couples prefer having boys. A daughter's virginity is of the utmost importance. If doubt or questions arise regarding a girl's virginity, the girl and her family would be shunned by society. It is the mother's duty to maintain her daughter's respectable reputation until she is married off. This aspect of Arab culture is one of the factors that make the Arab mother-daughter relationship frequently strained in contemporary Greater Syrian and Egyptian women's novels.

By showing the consequences of a mother's actions or lack of action on her daughter's character, the contemporary writer attempts to demonstrate the necessity of breaking the cycle of the flawed/absent/dead mother resulting in a flawed/absent/dead daughter. It seems to spring from the mother's protection of her daughter's virginity. Arab feminist writers have explored the matter of virginity and the Arab mother-daughter relationship in their fiction. It is a common theme: an adolescent girl starts exploring her sexuality and her mother discourages it. The mother's task is to ensure that her daughter does not stray in order to keep the family name untarnished and to maintain her husband's (and society's) high regard of her as a good and successful mother. The subject of sex is a forbidden one, and mothers do not broach it with their daughters because issues such as respectability and honour are considered taboo.

One of the measures to which mothers resort is keeping a girl's sexuality secret from her. In Nawal Saadwi's novella *Searching* (1988), the protagonist Fouada has negative issues with her body. She says that there were

feminine parts of herself which she often saw attached to her body and washed with soap and water every day without knowing them. Her mother

was the cause. Perhaps if she'd been born without a mother, she would have known everything spontaneously. When she was very young, she learned that she had been born from an opening beneath her mother's stomach, perhaps the same opening through which she urinated or another one nearby. But when she told her mother of her discovery, she scolded her and said that she'd been born from her ear.<sup>6</sup>

Because of the early death of Fouada's father, she has a limited freedom that other Greater Syrian and Egyptian heroines do not have. Her mother, although unable to shake off her own patriarchal upbringing when it comes to suppressing sexuality, is as liberal as an Arab mother of that generation could be. For example, she allows her daughter to obtain a degree in chemistry and does not interfere in her daughter's decisions. Fouada is an unhappy employee in a male-dominated environment. Throughout the novel Fouada is in search of her happiness, the man she loves who has suddenly disappeared, and of a fulfilling career that will help her find true self-satisfaction. In support of her daughter's soul-searching, Fouada's mother is willing to invest her savings in her daughter's business endeavour which is to start her own chemistry laboratory.

Fouada's mother is "unlike other mothers these days, [and] did not think about marriage."<sup>7</sup> After her husband's death, Fouada's mother tells her daughter that her "future lies in studying," and that "there is no use in men." Fouada's mother is supportive and lays "all her failed ambitions" on her only daughter. She supports her daughter's education and career plans, and financially supports her ambitions. In spite of her faith in her daughter's success, however, Fouada resents her mother. As Fouada walks around Cairo, her mother's words echo in her mind, "[may] the Lord make you successful, Fouada my daughter, and may you make a great discovery in chemistry." Fouada answers in her mind, "A great discovery in chemistry! What did her mother know about chemistry?" Fouada's rejection of her mother's high hopes can be explained if looked at from a Freudian perspective where the "daughter particularly blames her mother for the restrictions placed upon her sexual life."<sup>8</sup>

Another perspective on the resentment a daughter may carry towards her mother is discussed by Adrienne Rich in her book *Of Woman Born* (1976). "Few women," she says, "growing up in a patriarchal society can feel mothered enough."<sup>9</sup> According to Rich, "many daughters live in rage at their mothers for having accepted, too readily and passively, 'whatever comes.' A mother's [victimisation] does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues as to what it means to be a



woman.”<sup>10</sup> Fouada is brought up in a patriarchal society, and although her mother tries to break free from the stereotypical social conventions, she is unable to break free from the taboos regarding sexuality, and this is where Fouada’s resentment towards an otherwise supportive mother springs from.

Fouada does not forgive her mother’s attempt at suppressing her curiosity regarding sexuality. This unforgiving tendency manifests itself in a hatred towards all things patriarchal, and motherhood, in Fouada’s mind, is a patriarchal institution. Fouada links the atmosphere at work, the most aggressively patriarchal atmosphere that Fouada is subjected to on a daily basis, to her mother;

She looked up at the gloomy building and saw it bulging out of the open courtyard, like her mother’s stomach. Long wide cracks spread over its dark brown surface like stretch marks. She caught a strange smell, like the one she smelled in hospital maternity wards [...]. [The] feeling of nausea intensified and she knew she was approaching her office.<sup>11</sup>

Fouada associates the negativity of the workplace with her mother and of motherhood. The workplace prevents her from evolving as a chemist due to its patriarchal administration. Her mother prevents her from evolving as a woman due to her own patriarchal upbringing. This makes the two inherently linked in Fouada’s mind.

Fouada blames her mother for her unhappy life. “You don’t believe that I can do anything.” When her mother asks her why, Fouada answers, “because I am your daughter”.<sup>12</sup> Once Fouada’s mother assures her that she was always convinced that her daughter could achieve anything, Fouada replies: “That conviction ruined my life!” Fouada goes on to explain, “That conviction of yours haunted me like a ghost. It weighed me down.”<sup>13</sup> Fouada first accuses her mother of not believing in her and then blames her for believing in her too much. Fouada takes out her frustration on the only person who would take it; her mother. Fouada’s search leads to a gradual separation from her mother. In her book *Beyond the Myths*, Shelley Phillips discusses the psychological affects of this separation on the daughter; she explains that the daughter is “likely to feel guilty for seeking independence”.<sup>14</sup> Phillips suggests that once daughters get their independence, they “long privately for their mother’s death, in order to free themselves from the guilt occasioned by their leaving their mothers to a life of purposelessness and anonymity”.<sup>15</sup>

After her mother's death, Fouada gazes at a photograph that hangs in her room, "[h]er mother seemed to look at her with large, jaundiced eyes, feebly pleading with her to stay. She covered the face with her hand. Would her mother never lose that accusing look?"<sup>16</sup> Phillips analyses this issue; the "loss of her mother and the daughter's heightened awareness of the inevitability of her own death can be compounded by feelings of guilt and anger about the imperfections of the relationship with her mother".<sup>17</sup>

The death of the mother is a recurring phenomenon in Greater Syrian and Egyptian Arabic feminist writing. Maha, one of the narrators of Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt* (1996), loses her mother at a young age. Maha's motherlessness gives her the strength and determination she needs to resist the temptation of giving in to seduction. The memory of her mother motivates Maha to 'keep her honour.' Maha says:

The women who loved my brother Daffash, who sneaked out stealthily in the middle of the night to meet him, were fools. Stupid idiots who risked [honour] for love. Did Harb think that Maha, too, the daughter of Maliha, was a fool?<sup>18</sup>

Phillips examines the literary device of omitting the mother from the plot, explaining the advantage of this tradition. She argues that

[motherhood] can be idealised through the dead mother and any shortcomings can be separated and projected onto the living scapegoats. [...] Any questioning of the patriarchal system and its ambivalent expectations and impossible ideals is safely contained. The result is a good, undisturbing novel of the heroine's tribulations and her arrival at independent maturity.<sup>19</sup>

At one point, Maha regrets not succumbing to Harb's advances because she fears that he would never return. She then immediately blames her mother: "My mother was responsible. She had told me not to give in to men. [...] I should have listened to the call of my heart."<sup>20</sup> It is curious that Maha chooses to blame her dead mother for discouraging her from 'giving in to men' rather than blame the double-standards and chauvinism of her surroundings. Her society enables (perhaps even encourages) a man to seduce a woman without his having to worry about scandalising his own family or being punished himself. The man places all the blame on the woman for not resisting the temptation of intercourse and not preserving her family's honour. Maha also does

not choose to blame her brother, although she is aware that he would punish her severely; “What if Daffash found out? He would certainly kill me as he would a tiny rabbit.”<sup>21</sup> Again, the daughter feels justified in blaming her mother for the imperfections of society and the restrictions placed on women rather than blaming the men who enforce them. Dafash, Maha’s brother, is able to meet with women at night, while Maha would die at his hands if she were to ‘listen to the call of her heart.’ Rich’s theory applies here. The daughter deeply resents her mother for submitting to victimhood; that is, for following the unwritten rules of a patriarchal society for expecting her daughter to do the same. In patriarchal cultures, it is easier for a daughter to blame her mother for circumstances than for the daughter to try changing them.

In Faqir’s *My Name is Salma* (2007), the protagonist is both a mother and a daughter. Salma, who lives in the deserts of Jordan like Maha, does succumb to the “call of her heart” and is seduced by Hamdan. Salma and Maha are polar opposites. Maha’s mother, even after her death holds her daughter under tight control and is able to keep her daughter from compromising her honour through what she taught Maha in her lifetime. Ironically, Salma’s mother is alive and yet unable to save her daughter. Unlike Maha’s mother, she does not warn Salma against men. When she suspects that her daughter is in love, she merely says: “Salma, you stupid child, are you in love?”<sup>22</sup> She does not attempt to explain to her daughter the potential dangers of this love-affair. Salma and Hamdan’s relationship progresses, and Salma’s mother’s suspicion is finally aroused;

‘You little slut, what have you done?’ My mother yanked my hair. [...] ‘You smeared our name with tar. Your brother will shoot you between the eyes.’  
[...] She yanked, bit, belted until I turned black and blue and sank blissfully into darkness.<sup>23</sup>

After her mother’s initial rage, she brings a midwife who sticks “iron bars inside” her. The abortion attempt is unsuccessful, Salma wakes up soaked in blood and her mother says: “It is still clinging to your womb like a real bastard.”<sup>24</sup> At that point Salma runs to her teacher, who arranges for her to be taken into protective custody in a prison where she gives birth to a daughter whom she never sees again.

Salma only hears again from her mother once more. She receives one letter in prison which her teacher writes on her mother’s behalf. The letter warns Salma that her brother Mahmoud has vowed to shoot her mother if she attempts to visit Salma.

Eventually Salma is rescued by nuns who take her to Britain. Salma, now an absent mother herself, lives in torment and guilt. She is told by a minister that if she finds a job and a good place to live she can one day go back and get her daughter. The thought of saving her daughter is what gets her through the struggle of finding independence and confidence in England. Her progress, however, is always interrupted by thoughts of her mother, “Where was I? How far away was I from my mother?”<sup>25</sup> Salma's memories of her mother are symbolic:

My mother's black shawl was wrapped tight around my shoulder, but I could still feel the cold. Whenever I was beaten by Mahmoud, my brother, Mother would stroke my head to calm me down.<sup>26</sup>

Here, the mother's role towards her daughter is nurturing, but frail. A mother cannot do much more than offer her fugitive daughter a shawl that does not keep the cold away. She cannot stop her son from attacking his sister, but can only attempt to comfort her daughter after a beating has taken place. Salma's mother has no hope of preventing her son from killing her daughter.

Eventually, Salma gains independence and dignity. She shakes away her guilt and shame. After years of exile she goes back to Jordan, only to find that her illegitimate daughter has been thrown into a well by Mahmoud. Her mother, now blind, screams and begs Mahmoud not to kill his only sister but the novel ends with Mahmoud shooting his sister in the back. The well-known saying, an eye for an eye, which is also widely used by Arabs, only leads to blindness: Mahmoud's blind fury, Salma's blind hope, and Salma's mother's literal blindness. Her blindness, which can be viewed as an exaggerated symbol of helplessness, prevents her from saving Salma from Mahmoud's bullet. Her inability to save both her daughter and granddaughter is an extreme metaphor regarding the helplessness of the Arab mother, who is both mother and daughter, against patriarchal order in fiction.

Another character who finds herself pregnant out of wedlock is Mariam in Sahar Khalifeh's *The Image, the Icon, and the Covenant*. Mariam, a Christian girl, is pursued and seduced by a Muslim boy, Ibrahim. Mariam's story is narrated by Ibrahim, and so Mariam's relationship with her mother is reflected through his observations only. His own relationship with his mother is a negative one, “Whenever I look at my mother I see only a woman who used to be beautiful.”<sup>27</sup> He views her and his sister as his

problem after his parents' divorce and he coldly states, "If my mother were not alive, I would have gone to live with my father."<sup>28</sup>

Mariam's blind mother, who feels neglected by her own sons, persuades Ibrahim to visit his mother. Again we are confronted with the symbol of the blind mother, which recurs in the region's feminist fiction. The blind mother represents ignorance, helplessness, and the inability to see beyond patriarchy or truth. Mariam's mother knows nothing about her daughter's forbidden relationship with a Muslim boy. She is unable to see that her daughter needs guidance. Surprisingly Mariam's mother is able to influence Ibrahim's life positively. She encourages him to value his mother, and gives him advice about life. She does not, however, see that her own daughter is lost, already pregnant, and in danger of being killed by her brothers. Mariam's mother tells Ibrahim that "children are more important than our country," and that "our children are dearer to us than our lives;"<sup>29</sup> only through Ibrahim's conversation with Mariam's mother, we discover that Mariam is important to her. Nevertheless, Mariam's importance does not enable the blind mother to stop her sons from running after their pregnant sister with rifles. Although children are more important than one's country and one's life; when it comes to family honour, it is more important to sacrifice one child to save the entire family from social disaster. Actions speak louder than words, and what Mariam's mother says completely contradicts what she does not say. Her actions, however, say it loud and clear: family honour is dearer than her daughter's life.

Mariam's mother complains to Ibrahim, that it is the father and not the mother, to whom children are loyal.

Christ died on the cross and he didn't complain and didn't say, 'Mother,' though his poor mother cried over him until her tears dried up. He did not call for his mother but said, 'Abba, Father!'<sup>30</sup>

The image of Mary crying until her eyes dried suggests a mother losing use of her eyes after her child is lost. It is as though a mother becomes useless without her children. Mariam's mother then goes on to explain how she lost her authority over her children with the death of their father; she describes herself as becoming "marginal" after his death. By losing her eyesight, Mariam's mother embraces her role as marginal. She enforces her insignificance as a parent by stepping aside as her sons attempt to honour-kill her only daughter.

References to Mariam's mother keep turning up throughout the novel. We are told by Ibrahim that she “discovered [Mariam's] pregnancy despite her weak vision and became stricter with her”.<sup>31</sup> How Mariam's mother reacts to her daughter's pregnancy remains unknown, and exactly how she “became stricter with her” is left unclear. However, her becoming stricter implies that she always had been strict with her daughter. We know from her conversation with Ibrahim, and through her inability or unwillingness to stop her sons, that her sons pay little attention to her authority. Eventually news of Mariam's pregnancy reaches her brothers and they run after her with their rifles. Matter-of-factly, Ibrahim informs the reader that “[honour] killing is part of tradition, and only blood washes away the shame brought by a girl.”<sup>32</sup>

As previously mentioned, when Ibrahim goes back to Mariam's old house trying to find her and his son, he finds photographs of her brothers, but none of Mariam or her son. As Mariam's mother is unable to control her daughter's actions, the course she chooses to take is to erase all traces of her daughter's existence from her house. In Arab societies an unmarried girl must be controlled at all times, especially by her mother. Her mother feels herself to be in charge of her body, her actions, even her choices. Mariam's mother clearly could not fulfil her role as an Arab girl's mother. Rather than feel that she failed as an Arab mother, she chooses to sweep the scandal under the proverbial carpet.

Ibrahim finds Mariam's diary, and finally Mariam is given a voice. Khalifeh chooses a private medium in which Mariam can speak without inhibitions as she describes her own experiences as a mother:

They say that motherhood is miraculous, pure love, pure affection, sacrifice, devotion, and gratefulness, but I only feel oppression and revolt, I want to run away from my heart. Why should I be the only one tied down? This feeling and this baby hurt me. [...] I am oppressed, I am lonely.<sup>33</sup>

Mariam becomes a victim of patriarchal perceptions of motherhood. Marianne Hirsch says, “The adult woman who is a mother, in particular, continues to exist only in relation to her child, never as a subject in her own right,”<sup>34</sup> and so it is in the case of Mariam.

The fact that Mariam has the child out of wedlock makes her even more oppressed in patriarchal society than she was prior to her pregnancy. This harsher

oppression leads her to resent motherhood. She is shunned by society, rejected by the baby's father, and nearly killed by her own brothers. Hirsch, writing from a psychoanalytic feminist perspective, finds that "Maturity can be reached only through an alignment with the paternal, by means of an angry and hostile break from the mother".<sup>35</sup> Mariam, abandoned by everyone, in turn, reaches maturity by abandoning her own baby and joining a convent, embracing the paternal (in this case God) and breaking away from her mother. Simone De Beauvoir's argument about woman's otherness in patriarchal society applies to Mariam's case. She states that woman is othered under patriarchy and is the object while man remains a constant subject. Because he is the oppressor of females and does not participate in reciprocal relationships with them, a woman's life becomes empty. De Beauvoir affirms that, because of this emptiness, the woman substitutes the adoration of man by seeking religion and the adoration of God.<sup>36</sup>

The twist in the plot is that the man, Ibrahim, starts craving adoration from the woman he abandons. Mariam, however, accepts her place in the patriarchal order and embraces her role as a servant of God. She has no further need or desire to resume what Ibrahim ended decades earlier. Ibrahim, on the other hand, continues a frantic search for his long lost love and son, idealising and disregarding his negative role in Mariam's life.

Little is known about Mariam's feelings, but from what little evidence Ibrahim finds, he feels outraged that she abandons her child. Ibrahim believes that a woman's place is with her child, regardless of the mother's circumstances. In spite of the fact that all of society and even her own family are against her, Mariam is still expected to fulfil her role as mother. These double standards of a patriarchal society are instilled in its members, and while Ibrahim does not mind leaving the girl he seduced to fend for herself after her pregnancy, he finds it unfathomable for her to have deserted his child. Ibrahim is guilty of having sexual relations with a girl he has no intention of marrying. He is also guilty of abandoning her as well as her child. Furthermore, he is guilty of judging her parental choices. He is also a victim of patriarchy, which instils male supremacy and female inferiority in its followers and locks them into a straightjacket of gender. Mariam breaks all the rules; she refuses to be controlled by patriarchal tradition, and since patriarchy also demands unconditional love from a mother, Mariam breaks this rule as well. Ibrahim finds Mariam's actions shocking and impossible to comprehend, as it is believed that an Arab mother's place is with her child at all times.

The Arab mother in contemporary Greater Syrian and Egyptian fiction that does not abandon her child through death, necessity, or free will most often provides her daughter with the necessary and basic teachings of survival in the patriarchal society; how to 'catch' a husband, to keep him happy, and to please a mother-in-law are a few examples. The female novelist attempts to emancipate her heroine from the common Arab phenomenon of being taught the art of manipulation at an early age. As an attempt to "modify reality" writers choose to allude to this through other secondary characters rather than the protagonists. While the heroines are almost motherless and are forced to rely on themselves, other female characters in the novel have strong relationships with their mothers and are deeply dependent on them. In Samia Serageldin's *The Cairo House*, Gigi is introduced to Mirvat, her ex-husband's new wife, for the first time. Gigi observes the interaction between her ex-husband Yusef and Mirvat and reflects:

I could see that she had learned to handle Yusef. Under her self-effacing, pliant exterior I recognised the kind of relentless manipulateness which nature and nurture combine in women like her. This subtle skill is learned at their mother's knee and reaches its apotheosis in the capture of the most eligible suitor possible.<sup>37</sup>

It is expected that every Arab woman will learn and master this art of manipulation, and it is usually the mother who teaches her daughter how to practice it. In Gigi's case, however, her relationship with her mother is distant, and so it is her aunt, Tante Zohra, who takes it upon herself to educate Gigi in that respect. Tante Zohra attempts to reconcile Gigi and her estranged husband by instructing Gigi to use "a little patience, a little diplomacy".<sup>38</sup> Tante Zohra goes on to say, "I don't understand why you can't get your way with him. Pretty as you are, clever as you are, you should have him eating out of your hand. [...] A woman should be supple!"<sup>39</sup>

Gigi's mother is not as involved in Gigi's affairs as Tante Zohra. As a child, Gigi was chaperoned and accompanied by a French governess, Madame Helene. Gigi's mother remains nameless, although she is alive for most of the novel. It is Tante Zohra who finds Gigi a suitor and who tries to teach Gigi the lessons that an Arab mother 'ought' to teach her daughter. Gigi rarely discusses life-changing decisions with her mother, such as divorce or remarriage, because "confiding in Mama, Gigi had learnt, was a risky proposition. She always seemed [...] either quick to blame or, sometimes



to worse effect, quick to defend with immoderate, mother-tigerish loyalty.”<sup>40</sup> Gigi's lack of communication with her mother, and her mother's inadequacy in nurturing Gigi can be viewed as literary conventions which allow more character development. Phillips explains, that in a female fictional plot, when “mothers are dead or absent and unable to shield their daughters from the trials of attaining adulthood, then their daughters are obliged to develop some self-assertion and independence”.<sup>41</sup> Gigi is able to obtain just that, and she despises other women who are dependent on their mothers for such things, “I was willing to wager that Mirvat was one of those married women who called her mother every single day to discuss strategy”.<sup>42</sup>

From the helplessness of the biological mother springs the need for the surrogate mother-figure, another recurring phenomenon in Arab Feminist writing. In El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, after Firdaus runs away from her husband, she is found by a prostitute, called Sharifa, who adopts her as an underling. Thus, Firdaus is reborn; she says: “I [realised] now that I was being born again with a new body”.<sup>43</sup> In her book *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, Hirsch states that “surrogate mothers [...] are better able, at least in fictional representation, to help daughters avoid the traditional temptations of romantic love, [and] of marriage”.<sup>44</sup> And so it is with Sharifa and Firdaus. Sharifa opens Firdaus' reluctant eyes and discards any remaining naïveté or romantic notions by saying, “[none of the men] [realised] your worth, because you failed to value yourself highly enough.”<sup>45</sup>

Finally, after a life of emotional, physical and sexual abuse and poverty, Firdaus can eat, sleep, and live safely under the supervision of her surrogate mother Sharifa. She becomes a prostitute, and this new life is the opposite of how it was with her real mother in her childhood home; “Sometimes when there was no food at home we would all go to bed with empty stomachs. But [my father] would never fail to have a meal. My mother would hide his food from us”.<sup>46</sup>

Firdaus, being an orphan, fits the profile that Hirsch has analysed, where the heroine “is an orphan, attempting to cut herself off from a constraining past, to invent a new story, her own story, and eager to avoid the typically devastating fate of her mother”.<sup>47</sup> By doing her best to avoid the fate of her mother she chooses an entirely different path, the path of prostitution, but she ends up becoming exactly like her mother, dedicating her life to pleasing men. Firdaus' becoming a prostitute is a metaphor that aims to magnify the standpoint of the majority of Arab women: the conception is that if a woman is respectable, she will belong to one man only. If she

chooses not to live a 'respectable' life, then she is a prostitute, whether literally or figuratively.

Both Maha and Salma are absent mothers who long for their children. They both unknowingly end up following their mothers' fate in becoming helpless in relation to their children. Gigi and Mariam are also absent mothers through their own choice. Both get abandoned by their mothers for choosing the unconventional; in Gigi's case it was more disapproval rather than abandonment for divorcing her husband, leaving her son and marrying a French journalist. In Mariam's case the abandonment was more pronounced because her 'crime' was unthinkable; getting seduced by a Muslim, having a child out of wedlock and then joining a convent to seek salvation and leaving her son behind. Both Gigi and Mariam choose the unconventional 'Other' and both fight and choose their paths in order to escape the oppression of the patriarchal society. Both end up strong independent women who make their own choices, each pays the price by losing her children. These are two tragic patterns in Greater Syrian and Egyptian feminist writing: one "modifying reality" by emancipating the heroine from the restrictions of the patriarchal Arab society, but at the cost of the heroine's freedom. Her child is left a helpless victim who has to fend for her/himself. The other plot, where fiction reflects reality, ends with the mother neither emancipated nor able to care for her child. In the Greater Syrian and Egyptian contemporary feminist plot, the heroines who fight to emancipate themselves and whose conscious or unconscious goals are to not follow in their feeble mothers' footsteps end up doing just that; detouring but eventually inheriting their mothers' inability to change society.

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<sup>1</sup> Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intentions and Method* (London: Granta Publications, 1997) p. 82.

<sup>2</sup> Fadia Faqir, *My Name is Salma* (London: Doubleday, 2007) p. 123.

<sup>3</sup> Fadia Faqir, *Pillars of Salt* (Canada: Interlink Books, 2007) p. 129.

<sup>4</sup> Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992) p.12.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.12.

<sup>6</sup> Nawal El Saadawi, *Searching* (London: Zed Books, 1991) p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13.

<sup>8</sup> Phillips, p. 140.

<sup>9</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", *Signs*, 5 (1980) 631-60, p. 243.

<sup>10</sup> Rich, p. 243.

<sup>11</sup> El Saadawi, (1991) p. 31.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

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- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 60.
- <sup>14</sup> Phillips, p. 106.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 107.
- <sup>16</sup> El Saadawi, (1991) p. 111.
- <sup>17</sup> Phillips, p. 130.
- <sup>18</sup> *Pillars of Salt*, p.10.
- <sup>19</sup> Phillips, p. 291.
- <sup>20</sup> *Pillars of Salt*, pp. 13-14.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 13.
- <sup>22</sup> *My Name is Salma*, p.12.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 33-34.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 42.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.73.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 95.
- <sup>27</sup> Sahar Khalifeh, *The Image, the Icon, and the Covenant* (Cairo: Interlink World Fiction, 200) p. 18.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 21.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 65.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 66.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 82-83.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 87.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 179.
- <sup>34</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989) p. 167.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 168.
- <sup>36</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
- <sup>37</sup> Samia Serageldin, *The Cairo House* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004) p. 253.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 132.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 132.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 97.
- <sup>41</sup> Phillips, p. 290.
- <sup>42</sup> Serageldin, p. 253.
- <sup>43</sup> El Saadawi, (2001) p. 53.
- <sup>44</sup> Hirsch, p. 46.
- <sup>45</sup> El Saadawi, (2001) p. 54.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 5318.
- <sup>47</sup> Hirsch, p. 46.

*“It seems to me that these writers are not being very positive,” said the Sphinx.*

*“Hey,” said Suzanne, playing with edges of the magic carpet, “I’m just analyzing their work, I’m not agreeing with them.”*

*“I see your point, it’s a vicious cycle,” said the Sphinx with a sympathetic nod.*

*“Can I go home now?” asked Suzanne hopefully, “I’m so tired and parched!”*

*“No!” roared the Sphinx. “You will stay and convince me that women’s novels have a place here. If I am convinced, you can leave your books here and you can leave. If you don’t convince me, I will have no choice but to punish you.”*

*“But I’ve been talking for hours,” moaned Suzanne. “Even the carpet is drooping around the edges, look?” Suzanne let out a frustrated sigh. I should just give up and let the Sphinx punish me, she thought.*

*As if reading Suzanne’s thoughts, the magic carpet flew down to the shelf and picked up A Thousand and One Nights. She flew back up to the Sphinx.*

*Suzanne appreciated the carpet’s encouragement and gave her a pat. “Can the carpet rest on that high shelf, please?” asked Suzanne.*

*“Yes” said the Sphinx, reluctantly, “but you still have to convince me.”*

*“Well,” began Suzanne, “you know the Arab world is full of political conflict. You always hear about men fighting the wars, but what about the women who find themselves without a home? They often have to go into exile, becoming the Other in anOther land...”*

### III

#### The Arab and the Other:

#### Exile in the Greater Syrian Woman's Novel

Exile is a common condition in Greater Syria and in its fiction. Edward Said attempts to define exile as “strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted.”<sup>1</sup> In this chapter I will discuss exile's dislocation and its Othering effects on female characters in Greater Syrian novels. Greater Syria's ever-changing political and social environment generates exiles. The narratives explored in this chapter share a duality; a constant memory of home yet an urgent need to belong and adapt to the new geographical location and its cultural customs and norms. This duality in the characters creates an Otherness in the narrative; a constant awareness that the characters must bring themselves to adhere to “the terms of the dominant cultural categories”.<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Linde describes an Othered person as one who walks “around in the world of others who appear to have proper boundaries and effective [armour]”.<sup>3</sup> I will show that it is this lack of “proper boundaries and effective [armour]” that creates an antagonistic resentment in Othered characters.

Roger Bromley argues that “the narratives of the ‘migrant othered’ are always articulated in antagonism with the othering discourse (colonialism, racism, hegemonic whiteness or Western values for instance)”.<sup>4</sup> I will discuss three novels: Nada Awar Jarrar's *Dreams of Water* (2007), Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma* (2010), and Al-Leila Al-Atrash's *A Woman of Five Seasons* (1990) and show the resentment their protagonists experience towards those who do not share their circumstances.

Awar Jarrar's *Dreams of Water* responds to what Said described as an “unhealable rift” vividly. All of her characters struggle with war, displacement, and loss. The narrative is written in the present tense as if the narrator is recounting a dream. As it often is in dreams the narrative jumps between time and space.

Bromley discusses “texts which are written from the affective experience of social marginality, from a disjunctive, fragmented, displaced agency”,<sup>5</sup> such as Awar Jarrar’s *Dreams of Water*. He explains that “dream and fragment shape these fictions in an attempt to produce an act of reinscribing, of revising and hybridising the settled discursive hierarchies”.<sup>6</sup> The dream-like and fragmented nature of Awar Jarrar’s text suggests that the author’s purpose is to combine two cultures with polar opposite circumstances and allow the reader to feel the anxiety of the characters that are torn between these two cultures and their duality.

The author’s combination of using atmospheric language and pauses in the narrative to focus intently on Arabic sights, sounds and smells creates a nostalgic feel. It is as though the omnipresent narrator is savouring every Arabic moment, aware of the fact that exile is imminent. Lengthy details are revealed about cooking and the spices and herbs that Waddad, the mother of the main character, uses. After Aneesa, the protagonist, moves to England, these descriptions of Middle Eastern foods are replaced with a passing mention of practical sandwiches. This gives the impression that food is something savoured in the Arab world where it takes a long time to prepare, cook, serve and then finally eat, whereas in England it is quicker to prepare, and to eat, showing the contrast between the two cultures through Aneesa’s observation.

When the war in Lebanon erupts, Bassam, Aneesa’s brother, becomes involved in the Lebanese civil war and is abducted by militiamen. After his abduction he questions his reasons for joining and for not confiding in his sister Aneesa about his involvement in the cause. The reason is that he wants to “do something that [Aneesa] would not be a part of; something that would give [him] the sense of being free and independent.”<sup>7</sup> Bassam’s purpose for joining the cause is not merely the usual reasons of freedom and independence for his country and fellow countrymen and women; but also for the need to feel these same qualities within his own family. After his father’s death, his feelings that he is the Other since he is the only male in the family, and that his sister is his equal in everything drives him to war which is primarily a man’s world. This shows the lengths that some Arab men would go to in order to keep their superior status over women, perhaps even unconsciously. Bassam joins the cause simply because his sister cannot.

According to Patrick Bracken and Celia Petty, “The role of women during war has been described almost exclusively in relation to victim status”,<sup>8</sup> especially in the

Arab world, as Nawal El Saadawi writes, “The Arab woman who is subjected to mental, sexual psychological suppression has no other alternative than to sacrifice action. For it is man who takes action, and it is the woman’s role to await the action of man.”<sup>9</sup> This Arab female stereotype contradicts reality, for there is a long history of Arab women participating in battles in the past as Leila Ahmed shows in her historical documentation of the Arab women before and after Islam. She notes that women would fight alongside the Prophet Mohammed during battles, and they would actively participate in combat, recite poetry to encourage fighting, as well as tending to the injured.<sup>10</sup> There have been numerous accounts of females participating in the Lebanese war in particular. Men, however, usually consider fighting as a male undertaking, minimising women’s importance in it. Due to the social conditions subjected onto Arab woman which give her the classification of ‘defenceless,’ and ‘in need of a protector’, many women and men agree that war is for men only. These Arab conceptions, alongside brotherly love, trigger in Bassam strong feelings of protectiveness towards his sister Aneesa. As she grows older, she needs him less. Bassam’s feelings of redundancy create feelings of Otherness and emasculation, which can only be remedied through taking control of what his sister has no control over.

Bassam’s need to be a commodity is born out of a need to be a part of “something” other than just a family. Bassam feels the need to be part of his country, part of the solution to the political upheaval that his country is in. Awar Jarrar distinctively portrays the mindset of the Arab male living in turbulent times: on the one hand, he feels guilt for disappointing his mother and sister by joining the cause which leads to his martyrdom, leaving the two women alone and unprotected in a time of turmoil. On the other hand, dying a martyr for the sake of one’s country achieves a sense of pride and belonging. Bassam feels the need to serve a purpose. His hopeless situation makes him believe that joining the party is his only alternative:

Bassam felt when he was approached to join the group that he had no choice. He was young and strong and without a job or prospects for the future. It was either become a member of a political group or emigrate and there was no way he could have gone away and left his mother and sister on their own in the midst of this madness.<sup>11</sup>

After Bassam’s abduction, Waddad and Aneesa continue to search for him. Aneesa’s relationship with her mother becomes strained:

There are days when Aneesa thinks that if she could only concentrate hard enough she could make herself forget for hours at a time that there is a war raging around them [...] she is aware of the presence of violence all around her.

To her mother, and at moments like these, Aneesa speaks harshly and with impatience as if it were up to Waddad to change things, to bring Father back and get them out of the chaos in which they now find themselves.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, unable to take it any longer, Aneesa escapes from Beirut and seeks refuge in London. Her mother, however, stays behind in hopes of finding Bassam.

Awar Jarrar describes London as “truly magnificent” and “frightening” while she refers to the Thames as “deep and real and redolent of so much history.”<sup>13</sup> Beirut, however is described in a different tone, “cars splashing through water that streams past gutters, dark, murky and often smelly.”<sup>14</sup> These descriptions mirror Aneesa’s inclination towards both countries. London represents Aneesa’s feelings of freedom and independence. The freedom and independence she experiences in London which go deeper than merely escaping war; London offers a freedom from family and social ties. As for the descriptions of Beirut, they are dingy and dirty, representing images of corruption and war. Awar Jarrar uses the parallel descriptions of water in both countries to convey the image of Aneesa’s feelings of exile and rootlessness. Aneesa is Lebanese, and it is in Lebanon that she should feel a sense of belonging. However the Lebanon that Aneesa grows up in is a tranquil and clean place as we can gather from her childhood memories: “Somewhere between the village spring and the wilderness, beyond the fragrant fig tree [...] Aneesa stands in the single sunny spot in the square”.<sup>15</sup> Aneesa belongs to a safe and beautiful Lebanon, which is unlike the Lebanon that she deserts. The country which Aneesa escapes from is a dark, unfamiliar place. She leaves it behind and tries to embrace London as a new home, however, feelings of exile still haunt her,

what about all the things we left behind when we left home? [...] I can’t forget everything that’s happened, [...] Bassam, my father, what’s happened to our country. I can never put those things behind me.<sup>16</sup>

The novel’s title, *Dreams of Water*, suggests that water is a significant recurring metaphor. The sea is the opposite of land, and it is the divider of countries. Water represents change and cleansing, however, in Aneesa’s situation it is the land that changes; and that land needs cleansing.



Awar Jarrar illustrates the emotions of an exile vividly, she emphasises the struggle of belonging to a new place while clinging to an old place, “Lebanon is like a second skin that does not leave me even as I wish it away.”<sup>17</sup> Smadar Lavie explains that exile is:

challenging our received notions of place, disrupting those normative spatial-temporal units of analysis like nation and culture, it accounts for one type of displacement. ‘diaspora’ refers to the doubled relationship or dual loyalty that migrants, exiles, and refugees have to places—their connections to the space they currently occupy and their continuing involvement with ‘back home’. Diasporic populations frequently occupy no singular cultural space but are enmeshed in circuits of social, economic, and cultural ties encompassing both the mother country and the country of settlements.<sup>18</sup>

Lavie’s statement explains Aneesa’s thoughts and behaviour in London. When Aneesa first goes to London, her feelings are mixed. A transformation occurs; she is living on her own for the first time: “the novelty of having her own place, however small, does not wear off, even months after moving into the flat.”<sup>19</sup>

Under normal circumstances an unmarried Arab girl would not live alone whereas now, Aneesa is free to eat, drink, and socialise as she pleases, a situation that would not occur in Lebanon.

Aneesa’s feelings in London are a combination of worry about her mother alone in Lebanon, and homesickness. “She wonders how long it will be before she feels completely a part of this place, before it becomes where she comes from [...] rather than somewhere she has merely been.”<sup>20</sup> In Aneesa’s thoughts there is a tone of rootlessness and an eagerness to belong.

Eventually Aneesa starts making friends. Isabel, like Aneesa, comes from a ‘foreign’ background and so the two women are able to bond. Isabel opens new doors of belonging to Aneesa, and introduces her to her own friends. “[Aneesa’s] new friends are from everywhere and nowhere in particular, rudderless, as if they had been planted here by an invisible hand”.<sup>21</sup> Said discusses the feelings of an exile, “Exiles look at non-exiles with resentment. *They* belong to their surroundings, you feel, whereas an exile is always out of place.”<sup>22</sup> This describes Aneesa’s situation perfectly. She is happy “for a while”<sup>23</sup> with these friends who seem to be as “rudderless” as she is.

Changes slowly occur when Isabel attempts to share a more intimate friendship with Aneesa. She asks about Aneesa's past and Aneesa is reluctant to reply. Isabel's methods of asking do not appeal to Aneesa so she chooses not to reply to questions such as: "Mind you, they're pretty conservative where you come from aren't they? Don't approve of pre-marital sex, I suppose."<sup>24</sup> This is where the clash of cultures ensues; the Western mentality of openness and the ability to discuss private matters such as sexual history does not mix well with Aneesa's Middle Eastern conservativeness. It is moments like these when Aneesa is reminded of her 'Otherness'. Isabel either ignores or is oblivious to Aneesa's discomfort and introduces Aneesa to Robert.

Aneesa and Robert eventually become lovers. Aneesa is drawn to him after he discloses the fact that he had been to Lebanon. "He does not pursue the subject of Lebanon, nor does he ask her why she left or whom she has left behind, and she realises that that unquestioning acceptance is exactly what she wants from him."<sup>25</sup> Although Robert is English, the fact that he had been to Lebanon creates a bond between him and Aneesa. Aneesa only accepts him as a lover for his acceptance of her as an equal, not as an exile, nor as a refugee dealing with loss, but just as a woman.

Robert's appearance in Aneesa's exile experience complicates her life by alienating her even further from her mother. Aneesa's mother shows open irritation at her daughter during the long distance telephone conversations, "you're becoming like all the rest of the Lebanese living overseas. You know very well we just have to get on with things. I'm fine and yes, I am being careful."<sup>26</sup> Aneesa now has a secret to hide from her mother: "Aneesa wishes she could confide in her mother, tell her about her lover and the quietness that now envelops her life but cannot bring herself to do so."<sup>27</sup> Robert is a means for Aneesa to be more deeply integrated in a society where she feels like an outsider, but this only further separates her from her own culture, as 'dating' is seen as not typical of an Arab female's behaviour, and it is generally looked upon as decadent for a woman to partner with a 'foreigner'.

Awar Jarrar shows occasional glimpses of Aneesa's hostility towards 'outsiders'; those who are not exiles. Aneesa's lukewarm feelings towards Robert suggest that he reflects her situation in England in that it is something temporary that will end as soon as the war ends and she can return to her homeland.

After Aneesa's breakup with Robert, her friend Isabel says:

[you've] never taken us seriously, Aneesa, not me or Robert or any of us,[...] We're just something new and exotic, something for you to discover and pretend to care about [...] You've never really been here, Aneesa, in your head, you're always somewhere else.<sup>28</sup>

In Said's discussion about exile, he compares nationalism and exile: "nationalisms are about groups, but in a very acute sense exile is a solitude experienced outside the group."<sup>29</sup> Once Aneesa was with her group of "rudderless" friends, she belonged to something. However, she always maintained a measure of reserve and kept her real life and past secret because she wants to belong to something bigger than a group of friends in England. Her situation becomes similar to Bassam's, who also kept his involvement in the war from his family because he wanted to belong to something bigger than just family. As mentioned in previous chapters the Arab family is viewed as the main unit in a society. Here, Awar Jarrar creates an individual entity for her characters away from the family, showing that it is possible to belong to a nation without being governed by family. Awar Jarrar attempts to break the conventional family ties that Arabs are notoriously known for.

It could be that Aneesa involuntarily holds back from her new friends, because of feelings of guilt associated with her mother; "when [Aneesa] sits down on the sofa, just as she begins to get comfortable, an image of Waddad, alone in her apartment, comes to mind."<sup>30</sup> It all changes, however, one day at a bus stop, when Aneesa meets Salah, a Lebanese gentleman in his seventies. Aneesa and Salah share solidarity and avoid mixing with non-Arabs. This phenomenon is a common habit that exiles who meet abroad fall into. Exiles tend to isolate themselves from locals, an occurrence which is discussed by Said:

Exile is a jealous state. What you achieve is precisely what you have no wish to share, and it is in the drawing of lines around you and your compatriots that the least attractive aspects of being in exile emerge: an exaggerated sense of group solidarity and a passionate hostility to outsiders.<sup>31</sup>

Salah and Aneesa do not have 'a passionate hostility towards others', but they do share an instinctive caution and distrust towards non-Arabs. Salah's experience of exile is different than Aneesa's; he "discovers a new freedom in anonymity, in the studied indifference of the strangers who walk past him, their eyes pointing straight ahead, their stride confident and uninterrupted. [...] He grows increasingly

confident”.<sup>32</sup> He enjoys the very anonymity that frightens Aneesa. He finds a way to combine his two homes together, he buys Arabic newspapers, learns to take buses in London, he “begins to feel as if the city has several hearts that beat separately, each the centre of its own world.”<sup>33</sup> Salah’s personification of London prevents him from feeling the same intimidation that Aneesa feels. He likens the city to himself, with two hearts beating in two homes.

Salah and Aneesa bring comfort to each other. They start taking walks together and having picnics. Awar Jarrar portrays the English scenery beautifully and places there two Arabs at ease with their surroundings. While enjoying the English tea and other English customs, they speak Arabic and discuss Lebanon and are finally able to create a home away from home. Their home away from home, however, is a place where they do not interact with ‘Other’ people.

While Salah is in England he recollects his past in Lebanon, “[the] civil war is unexpected. Salah wonders how he could have been so unaware of what was going on in his own country”.<sup>34</sup> Here, Salah feels his Otherness in his own country. He and his wife Huda send their son away to England to keep him “away from the inevitable carnage”<sup>35</sup> and Salah and Huda start socialising with their old friends. Salah is “aware that in maintaining these friendships, he and Huda, like so many of their circle in Beirut, are keeping certain aspects of the war at bay, the devastation and harshness.”<sup>36</sup> Salah and his wife treat war-torn Beirut the same way Salah and Aneesa do. They keep the unpleasantness away by dissociating themselves from their surroundings, focusing intently on a small group of like-minded people, and avoiding entirely what goes on outside their little secluded bubble.

Salah worries about his son Samir, “that in leaving at so young an age, [Samir] might never find the will to return.”<sup>37</sup> Salah tells his son, “[we] do not belong to the West. [Lebanon] is our home.”<sup>38</sup> However, “Salah [recognises] the same underlying scorn for the country that Huda used to feel and is saddened for his son’s sake that there should be no place for which he harbours unquestioning love.”<sup>39</sup> Said experienced a similar disdain as an adolescent in the colonial Middle East. He explains that it is

important to understand the tremendous spiritual wound felt by many of us [Arabs] because of the sustained presence in our midst of domineering foreigners who taught us to respect distant norms and values more than our

own. Our culture was felt to be of a lower grade, perhaps even congenitally inferior and something of which to be ashamed.<sup>40</sup>

Now, Salah and Samir are in London to escape postcolonial Lebanon. In his youth, Salah would have witnessed the events that followed President Jamal Abdul Nasser's campaign of nationalising all that had been previously colonised. Nasser had succeeded in creating a new empowered Arab national identity. The new-found Pan-Arabism was short-lived; it was shattered with the defeat of Arabs in the 1967 war against Israel. That is the Lebanon which Salah knows.

The Lebanon that Samir grows up in is completely different. His Lebanon is one that is occupied by Israel in the south, and one that is at war with itself. Lebanon had become a land full of Palestinian refugees who were denied citizenship, and it was these refugees who were seen as Not Lebanese, that were causing friction with Israel and more devastation to 'the Bride of the Middle East,' as Lebanon is known. The fate of Lebanon was not in the Lebanese people's hands. This helplessness creates a contemptuousness in Samir and his generation of Lebanese, who see themselves as born in apocalyptic times.

Angel Rabasa, a historian and political analyst, explains:

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is not a catalytic event but a chronic condition that has shaped political discourse in the Middle East for over half a century. Arguably, it has retarded the political maturation of the Arab world by diverting scarce material, political, and psychic resources from pressing internal problems.<sup>41</sup>

The pressing internal problems that had to be put on a back-burner are social problems such as gender inequality, integrating Palestinian refugees into society, economic crisis etc. This uncertainty in the Lebanese atmosphere is what leads young healthy, capable people such as Aneesa and Samir to seek a better life abroad. Some, like Aneesa, cannot adjust to life away from home without creating a similar ambience to the one at home; while others, like Samir have no problem discarding of his old national identity and acquiring an entirely different West-oriented persona.

After Salah's death, it is up to Samir to tie up loose ends in Beirut. His return creates mixed emotions:

[Samir] is astonished that he should continue to think of himself as an outsider in a place where there is no one left to make him feel like one, and wishes he had the strength in him to fight back. In returning to Beirut he has recalled a measure of himself, that place where he is at his most vulnerable, where living is not merely a recollection but a breathing, sorrowful thing.<sup>42</sup>

Aneesa has these feelings of being an outsider while seeking refuge in London, Samir is the complete opposite and experiences these feelings of unbelonging whilst in Beirut. In a conversation in London, Aneesa tells Samir “I’ve never really belonged here [in London] anyway.”<sup>43</sup> Samir tells Aneesa: “leaving Lebanon made me a different person, saved me in a way because it opened up my life and my horizons. Made me more flexible because I found myself in an entirely different environment.”<sup>44</sup>

Slowly Samir starts settling into his parents’ flat and he begins “discovering this humbler, less-assured version of himself settling into Beirut as though it had never belonged anywhere else”.<sup>45</sup> In his replacement back into his old home, Samir’s confidence wavers, although his feelings of belonging strengthen. According to psychologist

Thomas J. Scheff, unacknowledged shame “can interfere with the discharge of painful emotions such as anger, fear, grief and shame itself. Since shame is a self-conscious emotion, persons [...] may fall into traps of self-consciousness”.<sup>46</sup> Leaving behind his London persona and embracing Beirut once again, Samir falls into the familiar emotions that, as I previously demonstrated through Said’s experiences, engulf the citizens of the Arab world. These postcolonial, post-war, feelings are of shame. The shame Samir feels helps him reintegrate in his own culture; however, it brings along emotional baggage that demoralises an otherwise confident person.

Beirut has never felt so familiar [...] [the] variety of sounds and smells are [recognisable] now, he [realises], as are the faces he sees, dark and well defined like his own. But it is a sameness that annoys him too, so empty is it of the possibility of standing out from the rest.<sup>47</sup>

Samir misses the Otherness he is accustomed to in London, being exotic and different. In Beirut Samir feels dull and “empty.”<sup>48</sup> In the end, he asks Aneesa to go back with him to London, “[we’ll] never have to return. We’ll be happy.”<sup>49</sup> Aneesa, however feels that “the city she knows is the only home she will ever have. [...] [She] can feel the pulse of Beirut and her part in it.”<sup>50</sup> Here, Aneesa is like Salah. By

personifying Beirut, a city which had been nearly destroyed, but is now slowly recovering from the tragedies that befell it, Aneesa feels belonging and a sense of purpose. As for Samir, he does not feel “brave enough”<sup>51</sup> to stay. Samir leaves, in spite of his love for Aneesa. Aneesa chooses not to join him, and remains with her mother in Beirut.

Aneesa’s experiences of seeking refuge in Britain are different to those of Fadia Faqir’s protagonist Salma in *My Name is Salma*. Aneesa escapes from war-torn Lebanon, but she knows that once the war is over, she can return to her country. Aneesa attempts to ‘fit in’ by befriending Europeans, but finds that she is more comfortable with Arabs, and that realisation takes her back to her real home. Salma’s circumstances are different. Originally Jordanian, Salma gets pregnant and is nearly killed by her brother Mahmoud for tarnishing the family’s honour. She is placed in a prison for protective custody until she has her baby. Once her baby girl is born she is immediately taken away. Salma is rescued by nuns who arrange for her escape to Britain. Salma, unlike Aneesa is an exile with no prospects of returning home.

Faqir’s novel, which is written in a first person narrative, starts with Salma describing the white sheep on the green hills of Exeter and then abruptly takes us to the deserts of Jordan. As a child, Salma is a shepherdess, and coming to England changes her life drastically. Salma’s confliction is portrayed in Faqir’ non-linear narrative. Like *Dreams of Water*, *My Name is Salma* regularly shifts between past and present, dreams and reality, thoughts and actions, Jordan and England. Both Faqir and Awar Jarrar have lived away from their homes, Awar Jarrar was forced to flee from Beirut during the war, and Faqir lives in the United Kingdom. Andrew Gurr writes: “use of memory as the basis for the finest kinds of creativity is one of the strongest features which the exiled writers have in common.”<sup>52</sup> Both novelists use vivid images of Middle Eastern landscape which creates a sense of nostalgia in their novels. However, while *Dreams of Water* addresses multiple characters, *My Name is Salma* concentrates solely on Salma, allowing the reader to have an in-depth look at Salma’s geographical and social displacement and their effects.

Salma renames herself Sally, as if creating an alter ego to protect herself and to assist in the process of belonging to a new place. Every detail of Sally’s life in England has an Arab equivalent in her mind, showing the dual nature of an exile trying to find the balance between two cultures: “I stuck a liner to my pants, pulled them up my shaved and oiled legs and [realised] that I was free at last. Gone were the days

when I used to chase the hens around in wide pantaloons and loose flowery dresses”.<sup>53</sup> In Aneesa’s case in England, there is no need to acquire a new language, nor a need to change the way she dresses in England. She did not need to change in order to “fit in,” she merely needed to open up and accept her new friends rather than keep them at an emotional distance. Salma however, completely transforms into Sally, adopting a new language, a new image, and completely absorbing a new culture. While Aneesa comes from a cosmopolitan city, Beirut, Salma comes from an obscure village in the deserts of Jordan. The impact of the culture shock which Salma receives is massive. Salma is forced to juggle her attempts to cope with the loss of her daughter and mother and her struggle to belong.

Images of white clouds and endless blue sky are accompanied by images of a prison with “high walls, the coiled barbed wire, the small barred windows”.<sup>54</sup> The freedom of the blue sky in contrast with the dark prison is a reminder that although Salma is free in Britain, she is a prisoner of her own thoughts and memories. Salma uses dark images to describe herself. For example, she tells the reader that she has done some “dark deeds,” and that her “face was black as if covered in soot,”<sup>55</sup> and that even her “hands were black.”<sup>56</sup> She continuously claims that she has “smeared [her family’s] name with tar.”<sup>57</sup> These dark images illustrate her feelings of guilt and shame. Sally, on the other hand, uses a different tone: “I dabbed perfume behind my ears and wrists, took a deep breath, tossed my no longer braided and veiled hair on my shoulders, pulled my tummy in, straightened my posture”.<sup>58</sup> Sally’s actions and tone suggest faked composure, however, Salma’s past always creeps into Sally’s thoughts. Even while tossing her hair, she notes that it is no longer braided and veiled, as if her freedom is too good to be true. Loose hair as opposed to braided veiled hair shows two sides of the spectrum, one of which is Salma’s and the other is Sally’s.

Faqir, like Awar Jarrar, portrays her heroine’s inhibitions through imagery. As Sally walks, she tries to get rid of the foul smell following her. Salma attempts to smell the nearby flowers but smells grease instead. It is as if Sally cannot escape Salma or her past. It is as though there is a constant battle between Salma and her alter ego Sally, and Salma always wins.

“A few years ago, I had tasted my first fish and chips, but my mountainous Arab stomach could not digest the fat, [...] Salma resisted, but Sally must adapt. I kept looking up *adapt* in the *Oxford English Dictionary: Adapt: fit, adjust, change.*”<sup>59</sup> There is a sense of urgency in the way Salma tries to adapt to her new surroundings, as



if the sooner her transformation from Salma to Sally is complete, the sooner her past will disappear. The entire narrative emphasises Sally/Salma's internal tug of war. Her displacement is felt much deeper and more acutely than that of Aneesa. Aneesa goes through her years in England in a dream-like state, reminiscing about the past, and knowing that her displacement is temporary. Salma's nightmarish flashbacks yank her away from a calm reality and constantly remind her where she has come from, and what would happen to her if she were to return.

"Apparently in England the police stop you in the street and check your papers and sense of belonging regularly. An immigration officer might decide to use my ability to digest fish as a test for my loyalty to the Queen."<sup>60</sup> Salma's fears are not of the police checking her papers since she is a legal immigrant and all her paperwork is organised. What she fears is that the police will check her "sense of belonging" and identify that she has not adapted well enough to the British way of life, hence she is not worthy of being British.

Salma completely ignores the Arab traditions that she grows up with, "with a lubricated razor, I shaved my legs and underarms carefully. [...] The painful and sticky sugaring belonged to the past".<sup>61</sup> The image of hair removal represents the practicality of her life in Britain, it is painless and effortless. As for Sally's past, it is difficult, painful and tiresome. Faqir's comparison is similar to Awar Jarrar's when describing the preparation of food. There are rituals in the Arab world that are lengthy, but are part of the Arab culture. Both heroines discard these customs and adopt new modernised means to the same ends, which also suggests that the global standards of a woman's appearance are as demanding as those of the Greater Syrian region.

Salma constantly compares her past and her present: "[rough] dirty hands I had. That was before I ran to freedom."<sup>62</sup> Now, she has "smooth hands, which were always covered with cocoa butter."<sup>63</sup> Salma also compares herself to flowers: "Now Salma the dark black iris of Hima must try to turn into a Sally, an English rose, white [and] confident".<sup>64</sup> Flowers are plants that are associated with women. The black iris, the national flower of Jordan, is a large black flower known for its strong fragrance. Salma associates confidence with "white," and with a more subtly scented and popular flower, which indicates how desperately she desires to blend in.

Salma goes to great lengths not only to embrace the new culture she now lives in, she is committed to erasing her previous identity and undertaking an entire makeover, modifying her personality, her life, her career and even her race. Salma is trapped in a

futile in-between. She feels alienated by the xenophobic remarks. She is called a “Fucking A-rabic!” and it is said about her that “[she] rode a camel all the way from Arabia to this dump in Exeter.”<sup>65</sup> Her landlady also demonstrates xenophobia when she includes Salma while talking about illegal immigrants: “Foreigners! Aliens like you”.<sup>66</sup> Comments such as these further add to Salma’s feelings of inferiority and self-consciousness, yet she continues to “adjust” and “fit in” because identifying with her Arab side is succumbing to the notion of her being filthy and “trash.”<sup>67</sup> The rhetorical question that is Salma’s obsession follows her throughout the narrative: “[was] it possible to walk out of my skin, my past, my name?”<sup>68</sup>

Salma goes to painstaking lengths to integrate in British society. She begins ordering apple juice in pubs because she says, “the colour of apple juice looked like beer so whoever approached me would think that I was open-minded, not an inflexible Muslim immigrant.”<sup>69</sup> Even when in Jordan, Salma is the Other; having a baby without being married separates her from others in her village. Because of her deviation, Salma loses her baby and her family in Jordan and must begin her life all over again in England. To avoid a similar fate in England, she now tries to behave as an English woman would. However, since Salma’s understanding of English is limited, and because her only encounters with English people are on a superficial level, she only succeeds in imitating a stereotype of the English woman. Here, Faqir demonstrates the Middle Eastern perception of the Western woman. The Occidentalism that Salma is unknowingly guilty of is her belief that to be English she must be fair-skinned, alcoholic, and would engage in sexual intercourse with strangers. Salma believes that she is “stepping out of” her Arab skin by drinking apple juice that looks like beer and sleeping with strange men by behaving in what she perceives to be an “un-Arab”<sup>70</sup> way. Therefore, Salma herself becomes guilty of Orientalism by putting all Arabs together in an inflexible Muslim box.

Through Salma’s struggle for belonging, Faqir raises questions of race and identity. Salma tries to simulate what Linde refers to as “effective armour” with her use of whitening cosmetics. Salma’s obsession with whiteness is a rejection of her own race. When she begins looking “whiter” through applying “skin-bleaching cream,”<sup>71</sup> and when her English improves, does she become white? Why does Salma associate the colours black and white with bad and good? Salma’s notion of whiteness is in itself racist; she believes that to be white is to be sexually promiscuous, ignorant, and hostile towards non-whites; yet, she believes that this behaviour is good because it

is white behaviour. Racism, whiteness and Western values are some of the othering discourse that Bromley mentions that Salma is antagonistic about but all the while struggling to adopt in order to “adjust”.

Salma fears that if she does not adjust and if she does not adapt to the social norms of Exeter, she will be discovered by the immigration officers (who she believes are on the lookout for non-Britons) and a tragic fate, deportation, will inevitably follow.

Patrick Bracken and Celia Petty examine exiles and their experiences in the new place:

Those forced to exile experience a rupture in the narrative thread running through their lives and around which they have organised their actions and associations. They must negotiate disrupted life trajectories, loss of status, culture shock and the attitude of the host society—ranging from accepting to discriminatory.<sup>72</sup>

But in addition to the discrimination, the culture shock, the loss of status, Salma has a fear of not belonging and then being sent back whence she came, which would mean instant death. Salma’s response to that fear is a determination to prevent a recurrence of her past difficulties.

She feels she only belongs in England after dark:

In the early evening the city belonged to us, the homeless, drug addicts, alcoholics and immigrants, to those who were either without a family or were trying to blot out their history.<sup>73</sup>

Although Salma is legally a citizen of the United Kingdom, this is not what creates a sense of belonging. Salma only blends in with the other outcasts in the society because she sees herself as an outcast. The only time the city “belongs” to Salma and other outcasts is when the indigenous citizens are in their homes. Lavie explains that “borderzones are sites of creative cultural creolization, places where criss-crossed identities are forged out of the debris of corroded, formerly (would-be) homogeneous identities.”<sup>74</sup>

Salma makes friends, gets a job, and meets John, who helps her gain some confidence. Thoughts of the past never stop coming to her, but they become less self-blaming and more sensible. On reflecting on Arab families, Salma says:

Our honour must be protected, our blood must be avenged; eating together, sleeping together ten to a room or tent, our destiny shackled together in a chain. [...] I [realised] that for better or worse I had broken the metal ring tying me to my family. Here I was in my new country, [...] I walked shackled to nothing but my nightmares.<sup>75</sup>

Still unable to get rid of her nightmares, Salma marries John and they have a son together. Salma never really overcomes her sense of shame regarding her past, but her sense of belonging in England grows. Salma finally decides to go back to Jordan in search of her daughter and she believes that because she is British, no harm can come to her, “I am a British citizen now and the British will protect me,”<sup>76</sup> and her friend replies: “Look at the colour of your skin. You are a second-class citizen. They will not protect you”.<sup>77</sup> The novel ends with Salma going back to Jordan to find her daughter and getting shot by her brother Mahmoud.

Like Aneesa, Salma is unable to find any real inner peace away from her home. Both women are able to experience an independence that an Arab girl living in Greater Syria cannot. Both women are able to feel a safety that their situations at home did not provide and they both adjust to their new lives in the UK. However, the Arab bond with family is too great, and both women leave loved ones behind for the sake of returning from exile.

Going back to Scheff’s theory regarding pride and shame, Aneesa and Salma are both governed by shame the entire time they are in exile. The reader can sense a muffled tone of shame in Aneesa’s case, where she feels shame for leaving her mother and shame for leaving Lebanon and not finding her brother. As for Salma, her shame comes from being different and acting immorally according to the standards of her society. Scheff states that:

A key aspect of the bond between persons and between groups is emotions of pride and shame. [...] pride generates and signals a secure bond, just as shame generates and signals a threatened bond.<sup>78</sup>

Both Aneesa and Salma go back to their homelands due to their fear of a threatened bond. Aneesa is able to reconstitute the bond with her mother and with her country, and sheds all feelings of Otherness in her own country. Salma, however, remains an Other in England despite the friendships and relationships she forms. However, Salma is incapable of changing her society’s traditions and does not escape

the Otherness of a 'fallen woman.' The two novels successfully demonstrate the difficulties that face women forced into exile in a non-Arab country.

Another situation of exile that differs from Salma and Aneesa's is Leila al-Atrash's Nadia in *A Woman of Five Seasons* (1990). In the previous two novels, each heroine had a home to return to, regardless of the consequences. Nadia and her husband Ihsan, however, are Palestinians who are forced to flee after the 1948 Israeli occupation. Like Aneesa, they emigrate in hopes of finding a better future for themselves, but the couple have no hope of returning to their homeland because their country no longer exists on the map.

The couple moves to Barqais, an Arab oil state, and Ihsan enjoys basking in wealth completely wiping away any traces of his impoverished past. Al-Atrash portrays the exile's situation from three points of view, Nadia's, Ihsan's and his brother Jalal's. Ihsan understands and accepts the situation. He chooses to annul his past and extract as much as possible from his present position in Barqais. Ihsan believes that "[conflict] doesn't make the world stop, [...] or wipe out its beauty. Quite the reverse. It enriches it."<sup>79</sup> Ihsan believes in individualism and he uses it to disentangle himself from the Palestinian cause. He does, however, continue to support the cause financially.

Nadia, like Salma, feels divided. While Salma is unable to appreciate her life in England because her past still haunts her, Nadia is unable to appreciate her life in Barqais because of the Palestinian struggle. Al-Atrash illustrates Nadia's internal confusion between feeling duty for the homeland and enjoying the riches of her everyday life metaphorically, as Faqir does. Nadia is torn between her husband Ihsan and her husband's brother Jalal. Ihsan represents a certain category of Palestinians living in diaspora; those who have left the Palestinian struggle behind and do what they can for it by donating money. These Palestinians are able to maintain lavish lifestyles and enjoy material things with a clear conscience. Jalal, Ihsan's older brother, is a freedom fighter, who represents the Palestinian struggle. Jalal clutches at the hope of freeing Palestine.

He is an idealist who sacrifices his life for the greater good. While Ihsan is healthy, well-dressed and well-fed, Jalal is thin, modestly dressed, and well-read. Jalal and Ihsan, like Sally and Salma, are two polar extremes and Nadia is unable to decide to which side she belongs. Nadia is the 'Other' in Barqais, and like Aneesa, finds groups of other Palestinians to befriend.

Nadia starts questioning other Palestinians' loyalty to the homeland once she socialises with other Palestinian exiles:

all that cant and hypocrisy—wailing how they miss their beloved homelands far away. They chose to come and live abroad, didn't they? They certainly don't try and hide those glittering diamonds on their necks and wrists and fingers! Diamonds, and more diamonds, hiding backgrounds you can't be sure of half the time [...]. It makes you wonder if those far-off homelands ever had any farmers in them, or servants, or [labourers], or small merchants maybe.<sup>80</sup>

Nadia becomes aware of the double standards that surround the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Al-Atrash explores the situation of Palestinians in diaspora through Nadia's reflections. Some Palestinians live in refugee camps while others live comfortably abroad, but like Nadia, feel the need to constantly mourn their lost homeland. Nadia blames those who leave, also blaming herself for turning her back on her motherland. In spite of her anger towards other Palestinian women who wear diamonds, she herself is guilty of wearing the diamonds her husband buys for her. What Al-Atrash conveys through Nadia's inner conflict is the guilt some Palestinians feel while living well. Nadia wears the diamonds in an attempt to embrace the present and put the past behind her, but like Salma, cannot enjoy her new life.

Ihsan's reasons for cloaking his wife in diamonds and flaunting her in Barqais are complex. Ihsan distinctly remembers his father's words about the importance of jewellery:

If, some day, you become rich, then trade in gold. Don't buy land and lose everything you've won! My father and his grandfathers owned great tracts, thousands of acres. And where are they now? But for your mother's gold, we'd still be at the mosque where we took refuge when the migration started. Bodies were crammed there, in misery, with women wailing. What good did those thousands of acres do? [...] But for your mother's gold! She had the wit to bring it with her. With that gold, by God, she kept us from hunger and beggary. She saved us from living in tents.<sup>81</sup>

What Ihsan's father says applies to many Palestinians who lost their land but were able to salvage status and escape the fate that befell other Palestinians through selling the gold women receive as dowry upon their marriage. After the Palestinian *Nakba*, or catastrophe, the importance of jewellery increased. Valuable jewellery implies stature and rank the world over, more so for Palestinians because of the role jewellery played in rescuing those fortunate enough to own it. The gold that Ihsan's mother owns

immediately keeps her family separate from other Palestinians, while most are poor, “living in tents”, “standing in tatters at the doors of the relief agency,”<sup>82</sup> Ihsan’s family is “spared the shame.”<sup>83</sup>

Ihsan grows up with the awareness that they narrowly escaped poverty. His father’s voice follows him,

It’s our nation’s destiny to be abandoned by the land when we need it—foreigners are forever disputing it with us. [...] Always keep your money ready, to be there under your hand.<sup>84</sup>

The advice of his father coupled with the trauma of losing his home as a child, leaves Ihsan with a need to prove himself worthy of people’s respect. His exaggerated generosity with his wife is also a means of gaining importance in the eyes of the rich society of Barqais:

will Nadia be able to stand out? Make other women say how elegant she is? Will she know how to use her fingers and neck, to make the diamonds shine on them?

And if she does? Then, Ihsan, those women will talk about your wife to their husbands—and the men will talk about you! Barqais will come to know just what Ihsan Natour’s worth!<sup>85</sup>

Ihsan lives a lie, because the diamonds that his wife is wearing cost him nearly all he has. He tries to show other people his wealth when, in reality, he is not as wealthy as he seems to be. Diamonds, to Ihsan, hold a great significance. Diamonds and jewellery are the reason that he was able to escape poverty, and they are the means that he expects to shake off his “Refugee” status and achieve a “Rich Businessman” status instead. Ihsan’s days of homelessness and helplessness create in him a hunger for power. His ambition for success is not only for his own personal satisfaction, but he needs it as a façade. He desires to hide his feelings of insecurity and inferiority behind a mask of elegance.

Nadia does not share Ihsan’s enthusiasm for gold. When Ihsan tells her how much gold he buys for her she answers, “[who] said I wanted gold? [...] For a sum like that I’d rather have land.”<sup>86</sup> Ihsan’s reply is: “How much [land] do people have left? If it hadn’t been for my mother’s gold, we would have been beggars after the emigration.”<sup>87</sup> Ihsan’s exaggeration in buying gold and jewellery shows his deeply rooted fears of being displaced again. He loses his land, his home, and everything he

knows in his childhood, which traumatises him. Gold, however, is something which fits in his suitcase. Land is a mere memory that brings pain to Ihsan, whereas Nadia simply insists: “I want land”.<sup>88</sup> When Ihsan refuses to sell the gold and buy her land she says, “isn’t gold a blessing from the earth, Ihsan? Would you ever have owned gold if it hadn’t been for the land?”<sup>89</sup> This fundamental difference of opinion that the couple has causes the already existing gap between them to widen. Ihsan’s belief is that wealth can shield him from all pain, including war, displacement, and loss. He believes that Palestine as a land has betrayed him, so his response is to turn his back on it physically and emotionally while supporting it financially. In Ihsan’s material-oriented mind, money is the solution to everything. He attempts to use money to fix his marriage, to fix his life, and to fix the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Nadia, on the other hand, is convinced that belonging to a place is more valuable than owning anything else.

Nadia’s inclination to believe in land comes from the concept of land in Arabic ideology. In Arabic, the word *Ard* is used to refer to land, planet Earth, territory, floor, ground or anything that is trodden upon by feet. The Arabic expression “without land” means “without a mother.” Much importance is associated with land in Arabic, more so than country. The concept of belonging to a country for Arabs is more recent and different to that of other nationalities. Mohamed Heikal explains, “It is difficult for Westerners to understand that Arabs regard themselves as members of a single nation, united by a common language and culture and living in a well-defined geographical area.”<sup>90</sup>

Over the centuries, Palestine has been a part of Egypt, part of *Bilad al Sham* (Greater Syria), and it passed through the hands of the Turks at the time of the Ottoman Empire, and the British during the reign of the British Empire, who redrew its borders on the map, finally passing it on to the Israelis. While Palestine was being fought over and passed around, each Palestinian family held on to their home and land which were handed down by previous generations. While the name of their country changed, their land remained constant up until their expulsion from it. Arabs of the past, especially, identified with the land that they came from i.e. the city, town or village of their families’ origin more than anything else. Homi Bhabha writes, “Nations, [...] are something fairly new in history.”<sup>91</sup> In the Arab case, our nation went through many transformations before it reached its current state of over twenty countries. Bhabha says, “The modern nation is therefore a historical result brought



about by a series of convergent facts.”<sup>92</sup> Nadia, Ihsan and Jalal are aware of this and each chooses to deal with it in their own way.

Ihsan has no problem in adopting Barqais as a new home. It is an Arabic place, after all, and has plenty of oil and opportunity for Ihsan to reshape his identity. Nadia, however, struggles with the society of Barqais which Ihsan forces her to mingle with for the sake of his own image. Nadia has difficulty integrating into the upper-class social gathering that the women of Barqais indulge in. In an attempt to convince her husband to leave her out of his schemes, she says:

I’ve tried already, and I can’t stand that whole atmosphere. [...] Every one of those women wears a set of different masks, changing from one to another the moment you turn away from her. Their minds are split—they’re driven by blind boredom. Several times now I’ve been there, for your sake, and I’m not going any more. Do you know what it means, to have to be someone you’re not?<sup>93</sup>

Nadia’s discomfort is not merely related to the double-faced women, but also the abundance of food served. Nadia attends a women’s activist meal, and all Nadia can think of is that “[there’s] enough [food] here, [...] to feed a whole refugee camp.”<sup>94</sup> When the hostess offers the main activist her father’s expensive dagger, the women ululate for her generosity. But when the activist asks them to donate money for refugee camps, the women’s faces change and they start muttering “[to] hell with her,” and “[do] they think we own a bank?”<sup>95</sup> Nadia, aware that she is the ‘Other’ among fellow Arab and Palestinian women in Barqais, begins to revolt and decides that she cannot endure the hypocrisy any longer:

here [in Barqais] our homeland was a song, a dress, a hanger. It had vanished as reality. When I came here first, I thought the homeland was planted deep in people’s hearts. So often I’d heard them sing about it. But where was it when our help was needed?<sup>96</sup>

The homeland among the rich in Barqais is merely an excuse for the women to have social functions. Although they claim to lament its loss, they, like Ihsan, enjoy their newfound wealth which can be found in oil-rich countries. This causes Nadia to question, not only her situation as an exile in Barqais, but also to question her relationship with her husband.

Ihsan and Nadia are not compatible as a couple. Ihsan finds Nadia’s love for reading threatening. He eventually stops her from reading books, and takes pride in the

power he has over her: “she obeys you absolutely. She even stopped reading books for your sake.”<sup>97</sup> Ihsan’s motive behind banning Nadia from reading is a common phenomenon. A woman who reads can be exposed to radical ideas that cannot be controlled. El Saadawi explains that Arab men “cannot stand an experienced and intelligent woman.”<sup>98</sup> She argues that the Arab man is afraid of an intelligent woman “because of her capacity to understand him and see through his failures, or weaknesses”.<sup>99</sup> Although Ihsan bans Nadia from reading books, she slowly starts to see Ihsan’s weaknesses and failures and begins to plan her rebellion; “[every] moment of this year I’ve dreamed, I’ve planned to rebel and reject, the moment that coiled person surges out from inside me.”<sup>100</sup> Al-Atrash illustrates that Nadia’s rebellion is not merely affiliated to the Palestinian cause, but it is gender-based oppression that Nadia rejects. Ihsan’s attempts to suppress Nadia’s dreams and use her as a trophy wife finally catch up with him.

Ihsan’s opportunism and sibling rivalry govern his life. Jalal, the elder brother is in love with Nadia, Ihsan knows this and does his utmost to woo her. Ihsan takes great pleasure in telling his brother the news of his engagement to Nadia. Ihsan’s interest in her is solely to deprive his brother from marrying the woman he loves. It also boosts Ihsan’s ego, that Nadia agrees to marry him and chooses not to wait for Jalal.

Jalal, as described by Ihsan, is always “playing the part of eldest son in an eastern family—the eldest brother, who’s supposed to be unselfish and make sacrifices.”<sup>101</sup> Jalal’s ultimate sacrifice was to give up his love for Nadia for his younger brother’s happiness. His sacrifice does not stop there, he gives up any chance of a normal life for the great cause of freeing Palestine.

When Jalal finally comes to visit, Nadia prepares a room in their gigantic, lavish Barqais house. Ihsan mocks Nadia’s efforts at catering for Jalal’s every comfort. He says “revolutionaries don’t care about this sort of luxury.”<sup>102</sup> Nadia’s reply is evidence of her high regard of Jalal and the path he has chosen to take:

He was a man [...] before he was a revolutionary. [...] Didn’t he rebel, after all, for the sake of beautiful values? To change what’s present and ugly? Is there anything more beautiful than freedom, Ihsan?<sup>103</sup>

Nadia views Jalal’s rebellion as a fight for freedom. She uses the same words to describe Jalal’s fight and her own struggle to find freedom from her husband’s tyranny. Jalal inspires Nadia to stay strong and continue to strive for what she believes

in. While Jalal's goal is the emancipation of Palestinians, Nadia's goal becomes the emancipation of women from patriarchy.

Nadia is in a transitional phase where she is unsure of her position. In her blind support for Jalal, she forgets her own guilt when it comes to the homeland. Her disjunction is apparent when she says:

Land's a pretty narrow symbol for your country! The homeland isn't just earth and trees. If it were, a person would be attached to something merely tangible. A homeland's the mixture of sadness and joy on people's faces; it's poverty and prosperity in mansions or tents; it's the stories of weary backs bending over the soil. Your country's the face of an old man—or the smile of a child attached to the land; it's the human beings, the farm beasts, the wastelands and the forests together—and the flowing of all these into your soul!<sup>104</sup>

For Jalal and Ihsan, land is the symbol for their country. Nadia's confusion regarding the homeland and her own marriage leads her to take a journey of self-exploration where she realises her real feelings regarding both issues.

Her journey is complete once she meets Jalal in person after many years apart. First they discuss books and theories; then they discuss the homeland. She learns of his engagement to another revolutionary and congratulates him. He reveals his love for her and tries to kiss her. Up until that moment Nadia had romanticised the situation with Jalal and had idolised him. His behaviour causes Nadia to be repulsed by him, “now all he could see in me was a female he could throw away or pick up at his leisure.”<sup>105</sup> Nadia is deeply wounded that Jalal is no different from her husband, that he deems her as an ownable sex object. She reflects:

When alcohol storms someone's head, it uncovers the hidden places of the mind, the ones people struggle to conceal and embellish. The threads of feigned tact drop away, along with the chains of hypocrisy in which a person wraps himself before others. He bares his reality, as Jalal's face was bared to me—the face he hadn't allowed us to see before.<sup>106</sup>

Nadia feels betrayed. Jalal who represents the revolution and freedom turns out to be a fraud. He assures her that if she agrees to be “his” he will “sacrifice anything.” This only adds to her disgust towards him because her attraction to him is based on his willingness to sacrifice a life of comfort and luxury to serve a greater cause. “Now I've found the knight's face to be so ugly, and I hate my image in his eyes.”<sup>107</sup> Nadia's disillusionment is not just that her husband, the women of Barqais and even Jalal's

loyalties are fake, but also her image in their eyes is distorted. They view her as a sex object that reflects the wealth and status of her husband.

Jalal's demeanour changes something in Nadia. Her rebellion begins. "I'm not their woman. Not anyone's woman!"<sup>108</sup> She tells her husband that she will no longer accompany him on any business trips and starts referring to this day as the day that she "took possession"<sup>109</sup> of herself.

Nadia relocates to London and starts a real estate business. Buying and selling homes heals her wound of losing her own home. In London, Nadia does not have that sense of 'Otherness' that she had in Barqais. Nadia, like Aneesa, does not need to adapt to England at all, since her displacement to Damascus and then to Barqais already teach her how to adapt to a new place. Nadia also comes to terms with her deserted homeland and heritage and is able to leave behind the feelings of guilt that haunted her in Barqais. Nadia accomplishes freedom from her exile, from her 'Otherness' from her husband and her brother in law and her "old Beduin" beliefs of pleasing her husband at all costs. Salma, Aneesa and Nadia all experience exile and escape to England the symbol of freedom, wealth, and imperialism. Ironically, it is an English gun that Salma's brother uses to kill her.

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*“It's the same with Egypt really,” said the Sphinx, “it was ruled by many empires. This place wasn't even called Alexandria. The Persians ruled over the Egyptians for a while, and then Alexander the Great defeated them and named this city after himself. He even built this library.”*

*“He may have founded this place,” protested Suzanne, “but it was the blood and sweat of Egyptian workers who built this library.”*

*“Yes,” nodded the Sphinx, “you are right. My king Ptolemy lived in exile for a while. He had to live in Rome with Cleopatra. But he returned. The alien will almost always wish to return home.”*

*The magic carpet nodded in agreement.*

*“But for some women,” said Suzanne, “they are alienated even when at home...”*

## IV

### Homeless at Home:

#### Alienation in Greater Syrian Women's Novels

Because the home is the main setting in the Greater Syrian female plot, alienation within the home is an issue that Arab women often address in their writing. Female characters in Arab fiction are subjected to different forms of alienation. My central argument throughout this chapter is that the alienation of an individual is accomplished through the high expectations of the family and through the individual's belief that they are not fulfilling the role that has been designated to them by the social conventions that surround them. In this chapter the term alienation is based on Roy Bhaskar's description of an alienated person as one who is "separated, split, torn or estranged from oneself",<sup>1</sup> and Thomas Scheff's theory that "Alienation occurs when two parties are disconnected from each other."<sup>2</sup> I will examine this estrangement of the self and the disconnection between two parties, or alienation, by exploring the family's role in causing it through creating a sense of unbelonging in female protagonists in domestic spaces and society's contribution to creating this unbelonging in females in public spaces. The two texts explored are Lebanese writer Hanan Al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* (1980), and the Syrian writer Ulfat Idilbi's *Sabriya: Damascus Bitter Sweet* (1980).

Although my main focus is the alienation of female characters, through exploring Idilbi's novel, I will also briefly address alienation from a postcolonial perspective to illustrate how outside foreign interference also succeeds in alienating the indigenous population creating a cause and effect relationship that goes hand in hand with alienation in the domestic sphere. Through examining these texts I find that the most adaptable theory to apply to these Arab women's texts is socialist feminism, since in the Arab women's movement there is not a "feminism" as Nawal El Saadawi states.

Marxist feminists believe that the social class system could be applied in the household, to be able to see that in capitalist society there is an important element that can be described as 'feudal' at work in the household.<sup>3</sup> Marxist feminists argue that the feudal form is the appropriate form to apply to the household because "it requires no intermediary role for markets, prices, profits, or wages in the relation between the producer and the appropriator of surplus [labour]."<sup>4</sup> Harriet Fraad, Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff based their model on households that contained an adult male who "leaves



the household to participate in capitalist class process [...] to earn cash income. [...] [and] the wife of the male, who remains inside the household.”<sup>5</sup> They base their analysis on households where the adult female works in the domestic sphere and does all the cooking, cleaning, shopping and so on. This model is suitable for analysing selected novels written by Arab women in the eighties in a Marxist feminist perspective.

Fraad and Resnick also argue that because laws are lenient when it comes to domestic violence, this further likens the domestic sphere to the feudal system.<sup>6</sup> They discuss how a feudal class position for women accords well with views regarding the belief that women are “naturally passive and masochistic, willing to serve a cause or human being with love and selflessness, while men are naturally active and aggressive.”<sup>7</sup> These characteristics also apply to the conditions of a majority of Arab women, especially in the eighties, therefore I shall be examining *The Story of Zahra*, and *Sabriya: Damascus Bitter Sweet*, where both female protagonists are portrayed as “passive, masochistic, willing to serve a cause or human being with love and selflessness,” while the majority of male characters are portrayed as “active and aggressive.”

El Saadawi accuses the feudal and capital classes of the Arab world of exploiting the working class generally, but women more specifically.<sup>8</sup> El Saadawi also believes that Marxist thought can largely influence women’s emancipation.<sup>9</sup>

István Mészáros explains that “human alienation was accomplished through turning everything into alienable, saleable objects”.<sup>10</sup> This concept of objectifying human beings is no stranger to Arab culture, where there is a long history of slavery and a sexual division of labour where the male leaves the home to work and the female stays behind for domestic work and childcare. Al-Shaykh’s *The Story of Zahra*, portrays this sexual division of labour within a nuclear family that is based on the exploitation of women.

The novel is one of the most critically acclaimed novels in Arab women writing. Al-Shaykh’s book has been banned from numerous Arab countries for its explicit sexual descriptions. Joseph Zeidan describes the novel as “[possibly] the most impressive work in the history of Arab women’s novels.”<sup>11</sup> Although this text has been discussed and analysed by numerous critics, here I discuss it from a different angle, focusing mostly on alienation and its consequences.

The narrative is in the first person perspective of three characters, Zahra, her uncle Hashem, and her husband Majed. The first person narrative creates an autobiographical, personalised tone which can be seen as a “political tool with the object of exposing Arab

society and its problems through personal narrative.”<sup>12</sup> According to Zeidan, this “method of incorporating the fragmentation theme is the multiple-point-of-view style” illustrates the “fragmentation of an individual female character” and the “cultural schizophrenia.”<sup>13</sup>

Zahra’s story begins by her mother telling her father that she was taking little Zahra to the doctor. Her mother would then take her to Damascus, to a hotel where she would meet her lover. While accompanying her mother on her sexual escapades, Zahra feels ignored, which creates feelings of resentment and bitterness towards her mother, “I carried this pain and hatred inside me whenever I disobeyed her and felt rejected, neglected by her. The man became the centre of her life.”<sup>14</sup>

There is a clear sexual division of labour in Zahra’s household. Her father, goes to work every morning and returns in the evenings, while Zahra’s mother stays at home tending to domestic affairs. Zahra watches her father eat his chicken: “My mother would never give me a single morsel of meat. This she always reserved for Ahmad, sometimes for my father.”<sup>15</sup> This better treatment from Zahra’s mother towards Ahmed, Zahra’s brother, is an example of the Arab woman’s belief in male superiority and her acceptance of female inferiority.

Zahra is aware that her mother needs her during her liaisons with her lover. In spite of her lover wanting some privacy away from Zahra, Zahra’s mother insists that her daughter stay with her at all times. Zahra reflects: “[My mother] actually needed my protection. [...] She wanted me to shield her.”<sup>16</sup>

Eventually, Zahra’s father discovers his wife’s infidelity, and beats Zahra in an attempt to force a confession. “I knew only dread of this god in his khaki suit, dread of his tram-car, dread of his strong body”.<sup>17</sup> Zahra views her father as a god. God in an Islamic context is one who has the ability to be both merciful and ruthless. He also has ultimate power over his subjects; a power that is beyond reproach. God cannot be questioned, and any punishment he bestows on a subject is deserved since God is incapable of injustice. Patriarchy is the law of the father,<sup>18</sup> and since God is the supreme father, and Zahra perceives her father as a god, his law is one that she feels she should abide by out of pure fear and faith.

In her book *Feminism and Families*, Hilde Nelson examines a father’s role in the family:

[The] most complex paternal function is concerned not so much with fatherly activities as with values a father 'represents'. Fathers are meant to be of the world and to present the world to their children, [...] Morally, fathers are judges with the authority to discipline and punish.<sup>19</sup>

This role of the father creates an acceptance of his punishment and submissiveness to his judgement, especially by his daughter.

After her beating Zahra watches as he beats her mother and reflects: "I no longer knew where I stood, what my feelings were, to whom I owed my loyalty. All I knew was that I was afraid of my father, as afraid of the blows he dealt [my mother] as I was of those he dealt me".<sup>20</sup> Loyalty to her father means betraying her mother. Zahra's dilemma is complex: either betray her mother, whom she resents, or receive punishment from her father whom she fears. Here, Zahra feels two layers of alienation. The first is concerned with an inner Islamic belief. In Islam, we are taught that the current life we are living "*hayat al dunya*" is only a rite of passage to "*al akhira*", the afterlife. We are taught that those who seek pleasure in this life will suffer in the afterlife. A true Muslim is one who works hard in this temporary life to please God in order to reap the rewards of the permanent afterlife. Every practising Muslim has the deep rooted belief that this worldly place is not our real place of belonging; our real home is with our God, whom we must serve selflessly. It is believed that every deed that one does is recorded by the angels. Mézáros explains, that alienation is "[characterised] by the universal extension of 'saleability' (i.e the transformation of everything into commodity); by the conversion of human beings into 'things' so that they could appear as commodities".<sup>21</sup> Of course Mézáros' explanation was intended to explain Marx's theory of alienation in a capitalistic feudal system; my argument is, however, that it can be applied to the servitude of the divine. Since there is no escaping the angels who record our every move, someone like Zahra is lost between what she instinctively thinks is the right thing to do, and what is the right thing to do in an Islamic and Arab context; which is to follow the law of the father. Regardless of whether she agrees with it or not, because her father, like God, is all-knowing, while she is merely a temporary servant in this life, her father must be blindly followed.

Zahra makes her decision to save her mother from her father, and this sets the pattern for the remainder of Zahra's life. Zahra defies the father, who she sees as her god, thus removing herself from the alienation of being a mere commodity unquestioningly serving

a higher power. Ironically, the Godlessness of Marx's theory applies to the Godliness of Islam.

The other level of alienation that Zahra encounters in this particular situation with her father, stems from the belief of 'father as protector'. Nelson views fatherly protection as "symbolically extensive"<sup>22</sup> and likens a father's protection of his children to the protection of a soldier to "his" country (here Nelson excludes female soldiers). "The mother/wife/citizen [honours] the protector."<sup>23</sup> Like other female protagonists discussed in chapter one, Zahra is confronted by the problematic necessity of honouring her father in spite of his corruption.

Nelson's argument is that this fantasy of fatherly protection and his right of punishment is particularly damaging to women as it implies the constant need of protection. I add to her argument that this is also harmful as it causes the neglect of woman's own better judgement. Zahra's father's behaviour alienates her by forcing her to forfeit her idyllic image of him and embrace his new role of a punishing god. Although this abrupt alienation by her father traumatises Zahra, it also creates a sense of empowerment as once again, she takes on the role of her mother's protector. In spite of Zahra's fear, she tries to stick her head out of the window and call for help. In doing so, she unwittingly tricks her father into thinking she is attempting suicide, allowing her mother to escape. By alienating Zahra in this way, her father succeeds in steering Zahra in the opposite direction, he creates a 'disobedient' daughter.

Zahra's seduction by a married man can be viewed as a direct consequence of her father's alienation of her. She narrates the experience numbly:

[Malek] first set about my seduction by speaking of friendship. Whoever has a face and body like mine is easily persuaded; or that was how I later [rationalised] my actions. He said how much he liked my face with its pimples, how the disfigurements actually excited him, even as he lay on top of me, penetrating my virginity.<sup>24</sup>

As discussed in previous chapters, virginity in Arab countries is essential for every unmarried woman. Malek knows this, but like many Arab men, does not care about the woman's fate as long as his own sexual needs are gratified. Because of Malek's disregard of Zahra's reputation, safety, and best interest, Zahra is forced to undergo two abortions and a hymenoplasty. Zahra recalls:

I went to try to have my virginity restored, and [...] I returned once more [to the clinic] after Malek had undone the doctor's handiwork in one split second, without it being any pleasure to him since he knew the restoration was counterfeit.<sup>25</sup>

Malek, a name which means 'owner' in Arabic, owns Zahra. Arleen Dallery suggests that female sexuality is "alienated, given over to another, it is controlled, used, or [symbolised] by another".<sup>26</sup> Malek, the owner of Zahra's body, does with her as he pleases while she remains passive. His treatment of Zahra fills her with "shame and contempt."<sup>27</sup> She says: "he began kissing me; as I remained passive"<sup>28</sup> and again, she recalls: "[my body] never once responded to his or experienced ecstasy."<sup>29</sup> Malek, the owner of Zahra, represents Zahra's alienation from herself and her own body. Although she experiences no desire whilst with Malek, she continues to meet him at a garage. Here, Zahra's low self-esteem and negative self-image allow her to be used by Malek. Zahra continues to meet Malek in spite of the fact that the experience gives her no pleasure. In fact, it is quite the contrary; these meetings create unhealthy feelings of low self-worth. This self-destructive behaviour can be seen as a consequence of her father's violence towards her. Zahra's adoption of the 'disobedient daughter' role, does not mean that she disobeys her father by pleasing herself, but in fact, she disobeys her father to please another man. Knowing that what she is doing is socially unacceptable behaviour, she believes that she deserves punishment, and so, blindly allows Malek to continue to use her.

Zahra's involvement with Malek further alienates her because her fear of her father grows. Zahra's homelessness in her own home can be felt. "I used to seek refuge in the bathroom back home in Beirut when I was afraid of my father's penetrating eyes—afraid he would discover what I had grown into".<sup>30</sup>

Shelley Phillips discusses Zahra's type of behaviour in a chapter about fathers. Phillips explains:

Some daughters become so addicted to out-manoeuvring the supervisory tactics of their fathers, that they are left with a yen for police-style drama in their sexual relationships for the rest of their lives.<sup>31</sup>

Zahra excuses her inability to enjoy her encounters with Malek by using her fear of her father:

I felt only that I was like the other girls I knew, someone with bigoted parents. But my father's image, coming into my mind, frightened me to the extent where I felt sure he would kill me should he ever find out. He would not hesitate, I knew, even if it meant him spending the rest of his life in prison. He was capable of severing my head from my body. I tried to dismiss all those images that, even so, kept haunting me as Malek brought his moving inside me to a conclusion.<sup>32</sup>

It is not clear how Zahra's relationship with Malek ends; however the disruptive nature of the relationship scars Zahra permanently. After her first abortion, Zahra's pimples become worse. She starts picking at them, a habit that particularly angers her father:

My father would go raving mad every time he noticed my face and its problems. He would nag at my mother sarcastically: 'That will be the day, when Zahra marries. What a day of joy for her and her pock-marked face!' Once he beat me when he caught me standing in front of the mirror, squeezing at my incipient spots.<sup>33</sup>

The people surrounding Zahra pester her regarding her pimples, but it is her father whose comments disturb Zahra the most. Zahra's father starts insisting that she marry a friend of Ahmad's. When Zahra says no, her mother laments that her daughter's future is to be an old maid. Zahra, however, is aware of her problem, "[the] day must come when I marry and my husband discovers that I am no longer a virgin".<sup>34</sup>

After Zahra's second abortion, she suffers a mental breakdown that is cured by electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). After her treatment, Zahra's father becomes kinder to her, but her mother is embarrassed and does not want people to find out that Zahra has been to a mental hospital.

Zahra's alienation in her own home is so severe that the only solution she thinks of is leaving. Alienation in labour, as Wally Seccombe explains, occurs when a member of society does not fulfil his or her role in the division of labour. Zahra clearly does not fill this role, since a woman's primary role in patriarchal societies is to reproduce and tend to domestic housework, (which, according to Seccombe, is "unproductive labour"<sup>35</sup> because it does not produce profit). Not only does Zahra fail to produce future generations of contributors to the Lebanese society, but to add insult to "social" injury, she undergoes two abortions. So, Zahra more than merely not fulfilling the role society bestows on

women by not reproducing, she is defying society's traditional expectations of women by terminating her pregnancies. Abortion in Lebanon is illegal but more importantly, by getting pregnant while out of wedlock, Zahra commits the unthinkable. So where does Zahra fit into the social scale?

Zahra, on the Arab social scale, is an "undesirable;" she is not a virgin, she is not pretty, she is not wealthy, and because of her stay at a mental hospital, she is seen as mentally unstable. Zahra however, does not attempt to beautify herself in order to please her family. Instead she chooses to defy social conventions and even takes pleasure in popping her pimples. She says: "[my] fingers would search one out, touch it, peel off the dry skin, squeeze it."<sup>36</sup> As a coping mechanism against the alienation she experiences, Zahra inflicts self-harm.

Zahra's "disfigured" face with all the aforementioned factors put together means her getting married is near impossible. All these social pressures applied on woman in the Arab world further add to her alienation. In Islam, a person's religion is considered 'incomplete' until the day of his or her wedding. Once married, one's Islam is finally 'complete' and that is why Zahra's parents keep pressuring her. Al-Shaykh demonstrates the social expectations placed on women in the Greater Syrian region quite explicitly in Zahra.

Zahra contemplates how she could get married and trick her husband, she says:

I plotted how I might trick him and so get round his discovering that I was a woman who had twice been aborted. The problem caused me many restless days and nights. No day dawned, in any case, when I didn't open my eyes to see the sun or the rain and feel scared stiff that my father might some time find out the truth. I comforted myself periodically with the fancy that nature would never let him learn my secret; that nature, knowing his fierce character, would shield me. I never asked myself whether my fear of my father was on a mental or a physical level.<sup>37</sup>

Zahra does not hope that God would shield her from her father. She comforts herself by thinking that "nature" would. The word nature in Arabic, *tabee'a* is a feminine word,<sup>38</sup> and usually evokes images of Mother Nature, or Astarte, the Phoenician fertility goddess, who is known as mother, goddess of war as well as goddess of sexual love.<sup>39</sup> Although Al-Shaykh does not explicitly say it, through her play on words, it is apparent that Zahra has rejected the "law of the father" and has embraced her Phoenician foremother's law. Asking for Nature to preserve her, Zahra is slowly discarding her previous beliefs that she

deserves to be punished for her sins, and starts accepting that sexuality is a part of Nature, and Nature will protect her. Again Marx springs to mind when he asserts that “people must have a direct and engaged relationship to nature.”<sup>40</sup> Here, Zahra willingly severs whatever link she has to what is “normal” in Arab countries, and instead, chooses human “Nature.” In a further attempt to sever herself from her bonds, she decides to visit her uncle Hashem in Africa. Zahra explains her reasons for going to Africa: “It was not to sightsee or to get to know my uncle better that I have come to Africa [...]. Now I am in Africa because I want to be far from Beirut.”<sup>41</sup>

Zahra’s first encounter with her uncle immediately creates discomfort. He wakes her up every morning by coming into her room, he touches her often, and she even catches him reading her diary. She hides her diary from him and he tears the room apart trying to find it again. Her uncle’s behaviour starts becoming more sexual. Zahra’s passive nature and inability to be assertive due to low self-esteem renders her incapable of telling her uncle to stop.

The days passed. I tried to bury my wounds, but kept thinking of my uncle’s hand squeezing my shoulders, my uncle behaving towards me like a man to a woman. The sense of sadness completely enfolded me. I retreated into my shell. What choice did I have? The hand had been my uncle’s hand.<sup>42</sup>

Zahra starts blaming herself, convincing herself that her behaviour towards her uncle is the reason he crosses the line. She says “now it could only look as though I had encouraged him.”<sup>43</sup> Zahra also recalls the correspondence between her and her uncle and feels that the letters she had sent may be the cause of his misconduct.

Hashem’s sexual advances drive Zahra to yet another mental breakdown. After more ECT treatments, Zahra attempts to escape from the discomfort her uncle causes her by marrying a man called Majed. Here, Al-Shaykh creates a shift in the narrative, and allows the reader to see Zahra from a male perspective. Al-Shaykh only has the two male narrators while Zahra is suffering her nervous breakdown, as though the only time that a man is allowed to speak on Zahra’s behalf is while she is confined.

Hashem, although his situation is entirely different to Zahra’s, also suffers from alienation. In Beirut, he joins the Nationalist party, which supports the restoration of ‘Greater Syria’. Al-Shaykh illustrates the alienation of the Lebanese youth in the 70s through Hashem. His dream of reconstructing what the colonising powers destroyed,



illustrates how he feels alienated from his own country. Hashem's joining of the Nationalist party is nostalgic; he and his party members wish to undo what the colonising powers have done. Hashem and his comrades attempt to recreate a country in which they could feel at home.

Hashem recalls how he is introduced to a

stimulating new world whose enthusiasms had made me into a man with a cause. These enthusiasms and their powerful currents drew me, as they did most of Lebanon. There was hardly a home which did not have its committed advocate, while, in schools and government institutions, men, women, and children would repeat the party's slogans in unison.<sup>44</sup>

By taking the Arab peoples' fate out of their hands and chopping up Greater Syria into four countries, the British and French colonising powers succeeded in creating despair among Arabs. Hashem and his comrades refuse to adhere to this despair and choose to fight back. But these passionate beliefs in a better future for Lebanon and its citizens drive Hashem and members of the Nationalist party into actions that cause the execution of one of his closest friends. This particular event shakes Hashem, who then starts attending meetings with the opposing party, the Lebanese Phalangists. The Phalangists do not believe in the rebirth of Greater Syria, but in an independent Lebanon free from any French or Pan-Arab influence. Hashem, liking the ideas of both parties, is a symbol of the pre-war confusion of Lebanon. Scheff's theory that alienation ensues when there is a disconnection between two parties applies here. Hashem believes in two different opposing political parties, which indicates the extent of his alienation.

Now wanted by the police, Hashem is forced to flee from Lebanon and seeks refuge in Africa. Although he bitterly opposes the colonial powers, his behaviour in Africa is similar to the coloniser's behaviour in Arab countries. Here, Al-Shaykh demonstrates the fickleness of Hashem's views, which represents a certain category of the Lebanese in the pre-civil war era. Hashem resents the foreign intervention in his country, but is equally capable of exploitation of another civilisation, which he deems inferior, when given the chance. Hashem's postcolonial perspective, stems from the French interference in Lebanon. Beirut, as described by the colonisers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, possessed "many conveniences of [civilised] life".<sup>45</sup> C. Lang Neil goes on to praise Beirut:

In [Beirut] are the consulates of all the Great Powers, many good hotels, etc., and perhaps one of the chief signs of its peace and prosperity is the

fact that newspapers are published here. The bazaars are well stocked; omnibuses run along the streets; the town has colleges, schools and hospitals; it is lighted with gas, and it is drained; and the Protestant, Roman Catholic and Greek Christians have mission establishments in the place, and places of worship of their own, without let or hindrance.<sup>46</sup>

Lebanon's obvious advancement in comparison to its neighbouring countries could be behind Hashem's feelings of superiority in Africa. Although Hashem is in exile in Africa, he does not feel humble or grateful for the refuge, but rather disdainful towards the Africans:

When Blacks drink, they drink the whole world. [...] There remains to be something disturbing which cannot be defined. [...] I see them at the back of my street in their open-sided bamboo cane hut, swaying and emptying bottles into their mouths; swaying and falling down on the ground.<sup>47</sup>

Al-Shaykh allows the reader to see Hashem's frame of mind. He is as contemptuous of the Africans as the French are of the Lebanese. Al-Shaykh's message is that we are all capable of committing the same acts of discrimination. The reasons Hashem chooses Africa as the country of his exile are similar to the colonisers' reasons: because of what he can extract and benefit from it. However, once there, he suffers from alienation; he asks himself: "How can I live rather than exist in this country?"<sup>48</sup>

When Zahra arrives in Africa, Hashem feels as though Lebanon has come to him.

I never imagined that one day my feelings for Zahra would reach the pitch they did. I was only trying to express the strange condition which overtook me, once I had met her [...] After all those long years, it seemed that I began to breathe again, and even to touch the fabric of my commitment to family and homeland. I felt I wanted to touch her hand and face and the hem of her dress. Through her I hoped to absorb all my life, both here and in Lebanon.<sup>49</sup>

To Hashem, Zahra represents Lebanon. His intense feelings towards his country and his family manifest themselves into lust for his niece. Here, we are exposed to two sides of the same story, while Zahra says that her uncle licks her fingers and that she could feel "his penis throbbing".<sup>50</sup> Hashem lies to himself, telling himself and the reader that he merely wants to touch her face and hands. His dishonesty, even towards himself, about his actions in respect of his niece, shed some light on his dishonesty towards Lebanon. Hashem is guilty of attending the political meetings of two opposing parties. Hashem

twists reality around, giving himself victim status. When Zahra finally musters the courage to tell him that her nervous breakdown is his fault, he screams at her and criticises her behaviour as if he is innocent. He suffers from alienation in Africa although it is he who refuses to befriend Africans. He suffers from unbelonging in Lebanon even as he hops from one political party to the other joining in demonstrations and giving long speeches about beliefs that Hashem himself does not practise. Through Hashem, again we encounter what Zeidan refers to as the “cultural schizophrenia” that is demonstrated in Al-Shaykha’s narrative.

When Zahra recovers from her mental breakdown, she informs her uncle of her wish to marry Majed, a man who had proposed to her prior to her confinement. He says to her: “Majed must be told about your condition. [...] Majed must be told, since we are a good honourable family.”<sup>51</sup>

Once more, we witness Hashem’s delusion, he believes that they are a good and honourable family, in spite of his dishonourable sexual advances towards his niece. This situation shares a striking resemblance to that of Firdaus and her uncle in El Saadawi’s *Woman at point Zero*, where the uncle is also guilty of having a less than honourable relationship with his niece, to whom he is guardian.

Through Majed, Al-Shaykh shows the perspective of another Arab male. Majed’s poverty back in Lebanon is the reason behind his coming to Africa. Majed grows up feeling nervous because of his lack of wealth, “I feared that sense of being displaced,”<sup>52</sup> he says. Majed’s fear of becoming homeless in his own home drives him to Africa where he decides to “make in Africa a second homeland.”<sup>53</sup> Majed, unlike Hashem leaves Lebanon for tangible reasons: while Hashem is forced to flee because of his confused loyalties to a country called Greater Syria that existed long before he was born, Majed travels hoping to offer a better life for his family. There are similarities between Majed and Hashem in regard to the colonial frame of mind. Majed’s views are extremely racist. His mother tells him: “Avoid those African girls like the plague.”<sup>54</sup> Majed says,

It was not [my mother’s] words, though, which stood between me and the daughters of Africa. It was their looks. I could never imagine my body uniting with one of theirs. I could never accept their thick lips, their barbaric hair, their black skin.<sup>55</sup>

Al-Shaykh demonstrates the view-point and double standards of a certain category of Lebanese society. Majed is resentful in Lebanon and feels alienated by those who are of a

wealthier social class than himself. Even in Africa Majed finds himself shunned by those who are richer than him.

I had thought that the fact of being far from home brought people closer together. How mistaken I was. It is only money which makes you strong in the world, gives a choice of friendships and achieves equality.<sup>56</sup>

The real concept of equality; that all humans are equal regardless of their circumstances, be it disability, race, gender or social status, is lost on Majed. His viewpoint is that one can only achieve equality through money. However, he comes to Africa to obtain money, which implies that Africa has more wealth and opportunity than Lebanon. If equality is obtained through material wealth as like Majed claims it is, then he ought to feel inferior towards the Africans whereas he views them with contempt.

Majed is a troubled soul who has mixed feelings towards himself and his body. He says he has “a special relationship”<sup>57</sup> with his body. He would look at a picture in the novel *Jane Eyre* of Jane and Mr Rochester kissing and become aroused and masturbate. Majed uses a Western medium to arouse himself. It is difficult to find a Middle Eastern book or magazine that contains such drawings, especially in a small village such as the one Majed comes from. Also, it is generally believed that sexual promiscuity is a Western trait that Arabs are free from. However, I believe that Al-Shaykh chose *Jane Eyre* because Jane, like Majed, is an impoverished girl who manages to construct a new life and also manages to secure the love of the rich Mr Rochester, thus fulfilling the Western fantasy. Majed needs a female Mr Rochester to give him the “equality” he so desperately yearns for.

Majed reads an article in a magazine that “[warns] the younger generation of the secret vice which could affect their minds.”<sup>58</sup> Such myths often circulate amongst Arabs about the dangers of masturbation, and these beliefs aid in creating sexual problems in both men and women, as well as a loss of confidence and feelings of shame. Majed then tries to abstain from masturbating, but finds it difficult. He is caught by his mother who says to him: “How could you let the devil whisper in your ear? [...] You’ll get tuberculosis, my darling. You’ll never father children!”<sup>59</sup>

Majed’s mother’s reaction alienates Majed from his own body. His body’s function is to produce children, and by indulging in the “secret vice” he believes that he has endangered his ability to fulfil his key role in society, which is to produce children. He reflects: “my greatest fear was that, when I eventually married, my wife would discover

my secret. She would be bound to leave me then.”<sup>60</sup> His sexual frustration, coupled with his fear of rejection and his inferiority complex amongst the Lebanese in Africa, increase Majed’s alienation from the Lebanese society in Africa and from his body, hence making him even more desperate to find a wife.

Majed’s explanation for marrying Zahra sheds further light on his character and his desperation to include himself in the very society that alienates him. “I needed to marry and beget children and to live in a house like everyone else if I was to become a real human being.”<sup>61</sup> Again, here we are confronted with the deep rooted Muslim belief that an unmarried person is incomplete. Majed also says: “When I saw [Zahra] and heard she was still a spinster, and that she was Hashem’s niece, I thought: ‘Here is a ready-made bride waiting.’”<sup>62</sup> Because Hashem is a patriot from the capital of Lebanon he is of a higher social rank. Majed is aware of this and he sees Zahra as a means of integrating with the Lebanese society that formerly shunned him for his poverty. Majed expresses his joy upon his marriage to Zahra:

Here I was, married at last, the owner of a woman’s body that I could make love to whenever I wished. From now on, surely my feelings of deprivation must dwindle: I have married Hashem’s niece and so fulfilled the dream I’ve had ever since being in the south... of marrying the daughter of an illustrious family.<sup>63</sup>

Zahra and Majed both alienate each other by regarding each other as useful commodities. Zahra perceives Majed as a means to escape from her uncle’s sexual advances, and Majed sees Zahra as his ticket to “becoming a real human being,” with the added benefit of sexual intercourse. Each objectifies the other; rather than being connected to one another as spouses, they are disconnected. Scheff’s theory of disconnection being a cause of alienation<sup>64</sup> explains the failed marriage. By making the two narrators confess their reasons for wanting to marry, Al-Shaykh demonstrates the disconnection between the couple.

Their wedding night proves to be disappointing when Majed discovers that Zahra is not a virgin. Zahra tries to lie, but eventually confesses everything to Majed. Majed handles the situation in a manner that conveys the possibility of the Arab world one day overcoming the ancient tradition of preserving woman’s virginity at all cost. Majed gradually overcomes his bitterness at being tricked by his new wife:

After several days, the intensity of these issues seemed to fade, as if such formidable questions become insignificant here in Africa, where there is no culture, no environment, no family to blow them up out of all proportion; [...] perhaps it is because there are no parents here, or because those who happen to be here have integrated into Africa and lack any culture to relate to.<sup>65</sup>

In his desperation to reap the benefits of marriage, Majed rationalises the unimportance of the virginity issue to lack of culture in Africa. By addressing Zahra's lack of virginity in a non-Arab social context, Al-Shaykh succeeds in demonstrating that the necessity of virginity in unmarried females is a mere social construction that serves no real tangible purpose. In spite of Majed's eventual nonchalance towards Zahra's deception, she suffers another nervous breakdown. When she goes back to the mental hospital, Majed realises that Zahra is not a useful commodity after all. Majed reflects that Zahra

would be no help to me in making a fortune from my work. [...] she would be incapable of looking after children. It seemed as if our roles had been reversed. Here was I, needing to take care of her [...].<sup>66</sup>

The sexual division of labour is clear in Majed's mind, Zahra's usefulness can only be calculated in relation to *him* as "the owner" of her body as he puts it. Ironically, although he is legally the "owner" it is Malek, whose name means "owner", who initially fulfils the male role, which is to impregnate Zahra and make her useful as a woman. Majed's reflections illustrate how Fraad and Resnick's theory of alienation applies to the domestic sphere. Majed expects Zahra to be able to serve him not the other way around. Kuhn elaborates on the wife and her usefulness.

A wife's relation to capital is always a mediated one because of her primary responsibility to service the family: her relation to production is always mediated through her relation to her husband, precisely through the relation of human production.<sup>67</sup>

Malek's views on Zahra's usefulness as a spouse are capitalistic. Her value as a woman decreases with her inability to serve her husband or potential children. Zahra is therefore not suitable to have any relation to Majed's capital, even a mediated one because of her mental breakdown, which can be seen as a temporary disability.

Al-Shaykh's inclusion of Zahra's mental instability adds to the list of feminist taboo issues discussed in her novel. Disability in general has gone unaddressed in the

contemporary fiction in the region. Disabled females in the region are doubly alienated because, as Margaret Lloyd argues, the “disabled woman has first to fight the prejudice that excludes her from fulfilling the stereotype.”<sup>68</sup> Zahra is alienated not only because of her “saleability” in domestic labour, but also because she cannot fulfil this traditional female role due to her mental disability. William John Hanna and Betsy Rogovsky explain that there is a “big difference between a disabled husband and a disabled wife. A disabled husband needs a wife to nurture him, but a disabled wife is not seen by society as capable of nurturing a husband who is not disabled.”<sup>69</sup> Hanna and Rogovsky’s statement clarifies Majed’s outrage at the reversal of roles.

Perhaps sensing Majed’s disappointment in the marriage, Zahra returns to Beirut. Her father and mother greet her with anger, asking her why she has left her husband. Zahra tells them nothing, but her mother’s incessant questioning becomes more and more aggressive, for example, she says: “Every day of my life I have gone on wondering who in the world would ever marry you. You are like the Sphinx, never speaking a word or smiling.”<sup>70</sup> Here, again the image of the goddess Astarte is conjured, as the sphinx is known to be her animal.<sup>71</sup> It is as if, even when her mother is hurting Zahra with her words, Nature is there, protecting Zahra.

Zahra feels a distance between herself and her parents. She refers to her home as her “prison.”<sup>72</sup> Zahra reflects: “My return had shown up a deep gulf between my family and me. I no longer belonged in this household. It was as if their duties towards me had ended with my marriage.”<sup>73</sup> To escape from her parents, Zahra convinces herself that her only option is to go back to Africa and live with Majed as his wife.

Once back in Africa, she takes one look at Majed and says “I felt the trap snap shut again.”<sup>74</sup> Zahra’s dilemma is once again complex. She is homeless in her father’s home in Lebanon, and homeless in her husband’s home in Africa. Because Zahra is female, the option of living alone is impossible. So after trying to make their marriage work, Majed tells Hashem that he can no longer tolerate her and Zahra returns to Beirut.

This time in Beirut, circumstances are different. The civil war keeps Zahra and her parents in their home. Zahra, for the first time in her life says, “I am totally relaxed.”<sup>75</sup> Zahra’s reasons for feeling relaxed are because she finally feels equal and because she does not need to go out in public:

I knew that I was at home, just as everyone else was at home and taking refuge, no matter who they were. Even the beautiful women we saw in the

society pages of the magazines were in the same fix, hiding in some corner of their elegant homes, hearing what I heard, thinking what I thought.

When I heard that the battles raged fiercely and every front was an inferno, I felt calm. It meant that my perimeters were fixed by these walls.<sup>76</sup>

Here Al-Shaykh demonstrates a fundamental difference between Zahra and Majed. Majed, who represents the working class Lebanese male, believes that equality comes with financial wealth. Zahra, who represents the alienated Lebanese female, finally experiences equality during the war. Ernest Renan explains how “suffering in common unifies more than joy does. Where national memories are concerned, griefs are of more value than triumphs, for they impose duties, and require a common effort.”<sup>77</sup> It is this “suffering in common” that makes Zahra feel equal for the first time. It is almost as if Zahra suffers from agoraphobia, and opposed to everyone else, she finds the war comforting because it keeps her at home. The war offers Zahra something she has always craved, a home that she can feel comfortable and safe in.

Many things change during the war. Zahra’s mother, formerly an adulteress, is now religious; she “would hide her hair under a scarf”<sup>78</sup> and becomes a “*hajja*, a woman who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca.”<sup>79</sup> Zahra’s father is “no longer a fat monster on whose chest and shoulders’ black hairs curled like cockroaches.”<sup>80</sup> Ahmad, Zahra’s brother, has grown a beard and wears his “combat suit”<sup>81</sup> and carries a rifle. Zahra reflects on the changes the war brings:

Daily needs [in Tripoli and Beirut] were reduced to the barest minimum. No one thought about what food to eat or when to clean the house or take a bath. No one cared whether or not a certain detergent washed linen cleaner or whiter.<sup>82</sup>

Family conflict ceases, and the war makes previously unacceptable behaviour transform into perfectly satisfactory behaviour. With the war comes Zahra’s escapism, a valid excuse for Zahra to stay in her housecoat all day and stay in bed. When the cease-fire is announced, Zahra panics since the “cease-fire meant having to leave the house. It meant going outside and seeing people and they seeing me for what I was.”<sup>83</sup> It is apparent that Zahra’s agoraphobia stems from her fear of people seeing through her exterior into her hidden self. In a previous chapter, I discussed another character, Salma, who also has to hide her past experiences because of the shame of having betrayed her family. The fear



and the trauma of being found out is severe; both Zahra and Salma go to great lengths to conceal the secrets of their past.

After a bomb nearly kills them, Zahra and her parents hide in the village. However, Zahra feels guilty at leaving her brother, so goes back to Beirut. Through Ahmad and Zahra, Al-Shaykh voices her own opinions of the Lebanese civil war. Similar to *Dreams of Water*, Ahmad, like Bassam, is uncertain about the reasons behind the war. Ahmad's speech about his duties gives insight to the average fighter's outlook on war:

It's a different story being on your own than it is being part of a large group. To belong in a group makes you part of the war and not a murderer. Your gun isn't a gun, but an object you carry naturally. And the group digests you so that you forget you are an individual.<sup>84</sup>

Scheff discusses two types of profound alienation, isolation which means detachment from a group, and engulfment, which is detachment of the self.<sup>85</sup> Scheff explains:

Superpatriotism and other forms of blind loyalty [idealise] engulfment. In this form of alienation, the social bond is insecure because the individual has given up significant parts of the self in order to remain loyal to the group.<sup>86</sup>

This form of alienation affects individuals such as Ahmed and his uncle Hashem who blindly believe in a cause. What Al-Shaykh implies is that their naïve unquestioning trust in their parties is what brought destruction to Lebanon. Ahmad's reasons for fighting change from day to day:

'I and the others are fighting imperialism; we are fighting America.' Another day he would remark, 'This is all an Israeli conspiracy to split the Arabs. They want to see us divided, but they'll not succeed.' A few days later he might say, 'The Palestinians fight with us, but the Palestinians have no right to interfere in what is purely a Lebanese war.' And then, a few days after that, he might say, 'I, personally, am fighting for the Palestinian cause.'<sup>87</sup>

The longer the war goes on, the more socially acceptable behaviour changes. Miriam Cooke explains: "differences of perspective and in socio-political roles that are acceptable in normal times become intolerable in war time".<sup>88</sup> It becomes socially acceptable for Ahmad and his comrades to rob houses, take drugs, and Ahmad even goes

so far as to start masturbating in front of his sister. Zahra contemplates, “You [Ahmad] smoke grass and fondle your groin, and can only come back to being yourself after you have killed and robbed, hated and fled.”<sup>89</sup> Whenever Zahra asks him what they would do after the war he would ask her not to start the conversation, Zahra wonders, “why was he so afraid of the war ending? Because he would then amount to nothing?”<sup>90</sup> Ahmad, like Bassam in *Dreams of Water*, has no future without the war because he has no qualifications and no experience in anything but combat, once the war is over they cannot become civil servants unless their side wins. Ahmad reflects,

I hope the talk of peace is only a rumour. I don't wish for this war to end. I don't want to have to worry about what to do next. The war has structured my days and nights, my financial status, my very self.<sup>91</sup>

War and anarchy become a way of life. Ahmad and others like him forfeit all responsibility. They answer to their commanders' orders and no longer adhere to the norms and values of their society. Universal wrongs such as theft, rape, and murder are not only disregarded in war, but practiced openly, as if to purposely mock the basis of civilisation.

Ahmad and his comrades are not the only ones who use the war as an excuse to disregard restrictions which society and the law place on citizens of the country. Zahra also finds ways of exploiting the war. Zahra begins experiencing sexually explicit dreams. She then discovers a sniper stationed on the roof opposite her aunt's apartment building. The sniper was killing anyone who was within shooting range regardless of which side they were on or who they were. Zahra manages to convince her aunt to seek refuge in the village with Zahra's parents. She then starts obsessing about the sniper, following the number of deaths he inflicted which are reported in the newspaper. She then sees him in the restaurant near her house. She says “he sat like any other human being at a table”.<sup>92</sup>

Miriam Cooke discusses the impact of Middle Eastern and South Asian women's war narratives in her book *Blood into Ink*. She illustrates how some of the works “demonstrate women's recognition of the humanity of the enemy, which complicates the perpetration of violence”.<sup>93</sup> In another book entitled *Woman and the War Story*, Cooke writes specifically about Lebanese women writers who tackle the war issue in their writing, “Lebanese women's writings redefine nationalism and extend it to reveal its

humanist dimensions.”<sup>94</sup> When Zahra sees the sniper as a man in that restaurant, it complicates her obsession with him. What Al-Shaykh manages to do is to blur the clear cut image of the ally and the enemy. By humanising the sniper and dehumanising Ahmad, Al-Shaykh succeeds in demonstrating to the reader that Ahmad and the sniper are two sides of the same Lebanese coin. Both are patriots whose aim is to serve their country, but both hold weapons that add to the destruction of their country.

The more Zahra sees the sniper as a man rather than a killer, the more flustered she becomes. She reflects:

Every time I saw the sniper, my thoughts would grow more confused, until a strange idea took root in my mind. I wondered what could possibly divert the sniper from aiming his rifle and startle him to the point where he might open his mouth instead? [...] perhaps a naked woman, passing across his field of fire?<sup>95</sup>

The next time Zahra sees the sniper in the restaurant she hurries to her aunt’s apartment, telling herself that if she can create a sexual distraction, the sniper would stop killing. Zahra, who is brought up in an Arab society where female sexual desire is taboo, has sexual dreams that stir her suppressed sexuality. Although she has had previous sexual experience, she describes her body as “stiff as wood” while with Majed and Malek. She justifies her desire by convincing herself that she is saving lives by distracting the sniper, rather than succumbing to the needs of her own body. Zahra feels she can only justify her sexuality through using it as a useful commodity in war time, thus actively participating in the sexual division of labour. Unconsciously, Zahra alienates herself from her body by treating it as a saleable object, being sold for the price of innocent lives.

She hurries to her aunt’s house and wraps a towel around her waist and prances out to the balcony where she knows the sniper will inevitably see her. She imitates her mother’s voice, in an attempt to seduce the sniper. Mimicking a mother who opened Zahra’s eyes to sexuality at a tender age by dragging her along to her sexual escapades, shows that Zahra is finally willing to embrace the female within her. She succeeds in capturing the sniper’s attention, however, he merely asks her what she is doing there, and does not make any sexual advances. This rejection frustrates Zahra:

I found myself hating the sniper for having seen me half-naked and heard me humming a song. Knowing I was alone on the roof, he had brushed me aside, as if I had no importance.

[...] I had lost a rare chance, briefly meeting a sniper feared by the community when he was not holding his rifle. I had got him to look at me as a man would look at a woman in peacetime.<sup>96</sup>

Zahra's reason for choosing the sniper in particular is not entirely because she wishes to stop him from killing. Seeing him in the restaurant, as a man rather than a militiaman, coupled with his being such a formidable killer, feared by all, and written about in the newspapers (almost achieving celebrity status), makes him highly desirable for someone as isolated as Zahra. She refers to him as the "god of death"<sup>97</sup> as she has in the past referred to her father as a "god in his khaki suit".<sup>98</sup> In an interview with author Victoria Secunda, Dr Marianne Goodman explains that people "often instinctively repeat what they experienced in childhood, even if it was the worst thing in the world. [...] Women choose men like Dad because *it's what they know*"<sup>99</sup> (original italics).

Zahra is as terrified of the sniper as she was of her father as a child. She describes herself as "petrified"<sup>100</sup> but is extremely attracted to the sniper because of his power over life and death. Like Zahra, he belongs to no side. He and Zahra have opposite views, very similar to the differences between Zahra and her father. She is against bloodshed, and the sniper is responsible for scores of deaths. Zahra, who is used to living in fear, is finally able to develop sexually because she no longer fears her father. Zahra needs another object to fear/love since the war is her biggest fear and the sniper is the only face Zahra can put to the war. To Zahra, the sniper is the war. Personifying the war, embracing the war and even loving the war because of the sexual freedom it offers Zahra, is Al-Shaykh's controversial statement.

After the sniper's rejection, Zahra can do nothing except sit at her window and wait for him to come to the restaurant again. Eventually she takes action and walks over to the apartment building where he hides, endangering herself by placing herself right within the sniper's aim. She says "As I mounted the stairs, life slowly flowed back into me."<sup>101</sup> Life flows back into her because, perhaps for the first time, she is in command of her life. The danger and the adrenalin rush heighten her feelings of being alive. She deliberately chooses to walk through the war zone to meet a dangerous killer. Al-Shaykh describes their sexual intercourse in detail, using words that conjure animalistic images, such as "pouncing" and quick movements, implying the instinctive rather than romantic nature of their coupling.

Cooke views the sniper as a rapist and Zahra as a victim in this particular scene.<sup>102</sup> In my opinion, however, I view Zahra as a willing participant. Searching Zahra's childhood for clues, I find that Zahra's most memorable moment with her father is when he beats her; perhaps it is even the most intimate moment, as the only time Zahra mentions her father touching her is when he "dealt blows" on her. All she can recall from her relationship with her father is fear. She describes her father as "Hitler-like."<sup>103</sup> I believe that Zahra enjoys her experience with the sniper, although she suffers from discomfort and back pain during intercourse. She is not yet fully aware of her body's needs. Zahra merely responds to what she knows about connecting with another person, which is to offer her body without receiving any pleasure herself but, on the contrary, receiving pain.

After this particular experience, Zahra says "A thread of happiness ran through me,"<sup>104</sup> which indicates that her encounter with the sniper is a positive one. Zahra returns to the sniper's hideout daily and for the first time in the narrative Zahra is at ease; "Feelings of security, of comfort, even of relaxation began to grow day by day."<sup>105</sup>

The war, which has caused havoc, is the reason her parents are in the village. The war is the reason Zahra has the chance to live alone and independently for the first time in her life. Zahra's case is almost identical to Aneesa's in Awwar Jarrar's novel *Dreams of Water*. The war brings necessary social changes, things that would have been socially unfathomable, become acceptable during times of war. Zahra's parents' absence allows her to focus on herself; her own needs and desires become her priority without her feeling the need to answer to anyone. Zahra says "the war has been essential. It has swept away the hollowness concealed by routines. It has made me more alive, ever more tranquil".<sup>106</sup>

Anastasia Valassopoulos discusses the development of Zahra's character during the war, "injustice and oppression emerge not just as products of war but, rather, as social phenomena already familiar to women that are re-examined in the literature of war."<sup>107</sup> In Zahra's case, it is not the war that brings patriarchal values, but the war that gives Zahra the opportunity to overcome them. Ahmad who has never suffered from oppression and always had everything served to him on a platter, deals with this lifting of authority unhealthily. Zahra, on the other hand, uses the anarchy of war as an opportunity to live healthily.

Zahra, now a fully developed character, wants to marry the sniper and live with him after the war. However, Zahra discovers that she is five months pregnant. She tries to get an abortion but the doctor refuses, and so she tells the sniper, who, after asking her to get

an abortion, agrees to marry her. It is here that the sniper's true nature shows. He reveals that he was told that she is unable to conceive. Even the trenches of war, do not change the deep rooted social norms. In spite of everyone behaving as if social restrictions do not matter in times of war, Zahra remains an undesirable wife. Her affair with the sniper makes her "dishonourable". Her reputation of being divorced and the instability of her mental health make her an unfit wife and mother in conventional Arab eyes. Her pock-marked face and overweight body also add to the unlikelihood that a superficial type of male, such as the sniper, who most probably is only interested in the physical aspect of their relationship, would marry her. After the sniper makes her a promise that he would meet her parents the next day, Zahra says she wants to "fly all the way home. I want to tell my mother that I am to be married."<sup>108</sup> Her happiness is not long lived. The sniper shoots her, killing her on the spot.

In her article Sabah Ghandour likens Zahra's body to Lebanon, "used and abused by its own people."<sup>109</sup> Valassopoulos argues that Zahra's death "acts as a symbol of the impossibility of this pleasure to continue."<sup>110</sup> Cooke, however, has a different view

The war, sublimated in her relationship with the sniper, allowed her to glimpse another possibility within the war: to espouse the feminine sense of responsibility, connection, caring and love. It had opened up a new way of being that was not passive, but active. It was a reaching out to others. However, this mode of existence was not yet one which the situation could accommodate, so she had to pay for her 'sanity' – for the desire to belong—with her life.<sup>111</sup>

Zahra's martyrdom is similar to that of other Arab heroines such as Firdaus, and Salma, who grow up as victims of patriarchy, but develop into women who refuse to adhere to the injustice which is inflicted upon them by their own societies and families. These Arabic fiction female characters battle society only to end up sacrificing their lives trying to pave a way for a better future for womankind.

Ulfat Idilbi's historical fiction novel *Sabriya: Damascus Bitter Sweet* (1980) shares many aspects with *The Story of Zahra*. Both storylines have a background of war and conflict, and both tackle women's equality issues. Like Zahra, Sabriya is oppressed by her family. Zahra is a mentally disturbed woman who senses injustice but does not pinpoint the source of her problem. She seeks her freedom and manages to find a way to fulfil her desires. Sabriya is the opposite; she is intelligent and aware of the reasons behind her problems. She recognises her inability to change her circumstances. Zahra

fights patriarchy by opposing it in her behaviour; she has premarital sex, refuses to succumb to consumerism and artificial beauty, and does not obey the men in her life in the way that is expected of an Arab woman. Sabriya, however, is well aware of the restrictions placed on women, spends most of her life not openly opposing patriarchy, but submitting to the role expected of her by her father.

The name Sabriya means patient. The names of Idilbi's characters are descriptions of their personalities. Sabriya is, as her name indicates, incredibly patient. Internally, she is "a high-spirited dog tethered by a strong chain."<sup>112</sup> The external image she portrays, however, is that of the submissive dutiful daughter. The strong chain that holds Sabriya to her family makes her bring home the highest grades from school, do all her domestic work, and patiently nurse her sick parents. She never complains to anyone but her diary and eventually her niece Salma. One day Sabriya expresses her frustration to her niece:

When will Allah take Sabriya away from this agony? Did they call me Sabriya because it means long-suffering? I am long-suffering. After such suffering, what is there left but the undertaker and the tomb?<sup>113</sup>

While Zahra complains that the bigger portions of meat are always served to her brother, she does not show that she is aware of the fact that this preferential treatment towards him is because he is male. Zahra merely knows that Ahmad is her mother's favourite. Sabriya, however, is more acutely aware of the differentiation between male and female, and feels resentment towards it. She says:

Mother used to wake me up every morning before dawn so I could help her clean the house and get breakfast ready. In our country they train a girl, as soon as she is aware of herself, to serve men, be it brother, husband or son. So when she has grown up she feels that such servitude is part of nature. I resented my brothers for being able to enjoy more sleep than I did [...].<sup>114</sup>

Zahra has a clear distinction between "nature" and "normal". She knows that her behaviour is natural, wanting to fulfil her sexual desires is part of nature. Sabriya feels that "nature" has been distorted to suit patriarchy. Even women themselves are unaware of what is truly in their nature. Simone de Beauvoir argues that "one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one."<sup>115</sup> Judith Butler further elaborates on de Beauvoir's theory by saying "one 'becomes' a woman, but always under a cultural compulsion to become one".<sup>116</sup> Sabriya is acutely aware that servitude is not the nature of Arab women, but that

their families and societies instil and nurture servitude in the mind of the majority of girls. El-Saadawi explains that the “passivity observed in Arab women is [...] not an inherent or inborn characteristic, but has been imposed upon them by society.”<sup>117</sup> Sabriya, although aware of this cultural phenomenon, submits to the role that society and her family choose for her.

*Sabriya: Damascus Bitter Sweet* is set in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century at a time of transition and uncertainty in the region. Syria was part of the Ottoman Empire at that time, until after the First World War, when the Ottoman Empire collapsed. The Sykes-Picot Agreement in May 1916 was drawn, which resulted in fundamental changes in the Arab world. Syria now became a French protectorate and was no longer part of what was officially known as Greater Syria. It was also a crucial period for women who were beginning to fight against the veil, which was mandatory for any girl who reaches puberty. The veil, often black, had to cover a woman from head to toe (even the face) whenever she was outside the house.

The historian Mehran Kamrava explains the importance of the era:

The 1910s and 1920s were periods of profound international change, with new countries being born and old empires dying. The Middle East emerged from the post war settlements of the 1920s with a new map, one almost [unrecognisable] compared to a map of the prewar era.<sup>118</sup>

The period which Idilbi focuses on in her historical novel is the period which has shaped the Arab world as it is today. It was an era which witnessed the birth of individual Arab countries and the birth of nationalism and loyalty to one’s own country rather than an Arab entity. It was also an era in which the role of women was steadily changing. Idilbi’s representation of this particular generation of Arab women who lived in a time where history was being written by men, for men, is not a coincidence. Idilbi narrates history from a female perspective, giving the reader a gentle reminder that women help shape history, not excluding Arab women. Cooke comments on South Asian and Middle Eastern women’s war narratives, “Women have begun to [realise] that they must record their participation in war. If they do not, no one will.”<sup>119</sup>

The novel resurrects events about the Franco-Syrian struggle through Sabriya’s private diary. The initial narrator, Salma, is Sabriya’s young niece. She tells the story of Sabriya from her own perspective, which is not entirely accurate at first because there are



many secrets in Sabriya's life that Salma is unaware of. Salma, whose name means pristine, is yet untouched by injustice. Salma is thrown full force into the reality of women's status as the events begin to unfold. The narrative starts off with the occurrences of the fortieth day after her grandfather's death, and Salma's memories take the reader back and forth in time. Sabriya is first introduced to the reader through Salma's observation, that her actions and behaviour seem contradictory. After her father's death Sabriya is seen crying, "What happens after Father? How can I carry on after you have gone, my dearest? If only you had stayed alive. If only I could have served you for the rest of my life."<sup>120</sup> Salma finds Sabriya's tears hypocritical and recalls another occasion when she overhears her aunt mutter to herself, "Oh, Allah. Either take him to you or take me. I can't stand it any longer."<sup>121</sup>

What Salma does not understand at first is that Sabriya gives up ten years of her life to nurse her paralysed father. She is his sole caretaker and receives no help from anyone, which is bound to be frustrating. According to Marx, as human beings, we are social animals, and we "develop as human beings through interaction with one another."<sup>122</sup> Moreover, to Marx, alienation is not merely the separation from society, but also, "the oppressive and boring form of work itself."<sup>123</sup> Sabriya fits this broader definition of alienation; she lives in isolation and is oppressed by the task of nursing her father.

Sabriya's genuine sorrow after her father's death has another layer. Other than being the customary grief which accompanies the loss of a loved one, the death of Sabriya's father also means the end of Sabriya's usefulness and purpose. Serving her father has been her duty since adolescence; as a result, the loss of this purpose causes alienation. The traditional conventions that Sabriya adheres to dictate that an unmarried daughter must serve her parents, but what happens when she is unmarried and without parents to serve? The fixed role that Sabriya has been brought up to fulfil has been fulfilled; now Sabriya is estranged from herself since she finds herself without a role to fulfil. Zeidan explains that for the Arab women in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, "being unmarried also meant being social outcasts and having very limited access to public life."<sup>124</sup> Whereas Sabriya has been living as a "social outcast", she has had the security of being the dutiful daughter. Now Sabriya is alienated due to the shift of status; she remains an outcast without the benefits of being the dutiful daughter.

Sabriya does not know how to live without servitude. In addition to mourning her father's death and coping with a new lifestyle, she overhears her brothers and their wives

discussing her future. They conclude that they would sell their father's house and their sister would be able to rent a room with her share of the inheritance (which is half the amount her brothers inherit according to Islamic law). Salma finds her aunt eavesdropping on the discourse. Sabriya says: "They won't be able to get me out of this house of mine except as a corpse. You'll see how I get my own back. I'll get them talked about all over the town."<sup>125</sup> Scandal and gossip are the worst punishment a female can inflict on her family because of the nature of Arab society; family honour is tied to a female member's virtue as emphasised in previously discussed works such as *My Name is Salma*.

Now Sabriya finds herself truly homeless. Her childhood home is to be sold, and she has no say in it because of her gender. Sabriya is unable to cope with all these changes. Her reaction to this new situation of homelessness is to organise a party marking the fortieth day of her father's death. Marking the fortieth day is a traditional custom rather than a religious one. The end of forty days after someone's death signifies the end of the official mourning period, and is often celebrated by friends and relatives gathering and reciting the Quran for the departed's soul. Often it is accompanied by coffee and an abundance of food. Salma likens the celebration to a wedding, and imagines "a young bride and her groom entering from the passageway".<sup>126</sup> Sabriya exaggerates the occasion by hiring singers, musicians, and dancers, like in a real wedding.

In Arab traditions, dreams often foreshadow future events. Weddings in dreams often indicate the death of whomever the dream is related to. A white dress in particular is seen as bad luck in dreams. Salma, wide awake on her grandfather's fortieth day, daydreams about a "slender-waisted young bride, proudly walking with her fine white wedding dress as if she was enveloped in an autumn cloud"<sup>127</sup> at the start of the narrative. The bride walks "proudly" through Sabriya's passageway. Although Sabriya's party happens in the spring, Salma's imaginary bride is "enveloped in an autumn cloud." Clouds and mists are a metaphor of the mystery of what happens after death, while autumn symbolises the death of summer and the birth of the harsh months of winter.

Sabriya's party, which celebrates a melancholy event, enrages her two brothers. Sabriya openly defies them by daring to organise a party without their permission; her being female means she must adhere to their authority. They conspire together to punish her by not reimbursing her for the costs of the entertainment. A confrontation between the siblings occurs. The manner in which Sabriya addresses her brothers leads the reader to

believe that Sabriya's character is wilful and outspoken which is a characteristic that most other Arab female protagonists do not possess.

After aggressive questioning from her brothers and their wives, Sabriya reveals that she paid for the party by selling her mother's carpet. She chooses that particular carpet because on the day of her father's passing, Sabriya notices her sisters-in-law inspecting it and assessing its worth. Although the carpet was promised to Sabriya as a wedding present, the sisters-in-law feel that since Sabriya remains unmarried, she is not entitled to the valuable carpet. In justification for the party and for selling the carpet Sabriya says:

let us consider that today is my wedding day. All my life I've wanted to do something just for myself. To invite people just once, to host a party or banquet, and to upset those who have upset me.<sup>128</sup>

Through this conflict between siblings, Idilbi communicates numerous historical facts showing us a rare glimpse of the choices available for women of the region during that era. Sabriya discloses that it is her eldest brother who succeeds in persuading her father to discontinue supporting Sabriya's college education, so she never obtains a certificate. Sabriya confronts her brother:

If I had been able to complete my studies as you were able to, I'd have been a thousand times better than you [...]. Most of my contemporaries have become school principals or senior officials. I've passed my life servicing a paralysed invalid.<sup>129</sup>

Contemporary Arab women novels almost solely use realism to represent the situation of women and to advocate social and cultural change. Zeidan explains that it is a characteristic of Arab women to write "historical or literary studies dealing with their female predecessors."<sup>130</sup> Idilbi's novel shows a very realistic glimpse of what life was like for a middle-class woman growing up in the early twentieth century in Greater Syria. Education was available to women of this social class and so was employment. Although Sabriya laments the conditions under which women suffer, she also demonstrates to the reader that there were some women who did enjoy a certain amount of independence. I will illustrate more through other examples that Idilbi provides later on in this chapter.

Sabriya's conduct; the party, selling the carpet, defending herself assertively against her brothers, implies self-confidence. This is why Sabriya's suicide, which occurs shortly after her brothers leave the house, takes the reader aback. Salma finds her aunt hanging

from a lemon tree in the courtyard, dressed in black. Syrian houses are famous for the courtyards that are surrounded by the house walls. The courtyard (which functions similarly to the veil) is an outside space in the middle of the house in which women can be outside and still be concealed from the world.

Salma describes the scene: “She was still hanging from the lemon tree, like a black flag at half-mast, protesting loudly at the oppression and injustice.”<sup>131</sup> This powerful image conveys many messages. A flag at half-mast is a sign of respect and mourning when someone of importance dies. Sabriya, although an anonymous citizen in her country, is a martyr for the same cause as her contemporary female protagonists have died for. Sabriya’s death, like Firdaus’ death in *Woman at Point Zero*, occurs at the beginning of the narrative so that the reader knows throughout that the heroine’s attempts at emancipating herself, and other women with similar circumstances, will ultimately lead to her demise.

In Arabic poetry, novels, films and song, the image of the lemon tree is often evoked as a metaphor of love. A lemon tree, common in the warm climate of the Middle East, is a popular tangible image for the abstract emotions of love. A lemon tree, aromatic and pleasing to the eye, produces bright yellow healthy fruit which is very sour to the taste which is similar to love in the Arab world which is often a problematic emotion because of the obstacles men and women face. The lemon tree represents the obstacles such as the family which makes it difficult for men and women to express their love freely. The lemon tree also represents the difficulties youths endure in order to obtain the object of their love. Sabriya is denied love by her family, so hanging herself from the lemon tree in the middle of the house in which she sees herself as a prisoner is a statement in itself.

Another popular convention among Arab women writers is the use of colour as a metaphor. Zeidan notes that the Arab woman writer often uses colour “not only for normal description, but also to illustrate the psychological or emotional moods of her characters, or to represent other aspects of them.”<sup>132</sup> The colour black is the colour that Arab Bedouins still wear in the deserts today.<sup>133</sup> Black can be found in most Arab country flags because it represents the colonisation and occupation that the Arab world has undergone. Black is also the colour of the Great Arab Revolution, which was happening in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the years Idilbi’s novel was set in. The rise of Arab oil countries occurred in the 80s, around the time this novel was written. The sudden boom in the oil-rich Arab countries brought the image of the submissive Arab woman

clad in black from head to toe to the Western gaze. That image, still dominant today, has made black the symbol of the Muslim woman's oppression. Idilbi challenges this image and makes black the symbol of resistance, as I will demonstrate later on in this chapter.

Idilbi brings together all these powerful icons together in one snapshot. Salma takes it all in, and then notices that all the birds in their cages have been set free by her aunt. "My aunt had released [the birds] from the captivity before her own tormented soul found release from its long bondage."<sup>134</sup> Sabriya viewed her home as a cage, and her death as the only way to be free. At this point in the narrative, Salma discovers her aunt's diary which gives insight into Sabriya's motives for ending her life.

Emile Durkheim discusses suicide and its types. Analysing Sabriya's suicide within Durkheim's framework proved to be problematic because her suicide falls under all three of his suicide groups. The three groups of suicide that Durkheim discusses are egoistic suicide, altruism, and anomie. Egoistic suicide "is distress at not belonging to a group."<sup>135</sup> Durkheim's evidence largely relies on the family, he "finds unmarried people more prone to suicide than married couples, and members of small families more prone than those in large families."<sup>136</sup> Sabriya's suicide can be viewed as egoistic suicide because she is the outcast among her siblings. She is the only female, she is unmarried, which means that her eldest brother, the most aggressive of the two, is her legal guardian under the Arab tradition of women needing the constant care and protection of men as previously discussed. The isolation that Sabriya experiences after her father's death is partially behind her suicide.

Sabriya's suicide can also be viewed as altruism, as it is "self-sacrifice for the sake of a group."<sup>137</sup> This type of suicide is particularly popular in times of war. Sabriya performs the ultimate sacrifice when she joins a demonstration against the French. Her childhood sweetheart Adil informs her that this demonstration depends on women's participation, but he worries that her involvement might anger her family. Sabriya's brazen reply to that is "I'm going to join the march and let them afterwards do whatever they like. [...] Nobody will dissuade me from taking part, regardless of the consequences."<sup>138</sup> The consequences of that march are directly linked to Sabriya's suicide. She is beaten by her father, banned by her family from continuing her education and Adil is killed at the hands of her brother Raghib.

After hearing the news of Adil's murder, Sabriya thinks of taking her own life. "With one leap I could throw myself to the courtyard, end it all and enjoy eternal

peace.”<sup>139</sup> She then decides against it because of her elderly parents, “I cannot cause such distress to my aged parents. I am not that self-centred. [...] I will live like a corpse [...] And when the old folk move on from this world, I will know how to put an end to this life of mine.”<sup>140</sup>

That march against the French in Martyrs’ Square, although it causes Sabriya’s demise, brings a feeling of empowerment to her:

I felt I had sprouted wings that enabled me to fly high, in spite of the black head-dress that hung from my head to my feet and the thick veil that covered my face. I felt I was a defiant wave in this sea surging in front of me. [...] For the first time I felt I was a human being with an identity and an objective, in defence of which I was ready to die.<sup>141</sup>

This passage takes us back to how Salma finds Sabriya hanging from the lemon tree, dressed entirely in black, defiant, and with all the birds free of their cages. This demonstration that Sabriya participates in and her suicide are the only two defiant moments of her entire life. Those are the only two actions that she takes that bring shame to her family. Those two moments are the ones where she feels that she is really a human being. The two actions are linked together; one where she performs the ultimate sacrifice in Martyrs’ Square trying to reclaim her country (knowing full-well that she would be punished for it), and the other is when she becomes a martyr in the square in the middle of the home that no longer belongs to her. Both times she makes statements: although twice the oppressor has taken her space away from her, Sabriya succeeds in leaving her thumbprint on it making it eternally hers.

Another type of suicide that Durkheim discusses is anomie, which translates as “ruleless-ness”: “a consequence of economic upheaval”<sup>142</sup>. Sabriya’s homelessness, and her brothers’ threat to deduct the price of the party from her share of the inheritance (which is half the amount of their own inheritance) must be a cause of apprehension for a woman who has never had to worry about finances before. Because she does not have a certificate, she has no qualifications to help her find employment and support herself financially.

Durkheim’s concept of anomie “stands in sharp contrast to Marx’s understanding of alienation”.<sup>143</sup> Richard Sennet’s introduction to Durkheim’s *On Suicide* explains the difference between the two theories:

To Marx, alienation is not entirely a destructive experience; feeling alienated can breed thinking about what's wrong, about who is the enemy; [...]. By contrast, anomie, as Durkheim describes it, remains stuck in the realm of feeling; one's suffering sucks the energy out of one's understanding; knowing what's wrong does not strengthen one's will.<sup>144</sup>

I argue that Sabriya's feelings of alienation throughout her childhood and adolescence give her the resolve to defy her family and participate in the march. However, after the death of Adil and after she is forbidden from completing her education, Sabriya realises that patriarchy is an institution too dominant to fight so she submits to living the life as a "corpse."<sup>145</sup> This shows that Sabriya gives up on living and knows that once she does not have to care for her parents, she will take her own life.

One of the "extra social factors" in suicide that Durkheim explores is imitation, and he blames the press for the spread of suicide.<sup>146</sup> At a young age Sabriya is exposed to literature by her brother Sami and his friend Adil. Through the exchange of books, magazines and newspapers between the three, Sabriya is introduced to the works of Mai Ziyada. Zeidan writes: "[Arab] women's literature took on a new and rich dimension of writing in the first decade of the twentieth century with the appearance on the scene of Mayy Ziyadah<sup>147</sup>." <sup>148</sup> Ziyada is known as one of the pioneering women in Arabic literature. She is known to have said: "Do not think that my young age prevents me from doing my duty, or deters me from rallying under our banner to serve the cause of women".<sup>149</sup> She has also described the history of the Arab woman as a "long and painful martyrdom."<sup>150</sup>

The image of the banner or the flag is conjured in powerful moments, Ziyada rallies under the banner of "the cause". Sabriya's body, clad in black, hanging from a tree is said to resemble a flag at half-mast. The academic Wa'el Rashid describes Ziyada's suicide as "lifting the white flag to announce that she is in a difficult psychological state"<sup>151</sup> (my translation).

Sabriya is fascinated by the literature to which she is introduced; she describes it as "a wonderful treasure trove".<sup>152</sup> She and Adil are particularly interested in the fight against the veil, which the pioneering generation of Arab women were involved in at the time. As stated previously, the full veil was mandatory for every Muslim woman in the early twentieth century. Early Arab women's rights' advocates were mostly concerned with eliminating it. Adil and Sabriya discuss the banning of the veil as well as the national struggle against the French, as though both issues are inherently linked. Adil

stresses to Sabriya that reading articles is not enough, he says, “You’ve got to carry on the important fight. It’s a woman’s fight as well.”<sup>153</sup>

Idilbi explicitly reveals Sabriya’s involvement in current affairs, which leads us to assume that Ziyada’s suicide may be a factor that affects her. After Ziyada’s brother and parents died, her family members put her in a mental hospital in order to cheat her out of her inheritance.<sup>154</sup> Sabriya’s end is very similar to Ziyada’s in that aspect since Sabriya’s suicide immediately follows her brothers’ attempt to rob her of her inheritance. Perhaps Idilbi’s inclusion of Ziyada’s works as a “treasure trove” within the narrative and the inclusion of suicide as a form of martyrdom (since Ziyada is known to have alluded to the Arab woman’s struggle as an on-going martyrdom) is her way of honouring Ziyada as a pioneer of the Arab woman’s movement whose life tragically ended in suicide.

David Lester’s study on suicide shows that there is a direct link between traumatic childhood experiences (such as punishment and loss) and societal influences and expectations on a person’s adult personality especially when it comes to depression and hopelessness. When an individual who has been exposed to such conditions experiences further difficulties associated with the social system, suicide becomes more probable, according to Lester.<sup>155</sup> This particular analysis of suicide can also be used to understand Sabriya’s. Sabriya says, “I am helpless, helpless.”<sup>156</sup> Sabriya’s favourite brother, Sami, is killed by the French which is a loss that she can never recover from. Her eldest brother and sometimes her father punish her violently, and although Idilbi shows a few examples of strong independent women, Sabriya is not one of them and she chooses not to fight after Adil is killed by her older brother. To Sabriya, the biggest oppressive forces in her life are her brother Raghif and the French; both of which robbed her of freedom and a loved one.

Salma views her aunt’s suicide as an act of defiance. In Islam, suicide is a sin, because it is believed that only God has power over life and death. Taking one’s own life means taking life out of God’s hands. As previously discussed in chapter one, Greater Syria is generally a religious and conservative region. Suicide is seen as a scandalous, embarrassing affair that cannot be recovered from. For other scandalous happenings related to family honour, the men of the family can take matters into their own hands by killing the female culprit. In the case of suicide, however, no measures can be taken for damage control. Sabriya’s suicide serves as the perfect punishment for her brothers because all the neighbourhood would now know that their ill-treatment of their virtuous



sister pushed her to commit the ultimate sin. Salma says: “She killed herself when all roads were blocked in her face. Her suicide was one of great protest against all the oppression that fenced her in.”<sup>157</sup>

Sabriya’s suicide causes quite a stir. Idilbi cleverly demonstrates the state of mind of religious people and their double standards. Just the evening before, Sabriya’s brothers discuss robbing Sabriya of her inheritance, although the fifth of the Great Seven Sins of Islam is to deprive an orphan of their inheritance. Salma’s mother disregards that, but focuses on the third of the Great Seven Sins which is taking a life, believing that Sabriya was condemned to damnation since the day of her birth. She says:

All things are in the hands of Allah and we must act in accordance with His wisdom. What has happened was decreed for your aunt from the day she was born. Ask Allah above to pardon her for the sin she has committed.<sup>158</sup>

Idilbi shows a debate between mother and daughter about different views in regards to religion. Questioning religion is a dangerous endeavour which writers cannot pursue without consequences. Idilbi tentatively brings up brazen questions without creating controversy by using both Salma, who has witnessed first-hand “the male’s self-centredness and cruelty towards even his close relations”,<sup>159</sup> and her mother, who has “simple faith”<sup>160</sup> which “attributed everything to Fate and to what was already ordained in heaven.”<sup>161</sup> Salma becomes enraged at her mother’s prayer and replies: “Allah forgive her? [...] wasn’t it He Who decreed the end for her from the day she was born? What is the crime she has committed for her which she has to be forgiven then?”<sup>162</sup> Salma’s mother’s reply to this outburst is simply “don’t be blasphemous”<sup>163</sup> which illustrates how the majority of people are unwilling to discuss the mere idea of there being a contradiction in religion.

Sabriya’s last day and her death open her niece’s eyes to issues regarding religion and patriarchy. Salma reflects on her mother’s character:

Mother was one of those people who live only for others, to satisfy them or to serve them. She did not live to satisfy herself or to provide comfort for herself. It pains me to think that most of the women of our country are like this.<sup>164</sup>

Sabriya’s mother is the same. In the harsh winter months, the family would stay in the warmer upstairs area. Sabriya says:

Mother suffered more than the rest of us because Father would not excuse her from making the *kubba* or the white vermicelli cakes, those winter dishes that we really cannot do without [...] So Mother spent most of her time in the kitchen or, you might say, in an ice-box.<sup>165</sup>

Similar to Zahra's mother, discussed earlier in this chapter, both Salma and Sabriya's mothers do nothing but domestic labour. Since domestic labour is not as respected as other types of labour as it does not bring any profit, women in male-dominated societies remain oppressed. Women, as Paul Smith puts it, "[occupy] an inferior position in social production,"<sup>166</sup> hence not worthy of respect in spite of all their hard work. Sabriya and Salma are aware of this in spite of everything being done to prevent them from questioning norms and values. After hearing the things being said about her aunt, Salma says:

how wretched are women in our country. They are not permitted either to learn or to earn. They are chained to custom and tradition. They are reluctant dependants and even then men are always complaining about them.<sup>167</sup>

It is typical of Arab women's writing to hold the male responsible for the heroine's oppression, Zeidan notes: "in many cases the heroine directs her hostility towards her father, the first male encountered in a woman's life and the embodiment of male authority and oppression."<sup>168</sup> Sabriya's hostility is directed at her eldest brother, Ragheb. He is the main obstacle who stands in the way of her freedom, her education, and her marriage. Idilbi's other male characters, however, unlike the male characters in *The Story of Zahra*, are not solely oppressive or guilty of adhering to patriarchal traditions. The youngest of Sabriya's brothers, Sami, and Sabriya's sweetheart Adil are examples of supportive and encouraging males.

Sami, a name which means "supreme", and Adil which means "fair" or "just" are the reasons that Sabriya is exposed to other models of women through literature. Sami fights battles with the rest of the family on Sabriya's behalf, while Sabriya remains silent. She writes in her diary, "I was listening to things being said by my family that concerned me, but I didn't dare say anything myself."<sup>169</sup>

Sabriya's eldest brother, Raghib (a name which means "one who wants" if directly translated) complains to Sabriya's father about her walking in the streets without a veil

covering her face. Sabriya's mother is immediately blamed for her negligence. Sabriya's brother Sami tries to speak up for her. He reminds his father that Sabriya, being merely ten years old, is too young to wear the veil. In Islam, the veil is only a requirement for girls who have reached puberty.<sup>170</sup> His father replies: "try and be like your older brother, concerned with the honour and dignity of your sister."<sup>171</sup> Sabriya's mother merely answers "as you wish, Sir" in her "customary submissiveness."<sup>172</sup>

In her book *About Chinese Women*, Julia Kristeva argues that women are currently given two choices that are on two far ends of the patriarchal spectrum; either aligning with the mother or the father. When a daughter chooses to align with the mother, this succeeds in maintaining women's silent and excluded role.<sup>173</sup> Although Kristeva's theory mainly focuses on China's patriarchal system, I believe it applies to Middle Eastern patriarchal systems as well. Sabriya, similar to Zahra, is naturally aligned with her mother since she is the only one among her siblings who is woken up early in the morning to prepare breakfast and do housework. Now, like her mother, Sabriya is to cover her face when she leaves the house. That particular moment has a tremendous impact on Sabriya. She says "From that moment I [realised] I was much weaker than all the forces that were ranged against me. I was being fettered by heavy chains."<sup>174</sup>

Sabriya says "a heavy black veil had descended over my face. I could see the way ahead through it only with great difficulty."<sup>175</sup> The predicament of the veil is as follows: according to Zeidan, a "frequent theme in these novels [written by Arab women between the 1950s and 1980s] is that the home is not the right place for a woman to reach her full psychological and intellectual potential".<sup>176</sup> In the days before the liberation from the veil<sup>177</sup>, it was both illegal and socially unacceptable for a Muslim woman to appear unveiled in the streets. For Christian women such as Ziyada, the fight for the emancipation of women, although difficult, was free of the burden of the veil, and so was their fiction. It was up to Muslim women to free themselves from the veil. However, not much of this struggle is represented in contemporary Greater Syrian or Egyptian fictional novels, and this is why Idilbi's novel is particularly important.

Idilbi brings to the surface many different issues that affected middle-class women in the early twentieth century. El Saadawi also elaborates on this point and explains that not all girls were forced by their fathers to cover their faces. She stresses that those who live in poverty cannot afford to think about traditions. El Saadawi explains that "A man who belongs to the working or poor peasant class is forced to buy a loaf of bread to feed

himself, rather than a veil with which to cover his wife or daughter's face." El Saadawi also explains that it mostly middle-class women, such as Sabriya, "who have known what it is to wear a veil or to be imprisoned in their homes."<sup>178</sup>

Zeidan's observation about the common theme of the Arab female protagonist needing to be outside the home to achieve character growth cannot apply to the veiled protagonist. Sabriya, unlike her Christian counterparts, is unable to reach a higher level of inspiration or freedom while outdoors, because she sees "with great difficulty" from behind her black veil. The experience of being outdoors is not merely about seeing clearly, it is about all the senses, including the sense of smell and touch. When the fresh air does not directly make contact with a face, and when the smell of fresh air does not reach the nostrils, is a woman really outside?

Sabriya views the veil as a "humiliation"<sup>179</sup> and a defeat. She can no longer play games at school nor walk to school with Sami and Adil. Sabriya explains: "It was totally unacceptable for a young veiled girl to walk out with young men even when they were close relations."<sup>180</sup> Muriel Dimen discusses alienation for women, arguing that a woman cannot escape alienation;

Every time a woman goes for a walk, her mind and her body are invaded by a social definition of her femininity that threatens to disconnect her from her own experience. This is the experience of domination.<sup>181</sup>

The purpose of the veil is to hide a woman's body from the male gaze as the female body is seen as a dangerous temptation to man. In Sabriya's case, she not yet a woman; nevertheless she is conscious of her femininity and views it as the reason for her forced seclusion. The veil, the means of her seclusion, serves to alienate Sabriya from her brother, to whom she has always felt equal. The veil also alienates her from classmates at school who were yet too young to wear it.

Idilbi shows that the veil is not imposed on Sabriya for Islamic reasons. Sabriya's eldest brother Raghieb complains, "Look, Father, in the whole of our neighbourhood is there a single girl as tall as Sabriya who goes out of the house unveiled?"<sup>182</sup> Sabriya senses that Raghieb's concern is not because he believes that it is in Sabriya's best interest to be veiled. He merely desires to exercise his power over his sister. After Sami tries to intervene his father says, "People who see her would suppose she was twelve or thirteen years old."<sup>183</sup> This clearly indicates that Sabriya's father is more concerned with society's

opinion of him as a father when his daughter ventures into town unveiled, rather than with God's wrath. However, if one was to follow true Islamic tradition, veiling is only compulsory once a girl reaches puberty.

Once Sabriya's fate is decided, Raghīb smiles "in triumph"<sup>184</sup> which indicates that his intentions for approaching his father are to do with wanting to humiliate Sabriya rather than look after her honour. Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* discusses the "paradox" of the veil. She argues that even when the veil is chosen freely by a female, it implies submission as a matter of course to God; however in reality the submission is to men.<sup>185</sup> Sabriya demonstrates Mahmood's argument; although she does not freely choose to wear the veil, she submits to it. Her submission is not because of her (or her family's) submission to God, but rather to society's expectations; a society that is governed by men, who, in turn, are governed by French colonialism.

In 1919, Damascus witnessed the first women's demonstration against the French occupation.<sup>186</sup> Idilbi writes about this event as Sabriya's first act of defiance to her parents' expectations. It is Adil who encourages Sabriya to join this demonstration. As mentioned previously in this chapter, it is here that Sabriya finds her voice. During the demonstration, Sabriya stands in a convertible with other women "wearing modest black headscarves and thick veils lowered over [their] faces".<sup>187</sup> This powerful image, although portrayed in a work of fiction, is based on accurate historical facts. The Arab Muslim woman veiled in black finds her voice. The men of the demonstration echo the women's slogans. Later, Adil tells Sabriya, "Your voice could be heard above everybody else's."<sup>188</sup>

Again, here we are confronted with the black veil as a banner of defiance, only this time against colonialism. Although Mahmood advocates that the veil is a symbol of submission, and Fatima Mernissi views the woman wearing the veil as invisibly existing in the man's world<sup>189</sup>, Suha Sabbagh has a different perspective. She says, "in some cases the *hijab* has become a symbol of defiance against Western policies in the region."<sup>190</sup> The women who stood in protest against colonialism used their veils as an empowering tool to display their national identity to the occupying foreign powers.

Sabbagh discusses colonialism in the Arab world and its effect on women in particular:

Women are doubly oppressed during periods of [colonisation]: they are oppressed by the system as a whole, and each woman is also the first victim of her husband when the latter is under excessive stress due to political factors. Periods of [decolonisation] are also the moment when Arab women emerge into the political sphere and assume leadership roles outside the home.<sup>191</sup>

This clearly applies to Sabriya; the decolonisation process temporarily empowers her, and Sabriya knows leadership for the first time in her life. However, that one demonstration that Sabriya participates in is only the beginning of the decolonising process; Sabriya suffers from the violence that ensues as an aftermath of her actions.

Edward Said also discusses decolonisation. He argues:

The violence of [decolonisation] is no more than an explicit fulfilment of the violence that lurks within colonialism, and instead of the natives being the object of colonial force, they wield it back *against* colonialism, as subjects reacting with pent-up violence to their own former passivity.<sup>192</sup>

Sabbagh and Said's arguments help shed some light on Sabriya's behaviour during the demonstration. Although formerly passive, Sabriya finds an opportunity during the process of decolonisation to react, using her "pent-up" frustration at her "former passivity" to find a voice against colonialism. Her standing in defiance boldly against the bigger oppressor is an indication that Sabriya, and the other women standing with her, are finally ready to stand against the patriarchal oppressiveness of their society and families.

Sabriya's strength comes from different sources, the first being Adil and her brother Sami's encouragement. Sami's death at the hands of the French during Syria's fight for freedom gives Sabriya a strong motive for wanting to defeat colonialism. Sabriya's teachers at her college also play a role in motivating her. She says they "kindled the spirit of our national feeling without worrying about the French or their spies."<sup>193</sup> The fearlessness of her teachers rubs off on Sabriya. That, coupled with the bravery of the other women standing with her, helps her discard of any feelings of weakness. She declares: "I had absolutely no sense of fear. Indeed I felt capable of facing anyone and defying the world."<sup>194</sup> This is the one point in the novel where Sabriya and her fellow demonstrators are not alienated. They all stand together in solidarity and overcome their alienation. By facing the powers that serve to alienate them as a people, women stand with their male counterparts rather than against them, in equality. By reinforcing their claim on their homeland, they overcome their homelessness.

Unfortunately, this moment, though heavily documented in Sabriya's diary, is fleeting. After the demonstration, her brother sees her walking with Adil. When she returns home, she says her father's "blows came one after the other." Sabriya, however, stands "stolidly before him, challenging him to strike further."<sup>195</sup> He bans her from going to college or going to any more demonstrations. Her brother Raghib further angers her father by suggesting that Sabriya and Adil have been together. Sabriya's father summons the local midwife to conduct a virginity test on Sabriya who finds her still "intact."<sup>196</sup> Sabriya, having been only hours before at a peak moment in her life where she had spent a day of empowerment and independence, is now in the lowest point of her life. She says that her father has "been reassured of the fine honour of the family that lay concealed between my thighs—my thighs, me, alone of all the family."<sup>197</sup> Sabriya is once again alienated and is reminded in the most degrading way of her disadvantage as the only female in the family, being the only holder to the key of the family's honour. "Degradation and misery oozed out of every pore of my skin,"<sup>198</sup> and that is the bitter aftertaste of her actions, which she had originally thought would be liberating to not only herself and other women, but to all Syrians under French occupation. Although these events were narrated in the 80s, one cannot help but compare them to the demonstrations that occurred in 2011 in Tahrir Square in Egypt when many of the women who had participated in anti-governmental demonstrations were forced to undergo virginity tests. At times when women attempt to break the patriarchal traditions, men such as Raghib and men in the Egyptian army need to forcefully remind women that they carry the honours of their families "between [their] thighs" as a form of degradation.

After this event, Raghib kills Adil, and Sabriya declares to her diary that her life is over. She spends the remainder of her life looking after her invalid parents. Sabriya's alienation turns into anomie. Instead of continuing in fighting for her country during the decolonisation process, and of trying to fight with other women against patriarchy, Sabriya ends her life.

Theodor Adorno famously said "it is part of morality not to be at home in one's home."<sup>199</sup> Both Sabriya and Zahra are not at home while at home. Their alienation in their own homes from their families results in their tragic deaths. Again, we are confronted with the tragic ending, typical of Arab women's writing. Sabriya says: "The tragedy is that they are not aware that they are imprisoning me".<sup>200</sup> The true tragedy is that neither Zahra nor Sabriya could break out of this family-inflicted prison and live a life of freedom.

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- 180 Ibid.

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- 182 Idilbi, p. 55.
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- 185 Mahmood, Saba, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (New Jersey, NJ: Princeton University Press 2005).
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- 191 Ibid.
- 192 Said, (2002) p. 449.
- 193 Idilbi, p. 132.
- 194 Ibid., p. 164.
- 195 Ibid., p. 167.
- 196 Ibid., p. 71.
- 197 Ibid., p. 171.
- 198 Ibid., p. 172.
- 199 Theodor Adorno, "The Essay as Form", *New German Critique*, trans. by Bob Hullot- Kentor and Fredric Will, 32 (1984) 151-71. p. 170
- 200 Idilbi, p. 46.

*The magic carpet was weeping, Suzanne stroked her soft fabric.*

*The Sphinx was also moved, "it never occurred to me that the occupier of a country could be likened to the occupier of a home."*

*"Can I go home now? You're being very cruel, keeping me and the magic carpet here in this damp burnt library against our will.*

*The magic carpet nodded.*

*"Enough!" roared the Sphinx, "I wish to hear more!"*

*"Fine!" shouted Suzanne, "but I'm only obliging you because I want these women's stories to be among these shelves, not because you scare me!"*

*The Sphinx roared, but neither Suzanne nor the carpet were bothered by his roars anymore.*

*He stopped roaring and said, "Just continue, will you?"*

*"Well," began Suzanne, "have you ever noticed what the beaches of Alexandria are like? Women swimming in the water are veiled most of the time..."*

## V

### The Great Taboo

#### Sexuality in *Women of Sand and Myrrh*

According to Susan R. Bordo, “The body—what we eat, how we dress, the daily rituals through which we attend to the body—is a medium of culture.”<sup>1</sup> Hanan al-Shaykh demonstrates how the body is a medium of culture in her novel *Women of Sand and Myrrh* (1989), which examines in detail how women in some Arab societies are forced to abide by a strict dress-code and lifestyle. The novel illustrates how these women finally rebel, each in her own way, using their bodies as a medium to break away from the culture in which they live in, and constructing a new culture with norms and practices which are distinctive to women’s culture.

Similar to other contemporary Greater Syrian novels that have a strong undercurrent of war and diaspora, *Women of Sand and Myrrh* has the theme of displacement and searching. Al- Shaykh, herself Lebanese and heavily affected by the numerous conflicts in the Middle East, explores out-of-place-ness and its effects on sexuality. The novel tells the stories of women from different countries, generations, and walks of life: Suha (Lebanese), Nur and Tamr (desert locals), Taj (Turkish), and Suzanne (American), but whose circumstances bring them to the same country. In this chapter I will examine sexuality in this novel in depth.

The rotating first person narrative begins with Suha, a twenty-five year old woman who, like Aneesa in *Dreams of Water* and Nadia in *A Woman of Five Seasons*, leaves her country because of war. Like Nadia, she flees to an oil-rich desert country, where there is plenty of work for men, but not much to be done by women except domestic chores. On a superficial level, the culture of the females living in this nameless desert is simple; the following passage is Suha’s description of it:

Everyday-life existed in the desert, but it was the daily routine of housewives and didn’t go beyond the smell of coriander, the neighbour who only half-opened her door because she had wax on her thighs, fortune-telling in coffee grounds, food on the stove, and gossip and knitting and babies’ nappies.<sup>2</sup>

For the outsider looking in, the cooking, the waxing, the fortune-telling, all these seemingly trivial elements are particularly related to the male construction of the female. This has become these women's culture because the males in the society have banned women's participation in the outside day to day life. Fatima Mernissi explains that "segregation of space and control over the visibility of women were forms of patriarchal control which emphasised the need to channel and contain women's sexual power."<sup>3</sup> Al-Shaykh, however, deconstructs this "segregation of space and control over the visibility of women" and reconstructs a female empowered, sexually charged culture. Although at first glance it seems that all women in this culture cater for the pleasure and comfort of the men around them, Suha is eventually surprised to find that it is not the case.

Suha is the link between the characters of *Women of Sand and Myrrh*. Through the characters' exposure to other women's stories the reader witnesses women's struggle for empowerment. Unfortunately, these secondary female characters are punished for their efforts one way or another. Mostly through Nur, Suha and Tamr, the reader gets a glimpse of some form of emancipation from the boundaries set by men. As is the general case in the novels of women in Greater Syria and Egypt, attempts to become empowered always come at a price.

Suha's monotonous life changes when she meets Nur, a rich local. The two women strike up a friendship in spite of them being exact opposites. Suha is educated and level-headed, while Nur is uneducated and impulsive. Like Suha, she is married to a husband she hardly ever sees. Boredom and frustration with their male-dominated surroundings bring the two closer together. Nur begins bringing men to Suha's house and using Suha and her husband Bassam's bedroom. In spite of Nur's use of Suha's bed-sheets making Suha feel uneasy, she does not try to put an end to it. Suha reflects:

Would anyone passing by this house believe that in one of its rooms there was a woman in bed with a man who wasn't her husband? [...] I thought to myself how human beings continually manage to overcome their circumstances, thinking up the strangest ways to give substance to their desires.<sup>4</sup>

Suha's reflections indicate that in spite of the discomfort it causes her, there is a thrill in the act of utter defiance. Suha and Nur defy all norms and standards. By opening the doors of her house to strange men, Suha breaks the barriers of segregation. By opening

her bedroom door to strange men, Suha aids Nur in giving “substance” to her desires of fulfilling her sexual fantasies.

Female solidarity is amplified in the case of Nur and Suha as neither of them has anyone else to depend on. Both are emotionally abandoned by their husbands, and both suffer from strict patriarchal laws that are inflicted on the female members of the society. Although the reader is not told the name of the desert country, the strict laws of segregation are explained. It is illegal for women to be employed, women must wear black *abayas* (long shapeless cloaks) and veils, women are not allowed to drive, and are not allowed to venture into the streets unchaperoned. According to Mernissi, “strict space boundaries divide Muslim society into two subuniverses: the universe of men (the *umma*, the world of religion and power) and the universe of women, the domestic world of sexuality and family.”<sup>5</sup> In this sub-universe that men create, women have to recreate and reinvent themselves in order to fulfil their sexual and emotional needs.

The main purpose for this complete male and female split in society is the protection of the male from committing sins that it is believed females may entice him to commit. A *hadith* (a saying of the Prophet Muhammad) states:

When the woman comes towards you, it is Satan who is approaching you.  
When one of you sees a woman and he feels attracted to her, he should  
hurry to his wife. With her, it would be the same as with the other one.<sup>6</sup>

My own interpretation of this *hadith*, which addresses the Muslim man, is that women who are out in public (male) spaces are likened to the devil. Satan in Islamic teachings was an Angel of fire who refused to bow to Adam, a mere man created from mud. A woman out in male spaces is therefore an evil outcast who refuses to bow to man. Satan was then cast away from heaven (like woman is cast away from public spaces) and stripped of his Angel status and dubbed as a devil. Satan only returned to heaven through manipulating Adam's thoughts and tempting him to taste the forbidden fruit.<sup>7</sup>

Women who are out in public spaces cause a threat, and this *hadith* urges men who are confronted by a woman out in the open to go home to their wives. Rather than fornicating with this woman who has ventured into public space, the man is encouraged to go to his wife. “With her, it would be the same as with the other one” indicates that all women are the same, regardless of who (or where) they are. One last suggestion is that women are available for male sexual satisfaction; otherwise, it would have been taken



into account that the woman who is outside her home may not wish to engage in sexual intercourse with a random man that she has passed on the street.

Islamic scholar Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi disagrees with Mernissi's critique of segregated societies. "The Islamic view forbids not only the acts which infringe upon the rights of others", he argues, "but also those which infringe upon the rights of the person's own body".<sup>8</sup> His statement illustrates that segregation is in everybody's best interest since individuals faced with temptation may not be able to fight temptation, causing them to violate their own bodies. Outside control is imposed over one's own body, removing responsibility over one's own actions. The message here is that the body poses a danger to the individual. This is how the segregation between the sexes is not only justified but encouraged.

Mernissi explains how this complete separation is further aided by the veil which permits females to venture through public spaces without losing the security of seclusion.<sup>9</sup> It is also meant to shield "the *umma*" from the havoc of "the *fitna*," or forbidden sexual behaviours, that could be released if women's sexuality were permitted to run unrestrained.<sup>10</sup> Al-Shaykh succeeds in demonstrating that in spite of the tight control, and of keeping women locked up indoors, nothing can stop women's sexuality from being unleashed. If anything, the segregation helps fuel it. I am not agreeing with the general conception of women's sexuality as uncontrollable. I am suggesting, as Al-Shaykh is, that all measures taken to keep women's virtue in check will eventually fail, since virtue is a social construction that imposes impossible demands on women in the Arab region.

An example of this "unleashing" of woman's sexuality is illustrated in the development of Nur and Suha's relationship. During one of Nur's frequent sobbing fits, Suha puts her arms around her in an attempt to console her:

I ignored the butterfly fluttering and stayed quite still. I felt a moist warmth, then a light-headedness that made me tremble and still I didn't move. Nur's face was still pressed against me. Suddenly the warmth of her breathing made my heart pound and a feeling surged through me that scared me. [...] I said to myself 'Nur's kissing me' and I didn't think as I did in real life 'A kiss is between a man and a woman', but just wanted more.<sup>11</sup>

Suha, scared of her own sexual arousal by another woman, experiences a split between mind and body. Her mind is “scared” while her body “wanted more” despite trying to “ignore” her feelings. Muriel Dimen argues that “sexual experience entails loss of self-other boundaries,”<sup>12</sup> however, Suha’s sexual experience with Nur creates a boundary between herself and her own body, her body in effect becoming the Other. She says: “I wanted to be separate from my body and give it orders”.<sup>13</sup> Suha further separates herself from her body by saying “I would never feel quite the same liking for [my legs] as I had done before, or look after them so carefully”<sup>14</sup> because her legs refuse to walk away, or perhaps because Nur had stroked them, as we are told that Suha’s skirt was pulled all the way up.

The confusion that Suha experiences after this erotic encounter is understandable; she not only cheats on her husband, but also realises that she is sexually attracted to another woman. The majority of heterosexuals in Greater Syria and Egypt, where Islam is dominant, view homosexuality as the greatest sin imaginable in spite of it not being one of the Great Seven Sins in Islam.<sup>15</sup> Homosexuality, like premarital sex, is considered a horrible crime by many individuals in the region, both Christian and Muslim; I believe that it is more for social reasons rather than religious ones.

Traditionally, homosexual (men in particular) are hunted and punished. Islam is generally blamed for this, however, as Yusuf al-Hallaj explains, “Sufism, a mystical branch of Islam, has a history of tolerance of homosexuality.”<sup>16</sup> Joseph Massad also documents that Islamic history has chapters about homosexual leaders such as the caliph al Amin who “used to prefer youthful boys.”<sup>17</sup>

The Quran itself is vague about homosexuality. The tribes known for homosexual practices are the tribes of Sodom and Gomorrah, who are also known as zoophiles.<sup>18</sup> In the Quranic verses, two angels come to the messenger Lot, asking him to warn his townspeople to stop their abominations. The townspeople; however, blame Lot for having two handsome men as guests without “sharing” them. Lot offers his two daughters to them instead, but the townsmen insist that they want to rape the two unknown guests. This angers God, which leads to the complete demolition of the town.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, it can be tentatively argued by liberal Muslims who look at reinterpreting the Quranic scripts that the punishment was for the practice of zoophilia as well as attempted rape rather than

practising same-sex sexual activity. Aleardo Zanghellini argues that the punishment was neither for homosexuality nor rape but for the practice of anal sex.<sup>20</sup>

Lesbianism in particular can be viewed more tolerably in Greater Syria, especially by more liberal Muslims. Whether lesbianism is an unforgivable sin or not depends on the different interpretations of the religion regarding whether female masturbation is permissible or not in Islam. Most Islamic sects ban masturbation except in the case of extreme arousal when fear of committing adultery is the cause of self-gratification. Sex between two women is not regarded as *zina* (sex out of wedlock) as there is no penile penetration nor ejaculation. As one of Al-Shaykh's character's exclaims, "A girl with another girl is like two hands."<sup>21</sup> The woman goes on to demonstrate by pressing her "palms together with all the fingers touching, and the thumbs, so that the two hands became one,"<sup>22</sup> indicating that no insemination occurs. Another example is when Nur's mother threatens to get Suha and her family deported if Suha does not continue the relationship with Nur. Suha's answer is "What Nur and I do together is forbidden. We have an illicit relationship."<sup>23</sup> Nur's mother looks uncomfortable and clears her throat. She replies: "That's wrong, my daughter. Wrong. But adultery with a man is worse."<sup>24</sup>

Al-Shaykh, whose sexually explicit novels are banned from many Arab countries, illustrates a point that is well known, but not spoken of. Two women having sexual affairs is "wrong" and "unnatural", but a man and a woman having sexual relations out of wedlock is "more wrong" hence lesbianism is seen as the lesser of two evils. Al-Shaykh's *Women of Sand and Myrrh* is the first novel written by a woman in the region of Greater Syria and Egypt to discuss lesbian love so openly, although previous books by El Saadawi vaguely touch upon the topic. A subtle example by El Saadawi's is Fridaus' infatuation with her teacher in *Woman at Point Zero*. Since Al-Shaykh's novel, there have been films by Arab women that also have lesbian love, such as the Lebanese film *Caramel* (2007), the short Jordanian film *Grey* (2007) and an Egyptian film called *Bidoon Raqaba—Without Supervision* (2009). None, however, delve into lesbianism as profoundly and explicitly as Al-Shaykh's 80s novel does. Although written three decades ago, it remains the only blunt and explicit lesbian narrative to date.

The novel demonstrates how a woman finds solace, comfort, and empathy in another woman's arms in the cruel patriarchal society where women's lives within closed spaces are similar to the barren emptiness of the deserts in which the novel is set. Although Nur

offers Suha what her husband cannot, Suha continues trying to deny her feelings for Nur because they make her question herself. To console herself, Suha says “I’m normal”<sup>25</sup> and forces herself to remember previous sexual encounters with men. Suha tells herself: “I’m not bent like Sahar, although I’ve laughed and joked and exchanged comments and gestures about men with other girls like me.”<sup>26</sup> “Bent” is a word that carries negative connotations and double meanings. Bent could mean “morally crooked” “dishonest” “corrupt” as well as “homosexual.” One cannot help but assume that Suha views these words as synonymous.

Suha’s immediate reaction is to separate herself from her body because that means that she falls victim to her dangerous body which succumbs to fulfilling a “forbidden” sexual desire. So it is her body that is to blame and not her. Her need to separate her mind and body is a psychological coping mechanism. Her mind is telling her that she needs to be heterosexual and married to a man. Her body and her emotions, however, respond to another woman in a way they do not to a man. Suha is yet unable to acknowledge that it is her mind as well as her body that is attracted to Nur, and so she, similar to Salma in Faqir’s novel *My Name Is Salma*, forms a split in herself. Suha is a mother, and living openly as a lesbian in the Arab world would mean losing her child and family, as well as being subject to homophobic violence. Homosexuality could be tolerated only if it remains unseen; nevertheless, once it is exposed, it is viewed with hostility in the Arab world, and punishment becomes imminent. The kind of punishment could vary from losing her family and social standing to being stoned to death, depending on the circumstances. Suha’s fear of the consequences forces her to pretend to be heterosexual.

Adrienne Rich explains that it cannot “be assumed that women [...] who married and stayed married, yet dwelt in a profoundly female emotional and passional world, ‘preferred’ or ‘chose’ heterosexuality.”<sup>27</sup> This statement sheds some further light on Nur’s motives to marry Samer, as well as Suha’s motive to stay married to Basem. Another explanation provided by Rich is that “Women have married because it was necessary, in order to survive economically, [and] in order to have children.”<sup>28</sup> Suha finds herself in this situation, not choosing heterosexuality, but rather trapped in it.

Suha’s intimacy with her husband is restricted. Suha does not fully realise it until she starts sharing intimate moments with Nur. Sitting together at the swimming pool or at beautiful gardens Suha feels that she and Nur are able to participate in the female world as

equals, they can go places together and do things together. She expresses her frustration in regards to her marriage in the following passage:

My relationship with Basem only existed inside the four walls of the house now; it didn't even extend to the garden or the car or the street. I rarely sat next to him in the front seat of the car. I didn't walk along with him in the street or go to the shops with him. We didn't lie together beside the pool and I didn't sit with him even on the back seat on the way to the airport; [...] our conversations were brief, restricted to matters connected with everyday life.<sup>29</sup>

Nur, however, provides Suha with everything her husband does not.

Basem and Suha's life as a couple suffered from the strict segregation that the country they escaped to enforced on its inhabitants. Suha's suffering has many layers, the first, leaving her family and friends in war-torn Lebanon, which is in itself a traumatising experience. However, the culture-shock she suffers in the desert, coupled with the change in her relationship with her husband, causes Suha emotional alienation and sexual frustration. The following passage shows the extent of estrangement between Suha and her own body while in bed with her husband:

However much I tried to relax I felt conscious of every noise outside and every movement in the bed, and the climax of our lovemaking was lost to me [...] I'd found out for the first time that I wasn't in control of my body and that only my feelings could make it move, but they wouldn't forget their dissatisfaction and were rebelling.<sup>30</sup>

Suha, finally realises that her mind and body are inherently linked, and that her body responds to what she is feeling rather than to what she is thinking. Her dissatisfaction with her husband is due to his emotional negligence and his constant absence. Through bringing her to a country where she is not treated as an equal, but viewed as a dangerous sexual threat that must be contained in black garments and thick walls, Basem demonstrates his lack of sympathy for his wife. His coldness towards the difficulties she faces through this isolation cools her feelings towards him, especially after her experience with Nur. Suha eventually musters up the courage to kiss Nur again, after she realises that she had been attracted to Nur all along. When Nur used to use Suha's bed with men, Suha would touch the pillow to smell "Nur's smell"<sup>31</sup> and hear Nur's laugh.

Nur's pursuit of Suha is explained by Mernissi. She argues that in countries "in which heterosexual encounter is the focus of so many restrictions, and consequently of so much attention, seduction becomes a structural component of human relations in general, whether between individuals of the same sex or between men and women."<sup>32</sup> Al-Shaykh demonstrates this, especially in Nur, who enjoys being a seductress. For example, when she sees Samer for the first time, she decides that she must marry him and she says she "pursued him on the telephone"<sup>33</sup> till they are finally wed.

Nur illustrates her defiance of the patriarchy of her society; although she cannot break the law openly, for fear of being flogged or imprisoned, she does find ways and means of getting what she desires. She has one reason for getting married: freedom. Her father sends her to college in Cairo. Nur experiences freedom for the first time, and says, "Just walking down the street on my own two feet was freedom",<sup>34</sup> and she also loves that in Cairo she can walk without an *abaya*. After she returns from Egypt she decides that she needs to get married in spite of her being sexually attracted to women: "I wanted to have a husband and a wedding and then I would become my own mistress."<sup>35</sup>

According to Julia Penelope, a lesbian in a heteropatriarchy is: "one who *resists efforts to make her into 'a woman'; one who defies the male descriptions and prescriptions that would limit her possibilities; one who refuses the very foundations of heteropatriarchal reality* (original italics)".<sup>36</sup> This description suits Nur perfectly. Nur does not marry for love or romance or heterosexuality, she marries because, for a woman living in a society completely dominated by men, little can be done without being married. Marriage is the perfect cover. Nur says "I thought of marriage as a way of being free and gaining access to others."<sup>37</sup> Nur marries because she desires sexual promiscuity, which is very un-womanly by Arab standards. El-Saadawi explains that a young girl is programmed to be "an asexual being"<sup>38</sup> yet at the same time programmed to be "an instrument of sex and a mere body which should be adorned and made beautiful so as to attract men and arouse their desire".<sup>39</sup>

In contrast, Nur and Suha are aware of their bodies and their sexual needs. Both women experiment with their bodies, Nur more boldly, as she also experiments with "phone sex" and with both men and women. Suha is aware of her body's needs, but is more afraid of succumbing to her desire towards Nur. Once she does delve into a love affair with Nur, her feelings about her sexual orientation remain confused. Suha's views

about sex and sexuality are liberal in comparison to the other characters in the novel, such as Tamr and Taj, to whom sex with their husbands is a painfully necessary chore. Suha, who initially enjoys sexual encounters with her husband and with other men before him, has trouble accepting her feelings for Nur. Nur, however, is the only character who is completely comfortable with her own body and with her sexuality, in spite of her being the product of an overwhelmingly strict heterosexual society. Her sexual interest in women as well as men is a rejection of all that the patriarchy in this unnamed Arab desert country attempts to demolish, especially in women.

Nur does the opposite of what her society, her husband and her family expect of her. She sleeps all day and stays up with friends all night. She goes abroad without her husband and has extra-marital affairs with foreign men; behaviour which is generally very male in an Arab context. She rejects daily duties that Suha mentions are expected of a woman in the desert, such as visiting neighbours and family members. When Nur gets pregnant, her husband tries to convince her that she would become “fulfilled as a woman.”<sup>40</sup> However, Nur does not adhere to what is “expected” of a woman and asks for an abortion, but is not permitted to have one. When the baby is born, Nur refuses to pick her up or to nurse her. She feels jealous of her friends who still enjoy the flamboyant lifestyle that Nur herself loves so much. Again, she rejects what womanhood and motherhood mean by attempting to “empty”<sup>41</sup> her breasts of milk without nursing her child. She resists all what is stereotypically associated with femininity except what actually brings her pleasure.

Nur discovers that her husband Samer has a male lover. Nur explains matter-of-factly that “the ones who preferred their own sex married and had children for the sake of society”.<sup>42</sup> Nur’s aloof explanation demonstrates that it is common for both men and women to enjoy same sex relationships, as long as it is hidden “for the sake of society.”<sup>43</sup> As mentioned previously, marriage is the perfect cover, and once under the marriage umbrella, a new hidden culture of sexual freedom is constructed among the homosexual population. Although a considerable number of citizens in this society are homosexual, and half of the society is of course, women, it is the men with chauvinistic tendencies who are in power. The vulnerable members of this society get punished for crimes that are easily committed by the un-punishable half of the society.

Nur takes advantage of the customs enforced by the un-punishable half of society. She goes out into the street dressed as a man. She says, “I confronted myself in the mirror

in men's clothes".<sup>44</sup> Confronting her image as a man conjures an image of duality. By confronting an opposing self, it is as though Nur wrestles with the image of herself as a man. She resents that she needs to look like a man in order to move in open spaces, while succumbing to the necessity of it. Nur generally experiences no fear or guilt while opposing the norms and traditions inflicted on her by her society; however, all her behaviours are carefully concealed from the public gaze, hidden behind closed walls and the rigid rules of segregation. This time, she is more vulnerable because she is in a position where she is no longer herself. By cross-dressing, she is assuming the identity of a man, and is in more danger of being exposed. Suffering from unrequited love, Nur tries to meet Suha in the middle of the night. She says:

I quickened my pace along the street that I'd never been in before on foot even in the daytime, and pulled the headcloth tight around my face, ready to talk in a deep voice if I met anyone. With every hurried step I took my dislike of Suha grew. What if I was discovered now? I'd be in disgrace and people would think I was meeting a man.<sup>45</sup>

Nur's dislike towards Suha for being the reason that she has to dress like a man and go out into public unprotected space is similar to Suha's dislike for her own legs after her sexual encounter with Nur. Both women target the blame for their frustration on other women (or female body part, in Suha's case) rather than acknowledge the genuine causes for this frustration which are the male dominated laws and customs that surround them.

Nur refuses to adhere to the restrictive rules, and continues to find ways and means to live her life as she wants it rather than how society and traditions dictate, which is in itself blameless. However, her everyday defiance does nothing to advance woman's situation in general. Nur continues to make statements that are imperative for the emancipation of the women of her region, but nobody is aware of these statements. Therefore, Nur's conduct is counterproductive.

Tamr, one of the narrators, takes a stand like Nur. Her stance, however, makes an essential contribution to improve conditions for women in the nameless desert country. Tamr is Suha's student at an institute for women. She struggles with what Joseph Massad refers to as "civilization and primitivism"<sup>46</sup> meaning the assumption that traditions from London are civilised and traditions from the desert are primitive. After a visit to London, Tamr decides to learn how to read and write. Her brother forbids it, so she goes on a hunger strike until he finally agrees. Tamr, although impressed by what she sees in



London and frustrated by the difficulties she faces in the desert, is surprised at Suha's suggestion that she should leave the desert and go back to London. She replies, "What would I do in London? A person away from his country and his nearest and dearest isn't worth a stick of incense."<sup>47</sup>

As previously mentioned, Tamr is forced to marry as a pre-teen. After having her son, she runs away from her husband and he divorces her. Later she is forced to marry again, a Sheikh this time, who also divorces her a month after they are married, which causes a huge scandal that leaves Tamr unphased. This indifference that Tamr assumes is what is unconventional about her. She differs to Suha and Nur by showing a strength that neither Nur nor Suha do. By running away from her first husband's home, Tamr is openly defying the customs of society, unlike Suha and Nur, who defy society, albeit secretly.

Tamr reconstructs "woman" in her patriarchal society. Tamr opposes the system by going on hunger strikes and embarrassing the men around her through challenging the rules of segregation openly. She goes by herself to the bank, not letting a man conduct business on her behalf, but following the necessary procedures herself. Although Tamr's heart "was knocking against [her] chest",<sup>48</sup> she walks into the male-dominated arena. She says:

On that occasion I'd known what I was doing was wrong; I was probably the first woman to cross its threshold, but women went into shops and stores and bought things. Who was going to stop me?<sup>49</sup>

Tamr's visit to the bank makes a statement. It is not illegal for women to go into a bank; however, women generally stay in cars and let men handle their business. Tamr demonstrates that a woman can venture into a public space legally by herself without relying on a man to assist her (given that a man drives her there, since in this unnamed desert, it is illegal for a woman to drive). Unfortunately, Tamr herself believes that what she is doing is "wrong" although it is her legal right to enter the building. Tamr's sense of right and wrong is distorted because of the environment which surrounds her. Even something that is within her right is "wrong" not only because of the law, or a certain interpretation of religion, but because others perceive it as "wrong", and so it has become "wrong".

In spite of Tamr's misgivings about venturing into uncharted territory for women, she goes to another male-only space. To obtain a permit for her hair and beauty salon and

her dressmaking shop, Tamr enters a government building. Her narration of this event is similar to the one about the bank. Tentative, with her feelings wavering, she says:

Silence hung over the place, and when I approached an official sitting at a table he appeared tongue-tied and waved me over to another table. From there I was passed from one person to another, and I realized that by coming into a government building I had made another big mistake. But it wasn't forbidden, and why should it be? The black cover was on my face, the black wrap around me decorously hiding my charms.<sup>50</sup>

Tamr's presence in the government building causes confusion among the workers, although it is not forbidden for a woman to enter it. Tamr clearly does not break the law, as her body and face are carefully concealed behind the black garments. The men, unable to deal with having a woman in their midst, are tongue-tied and cannot conduct their work. Tamr confronts men as a woman in their own territory in broad daylight, unlike Nur who resorts to cross-dressing to sneak out at night. While Nur tries to become a man in a man's world, Tamr remains a woman and demands to be acknowledged in a man's world. Al-Shaykh shows the different ways of dealing with the issue of the extreme segregation between the sexes through Nur, Suha and Tamr. All three women are mothers, and other than living in a society that oppresses women, they do not have much else in common. Out of the three, Tamr's ways of coping are the most assertive.

Tamr opens her own shop, after much opposition from her family, and becomes a successful businesswoman in a country where there is very little employment for women. In spite of facing many obstacles, Tamr chips away at the flawed system, demanding to be acknowledged as a full citizen. Similar to other Arab heroines, however, Tamr's empowerment comes at a price; celibacy. She falls under the category of Arab women who are described by El Saadawi as being "moulded" by their families into an "asexual being". While married, Tamr knows that it is her duty to endure intercourse with her husband. Her sexual encounters with her second husband are described with repulsion:

He smelt strongly of drink and I would remind myself that I just had to bear it for a little while; soon he would leave me. Sometimes he would fall soundly asleep when he'd barely climbed on top of me. This delighted me and I longed for it to happen every time.<sup>51</sup>

Tamr's delight at her husband's falling asleep before ejaculation indicates that sex, to her, is no more than a chore. She and her husband have no relationship outside the bedroom, there is no affection or friendship between them and Tamr is merely a sexual object. Unlike Suha and Nur, whose frustration with their husbands lead them to explore and find another option to fulfil them on both physical and emotional levels, Tamr never explores her sexuality and shows no desire to do so.

In Al-Shaykh's sexually-charged novel, Tamr stands out with her asexuality. The two Filipino employees at her workshop are not allowed to leave the shop unescorted by Tamr. Tamr wonders: "why they were so annoyed at not going out. How could I let them go out when the men here were like traps set ready for them?"<sup>52</sup> It never occurs to Tamr that perhaps these Filipino women would enjoy some attention from men, or that they would want to have sexual relations. To Tamr, sex is a negative experience. As a pre-teen, Tamr is shocked into having sex with her new husband by her family locking her in a bedroom with him. She refuses for several nights, but eventually she is persuaded by her aunt into giving in. Her aunt implies severe punishment (by reminding her of a girl who was hung on a palm tree) if Tamr does not consummate her marriage, so out of fear, Tamr complies.

To Tamr, sex is punishment. A woman is punished if she commits premarital sex; similarly, a woman is punished for abstaining from sexual intercourse with her husband. Sex itself is a painful, even degrading experience where the woman is just a tool for her husband's pleasure. These notions of sex thwart Tamr's sexuality. Therefore, in one sense, her family "moulds" her into an "asexual being." Tamr's own negative experiences with sex prevent her from healthily exploring her sexuality, and understanding other women's sexual needs. I will examine Tamr's traumatic sexual experiences in more detail later on in this chapter.

In her essay "the Origin of the Family," Kathleen Gough discusses eight forms of male power which, as Adrienne Rich puts it, are used to "enforce heterosexuality"<sup>53</sup> in women. All eight apply to the traditions of the unnamed desert country Al-Shaykh created as a setting for her novel. I shall examine Gough's theories and apply them to the characters and the plot of *Women of Sand and Myrrh* which can also be applied generally to a lesser extent to modern Greater Syria and Egypt.

The first form of male power is “denying women their own sexuality”<sup>54</sup> such as punishing women who practice premarital sex and women who commit adultery while not punishing men. A brutal example of that is narrated by Tamr when, as a child, she sees a pregnant girl hanging from a palm tree. This is the punishment that Tamr’s aunt threatens her with in order to convince her of having sex with her husband as a pre-teen. Tamr recalls “the women swarmed around the girl like hungry locusts”<sup>55</sup> torturing the girl. The girl’s own mother joins in the punishment. The local midwife further punishes the girl by cutting off the girl’s clitoris, desexualising her as a lesson for taking control of her own sexuality, that is, taking the control of her sexuality *out* of male hands. Adding insult to injury, the midwife further humiliates the girl by forcing her to swallow her own bleeding clitoris. Female circumcision in the Arab world is referred to as *tahara*, which means purification and cleansing. Making the girl swallow her clitoris means that the *najasah*, the dirtiness and uncleanness will stay with her, inside her, keeping her dirty and un-womaned forever. Performing the torture in public, cannibalising, dehumanising, *and* desexualising the girl, all this is done as a warning to other girls, they must abide by tradition—or else. This girl is now in the same category as a sexual-cannibal type of animal or insect where one is devoured after intercourse. Because the girl is no longer of human status, she can be sacrificed to save the honour of the rest of her family or tribe. The male culprit, however, is neither punished nor even sought.

Another example of men denying women their sexuality is Suzanne and her married Arab lover Maaz. Suzanne, a married Westerner, to whom sexual arousal is no stranger, takes control to achieve orgasm with Maaz, while he lays there unresponsively. This scene, when reversed, is common for Tamr, who views it as the normal way for a man and woman to be together. Maaz, however, is outraged by Suzanne’s behaviour. We can assume that he himself behaves the same way with his own wife, as Tamr’s and Taj’s ex-husbands behave with them. He says that he feels “disgusted” by Suzanne because she had “done things for [her] own pleasure, like a man.”<sup>56</sup> Because Suzanne achieves orgasm, she becomes “disgusting.” Maaz believes that only men have the right to feel pleasure during intercourse. He expresses his views to the confused American:

God created you [women] to bear children and to give pleasure to a man, and that’s all. [...] God created woman to make children, like a factory [...] she produces enjoyment for the man, not for herself.<sup>57</sup>

He calls her names such as “she-devil” and “hermaphrodite” and he then says that she is like a “man”. Due to Suzanne’s awareness of her own sexual desires and needs, and because she attempts to fulfil them by using Maaz’s body, he is insulted. He accuses her of being unfemale. He then punishes her by discontinuing their relationship and telling his friends about her. In Maaz’s reality, and perhaps in the reality of men who live under strict segregation, women are literally baby-making sex objects, who deserve punishment if they seek pleasure for themselves. Again, we are confronted with a scenario of a woman taking the customary sexual control out of a man’s hands and into her own. Although this woman is foreign, punishment, if only emotional rather than physical, is necessary. The male literally comes first and foremost, and any female who dares to deviate from this patriarchal equation is worthy of punishment.

Another form of punishment, which is also on Gough’s list, is forcing male sexuality on women.<sup>58</sup> Men have complete control over women’s marriage conditions, and therefore hold absolute power over women’s sexuality. The reasons for this unlimited power is discussed in chapter one. Al-Shaykh demonstrates the cruelty in this practise when she introduces Tamr’s story and Tamr’s forced premature marriage. She is obviously too young to understand what is expected of her as a wife. On her wedding night her father carries her, screaming, to her husband’s bedroom. She continues this for many nights, she says: “I screamed and screamed and bit his hand”.<sup>59</sup> Eventually she is threatened into allowing her husband to touch her. Tamr, who is kept in the dark about her own sexuality even after intercourse, says: “I didn’t feel married or pregnant, even if Ibrahim had lain on top of me and jiggled up and down and made a sticky liquid come out, and now my stomach had swollen out.”<sup>60</sup>

To further demonstrate male sexual domination over women in *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, Taj’s father, a Turkish villager, marries her off to an unknown Arab man who claims to be a Sultan. Taj recalls her wedding night. The man in the room she is pushed into, “who’d lain on top of her and hurt her while she kept her eyes tightly shut [...] hadn’t played with her [body].”<sup>61</sup> To Taj, and many women like her, sexual intercourse is a painful experience. Taj, also a foreigner to the desert’s prudish customs of keeping sex a big secret till after marriage, originally expects some form of foreplay. Her new husband, whom she only meets in the bedroom and not even at her wedding party, like Maaz, views a woman’s body as a tool for his own enjoyment. Such deeply rooted beliefs

are generally blamed on Islam, although Islam encourages husbands to practice foreplay with their wives before intercourse, and men are urged to be tender with their wives.<sup>62</sup> This general lack of understanding of female sexuality affects many Arab women. However, Massad and El Saadawi explain that this is a fairly recent phenomenon. In *the Hidden Face of Eve*, El Saadawi explores the Islamic influences on women's sexuality, advocating that because polygamy for men was allowed, women had to "compete for the favours of men and excel in subtle allurements to attract men towards marriage, love and sex".<sup>63</sup> El Saadawi explains that the need for women to attract a suitable husband:

tended to make Arab women more forward and positive in love and sex, characteristics in clear contrast to the passive attitudes assumed by the vast majority of [Arab] women living in our modern era.<sup>64</sup>

El Saadawi discusses another factor which aided in the assertive attitudes of Arab foremothers:

the naturalistic attitudes of Islamic teachings which prevented love and sex from being considered sinful as they were by Christianity, [on] the contrary, Islam described sexual pleasure as one of the attractions of life, one of the delights for those who go to Paradise after death. As a result, Arab women had no hesitation in being positive towards sex, in expressing their desire for men.<sup>65</sup>

While El Saadawi explains how the general perception towards sexual pleasure was in the past, she does not go into the reasons behind its decline. Joseph Massad's in-depth study on Arab sexuality argues that the change in Arab sexual behaviour is a colonial consequence. He states:

Western anthropologists were exploring the contemporary sexual lives and practices [of Arabs] [...]. It was within the context of what was called 'ethnopornography' that Arab readers began to read Orientalist accounts. [They were] influenced by such readings, and especially by the Orientalist judgement that Arab culture had 'degraded' to an age of 'decadence' under the Ottomans.<sup>66</sup>

Massad explains how the exposure of Arab intellectuals to Orientalist ideas of the sexual decadence of Arab practices led to "Victorian notions of appropriate and shameful sexual behaviour and its civilizational dimensions [which] would rank high in the thinking of these Arab intellectuals".<sup>67</sup> Massad's hypothesis that Western interference caused the

distortion of Arab sexual practices stems from the heightened colonial-induced sensitivity that the colonised people were left with, which is that the West is progressive and the East is backward. Al-Shaykh's novel touches upon this issue, not only in sexual practices between male and female characters in the novel, but also in body image, and everyday rituals.

An example of this is Tamr's perception of civilisation. She says:

I went into my room and stuck my tongue out in the mirror, examining it closely to see if one of the arteries in it had contracted and that was why it was so difficult for me to speak English; or was it just that English didn't go with a woman who wore an abaya and whose hair reeked of incense?<sup>68</sup>

To Tamr, English is a medium for her to connect with other cultures, which she views as more developed than her own. Her anger at herself for her attire, hair and inability to speak the foreign language portray Tamr's disdain towards her own culture. Her name, Tamr, means "date" which is the desert fruit, an indication that she is and always will be at home in the desert. Tamr becomes infatuated with Suha, which further sheds light on what she admires about other countries. Tamr combines Egypt, Lebanon and London together as she describes Suha. Tamr admires Suha's hairstyle and colourful clothes and accessories. She is also in awe of the freedom of the women at the college. She describes the women who had "taken trouble over their hairstyles"<sup>69</sup> and had "bundled their abayas up in their laps"<sup>70</sup> and a whole new world opens up to Tamr. What Tamr seeks is the freedom to wear colourful clothing rather than a black abaya, and in wanting this, she rejects other things about her culture, such as the incense, and dark tea. She is happy to sip Lipton tea, in spite of not liking its taste. However, Tamr learns to combine the aspects of other cultures which she admires with her own, by fighting the system and opening her shop, which is another haven for women to gather and share solidarity. Tamr begins to "walk proudly"<sup>71</sup> around her shop. Tamr says:

I'd felt that I had to open a place like this to establish my independence, and I'd become well-known among families here and in other areas. The old women who accompanied their daughters, just to watch, made me pleased because the fact that they came and sat there in my shop meant that they trusted me and gave my venture their blessing.<sup>72</sup>

Women begin to bring accessories that they have crafted themselves, and Tamr displays them in her shop. By opening her own shop, Tamr opens opportunities for many women to contribute productively to the male-dominated society. Men still control the space outside this haven, but the sign on the door indicates that no men are allowed in the shop. And so, Tamr succeeds in creating a space by women for women, away from the dominance of men.

Gough states that men tend to limit women physically and hinder their movement, which is what the segregation in this patriarchal country is meant to achieve. Gough also argues that men keep most of society's knowledge and cultural accomplishments from women.<sup>73</sup> Rich presents Gough's male power characteristics as an explanation of why women are "convinced that marriage, and sexual orientation toward men, are inevitable, even if unsatisfying or oppressive components of their lives."<sup>74</sup>

Al-Shaykh demonstrates these characteristics in her novel. However, her characters react differently to them. Tamr is the one who reacts most assertively. Upon her first marriage, she is told: "A man is an adornment, a crown for your head, a staff to strengthen your heart"<sup>75</sup> to make her believe that a woman cannot survive without a man. Tamr rejects this, and proves to all members of her society that a woman can fare very well without a man. Tamr, who starts off as a married and pregnant twelve-year-old, uses the money obtained from her divorces to set the wheels in motion for the emancipation of women in Al-Shaykh's fictional desert country.

Nur and Suha do not end up emancipated like Tamr. El Saadawi argues that unhappy love endings in Arabic literature stem from the notion of "virginal love." She explains, "The tragedy of *hob ozri* is a very common theme in Arab literature and poetry. The Arabs throughout the ages have expressed in song and verse the tortures of love, and the pleasurable pain of separation and yearning between lovers deprived of one another."<sup>76</sup> The virtue of *hob ozri*, is that the couple who are madly in love do not stay together, but separate, due to difficult circumstances, usually because of their families. This ultimate sacrifice is viewed as very noble, in that they would rather be separated from each other forever. El Saadawi advocates that masochism, experiencing pleasure while in pain, is a "protective device" used by people in Suha's situation. El Saadawi writes: "By [practising] sex I am guilty of sin, but I make atones for my sin by experiencing this almost intolerable pain, in which I even discover some pleasure."<sup>77</sup>



This is how *Women of Sand and Myrrh* ends; Tamr becomes a very successful businesswoman who is a stranger to her own body. Suzanne is rejected by Maaz and is approached by other men as a prostitute. Nur pines after Suha, and is divorced by her husband. Suha packs her bags and goes back to Lebanon. She would rather go back to a war zone than succumb to the sexual temptation of Nur.

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1 Jaggar and Bordo (1992) p. 13.

2 Hanan Al-Shaykh, *Women of Sand and Myrrh* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) p. 9.

3 Fatima Mernissi, "The Meaning of Special Boundaries", in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: a Reader*, ed. by Reina Lewis (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003) p. 503.

4 Al-Shaykh, p 46.

5 Mernissi, (2003) p. 490.

6 Mernissi, (1985) p. 42.

7 It is worth noting that in Islamic tradition, unlike in Christianity, it is not Eve who manipulated Adam into tasting the fruit, but Satan.

8 Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi, *Marriage and Morals in Islam*, Islamic Education & Information Centre. (1993) < [http://www.al-islam.org/m\\_orals/index.htm](http://www.al-islam.org/m_orals/index.htm) > [accessed 3.2.2012]

9 Mernissi, (2003).

10 Ibid.

11 Al-Shaykh, (1992) p. 50.

12 Dimen, p. 46.

13 Al-Shaykh, (1992) p. 50.

14 Ibid., p. 51.

14 The Great Seven Sins of Islam are: Claiming that God has a partner, practising magic, taking an innocent human life, cheating in business, taking an orphan's inheritance, betrayal at wartime, and accusing innocent women of adultery. (My own translation of Abi Hurayra's narration of the Prophet Muhammed's Hadith from Saheeh Bukhari)

16 Yusuf al-Hallaj, "Gays Around the Globe: Portraits of Lesbian and Gay Life in Other Nations", in, *Becoming Visible: A Reader in Gay and Lesbian History for High School and College Students* Jennings, Kevin (Boston, MA: Alyson Publications, 1994) p. 259.

17 Joseph Andoni Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007) p. 196.

18 Gieri Bolliger and Antoine F. Goeschel, "Sexual Relations with Animals (Zoophilia): An Unrecognized Problem in Animal Welfare Legislation", in *Bestiality and Zoophilia: Sexual Relations with Animals*, ed. by Anthony L. Podberscek and Andrea M. Beetz (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press).

19 The Quran, Hud, verse 77-82

20 Aleardo Zanghellini, "Neither Homophobic nor (Hetero) sexually Pure: Contextualising Islam's Objections to Same-Sex Sexuality", in, *Islam and Homosexuality Volume II* ed. by Samar Habib (Berkeley, CA: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2010) p. 288.

21 Al-Shaykh, (1992) p. 121.

22 Ibid., p. 121.

23 Ibid., p. 74.

24 Ibid., p. 75.

25 Ibid., p. 52.

26 Ibid., p. 52.

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- 27 Rich, (1980).
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Al-Shaykh, (1992) p. 56.
- 30 Ibid., pp. 56-57.
- 31 Ibid. p. 54.
- 32 Mernissi, (2003) p. 491.
- 33 Al-Shaykh, (1992) p. 250.
- 34 Ibid., p. 248.
- 35 Ibid., p. 249.
- 36 Penelope, Julia *Call Me Lesbian: Lesbian Lives, Lesbian Theory* (Berkeley, CA: The Crossing Press, 1992) p 78.
- 37 Al-Shaykh (1992) p. 253.
- 38 El Saadawi, (1980) p. 46.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Al-Shaykh, (1992) p. 261.
- 41 Ibid., p. 262.
- 42 Ibid., p. 252.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Ibid., p. 239.
- 45 Ibid., p. 240.
- 46 Massad, p. 336.
- 47 Al-Shaykh, (1992) pp. 89-90.
- 48 Ibid., p. 104.
- 49 Ibid., p. 104.
- 50 Ibid., p. 105.
- 51 Ibid., p.107.
- 52 Ibid., p. 152.
- 53 Rich, (1980).
- 54 Kathleen Gough, "The Origin of the Family", *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 4<sup>th</sup> ser., 33 (1971) 760-771.
- 55 Al-Shaykh, (1992) p. 252.
- 56 Ibid., p. 210.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Gough.
- 59 Al-Shaykh, (1992) p. 119.
- 60 Ibid., p. 126.
- 61 Ibid., p.138.
- 62 The Quran, Al Baqara, verse 223. (Your women are your tilth so approach your tilth however you please and present yourselves well and fear God and know that you are meeting Him and inform the believers. [My own translation])
- 63 El Saadawi, (1980) p. 135.
- 64 Ibid.
- 65 Ibid.
- 66 Massad, p. 8.
- 67 Ibid., p. 15.
- 68 Al-Shaykh, (1992) pp. 89-90.
- 69 Ibid., p. 89.
- 70 Ibid., p. 88.
- 71 Ibid., p. 129.

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72 Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>73</sup> Gough.

74 Rich, (1980).

75 Al-Shaykh, (1992) p.117.

76 El Saadawi, (1980) p. 149.

77 Ibid., p. 150.

*“Can't there once be a happy ending to a story written by an Arab woman from Greater Syria or Egypt?” muttered the Sphinx.*

*The magic carpet shook her head sadly.*

*“I'm trying to break the pattern,” said Suzanne, “but there are no happy endings in life.”*

*“You wrote a story?” asked the Sphinx eagerly.*

*“Yes...” replied Suzanne hesitantly.*

*“Then tell it to me!” commanded the Sphinx.*

*“But I'm tired!” protested Suzanne.*

*“Do it!” roared the Sphinx, “Or you will be punished!”*

*“I told you, I'm not scared of your punishment.”*

*“Fine, if I like your story,” said the Sphinx with promise, “you can go home and the books can stay here.”*

*“Well,” began Suzanne, “the story begins in Jordan, one sunny January Friday...”*

## VI

### Spring Began on Friday

The characters in this novel are purely fictional. Any resemblance between them and actual people living or dead is coincidental. Although the events that occur in regards to the Arab Spring are based on true facts, the characters' opinions and reactions are fictional.

## Chapter 1

Friday

“Yalla!” called Abu Ashraf, “Yalla! Come on, it’s ten to two!” He stood in front of the kitchen door where his jacket and shoes always hung and started putting them on.

“Yalla!” said Um Ashraf dashing to the toilet.

“Yalla...” mumbled Ashraf from the living room where he was still in his long white *dishdash* with his feet propped up on the coffee table. He grabbed the remote control and switched off Al Jazeera news, which was all he ever watched, and got up slowly, yawning. His sister Mona walked into the room, just as he was dragging his feet towards the door. They mock glared at each other and he nudged her shoulder as she passed by him.

“Yalla!” She called, “I’m ready!” To her brother she whispered, “Still not dressed? Damn your honour.”

Ashraf laughed and looked back from the doorway, “You’re such an idiot. When you damn *my* honour, you’re damning yourself.” His sister stuck her tongue out at him just as he started to slowly drag his feet up the stairs.

“Yalla,” Abu Ashraf said gruffly.

“Yalla, yalla!” said Um Ashraf jogging in the corridor towards her husband, her high heels clicking loudly with every step on the marble floor. She stopped and looked at the mirror that hung right next to the kitchen door where Abu Ashraf stood impatiently tapping his foot, “Yalla,” she said, tucking a few stray hairs into her bright red veil.

“Yalla ya Ashraf!” shouted Abu Ashraf, “Yalla ya Mona!”

“Yalla!” answered Mona running down the hall.

“Oh, I can’t *believe* we’re wearing the same colours!” moaned Hayfa, looking at her sister’s red sweater and her mother’s red skirt.

“Yes, how nice!” smiled Um Ashraf, touching Mona’s curly black hair, “We’re the ladies in red!”

“I’ll go change my top,” said Hayfa as she ran up the stairs.

“Noooooo, we don’t have time for that! *Yalla* we’re leaving now!” Abu Ashraf grabbed the car keys and opened the kitchen door.

“*Ladies in reeed,*” sang Um Ashraf slowly walking towards the car.

“It’s ‘*lady*’ in red,” said Mona slamming the car door.

“*YALLA!*” yelled Abu Ashraf as he honked the horn. Hayfa ran up to the car and Ashraf slowly walked out of the house, locked the door, and made his way to the car. “You all know that lunch is at two!” yelled Abu Ashraf, starting the car, “Why do you have to wait for the last minute to get ready?”

“But I was the first one ready!” protested Hayfa, buckling her seat belt as her father’s car backed out of the garage.

“You can’t wear the same colours? What a stupid reason to be late! Who cares what you’re wearing?”

“It’s okay *habibi*, don’t yell,” said Um Ashraf in an exaggeratedly calm tone.

“I’m not yelling!” he yelled louder, “This has to happen *every* Friday. Next time have your clothes laid out Thursday night so there will be no surprises on Friday so you don’t all end up ‘wearing the same colours’ again.”

“Baba, can I say I have the flu so I don’t have to kiss anyone today?” asked Mona. Hayfa frowned at her sister and nudged her.

“What’s this talk, *inti il tanyeh?!?*” snapped Abu Ashraf, his big spectacled brown eyes glaring at his daughter’s in the rear view mirror.

As it was every Friday, the drive was an uncomfortable one. It was only four minutes long but Abu Ashraf’s ranting made it quite unpleasant. It was the only time the family got together in one car and went anywhere—and the family members were more than happy to keep it that way. Um Ashraf was sure that nobody enjoyed the Friday family lunch, but it was a family event that simply had to be attended every weekend. Each Thursday night Abu Ashraf reminded them that there was an *azoomeh* at Tata’s house. They would complain to their mother about how these lunches ruined their weekends. Um Ashraf, usually able to soften Abu Ashraf towards their children in any situation, was particularly helpless when it came to these Friday lunches. She had long ago learned the art of manipulating her husband into doing what she wanted, but found that in matters related to her aunt, who also happened to be her mother-in-law, she could never win.

Um Ashraf glanced at her husband while he drove and yelled at their children. Little specs of spit were flying out of his mouth onto the steering wheel. She recalled their first argument as newlyweds, which was regarding his wedding ring. She had asked him to wear it, and he had simply refused. She had cried to her mother that night.

“There are two types of *Khalayleh*,” her mother had told her. “The normal man, and the man who’s a ring in his woman’s finger. No woman wants her husband as a ring on her finger, where’s the respect? The *Khalili* is conservative and strict; he doesn’t like his woman to argue with him. When you want something, if you ask him outright he will say no because being asked annoys him. You have to be smart.” As an experiment, Um Ashraf had chosen a chair in their new apartment that was oddly placed, causing awkward access to the doorway. She had smiled and taken her husband’s chubby, hairy hand in her soft pink one and stared deeply into his large brown eyes. She had lightly commented that the chair should stay exactly where it was because she could sit in it and check on the cooking in the kitchen without getting up. He had immediately decided to change the location of the chair. She had wanted it under the window, so she had asked him to place it near the TV. As far as Um Ashraf was concerned, that tip was the single most useful one that had ever been passed down from mother to daughter. Um Ashraf turned around in her seat and looked at her two pouting daughters. She would gladly pass the secret on to them when the time was right, but she felt that twenty-six-year-old, straight-haired Hayfa, and twenty-five year-old curly-haired Mona, were in no hurry to get married.

Hayfa was an architect. Her glasses, resting on her nasal hump, gave her an air of seriousness, in spite of the casual clothes she insisted on wearing. Her skin was slightly darker than the others’, and she often teased her siblings for being transparently pale. She was religious, she observed her five prayers, and deeply disapproved of her sister’s untraditional way of life.

Mona had first shocked her mother when she was fourteen by double piercing her ears. Um Ashraf had been distressed at her daughter’s boldness and immediately made her remove the new earrings. All the Al Mansiyeh girls’ ears were pierced by their grandmother at infancy. Double piercing, however, was too daring for Um Ashraf to even attempt convincing her husband to let pass. Surprisingly, when Abu Ashraf saw how outraged Um Ashraf was about her daughter’s piercings, he not only let her keep them, he



also took Hayfa to get hers double pierced the very next day. He often made a joke about his daughters being pirates.

Abu Ashraf pulled up in front of his mother's large house. They were always the last to arrive. The food was always already on the table and everybody was always waiting for them. They usually arrived promptly at two o'clock, but sometimes they were a minute or two late. All the uncles and aunts, and especially the grandmother, would complain about them being the last there.

It was the same every time. Everybody stood up and greeted them as they kissed their aunts, uncles, and cousins' right cheeks first, then two or three times on the left cheeks, one by one. It was awkward for Hayfa and Mona, because they were not allowed to kiss some of their aunts' husbands due to the fact that they were 'strange men', meaning they were not blood relatives. It was the same for Ashraf, he could not kiss his uncles' wives, although both of them were related by blood. He once made the mistake of kissing an aunt forcing her to ablute again. That was the talk of that particular lunch, and Ashraf was very careful never to do it again. There were certain cousins and aunts who they had to hug after they kissed, because they were closer to them than all the other aunts and cousins. Not hugging was not an option, although it caused a slight inconvenience as it made the greeting process longer. Hayfa and Mona made a game out of it, to keep the cousins who required hugs for last because they would not have to hug everyone else.

The first person who had to be greeted was their grandmother. It would cause a lot of turbulence—lots of talk about their bad manners throughout the entire duration of the lunch, and then more yelling in the car by Abu Ashraf—if their grandmother was not the first to be greeted. Hayfa, Mona, and Ashraf dreaded this the most because their grandmother's mood was ever so unpredictable. She would greet them with a happy smile if there was a special occasion, such as a rich suitor, a new job, or the occasional good grade in Ashraf's case. She knew all their news through Abu Ashraf, who faithfully went to her house every evening exactly between the *Maghreb*, sunset prayer and the *Isha*, night prayer and reported all the family news. She liked to monitor everybody's comings and goings. On this specific Friday, Ashraf had not shaved. She scowled when she saw him, "You look like the devil himself," she said as she gave him her cheek to be kissed. She then glanced at Hayfa and smiled, "What is this beauty?" as she pulled her for a hug.

Hayfa rested her head on her grandmother's shoulder and glanced at her brother's blank expression and raised her eyebrows up and down at him. Mona's turn was next, and their grandmother scowled again, "When are you going to get rid of that hideous thing that's on your nose?" about her nose ring. Mona did not reply as she dutifully kissed her grandmother's cheeks.

There were three uncles and their wives to be kissed or sometimes hugged, three aunts to be kissed *and* hugged, and their husbands to be greeted with a handshake. After all the elders were properly greeted, their cousins had to be tended to. There was no chance of saving the huggables for last this Friday because Sana, a cousin that was Mona's age, ran up to them very enthusiastically. "I'm so glad you guys are here! I'm starving! Why are you always so late?" she laughed, as she extended her arms to give Mona a hug. "Reema was just saying how *dar Ammo* Abu Ashraf are always the last to arrive!" Mona and Hayfa gave each other defeated looks. They had to hug *and* kiss *all* sixteen cousins.

After all the hugging and kissing, everybody started making their way to their designated tables. There were three tables: the table of the elders, the table of the youngsters, and the kitchen table. The fancy dining table was reserved for the elders; Tata, her sons and daughters and daughters' husbands, the one granddaughter who was married and her husband who only came every other Friday. The eldest son of each of her offspring also sat on the elder table, and, if there was enough room, her sons' wives would sit there too. Usually on the alternate Fridays when their pregnant cousin and her husband joined them for lunch, one or two of the wives would join the cousins at the 'younger' table, which was a plastic table brought in from the garden. It never ceased to be embarrassing for everybody involved when the unlucky wife walked towards them sheepishly holding her plate would joke that she came to the younger table because she was still youthful.

Their grandmother, her sons, her daughters and their husbands were the first to start eating. The rest would hover around the elders' table holding their plates peeping through the shoulders of those who were seated. Hayfa and Mona were lucky because Ashraf sat at the head of the table beside his grandmother, so he could scoop salad on their plates. Abu Ashraf sat in front of the main dish, which was stuffed mutton. Hayfa made her way towards Ashraf with her plate and had him fill it up with two portions of salad, and Mona

got two portions of meat from her father. They made their way through the crowd of cousins and plates towards the younger table. The other cousins had to fend for themselves, because neither their fathers nor their brothers bothered helping them get any food on their plates. If their mothers were on the table, they would sometimes help. The cousins often opted to ask Ashraf or Abu Ashraf as a last resort, since they were the only two on the big table who were friendly enough to be asked.

The unwritten rule was, if you were in your twenties, you sat on the younger table. The unlucky under-aged cousins sat in the kitchen while the help struggled with the washing up so that there would not be a shortage of spoons, forks, glasses or plates. There were only ten seats on the younger table. If none of their uncles' wives joined them, all the female cousins in their twenties would be able to sit. This Friday two wives were left stranded and sheepishly made their way over to the table, "We're sitting at the fun table today," said one of them. Hayfa and Mona tactfully stood up and sat on the couch. It was still near enough for them to participate in the conversation— which was always the same. It started off with everyone complaining about their jobs. Four of the cousins were still at university. They all went to the same university and majored in Business Studies. Most of the conversation revolved around their lectures, lecturers and mutual friends.

Because the two aunts were sitting with them today, they had to keep the conversation general. "I heard you had a suitor, Nadia," said Um Wa'el, who never let an opportunity to enquire about other people's misfortunes pass.

"Yes, I did," replied Nadia, her expression quickly changing from pleasant to uncomfortable .

"From whose *dar*?"

"*Dar* Ali."

"Which Ali? Hebron or Nablus?"

"Neither. He's Jordanian."

"Oh my!" "Yee on us!" "Really?" "Jordanian/Jordanian or is his mother Palestinian?" were the surprised responses.

Nadia continued to chew, her eyes glued to her plate. "So that's why your father refused," probed Um Wa'el, her large blue eyes staring intently at Nadia's face as if to scan her mind for information.

“Yes,” replied Nadia begrudgingly, knowing that her aunt already knew all the details since she and Nadia’s mother spent hours on the phone each evening.

“Well, was he handsome?” “Did you know him from somewhere?” “Who sent him to you?” “Was it awkward?” “What was his mother like?” “What kind of car does he drive?” asked the cousins.

Nadia remained silent. Her sister Fida replied, “He drove the smallest, ugliest, oldest car you can imagine. The fact that it still moves at all is a miracle.”

Nadia glared at her sister, “He paid for it himself— out of his own salary. How many of your suitors bought their own car?”

“Why do you keep saying that? Who cares *who* pays for the car. If his father has money, it means that one day *he’ll* have money,” said Fida, tossing her brown curly hair.

Um Wa’el glanced at Nadia’s troubled expression, “Thank your God that your father didn’t agree. Jordanians aren’t like us. You’d have had a hard life.”

Nadia silently glared at her mother’s sister, who also happened to be her uncle’s wife. Mona put her fork down with a bang, “Yes, Jordanians aren’t like us. Neither are Lebanese, Syrians, Iraqis, Egyptians, families from Gaza, Ramallah, Jerusalem... Even *Khalayleh* who still live in Hebron! I just want to understand—who *are* we allowed to marry?”

“Oh, you can marry from Ramallah, *habibti*, it’s just people from Nablus, Jerusalem and Gaza that we don’t like.”

“And anybody’s family that’s originally from a village,” said Hayfa, thinking of her own boyfriend.

“Well, of course, you wouldn’t want to marry villagers. They’re not like us.”

“She wouldn’t be marrying *villagers*,” snorted Mona. “She’d be marrying a man who was born in Amman, whose *father* was born in a village in Palestine before the war.” Mona felt her leg being poked by her sister.

“Away with the evil!” exclaimed her other aunt, hitting her chest with the palm of her excessively bejewelled hand. “You don’t want to marry villagers! They’re not *like* us!”

At the elder’s table, the men finished their meal, leaving the women to take away the food and the plates so the help in the kitchen, who at this point were exhausted from the never-ending washing up, could finally eat. Ashraf was the only male who helped with the

clearing up. After carrying the last load of dirty dishes, he slowly made his way to the living room where his grandmother, uncles, male cousins, and his grandmother's daughters were comfortably seated on sofas. Some lighted cigarettes, and some asked their sons to fix them an *argeela*, the water pipe that is smoked with fruity tobacco. Tata, Abu Ashraf and Abu Zaher always had *argeelas* after lunch. Since Zaher was too proud to help, Ashraf ended up fixing three *argeelas* and making sure they had enough coal. By the time he sat back down, there was no more mint tea left, so he had to make do with Arabic coffee with his *knafeh* dessert. He sat on the couch and listened to the boring conversation. They were talking about the new trading laws. Abu Farid, who married into the family and did not quite fit in, took a cigar from his pocket and started talking about the days when he took his wife, his son Farid and daughter Nadeen to Turkey to escape the 2003 Iraq war. "We had a magnificent time there," he said between puffs, "Farid would have been quite a hit with the ladies if he wasn't so uptight." He laughed and nudged his son who was sulking next to him.

Farid, a boy in his late teens, looked very much like his father, who was originally from Jaffa. Farid was quite religious. Neither his mother nor his father knew where he got his faith from. Abu Farid never prayed except at funerals when he had to. Um Farid prayed regularly but never wore a veil except the few times she visited the cemetery where her father, who had passed away six years ago, was buried.

Ashraf, who was in his early twenties, was glumly slouching next to Farid. "Look at Farid," his grandmother suddenly praised, "tall, dark, handsome, well behaved, clean shaven, his eyes are big and dark. Like the eyes of the stag they are. He's the most handsome of all my grandsons. He's also religious, may God keep him, and he goes to mosque every Friday before coming here," she stopped smiling suddenly and glared at Ashraf, "when was the last time *you* went to the mosque before lunch?" Ashraf stared back at her with his huge yawning brown eyes and said nothing. His grandmother suddenly chuckled, "Lucky is the girl that Farid takes! I'm going to have to marry him off to one of his cousins— we can't let someone from outside take away all his mother's efforts in raising and upbringing. No, we want one of our daughters to be the lucky bride." She smiled, which made the only wrinkles that she had appear at the corners of her eyes.

Her perfectly aligned false teeth and sparkling green eyes made her look much younger than her seventy-seven years.

Um Farid was looking at her mother happily until she had brought up matchmaking between cousins. “May God keep you, my mother, Farid loves you and speaks highly of you all the time, but please, I beg you, don’t talk of choosing one of his cousins for him. His father believes that he should choose his own bride.”

“Yes,” piped in Abu Farid, “marrying cousins is a dangerous business. Their children’s genes come out all wrong.” He glanced at Ashraf, who was blankly staring at the smoke his grandmother’s *argeela* was making, “The children may come out slow or even retarded.” Then he glanced at Reema who was walking by with a plate of *knafeh*, “If not retarded, then extremely hideous.”

“This is empty talk,” growled Tata, sounding much like Abu Ashraf. “My sons and daughters married their cousins. Look how smart all my grandchildren are. They all went to university and they all got the best grades! Look at the beauty of my granddaughters, their beauty causes craziness. Farid would be very lucky to take one of them.” Tata took a long puff from her *argeela* before saying, “I choose Siwar for him.”

Farid and Ashraf glanced at each other and rolled their eyes as an argument erupted between the older generation of *dar Al Mansiyeh*.

Hayfa, Mona, Nadia and Sana had cleared the table and had gone to the secluded staircase which was their special place. It was a safe spot because they could see and hear what was going on. Also, the girl whose jeans were low-waisted and top was not long enough could hide her bare skin against the wall and nobody would yell at her for having exposed skin. Today it was Mona.

“I’m really sorry that your dad said no to Talal—” started Hayfa.

“Damn the honour of this thing!” exclaimed Mona.

Nadia looked at them sadly, “If I’d known my father wouldn’t agree, I wouldn’t have told Talal to come.”

“I thought you guys were going to wait a bit more...” said Sana.

“Oh, there’s a lot that you guys don’t know. Fida found an old Valentine’s day card.”

“What? I thought you hid things like that in your locked jewellery box!”

“Yeah but I was getting ready to go out with Talal, so I had my jewellery box out when Fida walked into the room without knocking. She’d never seen the jewellery box before and was surprised when she saw it. She glimpsed the card and pushed me away to see what it was. I tried to tell her it was nothing, the date was written there, three years ago. And she opened it and saw the first ‘*I love you*’ Talal ever wrote me. I tried explaining to her that it was very old and I only kept it because I kept forgetting to throw it away, but she didn’t believe me.

“Anyway, she didn’t say much. I thought it wasn’t going to be a big deal, so I just went out. Talal and I met at the Pink Peach, and just as I was telling him about Fida finding the card, guess who walks in?”

“Fida?” Hayfa and Mona glanced at each other, both thinking, *my sister would never do that to me.*

“Yes, Fida, and Zaher!”

“What! Your brother saw you with your boyfriend?” “What did he do to you?” “*Ya habibi!*” the girls exclaimed.

“So I was absolutely terrified and tried hiding under the table. But Fida brought Zaher right over to our table. In front of *everybody* he grabbed my arm and pulled me out from under the table. He didn’t say a word to Talal. Talal tried to stop him, but Zaher said ‘I’ll break your face now. Don’t you ever contact my sister again.’ Talal said to him, ‘I want to marry her. I’m ready to come to speak to your father now and ask for her hand in marriage.’ Zaher told him that if he did, he’d personally break his face, so I gestured to Talal to stay quiet and I just walked away with Zaher and Fida. I was terrified that he’d hit me in front of everyone at the Pink Peach, but thank God, he didn’t.”

“What about Fida? How can she even look you in the eye now?”

“Fida, the animal? She laughed when he slapped me in the car! He drove like a maniac till we got home. And again, he grabbed my arm and dragged me into the house. And I was crying, crying, crying. I couldn’t even form the words to beg him not to tell Baba! So he dragged me into the living room where Baba was smoking his *argeela* and watching TV. Zaher threw me on the floor and started taking off his belt to whip me! ‘Do you know what your daughter did?’ he yelled at Baba. Baba came and stopped Zaher from whipping me, thank God. Then Baba hugged me and asked what happened. So Zaher told

him that I was out with a man alone in the Pink Peach. So Baba yelled at Zaher and told him that he's my father and he is in control of my life—not Zaher.”

“Wow, Ammo Abu Zaher is amazing!” exclaimed Hayfa, “If it were our dad, oh my God, what would he have done, Mona?”

“No I don't think Baba would physically hurt us. And we'd never be in that situation because Ashraf would never do anything like that, even if he found us on a date.”

“But what if Zaher found us out on a date?” asked Hayfa.

The four girls were quiet for a minute, then Sana said, “Yes, you guys are lucky that your brother is very good. Wa'el would do the same thing Zaher did. But I don't think Reema would ever do what Fida did. Backstabbing your sister is the lowest thing you can do. But I am sure if Wa'el did that to me, my father wouldn't stop him. My father might join him.”

“No, I think *all* our fathers wouldn't do that to us. I think we're all lucky to have good dads,” said Mona. “Anyway, what happened next?” she asked, trying to picture the tall, dark and strong Talal restraining himself from hurting the stalky, pale, temperamental Zaher.

“Well, I kept crying. Mama made me tea and sent Fida up to her room. Zaher continued to yell from the kitchen that I was dishonourable and that he's going to break my face for blackening his face in front of everyone at the Pink Peach. After a while, I calmed down and Baba asked me ‘who is this boy ya Baba?’ so I told Mama and Baba that I've known Talal since I was at school, and that we were in love throughout university. I told them that he's willing to come meet them.”

“Wow, I can't believe you had the courage to say all that! I'd be terrified!” exclaimed Hayfa.

“Yes, I was scared at first, but you know, when the words started, they wouldn't stop! They asked me how old he is, where he's from, and so I said that he's Jordanian, and they didn't say anything! They asked what he did for a living, what his father does, if he's related to the old prime minister, things like that. Then Baba told me to tell Talal that if he really loves me he'll come meet him and formally ask for my hand in marriage. I took it as a sure sign that he was going to say yes. So I told Talal to come yesterday. Now, he had already prepared his parents. They didn't like the fact that I was Palestinian, but Talal



convinced them that I was good and religious and I'm a daughter of a family. They would prefer a Jordanian wife for their son, but they're very good people, they wouldn't sadden their son."

"Wow, so the fact that you're from Hebron wasn't a problem?" asked Hayfa, "Kamal's family have a problem with that."

"No, to Jordanians, a Palestinian is a Palestinian. They don't really care which place you're from. It's different with your boyfriend's family because they're from a village near Bethlehem," explained Sana. "But for Jordanians, I think it's important where other Jordanians are from, the ones from Irbid don't like the ones from Salt—or something like that."

"Anyway, he came with his mother and father last night. I was so nervous; my heart was in my throat! He was very nervous too, especially when he shook hands with Zaher. Zaher was fuming, you could see evil in his eyes. So Talal's father asked my father if he'd do them the honour of giving them my hand in marriage, and my father said that it's an honour to meet them and have them in his home, but there was no chance of a union between us!" Nadia started crying at this point, "so his father said 'I was under the impression that you were the one who told us to come.' So Baba said 'I'm sorry you were under this impression. I never told Nadia it was a guaranteed yes. I don't like the fact that your son courted my daughter in secret for all those years. I can see you are a respectable and honourable family, but I just don't see that there is *naseeb*- no fate for us to be related in the future.' And then Talal said '*ya Ammi*, I love your daughter and I vow to honour and respect her and pamper her and put her as a crown on my head. I know that she is a princess in this house, but I give you my word of honour that she will be the queen of my house.'"

"How can *Ammo* Abu Zaher not be swayed with such a speech?" moaned Hayfa.

"Baba? He thanked Talal and repeated the same sentence again. That there was no *naseeb*. So that was it, they left. Talal hasn't answered or returned any of my calls. It's over."

"But didn't you ask *Ammo* why he did this?"

"He said he didn't like the looks of him. After they left, they made fun of everything about them: the lack of diamonds on his mother's fingers, and Talal's wavy black hair and

car. Talal is so proud of that car because he has been working as a graphic designer since he was still a university student and he's built himself from scratch. He earns much more money than Zaher or Wa'el do, and when it's time to get married and buy a house, he'll do it from his own money, not his father's."

The girls were startled by Reema's sudden appearance, "I'm not coming home with you, I'm joining the girls," she said to her sister, her green eyes sparkling with excitement.

Their pregnant cousin, Aseel, heavily walked over to them and stood in front of them with her hands on her hips, "You didn't have any *knafeh*! There's a little bit left, there's a bit of fine, as usual, the rough one was quickly eaten. Seriously, girls, Bassam got it from this new place in *Abdoun*, the cheese tastes like cream! And even the pistachios taste amazing." She glanced at Reema's round stomach, "Not you, *habibti*, you shouldn't eat *knafeh*." The excitement died from Reema's eyes. Hayfa thanked Aseel and asked her about her baby, "Tata hasn't given up praying for it to be a boy."

Mona scowled, "Damn the honour of this thing, you'd think in the twenty-first century it wouldn't matter if it was a boy or a girl!"

"I know," Aseel moaned, "Bassam is praying it'll be a girl, but his mother—"

"Hayfaaaaa! Monaaaa!" called Abu Ashraf, "*Yalla*, we're leaving."

Hayfa looked at her watch, "Oh, is it three o'clock already?" she stood up and gave her hand to Mona, who dragged herself up and pulled her top down in order to hide any glimpse of her underwear. They waved goodbye to their cousins and walked towards their father's car.

In the car, Abu Ashraf yelled at Ashraf for not going to the mosque and not shaving. "Sure. I'll go to the mosque if you go with me. I don't like going alone," answered Ashraf. Abu Ashraf continued to drive and did not say another word. Hayfa and Ashraf exchanged glances and suppressed their laughter.

Mona did not laugh with them, "Baba, if I wanted to marry a Jordanian would you let me?"

"It depends. If his mother is Palestinian, then I'll think about it."

"But why, Baba?"

"*Habibti*," replied Abu Ashraf with uncommon patience, "Jordanians and Palestinians will never be equals. We'll always be the refugees who came with nothing and built

ourselves from scratch through sweat and hard work from what Jordan had to offer. How would you feel if all your cousins suddenly moved in with us in our house? Ate our food, slept in our comfortable beds? Married, had children and started calling our home their home? Wouldn't you feel that they didn't *really* have a right to be there? Wouldn't you be a little resentful? Of course you would help them out, they are your cousins, but they would take away your own comfort, and you wouldn't be able to help blaming them for your discomfort. You would blame them rather than the circumstances that brought them." He pulled into the driveway, "the reason we wouldn't want you to marry a Jordanian is because you won't be looked upon as an equal, your mother-in-law would drive you crazy. They've also got different traditions than we do."

"What are the different traditions? That their weddings are three days and ours are just one? That's the only different tradition between us," Ashraf said, slamming the car door.

"Our weddings are three nights too," said Um Ashraf, referring to Hebron traditions, "the men's lunch and the *henna* night and then *shame*' before the actual wedding party. See? Three, like Jordanians." She lifted three fingers with a smile.

"And Mama's mother-in-law drove *her* crazy," added Mona.

Um Ashraf laughed. Abu Ashraf's face turned red as he fumbled with the house keys. She stroked Mona's hair and said, "Your grandmother drove all her daughters-in-law crazy, she is a very difficult mother-in-law. But we love her because we know she means well."

"*Yalla* finish this empty talk and go into the house," said Abu Ashraf gruffly.

## Chapter 2

### Friday Afternoon

After the *azoomeh*, Nadeen, Fida, Reema and Siwar all went together to Nadeen's house. Nadeen's parents, Um Farid and Abu Farid, were not as strict as all the other girls' parents, so Nadeen's house was usually where the girls escaped to after Friday's exhausting meal.

Siwar had not yet finished high school, so she was not a proper member of this cousinly cult. She sometimes managed to leave the kitchen table and join her cousins at the younger table, but that did not make them like her any more or any less. They mildly tolerated her, often teased her, and sometimes outright ignored her. The reason that she was able to join the girls this Friday was because her mother asked Nadeen to help cheer her up.

"I heard of another fortune teller," smiled Nadeen, who had the same large black eyes as her brother Farid. She threw herself on her bed, tossing her thick black curly hair over her shoulder and kicking her long legs in skinny jeans, "Who wants to go?"

"Are you sure it's safe to go to fortune tellers?" asked Siwar.

"Of course it's not safe *ya habeeleh*," laughed Fida, "but it's fun."

"We'll have to take our own coffee cups because this woman lives in one room with her six children and her *dorra* and her ten children," said Nadeen, "SHANDRA!!" she suddenly yelled in English, "MAKE FOUR COFFEE. VERY STRONG!"

"What kind of husband makes his two wives live in the same place?" asked Siwar.

"Oh Siwar, you're so naïve," laughed Reema.

A few minutes later, Chandra, Um Farid's Sri Lankan housekeeper, brought in four tiny cups of very strong black coffee. Siwar looked at the cup in confusion, "Drink as fast as you can," instructed Nadeen, "and think of your life as you drink." As soon as everybody finished their coffee, Nadeen expertly flipped the coffee cups around so that the black residue would make shapes along the white china of the cups.

They got into Nadeen's black BMW, talking about Muna's short red sweater that showed too much skin, Nadia's suitor's ugly old car, Hayfa's small breasts and Sana's big nose. They continued to gossip about their mutual friends at university as Siwar half-listened, and half-daydreamed about what her university life would be like. She could just imagine waking up at eight in the morning instead of six o'clock, wearing whatever she wanted instead of the hideous green school uniform, carrying one notebook and a pen instead of a huge overloaded backpack, taking her own 4x4 pickup—although she knew her father could not afford one—and picking up her handsome boyfriend from his house and walking together through the university campus. She was also excited about finally owning her own mobile phone. She never really gave much thought to what she wanted to study, she only knew that her father said she should study finance because he needed an accountant in his company. He said accountants these days were sneaky and expensive.

She stared out the window at the picturesque scenery of Amman. The dim January afternoon sun shone down on them as Siwar gazed out of the car window, absent-mindedly stroking the fringe of her short light brown hair. Siwar was teased for being “too skinny” by the tall and dark and perfectly shaped Nadeen and the shorter, rounder Reema. Siwar, like her cousins Wa'el, Reema and Sana, had her grandmother's olive green eyes. Out of all the cousins, Siwar took after her grandmother the most; she was petite, with honey-coloured skin that tanned easily in the sun.

The large white houses and the big apartment buildings were getting fewer and fewer as was the traffic. It seemed to Siwar as though they were cruising in a semi-deserted island full of yellow hills and trees. The longer Nadeen drove, the less familiar their surroundings were becoming. The area was getting more sandy and rocky.

Siwar awoke from her daydreams as Nadeen drove them through narrow, winding streets. The houses were shabby and grey; there were no trees or gardens. Broken glass, overloaded garbage cans, and cars with no windows and no tyres littered the streets. Children played, women gossiped, and men huddled together smoking *argeelas* and cigarettes. There were nine or ten dusty barefoot children running about playing with stones in front of a little cement house where Nadeen parked her car. They all looked alike; the girls had massive tangles of dirt and hair on their heads, and the boys all had short unevenly cropped black hair. Their ages varied between three years old and ten.

When the children saw the car, they all dropped their stones, and as the four girls got out of the car they were shocked at the stampede of children running towards them and grabbing at them. The girls ran after Nadeen as the children continued clutching at their clothes and bags, "*Ateenee shilen,*" the oldest one kept saying, "give me five piasters," all the others only seemed to want to touch the colourful fabric of the girls' clothes.

Fida kicked one of the more aggressive older boys in the shin, "What is this place you've brought us to, ya Nadeen?" she asked angrily.

Siwar held on to Reema's jacket and walked silently, trying to ignore the children's dirty hands on her body. They entered the front yard of the smallest, shabbiest house in the street, and Siwar had to cover her mouth and nose with both her hands as she started gagging at the stench. "It smells like hundred year old urine," gasped Fida.

"Shut up, this is a refugee camp" replied Nadeen, as she opened her purse and threw all the coins she could find in it in the air. The children screamed happily as they started jumping in order to catch the falling coins. "*Yalla,*" she led the way to a rusty metal door and knocked, "Um Mohammed?"

The door partly opened with a creak, and a wrinkled face with a loose veil around it popped out. When Um Mohammed saw the four girls her cautious expression immediately evaporated as she opened the door. "Come in," she said with a welcoming smile, revealing two gold teeth. Siwar buried her face in Reema's jacket, attempting to inhale a whiff of perfume, but the room's overpowering stench forced its way into her nostrils, causing her to gag again.

"If you vomit on my new Mango jacket, you're dead," whispered Reema.

Um Mohammed watched them come in, and closed the door behind them. Her house consisted of one big room with a partition near the door to make another room, which was used as a kitchen. There was a small gas cooker on the cement floor with a pot over it. A teenage girl, not much younger than Siwar, was squatting next to it, frying some meat. "The ladies who were here before you brought us a bag of meat. My husband's daughter wanted to surprise her father with it when he comes back from the mosque."

"You should add some bay leaves or cinnamon or something to the meat for the smell," Fida instructed the girl. "It will also improve its appearance and taste."

The girl looked up, her pretty face was as dusty as the children outside and her hair equally dirty and bushy, “We don’t *have* bay leaves or cinnamon.” Her *kohl* rimmed eyes looked straight into Fida’s without blinking, as she continued to violently stir the meat.

“*Waleh*, shut up!” Um Mohammed said sternly, “Come in, girls, *yalla*,” and she led them into the other room.

The room was all grey cement, the floor was grey, the ceiling was grey and the walls were grey. There was one window that overlooked the once grey—now yellow— street where the children had resumed their previous game. On the floor, there were thin torn mattresses of different colours along the walls, forming a square seating area. In one corner there was a big pile of mattresses. A baby, tightly wrapped in a blanket, slept on one of them. A single light bulb hung from the ceiling directly above the one chair in the room. It was a white plastic garden chair with red graffiti painted on the back of it. A plump woman sat in it and watched the girls come in. She wore a fake gold ring and a few fake gold bracelets. Her veil was properly tied around her head, completely concealing her hair. Her face was clean and somewhat arrogant. There were no wrinkles on her face, although she looked older than Um Mohammed. “This is *durrti*, Um el Abed.”

The girls sat on the mattresses, Siwar noticed that in spite of the warm sun outside, the room was very musty and cold. “We’ve brought our own coffee cups,” said Nadeen.

“Ah, good,” replied Um Mohammed, she sat on the mattress next to the baby and opened a tin can and threw some small stones on the floor. “Who wants to go first?”

“Me,” said Nadeen, handing Um Mohammed her coffee cup.

Um Mohammed looked into it for a few seconds and then picked up the stones, kissed them and threw them down again. “You’re doing your studies.” Nadeen and the other girls giggled. “You have too many things on your mind that stop you from studying. There is a man in your life. Either his name or his mother’s name or his last name has an R in it, he helps you with your studies, but he does it because it’s the only way he can sit alone with you.” The girls giggled again. “There is a girl with blonde hair, who is she? She is not a relative, she is a stranger, but she has her sights set on this man and she will try to hurt you.”

Nadeen glared at Fida.

“She said it’s a stranger, *habibti*, not a relative!” laughed Fida. “You’re such an animal!”

“What about my family life?” asked Nadeen, ignoring Fida’s giggles. “Will my father buy me a new car?”

Um Mohammed threw the stones again, “you drive recklessly—you should be careful. Your father will buy you a new car.”

The door opened. A teenage girl walked in, “Mama, can you lend me your slippers? I want to go to town and beg.”

Um el Abed took off her slippers and threw them at her, “Go. Beg. Bring us two piasters.” She looked at the girls and laughed.

“Are you and your *durra* friends?” Nadeen asked Um Mohammed.

Um el Abed laughed again, “Yes, of course we are friends, we are like sisters.”

Um Mohammed looked at Siwar and extended her hand, Siwar hesitantly handed her the coffee cup. At that moment, the youngest boy came into the house. He sat next to Siwar. She tried her best not to gag again as she looked into his face and saw a big green lump of snot under his nostrils. Um Mohammed threw the stones, “You are studying well. I see a white paper at the end.”

“Wow, so you’re not going to fail your *Tawjihi* exams!” Said Fida, “I was sure you’d be the first in our family to fail!”

“Listen to me,” said Um Mohammed, “there is a boy... Who is he? He’s handsome. His name has a W and H in it.”

“W and H?” repeated Siwar.

“Come September you will have a new life. You have many friends now. Not a single one of them will remain.”

“How grim!” mumbled Siwar.

“My turn!” Fida tried handing Um Mohammed her coffee cup. Um Mohammed pushed her hand away. “You are young and innocent,” she said staring into Siwar’s eyes intently, “and you have a good heart. Don’t let others trick you.” She took Fida’s cup and looked into it and threw her stones. “Count six days, you will have a suitor at your door.” The girls giggled, “A good man, he is rich. He is a stranger, not a relative. Is your father abroad?” Fida shook her head, “Does he go abroad? He will go abroad. I see many tears in



your house. A sister? A mother? These tears will stop within the month. Although you are sometimes selfish, you are mostly a very kind-hearted girl, you mustn't be so nice all the time. The summer will bring happiness to your household. I see a wedding." Fida beamed, and glanced at Nadeen. Nadeen was looking at the little boy who was lovingly fingering the bright blue shoelace on Siwar's white trainers as he licked the snot from his upper lip.

The door opened suddenly. It slammed against the cement wall, causing everyone in the room to start. In walked a tall dark man with a thick black moustache. The baby woke up and started crying and Um el Abed quickly got up from the chair and sat on the mattress. Um Mohammed took the baby and started hushing it. "What is this?" asked the man looking at the cooking meat.

"One of my clients brought us a bag of meat, your daughter wanted to surprise you," answered Um Mohammed timidly.

"Ah, good!" he smiled showing all his yellow teeth. He took off his worn brown sandals and sat on the chair, "Where is my plate?"

The girl quickly scraped all the meat onto a plate and brought him a loaf of flat round Arabic bread, "*Tfadal, Baba.*" He took the plate without a word and started eating, waving his greasy hand every now and then to flick the flies away. The little boy got up from beside Siwar and slowly edged closer to his father, eyeing the food hungrily. His fingers reached for a piece of meat, but his father flicked them away as he did with the flies. The boy stood beside the chair, watching, not daring to reach for food again.

"Shut that baby up," said the man, with his mouth full.

The girls looked at one another unsure if they should leave or ask for Reema's cup to be read. Um Mohammed took out her large sagging breast from the V neck of her long *tob* and started nursing the baby. She extended her left hand towards Reema, who hesitantly gave her the coffee cup and glanced towards the man who was chewing noisily. Um Mohammed winked at her and smiled. She threw the stones awkwardly with the hand that held the coffee cup, clutching the baby tightly to her breast with the other. She squinted into Reema's cup, "Hmmm, you have a lucky life. So many men love you."

"Really? Who?" asked Reema eagerly.

"Who is this man in your house? Your brother? He causes you many problems." The girls looked at each other knowingly; it was no secret that Wa'el, Reema and Sana's

brother, was merciless when it came to his sisters. “Don’t you worry, he’s travelling for a few days and you can do what you like. Your studies are going well. You will hear good news from a man called Mohammed, Ahmed or Abdallah.”

“Will my father allow me to go to Portugal as an exchange student?”

Um Mohammed threw her stones again, “Yes, you will be allowed to go to Portugal. You are travelling somewhere for the summer. You will cross two seas.”

The girls thanked Um Mohammed and handed her a dinar each. She handed the four dinars to her husband. He glanced at the four green notes and folded them slowly and neatly then put them in the pocket of his bright blue jeans. The man, Abul Abed, had finished eating his meat and started eyeing the girls. His eyes lingered on their breasts. He rubbed his pocket where he had put the money and licked his lips, “You know, girls, I’m looking for a third wife. Do you know a girl who wears jeans? This time around I don’t want an old fashioned wife—I want a modern girl who wears jeans. And like they say, the third one is fruitful!”

Fida laughed, “And what about your thirteen children?”

He laughed, “Are they thirteen? They are more than thirteen. They are sixteen. I want to make them twenty.”

Fida chuckled, “And how will you feed them?” Nadeen nudged her.

“Each child brings his fortune with him,” he answered with a laugh, twirling the end of his thick black moustache with his greasy fingers. “I marry my girls off and get the dowry and God sends fortune with the boys. My son Ali, he brought us a big fortune. He was hit by a car, but wasn’t killed thanks be to Allah, and I got a good sum of money that lasted us two years.”

“Thanks be to Allah for the safety of your boy, and thank you very much for your hospitality,” Nadeen said, dragging Fida towards the door, “we must head home before sunset. Salam!”

The girls ran towards the car and got in before the children could touch them again. They got in the car and quickly locked the doors as the children started banging the windows and shouting for more money. Nadeen sped away. “Ya Allah!” exclaimed Fida, tossing her long straightened fake blonde hair, “What is this?”

“Are you crazy?” said Nadeen angrily, “How could you talk like that to him? He could have kidnapped us or raped us or something!”

“What a scary man...” said Reema shaking her head, “I got so scared when he walked in.”

“The children are hideous, all of them!” Fida laughed.

“Don’t laugh.” Nadeen snapped, “That’s what *your* childhood could have been like if our grandparents hadn’t left Hebron when they did.”

“I didn’t think she was such a good fortune teller either,” continued Fida, “I guess we’ll see. If Wa’el *does* go away before next weekend and if I get a suitor on Thursday, then I’ll come back and see this woman again. If not, I’ll just continue visiting Um Fat’hi, she’s closer and more convenient to get to, and her house doesn’t stink. And if you pay her ten dinars, she can write a spell to bring you a suitor.”

“Oh, I really wish I can go to next weekend’s party,” said Reema, “I hope Wa’el goes away. But who is this Ahmed, Mohammad, or Abdallah who is going to bring me news?”

“Every other man in Jordan is called Ahmed, Mohammed or Abdalla,” said Nadeen. “Who is this boy you’re in love with, Siwar?” She glanced at her young cousin in the rear-view mirror, “Why haven’t you told us before?”

“Please don’t tell anyone!” Siwar begged, “Baba will kill me if he finds out.”

“Nah, he won’t kill you, he’ll just slap you a few times,” Fida said with a chuckle.

“Thank your God that your brothers are in America,” said Reema, “brothers are way worse than fathers.”

“Tell me about it,” said Nadeen, “Farid has a worm in his ass, always trying to turn my dad against me! So who is this boy Siwar, you haven’t answered my question.”

“He’s just a boy in my class. He plays the *oud*, he’s tall and handsome with beautiful long brown hair. He’s one of the most popular boys in my school. His name is Sari. There is no W or H in his name though.”

“Sometimes it can be his mother’s name,” piped in Reema, nodding.

“Sari and Siwar, sounds funny!” Fida laughed, “He’ll be the cause of your failure in *Tawjihi*.”

“Don’t say that,” Nadeen snapped, “but really Siwar,” Nadeen softened her tone, “you should be careful. I know what a distraction a boy can be to your studies.”

“Nadeen,” asked Siwar, “can you drop me off at home? The stench in that house has upset my stomach.”

“Me too,” said Reema, “especially after the heavy meal we’ve had at Tata’s house.”

The girls were uncommonly quiet throughout the rest of the long drive home. They all agreed to tell their parents that they had been at the Pink Peach for coffee. Siwar walked into her house heavy hearted, knowing that she had to call her boyfriend and tell him where she had been all this time.

“How was your outing with your cousins, *habibti*?” Her mother, Um Fadi, greeted her, from the couch. “Did you change atmosphere? Ready for more studying now?”

“Yes, we had fun.”

“We got so many crank calls. Someone kept calling and hanging up when I answered. I must talk to your father about getting a phone with callers’ I.D.”

Siwar’s heart skipped a beat, she tried to sound nonchalant, “Yes that’s a good idea.” She took the cordless phone to her room and dialled her boyfriend’s number. He answered before the first ring ended.

“Where have you been all this time?”

“I’m so sorry, I had no idea they’d ask me to go along to Nadeen’s house, they rarely do, so I couldn’t say no.”

“You could have called me from her house.”

“I’m so sorry *habibi*, we weren’t at her house the whole time.”

“Well—where were you?”

Siwar narrated her experience at the fortune teller’s house. He was silent for a few seconds after she had finished, then he exploded, “Are you stupid? How could you go to such a place? Do you know what could have happened if the police came? Of course she would tell you bad things about me. That’s what fortune tellers do. Did you believe her? I’m sure you believed her! And your cousins now know about me, I’m sure you were stupid enough to admit everything to them.”

Siwar took a deep breath, “Yes, I did admit to them that I loved you, but I didn’t tell them that you’re my boyfriend. But the fortune teller didn’t say anything bad about you!”

“You are a donkey. I don’t even know why I bother with you. Don’t call me again.” The line went dead.

Siwar threw herself on her pillow and wept. The phone rang again, she hoped it would be Sari, but it was Reema. “You won’t believe this! The minute I got home my mother told me that a man called Hameed bought her land! That land has been up for sale for *years!* My father thought it would never be sold! The fortune teller was right! She said I’d hear news from a man called Ahmed, Mohammed or Abdallah—Hameed is very similar to Ahmed—she was *right!*”

“Wow, *mabrook.*”

“That means that you will pass *Tawjihi.* Study well, okay?”

“Alright,” sighed Siwar. After hanging up the phone, she decided that she would waste no more time crying over her now ex-boyfriend. She grabbed her biology book with determination and started memorizing the different parts of cells. The phone rang again. It was Sari.

He was sobbing uncontrollably, “You don’t love me anymore!”

“I do! Of course I do!”

“You never do anything for me. Nothing at all!”

“I try, I always try, but it’s so hard, I have to study for *Tawjihi*, my parents monitor my every move, you know that.”

“I want to see you tonight.”

“I can’t, my mother is at home.”

“Ask her to go buy you something impossible to find.” He told her exactly what to say to her mother.

Siwar went to her mother, who was comfortably sipping mint tea and watching TV. “Mama, can you please go buy me a book? I need a book about human cells. You can find it in the book shop near Nadeen’s house.”

“*Habibti*, it’s Friday, no bookshops will be open now. We can go together tomorrow.”

“No, the one near Nadeen’s house is open on Fridays, you can try that, and if you don’t find it there, there’s a bookshop in the First Circle that opens till very late every day of the week. You’ll be guaranteed to find it there.”

“Is it that urgent? The First Circle is a forty-five minute drive on a Friday evening. I’m watching my Egyptian series. It’s the last episode.”

“Can’t you go after it’s finished? Please, please? I really need it.” She ran back to her room; “She’s going after her Egyptian *mosalsal* finishes. That should give you enough time to find a taxi and come over.”

“What about your father?”

“My father goes to his mother’s house every Friday night. He complains that he has to go to Tata’s house every Friday for lunch, so he spends his evenings at my other grandmother’s house. He won’t be back till late.”

Forty minutes later, Siwar and Sari were kissing in Siwar’s dark garden. Siwar hated meeting Sari alone because it always ended up with his long tongue all over her face. She hated the wet kisses and wondered how the movies made them seem so romantic. “Do you still love me?” asked Sari.

“Of course I still love you, *hayaty*, my life.” He sat on the grass and pulled her in his lap. “But I just have to focus on my studying. I need to pass. And so do you.”

“It’s easy for me to pass, but you, you need double the effort because you’re not smart,” he kissed her again, and stealthily slid his hand inside her sweat pants and inside her underwear.

She tried pulling his hand out, “Stop that, Sari, please.” He continued to massage her, “Will you stop? Things like that prove that you *don’t* love me.”

“No, this is how I show you how much I *do* love you, by ignoring my own needs and focusing on yours,” he started stroking her. “I think I’m definitely buying you that boob pump enhancer thing, your tits are way too tiny. Or, if you want to show me how much you love me, *you’d* buy it.”

“What? It’s sixty-five dinars! I’m still in debt after buying your birthday presents.”

He sighed loudly and took his hand out of her pants. He sniffed his hand and laughed, “Smells like scampi!” Siwar blushed, she had washed that area vigorously before he came. “There’s just no pleasing you,” said Sari seriously, “you even moan about my birthday. See? You don’t love me the way I love you!”

“You still haven’t gotten me anything for my birthday.”

“We had *exams*. You’re so ungrateful. I think I should find a more understanding girlfriend.” He got up suddenly, causing her to fall from his lap onto the grass.

She was silent for a moment, thinking if she dared say the words that she had been writing in her diary over and over again. Eventually she said, “All you cause me is pain.”

“It was just a small fall on the grass. Don’t be so dramatic.”

“You don’t treat me the way you used to. I think we should break up for real this time. We both have to focus on our studying. Our exams are in two weeks!”

“Studying is all you think about. You don’t love me at all.”

“You’re right, maybe I don’t love you anymore. You make me feel like shit every time I talk to you. I’m losing all my friends because at recess, I sit with you, in the joint classes, I sit with you. While I’m at home, I’m always talking on the phone with you. And *if* one of them invites me to her house—which I may add, hardly ever happens anymore—I spend most of my time there on the phone with you! I can’t take this anymore.”

Sari started sobbing, “I’ll prove to you that I love you. I’m going to marry you.”

“In five years? I don’t know if we’re going to last that long. We fight too much, Sari.”

“No, let’s get married now. I have a friend who can help us.”

“What? We’re not eighteen yet! And our parents will never let us!”

He knelt down next to her and took her hand. “No, listen to me, we’ll get married in secret. So many kids at other schools are doing it. We’ll be able to do whatever we want, we can share our bodies. The reason we keep fighting is because I’m too frustrated. I want to touch every inch of your body, but you won’t let me. We’ll rent an apartment where we can go and have our own little world.”

“What about our parents?”

“In five years’ time, I’ll formally ask your father for your hand in marriage. And then we’ll go through the proceedings of a real marriage, a *jaha*, an engagement party, a wedding, everything.”

“So it’s a fake marriage, so we still can’t do what we want.”

“No, it’s an Islamic marriage. It’s ok, you’re not smart enough to understand, we took this in religion class, remember? We can get married, it’s not *haram*.”

“It sounds like a crazy idea.”

“I’ll make you the happiest girl in the world. I’ll be the best husband. Just think, you’ll be the first among your cousins to get married!”

“Two of them are already married. One on my father’s side, one on my mother’s.”

“Yes, but come on, you’re seventeen. The others are in their late twenties and still unmarried. I’ll treat you well—I won’t be so frustrated so we won’t fight at all.”

“I’ll think about it. I also need to make sure that it’s not *haram*. But what if in five years’ time you come and Baba says no?”

“Why would your father say no? I’m handsome, by then I’d have finished university, I’ll probably have an excellent job. My parents are both highly educated, better educated than your parents. They both have excellent jobs. I’m from Jerusalem, for God’s sake, you’re from Hebron, if anything my parents are the ones who might say no! I would be marrying beneath me. Look at you, you’re a scrawny thing, nobody understands what I see in you.”

Siwar was deeply hurt by what he said, but she had no time to answer because she heard her mother’s car park in the garage. They quickly kissed goodbye and she snuck into the house and ran to her room. Her desk was already set in advance to look as if she was hard at work. She quickly sat on the chair and put her glasses on and stared intently at the text book with her heart beating fast. “Hello *hayaty*,” her mother said, “I’m sorry, both bookshops were closed. We’ll go together tomorrow. How is your studying going?” Her mother knelt down and gave her a kiss.

Siwar stared at the biology book after her mother left the room. The kiss her mother had planted on her cheek burnt like acid. She knew she was betraying her parents’ trust. She felt torn between overwhelming love for her boyfriend and the guilt she felt towards her family. She felt her boyfriend was right. He would be marrying beneath him. She felt lucky that the most handsome, most popular guy at school loved her so deeply in spite of all her shortcomings.

She also knew that marriage would mean that she no longer had to fear God. Every time she was with her boyfriend and the Imam in the nearby mosque called for prayer, she would feel a sharp knife stab at her conscience. Trying to block out images of the burning fires of hell, she tried to console herself that she was not *really* doing anything wrong—she was not having sex, her clothes always remained on, she would *never* have sex out of wedlock. Marriage would ease her fear of God, but what of the fear of her father? She wrote her name on her biology book in English, *Mrs Siwar Sari Ahmed*. She knew that most Arab women did not take their husband's surnames, but she felt she wanted to be



completely his, body, soul and name. She wrote her name in Arabic *Al Sayida Siwar Sari Ahmed*.

## Chapter 3

### Friday Sunset

#### Aseel

Aseel and her husband Bassam only attended her grandmother's weekly lunch every other Friday. Aseel found these Fridays a blessing, as it was a break from a long, boring chore-filled day. She loved seeing her uncles, aunts, cousins and, because she was the first married granddaughter, she had become one of the fortunate few whom her grandmother actually adored. Her being pregnant doubled the adoration, and she could safely say that she was now the most favoured in the entire Al Manseyeh family.

The Fridays that Aseel and her husband went to Tata's had the same routine. After lunch they would go home for their one-hour siesta, and then Aseel would call up her friends and talk on the phone for a few hours while her husband watched the afternoon Egyptian film or an Arab league football match. Later, the couple would visit Bassam's family. The eldest brother was married and Aseel did not get along with his wife. Dara was a tall, slim, veiled doctor. She was intelligent, smart, and funny. What bothered Aseel the most was that she was also her gynaecologist/obstetrician. Aseel, in her seventh month of pregnancy, loathed being in the same room with Dara. Dara and her husband Naji had met while they were studying abroad. Aseel had to admit even to herself, they made a handsome couple. Dara's small blue eyes shone radiantly, and the veil that rimmed her face complemented rather than hid her natural beauty.

Aseel slowly dragged her heavy body into her mother-in-law's living room. Her heart sank when she saw that Dara was already serving the coffee and Bassam's two brothers were happily chatting to their mother.

Aseel carefully lowered herself into the nearest chair with a sigh after she had made her round of kisses and hellos. "How is my grandson today?" asked her mother-in-law.

“We’re still not sure that he’s a grandson *khalto*,” laughed Dara, “the baby is still shy and doesn’t want to show us his private parts!”

“No, I’m sure it will be a boy, I made sure Aseel ate fish every day for a month before conceiving, and told her to wash her genitals in bicarbonate soda every night before going to sleep,” said Um Naji.

Aseel’s face and ears turned bright pink. She kept her eyes on her long red fingernails and started violently stroking her long wavy honey-coloured hair. “Green tea for the mother-to-be!” Dara said, removing Aseel’s hair from her hands and replacing it with a mug of tea.

“*Yamma*, this is old wives’ tales,” said Naji.

“Why do you think you don’t have any sisters?”

“Yes, exactly, because we don’t have any sisters, I really wish my first born would be a girl!” said Bassam softly, taking his wife’s sweaty swollen hand in his cold hairy one.

“Well, it’s *not* going to be a girl because *scientifically*—I saw this on TV—a doctor was explaining on the morning show—I forget what it’s called, you know, that new channel that just became popular—it’s a very good channel by the way, they have good cooking shows— you should watch those Aseel, you could learn a thing or two and feed my poor son, look at how skinny he’s become—and this new channel also has good Syrian comedies in the mornings. Anyway, this doctor said that the X chromosome is much stronger than the Y chromosome. It lives longer, but it *swims* much much slower than the Y chromosome.” Um Naji was pointing her index finger and was wagging her wrist as she spoke, “*So* if intercourse occurs on the same day of ovulation, the Y-chromosomes reach the egg first and the foetus is a boy. If intercourse occurs before or *after* ovulation, then it’s a girl. Aseel, Dara and I discussed this and we decided on the exact time of when Aseel and Bassam should try. We also discussed which position is guaranteed to make a boy. There is *no way* that this baby is *not* a boy. Little Abd El Muhaimen is going to grow up to be a strong healthy man just like my father, God rest his soul.”

Aseel felt a sudden surge of maternal strength. She knew she would not be able to live with herself if her son had to live with the name Abd El Muhaimen. “Ummmm, *Khalto*,

although Abd El Muhaimen is a good strong old name, I'd rather go with something shorter and more modern, like Tareq or Laith."

"What? Tareq? I never know what this name means. Urgent? Knocker? I never understand why people think that is a name! Laith? Lion? Is your son a beast? No, your son is a faithful servant of God, our protector. Naji's son will be named after his paternal grandfather, and it's only fair that my first grandson should be named after my own father." Um Naji's tattooed eyebrows moved up and down expressively.

Out of the corner of her eye, Aseel noticed Dara's eyes on her. If there was anything Aseel hated more than Dara's success, it was Dara's sympathy.

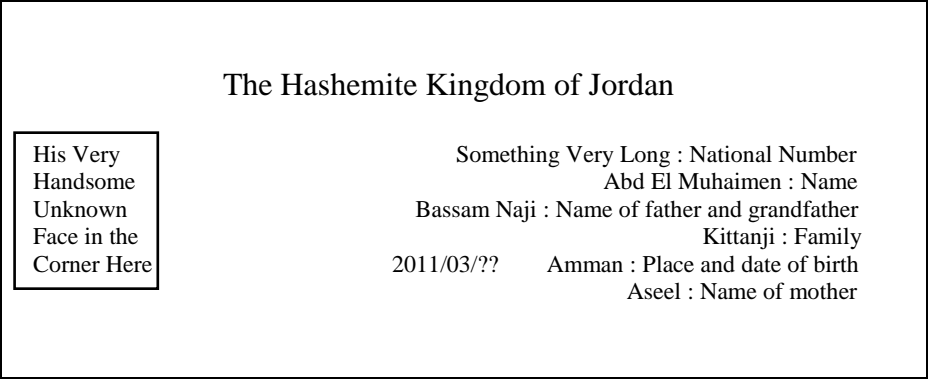
"And when is Naji's baby boy coming?" asked Aseel, with her eyes fixed on her mug of green tea.

Um Naji's attention shifted immediately to Dara. For the next half hour, Aseel was sure her mother-in-law would question Dara's fertility, asking detailed questions about her menstrual cycle, her fish eating habits, and of course how often she washes her genitals in bicarbonate soda. Aseel felt no remorse as she sipped her tea and was waiting for the right moment for making her excuses to leave. Her body felt heavy, and her embarrassment had caused even more perspiration than her pregnant body normally produced. She could feel the underarms of her T-shirt getting wetter and more uncomfortable with every passing second. Aseel felt an urge to be outside in the fresh air. She suddenly had an idea.

"Bassam *habibi*, I have a craving for *ish il saraya*, I think I'll just walk down to Cozmo and buy the ingredients so I can make it tonight and you can take some to work tomorrow." She knew her husband would not refuse since *ish il saraya* was one of his favourite desserts, and would kill all arguments about her over-tiring herself or that she should stay for supper. She energetically gathered her things and walked towards Cozmo, the department store that also had a massive supermarket.

The sun had just set, and the sky was a mixture of scarlet and purple. All she could hear were cars and honking horns, but as she sank deeper into her own thoughts she became oblivious to the sounds and pollution. Aseel rarely had time to be alone and think. She felt blessed, yet was terrified of the future. She was worried about the baby's health, although Dara assured her that everything was as it should be. Aseel could not but feel invaded; this baby had taken over her body. Although she loved him more than she loved

herself, if he was going to be named Abd El Muhaimen, and his middle name would be his father's and his family name would be his father's family name, how would he really be her son? She would have to raise him to be loyal to his family—his father's family. Her allegiance was to Al Manseyeh, and she wished her child's could be the same. She and her child would not even be of the same family. She could just visualize his identity card:



Aseel sighed. Her baby boy was going to carry his father's last name and his first name will be his grandfather's name. She felt angry. This was *her* baby! She was the one carrying him and giving him life, she was the one feeding him now from her own body, she would be the one to nurse him once he was born. She took comfort in the fact that once he was born those who wished to pray for him will have to refer to him as Abd El Muhaimen son of Aseel daughter of Sumaya, daughter of Waad. In prayer, he will be his mother's son—and, she vowed, his name will *not* be Abd El Muhaimen.

It then occurred to Aseel that she may very well have a daughter. Not that she believed in any of the things that her mother-in-law had forced her to do—Aseel had skipped a few fish meals, and in fact, had eaten chicken once or twice. She also had washed herself with the bicarbonate soda only once, and could not stand the discomfort. She could be carrying a baby girl. Aseel smiled at the thought. Then fear crept into her heart as she imagined what her mother-in-law's reaction would be.

Aseel had reached Cozmo. She went into the clothing section first. She suddenly felt hideous. Everyone at work and at her grandmother's house said she was adorable. They

told her she looked radiant and that pregnancy suited her. Her husband, on the other hand, had admitted that he could not find her attractive. She thought of the stretch marks that were appearing in spite of all the cocoa butter lotions that she was using on a daily basis. It was January, yet the bathing suits were on display. Would she ever wear a bikini again? Her eyes quickly scanned the splashes of colour. Not a single one-piece bathing suit was to be found. What about mothers? What about women who have stretch marks on their bellies? Are they meant to be locked away in their homes with their kids, never to swim again? She decided that she had to escape this section which seemed to have “For Single Women Only” written all over it. She turned around abruptly and hit her foot on a hidden rack dropping a garment. She looked around, there was nobody to assist her, so she slowly and painfully bent down to pick it up. It was a sober dark blue one-pieced bathing suit. “I could wear this for a funeral,” she muttered as she hung it back.

She made her way to the baby section and was smiling to herself at the mental image of her pregnant body in a bathing suit attending a wake. She felt someone’s eyes on her. Curiously, she looked up and found a blonde bearded man smiling at her. Taken off guard, she smiled back and instantly looked away. The initial Arab instinct would have been either to avoid or scowl at any unknown man looking in her direction. But he was obviously not Arab, and his smile was friendly.

She noticed a little pink sweater with white bunnies and her heart melted. She realised that she really wanted a girl. She was suddenly shocked at the thought. She had always assumed that she did not prefer either gender as long as the baby was healthy. Was her wanting a girl an act of defiance against her mother-in-law’s constant nagging? As she touched the soft fabric of the pink sweater, she imagined her baby girl wearing it and tears sprung to her eyes. She quickly searched her pockets for a tissue and accidentally dropped the sweater. *Not again*, she thought, while continuing to search for a tissue. “*Tfadali, madam,*” said a deep voice, she looked up and found that the bearded man—who, she could not help but notice, had a strikingly handsome face—was extending a small pack of tissues to her. She gratefully took one and blew her nose and he bent down and handed her the sweater that she had dropped.

“*Shukran,*” she said, taking the sweater.

“*Btitkalami Englizi?*” he asked in broken Arabic.

“Yes, I do,” she answered in English with a smile.

“This is your first baby?” he asked in a very pronounced British accent.

“Yes, it is,” she answered shyly. She was not used to talking to strange men. The fact that he was a foreigner made her less nervous because he would not assume the worst of her for engaging in conversation with him.

“I assume it’s a girl?”

“I don’t know yet, I just thought it was a beautiful sweater,” it then struck her that it was a bit odd that he was a tourist in the Middle East and was looking at baby clothes. “It’s a strange place to find a foreigner shopping in,” she said with a smile. She spoke English the same way she spoke Arabic, with the same intonations and grammar, and even pronounced the English words in a way that made them sound almost Arabic.

“Yeah,” he chuckled, “my boss just had a baby, so I thought it would be a nice gesture to get something.”

“Oh, in these situations, if you’re not a close friend of the family, you could send chocolate or flowers. Or a teddy bear. I don’t think they’ll expect you to get clothes.” Aseel looked into his green eyes and felt herself starting to perspire profusely again.

“Ah, see, it’s always good to have a local perspective, and preferably a woman’s! Thanks for the advice, I think I’ll take it. Are you feeling better now?”

Aseel’s face started turning red, “Yes, yes, I’m better. Thank you.”

They stood in awkward silence for a few seconds. He cleared his throat, “Well then,” he said, “I’d better get going now. Good luck!”

Aseel said goodbye and automatically headed in the opposite direction and kept walking until she found herself facing the fire exit at the very back of the store. She felt flustered and continued to pace aimlessly from isle to isle, thinking of the man’s voice, her body odour, her un-tweezed eyebrows, and wondered what else she could have said. She then remembered that she could go to the maternity clothes section. As she walked, her eye caught her reflection in a long mirror. She looked at her large body in the tight fitting purple training suit. Her face was bright pink, her hair was tangled and messy, and her red nails looked tacky. Her orthopaedic white sandals revealed swollen toes with chipped pink nail polish. She also noticed, with horror, that there was a small bush of very black hair on each toe. With her belly being so big, she could not see her toes, let alone reach them with

the sticky sugar she used for removing unwanted hair. Her heart sank, *I used to be beautiful*, she thought, looking at her sad puffy hazel eyes. Her pale face had bright pink circles on each cheek. She had not tweezed her eyebrows in months. She started grabbing garments without looking at the prices. She picked out some smart trousers, a few dresses, some blouses, and even dragged the heavy things to the shoe section and picked out sensible yet pretty sandals. Without trying the clothes on, she paid for them with her own credit card.

It had already gone dark, and as Aseel waddled back to her mother-in-law's house carrying the heavy shopping bags, she kept thinking of the blonde Englishman. When he bent down to pick up the sweater, did he notice her hairy toes and chipped nail polish? The thought mortified her and she reached for her mobile phone in her pocket and called her mother, "Hi Mama.... I'm fine.... No, no nothing is wrong. Are you free tomorrow after breakfast? Can you make some sugar tonight and do my legs for me tomorrow? No, there's no occasion, I just feel hairy.... Okay, that's great.... See you at eleven? *Shukran*, Mama."

She felt better as she put the mobile phone back in her pocket. She stopped walking and put the bags down. She stared at the sky and inhaled the January air, it felt as fresh and warm as spring. She felt her baby kick and smiled as she rubbed her belly. Hearing someone walking behind her, she turned around, hoping that it would be the Englishman. It was not. It was an Egyptian worker, carrying two shovels and a pair of big rubber boots, on his way back home after a long day working under the blazing sun. Aseel picked up her shopping bags and continued walking and daydreaming about wearing her new clothes and bumping into the Englishman. She imagined speaking to him in fluent English, telling him about her university degree, hearing all about his work, his reasons for being here, exchanging jokes. She smiled the entire way back. When she finally reached Um Naji's house, she froze, looking at the shopping bags and realizing that she did not bring the dessert ingredients. She walked to her husband's car and holding her large belly with one hand, she placed the bags under the car. She stood up slowly and looked at the menacing house that loomed before her. *I really don't want to go in there*, she thought.

Nobody had told her that marriage meant you had to put aside your personality, your opinions, your needs and wishes and dreams. She had thought that marriage was about love and living life to the fullest. Before marriage, she was always told by her father,



“When you have your own house you can do what you like. But as long as you live under my roof, you have to do as you're told!” That was her father's answer to everything, from going to a party to wearing a mini-skirt. She thought that once she got married she would be able to do everything she was not able to do before. She liked her husband, Bassam. He was not the most handsome man she ever met, but she liked him the most out of all her suitors because he was kind and gentle. He seemed to be looking for love too. Two people, who were looking for love, found each other. Aseel always thought it was romantic. But now, standing in front of his mother's house she felt that, although they had found each other, they had not found love in each other. Her baby kicked. She thought of the Englishman. She dragged her feet towards the oppressive house.

“Where have you been?”

“Where're the ingredients?”

“Are you alright?”

Aseel felt dizzy at the bombardment of questions fired at her from all directions. “*Yalla, yalla habibti,*” said Bassam taking her arm, “let's get you home, you look exhausted.”

One of the many Arab customs of common courtesy was for the host to stand outside and wave until all guests got into their cars, and drove off. No matter how hot or cold the weather was, Um Naji took this very seriously. If she went inside before the cars drove off it would be a sign that she could not wait for the guests to leave. This time, however, she needed the toilet desperately, and was shifting from foot to foot as she waved. The harder she waved, the more she willed them to hurry up.

Aseel, was thinking of the shopping bags that she did not want her mother-in-law to see. “*Khalto,* please go inside, the mosquitoes will eat you!” she shouted from behind the car, knowing that there were no mosquitoes in January.

“No, no, it's alright, I'll see you off,” shouted Um Naji in reply hopping from one foot to the other.

“Please, there's no need! We're not your guests!” To Aseel's delight, Um Naji's bladder made her forget her hospitality and she yelled something about there being no formalities among loved ones and quickly dashed inside. Aseel picked up her shopping bags and threw them in the back seat.

“What's all this?” asked Bassam, driving off.

“Just a few things I bought.”

“How did you pay for them?”

“I used my own credit card.”

“Send a woman to buy ingredients for dessert and she comes back with a lot of unnecessary things,” chuckled Bassam.

“What do you mean, unnecessary? I'm going into my eighth month of pregnancy, I need clothes to wear to work.”

“It's okay *habibti*, no need to get emotional.”

“I'm not getting emotional. I just needed clothes.”

“It's fine, it's okay *habibti*, just relax,” he cooed softly, “I know you can't control your hormones. Just try to take a deep breath.”

“My hormones are fine.”

“Just breathe, *habibti*, breathe and try to picture our baby.”

“Will you stop it?” Aseel screamed, “My hormones are not making me emotional! Your mother was going on about my pregnancy as if I was a cow!”

“This yelling is not good for the baby, *habibti*,” said Bassam with exaggerated patience, “just calm down.”

“Tell your mother to stop harassing me!”

“This is her first grandchild, she's just excited about it, *habibti*, mother means well. Just lengthen your soul on her.”

“My soul is going to snap because of her!” Aseel looked out the window. She wondered if she had gone too far. Bassam drove on in silence.

When they got home Bassam immediately went to his game console and started playing a football game. He put his feet on the coffee table and kicked his shoes off. Aseel took her shopping bags into the bedroom and came back into the living room and started tidying up the apartment. There were half filled glasses of coke on the coffee table, on the dining table and on top of the television. There were half filled bags of potato chips, chocolate bar wrappers, and there were even bits of popcorn on the carpet. She mechanically wiped the tables. She thought of the Englishman, imagining different scenarios where they might meet again and what they would say to each other. She

dreamily took out the vacuum cleaner and started vacuuming. Moments later she awoke from her daydreams and felt a tap on her shoulder. She switched off the vacuum cleaner, “Do you mind? I’m trying to play a game here.”

“Sorry *habibi*, this will only take a minute,” replied Aseel.

“No, *habibti*, do it tomorrow when I’m not home.”

“I’ve got things to do tomorrow, I’d rather do it now, it’ll just take a minute.”

“Look, I’ve been patient with you and your raging hormones. But can’t a man just enjoy peace and quiet in his own home anymore?”

Aseel looked at Bassam feeling her anger bubble up again. “If you would learn to chew with your mouth closed then bits of the popcorn you’ve been eating all day wouldn’t be bringing ants to the carpet and I wouldn’t have to vacuum when I’m so tired!”

“What’s this new trend of you raising your voice at me?” he yelled back. “And you know what? This is *my* apartment and I can do what I want with it. *Ana hurr*, if I want to chew with my mouth open, I’ll chew with my mouth open.”

Aseel threw the vacuum cleaner on the floor. “Since this is *your* apartment, *you* clean it!” She stomped into the bedroom and slammed the door.

Once in her room, she could feel her heart beating fast and her baby kicking frantically. She clutched her belly and took deep breaths. She saw the shopping bags that she had thrown on the bed. Her thoughts returned to the Englishman as she took out each item lovingly. She started trying on the clothes, struggling into each garment, admiring herself in the mirror, and then taking it off and trying on the next. She fumbled through her accessories trying to find additions to compliment her new outfits. She started applying makeup and realised that she did not have a decent concealer. She checked the time and found that it was a quarter to nine—the pharmacies would still be open. She quickly got back into her shabby track suit and went into the living room, where her sulking husband was still playing his video game, the vacuum cleaner was as she left it on the floor. “My skin feels irritated,” said Aseel, “I’m just going to buy some cream from the pharmacy.”

“Do you want me to go get it for you?”

“No, thank you.”

“Do you need money for it?”

“No, no,” she opened the door and said, “I won’t be long.”

Aseel stood in front of her apartment building and looked around. There was a cool breeze and the blazing lights of busy streets and inviting shops welcomed Aseel into the crowded city. There were several shops and pharmacies nearby. She decided to go into a perfume shop. The women were all dressed elegantly with diamonds glittering from their ears and fingers. Aseel felt awkward walking in, aware of her appearance, but was greeted warmly by one of the shop assistants. "I need makeup," said Aseel simply, "all mine is really old, from before I got married, and I feel that my skin is ageing, so I need something..." her voice trailed off as she put her hands to her face and pulled her skin back gently.

"Yes, yes, of course," said the delighted shop assistant, and started showing Aseel different colours and brands. The shop assistant applied samples of makeup on Aseel, who avoided looking at prices as she chose different products. She glanced at the mirror, her eyelashes looked thick and long, her hazel eyes were rimmed with black eye liner and her eyelids were coated in grey. She smiled, her lips shone but Aseel felt that her teeth were not as white as they could be. "So what's your night regime?" asked the shop assistant.

"I just wash my face and then moisturize," shrugged Aseel.

"Oh, I'll show you this new Vitamin E and C eye cream to reduce your puffiness, I also noticed you have dark rings under your eyes while I was applying your concealer. See? You just apply this much, as big as a lentil seed, and rub it ever so gently, like this," the shop assistant dabbed a clear gel, smudging Aseel's black eye makeup.

Aseel frowned, but took the tube the shop assistant handed her. Aseel was applying different colours of nail polish over each red finger-nail, thinking that she had already spent all of last month's salary on the new clothes she bought. She looked at her sloppily-done fingernails, "You know?" she said to the shop assistant, "Since my *jhaz* I haven't bought a single thing for myself."

"Really?"

"Yes, marriage makes you grow up and forget yourself."

"Don't scare me! I'm getting my *jhaz* ready. I just bought my lingerie from a place right across the street, over there," she pointed in the direction of the shop, "and tomorrow I'm going shopping with my girlfriends at the mall. Getting the *jhaz* is so much fun! It's like a dream. Someone just hands you money and says 'go buy pretty things!'"

Aseel looked at the young, eager, shop assistant. “Half the things I bought I never wore. When you're getting your *jhaz*, you're still in your single girl mentality, you buy the clothes you would wear now, not clothes you should wear to impress your in-laws, or the clothes a married woman is expected to wear. My advice? Go with your mother, not with your girlfriends.”

The shop assistant's smile faded, “Is there anything else you wanted?”

“Yes, pregnancy is giving me stretch marks...”

“This product works like magic, just apply it every morning after you shower. Do you have cellulite? We have a brand new product, this one,” she picked up a bar of soap from a shelf, “use this soap every day when you shower, apply it in circular motions, then use this,” she took out a round spiked plastic sponge. She moved it about in circular motions and said, “You rub yourself with this in circular motions and then you apply this,” she took out a tube from the shelf, “this one has coffee and grapefruit extracts, rub it on the area that has cellulite and then rinse it off and then apply this lotion and then it will disappear like magic. My friend tried, she was doing it regularly, like the five prayers. She swears it disappeared and it made her legs smooth.”

Aseel bought everything the shop assistant gave her. The more money she spent, the more beautiful she felt. As she stepped out of the shop she noticed that the streets were less busy and the shops were starting to close. She hurried into the nearby pharmacy and bought a two-week tooth whitening programme and then went to the lingerie shop that the shop assistant had pointed out. She poked her head in and found a man sitting behind the counter. “Can I help you, madam?”

“Errrr, I was just looking for a few things.”

“What exactly where you looking for, madam? We have a new collection of Syrian under-shirts and we have some very comfortable breastfeeding bras. What's your size, madam?” he asked, his eyes darting to her breasts, “I will give you a good price.”

Aseel's face turned bright red. She tried to muster a polite smile as she left the shop. She started heading home when a little boy clutched her clothes, “May God keep you and bring your son in safety and health. Give me a few piasters, may God grant you long life and health and give you a strong baby boy with blue eyes.” He extended his dirty hand and Aseel held her bags tightly and kept walking briskly. He kept walking after her, “May God

soften the heart of your mother-in-law on you, may He make your husband rich with the piaster of *halal*. May God keep you, by the name of God you look like a daughter of *halal* family.”

“Go away, I don't have money,” said Aseel walking quickly.

“May God keep you safe and healthy and give you a painless delivery, may God soften your heart on those lesser than you—”

“Hey, you!” shouted a man from the pavement, “You son of a dog! Stop bothering the woman! Go away, may God damn you and the likes of you!” The boy ran away.

When Aseel reached her home, she found her husband as she had left him. She nearly tripped over the vacuum cleaner, “These beggars in the streets,” she kicked the vacuum cleaner aside, “they are animals!”

“They are getting more and more aggressive. I feel sorry for them though, I usually give them any spare change I have.”

“You're crazy, don't feel sorry for them. They're trained to make you pity them. The boy that stuck to me now spoke like he was a seventy-year-old Hajj.”

“But what're a few piasters going to affect my bank account?”

“I'm going to bed, I'm so tired.”

“I see you bought more than just cream for your rash.”

“Yes. I used my own credit card, don't worry.”

“Are you going to leave the vacuum cleaner in the middle of the living room?”

“It's your house, isn't it? If you don't like it there, you put it away,” said Aseel, amazed at her boldness.

“Aseel, I'm going to let this pass because I know you are hormonal and emotional.”

“Good, because I'm too tired to fight with you now. Good night.” She went to the bedroom and lovingly put away all her new purchases, daydreaming of how she would look the next time she saw the Englishman.

## Chapter 4

### Friday Evening

#### Sana

Reema walked into the living room after her adventure with her cousins and the fortune teller to find Sana, Um Wa'el and Abu Wa'el scattered around the living room watching an Egyptian film. Abu Wa'el was in his white *dishdash* and Um Wa'el was in a blue *tob*, her dark brown hair in an oily bun. Sana was already in her green pyjamas. "What's this film?" asked Reema, sitting beside her sister.

"This girl, her name is Nadia of all names, was found by her father in the garden with a man. Now her father is punishing her. But the poor man, the man she was with in the garden really loves her but is of a different social class."

"Poor girl," said Reema.

"She deserves it, she shouldn't have snuck around with a man like that," grunted Um Wa'el.

"But she loves him," argued Sana, as the character Nadia sobbed in the background.

"Yeah, why are fathers so hard on their daughters all the time?" asked Reema.

"Fathers aren't hard on their daughters," replied Abu Wa'el, "fathers care about their daughters' wellbeing. These two are from different backgrounds. She's rich, he's poor. There is no compatibility between them. Girls are emotional and they are easily fooled, so it's up to their fathers to protect them from their own folly. If that girl would be allowed to marry that man, she wouldn't be happy, she wouldn't be able to carry on living the way she was living in her father's house. It's logical that the father intervened. But his punishment is not harsh enough, the film is fictional, it caters to the audience's entertainment."

"But, Baba, isn't it her own decision?"

"No, no, it's the father's decision of course. Why else is it that the father has to sign as proof of consent in the marriage contract? The father signs before the girl even."

“I wish I were born a boy,” sighed Reema. “Then you’d let me study in Portugal next year.”

Her father chuckled, “Why go to Portugal when Amman is so beautiful?” He patted Reema’s leg, “Besides, a father doesn’t love his son the way he loves his daughter! From the day of the girl’s birth the father recognizes the need to protect his daughter until she is married. And once she is married his heart is broken that another man is taking care of his girl. A strange man. It’s very hard on the father. That’s why the father has to make sure that the man who marries his girl has to be a good man.”

“Are you saying you love us both more than Wa’el?” asked Reema.

“No, I love Wa’el as well, but it’s different. Wa’el will take on the business after me. He will take care of his mother and his sisters after I’m gone. Wa’el’s son will carry my name. It’s important to have a son, but I don’t expect affection from Wa’el. Wa’el won’t take care of me when I’m old, you will. Men and women complete each other. You offer the warmth and tenderness, and he will offer the continuation of our line and the financial support.” He chuckled again and squeezed his daughter’s hand.

“But Tata always says that your daughter is your burden till you're in your grave.”

“Yes, but that means that we worry about you because there are more ways which you can get hurt,” Abu Wa’el chuckled, “Um Wa’el, make us a pot of tea.”

“Sana, make your father a pot of tea,” said Um Wa’el sternly.

Sana went without a word. She felt a surge of pride that her father thought her so important and relied on her to care for him once he grew old. She felt grateful for all her father gave her and was glad of the opportunity to give him something in return one day. Sana was a dutiful daughter. She had never done anything that would give her parents cause to be angry with her. Her father had once commented that her hair was too wild and curly, and since then, she had made a point to keep it straightened and tamed. She knew what her father and mother disapproved of, and that was why she never went out with men. She knew her parents disliked girls who went out and stayed out late, so she only went out with her girlfriends once a week, on Thursdays, never smoked *argeela*—since she was sure her parents would not approve of smoking, and never stayed out later than eight o’clock. Most of her girlfriends did all of those things, which she tolerated, but she made it a point never to befriend girls who smoked cigarettes, because according to her



father, a girl's reputation is permanently tarnished if she has ill-reputed friends. When she was at school she also avoided girls with boyfriends, but then she realised that she would end up friendless if she kept that up, so she began patiently listening to her friends' talk about their love lives. She recalled the twinkle in her cousin Nadia's eyes when she first started mentioning Talal. Sana's olive green eyes never had that sparkle, instead, they remained guarded.

Sana always felt that girls were more level headed than boys. When she had been at school, girls, especially herself, got much higher grades and never forgot to do their homework. Girls had not gotten into as much trouble, and girls had never got into any physical fights with each other. The teachers had always begged unruly boys to take the girls as examples. The girls had sat in the front, obediently paying attention and taking notes. The boys had sat in the back, throwing bits of chalk or anything else that could be thrown at the girls. Sana had been shocked one day, when she went to the first day of school and she found her best friend had chosen to sit next to a boy in class rather than her. It had devastated her when she had to sit next to a new girl at school who knew nobody, while her own best friend flirted with a boy. Sana had been angry at first, but then her friend explained that she loved this boy. Eventually Sana had decided not to take it personally when she found that all the other girls were choosing to sit next to boys in class rather than their girlfriends. So Sana had made friends with this new girl, and decided to indulge her love-struck friends. She had told herself it was a phase that they would soon grow out of.

They had not. The girls had continued to change. Sana had begun to notice that their school skirts were getting shorter, their legs were smooth and hairless, their giggles louder, their perfume more pungent and their eyebrows thinner. Sana stubbornly refused to change. She had not been able to comprehend why her smart friends were getting lower grades in exams. The girls had begun to sit in the back of the classroom and giggle with their boyfriends, and teachers started to snap at the girls as well as the boys. Sana had stopped going out with her friends on Thursdays, because now there were always boys around—the very boys who used to throw chalk at the girls years before! She had known her parents would not be happy about that. Rather than try to fit in and face her parents' wrath, Sana had alienated herself from the girls at school and focused on her studies.

On the first day of her *Tawjihi* year, Sana had overheard the girls who used to be her childhood friends talk about prom dresses in excitement. They had discussed last year's prom king and queen and who this year's potential winners could be. When she had gotten back home from school she had found her mother preparing lunch. "Mama, the girls are talking about their prom dresses already."

"Prom?" her mother had asked, chopping some vegetables for the salad.

"It's a party celebrating the end of *Tawjihi*."

"You mean a *mbarakeh*, a blessing party?" Um Wa'el had asked, stirring the contents of a soup.

"No, it's a party that happens after graduation."

"Like a *mbarakeh*?" Um Wa'el had frowned in confusion, adding salt to the soup. "Here, peel these almonds."

"No, mama, a *mbarakeh* is after you get your grades, and it's a family thing." Sana had begun squeezing the skin of the boiled almonds. "A prom is the night after graduation, right after the exams are over. It's a student thing."

"They celebrate before their exam results come out? That's ridiculous." Um Wa'el had made a face as she poured a generous amount of olive oil to the salad.

"I know it doesn't make much sense. But the girls are talking about their dresses. Sheema's mother already got her a dress from Lebanon."

"I always thought Sheema's mother was crazy," Um Wa'el had nodded, lifting the lid off the pot of rice.

"Why crazy?" Sana had asked, watching the steam rising from the pot.

"Well, she's divorced for one thing. And her daughters always wore the shortest skirts. I once saw a glimpse of her daughter's underwear." Um Wa'el had begun chopping the peeled almonds.

"Since I'll be buying a dress for Aseel's engagement, I can wear it to my prom too."

"You can't wear a dress that you buy for an engagement to a *mbarakeh*," Um Wa'el had snapped, frying the chopped almonds.

"Mama, it's not a *mbarakeh*. And a prom is just as fancy as a wedding or engagement. It's in a hotel—"

“Hotel?!” Um Wa’el had gasped, dropping the wooden spoon she was using to stir the almonds.

Discouraged, Sana had continued, “And the girls wear fancy dresses and the guys wear suits.”

“Guys?!” The almonds had begun burning.

At that moment, Sana had known that she was not going to her prom. She had not minded too much because she was used to being an outsider. That Friday, Um Wa’el had sat next to Um Ashraf and Um Zaher. “It’s in a *hotel* and there are *guys* there!” Um Wa’el had said with the utmost emphasis on “hotel” and “guys.”

“Yes, I know what a prom is, Um Wa’el. Did you forget that Hayfa graduated just last year?” Um Ashraf had smiled.

“Oh, yes, I forgot that Hayfa and Nadia graduated last year. So did your girls come to you with this nonsense?”

“Yes, Hayfa did. Her prom was supervised by a couple of teachers whom I really trusted. And the school principal is a good friend of mine. Her father got her a dress from Cyprus while he was there on business. She enjoyed it. Her father picked her up at midnight though,” Um Ashraf had smiled, “Hayfa is quiet, she didn’t complain. Mona,” Um Ashraf had jokingly gestured with her hands implying a major disaster, “Mona’s already warned her father not to expect her home before two in the morning!”

“Abu Ashraf let her go to a *hotel*? With *guys*?” Um Wa’el had gasped, her hand on her cheek.

“Nadia’s prom was lovely and decent,” Um Zaher had said. “Abu Zaher made me go with her as a chaperone. Don’t you remember, my sister? I told you all about it. There were other mothers there, and I had a good time with them. Nadia’s best friend was prom queen. Nadia was so happy that evening. We left at midnight. I thought it was very reasonable of her father to allow her to stay out so late.”

“I am quite surprised that their fathers allowed them to go at all. I don’t think I would feel comfortable with my daughter being in an environment where there are girls and boys dancing in a hotel in the middle of the night. Anything could happen. I can’t encourage that kind of behaviour.”

“Well, they’re hardly ‘girls and guys,’ they’re childhood friends. They’ve known each other their whole lives, their parents know each other. I think it’s harmless if it’s under some kind of adult supervision,” Um Ashraf had said gently.

“Oh, I heard some frightening things about proms. Zaher was quite insistent that his sister shouldn’t be allowed to go, but Abu Zaher said that as long as I was there it would be alright. During Zaher’s prom, according to Zaher, a boy and a girl actually tried to book a hotel room. But luckily it was a respectable hotel, so the hotel staff notified the chaperones immediately.”

“Sana told me that one prom ticket could cost up to thirty dinars!”

“Well, of course, it’s a fancy hotel, there’s a DJ, decorations, and good food, of course it would be quite expensive,” Um Zaher had explained. “But it’s a once in a lifetime thing, I wish we had a party like that to say good bye to school. It’s quite a new concept that we’ve taken from the West isn’t it?” Um Zaher smiled at her sister, embarrassed by her scowl in front of their sister-in-law Um Ashraf.

“Oh, you didn’t have a prom? My school did,” Um Ashraf had boasted. “It was in the school gym, and the boys from the boy’s school in the next neighbourhood attended as well. It was a joint prom for the two schools. But I was too shy to dance, I didn’t know any of the boys,” Um Ashraf had laughed.

“Aaah, I heard that Christian schools had parties like that,” Um Zaher had exclaimed, remembering that Um Ashraf had gone to high school in Bethlehem, which, in those days, was not too far to get to from Hebron. “How lovely! Well, you had Lebanese nuns, didn’t you? No, in our school, we had no such parties at all, do you remember, my sister? We had such strict teachers.”

Sana, who had been silently listening, noticed the look of shock in her mother’s eyes. She had known from that moment on, she would be an outsider among her cousins as well.

Sana was brought back into the present by the boiling kettle. She made a pot of tea for her parents and stepped outside and quickly gathered fresh mint. She inhaled the fresh January air and suddenly got the urge to take a walk. She went back inside and carried the tray into the living room, finding her sister was on the telephone. Her mother and father were arguing about her mother’s land that had just been sold. Her father was insisting that if she invested the money in his business she would get much more monthly income from

it than she would if she just put it in any old bank and took interest. Her mother, however, refused to listen to the logic of that, and kept insisting that it was her money and she could do with it what she wanted, and she wanted to put it in the bank so that whenever she needed money she could just have it instead of asking her husband for it. Sana changed into jeans and a T-shirt. She interrupted her parents' argument and asked them if she could go for a walk. Her father refused, saying that it was too dark for a walk, but Um Wa'el told him not to change the subject. Sana rushed out.

Sana walked and walked till the dusk turned into night. The neighbourhood was quiet except for a couple of Sri Lankan housekeepers who were gossiping across the fences as they watered the lawns of their employers' gardens. Sana wondered if the employers knew how much water these ladies wasted while they talked. There was very little water in Amman, and homes only got water once a week. *I wonder if there's any other country in the world that has trucks that sell tanks of water*, she thought as she passed by a few children whose parents had still not called them back inside. She strolled down the deserted streets and smelled the honey-scented early spring air. The insects had just started singing and she walked on slowly, reminiscing.

She was now twenty-five and still unsure of where she was headed. Unlike the other girls at work, she was neither married nor interested in getting married. Her mother and grandmother nagged at her to accept one of the many men that showed up at the salon of her father's house, but the idea of leaving her father's house and being in charge of her own household with a strange man terrified her. She did not really like children either, and every wife had to become a mother. She wondered if there was something wrong with her.

Why had she never been in love? She wondered if it was because no boy ever approached her. She wondered, if she *had* fallen in love, would her parents have let her marry the man she chose? She envied her cousins. Their parents were much more tolerant, in spite of her mother and her aunt being sisters, and her father and her uncle being brothers, somehow Nadia and Fida had ended up with milder parents. She tried not to care when Nadia went to Aqaba or the Dead Sea with Mona and Hayfa without inviting her to join them. She knew and they knew, she would never be allowed to join them because of her mother and father's strict nature.

Instead, she buried herself in her studies at school and university, and then in her work as an adult. She loved earning money and waking up early every morning and putting on trendy suits. The insurance company where she worked was one of the biggest in the Middle East, and because of its size and Sana's dedication, she was able to grab one promotion after the next. Now she had become team leader of pension administration, a position that she was proud of, in spite of the gruelling hours. She sometimes faced problems with her male colleagues who were uncooperative. Her only explanation was that they resented being told what to do by a woman, but Sana was not too bothered, she enjoyed problem-solving and viewed her male co-workers' unruliness as just another issue to overcome, just as she had at school.

She looked at the houses as she strolled, every now and then passing an uncle's house. It was a common joke about the people of Hebron, if one of them moved to a new neighbourhood, the rest of the family would soon follow. She unconsciously looked for the cars in the garages and at the lights in the windows. Hayfa and Mona had probably gone out. She could smell her uncle's *argeela* and heard the faint sound of the *oud*, she knew that her uncle and his wife were probably outside, him smoking and his wife playing the *oud* and singing.

Sana walked on until she reached her aunt's house. Um Fadi's car was gone, so was Abu Fadi's. She wondered where they could be. She turned around, ready to head back home when she heard whispers. She quietly walked towards the fence and peeked into the backyard. She saw her cousin Siwar with someone, it was too dark for her to tell how old he was, but she could see that he was tall and broad shouldered. It was obvious to Sana that this was not the first time Siwar had been with the boy because she was sitting on his lap and in between sentences they kissed passionately. Sana did not know what to do, whether she should keep watching or if she should go back or if she should confront Siwar. She could not hear what they were talking about, but she heard her aunt's car pull into the driveway. Sana hid behind a tree as the boy ran towards the very fence where she had been hiding and jumped out of the garden. It was dark and he did not notice Sana crouching behind the tree. He ran towards the street and then started walking briskly in the direction of the main road.

Sana crawled out from behind the tree and saw him hailing a taxi. Sana brushed off the leaves and dust from her clothes. She started jogging home, wondering what her seventeen-year-old cousin was thinking. If Siwar were ever caught by her father she could be killed for such behaviour. The laws of honour-killing in Jordan had changed, it was now strictly illegal to kill another human being no matter what the circumstances were, but few people cared, especially since judges continued to give lenient sentences. "Jail graduates men" they say, *Al Tar wala Al A'ar*; revenge rather than scandal. Sana's jog turned into a run. *Having a boyfriend is good and fine*, thought Sana, *as long as it does not cross the line*. Having him over while her parents were out, sitting on his lap, *kissing him*. She wondered how far they had gone. Sana kept running, what if it had been her brother Wa'el who had seen Siwar's foolishness? He would have strangled her to death then and there. True, Siwar's last name was not Al Mansiyeh, maybe maternal relatives could not be scandalized by a 'gone' girl. Gone, *mshalfeh*, that was the slang term used for girls like her cousin, girls who did not care for their honour or their families. Girls who let love ruin their lives. Sana reached her house, panting. Should she tell her sister? Should she call one of her other cousins and share the heavy burden of this secret?

"Well you could have told me you were going out for a jog, I would have joined you," said Reema as Sana walked into the living room, panting. "You jogged in your jeans?"

"I didn't think I would end up jogging," replied Sana, glancing at her parents who were engrossed in a Hollywood action movie. Reema tilted her head in the direction of her bedroom, so Sana walked first, and a few minutes later, Reema followed.

Sana was still undecided about whether she should confide in her sister or not. "I've been dying to tell you all day!" whispered Reema, "I've been to a fortune teller's." Sana frowned. "I know, I know, you disapprove of all things fun and exciting, I wouldn't normally tell you about this, but this particular fortune teller was amazing!" Reema continued to narrate all what the fortune teller had said to the girls.

"So Siwar was with you?" asked Sana.

"Yeah she was, apparently she has a boyfriend."

"What exactly did she say about him?"

“Don't you care about all the other stuff I told you? That woman said that I will hear good news from a man called Ahmad, a man called Hameed calls out of the blue and wants to buy mama's land? Come on, this is amazing! This means that many guys love me. I wonder who they are though, I don't know of any guys who like me.”

“So Siwar confessed that she has a boyfriend?”

“Not exactly. She said he loved her. Who would have thought, eh? Siwar is such a mousy little thing.”

“What is she like? I don't know her very well.”

“She's very quiet. I never thought she'd be the type to have a boyfriend at that age, I mean Fida, Nadeen, Mona, yes. But Siwar? She's too... I don't know, nothingy, you know? She's just nothing, I mean I can tell you about Nadeen, very assertive and strong, takes charge, has a kind heart. Fida is funny, I think she's jealous of Nadeen, and I think she enjoys bullying people, but I think underneath all that, she has a kind heart too.”

“No way, that Fida, she's got an icy cold heart. Her intentions aren't pure, that's all I can say about her. But back to Siwar. What about her religious views? What are her ideas and opinions like? Is she more like Nadeen or more like us?”

“Why the sudden interest in Siwar?” asked Reema suspiciously.

“I'm just curious,” replied Sana, picking at a thread on Reema's quilt. “I need to shower,” said Sana finally standing up. She made a decision. She was not going to tell anybody about Siwar's secret, but would speak to Siwar herself and explain the dangers of what she was doing. She decided to send her cousin a text message but realised that she did not have her mobile phone number. She walked back into her sister's room, “Do you have her mobile phone number?”

“Whose?”

“Siwar's.”

“Siwar? Why would you want her number?”

“Her exams are coming up and I want to wish her good luck.”

“Ah, you're always thoughtful. She doesn't have a mobile phone yet. Her parents are *so* strict with her. The poor girl is hardly ever allowed to go out with anyone but us cousins. And we don't really invite her to join us that often because she's so boring.”

“I had no idea that *Amta* Um Fadi was so strict.”



“Seriously, her parents are even stricter than ours,” Reema giggled, “I know it doesn't seem possible that anyone has stricter parents than us, but it's true. At least we were allowed to go out with our friends on Thursdays when we were in our *Tawjihi* year, but Siwar is just stuck at home studying all day long.”

Sana left Reema's room again and headed to the phone book and looked up her aunt's telephone number, not realizing that it was on speed-dial. She dialled the number slowly, still wondering if she was doing the right thing. She had a short chat with her aunt and then asked to speak to Siwar.

“Hello?” said Siwar, wondering why her much older cousin was calling her.

“Hi Siwar, how are you?”

“Thanks be to God,” she replied.

“I was wondering what you're doing tomorrow morning? I feel like seeing you, I haven't talked to you properly since you started *Tawjihi*.”

“Tomorrow?” Siwar felt confused; she and Sana had never spoken about anything except polite small-talk. “I have a math tutor in the morning, and a chemistry tutor after lunch. I guess you could come over after the math tutor leaves.”

“Wow, what a busy Saturday, math and chemistry! It's alright *habibti*, it will be over in a few months. I know it is hard for you to imagine, but one day you will look back on these days and laugh.”

They arranged a time and Sana hung up the telephone wondering how such an innocent sounding cousin could possibly be capable of such daring actions.

## Chapter 5

### Friday Night

#### Hayfa and Mona

“*Yalla ya Mona!*” Hayfa moaned, walking into their shared bedroom. Mona was applying heavy black *kohl* around her dark brown eyes in front of her large mirror.

“*Yalla, yalla*, I’m ready. Start the car while I go to the bathroom,” replied Mona applying the finishing touches.

“No, I always end up waiting for a *year*.”

“Look at me, I’m ready!” She was dressed in dark purple and black with gothic silver accessories. Her brown curls framed her oval pale face, and Hayfa thought her sister looked beautiful. She looked at her own reflection in the mirror, her straight brown hair was tied in a messy bun. She never bothered with makeup or accessories, or even pretty clothes. She went everywhere in baggy jeans and trainers. She was convinced that her inner beauty shone through and she did not need to look artificially beautiful. With a hook nose and boring straight hair, not much could be done to improve her looks anyway, she felt. She made her way to the car and impatiently waited for her sister. She waited five minutes then honked the horn. Her sister came running out, “Sorry!” she said, getting into the car.

Hayfa started driving silently. It was the usual Friday routine, after lunch their parents would take their afternoon nap and their brother would go back to watching the news. The girls would spend the afternoon outside drinking mint tea and discussing the events of the lunch and planning their evening outings. They took turns driving and paying for fuel and often bickered about who used the car more and who put in more money for fuel. Hayfa usually ended up giving in because Mona could never be swayed.

“Forgot to tell you, we’re picking up Odeh,” said Mona. Hayfa did not reply. She hated picking up her sister’s boyfriend because he refused to hide in the back seat. Hayfa was always paranoid about one of her uncles or cousins seeing her driving with two men in the back seat. Her own boyfriend, Kamal, obediently crouched in the backseat without a

fuss so as not to be visible to other drivers. Odeh simply refused. He said it was uncomfortable and silly. Mona would always snap at her and tell her to relax. "Driving in this city is too much of a mess, nobody has time to look and see who's in the backseat of a car," she would say. Hayfa and Kamal disliked Odeh, and it was *not* because he was Christian, Hayfa kept telling Mona. It was simply because he did not respect Hayfa's rules. He had ordered an alcoholic drink during her birthday dinner. It was *her* birthday and she believed she had the right to sit and eat comfortably without drunkards on the table. Mona had assured her that one beer would not get anyone drunk, but Hayfa knew that alcohol was alcohol and it was simply unacceptable.

The drive was uncomfortable, and unfortunately, it was much longer than four minutes. Koobz, their favourite café, was a long drive away. The two boyfriends sulked in the back while the two sisters tried to make polite small talk. Hayfa was a very careful driver, which irritated both Mona and Odeh. They tried to bully her into speeding up and over-taking the slow pickup truck ahead. "Let the girl drive!" Kamal said gruffly. Nobody said another word for the remainder of the drive.

Mona looked out the window, her chin resting on her knees, her arms hugging her legs, waiting for her sister to make her take her feet off the seat. She glanced at Hayfa, who was driving tensely, scowling and tight lipped. Mona looked out the window, not really seeing the splash of colourful cars in the January night. She was impressed by some new massive buildings she had never noticed before and wondered when they had been built. *Surely buildings that big would have taken years to construct*, Mona wondered. Amman was changing rapidly. She remembered when her mother used to drive her to Koobz when she was a teenager, it was a twenty minute drive from their house and that was considered far. Now, with all the traffic, a twenty minute drive was nothing.

Odeh coughed from the back, bringing Mona's thoughts back to him. He was Christian, which meant that the two of them did not have a future together. If he were to convert, his family would disown him, if not kill him. A Muslim woman marrying a non-Muslim man was almost impossible, although a Muslim man could marry a non-Muslim woman without any problems in Jordan. Converting for her was not an option, it would mean instant death. But, she wondered, by whose hands? Her father's? Surely her father could not kill his own daughter. Her father often seemed coarse and temperamental, he

was traditional and cared about his mother's opinion, but taking one's own daughter's life was too ruthless for someone like Abu Ashraf to do. She had once said this to her sister Hayfa, who, in spite of their differences, was really her best friend. Hayfa had been shocked at Mona's thoughts, "You are willing to leave your religion for a *guy*?"

"Well, they're the same, aren't they? The only real difference is that Christians drink and eat pork and they don't fast in Ramadan. I'm not even sure I believe in God."

"What are you saying?! This is blasphemy! *Kuffor. Istakhfir Allah Al Azeem.*"

"Why are *you* asking God for forgiveness? I'm the one who said it."

"I can't believe that you are committing *Kuffor* because of a guy."

"I'm not committing *Kuffor* because of a guy, Hayfa. Why is it *Kuffor* at all to question things?"

"I'm not telling you not to question. I know it's unfair that people in Africa are dying of famine and that people all over the world are suffering. But, this is all the will of God, this is a test. And people who suffer in this first life will be rewarded in the next one."

"That doesn't make sense if you ask me. And I'm sure that if there is a God, he could have just kept sending the same religion over and over again to different people. Why did he keep changing it and kept sending the prophets to the same people? Why did he forbid Jews from eating pork and shellfish and then let the Christians eat pork *and* shellfish, and then forbid the Muslims from eating pork but allowed them to eat shellfish? What did he discover about shellfish and pork over the centuries?"

"I wish you could hear yourself. You sound like a lunatic. Is all this because you want to eat pork? You are being illogical, and it's all because of a guy."

Mona awoke from her reverie as her sister slowed down in front of Koobz. "There's a parking spot over there," said Odeh.

"That's too tight. You know I have a problem with parallel parking."

"I'll park it for you if you want," said Mona.

"Want me to park it?" asked Odeh.

"Kamal, you park it," said the exasperated Hayfa. Mona and Odeh exchanged glances as Kamal took the wheel and parked the car.

Once in Koobz, the couples sat in different corners. Hayfa told Kamal all about her cousin and her ex-boyfriend and how the situation was in the family. “I’m so worried that this will happen to us,” she finished.

“No, our situation is different. We’re both Palestinian. There’s not a single reason I can think of for your parents not allowing us to get married.”

“You’re the same age as me, Kamal. That can be a major issue,” said Hayfa, still hiding the truth from him that her parents had already let her know that Kamal would not be welcomed into their family.

“Come on, your own brother said when you told him about us, that the Prophet Mohammed—*Alaihi Al Salatu wal Salam*, married Khadija, who was fifteen years older than him. Your parents can’t forbid something the Prophet did.”

As Kamal finished his sentence, Mona walked over. “Ah, you’re talking about whether Mama and Baba would let you two get married? My parents won’t really take Mohammed as a role model in marriage. He also married a very young girl. I’m sure Baba wouldn’t let my brother marry a very young girl!”

Kamal sighed and looked at Hayfa. Hayfa felt ashamed of her sister’s disrespect towards their faith. “What’s up, Mona, what do you need?”

“I need the two dinars you owe me.”

Again, Hayfa was embarrassed by her sister’s inability to let even two dinars pass without her asking for them. She rummaged in her purse and could not find change. “Kamal, do you have change?” He shook his head, lighting a cigarette. The waiter came, Kamal ordered an *argeela*, tea with mint, and a sandwich. Mona waited for the waiter to leave before asking again.

“Seriously, Mona, I don’t have it.”

“Get change from the counter then, please. I need it now.”

“I don’t have money, I was going to pay by card. Kamal, do you have money that I can get change for?”

Again, Kamal shook his head, blowing smoke from his nostrils.

“How were you planning to pay for all the stuff you ordered?” asked Mona.

Kamal continued to smoke, Hayfa got up, “I’ll go to a cash machine somewhere.”

Mona walked out with Hayfa, “Sorry, Heefo, but I just realised that I forgot my wallet at home and I want to pay for my tea.” Hayfa knew her sister was using her nickname because she felt guilty.

“You did not forget your wallet. You just wanted to make sure that I would pay you back the two dinars.”

“No, actually, not this time. But what’s the deal with Kamal? You’re always paying for him. Does he ever pay?”

“You’re so materialistic. He does a million other things for me.”

“*Waaaal*, it’s cold out here. Can’t believe it was such a warm day today—autumn sure dragged on this year! Remind me to dress for autumn during the day, and dress for winter for the night next time. Brother of a whore!” Mona rubbed her bare arms. “So what does Kamal do for you? Other than park your car.”

“Mona, you don’t know the first thing about being in a healthy relationship. You’ve had *one* boyfriend your whole life, and he’s not even Muslim!”

Mona laughed, “And you, you know *all* about healthy relationships because you’ve had such success?”

Hayfa laughed with her sister. “Mona, Kamal would do anything for me. This is just temporary; he has a few leads on some jobs. Once he gets a job, he’ll pamper me, that’s his nature. Here’s ten dinars.”

“Great Hayfa, thanks.” The sisters started heading back to Koobz, “Odeh’s starting his MBA. His boss agreed to let him work part time, and the university offers evening classes, so I won’t be able to see him except on Fridays from now on. He has to work on Saturdays too.”

“Wow.”

They walked on in silence. “*Sho hal ta’jeh, ya najeh*,” a man shouted at them from his car, “what’re these curves, little lamb?”

“Even Rainbow Street? No place is free from these pimps anymore,” Mona mumbled, “damn the honour of their sisters, aren’t Sweifeyeh or Abdoun enough for them? They have to invade this wonderful street, too?”

Mona went back to Odeh, and Hayfa went back to Kamal, who was smoking his *argeela* and making rings. “Your sister is unbelievable. She’s so stingy! Two dinars? Can’t she let you have two dinars? She’s a real *Khalileyeh*.”

“Odeh is starting his MBA. He’s going to keep working while he does it.”

“That idiot? He won’t last a week.”

“Well, I admire him for trying.”

“What does he expect to learn from an MBA anyway? You can only learn by real experience. All that education is for nothing. It’s just a waste of money. All to just hang a certificate on the wall and brag, and show people that you are better than them for obtaining a piece of paper. And where is he getting the money from anyway? I’d cut my right arm if he was as poor as he lets us think.” Hayfa said nothing. She watched him smoke the *argeela*. “Stop watching me, I’ll choke now from your evil eye!” Kamal laughed.

“I’m not saying anything. I didn’t ask you for it, did I? I’m sick of that conversation.”

“I told you, once we’re married and we have our own house you can smoke as much as you want. But I just don’t approve of girls smoking *argeela* or cigarettes in public. It’s just not a nice sight. People will instantly assume that you’re *nawarreyeh*, a loose girl. I don’t want anyone thinking that my girlfriend, my future wife, isn’t respectable. Do you see my point *habibti*? Any bad behaviour will reflect on me as well as yourself.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know—you keep saying.” She looked up and found her sister standing in front of her with a cigarette between her fingers. She threw eight dinars on the table, waved her hand and went back to her own table.

“Seriously, your sister is such a *Khalileyeh*!” laughed Kamal, shaking his head. “She isn’t normal!” Hayfa glanced at the table and noticed that the half eaten sandwich, the tea, and the *argeela* were all for her boyfriend. She had not ordered anything. She slowly took the eight dinars and put them in her pocket. She decided to steer the conversation away from trouble, and brought up the subject of her cousin Nadia again.

An hour later, Mona came back. “Shall we leave? I have to wake up early tomorrow, so does Odeh.”

“It’s still early,” objected Kamal.

“Mona’s right. It’s eleven, by the time I drop you and Odeh off and get home it’ll be midnight,” said Hayfa.

“Come on... stay more, just another half hour,” he coaxed.

“Some of us have to work tomorrow, *ya zalameh*,” said Mona, “I’ll meet you guys at the car.”

Kamal’s glare seemed to pierce Mona’s back as she walked away. “Did you hear what she said? She was so rude to me! If she weren’t your sister I would have slapped her.”

“Oh, so you’re in the habit of slapping women who aren’t related to me then?” mocked Hayfa, getting up, “I’ll go to the car too while you pay.”

“Let’s go pay together.”

“No, no, I need fresh air, and I hate that bar area, it’s full of drunk people and smoke, I need to go outside. See you downstairs!” She started walking towards the exit.

“Hayfa,” he grabbed her arm, “at least give me money for what you ordered.”

“I haven’t ordered anything *hayaty*, see?” she pointed at his uneaten sandwich, his empty tea cup and the burnt out *argeela*.

“Well I only have my card, but I saw you put some cash in your pocket. It’s quicker to pay by cash.”

Hayfa wished her sister had not given her the remaining eight dinars back in front of Kamal. She handed him the money and left the café. She found her sister and Odeh kissing behind the car. “Have you gone mad?” she yelled. “What if someone sees you?”

“We’re not sleeping together, we’re kissing. Ya Allah, you’re such a drama queen,” said Mona, getting into the car.

Kamal walked over to the car. He and Odeh sat in the back, politely avoiding each other. Hayfa congratulated Odeh on the start of his MBA, and they started discussing the different courses and modules he had to complete. Kamal interrupted Odeh in the middle of his sentence about a lecturer who also wrote an article in the newspaper recently about the economy in Jordan. “All that analysis means nothing, you know. It’s just to fill pages in the paper,” said Kamal.

Hayfa glanced at her sister and saw her smiling. She glanced at the rear-view mirror and noticed that Odeh had the same smile while Kamal sat, his arms folded, scowling



angrily. “Well, whatever,” replied Odeh calmly, “the man is a very respected expert, regardless of what you think of his articles.”

“Oh, Hayfa,” said Mona, “the petrol light is flashing, pull up at that gas station over there.”

“I can’t,” replied Hayfa, “I have no cash. They don’t accept cards here.”

“I have money,” said Odeh, “it’s the least I can do for all the times you gave me a lift.”

Kamal stuck his head between the two front seats and peeked at the gas meter, “It’ll get you home. Keep going.”

“No, you forget that Odeh lives on the way, but you live about fifteen minutes in the opposite direction, so that’s a whole half hour’s drive till we get home,” said Mona. “Do you really want the car to stop with us two girls alone in the middle of the night?” Hayfa and Mona looked at one another, each knowing what the other was thinking. Hayfa knew that Mona had given her the eight dinars on purpose, had probably already known that the car would need gas on the way home, and did this to prove a point and embarrass Kamal. Mona knew that her passive sister would never speak about money because she felt it was vulgar, and that this was the only way to shame Kamal without being forward and alienating her sister.

The sisters got home just before midnight, and found their parents still awake in the living room, waiting for them. “You’re late,” said Abu Ashraf.

“Sorry, we left at eleven, but the traffic was bad and we needed to stop at a gas station...” Hayfa’s voice trailed off, realizing her mistake.

“Stopping at a gas station at this time of night?” bellowed their father. “Have you gone mad, you two?”

“It was the safe gas station just off the highway, we wouldn’t have stopped there if it hadn’t been well lit,” said Hayfa.

“Anyway, we’ll talk about that more tomorrow. Now we have to talk about something else,” said Abu Ashraf, his voice dropping back to normal. “Hayfa, what are you doing tomorrow at one o’clock? You’ll be at the office, right?”

“Why?” she asked cautiously.

“Well, my friend’s wife called asking for your mother while she was praying. So I took the call—there is nothing wrong with that, she’s my friend’s wife and I wanted to say hello. Anyway, they have a son who worked in Indonesia. He’s thirty-five, an engineer, handsome, tall, blond—.”

“Blond? He’s not blond!” exclaimed Um Ashraf.

“He is, he’s blond! I remember him from his childhood.”

“No, *yalla*, he’s not blond, his hair is brown, the same colour as Hayfa’s!”

“Hayfa is blond!” yelled Abu Ashraf, “Anyway,” he continued, his voice dropping again, “he’s in Amman, looking for a bride. So his mother said that we were the first people she called because she knew that we are a respectable, well known family, with two beautiful unmarried daughters who are honourable and beautiful and educated.” His intonations were slipping to the sing-song way the people of Hebron used while complimenting someone. “So I told her to tell her son to come to your office tomorrow at one o’clock, isn’t that your lunch break? You two can have a cup of coffee together, and you can talk, get to know each other, see if you like each other. There’s nothing wrong with that, you’re twenty-six, Hayfa, it’s time you get married. I know you make your mother turn your suitors away, but you’re old, almost twenty-seven, and if you don’t find a good suitor now, you might miss your chance. This one is a good catch, an engineer, and his parents are wealthy. They were our neighbours back in Hebron, this friend’s father was my father’s dear friend. Dear, dear, friend. So tomorrow, wear something pretty and be nice to him when he comes.” Abu Ashraf smiled, and his daughters knew that he was enthusiastic when he raised his eyebrows and softened his voice.

Hayfa stood in silence, her eyes fixed on a thread on the carpet. She had done that often when she was a child. She would stare at something while her father talked, her eyes focusing and unfocusing. The focus of her vision would separate into two things slowly, and then would come back together into one thing as her eyes opened wider and wider. She was barely listening. It worked for her as a child, especially when her father explained a mathematical problem.

Mona was staring intently at her sister, waiting for her to object. After a few more moments of silence, Mona could not bear the ticking of the clock on the wall any longer. Mona felt that each tick shovelled more tension into the room.

“Baba,” she finally said, “how can you do this? How can you make an appointment for Hayfa like this without consulting her first?”

“Mona, don’t interfere,” said Abu Ashraf firmly.

For the first time, Hayfa took her eyes off the thread, and looked at her father, “Baba, you didn’t ask me first.”

“Nonsense. What was there to ask? A man wants to meet you for coffee so I told him to come meet you for coffee, what is so complicated about that? Go to sleep now. Tomorrow be nice to the man, and don’t wear your glasses.”

“Baba,” said Mona, “you can call your friend and cancel.” Hayfa wished her leg were not visible so she could kick her sister as a signal to stop provoking their father.

“What illogical empty talk are you saying?” he yelled. “It’s after midnight. If you two had come home at a decent hour I would have consulted you, but you were out, gallivanting around in the streets! I was hoping the woman wouldn’t ask to speak to you because I would have been mortified if I had to tell her that you were out of the house!” His yelling was getting louder, he suddenly lifted his hairy, chubby index finger and said, “Mona, if you please, this discussion does not concern you.”

“Ya Mona,” pleaded her mother, “let this night pass in peace.”

Mona looked at her sister, “Say something!”

“Baba, I don’t really want to meet this man,” said Hayfa timidly, “I’m sure he’s a nice man, and I’m sure his parents are nice people, but I don’t want to meet him.”

“There’s nothing wrong with meeting him for one farting cup of coffee!”

Hayfa knew that when her father started introducing the word “farting” into his sentences, that his temper would only get worse. So she took hold of her sister’s arm and dragged her out of the room saying, “Alright, I’ll wait for him tomorrow at one. Goodnight!”

Once upstairs in their room, Mona went on a rant asking Hayfa how she could possibly stay silent in such a humiliating situation. Hayfa, upset at her sister’s anger, kept trying to assure her that it was not the ordeal she thought it was. Their father was not forcing her to marry the man, he was merely forcing her to have a cup of coffee with him.

Mona paced the room, scheming, “Maybe tomorrow morning we can check the callers’ ID and call back the woman and tell her that you’re not interested.” “Maybe you

can introduce him to all the girls at your office, maybe you can show him that you misunderstood and you thought *you* had to help find him a bride.” “Maybe you can stuff a cushion under your shirt to make him think that you’ve got a beer belly.” Hayfa sat silently on her bed, listening to her sister, feeding off her sister’s rage. A soft knock made Mona stop pacing, Ashraf poked his head through the door.

“I just got home. Mama told me the news, how are you?”

“NOT WELL!” replied Mona, “And your eldest sister just stood there all cross-eyed. She didn’t say a single word. I think we should tell Kamal about this.”

“Yey, *walek* no, no, no,” Ashraf said, “that’s the last thing you need. Kamal will feel threatened, because, in all honesty, this guy is a successful engineer, of *Khalili* origin, Kamal is currently unemployed, with no prospects. He will get insecure and will do something drastic, like come to the office to meet the man himself. No, no, that’s the last thing we need.”

“Maybe tomorrow morning I can ask Mama to call the woman and apologise,” said Hayfa quietly.

“She finally speaks!” said Mona, “What are you going to do?” Mona tilted her head, wondering how her sister could defend her faith so vehemently and articulately, yet could not defend herself when it came to her own fate.

Hayfa was waiting for an opportunity to slip into the bathroom, where she would turn on the shower so she can talk to her boyfriend quietly and tell him everything. She needed to hear his comforting voice. She had faith that he had the perfect answer.

“Hayfa,” warned Ashraf, “really, don’t tell Kamal, I swear it will make matters worse.”

“We have to sleep, we’ll worry about tomorrow—well—tomorrow,” replied Hayfa with a smile. She tiptoed to the bathroom, where she tried calling Kamal, but got no answer. “Just as well”, whispered Hayfa, staring into the mirror at her large spectacled eyes. *I’m twenty-six, and I’m still the same weak, frightened girl. I’m a twenty-six-year-old loser.* Hayfa carefully started her ablution, washed her hands, face, and arms three times. Washed her mouth, her nose, her ears and lightly touched her hair with her wet hands. Finally she lifted up her right foot, washed it three times, making sure the water went through her toes, and then did the same with her left foot. She went to the deserted living

room with her white praying clothes and a prayer rug that Kamal had gotten her from Mecca. Hayfa started praying, her heart opening up completely to God, to all the prophets, to the angels. She prayed, enjoying each Quranic verse she whispered. She felt the words bring her peace as she prayed, observing the movements clumsily in the white garments. Finally she sat on the rug, her legs bent underneath her. *Dear God...* she prayed, *Ya Rub*. She did not have words to express what she was feeling, but she knew that God knew what was in her heart, and that God would listen to her unsaid prayers. She ran her fingers through the rich velvet of the rug. One day, two years before, Kamal had persuaded her to tell her mother about their relationship. Hayfa had resisted at first, but then allowed herself to be convinced. She had gone to her mother's room, found her mother performing her ablution in her bathroom.

“Mama?”

“I'm abluting, *habibti*, what is it?”

“I'll tell you after you finish praying.”

“Tell me now, it's alright.”

“Mama, remember Kamal? You met him at my graduation. We love each other. We want to get married in a few years.”

Um Ashraf looked at Hayfa, her usual pleasant expression transforming into a frown, “He's younger than you.”

“Just by a month.”

“Does he have a job?”

“He's applied to all the major banks in Amman, he has an interview next week.”

“Well,” Um Ashraf had said, drying her face and walking towards her bedroom, “we can talk about this after he gets a proper job.”

Her mother had started putting on the white praying garments, Hayfa opened her eyes wide, unused to her mother disregarding her this way. “For what it's worth,” Um Ashraf had said as she stood before her prayer rug, “you don't have my blessing.” She had turned east toward Mecca and started praying. Hayfa had stood still for a moment, half expecting her mother to stop her prayer and say she was joking. Her mother had stood still, murmuring softly in deep prayer, and Hayfa, feeling her heart breaking, walked to her

room slowly. Only after she had closed the door firmly behind her had she allowed her tears to fall.

Now, Hayfa sat, her entire body covered in clean white. *Dear God... Please...* tears streamed down her face. Her mother had caught her praying on this rug a few months back, although Hayfa had made sure to keep it hidden. “*Ya*, what a beautiful rug! Where did you get it?”

Hayfa’s first instinct had been to lie, as she normally did when her parents asked her anything where the answer would involve Kamal. But, robed in white, Hayfa had felt bad about lying after having just completed a prayer. So she had said, “Kamal got it for me from Mecca.”

Again, like the first time, her mother’s expression had changed, and this time, her voice had changed as well, “Do you think your prayers will be accepted on this rug?”

Hayfa had blinked in shock, her mother’s character completely transformed at the mere mention of Kamal, “God accepts prayers from everybody,” she had replied. Um Ashraf left the room, leaving Hayfa to her prayers. *Dear God, What is so wrong about me loving Kamal?*

Now, she wiped her tears with the white veil, *Dear God, please, give me strength.*

## Chapter 6

Saturday

Aseel

Aseel woke up refreshed and energetic, noticing that her husband had already left for work. She slowly got out of bed, showered, and made sure not to apply any lotions because they would interfere with the stickiness of the sugar. She stepped over the vacuum cleaner that was still on the floor and called the friends she was supposed to meet at the mall that day. She avoided the usual chit-chat and apologised about not being able to meet them. She got into some old navy blue sweats, glanced at herself in the mirror, and decided that she should look good *all* the time, so changed into one of the new outfits she had purchased.

She hailed a taxi and fifteen minutes later, she was showing her mother her new look. Um Omar was pleased with what her daughter was wearing, not because it looked good—she could never understand women’s fashion these days— but because, at last, Bassam had loosened his stingy hand and given Aseel some money to pamper herself. And she assumed, in return, Aseel wanted to sugar and look good to please her husband. Um Omar beamed at Aseel, believing her daughter and son-in-law had a very healthy relationship.

She led her daughter to her bedroom and called the Filipina housekeeper in English, “Vickie! Come! Bring Chair!” Um Omar winked at her daughter. “Since you’re here, we might as well go all out. Lucky for you your father and brother are invited to a wedding lunch and they’ll be eating *mansaf* there, otherwise I wouldn’t have been able to spend the entire morning with you.”

Aseel took off her new clothes and sat in kitchen chair clad only in her underwear. Her mother put a cushion behind Aseel’s back, and Vickie sat on Aseel’s right side with a pedicure kit while Um Omar had Aseel’s left foot in her lap and was using the sticky sugary paste to yank the hair away. Aseel winced once or twice, and then started talking about Dara.

“That girl *still* hasn’t gotten pregnant? How long have they been married? Four years?” asked Um Omar as she used her thumb to spread the brown lump of caramelized sugar onto Aseel’s leg.

“She’s such a goody-goody, you know? Always the first to serve the coffee, always the one to bring *mu’ajanat* or *tabbouleh*. She’s a doctor, how does she have the time to do that?” She gasped as her mother yanked the brown lump away.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if her mother prepared them for her just to please her mother-in-law in order to compensate for her barrenness. You think her husband will divorce her? Or will he just take another wife?”

“Mama, nobody takes another wife these days, it’s so—” another gasp, “*shwai shwai*, Mama... As I was saying, it’s so vulgar to take another wife. But I find it strange that he loves her so much.”

“Give me your arm. I can’t do the other leg till Vickie finishes.” She skilfully kneaded the now vomit-coloured sugar. She ended each sentence by yanking a lump of sugar off Aseel’s arm, “It’s true, even among my generation. Even my cousins in Hebron don’t take other wives these days. Ah, Nazmi, remember him? Your father’s colleague. *Khalili*. His wife was barren. She was like a *ghouleh*. She didn’t respect herself and stay quiet to repent her barrenness. She drove him crazy. She wouldn’t get out of bed to make him his breakfast, imagine?” Aseel avoided her mother’s eyes, she tried to remember the last time she woke up early to make her husband breakfast.

“She would stay in bed till two in the afternoon. Poor Nazmi would come home for lunch and find her still sleeping with no food ready! Then your father told him, ‘ya Nazmi, divorce her.’ But did you know she’s Nazmi’s first cousin? *Lazam Lazam*, their fathers are brothers from the same mother. So he couldn’t divorce her at all. So your father said to him, ‘ya Nazmi, marry another one’ so he took one. First he asked permission from his uncle. His uncle was very understanding. Of course Nazmi gave his wife all her rights, even though she didn’t deserve it. He let her have the big apartment and the car. Then the she-ghoul broke all the plates in the kitchen from her anger, but he went and bought her an entire set of plates even prettier than the old one!” Um Omar paused to throw away the lump of hairy sugar. She pulled out a fresh one and slowly kneaded it before using it, “By the name of Allah,” she whispered, “yes, so he took another one: a pitiful, kind hearted



spinster, very, very kind. She gave him three children. The poor man is flying with happiness about these three children. The first one was a girl, but he wasn't upset. The second one, thanks be to God, is a boy. He's such a good man with good will, God gave him what he deserved. May God keep him and his family well preserved."

"You know what, Mama?" said Aseel after a short pause, "I think I'll call Nadia and ask her to tweeze my eyebrows. Maybe give me a facial and bring me a hair mask too."

Soon Nadia was there, talking about Talal while massaging Aseel's scalp. Aseel's face was avocado green from the mask Nadia had brought, and her right foot was perfectly manicured while her left leg was bright red. Um Omar and Vickie had swapped places. Aseel sipped hibiscus juice and told Nadia to talk it over with her grandmother. "Tata was so excited when I finally agreed to marry a suitor, she really just wants us all to get married and have babies. She didn't care where Bassam is from."

"That's not true," piped in Um Omar, "your grandmother is a firm believer in education. She wants you all to study well first, *then* get married and breed."

"Vickie, after toes I want massage," said Aseel in broken English, which irritated Vickie who had a degree in English and spoke it fluently.

Two hours later Aseel stood in front of the mirror, completely transformed. Nadia had blow-dried Aseel's hair and applied some of the new makeup on her. Aseel's hairless hands had perfect red nails, and her newly pedicured toes looked pretty in her new sandals. "Now where can I go?" Aseel asked, rubbing her belly after a kick from the baby.

"Well, home to your husband of course!" smiled Um Omar, "Or maybe to your mother-in-law's house, maybe Dara will see you and get jealous."

"No, I want to be *seen*," answered Aseel.

"What do you mean you want to be *seen*. You should be seen by your husband and his mother. Who else should see you? *Yalla*, look at the time, you should be getting home and preparing Bassam's lunch."

Aseel frowned, looking at her shiny nails, "Nadia," she said, "do you want to have lunch with me?"

\* \* \*

## Sana and Siwar

Sana was grouchy after a sleepless night. She had spent the night tossing and turning, pondering different ways to save her young cousin from making a fatal mistake. She called in sick and spent her morning in the kitchen with her mother making *ma'amool* stuffed with rosewater-drenched pistachios instead of answering phone calls and replying to work-related emails. Finally, it was time to visit Siwar, and Sana felt her stomach churning with anxiety. She walked over to her aunt's house, with sweaty palms and a beating heart.

"Hi *Amto*" she greeted her aunt, and she felt her face go red as she got a sudden flashback of her cousin in that boy's lap. She wondered, for the hundredth time, what her aunt would do to Siwar if she ever found out.

Um Fadi expected Sana to ask for a cup of sugar or for an onion. She was surprised when Sana asked to see Siwar. There was no relationship between the cousins other than occasional babysitting when Siwar was younger. She called Siwar, and tried to join the cousins in the living room, but Sana took Siwar's hand and led her to her room.

Siwar had also been surprised at Sana's sudden interest in her, but she had not given it much thought, as she was mostly absorbed in thinking about her marriage to Sari. She felt uncomfortable as Sana sat her down on her bed and closed the door behind her.

"Siwar, I really don't know what to say to you. I saw you last night."

Siwar's heart skipped a beat, "Saw me where?"

"Saw you in your back yard with that boy."

Siwar's face went pale. "Please don't tell anyone! My parents would kill me!"

"Yes, *habibti*, I know, and it's not just your parents would kill you. Everyone in the family would! What were you thinking?"

Siwar had tears in her eyes, "He wants to marry me! I tried to tell him not to come to the garden, but he never does what I say. Boys are like that."

"You should know better! What if someone other than me had seen you? What if it had been the gardener, or one of your neighbours, or worse still, one of our relatives?"

“I know! But I’m lucky that they didn’t, and that you were the one who saw me, I’ll tell him not to come over again.”

“No, you’re going to do more than that. You are going to call him right now and I am going to speak to him and I am going to tell him that he is never to speak to you again.”

“No!” shouted Siwar, “Look, I know it was wrong, but I told you, I’ll tell him.”

Sana sighed, “look, *habibti*, I know that you probably love him, but let me tell you, when a boy comes to your house and puts you in this kind of situation it really means that he doesn’t care about you. It means he has no respect for you. Do you think he will marry you? Men only marry respectable girls, and by doing what you’re doing, you’re no longer a respectable girl!”

Siwar started biting her nails, remembering things Sari had told her about girls who were not respectable. “I know all about girls who aren’t respectable, but really, Sana, I’m not one of them. I don’t drink, I don’t smoke, and Sari is my first boyfriend... I know I shouldn’t have ever kissed him, but... if love was so wrong, then why are all the movies about love and all the songs about love, and all the poems we study at school about love? Love can’t be wrong.”

“Love isn’t wrong,” said Sana softly, stroking her cousin’s arm, “but the way you’re behaving with this boy is wrong. Proper love means that he will wait until you two are old enough, and then he will come with his parents to meet your parents and ask for your hand in marriage. This kind of love that you are talking about doesn’t exist in our world, it exists only in movies. In our culture, what you are doing is wrong.”

Siwar was quiet. Sana brought her face closer to Siwar’s, trying to look into her eyes, but Siwar looked away. “Not drinking and not smoking alone don’t make you a respectable girl,” continued Sana after a long pause, “being respectable means that you never put yourself in a situation that jeopardises your integrity. And *habibti*, what you did last night *did*.”

Siwar finally looked at her cousin, with tears streaming down her face. “My teacher will be coming in a few minutes.”

“I’ll leave now, but first, I need to speak to this boyfriend of yours.”

Siwar got up slowly and reluctantly dialled Sari's number. Sana took the phone and asked to speak to him, but was told that he had a tutor. As Sana hung up the phone, Siwar said, "It will take more than a phone call to make him go away. He loves me too much."

"If he loves you then he will understand that this is for your own good. He can do what he wants, he's a boy, nobody will say anything about him. But he has to consider your reputation." Sana got up and kissed her cousin. "I'll come back tonight and call him."

\* \* \*

### Hayfa

Hayfa sat at her desk, fidgeting. It was nearly one o'clock. She and Mona had discussed the situation that morning as Mona dropped her off at work. "Just be as vulgar as you can. You need to repulse him. Burp and fart if you have to," her sister had instructed. Hayfa was considering just being frank with the man. Mona was sure that he was unattractive. "Come on," she had said pointing her lit cigarette at her sister, "why would a handsome man need his mother to find him a wife?"

She had spent the whole day waiting for Kamal to call, wondering if she would be able to hide the truth from him or if she would eventually blurt it out. They usually had lunch together on Saturdays, but whenever she tried calling him that day to cancel their lunch date, his phone just rang and rang. He had not replied to any of her texts either.

Hayfa's heart sank as she heard the knock on her office door. She got up with a start, and opened the door. There stood a slightly balding, tall, heavy built man. "Hayfa?" He asked.

"Yes, I'm Hayfa, come in, how are you?" She blurted out quickly as she closed the door behind him.

He seemed uncertain about what to do next which took Hayfa off-guard; she had been expecting a confident alpha male businessman type. "Please take a seat." She pointed to a chair while she switched on the electric kettle. "What would you like to drink?"

He cleared his throat, "What are you having?"

Again, Hayfa was surprised. The men she knew always asked for what they wanted. “I... well... I’ll have what you have. I can make tea, instant coffee, hot hibiscus, hot chocolate...”

“I’m fine with anything.”

“So am I.”

There was an awkward pause.

“Tea then?” asked Hayfa, at last.

“Tea’s fine.”

Hayfa made the tea in silence. She carried the two tea cups to her desk; she had originally intended to sit behind her desk in order to feel a sense of authority, to remind herself that she was in control of the situation. Now, she was unsure. She decided to take a seat facing him and dragged over a small coffee table for their cups.

He cleared his throat, thanked her, picked up his cup to take a sip, and put it back on the table without tasting the tea. “Nice office.”

Hayfa tried to make polite small talk about the office. The man, however, merely nodded and cleared his throat and took a breath as if to say something, but said nothing.

They sat in silence. Hayfa could hear his stomach growling, and suddenly her own started making noises as well. She chuckled in embarrassment, patting her belly, “Sorry about that. I’m a bit hungry, it’s my lunch time.”

“Yes, I’m hungry too, it’s really not a good time for tea, is it?”

Hayfa laughed, “No, it isn’t.”

“What do you normally do for lunch?”

“Well, I bring my own lunch from home, except for Saturdays. Saturdays I sometimes have lunch in the café nearby with my b— with my friend.”

“Let’s go out for lunch then. I noticed the café in front of the building. It looks nice.”

Hayfa hesitated; she knew the waiters there, and worried what they would think if they saw her with another man. He scratched his head and cleared his throat, “Or is that not done? I haven’t been in Amman for so long; I really don’t know what people do around here.”

Hayfa laughed. “Yes, let’s go to lunch.”

At the café, the man was looking at the menu. The waiter came and asked if they wanted an *argeela*. “Do you want to share one?” asked the man, “I really don’t want a whole one all by myself, but it smells delicious.”

Hayfa smiled, she had not smoked in a café for years, not since her boyfriend forbade it. “That’s a good idea. Which flavour do you want?”

“Whichever flavour you want.”

“I’m alright with everything except double apple and liquorice.”

“So which flavour do you want?”

The waiter, getting frustrated with them said, “We have cherry, strawberry, apple, melon, lemon with mint...”

Hayfa and the man’s eyes met. Hayfa noticed that he had light big green eyes, like many of her relatives. She shook her head with a shrug, “Whichever, really.”

“Come on! Decide!” laughed the man.

Hayfa and the waiter laughed. “Okay then, mint!”

They continued laughing, after the waiter left. He came back with the *argeela* a few minutes later and asked them what they would like to order. The waiter left, and the man said, “You must come here often.”

They chatted about the café, which was a small place with bamboo chairs and soft Arabic oldies playing in the background. Their small talk progressed into a conversation about other cafes in Amman. After a while, the man said, “You know, when my mother told me last night that I had an appointment at one o’clock to meet you, I was furious.”

Hayfa, was taken aback. “When my dad told me that you were coming to meet me at my office today, I was furious too.”

They laughed. “I’ve never done this before,” he said.

“Never done what exactly?”

“Never met a girl traditionally. Though this isn’t exactly traditional, is it?”

“Yeah, I’ve never done this either. And you’re right, traditional is when you come to my house first with your mother to ‘inspect’ me.”

“I know! That’s horrible, isn’t it?” he chuckled. “Wow, so both of us were unwillingly set up by our parents. It’s funny that neither of us disobeyed our parents, though. I guess that’s something we have in common. And, liking mint *argeela*, too.”

“My sister and brother were giving me advice on how to repel you,” laughed Hayfa, surprised at her own honesty.

The man laughed. “So what ideas did they give you?”

They ended up talking about their families, their friends, their jobs, their universities and Hayfa found herself laughing at his stories and jokes. Eventually, she checked the time and realised that her one hour lunch break was over, and she was shocked at her disappointment.

They asked the waiter for the bill. The man reached over and took it before Hayfa could.

“Now, now, what’s this, you reaching for the bill?” he laughed.

“Well, if you pay, then we’d be giving into a proper traditional cliché. If I pay, we’d be breaking tradition.”

“Oh, I see, ‘one small step for woman, one giant leap for womankind’ *yaa’ni*?” he said in English. “Well, how about we split it? That way, we’re both contributing to change. And I won’t feel like a leech.”

They slowly walked out of the café in silence. He cleared his throat, “This is my car.” He and Hayfa looked at each other.

“Well, it was nice meeting you,” said Hayfa after a long pause. As an afterthought, she extended her right hand.

“Yeah, it was nice.” He shook her hand and shocked her by giving her a kiss on each cheek.

“Bye,” she said and turned around in a fluster and hurried back to her office. Once inside, she threw herself in her chair and put both hands on her hot face. Her mobile phone was ringing in the drawer. She reluctantly opened her drawer just as it stopped ringing. Sixteen missed calls. She started checking the numbers, one was from her mother, one was from Mona, three were from her father, and the rest were from Kamal.

She started checking her text messages:

Mona: “What’s going on with the suitor with the paralyzed honour?”

Kamal: “Hey *hayati*, sorry I missed lunch. Don’t be mad. Love you.”

Kamal: “Will you please answer your phone. Don’t be like this *albi*.”

Kamal: “You’re unbelievable. You’re mad at me for missing one fucked-honoured-lunch?”

Nadia: “Aseel and I are standing in front of the café and we see you with a man who isn’t Kamal. *Ya za’ara!*”

Hayfa sighed. Her mobile phone started ringing again, “Sorry Kamal, I left my phone in the drawer and I went out to lunch.”

“I’m really sorry, *habibti*, I’m extremely completely horribly sorry!” said Kamal’s anxious voice.

“It’s alright, Kamal, I’m not mad.”

“Kamal? You only call me Kamal when you’re mad.”

“I’m not, by *Allah*, where were you though?”

“You know, after you dropped me off I got a call from Ali and he told me to meet him at the internet café. We ended up playing network games until six in the morning. After that I just slept like the dead. So who did you have lunch with?”

“Aseel and Nadia,” she lied, without hesitation.

Hayfa and Kamal chatted until her father called her office. “Hello Baba,” she answered with a sigh.

“How are you *habibti*, how was—uh, the... meeting with the young man?”

“Good.”

“*Ya’ni*... did he appeal to you? Did you appeal to him?”

“Baba, I kind of have work to do.”

“Did he arrange a time to come to you at home?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No.”

After a long pause, Abu Ashraf said, “Then it looks like you didn’t impress him.” Hayfa could hear the disappointment in his voice.

“It looks like I didn’t, Baba.”

“Hmmm. *Yalla, salam ya Hayfa.*”

Hayfa’s mobile phone rang. “Hello?”



It was Mona, “*Yalla, Yalla habibti*, I want a detailed report about what happened with the brother of a fucked woman.”

“Nothing much. We went to the café together, smoked *argeela*, talked, laughed, split the bill...”

“*Sho, sho, shooo?* You went to a café? You *smoked?* You *laughed?* *Split the bill?*”

“Yes, I actually had a good time.”

“A good time? With a *suitor?*”

“Mona—”

“No, no, no, I’m not judging. Not judging at all. Just surprised. Well, did he take your number?”

“No, he didn’t. It wasn’t *that* good a time. It just wasn’t as bad as I thought.”

“Wow, so why didn’t he take your number?”

“Listen, I have tons of work to do, so I really have to go. *Yalla*, bye Monmon.”

Hayfa swivelled in her swivel chair. The hour she spent with the suitor started replaying in her mind, and she found herself smiling. Her smile faded when she realised that she did not know his name.

\* \* \*

Siwar

Siwar’s tutor had just left. She was not able to concentrate, and he grew frustrated with her. “If you continue being so careless and distracted, you will not pass,” he had warned as he was leaving. Siwar sat on her bed and stared at the telephone. When it finally rang, she timidly answered. She told Sari about her visit from Sana.

“That whore! Just ignore her, what can she do?” said Sari.

“I know, but she *saw* us.”

“She’s not going to tell anybody. If she was going to, she wouldn’t have come to see you.”

“But, she’s right. It could have been somebody else. I don’t want you to come to my garden anymore. And no more kissing until we’re married.”

“Alright, that’s fair. I’ll sort it out so we can get married next Thursday.”

“No, I mean a *real* marriage,” said Siwar as firmly as she could muster.

“What? You’re letting that jealous bitch come between us?”

“No, I’m not, but she’s right, in this culture our kind of relationship doesn’t work.”

“If she’s such an expert on relationships, why isn’t she married?” Siwar did not say anything. “Hey, has she ever even *been* in a relationship?”

“No. At least I don’t think so.”

“There you go! Not only is she from an entirely different generation, but she’s also a different species. She’s never been in love, so she knows nothing about relationships, let alone relationships of this day and age.”

Siwar and Sari continued talking until her mother called her for lunch. Siwar felt happy and in love. She was confident in her boyfriend’s love for her, and believed that Sana had no idea what she was talking about.

\* \* \*

### Aseel and Nadia

Aseel and Nadia drove around pondering where to have lunch. Nadia knew about Hayfa and Kamal’s Saturday lunches and thought it would be nice to join them, but was surprised to see her cousin with another, less attractive man. She and Aseel talked about it and came to the conclusion that it must have been a business lunch. Aseel suggested they go to Cozmo after lunch to have a look around.

As they strolled through the aisle of the department store, Aseel was aware of the fact that it was ludicrous to expect to see *him* again, but she kept looking for him anyway. Nadia was equally distracted. They walked in silence.

Aseel's baby kicked angrily, as if aware that its mother was thinking of another man. Aseel suddenly had an overwhelming feeling of wanting to be alone. She feigned fatigue, and asked Nadia if it was alright to drive her home. "Aseel, I really envy you," said Nadia after a long silence. "You have all that I want in life."

"What do I have?"

"You have a husband who loves you, you have a baby coming. You have stability and security."

Aseel did not reply. It was true, before she had gotten married, marriage was all she had wanted. Her job was merely a distraction until the right man came along. When she met Bassam, she had kept her job because she enjoyed it. After her wedding she had kept her job because her husband was not rich enough. She had never given much thought to what she wanted to do with her life. She had just wanted to get married and have kids. Why she had wanted that, she did not know now. Was there more to life than marriage and kids?

She thought of her life before marriage. Her girlfriends were her world. Her father fought with her everyday about the amount of time she spent with them. "A girl your age should not be out and about all the time!" her father would yell. She was in her mid-twenties at the time. Her curfew was eight o'clock. She remembered the time she came back home at nine quite vividly as it resulted in her father grounding her and confiscating her mobile phone for two weeks. She remembered longing to get married. She had never envisioned what her husband would be like. All she had yearned for was the freedom that she thought would come with marriage. What was worse, she wondered, life back then or life now? Married life before her pregnancy was alright. Her husband was at work all day, and she was free to spend as much time as she liked with her friends—those whose husbands allowed them to stay out late anyway. There was the irritating nightly ritual of her husband trying to have sex with her. She grew better at avoiding that with time. Aseel made a discovery early on in the marriage: if she suggested playing video games around bedtime, she would play a game or two with Bassam, he would get into the game, and then Aseel would discreetly go to bed without him noticing. Even sex was not so bad now that she has gotten used to it.

"Why do you want to get married?" Aseel asked, as soon as they reached the car.

“Why?” asked Nadia, “What do you mean, why?”

“I mean, what’s so appealing about marriage?”

“What a question!” said Nadia, starting the car and looking through the rear-view mirror.

“Well, I know I married because I wanted to leave my father’s house,” said Aseel boldly.

Nadia glanced at Aseel, “That’s why I want to get married too. It’s nice to spend guilt-free time with a man you love. It’s also nice to have your own home, to decorate the way you like, to cook the foods you like, that’s it, you’re mistress of your own home! But also, you’re not a complete Muslim unless you’re married. Your faith is only complete when you marry.”

“I don’t feel any more complete now that I’m married. In fact, I feel empty now. Like there’s more to life, but I can’t get there anymore. Like somehow, I chose the wrong path and now I can’t go back.”

“Are you having problems in the marriage?” asked Nadia, concerned.

“No, no, Bassam is nice. As nice as any man anyway. In comparison to my friends’ husbands, he’s great. It’s just... I feel like my whole life I’ve been prepped for marriage. But, now that I’m married, life is still going on, you know? But the excitement and anticipation are gone.”

“But you’re having a baby!”

“Yes,” said Aseel, rubbing her belly, “but will the baby really be mine?”

“You’re strange today, Aseel. You’re saying the strangest things.”

“My mother-in-law wants it to be a boy. But I realised yesterday, I want a girl. A girl like me, whose life will be beautiful because she can do whatever she wants.”

“A girl? Why would you want a girl?” asked Nadia.

Aseel frowned. “Why not a girl?” *I only want my baby to be a girl because SHE wants a boy*, Aseel realised.

“Well, boys are better. They allow their fathers’ names to live on. They help their fathers and their mothers in the future, and they can never dishonour the family name. Unless they do something *really* bad, like not support elderly parents or something outrageous like that.”

“That wouldn’t dishonour the family name.”

“No it wouldn’t. But it would make people talk,” Nadia shook her head, “you don’t want a girl. A girl could get raped, or get divorced. Anything could happen that would reflect badly on you as her mother.”

Aseel clutched her protruding belly, imagining her sweet daughter. She remembered having this conversation with her girlfriends in their university days. Sex was bad enough, thought Aseel. “I’d protect her. I wouldn’t let her go out at night.” Aseel realised she would have to impose strict rules and stifle her daughter’s freedom in order to protect her—like her parents had done to her. “Or,” said Aseel with sudden enthusiasm, “I could send her to a proper Ninja school in the East and then she could be a Ninja warrior.”

Nadia laughed, “You’re hilarious!”

Aseel thanked Nadia and went up to her apartment with a smile, imagining her beautiful daughter as a strong, resourceful Ninja warrior. She nearly stumbled on the vacuum cleaner that was still on the floor, and found her husband eating fast-food and watching the news.

“I had to get a *shawirma* because you were late, and didn’t have the decency to leave me a note about when you’re coming back,” Bassam mumbled slowly turning around to face his wife. His eyes widened at the sight of her, “Wow, you look beautiful!”

Aseel smiled at her husband, “The vacuum cleaner is still on the floor.”

Bassam got up and quickly started putting it away. “Where do you keep it?” he asked.

Aseel showed him where she had been stowing away the vacuum cleaner since they had moved into the apartment. He came back and stroked her straightened hair, “*Ya salam*, Allah loves me. My woman takes brains away with her beauty.”

Aseel tilted her head at her husband, “Shall we play video games?”

\* \* \*

## Hayfa

After work, Hayfa, Mona and Ashraf were sitting in the garden with their mother, enjoying the late afternoon breeze. It was getting cloudy, “*In sha’ Allah*, we’ll get some rain soon,” said Um Ashraf taking out some weeds, “it’s been such a long autumn. So Hayfa, tell us your news.” Hayfa was too shy to say anything.

“Was he handsome?” asked Mona.

“Not so much,” she replied.

“Was he polite?” asked Um Ashraf.

“What was his beard like?” asked Ashraf.

“His beard?” laughed Mona.

“You can tell a lot from a man’s beard. Religious, bad boy, lazy, geeky, lame, wannabe... a man’s beard says everything. I mean, look at me, this beard is a beard grown out of pure laziness, but it also makes me look cool, mature, serious even.”

“I thought you grew your beard to cover your spots,” Mona laughed.

Ashraf made a face at her.

“He was clean shaven.”

“Oh, that means he’s polite,” chimed in Um Ashraf.

“Or that he’s trying to *look* polite,” added Ashraf.

They heard Abu Ashraf park his car. The siblings started picking up the tray and cups to go back inside, but Abu Ashraf was too fast.

“Is this what you wore to the office today?” he asked Hayfa.

Hayfa looked down on her white shirt and black trousers, “Yes.”

“Didn’t I tell you to borrow something from your sister?”

“*Habibi*”, said Um Ashraf, “what’s wrong with her clothes, she can drive one crazy with her beauty. *Yalla*, go pray the afternoon prayer, and I’ll have Shanti heat up your dinner.”

“Drive one crazy with her beauty?” shouted Abu Ashraf, “Look at her yellow face! I told her to use her sister’s make up! I’m going to be saddled with her until I die. She will pickle in this house. Mona too! Her bad manners and staying out late will repel everybody. Who will want to marry them? This is your doing!” he glared at his wife.

The siblings retreated into the house, leaving their father shouting at their mother.

“Shall we wait for Baba to take his afternoon nap and then go to Koobz just the two of us?” asked Mona.

“Anything to get out of this house,” replied Hayfa.

At Koobz, Hayfa and Mona sat silently, Mona smoking, and Hayfa watching the strings of smoke entwine in the air. When the waiter came to take their order, Hayfa asked for a mint *argeela*. The waiter raised his eyebrows with a sarcastic smile, and said “*ya a’mmi.*”

“Waaaaal,” said Mona after blowing out a puff of smoke, “who would have thought that a meeting with some brother of a fucked woman would change you so much.”

Hayfa smiled at her sister, but remained silent. The waiter brought her the *argeela*, and as she took long minty breaths, she did not feel the thrill she had felt while with the nameless suitor.

Some of Mona’s friends happened to be at Koobz and sat with the sisters. Hayfa did not join in their conversation, but kept thinking of how she could have behaved differently at lunch. Did she overeat? How could she have asked for his name? Should she have asked him for his number? Her face turned red at the thought. He would think that she was the cheapest girl in Amman if she had done that.

Suddenly Kamal was standing in front of her. “What are you doing, Hayfa?”

“Hi Kamal,” waved Mona.

“You, stay out of this,” said Kamal, abruptly.

Hayfa’s eyebrows rose, “Don’t speak to my sister like that.”

Mona and Kamal both stared at Hayfa in surprise. Mona was smiling as she watched her sister get up and walk away.

“What are you doing, Hayfa?” repeated Kamal.

“I’m hanging out with my sister and her friends,” replied Hayfa calmly.

“You’re drinking *argeela* with guys, that’s what you’re doing,” shouted Kamal.

“So?”

“So? You going out behind my back is bad enough, but then sitting with guys and having *argeela* as well, might as well just bring two horns and attach them to my head yourself.”

“Ah, you’re worried about your reputation,” Hayfa said sarcastically.

“No, I’m worried about *yours*. Do you want to be known as a whore, like your sister?”

“Why is my sister a whore?”

“Look at her clothes,” he said, waving his hand in Mona’s direction. She was wearing a long green cotton top, purple leggings, and black boots. She sat with her foot on the couch. Her elbow rested on her knee as she brought her cigarette to her mouth. “Look at the way she’s sitting. I tell you, she embarrasses me! I hate showing my face when she’s around! And now you’re going out with her behind my back.”

Hayfa stared at her sister. She could not deny that if her parents saw Mona sitting like that they would have a heart attack. Conventions aside, however, Hayfa thought her sister looked laid-back and happy. “Behind your back? What are you, my dad?”

“You’re even beginning to *sound* like her!” Kamal bellowed.

“Keep your voice down. *This* is embarrassing. You act like you’re from the stone age. If I want to drink *argeela* I will, and if I want to go out with my sister without you, I will.”

Kamal’s eyes opened wide, “Why are you speaking to me like this? Why are you doing this to me?”

“I’m not doing this to *you*.” Hayfa pleaded, “I’m just sick of you saying all these things about my sister. She’s not done anything wrong. And I just want to do what I want to do. Is it so wrong?”

“That’s all we need now, girls doing what they want to do!”

“What’s so wrong with that?”

“You girls want to behave like Western girls! After a while you’ll want to drink alcohol and take drugs and eventually you’ll want to sleep around and give birth to boys of *haram*! Is this where you’re headed? If so let me know now.”

“Wait a minute, you know me. You know that neither Mona nor I are like that. I just felt down after a fight with my father and wanted to get out of the house. I didn’t think you



would get so angry. Those guys just joined us, I don't even know them that well, they seemed harmless.”

“And the *argeela*? You know how ugly it looks when a girl is sitting there drinking *argeela*? All that's left is a glass of whiskey to complete that image.”

“Why is it ugly for a girl to smoke?”

“*Because she's a girl,*” shouted Kamal.

Hayfa looked at her pale olive hands as she picked at her cuticles. They were small, hairless and soft. She then glanced at Kamal's large hairy hands with an unlit cigarette between his fingers. The image seemed ugly to her. She said nothing and continued staring at his shaking hands.

“Look,” said Kamal, “if you want to go out without me, I don't mind at all, just let me know. *Ya a'mmi*, a text message at least!” He made texting gestures with his fingers. “And next time some guys come to join you, tell them that your boyfriend doesn't approve. Do you know how humiliating it is to get a call from a friend saying:” he held up hand to his ear, “‘do you know where your madam is?’ and me, like an idiot, I say ‘in her father's house as far as I know,’ and then he tells me ‘he he he, she's drinking *argeela* and sitting with guys. Let me know if you need help filing your horns!’ You've blackened my face!” He shouted, “my horns have reached Aqaba!” He put both index fingers to his head to indicate long horns.

Hayfa fought her tears. She felt ashamed of herself. *Whatever possessed me to behave like that?*

They walked back to the table and joined the others. Kamal called the waiter and asked for a glass of *Araq*. Hayfa and Mona glanced at each other in surprise. Kamal caught them looking at each other and raised his finger to his lips, “*Husssss*, not a word. You've raised my blood pressure. I need to calm down. You girls, you make men sin against God.” He took the *argeela* from Mona's hand and took a deep puff. “Mint?” he asked, throwing it back at Mona, “I hate smoking mint.”

Sunday  
Siwar

The Indonesian housekeeper woke Siwar up at six the next morning with an aromatic cup of cardamom coffee. Siwar hated Sundays, she dragged herself out of bed and slowly put on her school uniform. Her mother was chatty while driving her to school that grey January morning, but Siwar was silent and irritable. The school year was different that year because of Ramadan's timing and also because of Tawjihi, which was the final year of high school. Siwar was unused to going to school in January and found the revision lessons that helped students cram before their exams slower than usual. She could not focus and kept signing her name and hyphenating Sari's last name until it was time for recess. Siwar knew that the classroom next door had religion, so she ran to her teacher in the hallway, and asked her a question that she had been worrying about all night.

"In Islam, can a woman get married without her father's permission?" asked Siwar.

"Yes, she can," replied the teacher, looking at another girl's notebook.

"So, even if my dad doesn't agree or doesn't even know, I can, in Islam, get married?"

"Yes, the only person who has to agree is you and the groom," replied the teacher, still looking at the notebook.

Siwar thanked her teacher with a smile, and ran to catch up with Sari, *Yes, I will marry you*, she kept repeating in her mind. But when she found him he was laughing with a group of her girlfriends.

\* \* \*

Hayfa

Hayfa was swivelling in the office swivel chair and thinking about the nameless man. As her chair turned round and round, she wondered why she was thinking of him. He was someone who came into her life for one hour, and that was it. She would never see him again. Thinking of him was useless. She kept repeating to herself *useless, useless, useless*. She thought of her own boyfriend. He was handsome. He was much more lenient than Talal, Nadia's ex. *He's great, although he freaked out yesterday. I'm very lucky*. Her mind wandered back to the day before, sharing lunch and *argeela* with the not so good looking, slightly overweight, balding, sweaty, funny man. She kept thinking of phrases he had said, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make fun of your favourite coffee shop," he had said, which had surprised her, a sincere apology about such a trivial thing, she found herself smiling again. "You live your life on maybes!" he had laughed after he had asked several questions to which she replied "maybe." She wondered what his impression of her was, after all, he *did* kiss her cheeks when they said goodbye. She wished there was a magical way she could find out what he was thinking. She googled, "How can I tell if someone likes me?" She found pages and pages of wiki-hows, which did not apply to her situation. *Why is there no How-To guide on the internet for arranged marriages when the girl already has a boyfriend and she doesn't know the suitor's name?* She stopped typing for a moment. *What if he has a girlfriend?* She started swivelling and typing different questions into the Google search engine. "How to interpret body language," *how am I supposed to know if his pupils were dilated!* "How to tell if someone is in a relationship." *He didn't get any mysterious phone-calls...*

At one o'clock there was a knock on her office door. She jumped in her seat. Her face turned red, she quickly took out a small mirror from her drawer and looked her reflection, the mascara she had carefully applied that morning was smudged, she licked her index finger and furiously rubbed at the smudge. She opened the door and found the receptionist standing there. Her enthusiasm disappeared.

"What is this beauty? I don't think I've ever seen you without your glasses before. What's the occasion?" asked the receptionist.

“What do you mean? I always take my glasses off,” replied Hayfa taking the pile of papers from the receptionist. She closed the door in the receptionist’s face without waiting for her reply.

\* \* \*

Aseel

Aseel was at work trying to explain to a fussy customer the conveniences of an iPhone. He kept arguing with her. In spite of the cold weather outside, she felt sweaty, and her face was getting red. The baby started to kick. Dizziness overcame her and she grasped the glass display of mobile phones and tried to keep smiling.

Her colleague noticed and took over, and Aseel made her way over to the store room and took a seat. Her face was pale with beads of sweat trickling down her face. Her colleague called Bassam, and he was there in a matter of minutes.

“That’s it, no more work for you,” he said, helping her to his car. Aseel stopped and pulled her arm away from his grip and looked at his face. He continued in a softer tone, “You’re going to leave your job when you have your baby anyway. Might as well leave now. Relax a bit, prepare the baby’s room. I want you off your feet.”

Aseel let him help her into his car. “But I like my job. I was planning to go back after my maternity leave,” she said as he slowly closed her car door.

After Bassam frowned as he started his car, “And what are you planning to do with the baby while you’re at work?”

“I could take him to my mother’s house during the day.”

“Maternity leave is only ninety days, the baby will need to be breastfed, how are you going to cope with that?”

“I can use a pump.”

“Selling mobile phones is hardly a career! It’s a dead end job. You would neglect your firstborn for that?”

“Look, it’s not like you have enough money to support me and the baby all by yourself anyway.”

“What? What do you mean? How do you know how much money I have?” Bassam’s voice was getting louder.

“I’m just saying that it wouldn’t hurt if I brought in a little bit of extra money.”

“Are you implying that I can’t support you and my child? That I need *you* and your stupid job that a monkey could do, to support this family? What is this arrogance of yours?”

Aseel said nothing. She stared out the window at the grey clouds. She felt her heart beating and the baby kicking wildly. As Bassam pulled over in front of their apartment building he said calmly, “Starting tomorrow, no more work.”

Aseel slammed the door and slowly made her way to the elevator of the building. She propped herself down on the couch and stared at a wedding picture of her and Bassam. Was her smile genuine in the picture? *What was I feeling on my wedding day?*

She tore her eyes away from the picture. Unconsciously, she reached for the remote and switched on the television. She flipped through the channels, realizing that she had no idea what daytime television was like. Losing interest, she walked towards Bassam’s desk and switched on his computer. She browsed through her unread emails then went to Facebook, which she had not logged into in a long time. The first picture she found was of her cousin Wa’el with his arms around two girls, *typical*, she thought.

She forgot her cousin’s profile picture when she noticed the headlines on the newsfeed of her homepage: “**Suicide Sparked Tunisia Revolution.**” Her friends in Tunisia had put up YouTube links, which she clicked one by one in awe. Some of her friends in Jordan had changed their profile pictures to the Tunisian flags. Her heart pounded, as one Facebook status after the other had words like revolution, freedom, and democracy. *Revolution?* Aseel, for the first time in her life, switched the television to Al Jazeera news.

\* \* \*

Hayfa

The evenings were getting bitterly cold. “Looks like winter is finally here!” said Mona as she picked up her sister from work.

“You can finally start wearing the sweaters you bought,” replied Hayfa.

Mona asked Hayfa about her day. Hayfa answered in monosyllables. “Hey,” said Mona touching her sister’s hair at a red traffic light, “what’s up with you? You seem absent minded.”

Hayfa bit her lip.

“My heart tells me that you’re into that man you met yesterday. Am I right?” Mona suddenly honked her horn at a car that was trying to overtake her, “Damn your father, brother of a fucked woman!” She steered to the right, “You *try* to drive on the right, following the speed limit, *but no*. You end up offending people who think this is a race— whoever gets to the next traffic lights first wins.” She glared at the man through the car window. “See? Now we’re next to each other at the traffic light, there was no need for him to go nuts trying to overtake me. Donkey. *WaAllah hmar!*” She looked back at her sister. “Sorry.”

“Yes, you’re right. I keep thinking about that man. But he didn’t give me his name or number or anything. It’s so stupid to be thinking of him. I love Kamal.”

“Well, do you know his last name?”

“It’s one of the big Hebron last names, but I can’t remember what Mama told me.”

“We could try to find him on the internet.”

“And then what? I can’t just stalk him. Plus I’m not sure *what* I want. He’s not good looking. He was all sweaty. He’s bald. I don’t know Monmon. I must be mental.”

“I think that you *were* in love with Kamal. But since meeting him, you’ve graduated from university and found a job and he still hasn’t. Life is really tough, yes, I know. It’s really hard to find a job in this country these days. It took you six months, and me... Remember what happened to me? A whole year of free-lancing and getting ripped off. But *we kept looking*. Our friends who couldn’t find jobs here went to the Gulf. But your boyfriend did *nothing*. He’s got no problem just hanging around at home, and letting you pay for his luxurious outings. I don’t get how you stayed with him this long.”

“Wow. I never knew you felt this way about him.”

“I’m really sorry, but Odeh and I... well, we’ve really started to hate him.”

“I don’t hate him. But I... I don’t know.”

“So it’s understandable that now—after meeting a guy who is successful, who did his Masters in Egypt and has had an excellent job in Indonesia and is opening a branch here—now, you’re having second thoughts about your boyfriend.” Mona checked her blind spot behind her and said in an undertone, “Just a little ambition.”

“Sounds so shallow. That’s not really it,” Hayfa turned towards her sister, “he made me laugh. He was so much fun...” Hayfa’s voice trailed off.

“Kamal?” asked Mona, and before Hayfa could answer, Mona shouted, “By the life of God, you don’t know how to drive!” Mona honked furiously.

\* \* \*

#### Fida and Reema

Fida was on the phone with Reema. “I’m telling you, this mesotherapy sounds amazing! You should try it.”

“Why me?” asked Reema.

“Well, because I want to try it, but I need someone to go with me. Come on! I already made us appointments for our double chins. It’s only fifteen dinars.”

“When’s the appointment?”

“Tonight at six.”

“But we’re watching the game.”

“Which game? Jordan and Japan? Come on, you know we’re going to lose.”

“But I want to watch it!”

“*Uf? Tayeb*, that’s why you’re staying home? Come on, I’ll pick you up and I promise we’ll listen to the radio in the car.”

At the clinic, the doctor examined Reema’s double chin. “You’ll need both meso *and* ultrasound therapy to get good results.” She held some of the skin around Reema’s neck and pulled, “Yes, yes, you’ll need at least sixteen sessions of ultrasound therapy, and five sessions of mesotherapy.”

“Does it hurt?” asked Reema.

“No, no, it’s harmless and painless,” she grabbed a needle.

“Oh, what’s the needle for?”

“Just relax,” the doctor pinched Reema’s skin and injected the needle to the side of her neck.

“You know, I’ve changed my mind, I don’t want to do this. It really hurts,” said Reema, trying to get up.

The nurse pushed her down and the doctor kept injecting the needle into different parts of Reema’s neck.

“It really hurts!” cried Reema.

“You’re such a baby,” laughed Fida, from the corner where she was sitting, flipping through *Layalina* magazine. “Did you know that that guy Qais from our school got married to a girl called Layla?” she snorted, “Imagine, a Qais marrying a Layla.”

“Fida, this *really* hurts.”

“*Yalla*, to the ultrasound room,” said the doctor, she patted Reema’s leg condescendingly.

Reema felt dizzy, “I don’t think I can get up,” she mumbled, she was finding it harder and harder to speak.

“Oh, it seems that you are a spoiled one, aren’t you?” laughed the doctor. “Let me see,” she poked at Reema’s swollen double chin, “does this hurt?”

“Ay!” shouted Reema.

“You are embarrassing me,” moaned Fida, “stop it!”

“Did you want meso done on you?” asked the doctor.

“No, after I saw that needle I decided not to. I’ll wait to see Reema’s results. I’ll just have these spider-veins lasered,” Fida touched the side of her face.

The two girls went to their different therapy rooms and met at the reception desk twenty minutes later. Both their faces were red. “That’ll be sixty-five dinars from you, and fifteen from you,” said the receptionist.

“What? Sixty-five? I thought it only cost fifteen?” moaned Reema.

“The ultrasound therapy is fifteen dinars for twenty minutes. The meso is fifty. We accept Visa, MasterCard, and debit card.”

Reema counted the money in her purse, knowing that she did not have sixty-five dinars. “Could you lend me some Fida? I’m twenty dinars short.”



Fida groaned and complained, but eventually gave Reema the money out of embarrassment when she saw tears in her eyes. In the car, Sana started sobbing. “It’s *so painful*,” she looked at herself in a small mirror. “My face looks like a watermelon. What am I going to tell my dad?”

“Stop it will you? You’ll be fine, just wear a scarf. They won’t even notice.”

Reema tried to sneak into the house without anybody noticing. Sana was the first to see her, “Jordan and Japan tied, 1-1. Hey, what’s wrong with your neck?”

Reema ran to her room and wrapped a scarf around her face. Sana walked in after her and found her crying.

“I’m just so sick of myself! All our cousins can eat what they want without getting fat! I am on a constant diet. I go to the gym instead of going out with my friends! I just wish I could eat normally! It seems I gain weight from just *smelling* food,” Reema sobbed.

Sana hugged her sister. Reema continued to sob, her tears drenching Sana’s sweatshirt. “What are you talking about? You’re beautiful.”

“Oh? If I’m so beautiful, why has no guy ever paid attention to me? Even our cousin Siwar, the idiot, has a boyfriend! I’m the only girl I know who has never had a boyfriend.”

Sana chuckled, “I’ve never had a boyfriend either. Is being in a relationship what determines your self-worth?”

“I’m just sick of being ugly. All our cousins are so beautiful.”

“That’s because they’ve had their noses done.”

“And Baba won’t let me do mine.”

Sana left her sister exchanging BBMs on her blackberry with their cousin Nadeen. She tried to call Siwar again, but her aunt told her Siwar had another tutor. Sana worried that her aunt was starting to get suspicious. She went and joined her parents, who were glued to Al Jazeera news. “What’s going on?” she asked.

Her father blew out a big puff of smoke, “The Tunisians are demonstrating. Donkeys. They’re just getting themselves killed.”

“How can their parents let them go out like that?” wondered Um Wa’el.

“We Arabs, we’re lazy and we are each after his own interest. Eventually these kids will go back home, *yindaboo bi byoot’hom*.”

\* \* \*

## Aseel

When Bassam came home, Aseel was still checking Facebook, sharing articles, checking links, reading articles and commenting on other people's discussions. She had begun feeling very patriotic.

"I'm starving. What's cooking?" asked Bassam, taking off his jacket and throwing his things on the couch.

"Nothing. I didn't cook."

"Why not? You've been here since three. Or have you been too tired?"

"Oh, no, I feel much better. Did you hear about Tunisia?"

"Crazy people, yes, I heard."

"Do you really think they'll succeed in overthrowing the president?"

"They're being massacred. I think this is only the beginning."

"What do you mean?" Aseel paused the YouTube video she was watching and turned around.

"If the Tunisians do this right, this is going to be the beginning of a new era."

A strange feeling of hope mixed with fear gripped Aseel's heart.

"Come on, I'm hungry, can you please make me something for *'asha'*?"

Aseel got up from behind the computer reluctantly and opened the fridge and started preparing Bassam his supper.

## Chapter 8

Friday the 14<sup>th</sup>

After lunch at their grandmother's house, the girls did not sit separately as they usually did. They brought chairs and everybody huddled together in the large living room with Al Jazeera news blasting out loudly from the television.

"If I hear that any of you disobeys me and goes out to today's demonstration, my anger will be on you," said Tata.

"Tata, it's our duty as citizens of this country. I'd be ashamed of myself forever if I don't go," protested Ashraf.

"What are you protesting about? Jordan is a good country," pleaded Tata, "it's safe, it's stable... We live here comfortable, happy, with no danger. Look at my brother's family, still in Hebron, they have to deal with the settlers, with the soldiers, they don't have money, some have to borrow money to buy bread. Here, we're free! And most importantly, we're safe."

"Tata, Al Rifa' ai changes laws as he pleases! The taxes and inflation are too much. The nation is hungry." Farid argued.

"These demonstrations won't do anything," said Abu Wa'el. He pointed his *argeela* at his son and nephews, "and if any of you go, the Mukhabarat will start watching you, and we'll all get into trouble."

"All of you, stay away from these demonstrations. We're Palestinians! And if we start meddling with Jordanian affairs They will say that the Palestinians are back to their old *Fida'eyeh* ways. And this, this— *Facebook*, stay away from it, the Mukhabarat are keeping a close watch on it," said Abu Ashraf as he also pointed his *argeela* hose at the young men and women.

"This is all a conspiracy, the West is behind this. They want us to start fighting amongst ourselves so they can do what they want in our lands," said Um Farid.

“Democracy in the region is not in the West’s interest,” said Abu Farid. “They’re terrified of us achieving true democracy.”

“We have democracy!” shouted Tata, “Didn’t we all go to vote?”

“Tata, you voted?” asked Reema in surprise, “Who did you vote for?”

“I voted for my neighbour’s brother-in-law.”

“That’s not democracy. That is corruption. You didn’t vote for him because he represented anything, you voted for him because your neighbour asked you to,” Abu Farid explained.

“I am corrupt for voting? I am fortunate to be a citizen of Jordan with the right to vote. Do you think I ever voted in Palestine?” Tata clutched her heart.

“Tata, Tata, calm down, calm down,” said Aseel, waddling over to her grandmother’s side, “someone call the girl, let her bring a glass of water.”

“May *Allah*’s blessings keep you my beloved,” Tata stroked Aseel’s arm, “may God never deprive me of you. I pray to Him that you have a boy and for you and him to rise from the ordeal in health and safety. What is this rash?”

“It’s nothing Tata,” Aseel replied. “I have been using some products that have given me a rash. It’s nothing serious, no need to worry *habibti* Tata. You just rest now.”

“These foreign products that have infested our city,” Tata spat, still rubbing her chest in pain, “just rub warm olive oil over it and throw those products in the garbage!”

Hayfa had gone to fetch some water for her grandmother rather than call the housekeeper to bring it. As she handed it to her, she bent her knees as her mother had taught her to. “Without a tray?” asked Tata gruffly, taking the cold glass. Hayfa flinched; her grandmother had scowled at her when she greeted her before lunch. News that Hayfa had not impressed the suitor had reached and infuriated her. “My sister has seen the joy in all her granddaughters. She’s even seen the joy twice in her son Khaled’s daughter Aysha. And me? Someone has prayed against me, it seems, God has only written for me to wed one granddaughter,” she had said when she saw Um Ashraf.

Hayfa went back to sit on the kitchen chair she had been sharing with Mona. It was a particularly gloomy Friday and the atmosphere was tense. She had spent her week thinking of the tall sweaty bald suitor, who, she kept telling herself, was not *really* a suitor, as he had had no intention of marrying her to begin with. Also, her brother, some of her

cousins, and many of her friends were slowly becoming activists on Facebook and Twitter, which was scaring her. Mona was more relaxed about the Tunisian uprising, “If they want to get rid of that brother of a fucker, they should be able to do it.” Hayfa, however, was terrified, *what if this happened to Jordan?*

Reema sat on the edge of a couch beside her mother with a Palestinian *hatta* covering her still swollen neck. Fida had burst out laughing at the sight, “I’m lucky I didn’t do it as well! That would repulse any potential suitor!” which had made Reema tear up again.

Siwar’s *Tawjihi* exams had started that week, and she had an exam the next day. She had begged her parents to let her stay home; her main reason was to avoid running into Sana. “I need to study! *Thaqafa ‘Amma* is a very difficult subject!” She had repeated to her mother, but her mother had insisted that going to her grandmother’s house would relieve some of Siwar’s stress.

“And your grandmother can read Quran over you to get rid of the evil eye. It will comfort you,” her mother had argued, “you can’t study *all* day long. And lunch at your Tata’s house is only one hour long, you know that.”

At her grandmother’s house, trying very hard to avoid Sana, Siwar found herself the centre of attention. Her *Tawjihi* exams were the next big topic after the Tunisian uprising, which she found annoying. Thanks to the newspaper articles about these exams, everyone knew that she had already had her religion and her communication skills exams. Siwar continued to dodge Sana until finally, Sana got her chance when she caught her cousin leaving the bathroom. “How is Sari?” asked Sana.

Siwar’s face turned red. “He—eh... he’s okay.”

“Have you broken up with him yet?”

“No. And we’re not going to break up.”

“What? Are you crazy?”

“We’re going to get married.”

“Yes, in five years maybe, but for the time being, you should concentrate on your lessons!”

“Oh Sana, please stop it. We’re going to get married *now*.”

“You think the family will agree to that?”

“According to my religion teacher, we *can* get married now. I don’t need anybody’s permission.”

Sana laughed, “Your religion teacher must be an idiot. In Jordanian law, your father must sign your marriage contract.”

Siwar was silent for a minute. “But *Islamically*, I don’t need *anybody’s* permission.”

“Yes, but you are living in a country that has *laws*. And the kind of marriage you’re talking about is called *zawaj urfi*, and this kind of marriage isn’t accepted as a legal marriage in this country. So even if you *think* you are married in the eyes of God, in the eyes of everybody else you’ll just be an adulteress.”

Siwar stared hard at her cousin in silence. “The slogans on the streets are *Allah, Al watan, Al Malek*: God, the nation, the King. God comes first.”

“If God comes first, then we wouldn’t have an honour crime problem in this country, would we? Since murder is *haram*. And also, if you *really* cared about *haram* and *halal* you would know that it’s definitely a sin to go against your parents’ wishes.” Sana felt guilty for the pain she was causing young Siwar, however, she walked away without consoling her.

Wa’el bumped into her. “Ashraf and I are going to the demonstration,” he whispered.

“What? In this rain?”

“If Baba and Mama ask where I am, tell them you asked me to get you something from the mall.”

Sana followed her brother with her eyes, as he and Ashraf wrapped black and white *hattas* around their necks. She ran after them and grabbed her brother, yanking at his leather sleeve. “Take off your *hatta*,” she said firmly.

“No, it’s freezing,” said Wa’el, yanking his arm away, “and it’ll help if they throw tear gas.”

Ashraf eyed Sana, “You think? These demonstrations are about reform in Jordan, not about Palestine. This shouldn’t be a problem,” he said, touching his *hatta*.

“Exactly, they are about Jordan. So either wear the red *hatta* or just wear normal scarves.”

Wa’el laughed, and looked at Ashraf, “You see the girls these days? They control their brothers, not the other way around.”

Sana walked back to where her grandmother was sitting and found Siwar sitting in her grandmother's arms, her head resting on her breast. Tata's right hand was stroking Siwar's short hair, both had their eyes closed, as Tata whispered words from the Quran. The aunts and uncles were talking and smoking, but Siwar could hear her grandmother's whispers. She could smell cigarettes and coffee on her grandmother's breath, and Siwar felt a wave of comfort wash over her when her Tata brought her hand over Siwar's heart and continued whispering. Siwar automatically started reading the verses in her mind, "*My Lord open my chest, and ease my situation, untie the knot from my tongue so they understand what I say.*" As the wave of comfort retreated from Siwar's heart, it was replaced by a wave of guilt.

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Aseel

"There's nothing about these protest on Jordanian news channels," complained Aseel to Bassam, flipping through different news channels. "It's all about Tunisia."

"It's on fire in Tunisia, and it's on fire here."

"How do you know it's on fire here?"

"Twitter. There are demonstrations in Ma'an, Karak, Salt even Irbid."

"Uf uf uf? Irbid too?" Aseel sat up.

"Do you want to go to my mother's?"

"I can't bear to tear myself away from the news."

"Me too."

Aseel and Bassam had established a new routine that week. Aseel would spend all day following Facebook updates about Tunisia. Her profile picture was, of course, the picture of the Tunisian flag. She would keep Al Jazeera news on TV as she did the housework and cooked. Bassam's office blocked websites like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, so he and Aseel would BBM throughout the day. Aseel would update him, and he would reply with predictions. When Bassam came home in the evening, the two of them would eat while

switching between news channels trying to find the latest news. Aseel and Bassam would have long and passionate discussions about Tunisia, and Aseel, for the first time in her life, felt better informed than Bassam. Bassam was set in his opinions, Aseel's opinions, however, fluctuated. If she read an article about how this Tunisian revolution could bring democracy, she would agree and enthusiastically tell Bassam. If she read an article about how unlikely a regime change in Tunisia would be, she would lose hope.

On this particular Friday, after rushing back home from Tata's lunch, Aseel and Bassam collapsed on the sofa and hurriedly switched on the television. Aseel's feet were propped on Bassam's lap while he gently massaged them. Aseel was surprised at how pleasant the sensation was. "You know, Soosoo," Bassam had even started giving her nicknames, "the Tunisians are truly amazing. That song you sent me, *Kilmiti Hurra?* It brought tears to my eyes and goose-bumps all over my body."

"It would have brought tears to my eyes too, if it wasn't for the way the singer was dressed. You could see her bra."

"What is this comment that doesn't have a taste! The song is much bigger than a bra! The woman is singing about freedom!"

"Yes, freedom for a country, not freedom to show your pink underwear to the entire world," retorted Aseel.

"I tell you the song brought tears to my eyes, and you're worried about her underwear?! The woman dedicated the song for Palestine and Iraq! This Tunisian woman, in the midst of a Tunisian revolution, is singing for Palestine and Iraq, and you're concerned about the colour of her bra? Her *bra*, Aseel?"

Aseel, confused at Bassam's outrage, took her feet away from his lap.

They sat in silence. Bassam munching on a cucumber, and Aseel sulking, still believing that the dress the singer was wearing could have been more modest.

Suddenly Bassam stood up and read out loud, "Breaking news, Bin Ali steps down!"

"What?" Aseel said, slowly standing up, "Steps *down*?"

"He's stepped down! Fled to Saudi Arabia!"

Aseel's heart started pounding, she could hear it in her ears. She and Bassam stood facing each other. Bassam gripped both her hands tightly. They stared into each other's eyes, and Aseel noticed that Bassam's eyes were glistening. They stood in silence,



absorbing the news. “Egypt!” cried Aseel, remembering a Facebook page she had come across which was trying to organise a demonstration that did not quite work. Her mind raced, “Syria!” Her heart pounding in her ears and her baby kicking made her shake her head in a frenzy, “Sudan! Algeria! Iraq!” She stopped shaking her head and stared deeply into Bassam’s eyes, “Palestine.”

“Soosoo,” Bassam chuckled, “Bin Ali stepping down is great news, but don’t get too enthusiastic, *hayaty*.”

“What do you mean? The people *did it*. Doesn’t this mean that people are powerful?”

“You are right, we’ve all learned something. But, Tunisians are different. They’ve been colonized by the French, and the French are famous for their revolution which brought true democracy to their country. Tunisians, well, they’re more enlightened than the rest of us. Egyptians are meek, Algerians are religious, Sudanese are lazy, and the Syrians... well that’s a Sunni-Alawi thing. Iraq and Palestine are a big fat divided mess.”

Aseel’s gaze wandered back to the television. Her heart rate and baby were slowly going back to normal, and she sat back down. Reading one headline after the other, Aseel’s optimism turned into mixed feelings of anxiety and something else she could not define properly. She grabbed Bassam’s laptop to see what Facebook had to say, and she found over one hundred status updates from her friends. Images of the Tunisian flag flooded her homepage, “MABROOK TUNIS” “♥ Tunis ♥” “RIP Tunisian martyrs. You did not die in vain” Aseel “liked” one status after the other, and commented on a few. She wondered what to write, wanting to impress her friends, but also wanting to be true to her thoughts. She tentatively typed, “Thank you Tunis, for giving us hope.”

Within a matter of minutes, Aseel’s status was “liked” by several friends, which made her smile. Bassam saw Aseel’s smile. “Let me see, let me see!” he took the laptop from Aseel’s lap and logged into his own account. He also “liked” her status. He typed away at his laptop, then took the blackberry out of his pocket and started BBMing. Aseel seized back his laptop and started looking at YouTube videos of the Tunisian vice-president’s speech.

After thirty minutes of silence, Bassam put his Blackberry back into his pocket and said, “I’ve invited my friends for *Mansaf* tomorrow to celebrate.”

“*Mansaf? Tomorrow?*” Aseel put the laptop aside, “How am I supposed to make *Mansaf*, we don’t even have *jameed*. I’m supposed to soak it in water all night.”

“I’ll go buy some now.”

“*Mansaf* takes a whole day to prepare, I don’t feel like having people over tomorrow.”

“Aseel, *Mansaf* practically cooks itself, don’t give me a stroke now.”

“What? Cooks itself? First of all, it’s my day out with the girls, and I ditched them last Saturday. So I *have to* see them tomorrow or they’ll get mad at me.”

“I didn’t make you ditch them last Saturday.”

“And then, I’ll need to stand all day at the pot taking the fat out of the meat, and mashing the *jameed*, and peeling and halving the almonds, and stirring the *jameed*... Yes it’s an easy thing to cook, but it requires effort, and I will have to wash all the dirty dishes afterwards, and put all the heavy plates away, and prepare the coffee, the tea, the dessert, then clean up and tidy the place before and after...” It felt more like torture than a celebration to Aseel. She rubbed her huge belly where her baby just kicked.

“I already invited them. Besides, other women do it. You’re not the first woman to have to cook while she’s pregnant.”

“You have a half-day tomorrow, help me.”

“What?” Bassam’s face twisted into a bewildered frown. “Have you gone crazy?”

Aseel sighed. She adjusted the laptop on her lap, and started checking news websites. Bassam got up and said, “I’m going to get the *jameed* now. I can help you by doing all the shopping now so you don’t have to worry about that tomorrow. What do you need?”

Aseel mumbled out a list of things she needed, knowing that the butcher’s would be closed at this late hour, and that she would have to go shopping the next day anyway. After Bassam left, Aseel switched off the laptop and started daydreaming about something she had not thought about for a while: the handsome Englishman at Cozmo’s.

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## Sana

Sana was pacing her room, checking her mobile phone every few minutes, waiting for news from her brother and Ashraf.

When she heard the front door open and shut, and Wa'el's gruff voice greeting her parents, she breathed out a sigh of relief. She did not want to arouse her parents' suspicion, so she let him use the bathroom, go into his room and go out into the living room where she heard him ask his mother for a sandwich. Um Wa'el dragged her heavy body up, and asked her husband if he was ready for his supper. After hearing her father's distracted "Yalla, we'll have supper," Sana left her room to help her mother. Sana and her mother were silent as one made the tea and the other heated the round flat bread on the stove. After putting small portions of *labaneh*, olives, and white cheese with black sesame on a tray, Sana walked into the living room, placing the tray in front of her father and brother.

"I asked for a sandwich," protested Wa'el.

"Mama's preparing it," replied Sana, walking back to her room.

Sana thought half an hour was a good time to wait before she casually walked over to her brother who was sprawled on the couch next to his mother and asked him if he could take a look at her laptop.

"Later," he said.

Sana breathed out a sigh of impatience, and walked back into her room. She decided that she could not wait much longer to find out what happened at the protest, so she called her cousin Hayfa.

When Hayfa answered, there was loud noise around her, and she had to shout into the handset so Sana could hear her. Sana did not want to shout back because she was afraid of her parents overhearing her. So she told Hayfa she would call back the next day. Sana was surprised that Hayfa was out so late, but she remembered that Hayfa and Mona were fortunate that their mother was not like hers. Even though their mothers were cousins, they dealt with their fathers in different ways.

Sana enjoyed hanging out at Ammo Abu Ashraf's house. Her uncle had the same bad temper as her father, but when unprovoked, he was funny. *Khalto* Um Ashraf was sweet, and she and her husband bounced jokes and retorts off each other. Because Sana did not

visit often, she received a culture shock while spending time at her uncle Abu Ashraf's home. She would notice that at suppertime, either Ashraf or Abu Ashraf would be in the kitchen preparing fabulous omelettes or fried tomatoes. "Taste this *foole*," Abu Ashraf would say, "I guarantee you that it's the best in Amman!" Often Ashraf would come into the living room asking if the girls wanted tea. Sometimes the girls would say yes, and he would bring in a tray for them, or sometimes the girls would thank their brother and would make their tea by themselves. She once asked them why their father stood in the kitchen in the evenings, and they told her it was because he spent quite a few years living in Cairo, where he had to depend on himself. Because Abu Ashraf loved food, he had to learn to cook even the most complicated recipes from a Hebron housewife's kitchen. Sana loved the atmosphere in their house. Mona, Hayfa and Ashraf were inseparable, unlike Reema, Sana and Wa'el, who, when not watching TV, were each in their own room doing their own thing.

Eventually, Wa'el knocked on Sana's door, asking what was wrong with her laptop. "I just wanted to ask you what happened at the demonstration?"

"Nothing. We got very wet and cold. The police were there, but they stayed far from us. People were shouting anti-Rifai slogans, and nobody was being dragged away to get beaten up or imprisoned—not to my knowledge anyway. Then news that Bin Ali stepped down began circulating, and the crowds were cheering like crazy, singing, *dabkeh* dancing, the girls ululated, some headed down to the Tunisian embassy to celebrate."

"Girls? There were girls there?"

"Yes, they looked like bitches out there chanting. They should stay in their homes."

"Were the men there harassing them?"

"I didn't notice anything."

"A place full of men like that, I'm sure the girls there got groped and harassed."

"Well, there were a lot of girls, so many. Do they think Jordan is Tunisia? The one asks himself: where are their brothers?"

"Their brothers were probably with them at the demonstration."

Wa'el laughed. "In that case, their brothers have horns and are an embarrassment to the country."

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## Hayfa and Mona

Mona and Hayfa were at Koobz with Odeh and Kamal. As usual, they were sitting at different corners, and each couple was talking about the other. Only this time they were discussing the same topic, the unavoidable end of the other couple's relationship.

"He can't convert and become Muslim—his family would kill him. And of course she can't become Christian—it's a dead-end relationship," said Kamal to Hayfa between mouthfuls of pizza.

"He doesn't have a job, he doesn't have any qualifications that would make him stand out. He has so many brothers and sisters that if his dad died, the little money he has would be split between all his children, not to mention his wife and mother, the way you Muslims do it, that Kamal would end up inheriting peanuts. How is he going to open a house and start a family? I tell you, their relationship is going nowhere, and the sooner your sister realizes it the better," said Odeh waving his unlit cigarette at Mona.

Trying to change the subject, Hayfa started telling Kamal about an old high school friend who suddenly added her on Facebook. "We chatted and he told me that he's looking for a wife."

"God pray for our master Mohammad!" said Kamal in an exasperated tone, raising both hands, "How many times have I told you not to add guys like that on Facebook?"

"Come on, he's an old friend."

"When did you chat with him?"

"At some point today, why?"

"Is that when I was trying to chat with you and you said you were busy?"

Hayfa tried to recall, but Kamal started shouting, "You ditch *me*, your boyfriend of four years, for some guy you knew in high school. Don't you know that the reason he added you is because he wants *you* to be his wife?"

"No I don't think so, because my relationship status shows I'm not available. Plus I talked to him about my cousin Sana and his first question was if she wears a veil, and then his next question was would she be willing to wear the veil, and then his last question was about her age. He didn't like that she was only six months younger than him. Apparently

he wants a girl in her early twenties. What is it with guys and their obsession with young girls?”

“Well, women age quicker than men, so that’s why it’s better to have a young wife,” said Kamal, calming down.

Hayfa frowned and tried to think of couples of the same age.

“So, the time you ditched me to spend talking with this guy, was it well spent?”

Hayfa checked the time and was relieved to find that it was time to leave. She went to call her sister, came back and found that Kamal had left the table. Mona had made Hayfa not bring her wallet on purpose to see what would happen. Hayfa started calling Kamal on his mobile phone and eventually, when he picked up, he said that he was already at the car and that it was too much hassle for him to walk all the way back under the rain. “But I don’t have money, I left my wallet at home.”

“That was smart,” he snorted. “Well, borrow money from your sister or Odeh.”

“You know them, they never have extra money.”

“Damn it, Hayfa, what sort of person forgets to bring money to a coffee shop?”

“When was the last time *you* paid for anything?”

“I will damn your God if you take that tone with me. Fine. I’ll come and sort it out.”

When Kamal came back, wet from the heavy rain, he laughed with the waiter about how women could not be trusted with money, and paid with his debit card. Mona, tapping her foot, noticed that Hayfa had her eyes focussed on a little ant on the floor. The waiter and Kamal made another joke about women’s expectations that men will always pay the bill. Mona involuntarily lifted her foot up and it came slamming down, killing the ant Hayfa was staring at.

Hayfa blinked, looked hard at her sister’s shoe, and then slowly looked up at her laughing boyfriend. He turned his face towards her and met her gaze. His laughter died. Hayfa and Kamal stared into each other’s eyes, cigarette and *argeela* smoke engulfing them. Music was playing loudly. People around them were drinking, celebrating Tunisia’s victory. Eventually, she tilted her head to the side and smiled, “I want to break up,” she said. Oblivious to her sister, Odeh, and the waiter’s discomfort at the situation, “I want to break up,” she repeated, nodding with each word.

## Chapter 9

### The Saturday After Friday the 14<sup>th</sup>

#### Aseel

The next morning Aseel chose a casual outfit from her new collection and headed out to the butcher. As usual, he pointed out how long it had been and he was starting to think she had found another butcher, and then enquired after her husband and mother-in-law. After Aseel told him that they were both doing well, he said “I just want to make sure she’s okay, she hasn’t been here in a while.”

Aseel smiled politely, remembering how Bassam’s mother had spent an entire half hour talking about this butcher, about how expensive his prices were and how he cheated and used imported meat and passed it off as local *baladi*. “If you love me,” her mother-in-law had said, “you will never go to that cheating butcher again.” According to her mother-in-law, this butcher’s cuts were not clean enough, he was sloppy, and he was nosey. But, Aseel liked him because he had a kind face, and his bushy blond moustache reminded her of her grandfather’s.

Aseel asked for a shoulder of mutton. “On my head, you just order me.” He smiled, “How do you want the cuts?”

“For *Mansaf*,” replied Aseel, her eyes wandering to the TV.

The butcher’s eyes followed Aseel’s. “I never thought I would see this again in my lifetime.” He unhooked one of the dangling sheep corpses from the window display. He started chopping off the shoulder, “When I was a boy,” he said, while slamming down his big knife over the recently slaughtered sheep whose eyes were staring accusingly at Aseel, “Revolutions happened often in the Arab world. But the tyrants who led these revolutions became presidents and they knew how to stifle the young man’s enthusiasm and patriotism. They grabbed him by the throat,” he brought his gloved hand to his throat in a strangling motion, not quite letting his rubber glove with blood stains touch his neck.

“They starved their young men,” he slammed down the knife again. “They stole their countries’ wealth.” Bang went the knife again. The butcher grunted, as he pulled the knife up over his shoulder. “They changed the education syllabus,” the knife banged against the sheep’s flesh again. “They distorted history.” He brought down his knife with a final slam. “They crammed knowledge into children’s heads, but stunted their critical thinking.” The butcher started trimming bits of fat off the mutton, which was now starting to look less like an animal to Aseel and more like cookable meat—if she avoided the dead sheep’s glare. “They were followed, they were under constant surveillance. News was censored. They lived in fear. But now, these old men, they don’t know the new technologies. They can’t protect themselves against it.”

Aseel gulped, wondering if her mother-in-law was right about the butcher after all. The butcher’s openness in talking about politics made Aseel suspect that he was a spy trying to trap her. They said that out of every trio, one was on the Intelligence payroll.

“Who knows what’s going to happen now,” said Aseel, cautiously. “This Tunisian guy seems to be just like the one before him. Who knows if he’ll listen to the people’s demands.”

“Ah, but that’s not the point.” The butcher started putting the meat in a blue bag, “The point is, the people brought down a president. Not with violence—but with spontaneous solidarity. They united against injustice.” The butcher smiled, and pointed his bloody blue glove at Aseel’s pregnant bump, “Your child will learn about this revolution in school.”

Aseel smiled and looked down at her belly and rubbed it.

“These bags are heavy,” said the butcher, “let me send the boy to carry them for you.” He called a teenage boy, “Boy, carry these bags for the madam. And come straight back!”

Aseel paid and thanked the butcher. She and the boy walked in silence. Once in the elevator leading up to Aseel and Bassam’s apartment, Aseel noticed that the boy reeked of sweat and meat. She brought her top up to cover her nose and mouth. The boy noticed, but said nothing and lowered his gaze after Aseel looked directly at him. His eyes reminded her of the dead sheep in the butcher’s shop.

After he put the bags of meat in the refrigerator, he stood next to it with his hands in his pocket.



“What are you waiting for?” asked Aseel. “The door is that way. Your boss told you to hurry back.”

The boy hesitated. He took a deep breath and said, “The bags were heavy.”

“You want money, is that it?” Aseel said in an icy tone. She reached for some change and gave him a handful of coins.

The boy started walking away. Aseel heard him mutter, “She spent all that money on meat and couldn’t afford to give me a dinar?”

Aseel’s face turned red, and she marched after him and slammed the door as hard as she could. *This new generation of kids really have bad manners*, thought Aseel, as she examined the dining room. She let out a deep sigh at the sight of all the dust on the ornaments. She took her mobile phone from her pocket and called her mother, “ya Mama, ya *habibti*, send me the girl that you have, may God keep you.” She explained about Bassam’s *mansaf* lunch.

“Oh, men do that. My father did it to my mother all the time!” Her mother promised to drive Vickie over and help with the preparations. Aseel started boiling the meat and scooping out the fat. She stood there, in front of the largest pot she could find, staring hard at a cardamom pod that was swimming with the bubbles, occasionally using the spoon whenever white particles appeared. The Tunisian vice-president’s appearance on the Tunisian scene had depressed her. She thought of how happy she had been only twelve hours before. Aseel had naïvely supposed that once Bin Ali was ousted, another president, one that was loved by all Arabs, would appear, like Jamal Abdel Nasser had in the fifties. As she scooped out another spoonful of white fat, Aseel realised that yes, the internet had made the organization of a revolution easier, but the organization of a post-revolution government was more problematic now than it was back in the fifties.

Vickie hesitantly tapped Aseel’s shoulder, startling her. “We knocked but you didn’t hear us so we just walked in,” she said in perfect English.

“Clean there,” ordered Aseel, pointing towards the dining room.

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## Siwar

Siwar kept looking at her watch as she stood at the school gate waiting for her aunt to pick her up. Her exam had finished at ten thirty, and her aunt was twenty minutes late. Siwar's exams were not going well, she had the sinking feeling that she would fail. The other girls were saying that the exam was easy, but for Siwar, the exams were incredibly stressful. First, they were not in her own school that she had been going to since she was a child. The unfamiliar buildings, the uncomfortable desks and chairs, and the freezing exam room was enough to overwhelm her. Moreover, the other girls in her class had somehow heard that she had been making out with Sari and some of them had stopped speaking to her.

The first exam had been religion. The school had provided an extra study session for the students with their teacher. It had been one of the rare occasions when Sari and Siwar had a chance to sit next to each other in class, since religion was a common subject for students of arts as well as sciences. While the teacher had been going through all the chapters, Siwar and Sari were exchanging love notes. At one point, Siwar had looked up and noticed that all the students had turned to look at her, some were giggling and some were sneering. She had looked at the teacher in confusion.

"Good, you're with us again," the teacher had commented. "Tell us what the punishment for *zina* is."

Siwar's face had turned red as she heard some of the students snigger. "The punishment for *zina* for unmarried offenders is one hundred whips."

"Ouch," one of the girls sitting in front of Siwar had said, looking directly at her. "That's a good reason for you *not* to commit *zina*," she had muttered.

"And Sari, what's the punishment for married offenders?" the teacher had asked, either not hearing or ignoring the girl's remark.

"Stoning to death," Sari had replied confidently. "But for that to happen you need four male witnesses who don't know each other to describe the scene in detail. And their testimonies must match otherwise they get stoned for accusing innocent people. So my question is, how can *anyone* be stupid enough to get it on in a place where four people can

watch them, without him noticing? And moreover, how can four people who never met, who have never seen each other all agree to testify against the offenders at exactly the same time?"

"Well, Sari, if you had been paying attention to the lesson when we had it last month, you would know that we discussed this," the teacher had replied. "But today we are here because you have a *Tawjihi* exam in three days. And so we won't get into that today, since you won't be asked questions like these in the exam."

"Isn't the reason for that so people *wouldn't* get punished for adultery?" one of the students had asked.

"Yes, that's one of the reasons, but now, let's go back to revising," the teacher had clapped her hands and asked another question.

After that incident Siwar had started noticing that her friends were avoiding her. She had not thought about it before because she was too involved with Sari and with studying. She then tried to call a few of them, and could hear them whispering to their mothers to tell her that they were busy, that they were in the shower, or that they were out.

Now, she pulled her school jacket tighter around her chest, and kicked a pebble, trying to avoid eavesdropping on what the other girls were saying. She was positive that they were talking about her. *They're just jealous of me anyway. None of them know what it feels like to be kissed or touched by a man, they're just little girls who know nothing,* Siwar told herself as she waited for her aunt.

Siwar finally spotted her aunt's car, jammed between other parents' cars coming to collect their daughters. Siwar, relieved to see her aunt so she could escape from the girls' daunting stares, ran to the car and got in. "How was your exam?" asked Um Zaher, trying to squeeze her car between two parked cars.

"It was hard," replied a sullen Siwar.

"Here's my mobile, call your mother, she's worried sick. She called me from work asking after you. The traffic is horrible, why do they choose schools so far away from West Amman for these exams?"

Siwar took the phone, but kept her eyes on the streets filled with students leaving the exam schools, looking for Sari. The boys from her own school were separated from the girls, and were sitting for their exams in a different school in the same area. Siwar let out a

huge sigh, wondering why IGCSE students had nicer exam halls than Tawjihi students. *And they're not segregated*, thought Siwar, catching a glimpse of Sari laughing with his friends. She relaxed, it seemed that he did well in the exam. She then reluctantly called her mother.

\* \* \*

Aseel

“Why don’t you make a large thermos of plain coffee rather than regular coffee, and that way you won’t have to hurry off right after lunch to make it?” asked Um Omar, “I’ll lend you Vickie, but some people are disgusted by food prepared by a servant.”

Aseel liked her mother’s idea, and also liked having an excuse to leave the mutton-smelling apartment. “The only time I use plain coffee is at Eid,” she said, grabbing her purse and coat. She left her mother chopping vegetables for the salad and Vickie polishing every ornament in the dining room.

Aseel enjoyed the walk, as she always loved passing through the busy streets in Sweifeyeh. This street was her favourite because it had a bakery and a small shop that sold coffee, the entire street smelt of fresh bread and freshly ground coffee. Especially on this cloudy January day, that scent warmed Aseel up. She went inside the shop and asked for a handful of plain coffee and looked around while a young man roasted some coffee beans with spices. She noticed that the shop had recently placed a few tables and chairs so that customers could now sit and drink coffee. They only provided two kinds of coffee, plain, and regular, and in normal Arabic coffee cups. Watching people slowly sip and savour the hot coffee in the small cups made Aseel crave some. Her lower lip protruded when she realised that decaf Arabic coffee was still uncommon in most traditional shops. She thought she could rush to one of the impersonal American style coffee shops a few doors down and grab a decaf and come back here to collect her coffee. She watched a man roasting cardamom pods with some coffee beans as she tried to decide. The young man had finished and handed her a warm bag of delicious smelling coffee, and so Aseel

decided that an extra fifteen minutes away from her mother and Vickie would not be disastrous especially that it was still early, and lunch would not be until three.

Walking into the coffee shop, Aseel was surprised to find it bustling. There were quite a few teenagers holding exam papers, and there were a few couples. She passed by one couple who were holding hands across the table, looking intently into each other's eyes, and talking. Aseel thought such public displays of affection were disgusting, especially from women who wore a *hijab*. *They're probably newly engaged*, thought Aseel. *After they get married she'll never be able to drag him into a coffee shop ever again*. She made a point of looking at their hands as she passed by them again, to show them her disapproval of their behaviour. They were oblivious to everything but each other. She then caught a glimpse of matching wedding rings on their fingers. Surprised, she tried to eavesdrop on their conversation as she waited in line for her turn, but because of the music, and the loud teenagers, she was not able to tell if they were making up after an argument, which was the only reason she could think of for a married couple to be out in a coffee shop on a Saturday morning. Finally she caught a giggle. Aseel was getting closer to the waiter behind the counter who was taking orders, and she managed to pick up a few sentences and realised that they were talking about ordinary things.

Aseel remembered the last time she and Bassam had gone out for coffee. It was on the last day of their honeymoon two years ago. Bassam had wanted to stay in the hotel room and watch TV, exhausted after four days of doing nothing but swim in the hotel swimming pool, and make love in the hotel room. Aseel, bored of hiding under a big hat, sunglasses and layers of sunblock, had wanted to go exploring. After a lot of nagging, she managed to get him out. She tried to hold his hand in the streets of Sharm el Sheikh, but he said his palms were too sweaty. They sat down at a café but he gulped down his coffee constantly looking at his watch. Eventually, Aseel stopped trying to make conversation. In awkward silence, Aseel checked out other women's accessories, while Bassam looked at their cleavages.

Aseel, depressed at the memory, decided that it would not hurt if she sat there for ten minutes to drink her coffee. She realised that it was the first time for her to have coffee in a coffee shop by herself. Her thoughts drifted to that dreamy autumn day when she walked

into Cozmo and saw Him. She wondered if He was married. *Foreigners don't marry*, she thought, *they have girlfriends*.

Thoroughly depressed, she went back to help her mother with Bassam's *mansaf*.

\* \* \*

## Hayfa

Mona thought Hayfa looked surprisingly cool, calm and collected for a woman who had just ended a four year relationship. She decided to keep a close eye on her sister, and kept texting her throughout the day. Hayfa appreciated her sister's concern, but found the extra attention irritating, especially while working with her team on a new design project for an important client in Qatar.

The topic everybody was discussing in between design suggestions and long work-filled silences was no longer the Tunisian revolution, but the demonstrations that took place the day before all over Jordan. Some of Hayfa's colleagues had gone, and they surprised her with positive feedback. She was too afraid to mention that her only brother had gone, and she herself did not understand why people were suddenly demonstrating everywhere. Yes, there were no jobs. Wages were low, costs were high, but how could demonstrations change that?

Tensions were starting to mount as some agreed with going out to demonstrate, and others disagreed. Hayfa, still undecided, tried to keep her team focused on the design task. Arguments were starting to erupt, and Hayfa noticed that her generally pleasant workmates could be incredibly unreasonable in a debate.

"Jordan has been a constitutional monarchy since the day of its independence, and that will never change!" yelled one of her colleagues, banging the table.

"Nobody wants to change that! We just want to elect our own prime minister!"

"We'll never be able to elect our own prime minister because every tribe will vote for one of their own. The King *must* assign a prime minister; otherwise, there will be chaos!"

"The people are starving! Taxes are high and wages are low!"

"The country is not a rich country, we have no resources, no water, no oil, nothing!"

Hayfa retreated back to her office, unable to listen anymore. Suddenly, everybody was discussing politics all the time. She missed the old days when talking about politics was off limits. Even different social networks she used, which used to be a fun way to connect with her friends, had become full of political issues. Hayfa felt silly changing her relationship status from “in a relationship” to “single” at a time when all her friends were so passionately involved in the resurrection of Pan Arabism.

After a lot of thought, she did change her relationship status, and found that Kamal had blocked her. After a few moments, she refreshed the page to see what her friends would comment on her new “single” status; Odeh “liked” it, most of her friends commented with sad smilies or “sorry to hear that.” Hayfa suddenly noticed an event invitation on the corner of her screen. The event was a demonstration scheduled for the following Friday. Out of curiosity, she scrolled down through the “attending” list. There were only a few dozen people attending so far. She recognized some old school friends, and old neighbours. Suddenly she froze. Was that *him*? She looked at the picture closely and clicked on it. He had strict privacy settings that did not allow “non-friends” to access his full profile *I hate people who do that*, she thought, although her own privacy settings were even stricter. Sick of the relatives that were contacting her online, she had restricted her profile settings so that it was impossible to find her except through mutual friends. She looked closely at the picture, she was almost certain that it was him. His first name was Lutfi. She smiled.

She received a text at that moment and jumped. Seeing that it was a text from Kamal, she felt irritated, *very mature, blocking me on Facebook and then bombarding me with texts*, thought Hayfa. There was a time when she would get butterflies in her stomach at every beep from her phone, in anticipation of a text or a call from Kamal. She thought back to the hot April day when they had first met. Hayfa had just lost a bet with her best friend, and she had to go to the university shop to buy a lollipop. Her friend Suad had been teasing her about losing the bet, and the two girls had been giggling. Kamal had suddenly run up to them.

“Excuse me,” he had said politely, “I couldn’t help but notice your T-shirt. It’s just like mine.” Hayfa and Suad, who had been just recovering from a laughing fit, burst out laughing again. “I’m Kamal,” he had extended his hand.

Kamal had ended up walking with the girls, sitting with them on the shady steps, and betting, and losing, and having to walk back to the shop and buy more lollipops. Hayfa assumed that he would like her friend, whose piercing blue eyes shone when she laughed. Her short curly hair and perfect nose with a skull shaped nose-ring often made Hayfa wonder why her stylish friend chose to sit with conservative Hayfa.

Hayfa had been pleasantly surprised when Kamal asked for her number. After he had left, Hayfa had checked to see if Suad was into him. Suad laughed, “Are you crazy? He was obviously into *you*! Nobody could lose *that* many bets and have to buy so many lollipops.”

Hayfa had been baffled at Kamal’s interest, but she had found him charming and had enjoyed the attention. She had decided to let the relationship develop to see where it would lead. To Hayfa, religion was an important aspect of her life so she had made sure to be as open about her religiousness as she could, and to see how Kamal would react to that. If the *Adan* called while Hayfa and Kamal were on the phone, Hayfa would tell Kamal that she was going to pray and that she would call him right back.

The first time she had mentioned that she would have to go pray he had thought that she was joking. After realizing that she was not, he had begun to pray too. A year into their relationship he had even started hinting that she should wear a veil, “Why have sins written for you, erasing your prayers? Either follow Islam correctly or don’t follow it at all,” he had once said.

“So let’s say someone eats junk all day,” Hayfa had replied, “but also goes to the gym and regularly eats fruit and salads. Are you saying because he eats junk, he should completely stop trying to do other healthy things?”

“That analogy doesn’t really work,” he had argued. “What you’re doing is more like gambling, and giving the money you’ve won to charity. So you don’t get any *hasanat*, good points, written for you.”

“But if I’m giving it to charity, that’s still good, whether it gets written for me or not.”

“What’s the point of *doing* anything if you’re not getting a *hasana* for it?”

“But that’s what volunteering is, you do something good, for nothing.”

“No, it’s not nothing, it’s for a *hasana*. To go to heaven.”



Thinking back now, she could not remember what had made her fall in love with Kamal. She knew that she had loved him passionately up until recently, and it had depressed her whenever she thought of the impossibility of their situation. Hayfa always thought of her future wedding day. She tapped her laptop with a pen and recalled that she always thought of *her* wedding day. It occurred to her that she never thought of Kamal as her groom, and certainly not him as her husband. She never thought of children, she never thought of her future with Kamal. *What did I daydream about?* she asked herself. She had daydreamed of a beautiful white wedding dress, that was all. A lovely wedding cake for which she would make her own cake toppers. Hayfa knew exactly what centrepieces she wanted, what music, what food to serve. She also knew what neighbourhood in Amman she wanted to live in, which building, which furniture, and what kind of china she wanted.

Hayfa realised now that she had loved Kamal simply because he had loved her and had wanted to marry her. But why had Kamal loved her? Why did he give her his phone number and not her friend Suad, who was by far prettier and more fun to be with? It dawned on Hayfa that Suad, although beautiful and outgoing, was not wife-material. *He picked me because I'm quiet and I dress modestly. I would have made a good wife and mother.*

Trying to think back to her school days, she recalled many crushes she had on different boys in her school. Her mother had always told her to be *tqeeleh*, to play hard to get. Hayfa thought of how she had never approached any of the boys at school. She even remembered a boy who had caught her staring and then had come to talk to her—she had completely ignored him. She had made a point of humiliating him in front of everyone. Hayfa often heard a word used while describing her, *mohtarameh*. Respectable, respectful. *Yes*, thought Hayfa, *I've always been a good girl who does not chase after boys.*

Hayfa wondered what would have happened had she never met Lutfi. Would she have married Kamal? Her mother utterly loathed him. Would she have fought for him? Hayfa could not picture herself fighting with her parents and grandmother in order to marry Kamal. *Maybe Mona would have fought for me.* She clicked on a picture of Kamal in a hidden photo album in her own profile, she slowly pointed the cursor at the “delete” button. She rationalized that love, no matter how intense it is at the time, really came and went, but family was forever. Fighting with her parents for Kamal would have cost her the

entire Al Manseyeh family, and now she did not even love Kamal anymore. Hayfa was glad that she had never fought for Kamal.

She remembered a time her mother had sent her to her grandmother's house with a cake. It was a strange request, her mother usually went herself to her mother-in-law's house. Hayfa never recalled another occasion when she had been alone with her grandmother. Tata's house always had people in it; cousins, relatives, family from Hebron, or some neighbour having coffee. That evening, Hayfa had peeked through the window and saw that Tata was by herself, reading Quran. Hayfa, never being in that situation before, had not been sure if she should knock or walk right in. She had decided to knock and not wait for an answer. Tata had looked up and smiled.

"How nice of you to bring me a cake! May God be pleased with you."

Hayfa had smiled, ashamed to admit that it was her mother's idea.

"Your mother tells me there is a young man who has proposed to you."

Hayfa's jaw had dropped.

"Your mother said he's your brother's friend."

"Yes," Hayfa had squeaked.

"And Mona also knows him."

Hayfa had cleared her throat, "Yes."

"And they both like him?"

Hayfa had nodded.

Tata had smiled kindly, and held Hayfa's hand. "So, what kind of work does he do?"

"He's still looking for a job."

"Ahhhh. It's hard to find work these days. What does his father do?"

Tata's understanding tone had surprised Hayfa, "His father is retired, but he used to work as an accountant for customs."

"And what about his mother. Have you met her?"

"Yes I have. She's very nice. She loves me."

"You've been to their house?"

"No!" Hayfa had gulped, still unsure about completely trusting her grandmother. "I met her at our graduation."

"So you and him, you're the same age?" Hayfa had nodded. "What did he study?"

“Business.”

“Does he have a Master’s degree?”

“No.”

“So you go out together?”

“Never alone, we’re always in a group of girls and boys, and always Ashraf and Mona are with me.”

“Ahhh, that’s good,” Tata nodded in approval, “and does he love you?”

Hayfa’s face had turned red. She had nodded.

Tata had smiled and asked softly, “And do you love him?”

Hayfa had smiled and nodded shyly. “Please don’t tell Baba.”

“Don’t worry,” Tata patted her granddaughter’s knee. “Your secret is in a well.”

Hayfa had hugged her grandmother and had felt very happy. She had wished her own mother would be so understanding about her relationship with Kamal.

Her grandmother had sent her away, telling her that she wanted to pray the sunset prayer before her sons and daughters came for their daily visit. Hayfa had also prayed when she got home, and thanked God for her grandmother’s kindness.

That night, Hayfa had stretched out on her bed with a romance novel listening to music on her MP3 player. She had impatiently waited for Mona to come home so she could tell her about her conversation with Tata. When Mona had finally come, she had stomped in and slammed the door of their shared bedroom. “What is wrong with you?” Mona had asked, standing over her sister. “Have you gone crazy?” Hayfa, removing her headphones from her ears, had stared at her sister in confusion. “You told Tata about Kamal.” Hayfa’s jaw had dropped again. “Baba just yelled at me. If you had switched off your stupid music, you would have heard him. Baba yelled at me for going out with you and Kamal! He told me to tell you to *forget it*. He said he will never marry you off to a man your age without a job and without a postgraduate degree. *How could you trust Tata and tell her the truth?*”

Hayfa had sat up, clutching a cushion tightly, her heart pounding. “She told me my secret was in a well. How could she do that?”

After that incident, Hayfa had spent several months lying to her father, claiming to have to go to work on Fridays in order to avoid going to the Friday lunches. She had gone

to her friend Suad's grandparents' house and had Friday lunch with Suad's family. Being with Suad's family made Hayfa realize that not all families were like hers. One of the many differences between the two families was that Suad's family lunch lasted an entire afternoon not just one hour. Everybody sat together, and everybody, no matter how old or young and regardless of gender, was an equal member of the family who was able to communicate freely. Hayfa loved being with Suad's family, but was also envious of their healthy relationship.

Kamal's family, he had assured her, was similar to Suad's. However, from the way he spoke, Hayfa had discovered that their only daughter-in-law was mistreated by everybody. One of the stories that had stuck in Hayfa's mind was when the daughter-in-law, now called Um Kareem, had her baby. None of Hayfa's friends or cousins had had any babies yet, so this was her first time to be exposed to the traditions related to the birth of a child. Hayfa was surprised to learn that once the mother and the baby are out of the hospital, they go to the mother's family and live there for a few weeks, while the father moves back into his family's home and visits his wife and new baby. Kamal's brother had wanted to stay with his wife and baby at Um Kareem's family home, but his mother fought to prevent that. She had forced him to stay with them, and had only allowed him to visit his wife and new-born for one hour every day. What had horrified Hayfa, was that Kamal had called his brother and his wife "selfish" for wanting to be together right after the birth of their baby.

Touching her screen with her finger, Hayfa stared at Lutfi's picture. What was his family like? They could be similar to hers, since he was also from Hebron. She could not know for sure that he would be interested in her, nor that she would be interested in him. But she had a feeling that she needed to see him again. She grabbed her phone to call her sister to ask if she should add him on Facebook. *Wouldn't he think I was easy? What if he has a girlfriend? Or boyfriend even? What if he hated me? What if I stank when he saw me, and that's why he never asked for my number? Or what if I was really annoying? Did I talk too much?* Hayfa knew that Mona would push her into adding him. Hayfa felt like a stalker, staring at his picture, but knew that she could never contact him.

\* \* \*

## Aseel

Aseel kissed her mother goodbye just before three. The apartment was spotless and the table was set. Vickie was banished to the kitchen with nothing to do but eat the bits of food that were not good enough to be served to Bassam's guests. Just before the guests arrived, Vickie summoned the courage to ask Aseel what the Wi-Fi password was so she could check her email from her iPhone. Aseel found it appalling that she even *owned* a smart-phone and demanded to know if "madam" knew that she had one. Vickie pretended to misunderstand the question, and started washing some already-washed pots and pans, which infuriated Aseel, "This is not the Philippines where you have infinite amounts of water!" Aseel shouted in Arabic, turning the tap off, "No waste water!" she said in English.

To Vickie's relief, the doorbell rang. Aseel waddled over to the door and greeted some of Bassam's friends. Bassam was not there yet, and Aseel sat them down in the spotless salon, and uneasily served them fizzy drinks. They were Bassam's friends and their wives, and Aseel was not sure how to talk to them.

"I heard a great joke yesterday!" said one of them, "Husni Mubarak was giving an interview, and he says 'of course Egypt must change, change is *Suna*, one of the mores of Islam.' So the journalist asks, 'and you? Won't you change?' And he answers: 'Me? I'm *Fard*, an obligation of Islam.'" Everybody laughed. Bassam walked in at that moment carrying a large tray of *knafeh*.

"What's so funny?" he asked, as Aseel lifted herself up to usher him into the kitchen.

"I didn't know you're bringing *knafeh*," she said glancing at the mountain of chopped pistachios she had wasted so much time on to add to the dessert that was cooling in the refrigerator. She took away Vickie's plate of food to make room for Bassam's large tray.

## Chapter 10

Friday the 21<sup>st</sup>

Reema was still wearing a scarf around her neck. Earlier that week, her parents had finally noticed that she was hiding her neck from them. Her father had suspected that his daughter might have a love bite, and had been delighted when he found that her neck was merely swollen. Um Wa'el had speculated that it might be her daughter's thyroid, "It could also explain your weight problem," she had said eagerly.

Reema had blinked back tears, and explained what had really happened, omitting the actual price and how much money she owed Fida. Her parents had yelled and screamed at her, but eventually they had calmed down.

As she walked into her grandmother's house at two o'clock, Tata greeted her with a frown and wagged her index finger at Reema's swollen neck. "Never do something this crazy again. You can become permanently disfigured. You are as beautiful as the moon, just stop eating so much." Reema nodded, again fighting her tears. "You know Tata, they say have breakfast as a king, have lunch as a vizier, and have dinner as a poor man." Tata rubbed Reema's curly brown hair, "Never resort to injections again. These things can cause infertility. Nothing is a bigger catastrophe than an infertile girl."

Reema started making her way to the dining room and overheard her mother telling all of her aunts about what Fida had made her do.

"It's not good to just take injections at any old clinic," Um Zaher said, "what if she gets a horrible disease? I'm going to kill that daughter of mine!"

Reema felt somebody jab her between her shoulder blades. "You animal," whispered Fida in her ear, "how could you tell on me like that? You've scandalized me! And you owe me money!"

They joined Nadeen on the younger table, “I *didn't* get a suitor,” Fida moaned. “That Um Mohammad was a liar. Let’s find another fortune teller, I’m thinking of paying someone to cast a spell so I can get married.”

“You’re so shallow,” said Nadeen, who got up and brought some food. She passed her plate over to Ashraf, who was scooping food for all the girls. As Ashraf handed her the plate back, he smiled at her. Tata caught that smile.

“I think it’s about time Ashraf gets married,” she said after everybody had sat down at their designated tables.

Silence overtook the room. “He’s young, *yamma*,” answered Abu Ashraf after a stunned pause. “Let his sisters get married first.”

“Young men *need* to get married early. He should marry one of his cousins of course. Nadeen.”

Abu Farid looked up. “Not Nadeen, and not Farid. May God keep you, leave them alone.”

Abu Ashraf glared at Abu Farid, “I wouldn’t want my only son to marry a girl from Jaffa!”

Abu Farid laughed, “Your father wed his daughter to a son of Jaffa. Are you better than your father?”

Um Farid touched her husband’s arm. “The people of Jaffa are the best in all of Palestine,” she glanced at her mother, “but *yamma* didn’t we already decide that there will be no talk of matchmaking between cousins? If Ashraf and Nadeen fall in love, they can come to us and tell us, but we can’t force them into anything.”

Ashraf glanced at Nadeen apologetically from the other side of the dining room, she purposely ignored his gaze.

“You people from Hebron, you think you’re so much better than everyone else?” muttered Abu Farid. “This interbreeding of yours is wrong! Any educated donkey could see that!”

Arguments erupted on the elders’ table. Ashraf, Farid, Aseel and Bassam grabbed their plates awkwardly and joined the younger table. Wa’el and Zaher stayed in their seats and continued eating.

“Well, this has never happened before,” mumbled Bassam as he took a seat next to Hayfa.

“Oh it has,” she said, “just never in front of you before. Guess that means you’re really one of us now.”

“Nadeen, I’m so sorry about this,” began Ashraf.

“Remind me not to hand you my plate next time,” laughed Nadeen, still evading eye contact.

“Wow, they really know how to make us uncomfortable with each other,” said Sana. “They did the same thing with Farid and Reema just a couple of weeks ago.”

Farid’s face reddened as he gulped down his rice.

Zaher walked up to them, pulling up his trousers and tucking in his shirt, “Ashraf, Farid! Shall we watch the match together tonight?”

Bassam’s face lit up. “Aseel and I are watching it too, why don’t you come join us?” He had never had the opportunity to befriend Aseel’s cousins before, and he needed to bond with Zaher because of a certain friend of his who needed a favour. Aseel glared at him, but he ignored her, “It’ll be fun. You girls can come too, if you’re interested in football.”

Mona looked worried. Hayfa glanced at her and said, “Mona’s watching it with her friends tonight, I’d be happy to join though.”

“Yeah, I suppose we need something to take our mind off what’s happening in the Arab world,” mumbled Aseel as she grabbed Bassam’s arm to help her get up.

“Speaking of which, I saw that the Egyptians are starting a demonstration soon,” said Sana.

“The Egyptians are like cats, they won’t be able to hold on like the Tunisians did,” said Bassam.

“Say God is one, man!” retorted Ashraf, also getting up. He and Hayfa started picking up everybody’s plates. Bassam stared at him, shocked. “Egypt is the mother of the world! Egyptians had revolutions, they were the first to rid themselves of Ottoman rule, they were the first to get rid of British and French colonizers.” Bassam watched intently as Ashraf and Hayfa worked in sync; Hayfa removed the dirty cutlery from each plate and handed it to her brother. Ashraf scraped off all the bones and uneaten food into one plate. It was a



ritual they had been doing every day after lunch at their house for as long as they could remember. “What are you saying, the Egyptians are like cats? Look at Egypt! They’re the pioneers in literature, cinema, music! Would we even have a pop culture if it wasn’t for Egypt?” Ashraf took a tissue out of his pocket and wiped some rice off the table. He crumbled the tissue and placed it with the bones.

Bassam’s eyes followed Ashraf as he took the dishes to the kitchen.

“Bassam,” Aseel whispered after her cousins had left the dining room, “the apartment is a complete mess! You can’t keep inviting people to our place without asking me first.”

“Don’t tell me what I can’t do,” he snapped, “*ever.*”

Aseel watched him as he walked away and joined her family in the living room. She walked in after him and stood in the doorway, her hand pressed against her aching back. She watched everybody help themselves to desserts. Tata’s sons and daughters sat on the comfortable couches, the men’s legs spread apart, their daughters bringing them their coffee and sweets. Their wives sat on chairs brought from the kitchen, they huddled together and gossiped. Tata herself sat in her favourite arm chair in the corner beside the gas heater with a blanket wrapped around her knees, wearing thick glasses and embroidering some cushion covers. The female cousins sat on the stairs or huddled in corners chatting. Ashraf and Farid were fixing several *argeelas* for the men.

Bassam sat with Abu Farid, as comfortably as if he owned the place. Aseel watched as her mother handed him a bowl of *Um Ali*. He ate one spoonful after the other and spoke without swallowing. She could hear his voice filled with unchewed food as he talked about Egypt’s doomed demonstration. She asked herself for the first time, *do I really want to spend the rest of my life with this man?*

Aseel wondered why she never asked herself that question before. She looked at her uncles and their wives, carefully avoiding each other. Her mother was sitting on a wooden kitchen chair beside the sofa her aunt Um Fadi sat on, discussing Siwar’s *Tawjihi* math exam the next day. Her father was sitting beside her teenage brother, Omar, on a couch on the opposite side of the room. Aseel remembered a lesson in Arabic class at school when she was young when they were taught that the young must always give up their seat to their elders. At the time she had not realised that that particular rule did not apply in her family if the young person was male and the elder female—not even a pregnant one.

\* \* \*

## Hayfa

Watching her sister get ready for her Friday date night at Koobz, Hayfa kept smiling. She was excited about spending the evening with her cousins. She and Ashraf and Mona had watched the previous match at Koobz together that week, and Hayfa had enjoyed the celebrations that took place in the café and in the streets after Jordan won against Syria. They had all danced *dabkeh* and sung. When they had left the cafe they found rows and rows of cars honking their horns with people's heads poking out of car windows. Jordanian flags had flown from shops and homes, and national music could be heard everywhere. What Hayfa had loved most of all, however, was the freedom.

“Wow, Heefo, I'm going out without you,” Mona said while applying her makeup. “Can't remember the last Friday we didn't go out together! Of course, tonight is going to suck because Jordan will lose and Odeh is going to do his angry rooster routine.”

“Come with us then! It'll be fun!”

“Ha!” Mona snorted, “Then he'll do his angry bull routine!” Mona looked away from the mirror and raised her eyebrows at her sister, “Look, look! Look who is behaving like a free-spirited single woman! Damn your honour,” she chuckled, looking back at the mirror, “would you have ever blown off *your* boyfriend on a Friday for a sister of a whore football match?”

“Monmon, we really have to do something about your vocabulary.” Hayfa started playing games on her iPod, as she smiled at her sister's comment. She felt giddy at the spontaneity of her decision to join her cousins to watch football. No need to ask anybody's permission, no need to check with anybody. *Just me making my own plans for the evening.* “Isn't it funny how the two of us are both single at the same time?” she had enthusiastically asked Nadia earlier that day. Nadia had not found it amusing.

Hayfa and Nadia had double dated before, but Talal and Kamal had not gotten along. Hayfa now began to notice the pattern; Kamal had disliked every male Hayfa had ever liked, and he had worked very hard at changing her opinion. He had always succeeded.

Hayfa had learned to dislike Odeh as much as she had learned to dislike Talal. She did, however, congratulate herself on disliking Talal, since he just left Nadia without fighting for her. At that point, her iPod indicated a new email message. *Kamal again*. It was another nasty email telling her that he had spent the night with a Russian woman that he met on the internet. “Just take pride in knowing that you are the cause of my *zina*. God will hold you accountable on judgement day.” Hayfa tossed her iPod on the bed, not understanding how them breaking up could possibly cause him to fornicate. The entire four years that they were together, they had never even so much as kissed. They did, however, hug a few times— once at their graduation, and once after his grandmother died. Hayfa’s face turned red when she suddenly remembered how The Man, the alleged Lutfi, as she now referred to him in her head, had kissed her cheeks.

She and Ashraf waited outside for Zaher and Nadia to pick them up. Hayfa had never ridden in Zaher’s car before, and was excited. Everything about this evening seemed new and refreshing to her. Ashraf noticed her impatience, “Brace yourself my sister, Zaher’s driving will make you say the *Shihada* in anticipation of your death.”

Hayfa laughed, “I just prayed the *Isha* prayer and I’ve still got my ablution. I’ll go straight to heaven if I die now! You, on the other hand,” she gave her brother a nudge, “you can say your *Shihada*!”

“Me? Every time I’m with Zaher in the car I recite all the Quran and all the prayers I know. I probably have a nice palace up there waiting for me just from my rides with Zaher!”

Zaher’s car stopped in front of them with a screech.

“Nadia,” he said, “go down and let the son of your uncle sit.”

“No, it’s alright,” Ashraf said, opening the back door and sliding in, “sitting in the front makes me car-sick.”

Once in Zaher’s car, Hayfa’s stomach churned, and even in the dark, she noticed that Nadia was not faring any better. Ashraf was the only passenger who had the courage to tell Zaher to slow down. Zaher merely laughed and pointed out that the car he was trying to overtake was being driven by a pretty girl. “I can’t let a girl overtake me.” Ashraf and Hayfa exchanged glances.

“Did you pass your driving test from the first time?” asked Hayfa.

Zaher chuckled, "I didn't even bother myself; I had an excellent *wasta*. I have a friend whose cousin works at the circle and they passed me."

"Lucky you," Hayfa said, "Baba wouldn't let any of us use a *wasta*, although I could have gotten one for myself, Mona and Ashraf too."

"Who was your *wasta*?" Zaher asked curiously.

Hayfa paused, Nadia turned around from the front seat and glared at her in warning. It was Talal who would have been their *wasta* since he had connections all over Jordan, if Abu Ashraf had not opposed the use of corruption.

"My friend had a friend who knew someone," Hayfa finally mumbled.

"So *Ammo* made you all take the test fairly!" Zaher laughed, hitting the steering wheel several times with his hand. "By God on you, tell me how many times you failed?"

At Aseel and Bassam's apartment, Aseel had snacks and drinks ready. It was enjoyable at first, but Hayfa noticed that the longer the game wore on, the more tense the atmosphere was becoming. The men were getting genuinely angry, the women had to eventually cease to make jokes about ugly Jordanian players and handsome Uzbekistani ones. Hayfa texted her sister, "the situation is shaky here. How are things with you?"

"Raging bull with rabies injected with steroids" was Mona's prompt reply.

At half time, things turned light again. Aseel asked if anybody wanted tea and of course everybody wanted some. Hayfa, Nadia, Sana, and Ashraf all volunteered at the same time, and started arguing with Aseel about her being pregnant and needing to relax. Bassam waved his hand at Ashraf, "leave it to the women, *ya zalameh*."

"I'm very particular with my tea. I make mine in a certain way," answered Ashraf.

"He's like that," mocked Zaher, "it's because he's got two older sisters who boss him around."

"You know guys," said Hayfa timidly, "they asked the prophet's wife what he was like at home and she said that he mended his own clothes, and milked the cattle and basically took care of himself; although he had more than one wife, they didn't wait on him hand and foot."

"See?" said Ashraf, raising his eyebrows at his cousin.

"What's your source then?" asked Zaher.

"Our mistress Aysha said it, in both Bukhari and Muslim," replied Hayfa.

“I never heard of it, I doubt it’s true,” said Wa’el.

Bassam caught the glance that passed between brother and sister. Ashraf and Hayfa gathered some of the litter around the room, and joined the other girls in the kitchen.

Hayfa heard Wa’el snort, “If I hadn’t been with him in last week’s protest and seen what a fearless mule he could be, I’d worry that he was a boy’s boy.”

“You were at the protest last week?” asked Bassam in surprise.

“These demonstrations are a waste of time,” spat Zaher, “and they ruin the economy. Look at Tunisia now, they rely on tourism, and here they are, their economy is crumbling. No tourist will be visiting their beaches.”

“Well, our protest brought down the fuel prices,” said Wa’el, smugly stretching his legs, “so, if anything we helped the economy.”

Hayfa, furious at what her cousin had said about her brother, nudged Ashraf in the direction of the living room and told him to join the other men. “There’s plenty of us here to clean up, there’s really no need for you.”

“So if there are enough women around to do the cleaning then you don’t need a man to help out?” he joked, picking up a sponge and a dirty cup, “So you’re saying that a woman’s place *is* in the kitchen!”

“Just go!” Hayfa began pulling him away from the sink in the direction of the living room, “us girls here will talk about Aseel’s pregnancy, babies, diapers, you go back in there and talk to them about football and politics.”

“So men don’t need to know anything about babies? Parenthood is for women only?” Ashraf yanked his elbow away from his sister’s grip and continued washing cups. Nadia, Aseel, and Sana all tried to persuade Ashraf that he should go back and sit with the men, “You know what, guys? It makes me angry that instead of trying to persuade me to go back inside and sit with the men and put my legs up, you should be telling *them* to come up here and help. I mean, it’s like you all accept that your place is in the kitchen serving the men.”

“We don’t accept it, we know it’s not fair, but at the same time, you’re my brother and I don’t want other guys thinking of you as a sissy.”

“So a man who does housework is a sissy? Didn’t you say that the Prophet did housework?”

Aseel thought Ashraf was exaggerating. “Why are you insisting on helping?” she asked, “We’re all telling you to go sit down. Who says no to such an invitation?”

“Look, I love you all, but with all due respect, I blame you for that,” said Ashraf pointing in the direction of his male cousins, who were discussing politics loudly. “I was taught by my parents that I am like my sisters. We were all treated the same; except of course, I am allowed to stay out as late as I want. And really, Hayfa, you and Mona are really the same as me. We think alike, we like the same stuff, we dislike the same stuff, so why should *you* serve *me* just because I’m male and you’re female?”

“Yes Ashraf, I agree with you one hundred per cent and I agree with the way our parents brought us up. But I don’t want *them*,” she pointed in the direction of the living room, “saying that you’re less of a man. Just behave like a normal man in the presence of other men.”

“Hayfa, you don’t see that you’re not just insulting me, you’re insulting all men.” Ashraf said, wiping his hands, having washed all the cups and bowls. “What you are saying is that normal men are like babies, unable to serve themselves, unable to clean up after themselves, that they need women to do everything for them.”

“Look,” said Hayfa, “when I get married, yes I will expect my husband to help me around the house. But I wouldn’t want him to do it in front of people, because then they will say that I wear my husband as a ring on my finger. That’s just not a reputation I would want for me or my husband.”

Ashraf left the kitchen, shaking his head in disappointment. Sana was the first to break the silence. “It’s unnatural, how nice your brother is.”

“He is right,” said Hayfa, “we should demand that men start to help out more. I mean, we’re helping out financially, so why don’t they help out domestically?”

Aseel thought about her own relationship with her husband, “Men are sloppy, they just *can’t* be clean. And no matter how much money you earn, it won’t be the same as he earns.”

“That’s not true, actually,” Sana protested, “my own salary is higher than all the men who work under me. If I get married, I’d be the main bread winner—unless I marry the CEO.”

“My salary isn’t as bad as my male friends,” said Hayfa, “I’m a project manager at the moment. I could totally go head to head with any man I marry, especially if he’s an employee.”

“You say that now,” smiled Aseel, patting her cousin’s arm, “but you have no idea what married life is like. No way will you be able to keep your full time, demanding, six-days-a-week job, *and* keep your husband happy. You have to cook, clean, and have intimate times together...” Aseel sighed, “And then you get pregnant! I had to quit my job, I just couldn’t do it anymore.”

Hayfa and Sana looked at Aseel in horror, “You *quit?*” “But you loved your job!” they protested.

“I tell you girls, you’ll quit too when you get pregnant. You’ll realize it’s not worth it.”

Different thoughts were running through Sana and Hayfa’s mind. Hayfa was thinking *that will never be me*, and Sana was thinking *I don’t want to get married, ever*.

“It feels like spring,” said Mona from the backseat of her father’s car.

“Isn’t it lovely?” answered her mother with a smile, “the janerick trees are already budding.”

“It’s really strange weather these days. It’s this global warming,” said Abu Ashraf, who was surprisingly relaxed and chatty for a Friday drive to his mother’s house. “When you were children, it snowed several times in February, the schools would shut down and I would take you out to play with the snow,” he shook his head, “now we’re lucky if we get decent rain.”

“Yeah, even last week’s rain was more like spring showers than winter rain,” mused Ashraf, “it’s like this year we skipped winter and jumped straight to spring!”

“These are strange times,” sighed Abu Ashraf. “This is turning out to be an astonishing year.”

“Doesn’t it remind you of when we were teenagers?” asked Um Ashraf dreamily, “when Jamal Abdel Nasser came, and there was hope?”

“Jamal Abdel Nasser was a dictator too; everyone in the Ba’ath party is a dictator. They create police states and just execute the opposition, accusing them of being traitors,” Ashraf argued.

“No! Jamal Abdel Nasser was wonderful!” protested Um Ashraf. “When he died, they found that he only had a little money and very few possessions! Not like leaders today who have millions!”

At Tata’s house, everybody was crammed in the living room again, the men sat on sofas, the women on chairs, and the younger generation sat on the floor. All eyes were glued to the television. Nobody got up to say hello, hug or kiss Abu Ashraf’s family as they walked in, late as usual. “The Muslims were praying the Friday prayer in Tahrir Square,” said Abu Wa’el to Abu Ashraf, “and the Christians surrounded them to form a human shield to protect them from the Pro-Mubarak thugs.”



Tata walked in and scolded the family, “Lunch has been on the table for five minutes! It’ll get cold now.”

Because Aseel and Bassam were not there that Friday, Um Wa’el and Um Zaher sat on the elders’ table on either side of Um Ashraf, who was extremely irritated by them because she preferred listening to Abu Farid and Abu Ashraf’s political debate. She enjoyed hearing her husband’s negative, over-realistic arguments and Abu Farid’s optimistic counterarguments. The Friday before, Abu Ashraf had said that he would cut off his right arm if the Egyptian demonstrations escalated to the scale of the Tunisian ones, or if they had the same outcome. “Tunisia’s population is a little over ten million; Egypt’s is over *eighty million*. A few thousand in Tahrir Square do not represent these millions,” he had said.

This week, it was apparent that Abu Ashraf had had a change of heart. Um Ashraf, however, could not hear what he was saying because Um Zaher kept nudging her to keep her wandering attention in check, as she talked about Magi Farah, the Lebanese astrologer, and her predictions for the year 2011. Eventually Um Ashraf began listening to Um Zaher after she finished her lengthy explanation of why she had taped Magi Farah’s interview that took place just before the New Year.

“She said that this will be a dramatic year full of changes,” said Um Zaher earnestly, “she said there will be coups starting January 22<sup>nd</sup>, not one, but many! And look, Tunisia has already overthrown her president, and Algeria started having protests around that time too! And look at Egypt! According to Magi Farah, there will be a great conflict on the eleventh of March, and then April is going to be the most dangerous month! It appears that there is always a war when Jupiter, Uranus, Saturn and Pluto form a square. She said that Uranus means demonstrations, coups, scandals and trials! She said diplomacy might play a role to calm things down. Things will continue to be bad until July, and then things will calm down.”

“My sister,” said Um Wa’el with concern in her voice, “it’s *haram* to believe in these things. Our Prophet said ‘lie the astrologers even when they speak truth.’”

Um Ashraf was happy that Um Zaher had finished her story and was starting to turn around again to the direction of Abu Zaher, who, Um Ashraf thought, had a dry sense of

humour that she loved. Um Zaher, however, nudged her again, and began re-explaining how Uranus, Jupiter, Saturn and Pluto would be forming a square.

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Aseel

Aseel squirmed in her seat, desperately needing the toilet, but dreading getting up. Although lunch at Um Naji's was less crowded than lunch at Tata's, somehow Aseel felt that she was unable to move there. Lunch at Tata's involved all the aunts and uncles and cousins, while lunch at Um Naji's included only Um Naji's sons and their wives. Aseel found the chairs here to be bulky and heavy, and she was so close in proximity to the others, that getting out of the seat was impossible for a pregnant woman if the person beside her did not get up and move their seat for her. Today she found herself trapped between her mother-in-law and Naji. Aseel thought it would be rude to ask her mother-in-law to get up and disrespectful to ask Bassam's eldest brother. Eventually, to Aseel's delight, Um Naji noticed that one of her sons did not have enough meat on his plate, so she got up to serve him. Aseel tried to use the opportunity to move the chair and make her way over to the bathroom, but the chair was too heavy for her to move with one hand, so she shifted to her side and tried to use her foot as well.

To Aseel's embarrassment, Dara saw her struggling and started to giggle.

"What do you want, Aseel, *habibti*, I'll get it for you," she laughed.

"I need to get up to use the bathroom," whispered Aseel.

"Oh, sure, *hayaty*," said Dara, giggling again and getting up, "frequent urination in pregnancy is perfectly natural." She pulled Um Naji's seat away for Aseel.

Um Naji, Bassam, and his brothers all looked up. "Oh, you need to piss?" asked Um Naji. "Hurry up, *yalla*; I know how the pregnant can't hold her piss! I don't want the velvet on my chair to stain."

Aseel winced at Um Naji's comment, as she continued to wrestle with her bulky wooden chair. Bassam, laughingly got up and pulled it out for her. "My wife is like a leaking faucet these days," he joked. Aseel did not respond, and hurried away. As she left the room, she heard Um Naji telling a story about a pregnant woman who laughed so hard

at a joke that Um Naji told that—. Aseel was happy to slam the bathroom door shut and block out the rest of the story. She could, however, not block out their laughter which, she felt was directed at her.

\* \* \*

Tata was shouting at Ashraf. “How could you go to *two* demonstrations after I explicitly told you not to?”

Ashraf glared at Zaher, who was smugly sitting beside his grandmother. “Tata,” Ashraf began, “the demonstrations were nonviolent. The police were handing out bottled water to us! The first one resulted in the King ordering the fuel prices to go back down, and the second one that I went to last Friday—well it resulted in the King removing the prime minister and assigning a new one. I’m happy I went.”

“Think of your family. You put a black dot on us all. You could have ruined our house!” Tata limped away, clutching her heart.

The family was back in the living room, silently watching the crowds of Egyptians at Tahrir Square. None of the men were smoking their regular Friday *argeela* and nobody had asked for tea or coffee. The girls were also intrigued, all except Fida, who was finding the entire political situation in the Arab world boring. While looking through emails on her Blackberry, she came across an email which had pictures of the Egyptian revolution. Her first instinct was to delete it, but some of the images were too bizarre for even her to ignore. “Look at these women.” She started passing her phone around, and everybody saw pictures of veiled and unveiled women protesting alongside men.

“Bitches,” muttered Wa’el.

Abu Ashraf turned to him, shocked. “These women aren’t doing anything unrespectable. These are brave and noble women.” Hayfa stared at her father in amazement.

“If these girls were here, their brothers would have shot them, for being on television, and having their pictures taken,” mumbled Wa’el, embarrassed by his uncle’s outburst.

“What is this empty talk?” replied Abu Ashraf, “Honour killings only happen in uneducated homes. And this is a *revolution*; these women are bringing something more important than honour to their families, they’re trying to bring freedom.”

“If it was my sister, I wouldn’t want her on television, shouting out for everyone to hear her. I would shoot her.”

“What?” yelled Abu Ashraf, he stared at his brother Abu Wa’el, “Have you heard your son?”

Abu Wa’el chuckled, “He’s still young.”

Wa’el, encouraged by his father’s reaction, said, “She’s my sister, my honour, and I don’t want her shaming me or my father. What if she gets raped in the demonstration? That would surely bring us all shame.”

Abu Ashraf’s eyes bulged and his lips turned blue.

*There have been no harassment issues at Tahrir square*, thought Sana, but did not have the courage to say that out loud.

“If you ever touch any of my granddaughters, I will kill you myself,” said Tata calmly from her armchair in the corner. She put her embroidery aside. “If *any* one of you,” she pointed her finger at Ashraf, Wa’el, Farid, Zaher, and even young Omar, “hurts one of my girls, I will kill you. Let God punish me in the afterlife.”

Um Zaher broke the silence with a forced laugh. “Of course Wa’el was joking!”

Um Wa’el felt she had to clear the air with her mother-in-law; she walked over to her and whispered, “Wa’el is religious, *Khalto*, and he would never do something like that, he was just trying to send a message to his sisters to keep them in line,” she murmured. “He wouldn’t really do something so crazy. And the girls would never go out demonstrating anyway.”

Tata picked up her embroidery, “I blame you for the way you raised him,” she answered her niece. “None of my boys ever hurt their sisters *or* their wives.”

\* \* \*

## Aseel

After the bathroom incident, Aseel's lunch experience seemed to spiral out of control. Her mother-in-law was, once again, openly discussing Aseel's body and pregnancy symptoms with Dara. While Dara used professional and scientific terminology, Um Naji used common colloquial vocabulary, and the words she was using to describe Aseel's different body parts made Aseel's face turn bright red and her heart race. Lunch at Um Naji's lasted much longer than at Tata's, and Aseel was trying to remind herself that once the next two hours were over, she would not have to go back there for another two weeks.

While having tea in the living room, Dara asked if she should schedule another ultrasound to try and discover the baby's gender. The question had sent a wave of anxiety through Aseel. Her mouth went dry and she could not think of any excuses. Bassam inadvertently rescued her. "Aseel, I have a crazy idea," he began, "since we've waited this long, why not just keep it as a surprise? Nobody does that anymore, but I think it would be wonderful!"

Aseel's face lit up and she breathed a sigh of relief. Um Naji frowned. "What nonsense is this? No, we will schedule an appointment for Sunday morning."

"Oh, *Khalto*, Bassam is so excited about keeping it a surprise, I don't want to disappoint him."

Bassam beamed at his wife. "That's it then! Dara, no ultrasounds! Unless the baby needs them."

Dara laughed, "No, no, the baby, and the mother are healthy *mashallah*."

Aseel got up and walked towards the kitchen, wanting to check Al Jazeera news updates on her mobile, but found that there was no WiFi connection. She noticed Um Naji's Sri Lankan housekeeper had paused from washing the dishes, and was looking at her. Aseel scowled at her and the Sri Lankan lady asked in a polite tone, "What do you want, Madam," in broken Arabic.

"Nothing!" snarled Aseel. She turned around and walked back to the sitting room, but heard them still discussing "little Abdel Muhaimen," Um Naji's first grandchild. Um Naji was saying how she would not be allowing Aseel to use diapers, and will insist on nappies

that can be washed and re-used. Um Naji's theory was that those diapers did not allow the baby's nappy area to breathe properly, and this might cause infertility in the future. Aseel felt sick and walked back into the kitchen and found herself once again facing the busy Sri Lankan who was scrubbing away at a mountain of pots, pans, and china.

The housekeeper paused and looked at Aseel again, and smiled hesitantly. Aseel continued to breathe heavily, trying to suppress her tears. Her tears started sliding down her face, in spite of trying to breathe them away. The housekeeper hurried over to her, drying her hands on her own skirt. "Madam, sit, sit," she said in broken Arabic, "sit!" she pushed Aseel into a chair and ran out of the kitchen, bringing back two cushions with her. "I bring Sir?"

Aseel shook her head, putting her hand to her mouth to suppress sobs. She heard her mother-in-law's voice coming closer and she quickly tried to dry her tears. The housekeeper, guessing that Aseel did not want to be seen, grabbed Aseel's arm and dragged her to her bedroom, which was a converted storage room, and closed the door. She went back to the kitchen and continued washing the dishes. Aseel heard Um Naji asking after her, and the housekeeper answered "bathroom." Aseel stopped sobbing and started looking around the Sri Lankan's room. It was a small room with only a bed, a chair, a desk with a small mirror hanging over it, a wardrobe, and no window. It was neat and smelled like a fresh garden. In spite of the old furniture, the room looked inviting with pretty narcissuses, picked from the garden, in a plastic water bottle on the desk. There were old calendar pages with beautiful scenery blu-tacked on the walls. What interested Aseel the most, were the pictures stuck with childish stickers at the corners, just next to the bed.

Aseel took a closer look, she saw the Sri Lankan housekeeper in one of the photographs, with beautiful flowing black hair, holding a happy toddler, and being held by a handsome young man. The smiles that radiated from their faces made Aseel smile. She looked at graduation pictures of the young couple, then saw the toddler growing up to become a handsome boy of nine or ten, she saw the Sri Lankan housekeeper's smile gradually change from radiant to sad.

The door to the room opened slowly, the Sri Lankan housekeeper smiled, her smile resembled the one in the most recent picture on the wall: reserved, sad, concerned. “Madam, how now?”

Aseel let out a deep sigh, at the sight of the Sri Lankan’s smile. She felt her misery at her mother-in-law’s comments fade. “What’s your name?” she asked.

“Komari,” smiled Komari sadly.

“Thank you, Komari,” and for the first time, Aseel smiled back.

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### Siwar

Siwar, having sat for her last exam just four days before, was not feeling relieved that her exams were over. She was feeling anxious, knowing that she had failed in more than one subject. Whenever she thought of how her entire future depended on these exams she could feel her chest tightening and the only consolation she could think of was Sari—only for a reason she could not understand, he was avoiding her, as were all her other friends.

She had given up trying to call him, at first thinking he did not need the distraction during the exams, and then she had expected to go out celebrating after the last exam, but he had never gotten in touch, neither had anyone else, except her aunts and cousins. Siwar had spent the afternoon after her final exam with her mother at a salon getting her arms and legs sugared.

Anxiety was building up. Whenever she tried to picture what her life would be like next year, she would imagine everybody she knew would be at the University of Jordan, and she would be at home studying for the same *Tawjihi* exams. Her life would literally be over; no Sari to love her, no friends, no mobile phone or driver’s licence—because those came hand in hand with a good *Tawjihi* mark. The more she thought about it, the more anxious she grew. Whenever she imagined her father or her grandmother’s anger when the grades came out, Siwar would start hyperventilating uncontrollably. Usually when these feelings overcame her, she tried to call Sari again, and got the housekeeper who always said he was out. There was one day when she called, she was sure it was Sari who

answered, but he pretended to be his brother and said that Sari was not there. Siwar did not think that life could get any worse.

That Friday, however, at her grandmother's house, Fida, Reema and Nadeen pulled her aside while everybody was watching news coverage about the Egyptian revolution.

"Siwar, we've been hearing awful things about you," started Nadeen.

Siwar's eyes opened wide, *how could Sana do this to me?*

"Yeah, you little slut," continued Fida, "none of us are going to be able to get married because of you and your boyfriend."

"Siwar, *habibti*," said Reema softly, "do you know a girl called Alia? She told her older sister, who happens to know Nadeen's friend, that you..."

Siwar gulped.

"That you s—" started Fida.

Nadeen interrupted her cousin, "That you gave him head," she said in English.

Siwar's jaw dropped, "*What?*"

"See? I told you girls that Siwar would never do something like this," said Nadeen, "it's going to be either Sari or Alia, one of them is making it up."

"Wait," said Fida, "she's not denying it, maybe she did do it."

"No, I swear! I never did!" Siwar hissed, too shocked to even cry, "That's really gross!"

"See?" said Nadeen, holding Siwar's face, "She's innocent. She's about to throw up just thinking about it!"

The girls were whispering in the corridor and none of the other family members were paying any attention to them. The cousins were trying to come up with a plan to exonerate Siwar and salvage her reputation. The girls also feared that if the gossip had reached them, it may reach their male cousins or, more dangerously, distant relatives.

The girls decided to say their goodbyes and walk over to Nadeen's house in order to discuss the situation. Siwar was grateful for her cousins' attention, she had never thought that they would dedicate an entire afternoon of their time to help her. She was also completely shocked at what Alia had said. Alia was just a girl with Sari in the I.T stream. She and Siwar had no relationship whatsoever, *how could she make up something so horrible about me?* As she half-heartedly waved goodbye to her relatives in the living



room, Tata called out to Siwar. She limped over to her and looked into her face, “What’s the matter?” she demanded.

Siwar wet her lips, “There’s nothing,” she shook her head.

Tata’s green eyes looked deeply into Siwar’s brown ones and said sternly, “You can tell me *anything*.”

Siwar looked away, feeling her eyes fill with tears, “Thanks Tata.”

Tata rubbed Siwar’s arm. Siwar looked into her eyes again, *I failed in my exams because I spent most of my time talking to my boyfriend on the phone. I’ve disgraced my family by allowing myself get talked about. I let a boy kiss me in the dark, and touch me... Could I really tell you anything?*

Tata’s brows came together in a frown. “Sleep here tonight,” she commanded.

Siwar took a sharp painful breath, Nadeen walked over to them, “Tata, what’s going on? We want Siwar to come with us.”

Tata gripped Siwar’s arm, “And the Prophet, sleep here!”

“Come on Tata, please!” begged Nadine, who, like Siwar, was Tata’s daughter’s daughter, so was not as afraid of Tata as the others were.

Siwar let herself be dragged away by Nadeen, but continued to feel Tata’s gaze on her. Siwar hoped Tata’s gaze did not see straight into her soul.

Fida’s first idea was to tell Zaher to shoot Siwar, because she was worried that a scandal like that would keep her a spinster forever. Nadeen quickly dismissed that, as Zaher was a maternal cousin of Siwar’s anyway, he did not really have the right to do it. Nadeen also pointed out that it was just a rumour and Siwar had not *really* done anything, so honour killing would be a bit harsh. Then of course, Reema yelled at them both to shut up because Siwar was beginning to shake.

Nadeen’s idea was to find out the root of these rumours. So the first thing she did when they reached her house was to call the friend of hers who knew Alia’s sister. He promised to call right away, and the girls sat together anxiously waiting for him to call back.

Siwar, still unable to cry, was silent while her cousins discussed her problem. She was too scared to tell them that she and Sari *had* gotten physical, but not to the extent Alia was

alleging. She worried that if she confessed everything, they may not believe that she was innocent and might tell her parents, or worse, her grandmother.

“What’s the worst that can happen?” Reema thought aloud, “it’s *just* a rumour. They’ll just ban her from ever seeing him again.”

“Ha!” Fida snorted, “Remember what Zaher did to Nadia? And now my parents are monitoring her every move. She’s not allowed to come back home any later than eight o’clock. Not that she goes out much anyway.”

Siwar was shocked to hear that twenty-seven-year-old Nadia was grounded. Siwar had always assumed that once a person grew up, that was it, they would be free. The thought of being a grounded twenty-seven-year-old further depressed Siwar. She also knew, now that such gossip was circulating about her at the university where she thought all her dreams would come true, she would never be able to hold her head high. Then she remembered that she would most probably fail her exams anyway, so she would never even *see* the inside of that university.

Nadeen’s mobile phone rang. The girls went quiet as Nadeen’s face grew sterner. “That son of *haram*,” she said shaking her head.

After she ended the conversation, Nadeen rubbed her face slowly and looked at Siwar in silence. After Reema and Fida’s probing, she finally said, “It was Sari who said that. And he swears it’s true. He says he has proof.”

Siwar, unable to absorb what her cousin was saying, remained silent. “Proof?” asked Reema.

Fida laughed, “How can someone have proof for something like *that*? Unless there were pictures...” she looked at Siwar accusingly.

“Apparently he knows about every single mole on your body,” explained Nadeen, “he told Alia’s boyfriend that he’s seen everything. Is there a huge mole on your lower back, just above your left cheek?”

The full extent of the situation was beginning to hit Siwar now, “I *told* him about my mole, he never *saw* it!”

“Should we tell Ashraf to beat him up?” asked Reema.

“No!” protested Siwar, “Maybe Alia is lying? We’ve had swimming lessons together at school, she must have seen my mole in the changing room. Maybe I should try calling him?”

Nadeen called another friend of hers at the mobile phone company and let him change her settings to keep her number hidden whenever she made a call. Next, Siwar dialled Sari’s number, taking a deep breath, and when she heard his mother’s voice answer, she handed the mobile back to Nadeen, who confidently spoke to Sari’s mother, asking her how she was doing, and went so far as to comment on the weather and enquire about her feelings now that Sari had completed the first semester of *Tawjihi*. She laughed along with Sari’s mother, and finally, asked if she could speak to him. She then handed the mobile back to Siwar when Sari’s voice came on the line.

Siwar hesitated, Nadeen nudged her, and whispered, “Be confident!”

“Sari,” she began, “why is everyone in the world saying that I... that I... had oral sex with you?” Her face turned bright red as she said the term “oral sex” in English.

“Siwar? Is that you? I’m confused, who said that?”

Aseel told him about Alia and her cousins. “And, you haven’t been returning my calls.”

“Well Siwar, I don’t know what Alia is saying, I’ll have a talk with her boyfriend. But yeah, you’re right I have been avoiding you. Ever since your cousin Sana found out about us you’ve become a drag, you refuse to meet, refuse to kiss or even hold hands. All you can talk about is marriage, and God and your family. I need a girlfriend who can satisfy my needs, and you’re obviously not the one for me.”

Siwar lowered her voice so her cousins wouldn’t hear her, “But I love you, and I told you that I will marry you as soon as you can arrange it.”

“Look, I need real proof that you love me and that you would do anything for me. My mother is going out tonight, so I’ll have the place to myself. Come over. Prove to me that you love me.”

Siwar felt torn. She heard her grandmother’s voice echo *sleep here*. She wanted, more than anything, to go back to the love she had with Sari. She could not imagine what going back to school without him as her boyfriend would be like. She would have nobody at school to sit with. “I’ll see what I can do,” she said, and they said their goodbyes.

Siwar, positive that Sari had not started these rumours, was unable to convince her cousins that he was telling the truth.

“Look, there’s no smoke without a fire,” said Nadeen, “why would Alia lie to her *sister* about you? I think it’s time you call some of your friends at school and see what kind of stuff they’ve been hearing.”

Siwar’s eyes filled with tears, “Nobody at school talks to me anymore.”

“Wow, that’s bad,” said Fida. “You really messed up your life this year.”

Siwar was not able to swallow down the lump in her throat. Reema came closer to hug her, “Why do you think they’re not talking to you?”

Siwar, still too afraid to admit that she and had Sari had been in, said nothing. Nadeen grew angry at the unshed tears in her cousin’s eyes. “Look. You are *Tawjihi*, and you don’t need this extra stress. We’ve got to show everybody at your school that this guy is a liar.”

“Maybe we should call Ashraf now, to call him and threaten him?” Reema suggested again.

“No!” protested Siwar again, “Then Ashraf would have to know why he’s beating Sari up, and then when he finds out the reason, he’ll know I’ve shamed the family!”

“She’s right,” nodded Nadeen. “This stays between us. Do you hear that Fida? If I find out you’ve told your brother about this, that’s it, I’m telling my uncle all about *you*, your boyfriends, and your trips to the fortune teller.”

Nadeen came up with another plan. She downloaded voice-changing software from the internet, and decided to call Sari again, this time, pretending to be a man. The girls also used Nadeen’s credit card to purchase minutes from an instant messaging service to call Sari from a new account that they created. Calling themselves mohamad123, Nadeen held the microphone and asked for Sari again. Her voice sounded gruff and serious through her laptop’s speakers, and the cousins tried hard to suppress their laughter. Even Siwar found herself smiling.

“Sari,” said Nadeen’s frightening voice, “I’ve heard that you’ve been dishonouring my family, spreading false stories about my honourable cousin.”

Sari's nervous voice muttered denials and excuses. "You sound like a pathetic little boy, I'm surprised that you're the fellow that's been causing havoc. Are you sure you're Sari? Do I have the wrong number?" Nadeen covered her mouth to suppress her laughter.

Sari was near tears as he begged, pleaded and promised that he had not said anything.

"Well, Sari, you're an intelligent young man, you know what sort of country we live in. If you touch my family honour again, well, you will leave me no choice."

Sari, nearly sobbing now, again promised that he would never even say hello to Siwar again. He tried saying that he had been trying to get rid of her but she was persistent. Nadeen shut him up, "What did I say? No more talking about my cousin. I'm telling you, you had better keep your mouth shut, or you know what will happen." Nadeen fumbled around with the mouse and clicked "end call." Finally, the girls burst out in hysterical fits of laughter. All except Siwar, who was wondering if this stunt meant the end of her relationship with Sari.

## Chapter 12

Friday the 11<sup>th</sup> of February

“*Yalla!*” shouted Abu Ashraf, as Ashraf sat in his *dishdash* watching Al Jazeera.

“*Yabba*, let me stay here today, I don’t have the spirit after yesterday’s disappointment.”

“What is this empty talk, *yalla!* Get up. Come the way you are! There’s no time to change.”

Half-heartedly, Ashraf got up and walked after his father. Hayfa watched him; his uncharacteristic sadness broke her heart. She felt that she was partly to blame for her brother’s depression. The night before had been her twenty-seventh birthday, she and her siblings had gone out to Koobz with some of her friends. One of their friends had told a joke:

“Mubarak, his son and his wife were in a helicopter flying over Cairo. He takes out one hundred Egyptian pounds. His wife asked, ‘what are you doing?’ He said, ‘I’ll throw out the one hundred pounds and make an Egyptian happy.’ His wife said, why not throw two fifties and make two Egyptians happy?’ His son asked, ‘why not throw four twenty-fives? Make four Egyptians happy?’ And the pilot says, ‘why not throw yourself and make eighty million Egyptians happy?’” They had all burst out laughing.

Hayfa had then received a long distance telephone call from Lebanon. A friend of hers who worked for a news agency had said: “See? God gave you the best possible birthday present! Husni Mubarak stepped down!” Her friend was positive that the Egyptian president had been ousted by his people. Hayfa had blurted out the news to her friends and everybody had rejoiced. Soon after, Al Jazeera news, which was blasting from every hanging television at Koobz, showed Mubarak giving a very determined speech saying that he would not step down.

The customers and waiters at Koobz, who had always booed at Mubarak's previous speeches, did not react. Ashraf too, had stood in front of the screen, completely shocked. Hayfa and Mona, also disappointed by the news, had not understood why their brother was taking it so badly. "Don't you see?" he had asked, "Egypt is the mother of the world. And she has failed. The dictator has won. The martyrs have died for nothing." After that, he had left Hayfa's birthday get-together.

Now he dragged his feet over to the car and threw himself in the back. Um Ashraf had concern written all over her face when she told Mona to sit next to her father instead of her. "Sorry Mama, I hate sitting next to Baba, he drives like the maniacs!"

"*Yalla!* Finish me! Somebody come sit in the front!" shouted Abu Ashraf.

Hayfa joined her father in the front as Um Ashraf and Mona sat on either side of Ashraf. "*Habibi,*" Um Ashraf stroked her son's arm, "you will see, the Egyptian people have shown us all what they are capable of. They will prevail, have faith in them." She smiled at him, feeling his pain, knowing that it was similar to the pain she had felt as a teenager in the sixties when the Arab army was defeated in the Six Day War.

"Ashraf, come on! If you are giving up, that means that the Egyptian nation might as well give up too!" coaxed Mona. Her words, however, were not as heartfelt as her mother's. Yes, she did care about the 25 *Yanayer* Revolution, as the Egyptians were calling it, but her interest in it was more to follow the trend than genuine. Her Facebook status was "leave, you pig". Aseel's status was "Come on, leave, my baby is sick of hearing your voice!" Hayfa's status was "Mubarak, you spoiled my birthday."

Um Ashraf was glad of her children's healthy involvement in political affairs. While she was growing up, people were much more political than they were now—at least before this new wave of revolutions began. People discussed politics, back then, not fearing who would overhear them. Now, she was noticing, for the first time in decades, the situation had gone back to what it used to be. Normal citizens were discussing politics in public spaces. Just that week she and her girlfriends had gone out and she had summoned the courage to talk about the demonstrations in Tunisia, Jordan, Yemen, Egypt, Bahrain and Palestine and the beginnings of trouble in Libya and Syria. When she found her friends receptive to her views, she boldly began comparing the countries, and analysing situations with them. She had never had this kind of conversation with her friends before. The

normal subjects they talked about were their children, their children's jobs, their children's spouses and, in some cases, their children's children.

But now, conversing with her lifelong friends in this way, she discovered different characteristics in them that she had never explored before. Insight, different perspectives and open-mindedness enriched their discussion. Um Ashraf had found herself getting more and more excited about the change in the Arab world. Since the women were of different religions and origins, they rarely brought up religious topics. That day, they had, and they had been able to discuss the similarities and the differences in religious beliefs without creating friction. Um Ashraf had returned home feeling enlightened and inspired.

Finding her children and husband watching Al Jazeera, she had smiled at her husband and daughters when they had mock scolded her for coming back home so late. "I also want to live my life!" she had answered back. It had added to her excitement to be able to discuss her friends' opinions with her family.

Now, in the car, they sat together in heavy silence. When they reached Tata's house, the television was blasting with images of Egyptians in Tahrir square, but nobody was watching. Tata was grumpier than usual. None of the family members were smiling or talking.

"It's like a wake in here," whispered Mona to Hayfa.

Reema came to greet them, not hugging nor kissing them. "Have you guys heard about Siwar?"

Hayfa's first thought was that the grades had come out and that Siwar had failed. They went to the dining room, and the normal hustle and bustle of Tata's kitchen and dining room was missing. They all spoke in hushed tones. Hayfa and Mona felt out of the loop.

Even the food was mediocre that day. The usual menu consisted either of *Idreh*, stuffed turnips, or *dama'a*, which were Hebron favourites, or other Palestinian or other Greater Syrian dishes such as stuffed grape-leaves and zucchini. On special occasions they would have a stuffed mutton or the Jordanian *Mansaf*. Hayfa and Mona stared at their plates filled with plain rice and okra and wondered what was wrong with everybody.

After lunch there was no dessert or *argeela* when the family retreated back to the living room. Aseel, also not understanding what was going on, found the atmosphere there



as depressing as at her mother-in-law's. Eventually, Sana and Reema took Aseel, Mona and Hayfa aside to where Nadeen, Nadia and Fida were sitting in the abandoned dining room, and told them what had happened the previous week with Siwar.

“Half an hour after we called and threatened Sari,” explained Fida, “*Amto* Um Fadi called *Amto* Um Farid, completely hysterical. Sari's mother had called her—get this—that dog went to his mother *crying* telling her that Siwar was sending her cousins to shoot him because he dumped her! She threatened to report Siwar and the entire family to the police.”

The cousins were listening in complete shock.

“*Amto* and *Ammo* Abu Farid stormed in on us in the room,” continued Reema, “*Amto* told us that Siwar's mother was coming over, and she warned us about what happened. *Ammo* was *really* nice, he hugged Siwar and asked her what the real story was. Siwar was crying, crying, crying. We were too ashamed to tell them what really happened, but Nadeen decided that we *had* to tell the truth now that parents were involved.

“What were you girls *thinking?*” asked Hayfa.

“It's not their fault that son of a hooker turned out to be a fucker!” Mona roared, “Who goes to their *mama* in such a situation?”

“Mama and Baba were really great,” said Nadeen, “and Mama really calmed *Khalto* down. But, of course, *Khalto* was angry, she had just discovered that, A) Siwar had a boyfriend, B) this boyfriend had dumped Siwar, and C) that Siwar had apparently threatened to have this boyfriend killed.

“So, I explained to my parents and *Khalto* about the rumours he was spreading. At first *Khalto* was insisting that Siwar should call and apologise to him and his mother, but after she heard the entire story, she got even angrier. Baba suggested that we call Sari's mother right back and threaten to sue for *qathef muhasanat*, because it's against the law to spread scandalous rumours, especially about females. We certainly have enough people to testify that they had heard the nasty things Sari has been saying about Siwar. But at that point... Siwar...” Nadeen's voice trailed off.

Sana explained to the others how she had seen Siwar and Sari together in the garden. Siwar had had to confess everything to her mother. Um Fadi had nearly slapped her, but Um Farid had grabbed her hand just in time. “I saw you and Abu Fadi kissing once before

you were married!” Um Farid had reminded her sister. “Punishing her is not going to help the situation now, she’s being punished enough, I would say.”

Um Fadi had wondered if she should call her husband from his mother’s house and tell him, but worried that he would react badly. Abu Fadi had volunteered to be the one to tell him. At that point, Tata had started calling her daughters because neither of them had shown up for their daily between-sunset-and-night-prayer cup of tea with her. She had known something was the matter the minute Um Farid answered the phone, after Um Fadi had ignored her mother’s call on her own mobile. Tata had insisted they all go to her house.

“We all walked over to Tata’s house together,” said Sana, “Tata was so relaxed and calm. She hugged Siwar, she defended her like a hawk! Wouldn’t let anyone blame her for the situation. Whenever *Amta* Um Fadi brought up how Siwar had put the entire family in this horrible situation, Tata would actually blame *Amta* for not keeping a closer eye on Siwar, and she also blamed *Ammo* Abu Fadi for keeping Siwar in a mixed school. Good thing we’re all in university already, otherwise our fathers would have yanked us all out and put us into girls’ schools!”

“Tata faced *Ammo* Abu Fadi when he came after *Amta* Um Fadi texted him to come to Tata’s house,” said Fida. “He was *mad* when *Ammo* Abu Farid told him the entire story. He wanted to kill Siwar *and* Sari!”

“You’ve destroyed our house!” he had yelled at Siwar. Siwar had hid her face in her grandmother’s breast, and her grandmother had clutched her tightly.

“Your house is not destroyed yet,” Tata had said calmly. “Do you want to bring your family to help us solve this catastrophe, or should I let my sons handle it?”

Abu Fadi had let out a deep sigh, “The less my family knows the better.” Tata had called Abu Ashraf and Ashraf. Abu Fadi looked at Um Fadi accusingly, “What?” he said harshly, “Happy? It’s your job that you insist on keeping.” He shook his head looking at Abu Ashraf, as if pleading with him to take his side, “All day she goes and leaves her daughter by herself, none of this would have happened if she had just stayed at home like the women of other men.”

Hayfa and Mona, shocked at their father and brother’s discretion, felt offended that they were the last to hear the news.

“Don’t be upset at *Ammo* Abu Ashraf for not telling you,” said Sana, “they were just protecting Siwar.”

“From *us*?” Mona flung her arms in the air, “Damn the race of this protection!”

“Anyway,” Nadeen continued, “*Khalo* Abu Ashraf was as calm about the situation as Tata. It was his idea to get the school involved. They called the headmistress, who also happens to be one of Auntie Um Ashraf’s best friends.”

“Please don’t tell me our *mother* was involved, too?” Mona banged her hands on the table. “We clearly come from a dysfunctional household,” she shook her head at Hayfa.

“So now,” Reema explained, “the headmistress is waiting for the second semester to begin on Sunday. She’ll carry out a full investigation to see what Sari has been saying about Siwar. Most probably they will kick him out. Tata decided to deny that Siwar has ever had any intimate relations with Sari, so that no matter what Sari says, it will just sound like he was still spinning a web of lies.”

“But was Sari *really* lying?” Hayfa asked, “If Siwar had really been intimate with him, then he wasn’t lying when he said these things about her.”

“Look, fondling and touching is wrong,” said Nadeen, “but come on, which of us hasn’t done it? Plus, Siwar *really* didn’t go that far with him, like he’s saying.”

Hayfa, Sana, Reema, Nadia and Aseel looked utterly shocked. “Thanks, *ya kalbeh*” Fida laughed.

“You?” Nadia stared at her sister. “If you do such things, why did you tell Zaher about me and Talal?” This was the first time Nadia had spoken to Fida since that night.

“I don’t know, I thought it would be good to see Zaher’s reaction so I can see what I can and can’t get away with. I didn’t know things would end up *so* bad.”

Hayfa and Mona asked where Siwar was now, and were told that she was not speaking and that her parents were very worried. “She’s sleeping here, at Tata’s house, upstairs in Mama’s old room,” Nadeen explained.

Aseel was sitting in silence, rubbing her bump, feeling so much older than her cousins. Her generation was completely different even though there was only a five year difference between herself and Nadeen. Her school had also been very different, being a Catholic girl’s school. The first man she had ever kissed had been Bassam, and they never held hands until after the *katb ktab*, when they both signed the marriage agreement. There

had been a period, between the *katb ktab*, when she and Bassam had started going out together, but her father had still shouted and screamed at her if she missed her ten o'clock curfew. The idea that her teenage cousin had been able to get away with actually having been physically intimate with a boy infuriated Aseel. Siwar had put the entire family in a position to be talked about. *Wait till Khalto Um Najji hears about this*, Aseel thought with dread.

"You know guys," Mona broke the silence, "when I was twelve, there was a rumour circulating around school that my best friend and I had a threesome with one of the boys without honour from Seven B." The cousins laughed. Mona lifted her right foot and placed it on her left knee, "I didn't even know what a threesome was, so I didn't mind so much. But then the entire Seventh grade, the fuckers, stopped speaking to me and my best friend. It was a very depressing month. Luckily it was the end of the year, and then Mama moved us to Siwar's school, so I didn't see those idiots without honour again until I went to university," Mona paused and played with her shoelace. "But you know? Even though I *really was* completely innocent, those fuckers made me feel so dirty. As if I really had done it. Even at university when they saw me, I was older, and much more confident, and yet, seeing them made me feel like I really was—*am*—a whore."

"Ha! Wait till your wedding night." Aseel mocked. "The next morning, I can't count the number of phone-calls my mother received asking her how I had done. *Everybody* asked me how it went. I *really* went from being honourable to becoming a loose woman in one night!"

Nadia blushed, she had been among those who had asked Aseel how it had gone. "But you were married, pleasing your husband *is* honourable."

"It's really hard, Nadia, spending twenty-four years of your life protecting your body, making sure no man sees it or touches it. And then, in less than twenty-four hours, you're meant to forget everything you've ever been taught, and you're expected to perform, like those naked women on television."

"Poor Siwar," said Hayfa, "we're all talking about her honour, and so are all our fathers and mothers. I wouldn't be able to show my face if I were her."

"Yes," said Sana, "you know what they say about a girl's honour. It's like glass, once it's chipped, it's completely destroyed and can never be repaired."

Mona frowned at her sister. "I'm going upstairs to hang out with her."

\* \* \*

Aseel

Bassam switched the radio off while they were driving home. "I'm just so sick of the news. The looting, the pro-Mubarak thugs, I can't take it anymore." Aseel waited for him to bring up the issue about Siwar. He had been among the elders in the living room as the family further discussed the issue. Abu Farid had been able to contact a friend of his in the Mukhabarat, who had given him detailed information of Sari's mother, father and uncles. Abu Farid had expressed his confidence that the family seemed honourable, and he was sure they would be appalled by what their son was doing to the daughters of the people.

Aseel was embarrassed by her cousin's behaviour, and was rehearsing a plea in her mind, begging Bassam not to bring it up at his mother's, who often mocked Aseel about Tata and the number of unmarried granddaughters she had. Aseel did not have the courage to bring up the subject herself, and continued to wait for her husband to mention it first.

As they drove on, they passed by the café where Aseel had had a cup of decaf coffee.

"Bassam," she broke the silence, "what do you think about having a cup of coffee at the café together? You can park the car at our building and we can walk here together?"

"Why pay four dinars for a cup of bad coffee when you can make us fantastic free coffee at home?"

"But I want decaf, I can't make decaf at home."

"Soosoo, come on, we'll go another day, I promise. See? We're home now anyway."

Upstairs in their apartment, Bassam followed the usual routine, and sprawled in front of the television, carefully staying away from the news channels. He watched a Friday talk show because Egyptian movies were not playing since the revolution started, and there was nothing on television except news.

Aseel sat at the far side of the couch with his laptop on her lap. Bassam grabbed her feet and put them in his lap, absentmindedly massaging them. While checking her friends' updates, she saw a YouTube link that one of her friends had shared. The topic was, "ALL

WOMEN MUST SEE THIS!!!!” Aseel asked Bassam for his headphones. He moaned and asked why she needed them. After she told him, he insisted on watching the link with her, and muted the TV.

They huddled together, and clicked “play” on the link. It was an interview of one of the famous talk-show hosts with a woman whose face was covered in black from head to toe. Two holes exposed her heavily *kohled* eyes. Her voice was strong, and she spoke in classical Arabic with the occasional colloquial word with a Gulf accent. Soon Bassam and Aseel realised that it was an interview about sexual intercourse. Aseel’s face turned bright red and she tried to shut the link down. Bassam laughingly took Aseel’s hands away, “Let’s see what this *Khalijeyeh* has to say about sexual relations between women and their husbands.”

Aseel reluctantly listened. The woman was talking about a book she had recently written about sex in Islam. The woman was earnestly explaining that she lectured in a women’s university and was always shocked at the questions about sex that the women asked. “I discovered that women knew nothing about sex or about their own bodies,” the woman was saying to the male host, who was asking provoking questions about what compelled her to write a book about such a topic. The woman kept her cool, and said, “There is nothing wrong with discussing sex when it’s for the sake of religious education. The Prophet, peace be upon him, said ‘no shame in religious matters’ which means we can ask and discuss anything as long as we do so in a respectable manner.”

The author explained that many women in her seminars knew nothing about what was religiously acceptable and what was unacceptable during sex. Although the talk-show host threw mocking comments at her, she remained direct. Her veil moved over her mouth, as she spoke quickly, with clear deliberate words. She quoted verses of the Quran and from the Prophet Mohammed’s sayings whenever the host challenged her. She insisted that there needs to be awareness about sexual issues, and she said she discusses everything in her book, which she recommended to any male or female Muslim who had questions about sex.

Finally, the host asked her what she would like to say to the female audience, she answered without hesitation: “Do not be afraid to discuss your feelings with your husband. Sex is not only for *his* pleasure. It’s for yours too.”

Aseel’s face was still red. “What a crazy woman!”

Bassam frowned at Aseel, “Why is she crazy, what she says makes sense. Maybe we should talk more about this?”

Aseel gave Bassam a playful slap on his shoulder, pushing him back to his place on the sofa. She put her feet on his lap again, and continued checking updates. Her friends’ statuses were changing quickly, “Bye bye Mubarak” “Hasta la vista, Baby” “Long live Egypt” and similar comments were appearing on her homepage.

“Bassam!” she shouted, her heart racing, she grabbed the remote control from him.

“Soosoo!” Bassam protested, as Aseel switched to Al Jazeera.

They both watched in awe. “Husni Mubarak left!” They shouted, they high-fived, they hugged. Texts began pouring in, Aseel walked to the balcony and opened the sliding door, cheers and ululations could be heard from the street as people started making their way towards the Egyptian embassy to celebrate. Bassam closed the door, grabbed Aseel’s hand and dragged her to the closet where he helped her into her jacket and shoes, and then dragged her to the elevator. They joined the crowds, they sang and Aseel ululated with the other women in happiness. Bassam swooped down and kissed Aseel’s bump, which he had never done before, and shouted to the people around them, “My child will be born in a free democratic Middle East!” The crowd cheered, and more *dabkeh* dancing broke out.

\* \* \*

The al Manseyeh family seemed to have forgotten Siwar’s predicament as celebrations took place in Tata’s living room. Her children had come back for the evening mint tea, and the unexpected news of Mubarak leaving brought cheer to the gloomy house. Siwar heard the screams and laughter, and slowly walked down, showing her face for the first time.

“Come, my beautiful!” shouted Abu Ashraf to her, “The tyrant has stepped down!”

Siwar, who had not been paying much attention to the revolutions, smiled that her uncle had called her beautiful. She walked down, still uncertain of how to behave in front of Abu Zaher and especially the judgemental Abu Wa'el. Abu Ashraf noticed her reluctance. He walked up the stairs, clasped her hand, and brought her down, "Our beautiful daughter is here," Abu Omar and Abu Zaher greeted her with unusual kindness, carefully avoiding any allusions to her recent ordeal. Abu Wa'el, however, refused to shake her hand and turned his face to her.

Tata, who was embroidering in her chair, saw the snub from the corner of her eye, "Siwar, come witness history in the making. Say goodbye to old traditions. Welcome forgiveness and freedom."

"Freedom for girls to do as they please, it seems," Abu Wa'el muttered.

Abu Ashraf, looked at his younger brother sternly. "Expand your heart and your mind, my brother. Siwar regrets her actions. I know from now on she will make us all proud."

Abu Wa'el got up and left Tata's house. Um Fadi saw the pain in her mother's face, as she continued to stitch red crosses on a black background. She did not try to follow him, because she was also ashamed by her daughter's behaviour. She felt that she had failed as a mother and that her failure was hanging in front of her family. She had thought she had raised her daughter better than that. But then when she tried recalling mother-daughter conversations, she could not remember much about them.

Mother-daughter conversations about menstruation, hair-removal, and boys never came up. One Friday shortly after Siwar turned thirteen, her sister Um Farid called her after lunch and informed her that Nadeen had told her that Siwar had started menstruating and that Nadeen had been smuggling Cinderella sanitary pads to her for the past few months. After that, Um Fadi casually mentioned to Siwar that there were all kinds of sanitary pads in her bathroom cupboard.

Um Fadi could not recall when Siwar had started shaving, but remembered that one day Abu Fadi had asked her if she had used his razor. Puzzled, she had asked her two sons, Fadi had said that he had his own razor, which had also been used so he had started hiding it in his room, Anwar said he used an electric shaver. Um Fadi assumed it was Siwar and



tried to talk to her about it. She found Siwar uncommunicative and so called Um Farid and asked her to take Siwar to a salon.

It was only recently that mother and daughter had discovered their synchronized menstrual cycle. They established a monthly routine of going to the salon together. Um Fadi was beginning to feel more intimate with her daughter, their topics, however, were always about school, teachers and studying. They never discussed boys. Um Fadi blamed herself for being negligent and not helping her daughter open up and trust her. If her daughter had trusted her mother enough to talk about such things, none of this would have happened. Her own mother and sisters had always been her confidantes with whom she was able to talk to about everything. Why had she not established the same relationship with her daughter? Why had her sister managed to have an open relationship with her daughter *and* her niece?

Um Fadi watched her daughter with her doting uncle. She wished her own husband could be as forgiving as Abu Ashraf. Abu Fadi was perfectly happy with Siwar staying at her grandmother's, and Um Fadi was too nervous about bringing up the subject of her return home. The prank calls they were getting on a daily basis discouraged Um Fadi from insisting on taking Siwar back. She wondered if she should ask Abu Farid to speak to her husband about it.

Zaher walked in with *knafeh*, to celebrate Mubarak's ousting. When he saw Siwar, his smile faded and said "I got this *knafeh* to celebrate an honourable cause with honourable people." Siwar got up from beside her uncle and ran up the stairs.

## Chapter 13

### The Saturday After 11<sup>th</sup> of February

#### Hayfa

That morning while Mona drove Hayfa to work, she had said things that had baffled her sister. Mona was throwing about names of girls their age who recently moved out of their parents' houses and were now living together in a small apartment in the First Circle area.

"Why would they want to live alone?" Hayfa had asked, "Where are their parents?"

"They just don't want to live with their parents anymore," Mona had answered.

"Craziness!" exclaimed Hayfa, "What's happening to this city?"

"Don't you ever wish you could have your own place?" Mona had asked.

"Of course I do, when I'm married."

"But what if you never marry?"

Hayfa had glared at her sister, "Why? What's wrong with me? Why would I never get married?"

Mona had smiled at her sister, "There's nothing wrong with never getting married."

"How depressing! Imagine living with Mama and Baba forever, and not being able to invite my friends over whenever I want for the rest of my life! I have a whole design of what I want my house to look like!"

"Well, you better hurry then, you're twenty-seven, certainly not getting any younger. You're not exactly making an effort to find someone, unless you plan on getting back together with Kamal, in which case, kiss your dream house goodbye because you'd be living with his family anyway."

Now Hayfa sat in her office, staring at the cake in front of her. Someone had brought *knafeh* and someone else had brought some Circassian honey cake in celebration of Egypt's victory. Her sister's words had hit a nerve. *What if I never get married?* Her sister was right, she was twenty-seven. Most of her school friends were already married and had already had at least one child. She got sick of going to Cyprus every single June, spending

all of her salary on dresses that she would only wear once. *You wear the dress to one wedding, engagement, or katb ktab party, she thought, then your pictures show up on the internet, and that's it, you can never wear it again.* She could not even share clothes with her sister and cousins like they used to. It somehow seemed tacky to get caught wearing someone else's clothes—and really, people were merciless when commenting on pictures.

Hayfa hated dresses, and she hated wasting her salary on clothes. Just once she wished she could spend her savings on a holiday in an exotic country, like Chile or Indonesia, where she could explore other cultures and try out different foods. But, she was always here, in the Mediterranean area, which was so similar to Amman, always shopping for a dress to wear to someone else's wedding. Who knew, maybe this year she would not have the money to go abroad, given the way things were looking economically.

Architecture was not doing well in Amman these days. So many firms had shut down, and some of her colleagues were saying that this firm could be next. They only had two projects at the moment, the one for Qatar, and one for Dubai, and not much was left to do on the project she was managing. *Nobody has money for new buildings,* thought Hayfa as she looked out her office window at the two unfinished skyscrapers.

She went back to Facebook to look at Lutfi's picture. Her sister's words still echoing in her mind, she thought of the Egyptian and Tunisian and even Jordanian women who had taken to the streets demanding change. Siwar had *kissed* a boy and gotten caught, and everything was fine. All the consequences that could have happened, that Hayfa had spent her whole life worrying about, did not happen.

What if Hayfa composed a casual message, suggesting she and Lutfi should meet up again? It had been a month. Had too much time lapsed? Had he forgotten about her already? Hayfa took several deep breaths to calm herself down. Her hands were shaking as she typed the message. How could she justify finding him online? She tried to find out if he was attending any new events that she could claim that she found him through, but his privacy settings would not allow her to see anything. She decided that since they had started out being honest, she should continue being honest, and so she typed a message mentioning that she had stumbled onto his profile a few weeks back and had spent the entire time wondering if she should get in touch or not. "Would you like to have lunch at that café again sometime?" *The ball is in his court now,* she thought clicking the "send"

button. She could not believe what she had just done, this was the first time she had done anything without even consulting her sister.

Minutes later he replied suggesting they meet for lunch that day. Hayfa's excitement grew, that was only half an hour away. She rushed to the toilet, and checked herself in the mirror, cursing herself for not wearing something nicer. She kept smiling and her eyes looked bright. She took her glasses off and paced in her office until it was time to walk over to the café. She tried one last time to smooth the crease in her shirt and nervously walked over to the door. Before opening it, she lifted her arm up and brought her nose close to smell her underarms and noticed that the excitement had made her sweat. Appalled, she thought she would hurry to the toilet and dry the underarms of her shirt using the hand-dyer in the bathroom. She opened the door in a rush and found him standing in front of the door, about to knock.

She smiled broadly, and so did he. "Can you sit in my office for just one second? I'll be right back!" she said, and rushed to the toilet. While drying her shirt she tried to control her breathing and her racing heart. *He's here, he's here...* she repeated in her head. He was taller than she remembered, his eyes were greener, and his bald head was not as bald. She washed her underarms in the freezing water, and dried them with toilet paper before putting the shirt back on. She hurried back and found his foot swinging nervously as he sat in her office. "Yalla?"

"Yalla," he replied with a smile. He had not shaved, and he was wearing jeans and a T-shirt that said *wuthafuck* in Arabic, which meant "has he employed you?" He saw her trying to read what was written on his T-shirt, and he laughed, "Sorry, I didn't have time to change, I was at work when I got your message."

They walked together under the February sun, "Nice day, eh?" he asked, letting her walk on his left, in case a car came from the right. Hayfa remembered that Kamal used to do that too.

They both automatically walked back to the same table they had occupied during their last meeting. Hayfa fondly waved at the waiters, whom, she felt, were wondering where Kamal had been. She congratulated them over Egypt's victory. Surprised, she heard Lutfi greet them familiarly. She glanced at him in confusion.

"I have a confession," he said, "I've been coming here every Saturday."

Hayfa's eyes opened wide, "And I haven't been here since you and I met!"

"And why not?" he asked, "You can't tell a man you have lunch here every Saturday and never come back!"

"A lot has happened," she admitted.

They discussed Tunisia and Egypt, and the Wikileaks, especially the ones about Palestine. She told him that her brother went to the same protest that he had gone to. She was happy that they agreed on most views. She was so comfortable talking to him, she caught herself smiling a little too often. *Stay cool* she tried to tell herself, but finding him smiling too, she let herself relax.

When the waiter came, they had the same debate over who decided which *argeela* flavour to order. This time the waiter said "I'm deciding for you—I'm bringing you strawberry," in his Egyptian accent.

"So," Lutfi started after the *argeela* arrived, "I was happy to get your message. I felt like an idiot coming here every week."

"Trust me, I would have come here if I'd thought you'd be here!" Hayfa took a deep breath and felt like she was about to go bungee jumping. "I had so much fun last time we met, and I felt disappointed that you didn't call back." Her face turned red.

"You know? I had so much fun too, but I got a vibe from you that you weren't interested. You ran back into your office so fast, and..." he shrugged, "I'm not very smooth, in case you haven't noticed." He said the word "smooth" in English. "And this was arranged, and I wasn't sure how to behave. Was I supposed to go back to my mother and tell her to call your mother?"

Hayfa smiled at him, relieved. She asked him how it went with his family when he got back last time, he laughed and said his parents were sure he would never ever find a woman who would be willing to marry him.

\* \* \*

Aseel

Bassam's friend had invited them for *mansaf* to celebrate Egypt's victory. She had gone out with her girlfriends in the morning, as usual, but going out with them was

becoming boring. She vowed that the following week she would have her decaf coffee by herself with a book about parenting.

Now, she needed the toilet again. She was getting fed up with her pregnancy and half of her wanted the baby to come right away, and the other half did not. She knew that once the baby came, she would not be able to spend hours checking out the news and the internet. She knew cartoons would eventually take Al Jazeera's place, and she wondered what would happen job-wise. She remembered what her cousins had said about earning more money than men, and she felt depressed at not having an income of her own. But most of all, she was depressed about her having to name her baby Abdel Muheimen.

She managed to go to the toilet again, and hoped that Bassam would not notice. Nevertheless, the minute she returned, Bassam did see her. Aseel feared that he would make fun of her bladder again in front of everybody as he had at his mother's house, but he just smiled at her and asked, "Bathroom again? Do you want to switch seats?"

They had the *mansaf* and made bets about Qathaffi since Libyans had started organizing themselves and showing the intention of starting some protests. They bet on *mansaf* and each predicted a date for his departure, and whoever was the most off would invite them for lunch.

"I think Qathaffi will be gone by the time our baby is born," Bassam said, rubbing his wife's bump. Aseel noticed that he was becoming more comfortable with touching her, especially in public. That night, he had snuggled close to her and placed his hand on her bump while they slept. She had never slept in his arms before, and she had found it comforting and nice. She had fantasised that it was the Englishman who was hugging her.

Now, at their friends' house, Bassam was paying extra attention to her. He scooped rice on her plate, and he fished out a handsome amount of almond and pine nuts for her, he chose the best possible piece of mutton for her, and he poured a generous serving of hot *jameed* yoghurt over it.

"Look at how Bassam takes care of his wife?" one of the ladies nudged her husband, "Why don't you take care of me that way?"

The others laughed, but Aseel's face went bright red.

"When you get pregnant, I'll treat you the way Bassam treats his wife," laughed her husband.

“Now Bassam is pampering her, wait till the second and the third come, Bassam will run away!” another friend of Bassam’s chimed in.

Aseel was beginning to sweat. Bassam laughed with them, but surprised her by taking her hand, which was gripping her skirt tightly. He raised her hand and kissed it, “When the second and third kids stage a coup, Aseel and I will run away together.”

The friends laughed and cheered, and Aseel beamed.

\* \* \*

### Sana

None of the employees were doing much work this Saturday. By four o’clock, Sana found herself alone in the building. She did not have much work to do, so she thought she should leave early, but figured with people still excited about Egypt, it would take her over an hour to get home. She decided to pray the afternoon prayer at the office, which was something she rarely did because she generally did not like to ablute in the office toilets. Today, however, she still had her morning ablution, she tried to remember if she shook hands with any men or if she had used the toilet. She closed her office door, and didn’t bother hiding the window on the door by taping paper over it because she assumed that she was alone in the building. She opened the drawer where she kept her spare white praying clothes, and put them on.

After she finished praying, she was startled by the Egyptian janitor’s face in the door window. She quickly got up, nearly tripping on the skirt, and took off the white veil.

“Mahmoud, you scared me,” she said, embarrassed that he had been watching her.

“May God accept your prayers, *ya Sitti Sana*,” he said with an insincere smile.

“From us and from you,” she replied.

“Praise be to Allah, I didn’t know that you prayed.”

Sana smiled uncomfortably as she folded her praying clothes.

Mahmoud plugged in the vacuum cleaner in a socket in Sana’s office. “You’re leaving? *Sitti Sana*, do you mind if I clean your office before you lock the door? The keys are downstairs, and my back is broken from walking up and down those steps all day. I’m not allowed to use the elevator.”

“Of course,” answered Sana, beginning to pack her things. “A thousand congratulations on your victory.”

“Did you see? Our Lord opened it in our faces, Our Lord is big. Thank God that monster has gone. But may Our Lord protect us from what’s to come.”

“Yes, well, Egypt is in our prayers, I hope God will answer.”

“You were always a respectable and honourable lady, *ya Sitti Sana*, can I say something to you? But I’m scared that you’ll take offence.”

Sana’s discomfort was increasing, but she mustered a smile and replied, “*Tfadal*. Ask.”

“*Sitti Sana*,” he said in an imploring tone, “you’re a *sit* that knows Our Lord, and you are a *sit* who is respectable and kind . But your appearance does not indicate it. Since you are already doing half your Islamic deeds, why not complete them and hide your hair?”

Sana began to stutter, “I, eh, I don’t want to wear the veil now, I’m not ready for it. Now I must go, the time is late.”

Mahmoud blocked her way. “I saw you wearing the veil, you looked beautiful, like the moon.”

“Thank you Mahmoud, *salam*,” and with that, Sana elbowed him out of the way.

“But, *Sitti Sana*, I haven’t finished cleaning. And you have to lock the door after me, otherwise someone might come in and look at your things—or, Our Lord forbid, take something.”

“It’s OK, Mahmoud, the office is clean enough,” replied Sana impatiently.

“A moment, *Sitti Sana*,” he swooped down and took a small hairball of Sana’s hairs from the bin. She had brushed her hair in the office earlier and had absent-mindedly pulled out a few hairs from between the comb’s teeth and thrown them in the bin. Sana opened her eyes wide while Mahmoud raised the brown hairball in front of her eyes, and rocked it slowly, as if to hypnotize her. “Since you’re already a religious *sit*, have a little respect to the parts of you that you shouldn’t show a man,” he said with a cruel smile.

Sana snatched the hairball from between his fingers and threw it in the bin again. She slammed her office door after he dragged his vacuum cleaner out. Her hands were cold and sweaty as she fumbled with her keys. Mahmoud’s mocking gaze followed her. She willed herself to slide the key into the lock and turn it without it jamming. She walked



away briskly, and was only able to stop shaking after she reached her car in the deserted basement. She locked the car door and finally was able to breathe.

## Chapter 14

Friday the 25<sup>th</sup> of February

“*Yalla!*” shouted Abu Ashraf at Mona who was looking at the mirror and applying her mascara.

“Baba, I know it’s time to go, please can you let me finish this?” Mona asked calmly.

“Why do you have to apply makeup now? Who’s going to see you there? There are no strangers there! *Yalla*, finish me.” Hayfa, who was in the kitchen drinking water, heard her father screaming. She closed her eyes and uttered a prayer asking God to prevent her sister from talking back.

“Baba,” Mona said again, still applying mascara and keeping her tone of voice calm, “one day you will have to come to terms with the fact that I am turning twenty-six soon, and no longer a little girl that you have to raise. You can’t keep shouting at me forever.”

Abu Ashraf’s eyes bulged, “Why not give me two slaps?”

“Baba, why make a drama out of it?” emphasising the word drama in English. “See? All done. It took more time for you to shout than me to finish what I was doing.” She walked past him towards the car.

Abu Ashraf stomped after her, and began shouting at his wife, who was adjusting her blue veil in the hallway mirror. “See your daughter? She wants to raise me!”

Um Ashraf had heard the exchange, “I don’t blame her, *habibi*, are you never going to change this shouting habit of yours? One of your veins might pop.”

In the car Abu Ashraf continued to yell, about how he spent his entire life sacrificing everything for this family. How he wanted nothing from his son and daughters but to be happy and successful. His voice grew louder when the part about nobody appreciating him or his efforts came up. “Other fathers don’t give a damn about their daughters! Other fathers marry their daughters off to rich men to collect the dowry! I haven’t done this to you! I’ve asked you for nothing! Where is your gratitude? Even obedience is now something a father can’t expect from his children?”

Just before he pulled up in Tata’s driveway, Um Ashraf banged her hand on the glove compartment. “Enough!” she screamed, “I’m sick of your shouting!”

She left the car and slammed the door as hard as she could. Abu Ashraf's expression turned from anger to shock as he watched his wife walk away in the direction of Tata's house. He got out and walked after her. Mona was glad that her mother had finally snapped and hoped that her father would have to grovel a bit before her mother forgave him.

At Tata's house, the usual hustle and bustle greeted them. Tata scowled at Ashraf and said as she gave him her cheek to kiss, "Didn't I tell you not to go out protesting anymore?"

"And you," she said to Hayfa, as Hayfa obediently kissed the right cheek and then the left, "you encourage your brother to take part in craziness."

Hayfa and Ashraf exchanged confused glances, their own parents had no idea that they had gone. "She's not natural, she has eyes *everywhere*," Ashraf whispered to Hayfa.

"Here's our beauty," Tata smiled at Mona, "if only you would get rid of that thing on your nose, you would look so much more beautiful." Tata hugged Mona tightly, as Mona shot her siblings a confused look, "I have something to talk to you about." Tata whispered, "A suitor has come for you."

Mona's brown eyes opened wide. "But Tata, isn't it the custom for the eldest daughter to marry first? I can't do that to Hayfa."

Tata escorted Mona to her bedroom, "God is knowledgeable about how much I love your sister; but look at her, she's not very pretty, her glasses make her look older, her nose is like a witch's, and her clothes are so horrible. But you, look at your hair, if only you would straighten it you would become the most beautiful of the Al Manseyeh daughters. You figure steals the mind, your style, the colours you wear, if we wait for your sister to get married first, you will never get married. This suitor is too good to pass up, he's an engineer, he has an American passport, and his father is a millionaire!"

"Tata, thank you, but I'm not interested,"

"If it's Hayfa you're worried about, I'll talk to her."

"No Tata, I just don't want to get married."

"What is the empty talk?" Tata frowned, "What do you expect to do for the rest of your life? Your father can't keep spending his money on you."

"Actually Tata, I have my own salary, and Baba doesn't spend any money on me."

“What is this empty talk? He feeds you, he keeps you warm in the winter, he pays the bills, he pays for everything.”

“Tata, yes Baba is generous, but I spend every single day from eight in the morning until six in the evening at work. I eat there, from money which I earn, and I come home around seven, I change, and I go out with my friends. The only day I *don't* have lunch in the office is Friday, and that's when I have lunch here.” Tata stared at Mona in awe, “You're the one who always told us that education is a weapon in the hands of a woman, right Tata *habibti*? And it was the most valuable lesson you ever taught us. Tell this suitor that Sana might be more interested. *Yalla*, Tata, let's have lunch?”

Tata's face was white from her talk with Mona, but nobody noticed as plates and cutlery were being passed around the dining room. Abu Ashraf had run after his wife just to walk past her and open the door to Tata's house first. She watched him ignore her, and was infuriated by the way he made a point of showing her that he did not care that he had upset her. She decided to ignore him. She would ask Um Zaher if she could join her and her sister for coffee at her house after lunch. Hayfa and Ashraf were concerned about their parents' argument, but were more curious about what Tata wanted with Mona. Hayfa was sure it was about a suitor, but Ashraf assured her that it must be that Tata wanted to talk her into stopping them from joining in any more protests.

That Monday evening there had been a candle lighting solidarity stand at the Libyan embassy on Jubran Khalil Jubran street. Hayfa, Ashraf and Lutfi had gone together. Ashraf and Lutfi had gotten along excellently, as Hayfa knew they would. After lighting the candles and praying in solidarity with the oppressed Libyans, whose leader was massacring them in a way that no other Arab leader had done to his people since the revolutions began, Hayfa had wanted to go home straight away. The days were sunny and warm, but the cloudless nights were chilly, and Hayfa's stomach was beginning to ache. Lutfi stopped her from walking away and pointed to some children who had been hiding between the buildings. Hayfa, Ashraf and Lutfi hid behind a parked car after everybody had left to see what those children wanted. Some of the children had been wearing sandals, flip-flops and even torn T-shirts in the cold February night. The children had collected all of the candles and had quickly run away.

Mona joined them and the younger table after Ashraf had put meat and salad on her plate. “Suitor,” she had whispered to him after he winked at her questioningly. Mona sat beside her sister, “suitor” she repeated. Hayfa bit her lip, hoping that her sister had dealt with the situation diplomatically and had not upset their grandmother.

Siwar had begun joining her cousins at the younger table, and had left Omar to sit in the kitchen by himself. Her results had come out the previous Friday. She had failed. She had known that the results might be coming out that morning, and while Siwar was in the shower, she heard the telephone ring. She prolonged her shower as long as possible. Finally when she finished getting ready, she had gone downstairs and found her uncle Abu Ashraf sitting with Tata. “*Khalo!*” she ran to him happily, forgetting about her grades.

“*Khalo,*” Abu Ashraf had replied, “I have some bad news. You’ve failed in chemistry.”

Siwar had stood there for a moment absorbing the news. Although she had thrown herself at her grandmother’s lap and sobbed, she was secretly glad that it was only chemistry that she had failed in. Tata had been near tears herself, which had shocked Siwar because she had always thought of her grandmother to be as strong as a rock.

“Don’t cry, ya Tata, by God you are shredding my heart,” Tata had said to her, stroking her hair. “Come with me, I have a present for you.”

Tata had taken Siwar to her bedroom and took out an old fashioned gold watch from her jewellery box, “The people give gold to those who pass, but I’m giving this to you because you haven’t, and I know you will never fail again. You will rub an onion in their eye, those who have talked about you. You will rub an onion in their eye when you pass and enter university. Education is the weapon that arms you for the battles of life.”

That afternoon Siwar had refused to go down to lunch. She had lain in bed trying to ignore the celebrations in the streets. She had hidden her face underneath her pillow, but could not get rid of the image of Sari in his brother’s car, celebrating his high *Tawjihi* average by honking the horn. She tried to shut her eyes to block the image of his happy smile but it only became more vivid.

Her first week of school had been difficult. Her Tata had to force her to go, and the minute she walked in through the gates she had seen Sari with her old friends. She remembered how she had introduced him to her group, so keen for them to like him. How

had he managed to alienate her from her own friends? How had she not noticed what he was doing?

She was happy that her cousin Mona had given her an MP3 player, telling her she hardly ever used it since she got a free iPod with her new Mac laptop. Siwar had expressed her fear of school to Mona. Mona had shared a secret game she had played in the past to make herself feel better.

“When I was your age, I wasn’t liked at school. I would daydream about how amazing my life would be in five years. It really worked, and the time alone helped me realize what I wanted to be; and as far as I’m concerned, I wouldn’t have become a successful graphic designer if I hadn’t had all that time alone thinking and drawing.”

Mona was very proud of her success, and was sure her cousin Siwar could pick herself up after her recent scandal. Mona was not always successful. Every first day of school, the homeroom teacher would read out the names of the students. After reading Mona’s name, noting that her two middle names were the same as Hayfa’s, the homeroom teacher’s face would light up, “Are you Hayfa’s sister?”

Mona would nod, dreading the next question. “Are you as smart as her?” or “What was your average last year?” Mona would shyly give her mediocre average, and watch the teacher’s face change from delighted to shocked. Soon the teachers would see that Mona was nothing like Hayfa, and they would begin to seek out Hayfa after school to discuss her sister’s bad grades or unruly behaviour.

The last year of school had been hell because Hayfa had graduated. Hayfa would drive to Mona’s school after her classes at university, and would pick Mona up two or even three hours early. The teachers loved Hayfa so much that they let her break the rules.

Even Hayfa’s help in skipping classes had not made Mona’s school experience any better. There was a rumour that circulated about Mona being a devil-worshipper, because of the dark clothes she wore when she was not in her school uniform, the strange drawings she drew, and the music she listened to. Among the religious Muslims and Christians in her school, the reputation of being Satanic was worse than being known as the girl who has threesomes.

Hayfa had received a large sum of money from her uncles for her exceptional *Tawjihi* grade, and Mona asked her to lend her some to buy a discman to take to school. Hayfa

ended up buying it for her sister as an early *Tawjihi* present, and Mona would sit at recess, on the playground floor, listening to music. She would draw caricatures of her future. She predicted that she would be successful, and she drew caricature pictures of each and every one of the classmates who hated her so much, imagining what their futures would be like. Mona never admitted it to anybody except Hayfa, but each and every one of her predictions came true. The popular girls who hated her the most married rich men and did not bother finishing university. Thanks to the internet, Mona was able to check on them from time to time, and she found that most of them spent their days watching dubbed Turkish soap operas, leaving their maids and nannies to raise their children. The guys were mostly unmarried, they were employees in banks or in their fathers' businesses. Mona realised that the most successful of her school friends were the outcasts, like herself, and the others who were popular and happy at high school were leading lives that Mona did not envy.

A surge of pride ran through Mona whenever one of the posters she designed appeared on the side of a building or a tunnel in Amman. In her mind, at the age of twenty-five she had already achieved everything she had ever wanted to except living on her own. She knew that living on her own would be impossible unless she moved to Dubai or Lebanon. She did not particularly want to move to another country, because, although she moaned about Friday lunches, she really did love her family, and could not imagine spending a Friday away from them. Odeh was also an important factor; she knew that she would never be able to marry him, but she was becoming more sure that she needed to find another way for them to be together. Now that Hayfa was seriously thinking about marriage, Mona was hating the idea of living with her parents forever even more.

Mona had begun focussing on Siwar, encouraging her to sit in the front row in front of everybody who hated her, and to pay attention to her teachers and follow the lessons well.

“I know recess is the worst time, when you sit alone, while the fuckers are having fun. I promise you, when you listen to music, it makes you feel like you're in a movie and that everything that is happening around you is make-believe. I think you should really imagine what you want your life to be like, keep imagining what kind of life you want to lead. Study hard, because if you don't pass *Tawjihi*, you won't make your dreams come true.”

Siwar had begun to do what Mona told her. She had listened to the same songs her cousin had saved on the little MP3 player, which were much cooler, she thought, than the Lebanese and Egyptian pop songs that the other kids at school listened to. The songs she rocked her head to were new sounds from West Amman singing about everyday Amman issues that she related to. One of her favourite songs had become Aziz Maraqa's "*Najeh*" about the misery of the *Tawjihi* year, and how beautiful life was after it.

The school principal, Um Ashraf's close friend, had kept her end of the bargain. She and the school counsellor had called different students into their offices and asked them about what Sari had been saying about Siwar. The students who were reluctant to tell on their friend were reminded by their principal that Jordan was a country of tribes and honour, and that scared them into telling the truth. The different stories and the inconsistencies in the accounts of the students proved to her that he was, indeed, lying about most of the allegations about Siwar. She had mentioned to Um Ashraf that Sari and Siwar had the bad habit of sitting in unhealthy isolation most of the first term. She had looked through his file and contacted his previous school, who said that a similar incident had happened with one of their female students, and they had told his mother that they would not be keeping him for the following year.

The principal had contacted his parents and explained the situation to them. His mother begged for him to stay, the principal told Um Ashraf, as no good school would accept him in the middle of the *Tawjihi* year, which was the most crucial year of his life. The principal had been forced to keep him on because of his excellent grades. She had, however, made him sign a formal pledge that he would never talk about another girl in this school again. The principal had made him apologise to Siwar in front of her classmates.

The students had begun to isolate Sari, but Siwar still found it hard to hate him. She remembered the way he held her in his arms and whispered loving words in her ear; she could not believe that he was the same person who had spread lies about her and had even gone as far as to get her in trouble with her entire family. Siwar knew deep down, although she would never admit it to anyone except herself, that if Sari *had* asked her to do the things he said she had done, she would have... eventually.

These thoughts were what had driven her to go upstairs to Tata's roof on the day of the *Tawjihi* results. While on the roof, listening to fathers shooting their guns in



celebration of their sons' and daughters' achievements, she hoped one of the bullets would kill her. The longer she had stood on that roof, the more she had wanted to be shot. She felt that a shot from a gun would be the only way to cleanse her of her mistakes with Sari.

Siwar was saved from the gunshots by enquiries from her cousin Mona. Tata had climbed up the stairs, ecstatic that one of the girls had thought of Siwar on that dreadful day, and was startled to find that Siwar was not in her room. Tata had climbed up hurriedly to the roof, ignoring the pain in her legs, and had found Siwar sobbing and waiting to be shot.

Tata had called Siwar to go down to see her cousin, pretending not to notice how unhappy she was. Mona had insisted that Siwar should dress nicely because she was going to take her to Koobz.

This Friday, Siwar was feeling much better. Her cousins were being extra nice, except for Zaher and Wa'el, and most of her aunts and uncles were understanding. Her father, however, had stopped coming to Tata's house, and Abu Wa'el still refused to speak to Siwar or her mother. Sana and Reema were embarrassed by their father and brother's attitude towards Siwar, but both of them agreed that Siwar should have been punished for her behaviour, rather than rewarded by everybody. Neither Reema nor Sana agreed to join them at Koobz the previous Friday evening; their parents would not have let them go anyway.

Aseel waddled over to the younger table, hoping to find someone to discuss Syria's Friday of Dignity protest.

"Doesn't your baby want to come out of there already?" joked Nadia.

Aseel rubbed her belly, "You see? The baby is comfortable in there." Her cousins asked her if she and her husband would like to join them for coffee, but she reluctantly declined, knowing that they would have to visit Bassam's mother that evening.

After lunch, the family sat in Tata's living room, Ashraf and Farid fixed the *argeelas*, Hayfa brought in some tea with fresh mint from the garden and Nadia served the coffee from the large *dalleh*. For the first time since Tunisians had overthrown their president, they did not switch the television on. They were, however, discussing politics. Abu Farid was concerned about the referendum in Sudan, "The West is behind this split!" he said, "If Sudan didn't have this civil war, and if her people took advantage of her resources, she

would feed the entire Arab world! She has water, oil, and soil! She is the fruit-basket of the Arab world.”

“I heard a funny joke about Libya,” Bassam said loudly, “a Japanese guy and a Libyan were having an argument about which country was better. The Japanese man said, ‘Our biggest idiot can build a laptop from scratch.’ The Libyan replied, ‘our biggest idiot can lead a country.’”

Um Ashraf knew her husband well, and she knew that he was waiting for her to make a gesture signalling her forgiveness. She had learned long ago that he was a proud man, but also knew that deep down he had a kind heart. This time however, she did not want to be the one to wave the white flag, and she continued to laugh and joke with her sisters-in-law, noticing, from the corner of her eye, that her husband was watching her. She knew that by pretending that she also did not care, she was on uncharted grounds, and there was no predicting the way her husband would react. Um Ashraf was nervous that he would yell at her in front of the family, but still refused to back down from her stance. *It’s now or never*, she thought.

Abu Ashraf, watching his wife more closely than usual, noticed that his wife was rubbing her back while sitting on the wooden kitchen chair beside Um Wa’el. “Um Ashraf, have my seat,” he said, which, to Um Ashraf was the white flag that she had been waiting for since they got married.

Tata scowled, but said nothing and continued to cross-stitch. Um Ashraf happily thanked her husband and took his seat beside Abu Zaher, whose jokes she always enjoyed. “What have you done to my brother?” he joked.

Um Ashraf laughed. Tata, infuriated by her daughter-in-law’s behaviour, muttered, “What an age it is, the women are behaving like men, and men are behaving like women.”

Um Ashraf’s smile faded. She knew that her mother-in-law had double standards when it came to her children and grandchildren. Um Farid was sitting on a comfortable sofa, and Abu Farid sat on one of the velvet dining room chairs, which were not as comfortable. Tata turned a blind eye to her own daughters’ actions, but if one of her daughters-in-law stepped out of line, they were bound to hear a word about it from her.

“You have raised noble gentlemen with hearts of gold ya *Khalto*,” Um Ashraf said, looking at her husband. She knew that she would need to have a talk with him about raising his voice at her in front of their children that night.

“Did you hear that Mona rejected the rich suitor that wants her?” Tata continued, still stitching.

Um Ashraf, taken aback by the news, said, “No, *Khalto*.” Getting over her initial shock, she tried to sound casual as she said, “but the news doesn’t surprise me. My daughters don’t believe in traditional marriage.”

“No, your daughters don’t believe in marriage at all. Not traditional nor any other kind.”

Um Ashraf looked at her mother-in-law, who also happened to be her late father’s cousin’s wife. She wet her lips and began to speak, but decided against it.

“Girls these days, *yamma*, they break the neck,” Abu Zaher said, between breaths of his water-pipe.

“This is why my sister’s seen joy in all her granddaughters and I haven’t,” Tata snorted, “I encouraged education, yes, but my daughters-in-law raised their daughters to be too independent. They begin to think they don’t need men!” Tata shook her head sadly.

Abu Ashraf waved his water-pipe at his mother, “*Yamma*, our children have reached an age where we can’t raise them anymore,” he took a long breath of strawberry smoke and exhaled, “I think we should just let them make their own mistakes. That way they can’t blame us for anything.”

“This is empty talk,” Tata mumbled. “This attitude is what is bringing talk upon our family.”

“*Yamma*, the people are talking, are talking. Whether there is something to talk about or not, the talkers will talk,” Abu Ashraf said.

Um Ashraf smiled at her husband fondly, she had never seen him contradict his mother’s wishes before. She looked at Um Fadi, hanging on her mother’s every word, and then saw Mona walk across the room nonchalantly, to get some dessert for her and her sister. Um Ashraf noticed that Tata’s angry gaze was directed at Mona, and she glanced at her husband, and noticed that he was also gazing at Mona with love and pride shining in

his eyes. Um Ashraf was also proud that she had brought up her children to be independent.

\* \* \*

### Aseel

Aseel and Bassam had now begun discussing topics which were unrelated to politics. He shared everything about his day with her, and she loved hearing about his colleagues at work; his awful boss who was having an affair with one of the accountants, the different scandals at the sales department and the crazy clients who had strange requests.

Siwar's dilemma had eventually come up, and Aseel was surprised at Bassam's relaxed opinion on the matter. He did not see any harm in what Siwar had done. He blamed Siwar's boyfriend for his indiscretion. "Don't you remember your first crush at school?" he had asked.

Aseel had never had a crush as a teenager, not on a real person anyway. She loved Amr Diab, the Egyptian star, he was probably her first crush. She teasingly asked Bassam about his crushes, and he named a few girls.

"Why didn't you marry one of them?" she had asked.

"It never occurred to me to," he had answered.

"So why did you marry me?"

"I married you because something about you felt right," he had answered, bringing her hand up to his mouth and kissing it. "Why did you marry me?"

Aseel paused and thought, "Something about you felt right."

Aseel thought back to when she had first met Bassam. Her mother had received a call from her neighbour telling her of a lovely, slightly eccentric, widow who was searching for a bride for her son. Um Omar, desperate for her mid-twenties daughter to get married, had agreed for them to come for a cup of coffee. Although Aseel had been unlucky with all the other suitors, her mother had not given up hope, and had continued to accept men and their mothers to meet Aseel. Bassam had ticked all the right boxes, employed, handsome, from a good Palestinian family and Aseel detected a certain warmth about him that she had liked. His mother had impressed Aseel with the many diamonds on her

fingers, and so, both Aseel and Um Omar had assumed that Bassam was rich. After the engagement, Aseel found out that Um Naji had a habit of borrowing diamonds from her sister.

Now Aseel found herself sitting in her mother-in-law's house again. The idea of being there was beginning to cause her severe stress and anxiety. She dreamt of Um Naji at night. Her recurring dream was that Um Naji took Aseel's baby and raised it as her own. The baby was mostly male in the dreams, but sometimes it was a girl. Aseel would start agonizing about the visit starting Wednesday. Whatever outfit Aseel chose, Um Naji always found something negative about it. Anything that Aseel tried to say, Um Naji always made a retort that made Aseel feel like a fool.

Dara's presence in Um Naji's house added to Aseel's discomfort. Dara was thin and athletic and moved with ease, serving the coffee and handing out desserts. Aseel felt like it was a constant competition over who pleases Um Naji more. Aseel had the upper hand because she was pregnant with the first grandchild, but Dara was trying hard to compensate by being the perfect daughter-in-law.

Aseel's only consolation in that oppressive house was Komari. They had struck up a friendship, and Komari had plenty of advice about pregnancy and childbirth to give to inexperienced Aseel. Aseel had begun to join Komari in the kitchen and sit beside her as she did the dishes after lunch, or just go to Komari's room for a chat if she was at her mother-in-law's for after sunset prayer tea.

That Friday, Komari was at the little shop nearby meeting her friends, and Aseel found herself unable to bear sitting with her mother-in-law any longer. She thought she would use the dessert excuse again and walked down to Cozmo.

The walk was serene just after sunset. Birds were chirping, pink honey-scented flowers were in bud on the trees and the purple-skied world took Aseel's breath away. As always, Aseel thought of her baby and what she or he might be like. She was sure that true democracy would come to Jordan, as the King had promised. Egypt was always the first to make big steps and history shows that neighbouring countries got influenced by these changes. Aseel was confident change would eventually come here and her child would have the opportunity of becoming prime minister, regardless of gender or origin. She

wanted her baby to grow up to become strong, the idea of her child becoming a ninja warrior still excited her, and she would raise her child to believe in everything positive.

Strolling around in Cozmo, she daydreamed about her child being a strong public figure, unifying Arabs and resurrecting the glory of Arabia, which would once again become the heart of the world in technology, knowledge and civilization.

As she looked through the baby clothes, she continued fantasizing about the beautiful future. For the first time in her life, she was proud of being Arab, rather than using the word to describe negative traits in the people of Amman. She remembered all the times in the past she had watched the news helplessly while an Arab country was being attacked by a Western force, and she felt that helplessness was no longer a word in Arabic vocabulary.

She thought of her husband and the effort he was making to keep her happy. She suddenly decided to get him a present. *He deserves one*, she thought, and started thinking of what she could get him as she made her way to the men's section. She recalled that he sometimes had a sweaty odour after work although he showered every single morning. Maybe she could get him something to keep him smelling good all day? She cringed at the idea of his clients thinking he was always smelly. As she tried to pick the perfect set for him, she gasped as she thought she saw the Englishman out of the corner of her eye.

She turned to look at him, immediately beginning to sweat. He noticed her looking.

"I saw you before," she blurted out in English, with her strong Arabic accent.

"Oh yeah, I remember you," he replied with a smile.

She had fantasised about this moment many times, but all the clever things she had thought about saying to him escaped her now. "You found a present for your boss's baby?"

"Yes, yes I did!" he laughed, his hand running through his thick blond hair. "I took your advice and got a teddy bear. My boss said I shouldn't have, but I could tell she was very pleased with it."

Aseel laughed, "Good, good," not sure of what to say but wanting to keep the conversation going. "Have you seen what happened to Tunisia and Egypt?"

"Yes, it's amazing what they've managed to do."

"Yes it's very exciting."

"So what do you think is going to happen next?" he asked.

Aseel was surprised at the question. What was going to happen next seemed so obvious to her. She thought that the future had never looked so bright.

“I think Libya will get rid of Qathaffi, and I think Bahrain and Yemen will make some changes too. I also hope that Hamas and Fatah unite, because that is what the people are asking for now.”

“Really? Don’t you think that it’s slightly more complicated? But what about Egypt and Tunisia? You think they will be able to achieve real democracy?”

Aseel, disliking the question, answered without hesitation, “Well, did you not see how they found Zein El Abidin’s treasure in his palace? And they promised that all those millions will go to Tunisians. That is a big step. If there was no democracy, the people at the top would steal that money.”

“I don’t think Arabs can actually *handle* democracy. Democracy is a Western concept and it will take years before Arabs can truly comprehend it.”

Aseel’s mouth formed an angry pout, but she could not answer. Was democracy Western? *Didn’t the Muslims have the concept of Shoora and dialogue? Didn’t they vote for Caliphs?*

“Yeah, democracy goes hand in hand with the Western Christian world, and the Middle East, which is predominantly Muslim, won’t be able to cope with it,” said the Englishman with his hand still scratching his head. “The Islamists had a huge role in Egypt’s revolution, they’ll most probably win over the majority and then turn Egypt into another Iran.”

Aseel watched him scratch his head, and saw him take some dandruff out of his blond head. He absentmindedly brought his hand over to his face and examined the white dot before flicking it away. Aseel squinted in disgust.

“But Christianity came from the Middle East,” Aseel blurted out, not knowing what else to say.

The Englishman laughed, “Now, that *is* true.”

Aseel did not like his laugh. His teeth were yellow. His hand resting on his waist had long black fingernails. She hated him more with every move he made. “I will buy my husband a present now. Bye.” She turned around again, hating herself for ever finding him attractive and for wanting Bassam’s arms around her at night to be his.

“Do you need help picking it out?” he asked.

She turned to look at him and noticed a stain on his jeans. Imagining it to be a urine stain, Aseel found it hard to control her expression. “No, it’s OK.”

“But they’re Western brands, you helped me with Eastern stuff last time, maybe I can help with this?” Aseel noticed pimples underneath his beard. She turned away again and focused on the “made in China” label on one of the boxes the Englishman had pointed at, and tried to breathe.

Suddenly, all the things Aseel had ever heard from her friends, who had been abroad, about Europeans flooded her mind. According to Wa’el, who had spent a year in Germany, people did not use a bidet, people did not wash their hands after using the toilet or even before eating. Bassam said that Western people were always either drunk, high or having sex with strangers. In Amsterdam, prostitutes stood in window displays like mannequins, clinics handed out condoms like candy, and anyone could order drugs in brownies at cafés. Zaher had told her about an incident in England when he had eaten in a fast food restaurant. Somebody had greasy hands, and after using the toilet, he’d filled up the dirty basin with water, because there were two separate faucets, and he washed his hands and face, without soap, using the same dirty, greasy water again and again. Aseel’s stomach was getting upset and she felt like she would throw up.

“Are you alright?” he asked, coming to face her and extending his hand out to lightly touch her back.

His hand on her back was the final straw. She imagined him licking his fingers, picking his nose, and then urinating without ever washing his hands. To Aseel’s horror, she found herself vomiting all over his shirt. With a yelp, he jumped back, and the rest of Aseel’s lunch landed on the light brown carpet of the fancy department store. Some bits of digested food also landed on his muddy shoes.

“Shit!” he shouted after she had stopped heaving.

Aseel took a tissue out of her pocket and wiped her mouth, breathing heavily. She could not bring herself to apologise because she felt that vomiting on him was a good excuse for him to take a shower and wash his clothes.

Two staff members rushed over, one nearly vomiting herself and turned her face away, as the other spoke through a walkie-talkie and called a janitor. Aseel apologised to



them, and they assured her that it was alright. The janitor came with his kit and a roll of toilet paper for the Englishman.

Uncertain of what to do next, Aseel grabbed one of the cologne, deodorant, and shower gel sets and hurried to the cash register, still not looking at the Englishman. She heard him complain to the staff members that if this had happened in England, the person responsible would have been extremely apologetic. Aseel turned around and walked right back over to him, her heart racing.

“I didn’t apologise to you because you are the one who should apologise to *me*,” she said, pointing her finger from him to her.

His eyes opened wide, “You just puked all over me for God’s sake!”

“I wouldn’t have puked,” she said, not sure what the word ‘puke’ meant, but hoped it had something to do with vomiting, “if you,” she took a deep breath, “were not so disgusting.”

She walked back towards the cash register to pay for Bassam’s gift. She heard the staff members apologizing for her behaviour and offering him a free shirt. Aseel felt even angrier. She wanted to march right back over there and tell them that he was being paid double what any other more qualified Jordanian was being paid, and he could afford to buy his own shirt. But just as she was weighing the pros and cons of going back there, she felt a painful pang in her uterus.

She pressed on her belly with both hands and tried to control her breathing. After the pain subsided, she quickly paid for the present and called Bassam asking him to come get her. Five minutes later, his car was parked at the front entrance of Cozmo.

“Are you alright?” he asked. The concern in his voice made Aseel smile.

“I have a present for you,” she grinned broadly, offering the carrier bag to him. “I threw up on an Englishman.”

## Chapter 15

Friday the 11<sup>th</sup> of March

Hailstorms and sub-zero winds hit Amman out of nowhere. The Al Manseyeh family dressed in woollen clothes and large coats for the first time that year. Ashraf and Mona even wore woollen beanies, and Siwar was wearing gloves while indoors. Tata hugged her woollen shawl, and complained to Abu Ashraf, “No matter how long I keep the heater on, the house just does not get warm!”

Tata had cooked a Circasian dish called *Ships o Pasta* which was known for its warming components. Its combination of walnuts, chicken broth, and chilli and garlic sauce poured over rice and burgle wheat cakes were sure to bring warmth to the coldest days. “What a strange year,” Tata said, “may God protect us and shield us. We jumped from autumn to spring, and now we’re having a harsh winter?” she shuddered, “My son, may God keep you, see what’s wrong with the heater.” Abu Ashraf merely nodded. Tata frowned at his unusual silence. *What has Um Ashraf done now*, she wondered.

After more observation, Tata could sense that her children were concealing something from her. She tried to probe, but was not able to retrieve any information from anyone. Tata made a mental headcount and realised that Zaher was not there.

“Where is Zaher today?” she asked his mother.

Um Zaher’s face turned from pale to even paler, “He’s got the flu, today, *Khalto*. He sends his *salam* to you.”

Tata was unconvinced. She limped over to Fida, “Where is your brother?”

Fida stuttered, “He—he’s invited somewhere else for *Mansaf*.”

“My son,” she asked Abu Zaher, is Zaher having *Mansaf* for lunch, or is he home sick with the flu? Or has something happened to him. My heart tells me a catastrophe has befallen him. Don’t you dare hide the truth from me. Or my wrath will be on you till the day of the end.”

Abu Zaher and Abu Ashraf exchanged glances. “*Yamma*,” Abu Ashraf answered, “Zaher got into a little car accident, he is fine, but he needs to rest.”

“Accident!” Tata cried, “My catastrophe!”

Abu Zaher glared at his brother, “*Yamma*, he wasn’t hurt, he’s fine.”

“Whose fault was it?” Tata asked regaining her composure.

“*Yamma*, if it’s serious we would have told you, but it’s not worth mentioning. Let’s have lunch, it smells good.”

There was a heavy atmosphere of gloom at Tata’s house that Friday. Her grandchildren were used to sunlight streaming through the large windows and warmth steaming from the kitchen. Today, the curtains were drawn to keep the cold out, and the gaps between curtains revealed foggy greyness outside. Mona glanced down at her hands and noticed that her fingernails were blue, even rubbing them against each other did not warm them. Hayfa yawned and her brother laughed when he saw that steam was coming out of her mouth. The gas heater was on, Nadeen and Fida sat next to it, back to back, on the carpeted floor, each fiddling with her smart-phone.

What Tata did not know, and what everybody else did, was that Zaher was in prison because the driver of the other car had been killed by Zaher’s reckless driving. From the perspective of the police on the scene, it was not Zaher’s fault because the other driver had ignored a stop sign, but the man’s family’s point of view was that Zaher deserved to die because he had been speeding and could have stopped in time if he had tried. Because of the other family’s insistence, the police had put him in prison temporarily for his own protection until his family could solve the situation with the other driver’s family.

Abu Zaher, and his brothers had been to the man’s wake and had tried to set a date for negotiations. They were willing to pay anything to save their son, but the other family, who were of Jordanian origin, said that their women would not change their black clothes till blood was shed.

Her mother’s sobs had compelled Nadia, who had not had any contact with Talal since her father’s refusal of his proposal to her, to send him a text explaining the situation, hoping that he might be able to help. Without any hesitation, he had hurried to their house to meet with Abu Ashraf, Abu Zaher, and Ashraf. They had promised to talk to the men of the other driver’s tribe after Friday prayer, to arrange an *attweh*, an offering from the Al Manseyeh family.

Talal and his father had also contacted their relatives in the police station and the prison to make sure that Zaher was treated well. Nadia, Fida and Um Zaher had listened to their discussion from the kitchen, and Um Zaher could hear the shame in her husband's voice as he spoke with the man who he had rejected as his daughter's husband. Talal's father had started the meeting by saying that they must put aside the differences of the past, in order to solve the problems of today, which helped put Abu Zaher at ease. Um Zaher noticed, however, that her husband was letting his eldest brother take the lead, which was unlike him. The brothers, although they had a closer friendship with each other than with their other brothers, still had a competitiveness in their relationship which Um Zaher and her cousin Um Ashraf often joked about. That Thursday night, however, Abu Zaher was a broken man, and that in itself scared Um Zaher. She was used to having a strong unbreakable husband whom she could always depend on. His lack of confidence in this situation made her fear for their son's life as well as her husband's. She was glad that Abu Ashraf kept a cool head and was able to talk on her husband's behalf at this emotional time.

Nadia had had different emotions surging inside her while listening to Talal address her father. His tone was very different from the time he had come asking for her hand in marriage. Then he had been nervous and uncertain, hoping to impress Abu Zaher with his good manners. That Thursday evening, his demeanour had been entirely different. He had been direct, and his confidence that the situation could be resolved without bloodshed reassured Nadia. She had had no doubt whatsoever that he would succeed in saving her brother.

Neither Abu Talal nor his son had gotten in touch yet, and Um Zaher could see that her husband was nervous. His nervousness turned her into an emotional wreck. Um Zaher, who usually cried loudly and publically, had been forbidden to do so by everyone in the family. The family was concerned about Tata's heart, and Um Zaher was told repeatedly not to cry that Friday. She needed to be escorted several times to the room Siwar had occupied, so she could cry unabashedly. This time it was her cousin Um Farid who was escorting her upstairs and rubbed her back while Um Zaher sobbed.

“I don’t know who I’m more worried about,” she cried, “my husband or my son! My poor son is in a cold dark prison cell on this freezing day. It’s like they buried him alive!” She blew her nose, “And his father! His father has aged ten years in these four days.”

Um Farid continued to comfort her cousin patiently, “My brother will be fine, God will deliver us from this catastrophe.”

Back at the lunch table, Um Zaher could not swallow even a morsel of food. She could not imagine enjoying warm rich food, while her son was eating stale bread in a cold prison cell. Um Wa’el was unable to console her sister, and Um Ashraf, who assumed Tata’s role of the calm problem solver, was the one who repeatedly commanded Um Zaher to control herself in front of Tata.

“Our *Khalto* has had to deal with too much in the past few months,” she hissed at Um Zaher. “We can’t add to her worries.”

Tata was trying to read her children’s faces. She could tell that Zaher was in serious trouble. “Zaher is in the hospital, isn’t he?” she asked Ashraf, who was sitting beside her.

Ashraf choked on a hot mouthful of garlicky chicken.

“This is all from the evil eye,” Tata said loudly. “I told you to slaughter a sheep when you bought Zaher this BMW. I told you to divide the meat among the poor—especially the Egyptian worker who washes the car every morning.”

Tata noticed that once again Abu Zaher glanced at his brother. Abu Ashraf said, “*Yamma*, Zaher is not in the hospital. He’s in prison. We hope that Zaher will be let out first thing Sunday morning. We can’t do anything sooner than that.”

“Prison?” Tata shouted, her hand coming to her heart, “Our catastrophe!” None of the family members responded.

“I have money, if you need it,” Tata said after a long pause.

Abu Ashraf nodded at her. Um Ashraf was amazed at how shrewd her mother-in-law was. She recalled how her mother had spoken of her when she was younger.

“The woman of Ashraf? God be with the women who will marry her sons,” her mother had said to her after a friendly Eid visit that Tata and her husband had paid to his cousins who still lived in Hebron at the time. Tata had liked her immediately; she had reached out her to touch Um Ashraf’s soft hair.

“Your hair is like silk,” she had said. “Have you seen my eldest son?” Tata had asked Um Ashraf’s mother, “He is five years older than your daughter. He’s blond, and as beautiful as the moon. He is studying in Egypt, but when he comes back, can I bring him for coffee?”

Um Ashraf had loved the idea of moving to Amman and marrying a man who was blond and who was as beautiful as the moon. But her mother had been adamant that her only daughter should never be married off to a son of “that woman” who had a reputation of being one of the toughest *Khaliliyeh* women.

When the time had come, however, and Tata had come back with her eldest son, Um Ashraf’s meek mother had found herself powerless in the presence of Tata’s strong and forceful character. She had seen that her daughter was as inclined as her father was. Her father was honoured that his cousin had come personally with his wife and son all the way from Amman to ask permission to have coffee with his beautiful daughter. His daughter was in awe of the woman sitting before her, she was nothing like the other women in Hebron. Um Ashraf wondered where she got her strength.

The only person left alive who knew where Tata’s strength came from was her sister. Tata’s sister was twelve years older than Tata; in between these two sisters their mother had had seven boys. Tata’s sister was brought up traditionally, she had to wake up every morning before the dawn prayer to help her mother and her aunts to bake the bread for the men and the boys. She spent her days with her mother, cleaning, ironing, sewing, and rarely left the large family house that was shared with their grandparents, uncles and cousins.

When a beautiful girl was born after seven boys, her delighted father called her Waad. His wife had been complaining to him that soon their daughter would have to be married off, and she would be left alone to take care of the growing number of males. The arrival of a daughter meant that by the time their eldest got married, their youngest would be able to help and he did not have to hear any more of his wife’s complaining.

“A girl? The good luck ended after seven boys!” his neighbour patted his back, “*Insha’Allah* the next will be a boy!”

“She’s worth one hundred boys!” was her father’s famous reply.

Waad, however, was nothing like her sister. Having seven older brothers to spoil and bully her, she often refused to help her mother, and would run into the city with her brothers, and help them push vegetable carts. The eldest of her brothers was especially fond of her, and insisted on teaching her how to read. The only book that had been available to her was the Quran. She read it over and over again, enjoying its rich language and intriguing stories.

Being the only female in the family who could read, gave little Waad special privileges. Her uncles' wives brought her pistachio cookies and asked her to read letters her uncles had received, giving the wives insight regarding how much money their husbands really had, and what they were doing during their weekend visits to Bethlehem.

Waad's eldest sister, having married and gone to her father-in-law's house, doted on her sister, worrying about the day when she would have to get married and obey a husband, a mother-in-law and a father-in-law. Waad was not concerned, and continued to play with her brothers and male cousins until they were old enough to go with their father to fight with the Turks against the invading English and French in different parts of Greater Syria.

With the men away from the household, Waad's reading and writing skills served her well. She continued to send letters to uncles in other Arab countries, and helped keep the vegetable selling business afloat.

While Waad was still young enough, she was able to go out and sell vegetables with her male cousins without causing scandal. Her mother and aunts could not complain about Waad's controversial behaviour, since they relied on the money and supplies she and her cousins brought home. Her cousins needed her with them because of her extraordinary reading and counting skills, as well as her ability to deflect haggling. She sold at a profit that her cousins could not match.

One day after long hours of selling with her young cousins, Waad came home and found her mother and aunts sobbing over a body covered in bloody sheets. Her eldest brother had been killed in combat, and his body had not been cleaned because a martyr had to be buried bloody so the angels would wash him before he went to heaven. Waad instinctively held back her tears, having heard her own Tata say that every tear drop that falls over a dead body burns the dead person's soul. Witnessing her mother's breakdown,

Waad stayed strong, and looked after her mother and aunts. The next day Waad dressed as a boy and snuck behind the other men in Hebron, as they carried her brother to the cemetery. She still refused to cry, worrying that her tears would burn her brother's soul.

Over the years, many young men were brought to the house covered in bloody sheets. Three more of Waad's brothers were killed, and some of her cousins and uncles as well. Waad was now too old to disguise herself as a boy and attend the burials. She stayed home, still refusing to cry so as not to hurt the deceased, and looked after the sobbing women.

Ashraf had seen Waad as a child selling vegetables, bossing and bullying her male cousins around. When his mother began searching for a bride for him, he requested the daughter of the vegetable seller. At first, his mother refused, fearing that a girl like Waad would be difficult to control. After Ashraf's insistence, however, she found herself knocking on their door one day and asking for an audience with Waad's mother. Waad herself had opened the door and had understood why that woman was there.

Not liking the looks of her, "We're not interested," she said, slamming the door.

Waad's mother had been horrified at her daughter's behaviour, and worried that no more suitors would come. Sixteen year old Waad had watched her female cousins get married, and was worrying about her mother, since her brothers' widows were remarrying and leaving her mother alone with nobody to look after her.

Ashraf refused to give up. He sent his sisters, cousins, aunts, and then finally went himself. He knocked on the large metal door. Waad opened the door just a crack and did not reveal her face. They spoke like that, on opposite sides of the door, and Ashraf explained that he had seen her selling vegetables years ago, and had always known that he would one day propose to her.

"Go, there is no *naseeb*," Waad said before slamming the door.

Ashraf's mother sent them three roses the day after, which insulted Waad's mother and caused her to throw a slipper at Waad. "Do you know what those three roses mean? It means you're only good for three more years and then you'll wilt and wither and bring shame us on us all! Why has our Lord forsaken me? All my children were angels, motherhood was easy, and then God sent me this last one who has turned my hair white!"



Ashraf came again, which angered his mother, but pleased Waad. She explained to him, from behind the metal door, why she was unable to marry. Ashraf assured her that his household had so many women to look after it, that she could come visit her mother as often as she liked. She told him that her father was away fighting, and told him to talk to one of her uncles after Friday prayer.

Ashraf and Waad were wed, and Ashraf kept his end of the bargain and allowed Waad to visit her family often. But whenever Ashraf was not in the house, away on business, or out fighting in Jerusalem, the women in the house would try to get Waad into trouble with her father-in-law. One time, Waad's eldest sister-in-law gave her the wrong ingredients and instructions to cook newly gathered cauliflower and freshly slaughtered sheep. Having destroyed the precious meat and cauliflower, Waad had nothing to serve the large family for breakfast that Ramadan evening. Waad's father-in-law had chased her around the house with his cane. When Ashraf had come home from fighting in Jerusalem, he had found his wife locked in their chambers, sitting numbly on the mattress, black and blue from his father's cane. He spat on the corner of the long black and white *hatta* that covered his head and tenderly wiped the dry blood away from her lip, "We're moving out," she had said numbly.

"How?" Ashraf had asked; leaving the family home was not easily done in Hebron.

He had a friend who had recently fallen in love with a Circasian woman in Amman. He had left his family in Hebron and gone there to kidnap her, as was the Circasian tradition when a girl's father refused a marriage proposal. Ashraf's friend had sent him letters from Amman, telling him that it was a better place to open a new business. "These Circasians are farmers and know nothing about business, and our families aren't there, so there is no constant surveillance!" he had written to Ashraf, "It's a *Khalili's* heaven!" Waad, having read these letters, now brought up the Amman option to her husband.

Waad convinced Ashraf to borrow a cart from one of her cousins, and fill it up with cheap Hebron-made glass merchandise to sell in Amman. Waad insisted on taking her mother with her, as the death of so many of her boys had left her broken. Waad also needed her mother to look after her two boys, and hoped they would revive her mother's spirit and give her a sense of purpose. Her father had taken another wife, a widow who lost her husband in the fighting. She was the same age as Waad's sister.

Ashraf and Waad's business in Amman flourished. Life was not as grim in Amman, the weather was slightly warmer than Hebron, and the traditions were not as rigid. Waad was able to walk in the streets, with only a loose silk veil flapping over her face, not worrying about scandal and gossip. Soon, however, many of Ashraf's brothers were coming to Amman, to escape the overwhelming trouble that was taking place in Palestine. Soon, there was a neighbourhood in Amman full of the people of Hebron. The freedom and gossip-free life that Waad had briefly enjoyed had been replaced by the oppressiveness of Hebron housewife talk.

In the fifties, the king of Jordan, Abdallah the First, was assassinated in Jerusalem. After the three day mourning period, Waad noticed that women were walking in the streets without veils on their faces. She noticed that Christian women had taken off the large crosses off their chests, which was the way they justified not covering their faces. Soon, Waad was not able to distinguish between Muslim and Christian women, they all dressed the same. Waad herself began walking out into the *souqs* of Amman without a silk veil concealing her vision. Waad loved breathing fresh air and enjoyed the fluorescent colours of the city.

Ashraf continued going back and forth between Hebron and Amman; the one borrowed cart had now turned into several trucks. The family continued going to Hebron every Friday to have lunch with the family until one grim day in 1967, when Ashraf's truck was not full of merchandise, but was full of relatives who had lost their homes and belongings. That was when Waad's sister and her sons and daughters had finally moved to Amman, leaving Waad's two remaining brothers in Hebron.

The Al Manseyeh home in Hebron had been demolished and replaced with a large settlement of North American Jews, Waad was told by her brother. Ashraf held on to the key to the front door until the day he died.

Now Tata sat at the head of the table, with Ashraf on her right, in the seat his grandfather occupied in his lifetime. All heads were turned towards Tata as she asked for details of Zaher's predicament.

When Abu Ashraf explained that Talal was the person helping Zaher, Tata nodded.

“Next Friday their family will have lunch with us. I will stuff a sheep for them. I will stuff intestines and grape leaves as a side dish. Daughters of my sister, you will come Thursday morning to help me.”

Um Zaher nodded, with tears streaming down her face. Um Wa’el resented that Um Ashraf had not been asked to come and help. She felt that Um Ashraf was always given preferential treatment perhaps because she was a distant relative, or because she was the eldest daughter-in-law.

“Ashraf,” Tata continued, “tomorrow morning, buy three sheep, and have them slaughtered and distribute their meat at a refugee camp.” Um Wa’el also resented that her aunt had not asked Wa’el to slaughter the sheep. After all, he was older than Ashraf, and was closer to Zaher than Ashraf, since Um Zaher and Um Wa’el were sisters married to brothers, and Um Ashraf was merely a second cousin.

Tata glanced at Nadia, who was still eating quietly. Again, Tata nodded.

\* \* \*

Nadia

After lunch, Um Zaher was apprehensive because no word had come from Talal. Abu Zaher was pale, but remained silent. They had driven over to Tata’s because of the cold weather, although their home was less than a minute’s drive away. The hail that pounded on the windshield concealed Talal’s car, which was parked at their house.

Talal and his father had waited for them in Talal’s small freezing car. His father owned a large new 4x4 but Talal always insisted on driving his own little car. He and his father hurried to the front door just as Abu Zaher was unlocking the door, taking the family by surprise.

Abu Talal allowed Abu Zaher to usher him into the salon. He nodded at his son, indicating that he should speak. “Good news,” Talal said, once Um Zaher left the room, “they agreed to meet for the *attweh* tomorrow, and they will lift the call for revenge. Zaher will be out of prison, *insha’Allah* Sunday morning.”

“My brother Abu Zaher,” Abu Talal said, “you will need to gather the elders of Hebron. I will bring the elders of my tribe.”

Abu Zaher thanked them, his voice failing him.

“No thanks for duty,” replied Abu Talal, “we were almost one family once,” he let out a sigh, “the sum they are asking for is a hefty one. I hope you will be able to get it together before tomorrow.”

Abu Zaher gulped at the sum, and Um Zaher, who was listening from the kitchen, let out a yelp. “It’s okay Mama,” Nadia urged, “your son’s life is worth all the money in the world!” She hurriedly made coffee and served the men, knowing that her father would want them to leave as soon as possible so he could contact his brothers, cousins and uncles.

When Talal took the coffee from her, he met her gaze. The look in his eyes told her that he forgave her and her family for their rejection of him. She wondered if he knew that the reason her father had originally rejected him was because of his Jordanian origin. She hoped that he thought it was for another reason, perhaps she could tell him that it was his old car, or the lack of recommendations from his neighbours.

After the men left, Abu Zaher called his brother. Nadia could hear him say, “Where are we going to get the money from?”

Nadia listened as the brothers, sisters, and their husbands discussed how much money they could contribute. Abu Fadi refused to contribute anything, not forgetting that Zaher had snubbed his daughter, whom he had let back into his house after weeks of banishment. Abu Omar also felt that it was going too far, helping out his wife’s nephew that way. Abu Farid, however, loved the Al Manseyeh family and thought of them as his own; so he donated the few thousands of dinars that he knew would not be tied up in business deals. His wife donated her dowry, which she had been saving for an emergency. Abu Wa’el and Abu Ashraf both donated more than they could afford. Ashraf, still in his final year of university, was unable to give any money, but he knew that his sisters had money that his uncles would never agree to use, so after phoning and asking them if he could volunteer it as his own, he did. His father was surprised at the large sum his son offered, but was in no position to decline. Wa’el, who had recently graduated, had very little money, which he hoped to use to get married. Shocked at the amount his father offered, he knew that he

would be unable to depend on his father for a big wedding, and he hoped his mother had some cash hidden away somewhere.

Hayfa contacted Sana and told her that she and Mona had contributed to the *attwa*. She was surprised, since none of them really liked Zaher, but decided that she did not really need to buy a new car, so she called her brother and told him to tell her father that she was willing to give a few thousand dinars. Abu Wa'el was surprised at his daughter's wealth, but refused to accept it. Abu Zaher had a look of desperation in his eyes when he said, "I don't want to have to ask my cousins. Your daughter will be the first to get her money back."

"What strange times these are," Abu Wa'el said, shaking his head, "the daughter has more wealth than the son!"

They were a few more thousand short after each and every family member gave what they could. That was when Abu Ashraf called Tata, "*Yamma*, I hate to ask you, we should be the one giving you money, not the other way around."

By late Friday night, they had each been able to calculate how much they could afford.

"We're lucky that the banks have started opening on Saturdays," Abu Ashraf mused. "Tomorrow morning, each of us should go to his bank, don't forget to take your passports and I.D cards. We should all meet here at ten o'clock."

\* \* \*

Aseel

Aseel was crestfallen and Bassam tried to find innovative ways to cheer her up. The one thing that worked was when he told her that they did not have to go to his mother's house that evening and that they could go to the café that she always wanted to go to.

Aseel's face had lit up at his suggestion, and in spite of the freezing weather, they wrapped themselves up in woollen hats, scarves, gloves and coats, and braved the rain and hail and walked to the café. After ordering their coffees, they found an intimate corner and sat with their heads together. They continued to discuss Zaher's problem, "This is a tribal society," Bassam said, "and those of us without a tribe—we must adapt."

“Thank God for family,” said Aseel and slid her left hand with her sparkling gold wedding ring into Bassam’s right one. She sipped her decaf coffee happily.

\* \* \*

### Sana

Sana was watching an Egyptian film with her father. She saw the worry and frustration in her father’s face. Wa’el had been difficult, he had blamed his father for giving away so much money to Zaher. Sana had overheard her mother and brother,

“I am twenty-three years old!” he had shouted, “in five or six years I will need to get married! My wife will need a dowry, a *jhaz*, a *shabkeh*! How much do you think people pay for a *shabkeh* these days? Do you think any respectable family pays less than seven thousand today? In five years, the price of gold and diamonds is likely to double. Today, the silliest wedding costs ten thousand dinars, how do you expect me to get married? Do you want me to go beg to be able to afford it? How could he give all his money to my cousin, not caring that he will blacken my face in front of my in-laws?”

Um Wa’el’s heart broke for her son, but at the same time, she thought of her nephew Zaher and how much she had loved him as a baby. Her sister deserved help, but not at the expense of her only son. Um Wa’el had begun sobbing and had promised him that she would sell all her gold and all her land to be able to raise his head in front of all the Hebron families in Amman. “May God give me strength so my son is not deprived from what is rightfully his!” she had prayed.

Sana stood at the doorway and said, “If I had been born a boy, I would never have asked Baba to pay for my wedding. I would have paid for it myself.”

Sana angrily walked into the kitchen, wanting to make her father a cup of tea. She had hoped he had not overheard what her brother had just said. She had been surprised to find her father sitting in the dark kitchen. She had realised that he had heard everything.

To Sana’s delight, her father had patted her hand and said, “You stood for your cousin in a way that none of us will ever forget. Your mother recently sold land, and put the money in the bank. She neither offered to help me nor her sister with it. Your brother is

behaving as if I am already dead and all my belongings are rightfully his. You Sana, you are my pride. You know the true meaning of family.”

Her father’s words had warmed her heart. She lovingly made tea, and was startled by her brother rushing past her and storming out without asking their father’s permission. Abu Wa’el had left the kitchen and gone upstairs and had switched on the TV and found a film. Um Wa’el, angry at her husband’s disregard of their son’s future, went to pray and ask God for help, mercy and money so her son could find a good wife.

Now Sana was happily sitting with her father, the film was about another girl called Nadia, who was also fighting with her family for the man she loves. As Sana watched, she thought, not for the first time, that no man was worth fighting with her family over.

## Chapter 16

Friday the 25<sup>th</sup> of March

Hayfa

“*Yalla*, it’s nearly two o’clock,” Abu Ashraf said with a sigh, switching off the television.

“May God preserve us and shield us,” Um Ashraf said, putting on her veil in front of the hallway mirror.

Hayfa and Ashraf had received two separate invitations on Facebook, for two separate events that wintry week. One was called a “loyalty march” which was to start from the King Hussein gardens, and the other event was called “a peaceful protest” which was on the Dakhileyh roundabout underneath a bridge. The person who sent the loyalty march invitation had been Hayfa’s maternal cousin, also from the Al Manseyeh family. The other invitation had been sent by a good friend of Hayfa’s, and while she and her brother had checked the attending lists on both events, they realised that people they knew and loved were going to one or the other.

“How stupid,” Hayfa had said, “organizing two different protests on the same day! I swear the protestors don’t know what they want!”

A group of her university girlfriends were going to the Dakhileyh event, and they seemed optimistic. “Nobody can complain about the lack of democracy in this country anymore.” one tweeted. “If there’s anything you don’t like about your country, come to the demonstration,” tweeted another. “YES WE CAN” tweeted a girl, quoting President Obama.

Hayfa had asked Lutfi if he was going, “I’m not sure Heefo, I’m not sure what this protest is about.” Hayfa, not sure what the differences between the two protests were, would have gone to the loyalty march because it was closer to her house, just to spend a day out with Lutfi. She was disappointed that he did not seem interested, “There’s no clear-cut demand. I can’t join a group without knowing what they’re protesting about, you



know? I'll sit this one out. And that loyalty march sounds weird. The situation is shaky. I think I'll just meet you at Rainbow Street later for an *argeela* if that's alright with you?"

Hayfa had not told him that she desperately wanted to spend the day with him. She had a constant urgent feeling whenever Lutfi was not with her that she wanted to be with him all the time. He was so much fun, but most of all, he was polite and on her wavelength. Nothing he said ever bothered her. "He's so nice," she had said to her sister, "maybe a bit *too* nice. Maybe he's fake."

Mona had given her a strange look, "He's not too nice, he's *normal*. Kamal was an ass."

As they reached Tata's house, the oppressive gloominess was there that day, in spite of the partly sunny weather outside.

"See?" Tata greeted Ashraf, "I told you these demonstrations don't bring anything but trouble. May God enlighten them and stop them from destroying the country."

"How is this beautiful girl, this?" Tata said, smiling at Hayfa. Abu Ashraf had told Tata that a suitor would be coming to meet them soon.

"I told you to get rid of this thing on your nose," Tata said to Mona.

Hayfa had asked Mona to tell her parents about the new relationship with Lutfi. Mona had refused.

"Heefo, I love you," she had said, "but you should learn to talk to Baba; he's actually quite reasonable sometimes."

Hayfa had finally summoned the courage and sat her parents down. She had told them that she and Lutfi had met several times and that she would like him to meet them, on his own, without his mother. Abu Ashraf had been shocked, and had yelled at her for sneaking behind their backs.

"Baba, you're the one who *set up* our first meeting!" she had protested, "How could you get angry that we continued to meet?"

"That was in *January*!" he had yelled back, "how could you go out gallivanting with a man for two months like that without my permission? And him! What kind of man is he? He is obviously without honour! Any decent man would want to meet your father first and ask his permission! I'm calling his father and telling him to keep his son away from my daughter."

“*Habibi*,” Um Ashraf had intervened, “this isn’t the seventies anymore, this is how young people get to know each other.”

“Yes Baba, please,” Hayfa had said, her voice faltered, but she pushed herself to continue, “back in your time, you had long engagement periods to get to know one another; but now, engagements mean spending lots of money on gold and diamonds, parties, events, how could we get to know each other in such circumstances? Now, we’ve met several times, and we’re sure that we like and respect each other, so we want to make it official. However, we do not want to *noktob ktab*, we don’t want to be legally bound together, we want this relationship to stay casual until we know each other even more.”

“What?!” Abu Ashraf had bellowed. “What is this empty talk! And God, my daughter wants to bring me her *boyfriend*.” Abu Ashraf spat out the word “boyfriend” in English.

“What have we said about your yelling?” Um Ashraf had asked, “Didn’t we say that you can no longer terrorize us with your voice?”

Hayfa had taken a deep breath, “Look Baba, I know there is no better father than you. But I still haven’t forgiven you or Mama for the way you behaved about Kamal.” Hayfa had looked her father square in the eyes, she felt her knees shaking, but her voice was becoming more confident. “You will *not* do the same thing to me again. Especially that this time *you* chose this man, you arranged the meeting, in spite of me not wanting to go, I did, for you.”

Abu Ashraf had frowned, “Who’s Kamal?” Hayfa had laughed that her father did not remember the incident which had turned her whole life upside down. Eventually Abu Ashraf had calmed down, and had slowly begun to become excited about his daughter’s suitor. Um Ashraf, too, had already begun dreaming about the engagement party, and which seamstress to call for the dress, and which shops to visit for the fabric. She could not wait to call her friend and have a giggle about how their children had hidden this relationship from them.

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## Aseel

Aseel and Bassam had also discussed the unusual manner in which these two separate events had been organised. Nothing was said about them on any of the Jordanian channels or newspapers, and not even Al Jazeera was giving much coverage, as more important happenings were occurring in Syria and Libya.

Bassam and Aseel stayed at home that day. They were waiting for the baby to make an appearance as it was already overdue, but Dara did not seem worried. Aseel felt like she was ready to explode, and all fear and worry about the pain she would feel in the delivery room was overshadowed by the need of wanting her body to get back to normal. She was frustrated at being pregnant and simply wanted to meet her baby and become a mother.

The extra anxiety over NATO enforcing a no fly zone over Libya was also affecting Aseel's pregnancy. "The Arab Spring has turned ugly," she complained to Bassam. "I only wish Gaza had the oil Libya has, then maybe NATO would help her people too."

Bassam accused Aseel of being naïve, "Libya is huge and rich, and her people are few. NATO is not doing this for Libya's people; it's doing it because she is their biggest oil provider. And whatever weapons they use, it's Libyan money that will pay for it. And after all this is over, Libya, like Iraq, will be completely destroyed; who do you think will rebuild it? This is not benefiting anyone except the West."

Tweets and Facebook updates began pouring in from the streets of Amman. Bassam and Aseel soon forgot about Syria and Libya and became more and more concerned about what was happening in Amman. The loyalty march was making its way to the Dakhileyeh roundabout and the *baltajeyeh* seemed to want to clash with the demonstrators. *Baltajeyeh* had become a popular word in Jordanian vocabulary after the Egyptian revolution; the word was originally used for the pro-Mubarak thugs. "Why are they describing themselves as *baltajeyeh*?" Aseel asked, reading the tweets. "If you don't like Jordan, leave it." "Go back to the King Hussein Bridge" and other anti-Palestinian slogans began appearing. The images that appeared on YouTube shocked Aseel to tears. Neither Aseel nor Bassam could understand what was going on in their country.

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## Sana

“I tell you,” Sana was saying to Nadia and Hayfa, “I’m fed up with the men at work!”

The insurance company insisted that all female staff wore high heels to work, and Sana was fed up with this rule. Her lower back was aching because of the running around she had to do the previous day. This Friday, she was wearing comfortable flats and jeans, “I *miss* my jeans,” she had moaned to Reema that morning.

The day before had been a particularly busy day at the office. After running up and down the stairs several times in her uncomfortable shoes, she finally was able to sit down in her office to do some administrative work. Her door had suddenly swung open, startling her, a colleague who was ten years her senior came into her office.

“They’re making us leave early, there’s a protest at the Dakhileyh roundabout.”

Sana’s heart was still pounding from the way he had come into her office, “You could have knocked before coming in, or you could have called my extension line. You didn’t have to rush in this way.”

“I apologise then!” he had mocked, and turned around and slammed the door after him.

Sana was getting increasingly irritated by the lack of respect she was shown around the office. Although she always maintained a professional, serious air, the men around her simply did not respect her. She wondered if it was because she was young, or unveiled, or simply female. She came to the conclusion that it must be because she did not have a postgraduate degree as many of them did. A postgraduate degree would bump up her salary considerably, but what she wanted more than anything, was to be respected.

“The way I dress,” she insisted to Nadia, “can’t bring any criticism to me. I’m careful to abide by the dress code, high heels, and conservative suits and modest shirts. I even wear undershirts in the hot summer! Not even a glimpse of my bra can ever be visible through my shirt. My suit jackets are always long enough to cover my behind, or if the jacket is short, I wear it with a long skirt. My buttons are buttoned to the very top, my blouses always loose fitting as to not draw attention to my chest.” Sana put so much

thought into her clothes, making sure that nobody could accuse her of not respecting herself, and then use it as an excuse not to respect her. She used the bare minimum of makeup, also to avoid the male gaze. She always took a folder with her to any meeting with a client, in case his eye wandered to her breasts. She skilfully held the folder in order to further conceal her carefully concealed breasts, and pretended to take notes. And yet, she was not respected.

“Wow,” said Hayfa, “I don’t put any thought into what I wear at all. I can wear jeans to work if I want, unless there’s a meeting with fancy clients, then I have to wear a suit. But no high heels *ever*.”

“Me too,” said Nadia, “I’m just a preschool teacher, I’m supposed to wear fun and colourful clothes. But nothing too expensive, you don’t want to know the things that happen to my clothes in that classroom.”

Sana had tried to observe other women in the office. Shatha was veiled, but was not married and held no postgraduate degrees. She was also mistreated, given more work to do, and men took liberties with her, coming into her office with their mugs of coffee, talking to her about their marriages. At least Sana had been able to put a stop to *that*. Sana had tried talking to her father about it.

“I just don’t feel respected. I feel like I have to constantly prove myself.”

“Nonsense,” he had replied, “as long as you respect yourself, you force them to respect you.”

Sana had asked Shatha, “it’s because we’re not married,” she had said. But Sana was still unconvinced. She decided to ask Um Ashraf, who had worked most of her life until she recently retired. Sana had considered asking Um Fadi, but thought that since her father was not speaking to her, it would be better to avoid trouble.

Abu Ashraf had been delighted to have Sana visit, he had made her tea and brought it outside to where Um Ashraf was sitting playing the *oud*. Mona and Hayfa also joined them outside. Sana had explained her problem.

“It’s because they don’t like successful women,” Um Ashraf had said, putting her *oud* aside. “They’ll always wait for you to show a sign of weakness so they can say that women belong in the home.”

“Why? Don’t women belong in the home?” Abu Ashraf had joked.

“It’s true,” Mona had said, “I’m lucky that I work in a very chilled out environment, we’re all artists and being male or female doesn’t matter, most of the people where I work are gay anyway. But my girlfriends who work in male-dominated companies, they do complain to me about how arrogantly the men treat them.” Mona said the word “gay” in English.

“Gay?” Um Ashraf had repeated the word in English, “Gays in Jordan? They must be foreigners.”

Hayfa and Mona had rolled their eyes. “The point is,” Hayfa said, “that our society is *still* not ready for successful women, although there are *so* many of us. My office has more women than men—the men go to the Gulf and the women stay here.”

“I personally prefer hiring women,” Abu Ashraf had boasted.

“I thought you only hired men from Hebron,” Hayfa had mused.

“The men, yes,” Abu Ashraf had explained, “men from Hebron are the most honest and reliable. But my receptionist is always a woman. Not necessarily from Hebron, I prefer Christians actually because they dress nicer. Women are better employees. They don’t ask for too much money, they take whatever you offer them without asking for pay raises. They’re loyal; men are constantly trying to find a better job, but women they often already have husbands who bring in money. And they’re better with my clients, clients prefer dealing with a pretty woman than a gruff man. But I prefer hiring married women, an unmarried woman might suddenly find a husband and leave.”

“I have a different point of view,” Um Ashraf had said, “I always preferred to hire men. Yes, women are more dedicated, I did notice that, but women bring a lot of baggage with them. If she has a headache, she will take the day off. I never took a day off when I had a headache! I went to work every day even when pregnant! And if her child is sick, she takes the day off, if her mother gets sick, she takes the day off. It makes the work suffer.”

“Both of you are horrible,” Mona had said, shaking her head, stopping herself from swearing in front of her parents. “See Sana? This is why you’re having trouble at work. You’re not seen as an individual, you are put in a box. Your box is labelled, ‘single’ and ‘female’.”

“Why are we horrible?” Abu Ashraf had frowned, “I said I like to employ women! I treat them very well!”

“Baba, your reasons for employing women are condescending!” Mona had replied.

“What is this empty talk!” he had shouted.

Sana now sat fuming telling her cousins about her colleagues and how she was not sure how to deal with them.

“Yesterday, I looked up from my desk and found Mahmoud the janitor peeking through the window of my office door. He opened her door, ‘still unveiled?’ he asked with a smile, you know what kind of smile? The sleazy smile men have sometimes.”

Mona had come with her plate of dessert and was now sitting with them on the stairs, “The brother of a fucked woman!”

“I looked at him and said: ‘I don’t appreciate your remarks.’ He looked at me, his smile becoming even sleazier,” Sana shook her head.

“*Lah, lah, lah,*” he had replied, “I didn’t mean to offend you at all, I only wanted your best interest, I am a man who fears our Lord.”

“I said, I don’t appreciate your remarks. Leave now, if you please,” Sana had replied, keeping her tone firm.

“*Ya Sitti* Sana, you’re a good *sit*, I plead with you, don’t be upset with me, I—.”

“I said,” Sana had screamed, “I don’t appreciate your remarks!”

Mahmoud had stood in her office in shock. Other male colleagues heard her voice echo in the halls, and came rushing in. “What’s going on?” one of them had asked.

“Nothing,” Sana had answered, “something between me and Mahmoud.”

“They’re evacuating us, Sana,” one of the colleagues had said, “we have to leave now.”

“Yes, I will leave soon, I just want to send this one email because my client can’t wait till Saturday for this.”

The men had turned around to leave, she heard the one she had snapped at earlier tell the others, “I don’t know about these women, they’re so moody. She did the same to me today because I went into her office without knocking.”

She had heard Mahmoud snigger, “She must have the ‘habit’, Our Lord told us to lengthen our patience with them when they are like this. What can we do? It is our burden

to be their guardians.” Sana’s hands had involuntarily slammed down on her desk and she pushed herself up, feeling a sharp pain in her back. She knew of two ‘habits’ that the boys at her school referred to; one was the ‘secret habit’, which the girls explained to her as for boys only, and the other ‘monthly habit’ was menstruation.

She had marched out of her office after the men. “How dare you say that about me?” she had said to them, standing tall in her high heels.

“No, no, Mahmoud was joking,” one of them had said.

“Joking?” Sana had retorted, “Well Mahmoud, do you know that he,” she pointed at one of them, “doesn’t pay *zakat*? Have you gone to his office badgering him about it? And he,” she pointed at another, “he drinks. Will you go talk to him the way you talked to me?”

The other men’s expressions changed from mocking to protective, “How has he been talking to you?” asked one, expanding his chest.

“Mahmoud, I will break your face,” said another, his voice becoming gruffer.

Mahmoud cowered, his previous smug expression completely evaporating. “By the life of Our Lord, I swear to you!” he began.

Sana had begun laughing, and had gone back to her office.

“Fuckers without honour!” said Mona, after Sana had finished telling her story, “I hope they beat Mahmoud and made him see the rooster a rabbit.”

Tata was embroidering in her chair, Al Jazeera was on, but nothing was being said about the demonstrations in Amman.

“Somebody, check il email,” Tata said suddenly, who always referred to the internet as ‘il email’ “I want to know what’s happening in Amman. Come here, *ya habibi*,” Tata said to Zaher softly, “let me read Quran on you.”

Zaher brought a chair beside Tata’s arm chair and sat beside her, she put her hand on her shaved head and began to recite verses from the Quran, “Your lovely hair,” she said in between verses, “may God break the hands of those who shaved your beautiful hair away.” After another ten minutes of reciting Quran, Tata stopped.

“Zaher, I need to talk to you,” she stood him up and took him to her room.

The previous Friday, Tata had served stuffed mutton, grape leaves, and stuffed intestines for Talal and his mother and father. Tata had liked them, and had particularly liked Talal; his handsome dark face looked very familiar. Tata was itching to have a



moment alone with Nadia, so she had asked Um Zaher to prepare a cake for her and send it later that evening with Nadia.

“How nice of you to bring me a cake!” Tata had smiled. “May God be pleased with you.”

After the pleasantries, Tata had gotten straight to the point, “You love Talal, don’t you?”

Nadia’s face turned bright red. She nodded and began crying.

Tata hugged her, “If he comes to ask for your hand in marriage again, I’m sure your father will say yes now. Don’t cry my beauty.”

Nadia shook her head, “Talal’s pride...” she sobbed, “he won’t come again.”

Tata’s heart had wrung with every one of Nadia’s sobs. She had stroked her curly black hair but could not think of anything to say to comfort her heartbroken granddaughter.

Now in Tata’s room, she sat Zaher down on her bed, “You will call Talal today and arrange a meeting with him. First; you need to thank him for his help—he’s the reason you’re alive ya Tata,” Tata said softly. “And then ya Zaher, you will apologise for standing in his way to marry your sister, and you will ask him to come again and ask for her hand in marriage again.”

“What?” Zaher snapped, “I would never bow my head so low! If he wants her he should come ask for her.”

“Bow your head so low?” Tata snapped back, “You were in prison, you killed a man, you yourself were going to be killed because of it, your head should already be bowed low. If I were in your place, I would be humble now, ashamed to lift my eyes from the ground! Maybe we should have let them kill you, do you know how much money you’ve cost this family? Your head is already bowed and blackened. You can make amends by letting your sister marry the man she loves and who loves her.”

Zaher’s eyes opened wide. He had seen his grandmother’s anger directed at others, but never at him. He was her eldest grandson, and always held a special place in her heart. He nodded and looked down to the floor.

Tata pulled him up and they went back into the living room. The heavy cloud of gloom was back, “What is it?” Tata asked, genuinely afraid.

Abu Ashraf looked at her sadly, “A man has been killed at the Dakhileyeh roundabout.”

\* \* \*

Friday Evening

Aseel

Aseel was now crying uncontrollably, watching a divide among her friends on Facebook. There was a poll, “Are you with or against *shabab 24.3*?” The poll showed all the friends who had voted. Friends and family voted for or against. At first she had thought that her Jordanian and Circasian friends were voting against, and her Palestinian friends were voting with, but upon closer look, she found a mixture of Palestinians, Jordanians, Chechnyans, Armenians, and Circasians voting on both sides. She herself did not vote out of fear that the secret service, the *Mukhabarat* would be monitoring the poll.

She sobbed at the virtual line of divide on Bassam’s computer screen. Seeing half her friends support a cause and the others oppose it, the status updates and the tweets were also scaring her. Many were calling for the expulsion of Palestinians from Jordan. This scared Aseel most of all, where would they go if Jordan was no longer their home? Some of the 24<sup>th</sup> March supporters were saying that the first martyr of the revolution had died. *Revolution?* Aseel thought, *in Jordan?* The thought made her cry even more.

\* \* \*

Nadia

Zaher had asked her for Talal’s phone number right after the lunch at Tata’s. Nadia had been terrified, but had not argued. She had gone to Sana’s house, to discuss the possibilities of what Zaher wanted with Talal’s number.

While at Sana’s house, they had forgotten about Zaher and Talal when news of the clashes came on Al Jazeera news, which they were watching on Sana’s laptop in her

bedroom. One of the pictures they kept showing was a man from the 24<sup>th</sup> March supporters with blood dripping off his face.

“I know him!” Nadia said, “That’s one of Talal’s cousins!” Without thinking, she called Talal. “Your cousin is on the news! Is he okay?”

“Nadia, it’s crazy out there, I hope you’re at home and safe?” he replied.

“I’m at my uncle’s house. Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m okay, I’m going to the hospital to see my cousin, it’s funny, I have cousins on both sides.”

“Me too,” said Nadia, “but they’re saying it’s going to start a Jordanian-Palestinian civil war. I’m very scared.”

“That’s impossible,” Talal assured her, “Palestinians are forty per cent of this population—.”

“Seventy per cent,” Nadia answered.

“Forty.”

“Forty per cent are just the ones in the camps. But including the passport holders, we’re seventy per cent.”

“Nadia, maximum fifty per cent. But anyway, you are integrated into this country in a way that is impossible to just dissolve because of something like this. Palestinians are now Jordanians. We are all Jordanians. Nothing is going to happen.”

“Sana says it could end up like Lebanon.”

“The problems in Lebanon in the eighties were religious. Here, the majority of Jordanians know that according to the constitution, Palestine and Jordan are one country anyway, so there is no such thing as Jordanians and Palestinians, we’re all one. Don’t worry Nadia, I promise you, yes, there are some crazy people out there who hate Palestinians, but they’re a minority. Don’t be scared. Anyway, I was coming to your house with my father tonight, but this news about my cousins changed everything. Zaher called me and told me to come to your house.”

“What?” Nadia looked at Sana, “Zaher told you to come to our house? Why?” Sana began jumping and making gestures in front of Nadia.

“To further merge Palestinians and Jordanians together, why else?” he laughed. “Our children will be *mbandageen*, a mixture of both. I tell you from now, our wedding will be Jordanian style.”

Nadia laughed, but saw an image on Sana’s computer screen that scared her. “What if Palestinians are expelled from Jordan?”

“Nadia!” Talal said with frustration, “Trust me, these idiots are just idiots! How can they expel half of the population? The economy would collapse, they’re not that stupid. Our Queen is of Palestinian origin! And I’m not the only Jordanian with Palestinian in-laws, trust me, we won’t let this happen. Now I have to go. I’ll see you tomorrow evening at your house *nshalla*.”

Nadia and Sana jumped together happily, while images of clashing Jordanians played on Al Jazeera news.

\* \* \*

#### Hayfa and Mona

Due to the trouble at the Dakhileya roundabout, Mona and Hayfa stayed at home. They sat in front of the television with their parents and brother, worried sick.

“The world is in the palm of a trickster Jinn,” Abu Ashraf said, “I really cannot predict what will happen.”

The images shifted from one Arab country to the next. One image that particularly moved Mona was a sea of Yemeni women dressed in black. Their faces were veiled in black, and they held megaphones and chanted together, their voices really loud.

Um Ashraf took the remote and switched off the television. “Please, my heart is hurting me, let’s not watch this anymore.”

“Something has been on my mind,” said Mona, the images of the Yemeni women still in her mind. “When Hayfa gets married, I want to move out.”

“Move out?” Um Ashraf frowned.

“I need my own place to live, and I don’t see why I can’t have that just because I’m single.”

“What?” bellowed Abu Ashraf, “What is this empty talk?”

“I work in the Third Circle, do you know how much time I spend driving? I also can’t bring my friends over because of Baba’s routine. And I can’t decorate this house the way I want to. You always tell me that I can do what I want with my own house once I’m married. But I’m never going to marry, so why should I never get a house?”

“Are you crazy?” Abu Ashraf yelled, “What will the people say about us! No, you will stay here, as long as you’re not married, you will stay here.”

“No Baba. I found an apartment. I’m moving next month, I paid the deposit and signed the contract.”

“Wait, what are you going to do in this apartment of yours? Have parties?” Um Ashraf asked; her expression reminded Hayfa of the time they discussed Kamal.

“Yes, I might have a party, every now and then,” Mona said, “but mostly, I just want independence. Why should I have to live like a little girl in this house when I’m nearly twenty-six years old. Girls my age already have babies, it’s not fair that I should be treated like a child just because I’m unmarried. I’m moving, you can’t stop me.”

Abu Ashraf’s face was turning blue, “What do you mean we can’t stop you, I can! I forbid it!”

“You can’t forbid it, Baba. What are you going to do?” Mona said, looking at her father innocently. “You taught me to be independent, you taught me that I can do anything.”

“Mona, please,” Hayfa said.

“Baba, calm down,” Ashraf intervened, “Mona isn’t doing this to upset you.”

“You just want to do as you please,” Um Ashraf screamed, “you want to have parties, and God knows what else, maybe even drink too! You just don’t want to be supervised!”

“I’m going to be twenty-six! I shouldn’t have to *be* supervised at my age!”

“And you’re going to live alone? Your neighbours will think you are a prostitute, the police too, for that matter,” Abu Ashraf said, his voice surprisingly low.

“No Baba, it’s in a neighbourhood in the First Circle, full of young people like me, living away from their parents. Some people are sharing apartments, but I want to be completely alone. I will come to every single Friday lunch, I promise. And I will visit here as often as I can, but I don’t see why it’s fair for Hayfa to move out and not me.”

“What is happening to this city?” Abu Ashraf shook his head and reached his hand into Mona’s pocket and took out her mobile phone. He glanced at it and put it into his own pocket. Mona’s eyes were opened wide in shock. He got up from the sofa and walked over to the key hanger and took Hayfa and Mona’s car key. Dangling it in front of Mona he continued, “You are not allowed to use the car. I gave you trust, but now I see you were not ready for it. Starting from tomorrow you are no longer allowed to leave this house—not to go to work nor to see your friends.” Mona’s lips were beginning to tremble. “I can’t stop you?” Abu Ashraf said calmly, “Don’t test me.”

“Baba,” Hayfa said timidly, “she hasn’t moved out yet, she was just suggesting it. Of course she’s not moving out.”

Mona had not anticipated this reaction from her father. Her mobile phone was full of private messages between her and Odeh. The thought of her father going through them was making her heart race.

Um Ashraf was afraid. “*Habibi*, this is a discussion, Mona is just discussing her options with us.”

“Mona, another father would have brought his gun out and shot you,” Abu Ashraf said. “I am an open-minded man.” He said the word “open-minded” in English.

“You don’t have a gun,” Mona said, with rage in her voice. “Fine, I won’t move out now. I will stay home and marry a horrible man I don’t love just to be able to leave this house.”

“What’s so bad about this house?” Abu Ashraf bellowed, “I give you everything, you can do anything you want! Why would you want to leave this house? I treat you well! No father treats his daughters so well!” He threw Mona’s iPhone at the wall and it smashed into pieces.

Mona, at a loss for words, ran out of the living room. Hayfa picked up Mona’s SIM card and walked after her.

\* \* \*

## Aseel

Bassam had forced Aseel to stop watching the news. She was as worn down as if she had been out demonstrating herself. She was completely distraught about the number of deaths in Libya, Syria, and now the clashes and bloodshed in the streets of Amman. She was not sure if the pain she was feeling was contractions, or just pain caused by stress. She asked Bassam to help her to the bathroom.

She noticed drops of blood on her panties. Her hands started shaking and she called Bassam into the bathroom. He came in, worried, and found her crying on the toilet, holding her bloody panties. "I'll call Dara."

Dara said it was perfectly natural for a woman to bleed as she was going into labour. "But her water didn't break, and it seems she's getting contractions," Bassam argued. Dara said Aseel should stay home until the contractions become more frequent, and then they would all meet in the hospital.

"I'll arrange for an ambulance," she said, "because there is a strong police presence in the streets tonight, and you don't want to be stopped."

Aseel was sobbing, "I don't want my baby to be born tonight, today was a horrible day."

Bassam rubbed Aseel's legs, "Shall we try to sleep? Maybe the baby will be born tomorrow, not tonight."

They sat together in silence; every hour, a contraction would make Aseel feel certain that she would die any minute. Bassam had watched videos on YouTube, and was trying to help Aseel breathe in order to control the pain.

At nine o'clock, Aseel asked to be taken to the hospital, and refused to call her mother; she also refused to go in an ambulance, and insisted that Bassam should drive.

"Please don't call your mother either, and tell Dara not to."

"But I'm sure Dara already told her," Bassam said, dragging her suitcase in one hand, and holding her in the other.

As Dara had warned, there were police cars everywhere, keeping order in the streets. Every time a policeman stopped them, Bassam would roll down the window and point at Aseel; his blinkers were on, which indicated an emergency. The policeman would say “*Bil salameh*,” and would wave them away. They were stopped several times before they finally reached the hospital.

In between contractions, Aseel still discussed politics. Bassam begged her to stop, but she even talked to the nurses about what happened today and asked what their opinion was. Aseel felt she needed to hear assurances from as many people as possible that Jordan would be alright, that her baby would be born into a safe country.

“I know us Palestinians need Bashar Al Assad, because he supports us, but the Syrians deserve to get what Egypt got. I don’t know which is better,” Aseel said desperately. “And Qathaffi, I saw him in an interview, he really doesn’t know what’s going on, he really thinks Al Qaida is behind the demonstrations in Libya.”

“Soosoo, please,” Bassam, said, stroking her sweaty forehead, “please, forget it.”

“I’m just worried that the Arab Spring is over,” she said, “or maybe it never even began!”

Dara asked the anaesthesiologist to inject the epidural needle. Aseel sat up, and as the doctor was injecting the needle in her back, Aseel got a contraction.

“Don’t move,” the doctor said calmly.

Aseel remembered the breathing techniques Bassam had tried to explain to her and began using them, trying as hard as she could not to move.

“We’re doing fine, Soosoo, *habibti*,” Dara said.

Aseel resented being called “Soosoo” by anyone other than Bassam, but she followed Dara’s instruction, although she could not really tell if she was pushing or not because of the epidural’s effects.

An hour later, Dara held out a baby boy to Aseel. “Little Abdel Muhaimen is here,” said Dara, softly.

Aseel, reaching out and taking her baby boy from Dara’s hands, “Rabei is here.”

Bassam smiled, not understanding his wife’s reference to the spring season. He assumed the drugs had made her delirious. “Fridays are good days to be born,” he said as he put his mouth to his son’s ear and said the call to prayer.



## Chapter 17

Friday the 1<sup>st</sup> April

“*Yalla*,” Abu Ashraf said, watching his wife choose a veil from her closet.

“*Yalla, yalla*,” she answered, picking a pink one and expertly putting it on.

Mona was in her room. Although Abu Ashraf had allowed Hayfa to drive her to work in the mornings, Mona was still not allowed to go out in the evenings. Rage was building up inside Mona. Each night she had a different fantasy. One night she fantasised about burning the house down, one night she fantasised about calling the morning radio show and shouting out her father’s name followed by a string of insults. She fantasised about packing her things as Odeh waited for her in the car. She would wave goodbye to her father as she and Odeh rode away into the sunset.

In spite of Mona’s anger against her father, she could not hate him. She loved him and she wanted him to love her back. Her hunger strike did not affect him; he seemed unconcerned about her misery. Mona felt that her father did not care about her at all; if he did, he would not punish her this way. Her father was not speaking to her; she had said “good morning” to him several times, but he had not replied. *How immature*, Mona had thought.

Odeh had not supported Mona’s decision to move out. He had come to see her at work, but he had blamed her for her behaviour with her father. “A girl living on her own? What would people say?” had been his response.

“I was doing it to be with you,” Mona had snorted.

“You and I don’t have a future together,” Odeh had said with a sigh. “If I become Muslim—which I wouldn’t want to anyway—my family would kill me, and it’s difficult for us to marry the way we are now. If you convert, you become an infidel and you could be killed. There is no way.”

“I wish the demonstrations would succeed in changing the government. Then maybe someone in the new government could change these laws,” Mona had said, taking a cigarette out of Odeh’s pack.

“This isn’t something a government can change, Mona,” Odeh had explained, “this is a cultural thing... It will never be OK for a Muslim woman to marry a Christian man.” They had sat together in silence for a while, until Odeh had finally said, “I never thought I would fall in love with a Muslim girl.” He had sighed, with tears glistening in his eyes, “I think the responsible thing for us to do is to break up, we’re never going to be able to be together.”

Mona had frowned, “We’re together now.”

“Yes, but we will never be able to live together as husband and wife.”

“We can, abroad.”

“How are we going to live abroad? I barely have enough money to support myself here! And we would need visas, and those are *impossible* to get these days.”

Hayfa had discussed Mona’s situation with Lutfi. Kamal’s stance on Mona and Odeh’s relationship was very rigid. Hayfa knew Lutfi was more liberal, but had assumed that his position on her sister’s relationship with a Christian man would be similar to her own. “Yes, Odeh is a lovely man, but Mona should dump him,” Hayfa had concluded.

“Why should Mona dump him? If he’s as lovely as you say he is, shouldn’t you be more supportive of your sister?” Lutfi had asked in confusion.

Hayfa’s eyes had opened wide, “But he’s Christian.”

“So?” Lutfi had smiled, “I’m Atheist!”

“No,” Hayfa had laughed, “you’re Muslim!”

“I was born a Muslim, but I don’t believe in Islam. I thought you knew.”

“You’re still a Muslim. The only way you would stop is if you converted to something else.”

Lutfi had laughed. “Hayfa, your sister loves somebody. It’s so hard to find love. You and I are lucky to have found each other, and I think your sister is lucky to have found someone too. The fact that he’s Christian shouldn’t matter, not to you anyway. I’m surprised at you.”

“*Yalla!*” Abu Ashraf’s voice was beginning to get louder. He glanced at Mona and Hayfa’s open bedroom door. Mona was sitting on the bed, clearly not ready. “Why isn’t your sister ready?” he shouted at Hayfa.

“She’s not coming,” Hayfa answered timidly.

“To the shit!” he shouted, “May He make her never eat again!” He slammed the bedroom door on Mona.

Mona felt the rage inside her bubble over. She jumped off the bed and opened the door and charged at her father, standing close. She knew he could hit her if she provoked him, but she did not care. “You are no different from all those dictators! These revolutions you are supporting, they are protesting against *this!*” she said, waving her hands around, “You don’t see *anything* wrong with the way you run this household, just like Mubarak and Qathaffi and Asad don’t see anything wrong with the way they run their countries. You’re willing to let me starve rather than let me live happily? Why?” Tears were streaming down her face.

Abu Ashraf’s face had turned red with rage. “When you speak this way to your father you deserve to starve!” he yelled.

“Just like when the people dare to demonstrate and voice their discontent with a regime, they deserve to starve?” Mona said, calmly, wiping her tears away. “Do I need to do what they’re doing? Persevere until you have a heart attack and die? Is your death the only way I’ll ever gain my freedom?”

“Mona!” Hayfa protested, and tried to pull her sister away, but Mona stood her ground.

Abu Ashraf swallowed. “What do you want Mona?”

“OK, I understand that you don’t want me to live alone,” Mona sniffed, “you win. But I want to be able to feel that this is my house too, not just yours.”

Abu Ashraf’s lips trembled. Hayfa could not tell if it was because of anger or another suppressed emotion.

“Baba, you make me feel like you don’t love me at all, you don’t care about me, you don’t care if I eat or not, you don’t care if I’m happy or not... just because I opposed you once?”

Abu Ashraf pursed his lips tightly; his face was still a dark shade of red. “We will talk about this later,” he said in a low, composed tone, “right now I have to go to my mother’s house. You can join us if you want. I’ll wait for you.”

Mona saw this as an acceptance of her white flag. She rushed into her room, and came out again within a few minutes, dressed in jeans and a Che Guevara T-shirt. Abu Ashraf noticed the T-shirt and nodded.

At Tata's house, the usual hustle and bustle greeted them.

"I've seen Aseel's new baby!" Reema said. She was feeling much better after the swelling in her double-chin had gone down to its normal size. "He's beautiful! He's got big cheeks just like an Al Manseyeh!"

Tata was surprised to see Mona there as she knew that her son was not happy with her. "Don't upset your father," Tata whispered to her, as Mona obediently kissed Tata's right cheek.

"I'll try not to," Mona replied, and kissed Tata's left cheek.

"How's our bride?" Tata asked, smiling at Hayfa.

"Look at our prince," Tata smiled at Ashraf, who had shaved especially that day.

Sana's eyes were red and had dark circles under them. Nadia was holding her tightly.

"What's wrong?" Mona asked, her eyes equally red.

"I'll tell you over lunch," Sana replied.

Once the four girls had their plates of stuffed grape leaves and zucchini, they sat together on the stairs, in order to talk privately.

"I got fired," Sana said, suppressing a sob.

That Monday, Sana had stayed at work longer than usual, because of a client who needed to travel urgently the next day. As she walked in the dark empty parking lot to her car, she could hear her high-heeled shoes echoing. She was feeling exhausted, the buckles on her new shoes were digging into her ankles. *Who designs these shoes?* she wondered as she limped towards her car.

She suddenly let out a scream when a man jumped in front of her.

"Mahmoud?" she had asked in confusion, "Sorry for screaming, you startled me. Hi."

"*Wa alaikum il Hi wa rahmatu Allah wa Barakatuh,*" he replied with a smile and a nod.

Sana was not amused at his replacing the word *salam* with the English greeting hi in his religious reply. "Your blood is very light," she had said dryly, referring to his sense of humour.

“*Sitti Sana*, I got shooed out of work yesterday because of you.”

“I’m sorry Mahmoud, I did not mean to get you fired,” she had said, but then had regretted apologizing, “you did step off the red line with me though.”

“Me?” he had asked, pointing at his heart with his index finger, “By Our Lord I didn’t mean a thing.”

“Well, I’ll talk to my manager tomorrow,” she had replied, trying to walk past him.

He had grabbed her arm, and repeated “tomorrow?” Sana had gasped, trying to yank her arm away, “and what about tonight?” he had continued, “Our Lord alone knows that I have nothing to feed my wife and little child tonight.”

“Let go of me Mahmoud,” Sana had said, trying not to panic. “I think I might have some change in my car, I’ll give it to you and you can buy some food for tonight until I talk to the manager tomorrow.” She had said this, still trying to yank her arm away, knowing that the minute she reached her car she would lock her door and drive away as quickly as she could.

Mahmoud had grabbed her other arm and had brought his face close to hers. She had smelled his hot onion breath on her face. He had begun to drag her into a more secluded corner of the empty parking lot, near the stairs. She had tried to push him away, but he had twisted her arms behind her back. Sana had tried to scream, but was not able to utter a high-pitched scream like in the movies, so she just began to shout “Stop!” as loud as she could. Mahmoud had covered her mouth with his hand and kept her still as they both heard someone running down the stairs.

Shatha had stood in front of them, holding her mobile phone to her ear, “Mahmoud is attacking Sana!” she had shouted at the phone, panting, “Hurry! Come quickly!”

Mahmoud had pushed Sana away from him and ran down the stairs into the basement. Sana had thrown herself at Shatha, shaking.

“Son of a whore!” Mona exclaimed after Sana had simply said “I was attacked by Mahmoud the janitor.”

“*Ya Allah*,” Hayfa said, her hand on her cheek, “what do you mean *attacked*?”

Sana did not go into the details of the attack, “One of the girls at work had forgotten her mobile phone in the office and had gone back to get it,” Sana said, wiping her nose with a tissue, “the guy she was with, well, he’s an animal of a colleague. He pretended to

be concerned, but the next day he told everyone at the office, including the manager, that I was raped!”

“Brother of a fucked woman!”

“The manager called me to his office and said that it was my provocative *attire* that caused the attack! And he said that the reputation of the company is everything, and something like this could damage its reputation, so he fired me.”

“But, you weren’t raped, were you?” Hayfa asked, beginning to panic.

“No, no I wasn’t, thank God,” Sana replied, “but the manager, he wouldn’t listen to me. That animal who helped me told everyone that I’ve lost my honour.”

“Isn’t this *qathf muhassinat*?” asked Mona, “Accusing innocent women? This is illegal, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but taking this to court would cause a scandal,” Hayfa said.

“May God send a giant to fuck his ass!” Mona said, as she rubbed Sana’s arm. “Have you told your father?”

“You’re joking?” Sana snorted, “of course not. I had trouble enough persuading him to let me work in the first place; he would argue that this is my punishment for wanting to live and earn money like a man.”

“*Ammo* Abu Wa’el can be conservative,” Nadia said with an understanding nod.

“I just said that the animal who told on me had told a lie about me to the manager and that I had been fired. I didn’t go into details.”

“Well, it’s their loss, the pimps.” Mona said, “You’ll just apply to their competitors, you know all their critical information anyway; you’d be an asset to any other insurance company.”

“That’s what I thought,” Sana answered, beginning to cry again, “but somehow my reputation has spread, as a dishonourable woman, and as dressing provocatively at the office. I got rejected by the two other insurance companies.” Sana began sobbing, “I’m so worried that someone will tell my father or brother!”

“I think we should tell Tata about this,” Hayfa said, “not about what happened with Mahmoud, but about the *lie*.”

“No, don’t you see?” Nadia urged, “They’ll ban all of us from working!”

“I’m sure they wouldn’t,” Hayfa argued, “everyone knows that Sana is respectable, her clothes are very appropriate, she would never provoke such an attack!”

“I provoked this attack because I’m not *veiled*,” Sana said, still crying.

“What?” Mona protested, “Sana, the way you dress is exactly what a veiled woman would wear, except that you don’t cover your hair! Look at me, look at how I dress! I wear shorts to work—not in front of my parents, but I take off the long ‘parent skirt’ in the car— and nobody has attacked me! Nobody *should* attack any woman, whether she’s veiled or not!”

“Yes, Sana,” Hayfa said, “there was a story I heard of a veiled student who got raped by a security guard at the university a few years ago, so it’s not because you weren’t veiled or because you were out in the real world working.”

“That brother of a whore was just trying to punish you.”

“Well, he succeeded,” Sana said with a bitter smile.

“Maybe we should send some thugs to his house, this animal who lied about you.” Hayfa thought aloud, “I mean, his girlfriend is your friend, isn’t she? And she saw what happened? She knows it’s a lie.

“I tried talking to Shatha,” Sana said, shaking her head, “she asked me to understand that speaking to me could tarnish her reputation.”

“That fucked woman,” Mona blurted. “May God send a long finger to—.”

“What about Mahmoud,” asked Hayfa, interrupting her sister, “shouldn’t he be punished for such a doing?”

“His life is punishment enough,” Sana replied, “he’s a poor man with a wife and child to feed.”

“Well, let him go fuck his own wife then!” Mona protested.

“Mona!” Hayfa warned.

“What Hayfa?” snapped Mona, “he should be punished! Why is it that in our country it is the woman who gets punished for a man’s bad deeds? We should do something, regardless of whether he is a poor wretch or not! Why did he do what he did?”

“Because I got him fired,” mumbled Sana.

“No,” Mona scowled and pointed her index finger at Sana, “because you refused to let him intimidate you.”

“It’s just better to avoid problems like this,” said Nadia shaking her head, “you should have just let him talk to you about the veil, just say ‘yes, may God grant me enlightenment, okay *salamu alaikum,*’ and ignore him. You antagonized him, and this made the problem even bigger.”

“Don’t blame her for the way she answered that brother of a whore. We should stop letting men get away with it!”

“What happened has happened,” said Hayfa, “what do we do now?”

“Have a virginity test and show the results to your boss!” said Nadia, “that would exonerate you and get the animal who lied in trouble!”

Sana cringed at the idea. Mona shook her head, “No, don’t you see? Whether she was raped or not isn’t the issue. I also doubt the competitors aren’t hiring her because of this, I think they simply found out that you were fired and that’s why they won’t hire you. What you need is a fresh start.... Maybe go away to study for a year or two and come back with new credentials and you’ll easily find another job. You always said you wanted a postgraduate degree, right?”

Tata walked over to them, “Come sweeten yourselves for the joy of Aseel’s boy! May God grant me life and show me happiness in all my girls!” she lifted her hands up in prayer, “May He maintain his blessings on us. *Ameen ya Rub.*” She closed her eyes and brought her hands to her forehead and slid her hands over her face. “*Yalla*, come eat dessert, so we can go visit your cousin. Today I made the *knafeh* myself, to celebrate my first great grandchild. You will eat your fingers after it!” said Tata with a cheerful chuckle. “*Yalla*, go eat, I want us to leave to the hospital at three o’clock,” Tata’s smile died when she noticed Sana’s red eyes.

Sana and the others smiled at Tata and kissed her, “May God keep you for us Tata,” said Nadia giving her Tata a kiss.

“You will provide me with my next great grandchild, by God’s permission,” smiled Tata, patting Nadia’s curly black hair. Her concerned eyes followed Sana to the large round tray of half eaten *knafeh*.

Mona took her plate of *knafeh* outside and sat on the stairs leading to the porch. She felt the sun warm her bones. She watched as a skinny grey cat with a bulging stomach slowly edged closer to a large pile of black garbage bags near the street dumpster. A big



yellow cat hissed at the pregnant grey one, which made her hide under a car, still hungrily watching the yellow cat rummage through the garbage. Its greed angered Mona, and after she noticed that the yellow cat was male, she felt even sorrier for the pregnant grey cat. Mona ran at the yellow cat and scared it away, and then scooped up all of the cheese off her *knafeh*, making sure to separate the sweet syrup and pistachios so they did not upset the cat's stomach, and then dropped the large lump of cheese under the car where the grey cat was hiding. Mona made her way back to the front porch, and sat down to watch as the grey cat ate with relish. *What am I going to do?* Mona asked herself; her momentary happiness at feeding a hungry pregnant cat was now replaced with despair. Her mind raced between her own misery and her cousin Sana's predicament. Mona knew that her cousin would not fight for her rights, and the more Mona thought about it, the more she realised that she did not feel like fighting either. *I wish we could both just run away.*

\* \* \*

Aseel

The hospital room flooded with sunshine. Flowers and blue balloons kept piling into the overcrowded space. Aseel missed her baby; Um Naji, Abu Omar, Um Omar, and Bassam took turns holding him. She was only allowed to touch him when he needed feeding, and even then she was not given privacy—her father, brother, and Naji stared at her bosom as she nursed her baby, which made her feel highly uncomfortable. Aseel wanted to go home, but Um Naji insisted that she should stay a week to recover her strength—and eat for free—since her husband's insurance covered the costs. Um Naji and Bassam were referring to him as little Abdo, and Aseel was growing more and more frustrated.

“Little Abdo needs to be rubbed in olive oil again,” said Um Naji.

“Why does he need to be rubbed in olive oil at all?” asked Aseel, but the room was so full of people that Aseel's voice was not heard.

Um Omar had received a text message early in the morning of the delivery from Bassam, telling her the news. She had rushed over, with hair and makeup products, perfume, and a velvet housecoat for her daughter. When she first saw her exhausted

daughter, she had cried “*Alf mabrook ya omri*, a thousand congratulations, my age, my life, my heart!” After peeking at the sleeping baby, she had begun applying concealer around Aseel’s tired eyes and had tried to fix her dishevelled hair; “You don’t want your mother-in-law to see you this way!”

“Mama, I just gave birth!” Aseel had complained.

“I know *habibti*, but that’s no reason for you to remain unsightly!” Um Omar had helped Aseel into the pretty new housecoat, “And now you’ll look beautiful in the pictures!”

Unfortunately, all the pictures of the baby were with his other grandmother. Aseel tried not to mind. She also tried to drown out the noise by staring out of the window. Her room overlooked central Amman, but from the angle of her bed, Aseel could only see flat rooftops with dusty satellite dishes, television antennas, and flapping laundry on the roofs. She watched a woman on one of the roofs who held a toddler with a pacifier in one arm, and a laundry basket in the other. Clothes pegs filled her mouth and she dropped one or two when her baby tugged at her veil. Aseel watched as the woman struggled to throw the contents of the basket over the wire, holding the baby carefully. She then smoothed one sheet after the other, securing them with clothes pegs. A gust of wind made a man’s long white *dishdash* fly off the wire and onto the floor. The young mother dropped the basket and trotted after the white garment before it flew further away. She lifted it up and inspected it in the sunlight—even Aseel could see that it had gathered dirt from the rooftop’s floor.

The woman’s irritated expression evaporated after gazing at her child for a few seconds. She kissed her baby, and carried on with her task, leaving the dirty *dishdash* on a broken chair on the roof. After the woman had finished hanging the laundry, she stood with her baby near the edge—but not too close—and pointed at Aseel. She talked into her baby’s ear and laughed. Aseel was startled, *why would she laugh at me?* The woman and the baby waved at Aseel, and it was only then that Aseel realised that they were waving at their own reflections on her window. Aseel saw the woman’s white teeth flash in a smile and felt envious. *I want alone-time with my baby*, she thought, *but I don’t want to do laundry*. The woman turned around, threw the dirty *dishdash* into the empty laundry basket, opened a rusty door and disappeared.

A balloon popped, startling Aseel and bringing her attention back to the room. The baby began crying, and Um Naji's irritating voice began cooing "Shhhhh, little Abdo, shhhhh...."

"*Khalto*, give him to me, by God," asked Aseel, lifting her arms towards her son.

"No, no, he wants his teita," said Um Naji, rocking the crying baby, "Look at him, he has my cheeks and my chin!"

"*Khalto*," said Aseel more firmly, "I miss him. Give him to me, please."

"*Lolololo*," continued Um Naji, "see, he's calming down with his teita, *lolololo*..."

"Give him to me!" shouted Aseel.

After a moment of quiet, chaos broke out in the room; the baby cried even louder, Um Naji shouted, "you talk to me this way? Fine, I will show you!" she handed the baby over to Um Omar, who also had an indignant look on her face.

"Aseel," Bassam reprimanded, "what are you doing?"

"How can you speak to your mother-in-law this way?" shouted Aseel's father, watching Bassam run after his mother who had just slammed the bedroom door shut; further agitating the baby.

"Baba, he's *my* boy!" protested Aseel, "I want to get to know him! I want him to get to know me!"

"It's your fault," he shouted at Um Omar, "you brought her up to be haughty!"

"I wouldn't blame Bassam if he divorced you after this," said her teenage brother Omar from an armchair in the corner. "I would divorce my woman if she spoke that way to mama."

"*Ya salam*," spat Abu Omar, "you make your husband divorce you and then who is saddled with you and your son? Me!" Abu Omar yelled, "I tell you from now, I don't have divorced girls!" He stormed out to apologise to Um Naji.

Naji and Dara had also gone out with Bassam and his mother, but Aseel was glad when her mother finally handed her the crying baby.

Aseel gazed at her son lovingly. She and Bassam had stopped discussing political affairs since the baby was born. Aseel had continued to worry about the Jordanian-Palestinian situation, but after stealthily checking Facebook and Twitter on her Blackberry, while her husband and mother-in-law gushed over the baby, Aseel had known

that there would be no civil war. She began humming her favourite song *Mawtini* in her son's ear as he nursed.

"What are you doing *ya mama*?" asked Um Omar with despair.

"Mama, I'm sick of that woman."

"I couldn't wait till you had this boy and relieved me from my worry, and now look what you've done! You've destroyed your house and your father's house!"

"*Khalas mama*," said Aseel calmly, stroking her baby's soft black hair, "I said what I said. You can either go and console her, or stay and console me, but don't accuse me anymore."

Aseel kissed the tiny head on her breast, and then looked out the window again as the woman and her child reappeared with the now clean *dishdashah*. The woman hung it at the end of the line, and then began playing peek-a-boo with her baby through the flapping bed-sheets. Aseel found herself smiling at them. "So little Rabei," she asked her sleeping son, still stroking his head, "is your father going to choose his mother or your mother?"

She looked up and found Bassam standing near the door, watching her, with his hands in his pockets. "This is the second time I hear you calling him Rabei," he said.

*I shouldn't be afraid of my husband. He should be my equal*, Aseel thought, and then looked outside at the woman and her baby. *Is she afraid of her husband? Where is her husband on a Friday? Is he watching TV? Why doesn't he hold the baby while the mother hangs the laundry?*

"What are you doing, Aseel?" asked Bassam sternly. "Make me understand."

Aseel stared at his sad eyes, *I love him. Does he love me?* She looked out the window again, *does she love her husband?* She took a breath to speak, but then sighed again. She looked at her Rabei, and felt her eyes fill up with tears. A lump formed in Aseel's throat and her eyes continued to dart from one place to the other—from Bassam's confused sad face, to the popped balloon on the floor, to the woman playing with her baby, to her sleeping boy, to the wilting rose pedals.

"Aseel?" probed Bassam with concern.

She felt her lips shaking and tried to stop them by biting hard on her lower lip. The bite consoled her somehow, the harder she bit, the less her heart hurt. She shook her head at Bassam. *If he divorces me because of my mother-in-law, how will I support myself? I*

*quit my job, so I won't get a salary for maternity leave. Where would I live? My own father said he wouldn't take me in, so I will have nowhere to live. Would Tata let me live with her? Would I be able to get a job and rent an apartment? How much money does one need to rent an apartment? Would my salary enough for me and my baby? Who would take care of him while I'm at work? I won't have health insurance if he divorces me; what if the baby gets sick? How will I pay for day-care, nappies, clothes, food, bills? Thank God summer is here and I won't have to worry about the fuel for the boiler for a while. I'm getting discharged today, who would look after Rabei, I'm still uncomfortable walking around with those horrible stiches. Would he really leave me because I shouted at his mother? Would he remarry? Have more kids? How could Baba be so cruel to his only daughter? How would Rabei feel, growing up without a father? Would he hate me?* Aseel's eyes kept blinking away tears and looking at different objects in the room.

Aseel looked up at Bassam, and then down at her wedding ring. *I need him*, she realised, her heart sinking.

Tata walked into the room, "There is our princess," said Tata to Aseel, pushing Bassam aside. Tata embraced Aseel strongly, "We would never let anybody hurt you. *Mabrook my beauty, mabrook.*" Tata gave the baby three kisses on his head, "The name of God on him, he is wonderful, may the Preserver preserve him!"

Aseel's tears finally began streaming down her face. Tata took Rabei from his mother and placed him gently in his crib. "You," she glared at Bassam, "you call yourself a man?" Tata tried to sit on the edge of Aseel's bed but it was too high for her. "Stop crying, my beauty," said Tata, stroking Aseel's wavy hair, "enough, my moon." Bassam walked over and placed his foot on the pedal to lower the bed.

Tata gave him a dirty look, but sat on the bed and bundled Aseel up in her arms and rocked her back and forth, cooing, "We step on those who upset you, we trample over them, who do they think they are? He who steps on one of your edges will—will—," Tata glared at Bassam, who was standing helplessly near the door, "will regret it!" she said finally, "The Manseyeh girls are precious! Each more precious than the other! He who doesn't place her in his eyes does not deserve her!" Aseel stopped wailing and felt comforted by her grandmother's words. "As long as I live," Tata whispered in her ear, "you need no one."

Abu Ashraf stormed into the room, also pushing Bassam aside, “You have no fear of God?” he asked Bassam, “Don’t you know it is *haram* to leave your wife before the passing of three months for her labour?”

“Pray on the Prophet, Abu Ashraf!” protested Bassam.

“May God pray on our master Mohammed,” replied Abu Ashraf.

“Who said anything about me leaving Aseel?”

“That’s right!” shouted Tata, “She’s leaving *you*. Our daughters are full of pride! We won’t allow you to insult her pride!”

“Ya Tata, ya Abu Ashraf,” pleaded Bassam, pressing his fingers to his thumbs in a pleading gesture, “I would never insult your daughter; you gave her to me as safekeeping on my neck!” he said with both hands going to the back of his neck. “This is something I will honour for as long as I live.”

Abu Ashraf stood with hands on his waist, liking what he heard. He nodded in agreement, “Yes, we give our daughters away in exchange for nothing except the maintenance of their respect and dignity,” he said, waving his index finger at Bassam.

“You made our daughter cry one week after she has given birth to the carrier of your name, may God forgive you for your grievance,” said Tata shaking her head in disappointment.

“Aseel,” said Abu Ashraf, “what are your demands? You command and we obey! Under which conditions will you take him back?”

Aseel felt a surge of strength overtake her. “I want the boy to be called Rabei, not Abdel Muhaimen.”

“Is Abdel Muhaimen the name of your father?” asked Tata, puzzled.

“No, it is the name of my mother’s father,” answered Bassam uncomfortably.

“Look! I am with the grandfathers being honoured by naming first grandsons after them, and I support the importance of mothers-in-law,” said Tata with her reasoning tone, “but if every grandmother comes and wants to name her grandchild after her father, the country would be full of boys with ugly old names! Come on Bassam, we all want to please your mother, but not in this way. It is not the custom for the sons to be named after their maternal ancestors. What do you say?”

Bassam looked at Aseel's hopeful face. He nodded. "My mistress commands. Anything else? What are your demands my lady?"

Aseel smiled at Bassam, still sniffing, "I don't want to do the housework alone. Either we pay Komari, your mother's housekeeper, to come clean for us twice a week, or you have to do it."

Bassam smiled. Abu Ashraf was uncomfortable with Aseel's requests, which seemed unreasonable to him, but said nothing. "You command, my mistress, what else *sitti*?"

"Let me hold my baby and take a photograph with him," said Aseel, still smiling and sniffing.

"See?" asked Tata, "our girls are reasonable! Now, come, kiss your wife and wipe her tears, and then leave me to talk to her."

Bassam kissed Aseel's forehead, "Now, Abu Ashraf, I have a request, my mother is upset, please help me remedy that." The two men walked out together.

"Thank you Tata," said Aseel, with tears welling up in her eyes again.

"My daughter, they say nothing is dearer than a son except the son of the son. You are dear to me, and your baby is dear to his grandmother. She is your mother-in-law. It is the duty of every wife to be kind to her husband's mother, even if she is awful. Don't you know the Palestinian folk songs? 'A snake with ten heads, his mother bit me...' It makes me sad that you shout at her and insult her; it means that we have not raised you properly and that blackens our face. What will people say about us?"

"I know, Tata," said Aseel humbly, "I've never done this before but she wouldn't even let me hold my boy!"

"I wanted to smack my mother-in-law many times," said Tata, "I always remained obedient," said Tata, remembering the many arguments with her husband's family. "Are you able to walk now?" Aseel nodded, "*Yalla* go now and apologise to her in front of everyone, give her some of her dignity back. I'll stay with the baby and read Quran on his head."

Omar slowly opened the en suite bathroom door and popped his head out.

"Have you been hiding there all this time?" asked Tata with a chuckle. "I hope you learned a lesson in diplomacy!"

Omar shrugged uncomfortably.

“How is your rash?” Tata asked as she helped Aseel get up.

“All gone!” Aseel giggled, showing her grandmother her arm, “Olive oil works like magic.”

“Olive oil and Nablus soap...” Tata said, helping Aseel make her way to the door. “Those are the only beauty products I ever use.”

\* \* \*

### Hayfa and Mona

The sisters were strolling away from the hospital parking lot. The drama in the hospital corridors was too much for Mona, and they told their parents that they would walk to Koobz and ask Lutfi to drive them home later in the evening.

Making sure they were a good distance away, Mona took out a cigarette, ignoring Hayfa’s discomfort at her sister smoking in the street. The sun was slowly setting behind the hills and rooftops. The streets were quiet that Friday, “Let’s bet. How many remarks will we hear?” asked Hayfa.

“I bet...” Mona thought for a while, “None. We’re in a residential area, and later when we walk through Rainbow Street, there won’t be crowds of fuckers. After all, this isn’t Abdoun.”

“I don’t know, we’ll have to hear at least *one* comment, I predict, from a car.”

The sisters shook on the bet, and continued to walk in silence. Children played ball in the street, using their neighbours’ wheelie bins as goalposts. Birds were chirping in the pine trees, and young couples walked side by side, carefully avoiding contact. Nearby there were honking horns, “A *jaha*?” asked Hayfa, “or could be a wedding. Want to make another bet?”

“Don’t feel like playing this game today, Heefo,” replied Mona taking another puff of her cigarette.

“Do you feel that I’m abandoning you because I’m getting married?”

“I don’t *feel* it. You *are*.” Mona gave Hayfa a defeated smile.



Hayfa stared hard at her sister, who was pressing the butt of her cigarette on the pavement. Mona tossed it in one of the wheelie bins the kids were using, avoiding Hayfa's gaze.

"Mona, talk to me..." begged Hayfa.

"Not today, Heefo," said Mona, giving Hayfa a kiss on her cheek.

"Why are we going to Koobz then?"

"Well, you're meeting Lutfi aren't you?"

"Are you meeting Odeh?"

"We broke up," said Mona, finally meeting Hayfa's gaze.

"I'm so sorry Monmon," began Hayfa.

"Stop, please Hayfa," said Mona, "I know you were against us from the day we met. You were right all along—there is no way that we could ever bend the rules, that's it, it's over. Now please, let's enjoy the sunset."

The sisters walked in silence past the big hotels. Cars passed by, but as though sensing that Mona was not in the mood, none of the men driving by stopped to comment at the two women. The smell of *Shawirma*, coffee, bread, *argeela* filled their nostrils as they strolled through the cobblestoned Rainbow Street. A musician was playing on the public terrace overlooking Hercules' temple and the big flag of Jordan; artists were sketching and a man selling *turmos* and grilled corn was singing along to the musician's tune. Hayfa kept glancing at her sister, who had a serene look on her face. An eighties' BMW with pictures of the king of Jordan covering its back windows skidded past. A Jordanian flag flapped on the antenna. "Didn't the king ban people carrying his picture in his support?" asked Hayfa, staring after the car.

"I think he banned so-called 'loyalty marches' because they're not protesting against anything, they're just disrupting traffic," replied Mona, absent-mindedly.

When they finally reached Koobz, they found Lutfi standing there, waiting for them. They let the security guard search their bags before going upstairs to their usual place. "I'm not going to sit with you tonight," said Mona, "I'll sit over there."

"No, you're not," said Lutfi, "what's up with you today, you're acting weird."

"She and her boyfriend broke up," said Hayfa, cautiously.

Lutfi grabbed Mona's arm and sat her down, "Master! We need an *argeela* here quickly—what do you like Mona? Liquorice? Bring us one liquorice and one mint, but a little quickly, may God keep you, *habib albi!*" Lutfi smiled at Mona, "Mona, from the moment Hayfa told me that you wanted her to stuff a cushion in her shirt at our arranged meeting I've loved you as a sister. Please, let me love you as a sister!"

Mona laughed, "I'm not being a drama queen, I just need to think!"

"Let's think aloud," said Lutfi.

"You'll meet another guy, Monmon."

Mona and Lutfi frowned at Hayfa's remark. "So, you and Odeh, you had a mutual breakup?" Mona nodded. "So, Hayfa told me about your fight with your father, your father can be scary, he gave me a few looks that really frightened me!"

"Baba's a good man," said Mona, after thanking the *argeela* master. "Like today, you should have seen the stance he took for my cousin Aseel, who had a fight with her husband and her mother-in-law."

"Be careful, Lutfi!" Hayfa joked.

"I will!" he laughed, "Believe me I will." He took a puff from the *argeela* that Hayfa held for him, "Listen Mona, I am in my thirties, and as long as I am single and in Jordan, I live with my parents. It's not right—it's very annoying, actually! But, I am a man and it's difficult for me to move out. If I hadn't gone to Indonesia I would have never left home! But, luckily now my lovely bride and I are going to get married and move into our own three bedroom place: one bedroom for us, one bedroom for our future baby, and one room for our Monmon."

Hayfa and Mona both looked at Lutfi in confusion. "Listen to me," he continued, "this room will remain locked, and only you will have the key. It's en suite, and you will have a little fridge and microwave and TV. Like a little dorm room just for you. You can sleep there as often as you like, bring whoever you want for a sleep over as long as you are sure they are honest. Neither Hayfa nor I will ever ask you questions about who you have with you, okay? Obviously, your dad will think that you're just spending time with your sister, and it's very normal for a sister to stay in her sister's house for prolonged periods of time. You can throw parties in our apartment, as long as you give us notice and the music is reasonable and your friends respect our home. What do you think?"

“It’s a very generous offer, Lutfi, it’s actually great,” said Mona with a sad smile. “But I’m thinking of studying abroad for a year or two.”

“You can’t leave me!” said Hayfa, panicking.

“You have Lutfi,” said Mona, “I won’t worry about you anymore; I know Lutfi’s a good guy. Hayfa, Baba broke my heart, Odeh broke my heart, I just want to be alone for a while, you know? I want to go somewhere that isn’t so tied up with traditions and honour. I want to go somewhere where I can be anonymous.”

“You think Baba will let you study abroad?” asked Hayfa. “None of us girls has ever gone abroad alone before.”

“I’m thinking of asking Sana to join me,” explained Mona, enjoying her mint tea, “I think, if we make a good argument to Tata, we could actually pull it off. Sana’s as broken hearted as I am. I think a year or two abroad would really help us. I’ve been thinking of Sana’s,” she paused and cleared her throat, “problem. We’ve both earned enough money to support ourselves for at least a year.”

“But, if you’re gone for a year or two, you’ll be twenty-eight! That’s too late, Mona, how will you ever get married?”

“Hayfa, why would I want to get married? Do you know of any happy couples around? Look at our parents and aunts and uncles, look at Aseel and Bassam! I don’t want to be trapped in a marriage for the sake of being married. I think if Sana and I go away, being abroad could really help us, we can enhance our careers. I’m sure Sana would be able to get a job after getting an MBA or something, she won’t have to keep herself tied to insurance, she can find some other company, maybe one day she’ll *run* a company!”

Lutfi nodded, taking Hayfa’s hand, only to take the *argeela* away from her to take a puff himself. Hayfa hugged her sister, “I think it’s a good idea,” said Hayfa, softly.

“So did you enjoy your walk over here, ladies?” asked Lutfi.

“Yes,” answered Mona with a smile, “spring has definitely begun at last!”

Hayfa smiled, “And thanks to that interview on TV with Prince Hasan, Jordanians and Palestinians aren’t fighting.”

“What a year 2011 has been so far, eh?” said Mona, taking another puff of liquorice, she looked at the smoke that fogged the café, “And it’s only the first of April.”

“Oh, Mona,” said Lutfi, “you know that very generous offer I made? That you could have a room of your own in our flat?”

“Yes, Lutfi, that was wonderful of you,” said Mona sweetly, blowing him a kiss.

“That was an April’s fools’ joke!”

“You brother of a—.”

Hayfa laughingly covered her sister’s mouth with her hand.

## Glossary

|                               |  |
|-------------------------------|--|
| albi                          | my heart   |
| ammo (or with 'i' in the end) | paternal uncle   |
| amto (or with 'i' in the end) | paternal aunt  |
| asha                          | light supper   |
| azoomeh                       | large gathering for a meal   |
| baba                          | father   |
| dabkeh                        | Greater Syrian folk dance  |
| dar                           | house of   |
| dishdasheh                    | long Arabic gown (for males)   |
| dorra                         | other wife (married to the same husband)   |
| ghouleh                       | she-ghoul  |
| habeelah                      | stupid   |
| habibi                        | my love (masculine)  |
| habibti                       | my love (feminine)   |
| hatta                         | a traditional scarf worn in many Arab countries. Each region has its own design, colour, and style of wearing it. Although it was originally used by men to cover their heads, it is now worn by both men and women and can be wrapped around the neck, shoulders, or waist. |
| hayaty                        | my life  |
| inti il tanyeh                | literal translation: "you other one" adding to an already ridiculous situation   |
| jaha                          | two parties of men gathering where one party asks the other for a woman's hand in marriage   |

|                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| katb ktab                       | the official signing of the Islamic marriage contract                        |
| Khalili/ Khaliliyeh             | a person or thing from Hebron  |
| khalo (or with 'i' in the end)  | maternal uncle   |
| khalto (or with 'i' in the end) | maternal aunt  |
| knafeh                          | a dessert from Nablus  |
| labaneh                         | a sour dairy product similar to yogurt                                       |
| lazam                           | closely related  |
| ma'amool                        | semolina biscuits stiffed with dates, walnuts, or pistachios                 |
| mansaf                          | Jordanian national dish made of dried yogurt                                 |
| muajanat                        | Arabic nibbles, made of dough, could be baked with meat, cheese, spinach etc |
| shawirma                        | meat or chicken sandwich   |
| sho                             | what   |
| shwai shwai                     | slowly   |
| tabbouleh                       | parsley salad  |
| tata                            | the term used for grandmother popular in Hebron                              |
| tfaddal                         | a polite word of offering and welcome  |
| tob                             | woman's traditional long gown  |
| ya'ani                          | meaning  |
| yalla                           | hurry up/come on/ let's go   |
| zaara                           | (female) rascal  |

*"Nobody died," marvelled the Sphinx.*

*"Well, the martyrs in Tahrir Square did," said Suzanne.*

*"I watched those demonstrations. I was watching them up until the moment you wandered in here and began placing novels written by women on the shelves. I am the guardian of Alexandria... I am worried about her," the Sphinx sighed. "I hid under water for a long time; I gave up when the Romans took over, but I returned when Egypt went back to Egyptians. I've been watching over her ever since."*

*"Don't you think you should go check up on her?" coaxed Suzanne. "I also need to go home. I need to check up on Jordan; there were clashes between her tribes and her police on the day I came to Alexandria. I also need to check on Palestine, Gaza wasn't doing too well when I came here. I need to go home."*

*The magic carpet nodded frantically; she too had been away too long.*

*"Yes, you may go and your books may remain," said the Sphinx, "but, I'm still not completely convinced that women's writing is as good as men's." The Sphinx turned around and walked away.*

*Suzanne snorted; "Typical" she whispered to the magic carpet as she floated back down. "It'll take a while for them to admit that we're their equals."*

*Suzanne sent the magic carpet back to her world of Jinn and magic caves. She started to leave the library to go back to her own world of Jinn, crime and conspiracy theories. On her way out, she felt sad about leaving. Why are things the way they are? Suzanne wondered. Could I have done something better?*

*Suzanne stood before the surface of the bubble surrounding the underwater library, which was not quite as clear as glass. She touched her throat with her right hand. "Why did I write what I wrote?" she asked aloud.*

*The ground began trembling and smoke was rising from the ground. What now? thought Suzanne, trying to keep her balance.*

*Thinking that the Sphinx had returned, Suzanne mumbled, "You're joking, right?"*

*"You called me!" protested a female Jinn from behind the smoke. Suzanne waved the smoke away and squinted at her; she was of similar height, had straight brown hair, large hazel eyes and a long nose. She wore a black Palestinian tob embroidered in red and green.*

*I should learn to stop touching things, thought Suzanne.*

*They stood in awkward silence.*

*"Who are you?" asked Suzanne.*

*The Jinniya laughed, "I'm your qarina!"*

## VII

### Self-Reflection

Suzanne frowned at her *qarina* with resentment, “Are you me? My evil counterpart?”

“No,” smiled Suzanne’s *qarina*, “I’m me, the Jinni version of you. We’re not one and the same. But I am almost as close to you as the artery in your neck. I’m not evil, it’s just a misconception—just because I’m powerful it’s assumed that I’m evil. You were reflecting about your writing, I’m merely here to help you reflect. So why did you write your novel?” she asked.

“Well,” began Suzanne, “Nawal El Saadawi said: ‘Pen and paper could be more dangerous than pistols in the world of reality and fact.’” Suzanne shrugged, “I just wanted to endanger...” Suzanne’s voice trailed off.

“Endanger what?” asked the *qarina* arching her eyebrow at Suzanne.

“Patriarchy, masochism, sexism—I don’t want these concepts to exist anymore.”

“How do you think that you, one human woman, can ‘endanger’ or over-ride patriarchal beliefs and practices that have been around for thousands of years?” The *qarina* used her smoky index fingers to quote the word ‘endanger’.

Suzanne thought for a moment. She considered acknowledging her arrogance but then remembered what Firdaus and Sabriya had told her about Shahrazad. “I’m doing what Shahrazad did. I am using the power of stories and words to promote change in Greater Syria and Egypt. Ahmad M.S. Abu Baker analyses the power of storytelling, he explains that

Story telling in the book of *A Thousand and One Nights*, functions as a way sublimating Sharayar’s desire for murdering Sharazad and releasing it through catharsis. i.e. the stories function as a therapy for Sharayar and as a brain-washing mechanism through which Shahrazad hopes to cure Sharayar from his murderous desire that has led to the deaths of many women because of his wife’s act of infidelity.<sup>1</sup>

“Of course,” added Suzanne, “‘brainwashing’ isn’t the word I would use, but other than that, I think Abu Baker has pretty much summed it up. The novel I’ve written is the story of women, and I’m writing it to expose certain things and to change people’s mentality.”



“Why, then,” asked the *qarina*, “did you write about Palestinian women? Why not women in Jordan?”

“I wanted to address the issue of Palestinians in diaspora. Let’s see...” Suzanne began calculating with her fingers, “if women constitute fifty per cent of the Jordanian population, and Palestinians constitute seventy per cent of the Jordanian population... I’m no mathematician, but I’d say that there’re a lot of Palestinian women living in Jordan. I merely wanted to give them a voice.”

“Why do you feel that they need a voice?” asked the *qarina*, resting her chin on her hand.

“The representation of the Arab woman in media, in men’s fiction, and even in some women’s fiction is stereotypically as a silent, demure, oppressed human being. While we are oppressed to an extent, I wanted to challenge that stereotype. There are so many women’s movements today that aim to counter the oppression that we simply should not remain under-represented.”

“So who exactly are you representing?” asked the *qarina* mockingly, “*all* Arab women?”

“Obviously I am not representing *all* Arab women; I am representing Palestinian-Jordanians who live in West Amman. While, yes, I mainly focus on the middle-class, I do show glimpses of the working class, such as the encounter with the fortune teller.”

“Why the middle-class?”

“The novel was written from a middle-class perspective because not many of my contemporaries represent the middle-class. El Saadawi focuses on the working class in her fiction, and Faqir focuses on desert villages and their self-sufficient inhabitants. Only Samia Seragildin’s narrative has an upper-middle-class setting,” Suzanne made a face at the *qarina*, whose face, although identical to Suzanne’s, had more arrogance in its features. “I chose to show Amman through middle-class eyes in order to expose the capitalistic state of mind that many middleclass families possess. The cousins get into Nadine’s fancy BMW and head to a refugee camp. The girls witness the poverty, and rather than feel humbled by the experience, they mock the lifestyle of the citizenless and their misfortunes. The refugee camps around Jordan are slums and ghetto-like with poor hygiene because of the lack of properly-functioning sewer systems. Although we are all Palestinians in diaspora, there is an Us and Them: those who were able to obtain citizenships, and those who were not. Those who were able to achieve social and economic status, and those who were not, those who integrated into Jordanian society, and those who did not. Middle-class

Palestinian-Jordanians are also part of the problem. The girls visit Um Mahmoud, the fortune teller, who is doubly oppressed, by her gender and her social and economic status. She and her *durra*—the other wife— not only share a husband, but also a home. Rather than feel sympathy, Fida laughs about it. The cold-heartedness of the middle-class is something I wished to confront. Yes, middle-class Palestinian women are oppressed by their families, their husbands, even the law in Jordan, but they are in a much better situation than Palestinian women from other economic backgrounds.”

“What about Palestinian men?” asked the *qarina*.

“I did not go into the male’s psyche at all, but showed a glimpse of men’s thoughts and beliefs through their behaviour and interaction with my female characters, as do Faqir and El Saadawi in their novels.

“Al Shaykh’s writing is probably the most exploratory of all Greater Syrian and Egyptian female novelists; she occasionally uses a male first person narrative to show a different side of her female protagonist. Faqir also adopts this style while narrating Maha’s story, showing the differences between male and female perspectives. I did not mimic this style because I felt that there was enough literature reflecting the Arab male’s views on women, and felt the Palestinian-Jordanian woman deserved undivided attention. While Leila Al-Atrash does represent the Palestinian exile attempting to acquire a new home, I attempted to show exiles on a larger scale, showing one generation after the next. Tata has feelings of gratitude towards Jordan, she views it as a sanctuary that has kept her safe after she lost her home in Palestine. Abu Ashraf and his siblings represent a disenchanting generation who saw Arab governments try to unite and save Palestine. They failed with massive losses in 1967. They are the generation that holds on tight to their Palestinian upbringing and traditions, making sure to marry only from their original city, and wanting their children to carry on the same traditions. Although this generation has grown up in Jordan, they reject much of what is authentically Jordanian. In my personal opinion, I believe that this rejection stems from their resentment.”

“Resentment?” asked the *qarina*.

“Yes, *qarinati*,” answered Suzanne, “resentment. To take the example I used in my novel; Hebron, where I’m from, is a city rich with history. Founded by the prophet Abraham, it is believed to be the burial ground of Adam and Eve. The most recent of national heroes, Saladin the conqueror of Crusaders, settled there. For these proud inhabitants of Hebron forced to flee and seek refuge in a new city like Amman, this must

be the reason they tend to alienate themselves from the rest of society. As Ernest Renan explains:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage.<sup>2</sup>

“This is what I aimed to portray through Abu Zaher’s refusal to let Nadia marry a Jordanian, and through Abu Ashraf’s employment of only men from Hebron. Although we all live in Amman, and many of us carry Jordanian nationalities, we still consider ourselves from the nation of Palestine. Each Palestinian affiliates to their city of origin, more out of wanting to keep the memory alive than anything else. At least, that is the case with first generation refugees and immigrants.

“Second generation Palestinian Jordanians, such as myself, differ. Some of us view ourselves as Jordanian and some of us are confused about our national identity. The Al Manseyeh family is a fictional family, with fictional characters, but some of the characteristics of the family are based on my own. I come from such a strong and traditional Hebron background that I had no idea what other Jordanian families were like until I went to university. Although I have never set foot in Hebron, most of my characteristics are, without a doubt, a Hebron woman’s characteristics.

“I tried to illustrate this particular aspect throughout the novel. For example, Aseel’s underhandedness by causing trouble between Dara and her mother-in-law is something a woman of Hebron would do. Education is also an important feature of Hebron life, one of the most important and earliest of universities in the Arab world was founded in Hebron, and Hebron is famous for its books, libraries and bookshops. Tata’s emphasis on the importance of education stems from that, although her own family had to neglect proper education due to the political turmoil in the region.

“Intermarriage in the Al Manseyeh family is another Hebron trait that my own family is well-known for. Um Wael and Um Zaher are sisters, and they are the daughters of Tata’s sister. Um Ashraf is also of the Al Manseyeh family, although more distantly related; her father being the cousin of Ashraf senior. This practice is popular among people of my city (Hebron) and my generation gets incredibly frustrated when our parents attempt to match-make between us cousins.”

The *qarina* laughed, “Yes, your novel is very Hebron in some ways, but very untraditional in other ways. I enjoyed seeing the images in your mind while you wrote it. But why is it written in English? I remember you were thinking it in Arabic. Even, stylistically you wrote it in a way that sounds Arabic even in English. Who’s your intended audience?”

“My intended audience, for the time being, is the English speaking audience,” answered Suzanne with a nod. “Writing a novel in Arabic for me is simply not an option because there is a duality in the written Arabic language that I cannot represent myself with. Written Arabic is always in Classical standard Arabic. This is not the language we communicate with in everyday life, and this is a language that, when used generally, addresses the male only. The only way for me to feel comfortable with writing in Arabic would be to write in colloquial Ammani, which is the language I speak.”

The *qarina* burst out laughing, “Imagine! A novel written purely in colloquial!”

“*Alf Lela wa Lela—A Thousand and one Nights* was written in the colloquial tongue of its time. Mo’nes Razzaz was a Jordanian novelist popular in the nineties. He wrote his narratives in classical but the conversations within the narrative were sometimes in colloquial, so does El Saadawi. But I find that alienates the wider Arab audience since we each have different dialects and vocabulary in colloquial. I can only imagine what my father would say if I wrote in colloquial! He’d say that it’s an indication of a lack of education and a lack of respect to the Arabic language. Said explains how we Arabs view our language:

For all the major literatures and languages, Arabic is by far the least known and the most grudgingly regarded by Europeans and Americans, a huge irony given that all Arabs regard the immense literary and cultural worth of their language as one of their principal contributions to the world.<sup>3</sup>

“The reason I write in English, other than the difficulty of writing with sincerity in classical Arabic, is because I cannot fathom any Arab ever wanting to read my work, let alone publish it. For the Arab reader, my novel is too self-critical, and too outrageous. Arab women, for example, do not publicly use foul language as Mona does. The scene between Sari and Siwar would shock an Arab audience. Although Jordanians are comfortable with reading similar stories written by foreigners, even by Arab male authors—when an Arab woman writer writes the way I have she is not viewed respectably.”

“I’m not convinced. Why would you rather write in English, a foreign language, than Arabic?”

“OK,” answered Suzanne patiently, “I thought it would be an interesting experiment to translate some literal expressions from Arabic to English in order to demonstrate the poetic nature of Arabs in their everyday language. Perhaps it can be a source of insight to curious non-Arabs. And, I’m a writer, I want to experiment with language and globalisation; what better space is there for me to experiment than in fiction, like my predecessors and contemporaries?”

“To address the real reason though, is to go back to Said’s theory about the reasoning behind Arab women using English to present their fiction in recent years. He says they do it ‘on their terms’ and with the ‘explicit aim of dispelling prevalent stereotypes against them.’<sup>4</sup> I do the same in my novel. Although family interference is viewed as a negative feature, I show the positive side of it, as well as the negative, to explain to the Westerner that Arab women, at least those in the Greater Syrian and Egyptian region, are not as helpless as they’re portrayed in the media. I believe the Arab woman can liberate herself; it is slow and gradual, but change is certainly underway—at least in Amman.”

“So you really think it’s changing?” asked the *qarina*, tilting her head.

“I really think so,” Suzanne nodded. “But change cannot happen overnight; there are things that are so deeply rooted in people’s minds that they thwart progress. The naming system I used in the novel, for example, although perhaps complicated to the Western reader, aims to show the importance of the first born male. One is reborn with the birth of his or her first son; even their name changes to take on their new son’s name. This common practice reinforces the binary opposites; male heirs are important, helpful, and continue the family line; females born into the family are unimportant, unhelpful, and unnecessary. This is another feminist issue that should be tackled; I view it as another patriarchal practice that adds to female inferiority.”

The *qarina* frowned. “That’s a harmless practice. Is that what you human women want to do now, to change language?”

“Not change, but yes, it should be modified. I think it will, gradually, over time. I wished to expose my reader to the female world, and show them how patriarchy has become accepted. All ‘below the belt’ bad language revolves around women’s honour. The worst swear words are related to a mother or a sister’s genitals. Mona’s use of these words conveys her acceptance—even agreement—that questioning the virtue of a man’s female family members is the deepest insult.”

“Ah, come on,” said the *qarina*, giving Suzanne a little nudge. Suzanne’s skin turned red where the *qarina* touched her. “You human feminists shouldn’t be so sensitive!”

“It’s not as harmless as you think!” protested Suzanne; “In *The Female Eunuch*, Germaine Greer discusses linguistics and its affirmation of the gender binary opposites. Using words such as ‘fuck’ suggest that men are active and women are passive.<sup>5</sup> The same can be applied with Arabic foul vocabulary: ‘brother of a fucked [woman]’ for example, is loaded with meaning. The ‘fucked’ woman (which implies that she could even have been raped) insinuates that the woman is no longer a virgin, hence scandalous, and a danger to her family. The man who has ‘fucked’ her was triumphant in destroying her brother; again reinforcing the idea that men are active, powerful, capable of ‘fucking’ and destroying other men through the ‘fucking’ of women. This very common swear word also reinforces the concept of females being a danger to their family because of the possibility of tarnishing their honour. Mona’s casual use of such dangerous misogynist words, even when she is discussing a feminist issue, shows that women themselves are often part of the problem.

“I believe that the use of insults like ‘brother of a whore’ or ‘damn your honour’ are extremely damaging to women because they reinforce the need of keeping a sister or a mother locked up in a house in order to defend family honour. I demonstrate this in Wael’s absurd retort that the women in Egypt who were calling for freedom were ‘bitches’ simply because they were on television where other men’s eyes can see them clearly. A liberal friend of mine used that very word to describe Jordanian women who were calling for the end of corruption; to him, there was simply no need for women to go out demonstrating. This shocked me, coming from a liberal who had a foreign girlfriend with whom he shared an apartment. I simply could not comprehend why women calling for freedom would be seen as ‘bitches.’ After going through numerous online newspapers where internet users’ comments were available, I found that while many do believe that it is about time women’s issues got more attention, there are still those who wish to keep things as they are. I tried to demonstrate the double sidedness of those who are with and those who oppose through the conversation between Wael and Abu Ashraf about the honourability/bitchiness of the women involved in the Egyptian revolution.”

“Yet you believe that things are getting better?” the *qarina* probed.

“When I read things about the Arab world written just a few years ago, I already see the differences. For example the historian Angel M. Rabasa said that:

Arab [civilisation] began a long decline beginning in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as the people of the region came under the rule of a long line of non-Arab powers. The more recent experience with European colonialism— and the subsequent line of authoritarian Arab regimes after the British and French withdrew from the area— left a deep impression on the Arab psyche. The average Arab citizen in the Middle East has not controlled his or her own destiny for centuries.<sup>6</sup>

“When I began writing my novel this was most certainly the case. But now, Arabs feel very differently, and the Arab Spring has rid us of that feeling of humiliation. Although things remain turbulent and uncertain, I wished to elaborate on the fact that we in Jordan were very impressed with Tunisians and Egyptians for ‘controlling’ their own ‘destiny’. We are anxiously waiting to see what will unfold in Syria. If Syrians manage to take control of their country, much will change in the Arab world.”

“So is this ‘lack of control over one’s own destiny’ a theme in your novel then?” asked the *qarina* with a mocking smile.

“It’s a theme the writers I have explored address. El Saadawi, Faqir, Idilbi, and Al Shaykh, all have tragic endings in their novels where the heroine either is killed (Salma, Firdaus, and Zahra) or meet another tragic ending of some sort; such as Maha, who is placed in a mental asylum, or Suha, leaving her lover Nur behind and assuming the role of heterosexual wife in a loveless marriage. Even Samia Serageldin’s character Gigi ends up without family or friends in a foreign country, also trapped in a loveless marriage. Another central theme was a mother’s abandonment. Salma abandons her baby, Maha’s child is taken from her, and Sahar Khalifeh’s character Mariam also abandons her child in order to save her own life, and then abandons her other baby because of her guilt. Gigi too, she leaves her son with his father. It’s like a mother cannot be a free woman unless she is on her own. Another common theme is the silent or absent mother, and the lack of female solidarity in most of these women’s novels.

“To answer your question about themes, my *qarina*,” said Suzanne, “in my own creative writing work I chose to focus on female solidarity, motherhood, sisterhood, and family. I did this because I come from a culture where segregation between the genders happens often, and it is mostly automatic, and women usually stick together, especially family members—they tend to stick together. Perhaps the ‘happily ever after’ fairy-tale ending is unrealistic, but I wished to portray a Palestinian family in a large society where women did not have to give up their children in order to be liberated, women did not have to die or be punished for wanting to be liberated. I simply wanted to portray female

empowerment—an empowerment whose presence is becoming more pronounced in Amman.”

“So this female empowerment in Amman, does this mean that a woman has complete freedom, like a man?” asked the *qarina*.

“No, not exactly,” said Suzanne, embarrassed. “Killing women in the name of preserving family honour was a central issue in Jordan that went on unaddressed for too long. Now, in 2012, honour killing has become a much debated topic with many activists and lobbyists attempting to change Jordanian law. Honour killing is a practice that occurs in different Arab countries; it occurs ‘when a family feels that their female relative has tarnished their reputation by what they loosely term ‘immoral behaviour.’”<sup>7</sup> Women’s liberation activists are fighting this now. Just the other day I was signing a petition about it...” Suzanne shook her head, “some of the comments I found underneath the petition were shocking. Most people were supportive of the case, but some men’s comments are really scary. One guy said:

May I ask a question? When a girl becomes loose and does the seven sins, should we tell her ‘perfect, you’re great’? Or when she brings her boyfriend home, should we not punish her? Or if she’s talking on the phone with her beloved under the covers, should we tell her ‘just don’t make any noise’? This is because there are no real men left that women have begun to talk this way, and those of you who support this movement, may God keep you for your sisters because you are a catch... This is what civilization and progress have become here.

Although men like this guy still have seats in the parliament and are opposing the activists’ demands to punish the murderers, I did not explore the issue of killing women in the name of honour in my novel because my contemporary Faqir has already written about it in *My Name is Salma* and *Pillars of Salt*. The issue has had sufficient media coverage now.

“Through Zaher’s dilemma with the car accident, I aimed to show a different side of honour killing where the female is not the victim, but rather, it is the male.”

“The male?” asked the *qarina* with confusion.

“Faqir has Salma rescued by French nuns, and she is taken to the UK to start a new life. I, however, decided to have Zaher rescued by the very man he publicly insults because of his relation to his sister. Zaher’s crazy driving and the subsequent car accident are a realistic terror that every citizen of Amman is aware of. Although there are strict laws about driving, and an incredibly difficult driving test; many people, myself included, pass



the test using a *wasta*, a connection. As in Zaher's case, it is usually a relative or a friend. The issue of corruption has only begun to be addressed in more depth now that the Arab Spring has begun. Jordanian citizens are now taking to the streets nearly every Friday calling for the end of corruption. I felt I needed to address it in this novel, since chaotic driving in Jordan takes many lives each year."

"So the chaotic driving takes lives also through honour killing?" asked the *qarina*, still confused.

"It's not just the driving, it's the tribal code that is dominant in Jordan," answered Suzanne with frustration. "Andrew J. Shryock explains that Bedouins in Jordan continue to

solve their disputes, informally at least, by traditional legal means. Tribal law has since worked its way firmly into civil jurisprudence, and today government judges [...] will decide a case involving tribespeople only after the dispute has been settled by customary means: namely, by calling a truce, appointing guarantors, assessing fines, and hosting a formal reconciliation. It should be said that the state does not officially sanction any of these procedures.<sup>8</sup>

This is how disputes get solved, and there are some things that can only be solved through bloodshed."

"Does everyone in Jordan belong to a tribe?" asked the *qarina*, whose world did not have a tribal system.

"No," answered Suzanne, "Shryock explains that,

non-tribal Jordanians (Palestinians foremost among them) are apt to find 'Bedouin patriotism' threatening. It intensifies nativist, anti-Palestinian sentiment by creating a privileged form of national identity which only Jordanians of tribal descent can claim.<sup>9</sup>

Faqir has touched upon tribalism in Jordan in her two novels, *Pillars of Salt* and *My Name is Salma*. To me, however, as a Palestinian living in Jordan, tribalism is completely alien. The only times that I have encountered it was through second-hand accounts of either my Jordanian friends, boasting of the benefits of it, or through fellow Palestinian-Jordanians who have encountered the evils of it. Tribalism is ignored in Jordanian media. Officially, we are all Jordanians; unofficially, we are a divided society. I try to convey this from the very beginning of my creative work. When Nadia is asked by her aunt about the suitor her father rejected, the first question is:

'From whose *dar*?'

'Dar Ali.'

'Which Ali? Hebron or Nablus?'

‘Neither. He’s Jordanian.’

‘Oh my!’ ‘Yee on us!’ ‘Really?’ ‘Jordanian/Jordanian or is his mother Palestinian?’ were the surprised responses.

The reason I highlighted this issue is because I wanted to be true to the society which I am representing. Although most of us ignore these issues while we are together, in private, at least in my family, Jordanians are viewed as the Other. And thanks to Facebook and Twitter, I have been able to witness Jordanian responses to demonstrations and the clashes that occurred in the chapter of Friday, the March 25<sup>th</sup>, which are based on real clashes that occurred on March 25<sup>th</sup> in Amman. The responses to those demonstrations showed the split in Jordanian society. It was a painful moment for me when I saw my Facebook homepage with a poll, ‘are you with or against.’ Horrible things were written about Jordanians by Palestinians, and equally horrible things were written about Palestinians by Jordanians. These public outcries do not occur often, and it was that day, on March 25<sup>th</sup>, that open discussion about the Jordanian-Palestinian issue in Jordan began. An example of that is the Jordanian PM Mohammad Al Kooz who called for those who do not like Jordan exactly as it is should go to the King Hussein Bridge which connects Jordan to Palestine.<sup>10</sup>

“So is Nadia and Talal’s story realistic?” asked the *qarina*.

“I introduced Talal and Nadia’s predicament early on in the novel and also very early on in my PhD. I was unsure of how to resolve it, but then in the very last chapters, I unrealistically let Zaher back down; perhaps it was wishful thinking on my part. The reason I introduced Talal and Nadia’s problematic relationship was because I wanted to demonstrate family interference in most issues concerning women. I also wanted to highlight discrimination, in that, yes, Palestinians are at times discriminated against, but it is a vicious circle—a hierarchy of discrimination, if you will. Men discriminate against women, women discriminate against their hired help (be they Muslim Indonesian, Malaysian, or Egyptian, or Christian Filipinos or Sri Lankans). Veiled women discriminate against unveiled, and unveiled discriminate against veiled... etc.

“While Nadia and Talal are finally able to overcome the obstacles that they face, Mona and Odeh are not because their obstacles are of a religious nature. While it is realistic for Nadia and Talal to eventually be together, at the present time, it is still not possible for a Muslim woman to marry a Christian man in Jordan. Although Mona attempts to move out of her parents’ house and rent her own apartment in order to have more freedom to spend intimate time with Odeh, he is aware that Amman’s conservative families are still not ready for this.”

“Doesn’t this make Mona a victim of patriarchy like the other Arab heroines?” asked the *qarina*. “She tries to change society but she ends up broken hearted and still a prisoner in her father’s house.”

“Yes, but I compromised...” smiled Suzanne, “I let her have a tolerant brother-in-law who will allow her to have freedom in his house.”

“But, the brother-in-law allows her...” taunted the *qarina*, emphasising the words “brother” and “allows”.

“I said gradual change, *qarina*, gradual. Amman’s traditions cannot be overturned in a month!”

“Ah, but much does change in a month,” said the *qarina*, “look at Um Ashraf and her girlfriends—they talk politics!”

“Yes the previously apolitical people of Amman have become more politically aware now with the Arab Spring. Aseel is another example of that.”

“That Aseel, I never knew whether I should love her or hate her!”

“I know,” laughed Suzanne, “Aseel is genuinely involved in the Arab Spring, but she does not completely understand what it stands for until she is humiliated in front of guests and the housekeeper helps her hide. She then understands that the Arab Spring is about humanity and justice.”

“What about Hayfa?” asked the *qarina*; “to her, politics is a way to get closer to Lutfi!”

“Well, not everybody has the same level of involvement in the movement.”

“What about what happened to Sana? Her encounter with the horrible janitor? Sana was defeated at the end.”

“No, although I left it open-ended, I left it on a positive note. She and Mona have a chance to start over, and when they come back Sana has the option of starting her own company. Yes, she loses her job because of her tarnished reputation, but Amman isn’t that bad, not anymore anyway. She’ll be able to start over; sometimes it’s better to start over. Plus, the reader knows enough about Tata by now, to know that if she finds out about Sana, she will have her back and fight mercilessly on her behalf. If not Tata, then Abu Ashraf will, or maybe even Mona.”

“That Mona is so Westernised, isn’t she?” asked the *qarina* with flames flashing in her eyes.

Trying to sound unfazed, Suzanne asked, “What makes you say that?”

“Well,” Suzanne’s *qarina* began, “she is so strong, she stands up to her father, she tries to break away from the family, she questions traditions and religion, she uses foul language, and the way she dresses...” the *qarina*’s voice trailed off. She tilted her head at Suzanne after a pregnant pause, “Isn’t that Westernised?”

Suzanne felt her blood boiling, but forced herself to think for a moment. “First of all,” she finally said, “using the suffix ‘ised’ is to imply that something has become or has converted into its current state. *Qarinati*, what you are implying by saying that Mona is

‘Westernised’, is that Mona has become less Middle Eastern and has converted into a more Western state of being because she is stronger than the other characters, because she stands up against patriarchy, and because she questions things.

Let us compare her to Tata who also breaks away from convention by convincing her husband to leave his family and move from Hebron to Amman. Tata is also strong; she pushes boundaries with her clothing and dresses as a man to gain access into male-only spaces. She does not favour her sons over her daughters; on the contrary, she favours the daughters of her daughters more than the daughters of her sons. Is Tata ‘Westernised’? What about the Prophet Mohammed, he was strong, he stood up against the current, questioned traditions and the religion that his tribespeople followed. He left his tribe, Quraish, and the uncle who raised him and migrated to Medina; was he ‘Westernised’?”

“Ooh,” murmured the *qarina*, “hit a raw nerve, have I?”

“Second of all,” Suzanne continued, ignoring her *qarina*’s comment, “it is incredibly Orientalist when we Easterners are praised for being ‘Westernised’. The concept of ‘Westernisation’ was conceived by Tomas Babington Macaulay in the 1830s. In 1835, in his *Minute on Education*, he recommended that Arabic should not be taught in Indian schools because the language may become ‘useless’. He also claimed that nobody could maintain that ‘Arabic and Sanscrit poetry could be compared to that of the great European nations.’ He goes so far as to say that he has never found anyone who could deny that a ‘single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.’ He hoped to create a class of colonised people although not English ‘in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.’<sup>11</sup> What he is basically saying is that we are inferior to the West in everything; in opinions, morals and intellect. Of course we could say that he’s just a colonialist from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and his views don’t apply to our contemporary times, but Michelguglielmo Torri<sup>12</sup> explains that the term ‘Westernised’ defines people who have been colonised who ‘acquired an education based on English language and culture.’ So referring to Mona as ‘Westernised’ is so much more than that since her education and morals are certainly not English or Western. She is an empowered Arab female. Referring to an empowered female as ‘Westernised’ simply because she is an empowered female is enforcing all the stereotypes I have been trying to counter in this thesis, isn’t it? In fact, accusing any Arab (or any non-Westerner for that matter) of being ‘Westernised’ because they have liberal views or because they are educated is Orientalist, because it is implying that any enlightened non-Westerner cannot be enlightened and remain a non-Westerner because education, enlightenment, and everything contemporary such as jeans, ice-cream, and burgers is Western. Never mind that jeans and most Western garments are manufactured in the East anyway, or that Western fashion has been greatly influenced by Eastern clothing traditions. Never mind that the alphabet, numbers, and the wheel, are all Middle Eastern inventions. What about every Westerner who reads or writes or uses a vehicle with wheels, or Westerners with piercings? They aren’t dubbed as Easternised; and if they were, it wouldn’t be as praise, it would probably mean that they are backward. Fatima Mernissi explains that many equate modernisation with Westernisation.<sup>13</sup> Rey Chow explains that

genuine cultural translation is possible only when we move beyond the seemingly infinite but actually reductive permutations of the two terms—East and West, original and translation—and instead see both as full, materialist, and most likely equally corrupt, equally decadent participants in contemporary world culture.<sup>14</sup>

The *qarina* floated around Suzanne menacingly, leaving a trail of smoke behind her. “So, my human,” she began deliberately, “have you explored all you set out to explore on this creative quest?”

Suzanne looked into her *qarina*'s eyes, wondering if hers was the face that stared back at her from the bathroom mirror at night, as Suzanne's home-ed teacher had told her as a child. “It's been quite a journey,” answered Suzanne, “I started by exploring Palestinian women in Jordan, and ended up examining women in Greater Syrian and Egyptian fiction, and then examining Palestinian women in Jordan before and during the Arab Spring. I've looked at their situation from all sorts of angles: psychologically, socially, legally and from a religious perspective. I've used a personal point of view as well as a detached one. I've stumbled upon some interesting things,” she smiled at the *qarina* as she said that, “I think I've done what I wanted to do in this novel.”

The *qarina* nodded in understanding, and with a loud POOF she was gone, and Suzanne was left standing alone.

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1 Ahmad M.S. Abu Baker, “Metamorphosis & the Therapeutic Function of Storytelling: The *Arabian Nights* Vs. Franz Kafka's Animal Stories”, *Cross-cultural Communication*, 7 (2011), 86-95.

2 Ernest Renan, “What is Nation?”, in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Bhabha, Homi K. (London : Routledge, 1990) p. 19.

3 Said (2002) p. 316.

4 Ibid. p. 407.

5 Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006).

6 Rabasa, p. 70.

7 Rana Hussein, *Murder in the name of Honour* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009) p. xi.

8 Shryock, Andrew J., “Popular Genealogical Nationalism: History Writing and Identity Among the Balqa Tribes of Jordan”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (1995), pp. 325-357.

9 Ibid.

10 Tamer Smadi, “Whoever does not like Jordan, the King Hussein Bridge is Open!”, Al Sabeel News (2011)

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11 Thomas Babington Macaulay, *Minute on Education* (1835)

<[http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealc/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/txt\\_minute\\_education\\_1835.html](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealc/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/txt_minute_education_1835.html)> [accessed 3.10.12]

12 Torri Michelguglielmo, “Westernised Middle Class, Intellectuals and Society in Late Colonial India”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25 (1990), 2-11.

13 Mernissi, (1985) p. 15.

14 Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, Film and Culture Series (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) p. 195.

## Conclusion

Suzanne stood at the door of the large burned underwater library of Alexandria. *If I leave and close the door behind me, she thought, will it go back to being forgotten?* She walked towards the shelf she had filled with novels written by women. She brought back Firdaus and Sabriya. They seemed confused at being brought back.

“We need to fix this place,” said Suzanne urgently. “Things can’t stay the way they are!”

“What do you mean honey-girl?” asked Firdaus. “Isn’t this place in your imagination anyway?”

“I mean,” replied Suzanne, “I would like this place to look like a real twenty-first century library before I leave.”

“We can bring a Jinni to do it for us,” added Sabriya.

Excited, Suzanne rushed over to *Alf Lela wa Lela* and brought out the Jinni from Prophet Solomon’s jar. “*Shubeik Lubeik*, your servant between your hands...” bowed the Jinni.

“Can you please clean this library?” she asked the smoky Jinni. “Can you unburn these books and bookshelves please? And I think we should have a critical theory section so I can add things written about women’s novels—like my thesis.”

“This place also needs Persian carpets, lots and lots of them, to decrease the echo,” Sabriya added.

“Oh! And computers! I’ll need a table full of Toshiba PCs please,” Suzanne asked the Jinni, who was getting things done as quickly as he could.

The Jinni did as he was told. Suzanne returned him to *A Thousand and One Nights* and began filling the new bookshelf with books discussing Arab women’s novels. She was about to add her thesis to the shelf, but hesitated.

“Bury me,” began Sabriya, “why don’t you want to put it on the shelf?”

“I do,” replied Suzanne, “but...”

“Bring it here, iris of my eye,” said Firdaus, “let’s take one last look at it.” Suzanne joined her and sat on a brand new library chair. Sabriya brought some Arabic coffee for

them, unable to discard her hospitable Syrian ways. “So have you done everything you set out to do?”

“Yes, Firdaus,” nodded Suzanne, “I have. My main goal was to examine my contemporaries’ novels and address the recurring themes. Then, I wrote my own novel, focusing more or less on the same themes, but discussing them in my own way.”

“More or less?” asked Sabriya.

“For example, the role of the family in the oppression of its female members, and the family’s role in encouraging male experience, and thwarting female progression. This central theme in Greater Syrian and Egyptian writing is evident in almost all of the novels I explored. Look at you, Sabriya, look at the way you were treated in comparison to your brothers, look at Maha and her brother Daffash, Salma and her brother Mahmoud, Zahra and her brother Ahmed... I acknowledge my contemporaries’ point; the male is encouraged to go out and live his life, and his sister is prohibited from enjoying the same rights as her brother, but I showed a different familial oppression. In my own novel, the family is there to solve all its members’ problems, and it monitors them in a way that leaves no space for error. When you err, you hurt your entire family, which is so oppressive! So, this is what I mean by ‘more or less’—I addressed the same issue, but in a different manner.”

Suzanne took a sip of Sabriya’s cardamom coffee; she felt it warm her up. “I also re-examined the mother-daughter relationship in my novel,” she continued after a short pause. “While my contemporaries’ female characters seemed to, perhaps inadvertently, have strained mother-daughter relationships, I had a major maternal figure, Tata. She’s super involved in all her children and grandchildren’s lives, which is incredibly oppressive when you think about it, but she is neither silent, absent, helpless nor dead. Tata was my way of breaking the pattern.”

“In my chapter *The Arab and the Other*, I examined Otherness when Arab women are forced into exile and found that my contemporaries’ characters do not really attempt to integrate in their new homes.”

“Did you have women in exile in your novel, cream and honey?” asked Firdaus.

“All the females in my own novel are Others. The Arabs of them are Palestinians in exile, with no prospects, or even desire, to go back. The non-Arab female characters are oppressed immigrant workers. So, again, I explored the same theme, but in a different way.”

“But surely they integrate?” protested Firdaus.

“Aneesa in *Dreams of Water* and Salma in *My Name is Salma* both have their different interpretations of what it means to be the Other. Aneesa tries to integrate by finding white friends and boyfriends—same with Salma actually, she marries a white man. Aneesa’s way of being British is eating tasteless sandwiches, and Salma starts using a razor instead of sugar for hair removal. Neither of them really feels at home in their new home. My own characters view themselves as Others, and they cling on to their Otherness as a way to remain Palestinian, similar to Nadia in *A Woman of Five Seasons*.”

“Do you have any white people in your novel?” asked Firdaus.

“Just one man,” smiled Suzanne, “and at first he is the exotic, desirable Other; then he becomes the rejected coloniser.”

Suzanne watched as Sabriya made more coffee in the library’s new café. “Then I examined domestic labour and alienation in the society as well as in the home. I find that most of my contemporaries’ characters suffer from alienation, from their societies, from their families, their homes, their own bodies even, such as in the case of Suha in *Women of Sand and Myrrh* and Zahra in *The Story of Zahra*. I think this phenomenon is slowly being remedied; woman’s active participation in society in terms of productive labour integrates her in society; and gives her the financial ability to feel at home in her own home. But unfortunately, as Al-Shaykh shows through Zahra’s experiences, it takes a war to overthrow all the stifling norms. So while in my novel, the women are able to leave the house and work and earn as much money as a man can, they are still powerless to change their family’s patriarchal way of thinking. But, I’m still optimistic, the Arab Spring is only a year old, and I’m sure that slowly things will change.”

“You think they’ll change to the extent that feminist issues will be openly discussed?” asked Firdaus.

“The biggest taboo in the Arab world is sexuality—especially homosexuality,” replied Suzanne, “The Greater Syrian writer who has conducted an in-depth exploration of this topic is Hanan Al-Shaykh. In her novel *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, Al-Shaykh demonstrates the consequences of premarital sex, as Fadia Faqir does in *My Name is Salma*. Al-Shaykh also explored cross-dressing as a resort for women to participate actively in male-only public spaces. Tata is my only character who resorts to cross-dressing as a means to go to a male-only space. Through Nur and Suha’s love affair, and



Tamr's experiences with her husbands, Al-Shaykh broaches the taboo topic of sexuality in a way that no other Arab woman writer in the region has."

"But we're all victims of this great taboo," Firdaus mused, "I wouldn't have been executed if I hadn't murdered a pimp who was about to rape me."

"And my handsome Adil would not have been murdered by my brother if I hadn't walked with him openly in public," reflected Sabriya.

"And Sana wouldn't have been fired if she hadn't been attacked by the janitor. And the janitor wouldn't have attacked her if she hadn't openly defied him, the way Firdaus openly defied her pimp."

"It comes to full circle, doesn't it sugar girl?" Firdaus smiled sadly.

"Yes it does," Suzanne nodded. "I tried to break as many patterns as I could, but some things I couldn't change too drastically." Suzanne got up, carrying her heavy thesis. "But soon," she added with more enthusiasm, "it will get better. We Arab women in Egypt and Greater Syria have written about these things, which is the first step, isn't? Exposing the problem was our task."

Suzanne placed her large thesis among the other literary criticism books. She put her arms around Firdaus and Sabriya, who both stood on either side of her, and admired the refurbished, well-lit imaginary library of Alexandria.

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