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# Rosewater

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Rosewater

By  
Hanan Hazime

A Creative Writing Project  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through the Department of English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts at the  
UNIVERSITY OF WINDSOR

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

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Rosewater

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June 12, 2015

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## **Abstract**

*Rosewater* is an Arab-American novella composed of two short stories- “Hab al Ruman” and “Sharbat”. “Hab al Ruman” is set in 1983 in Mount Lebanon and presents the mental journey of a single Muslim mother as she struggles to preside over her adolescent daughter’s future. “Sharbat” is set in 2012 in Southwestern Ontario and features the disjunctive psychological explorations of a young Lebanese-Canadian Muslimah as she struggles to liberate herself from the restrictive cultural binaries imposed upon her.

## **Dedication**

*To Mama, for teaching me how to be a strong woman.*

*To Amelia, for helping me fight off the Dementors.*

*To Shae, because inta Shamsi ila al abad. Cara mi ti!*

## **Acknowledgments**

All my gratitude is owed first and foremost to God (Alhamdulillah).

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*Rosewater*

# *Hab Al Ruman*

**(Pomegranate Seeds)**

“There’s really no such thing as the ‘voiceless.’ There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.”

—Arundhati Roy

# Chapter 1

*-Mount Lebanon, 1983-*

Abu Khairy is expecting a large dinner party tonight. I will have to kill a lamb. Men love to eat and rich men like Abu Khairy must have meat for all their meals. They cannot survive on lentils and beans as we do. How many animals and how many women have ended up buried in between men's ribs? *Alhamdulillah*, I am paid to cook their meat, but never will my stomach become a graveyard. I run a finger along the flat edge of my newly sharpened knife. The elders in the village say slaughtering is a man's job; women's fragile spirits cannot handle something so violent. They think we will faint at the sight of blood, but we've been bleeding between the legs since Allah created Hawa. When I gave birth, alone, to Sajira sixteen years ago, I cut my own umbilical cord with a pair of sewing scissors. As for slaughtering animals, a slash to the jugular vein is all it takes. Cleaning out the innards is the difficult part. I sigh. Sajira will be upset if she knows I'm to slaughter her favourite little lamb today.

"Sajira!" I call into the open door of our shed. "*Yallah*, hurry up!" I've asked her to go purchase some spices for me. I'll wait until she leaves before killing the lamb. She's taking far too long to get dressed and I'm already behind.

"Yes. Mama, I'm coming." She slowly makes her way over to where I'm standing in our garden, her white scarf fluttering in the wind. I gesture to her face with my knife.

"Why is your face uncovered? Did I not tell you to wear your burqa?"

“But Mama, I can NOT breathe with that thing on. I hate burqas. Why can’t I just wear a chador or *shayl* like the other girls? You let me wear the chador to school; why can’t I wear it to the *souq*?”

Walking uncovered in the market streets is too dangerous. The licentious eyes of men will follow her everywhere. Better to be safe.

“Don’t ask questions Sajira. Trust me. I know what’s best for you.”

Sajira looks up at me with a glint of defiance in her blue irises.

“But Mama—”

“No. Sajira.” I give her a stern look, tapping the knife blade against my left thigh. “Go back inside and put it on or else I’m not letting you go. Would you rather sift lentils for me?”

“Okay fine. I’ll wear it, but *Wallahi* I look like a sack of potatoes in that thing.”

I’m only trying to protect her. She will have young men chasing after her soon enough. Any girl her age would welcome the attention. I slash at the air with my knife. Better to cut off temptations altogether than to attempt to control them. I will not allow Sajira to destroy her future. One glance was all it took to destroy my own.

\*

It was Eid Al Adha and I was excited because I could finally wear the new dress Amtu Salwa sewed for me. I had been eyeing the cerulean silk hanging in the souq for weeks. The dress clung to my fifteen-year-old body in all the right places, accentuating my curves. My family wasn't religious. As long as I wrapped a loose *shayl* around my head, my dark curls only partially covered, they were content. More often than not, as I swung my hips at the village boys, I would allow the *shayl* to slide from my head, leaving it to rest uselessly around my neck. It was all a game to me. I was young, beautiful, and untouchable. They could look, they could crave, they could dream, but they could never have me. I felt powerful. I loved to tease them. I would never do anything *haram*. The boys would whistle and call out flirtatious things, sometimes even offer me gifts. I never stopped or gave any of them a second glance.

The Aunties had sent me to fetch some pomegranates for the lamb mansaf. The heavens were perfectly blue that day, I remember thinking, perfectly blue. As I swayed down my uncle's orchard in my new dress, I felt like I was wearing the sky. After filling up my basket, I set it on the ground and tied my *shayl* around my waist. Singing out loud, I gyrated my belly and hips to the rhythm, my gold bangles jingling. Then, losing balance, I accidentally knocked the basket over and the pomegranates rolled onto the dirt. I bent down to gather them and when I stood up, there he was, right in front of me, holding one of the fallen pomegranates and smirking. I squealed.

“I'm sorry, did I startle you?”

I couldn't compose myself well enough to answer right away. I could only stare. His eyes were blue, perfectly blue. This must be the *Ajnabi* boy. I had

overheard the Aunties gossiping earlier about Uncle Rashid's new neighbour, a wealthy merchant with a French wife.

*What's so wrong with our women that he had to go marry a white one? You're just jealous of her light skin and eyes... She's not accustomed to our ways... You should see their son. Mashallah, so handsome. Pity having a mother like that though...blue eyes... Is he married? No, but I'd never let him marry my daughter...bad seed I tell you... No, no... Nothing good can come out of such marriages...*

"That's mine!" I said, pointing at the pomegranate in his hand.

He laughed. "It's mine now."

"Give it back."

"No."

"Stealing is *haram*. You'll go to Hell."

"I don't care."

"You should."

"Make me."

I walked over and reached for the pomegranate. He grabbed my wrist.

"Let go!"

"No."

“I’ll scream.”

“Let me have the pomegranate then. *Eid kareem* to me.” He winked.

“Okay. Keep it. But *Insha Allah* you’ll choke. Thief!” I pulled his hand off of me.

“Feisty girl. I like it. Are you a jinni? You’re way too attractive to be human.” He winked again, and gave me a cheeky smile.

If anyone could be mistaken for a mischievous jinn, it was him. The contrast between his dark hair and rosy white skin made his eyes, which matched the sky, even more striking. His lips were the same colour as the pomegranates. His teeth were unnaturally white. Even the navy blue suit he was wearing seemed to give off an otherworldly sheen. No man had ever spoken to me so boldly. It was both infuriating and exhilarating.

“How dare you speak to me like this? My father will kill you if he finds out. And my uncle just finished butchering the sheep. The knives are still bloody...”

“You won’t tell them.” He smirked at me. “I watched you dance. You’re very good.”

“Ah, you’re a thief *and* a creep. How lovely.”

“I was walking home and I heard you singing so —”

“This isn’t a public road. You’re trespassing.”

“No, I came to wish Uncle Rashid *Eid Mubarak* and since our orchards connect to yours, I took a shortcut.”

“Oh.”

“I’m sorry if I offended you. I was just kidding, but really you are the most beautiful girl I have ever seen... *Mashallah*. What’s your name? ”

I blushed. “Zahra.”

“A rose named after a rose.”

“Well, this rose has thorns,” I said as I untied the *shayl* from around my waist and wrapped it tightly over my head.

“He who can get past the thorns shall have the rose for himself,” he whispered. His voice was softer than most men’s and his accent was tinged with French, which made him sound exotic.

“I suppose you think you can.” I picked up my basket and started walking away.

“Yes... Wait!”

“What?”

“Here.” I turned back around. He threw the pomegranate at me. It landed right in the basket. “Will I see you again?” His eyes were wide, and expectant, like a child begging for sweets. I didn’t want to appease him. That wouldn’t be fun at all.

“Maybe.” This time, I winked at him.



*Maktub*, they say; Allah has already written out our destinies. Sometimes I wonder if God has written out a myriad of destinies for us, each one branching out and bearing fruit like figs on a tree, where it is ultimately our choice which fruits we pick or not. Had I sunk my teeth into the wrong fig?

\*

Sajira comes out of the shed, this time wearing her burqa. Even if she despises me for it, even if she thinks I am a wretched, awful mother, I must be certain to guard her honour. She has *his* eyes. Allah Himself does not ask us to hide our faces, but men are not as merciful as their creator. Until men can learn to control themselves and rise above their animality, we must protect ourselves in every way we can. One glance, that's all it takes.

“Happy now, Mama?”

“Much better. Make sure you keep it on, and don't forget that even if I'm not there, Allah is watching you. ”

“I know, Mama. You always say that.”

“Just get the spices and come straight home. No loitering in the *souq*. No chatting with strangers. And under no circumstances are you to chat with boys, especially not that curly-haired boy...the one from school...what's his name...the barber man's son. I don't like the way he was looking at you the last time we went to the *souq*, trying to flirt with you right in front of me, pretending it was about schoolwork. There was no need to ask you. He could easily have called up one of his

male friends, but ah, I know these tricks the *shabab* use. Stay far away from their shop.”

She yanks the veil off her face and grimaces at me. Sajira can be unbelievably stubborn sometimes. I wish she would just listen. How do I tell her that I’m only imposing these rules in order to protect her? I wish my mother had been this attentive to my behavior when I was Sajira’s age. If my parents hadn’t allowed me to run about so freely, I might not have eaten the wrong fruit. No matter, *Alhamdulillah* for everything. Sajira will thank me later.

“*Khalas* Mama. You don’t have to keep reminding me. I already know. Boys are *haram*. And apparently breathing is now *haram* too because you’re making me wear this stupid thing on my face. Nobody cares what I look like. Don’t you see? Not all men are perverted cowards.” Sajira’s lips are contoured with displeasure. “I should just stay home and die because apparently having fun is also *haram*. This isn’t fair. That boy’s name is Adel and he actually was asking me about an assignment. Maybe I shouldn’t go to school either because there are evil men there too. You know what Mama, if you don’t trust me, then why don’t *you* go get the spices?”

“Sajira! Don’t speak to me like that. I never said speaking to men is *haram*, but speaking so disrespectfully to your mother is indeed very *haram*. Of course I trust you.” I tighten my grip on the knife. “It’s the other people that I don’t trust.” Sajira stares at me, scowling. Perhaps I shouldn’t be sending her to the *souq* alone, but it’s still early and I need those spices. I can’t kill the lamb in front of her. Last time she cried for an entire afternoon. *Ya Allah*, give me patience. “Stop this nonsense. You can breathe

perfectly fine with the veil on. I'm going to let you go this time, but please do hurry up, it's almost time for noon prayers and I still have lots to do. *Yallah* go, and remember what I said. No boys. Allah is watching.”

\*

The second time we met, it was raining. I was walking to my best friend Miriam's house. Her cousin Noora was getting married the next day and Miriam had wanted me to help out with some last minute wedding preparations. I'd have to stay at her house overnight. We were all going to take Noora to the *hamam* over in the next village. The bride would need to be waxed and washed, her skin scraped raw for her new husband.

I had never been very keen on visiting the *hamam*, but custom demanded that I go. My family was rich enough to afford a modern bathroom, complete with warm, running water. The public baths were always too hot. The sickly sweet amalgamation of scents often made my stomach uneasy, and looking upon the distorted, post-pregnancy figures of the older women made me cringe in disgust. Allah had gifted me with a curvaceous body which I knew to be the envy of many girls in the village. I was extremely wary of their *hasaad* cursing me with an evil eye, and for that reason I preferred to bathe privately. I hated to think that one day I would have my youth and beauty suckled away by little creatures like these women had.

My mother had different ideas. She had berated me that very morning for “falling behind.”

*When I was your age, I had already given birth to Muhammad and Asmah. Noora is two years younger than you and look at her, already getting married, but you... why do you keep refusing all these wonderful suitors? Foolish girl! You mustn't be so snobbish, thinking you're too good for everyone. You're pushing away your naseeb and pretty soon suitors will stop knocking on our door. You're not getting any younger. Do you want to be an old maid like your Aunt Salwa? Do you, Zahra? Because unless you put that brain of yours back into your skull, that's exactly where you're headed...I won't have this. We've got too many spinsters in the family already. You're too pretty for that. If this cow of a girl Noora can get a husband...*

Marriage was the furthest thing from my mind at the time and my mother's words were like summer mosquitos who, unable to draw blood, kept on insistently biting me. I did not want to be chained to a man here, to live out my life as my mother and aunts did, cooking, cleaning, and rearing children. My dreams were vast and grand; I was going to move to the city, to stand up on a fancy stage and sing. I was going to become a legend, like Om Kalthum and Fairuz. Audiences from all over the Arab world would come to fawn over me, over my voice, over my beauty. My songs were going to play on the radio. Men would buy me roses. I was going to see the world, shop for glamorous dresses in France and Italy. I was going to be famous.

My mother was right. I *had* been a foolish girl then, but I had wholeheartedly believed myself to be destined for things far greater than a mundane village life. All the men who had proposed to me had been excruciatingly boring, and marriage to any one of them would have sentenced my dreams to death. *Maktub*. Perhaps, if I hadn't argued with my mother that morning, I would have been in better spirits and I would

not have chosen to spite her by taking the forbidden route to Miriam's. That route, which ran along the valley between our house and Miriam's, was often crossed by highwaymen and my family had long ago forbidden me to walk there alone.

I had made it nearly half-way through the valley when it began to rain. My change of clothes for the bath and wedding party were safely folded away in my bags, but the peach coloured dress I had on was glued to my body in all the wrong places and had become completely transparent. The lace hem was soiled. My hair, so carefully plaited hours earlier, had frizzled out of my loosely wrapped *shayl*. Cursing my luck and furious at my mother for spoiling my mood, I began to run in hopes of getting out of the rain faster. Running proved to be even more detrimental to my situation though when I lost my footing and slipped in the mud. I tried getting up, but the ground was sludgy and I slipped again. In the distance, I could vaguely make out the figure of a man on a donkey slowly approaching. I hoped to God it wasn't someone I knew. "*Ya Allah, why?*" I screamed at the skies while the downpour assaulted me. As the man on the donkey came closer, I realized with a jolt of apprehension that it was *him*, the pomegranate thief. I groaned.

"If it isn't my little jinni... May I join you? I do love playing in the mud." His laughter rang in my ears as he got off his donkey and plonked himself next to me on the muddy ground.

"What are you doing? Are you crazy?" I stared at him. Despite being drenched in rainwater, he still managed to look impossibly flawless. His wet curls had cascaded down to his eyebrows, making him appear even more mysterious.

“ I might ask *you* the same question. I’m not the one taking a bath in the rain. Although I must say, you look absolutely ravishing at the moment,” he smirked, sliding himself closer to me in the mud.

“Shut up! I fell.” My cheeks heated. I would play this encounter over in my head later, and with reach replay, my mortification at being seen in such a state would increase tenfold.

“I can see that. I was enjoying this fine weather with my buddy Melo here” – he pointed to his donkey, which was braying loudly – “when my eyes...”

“Your donkey has a *name*?”

“Yes, of course... As I was saying, my eyes fell upon a precious little rose drowning in mud and I thought to myself , Qays, you must charge forward and rescue your Layla... So, fair lady, would you permit me to offer you a ride on my glorious steed?” His donkey was far from glorious. Its shaggy white hair was matted from the rain and its legs were caked in mud.

“*Ya Allah*. You really are crazy. ”

“Didn’t I just tell you that I am Qays, Majnun Layla? Now, allow me to help you or we’re both going to keep on getting wetter and filthier, ma chérie,” he winked.

“I don’t need your help! Find yourself another Layla to rescue. I can’t believe –”

But before I finished my sentence, his muscular arms were anchored around me, lifting me up. My heart began to dribble even harder than the rain. No strange man had ever touched me before.

“*Yee!* What are you doing? Let me down.”

“Rescuing you.”

“Put me down! Now.”

To my surprise, he actually respected my request and let me down. I took a deep breath, willing my heart to stop racing. Although I was cold and wet, his touch had sent a surge of heat all through my body. My heart continued to flutter. I didn’t like not having full control of my body. I felt dizzy.

“I am perfectly capable of walking.”

“Clearly not. You’re a mess... a pretty mess, but still a mess.”

“Shut up.”

“*Yallah*, quit being so stubborn. You know you need my help.”

I simultaneously despised him and found his insolence intriguing. No man had ever dared to speak to me in such an abrasive manner before, not even my male relatives. I did need his help, but I was not accustomed to accepting charity from anyone; I knew he would expect something in return. Men always did. The trick was to tease them until they came begging you for more; until they were on their knees, offering you their money, their land, their hearts, but to never give in. It would have been more dignified to refuse his offer. Under no circumstances would it have been deemed appropriate for me to ride on the back of a stranger’s donkey. Despite

knowing that my parents would be furious if they found out, I relented. We rode away on his donkey in the rain. I just wanted to get to Miriam's and change out of my wet clothes, but being in such close proximity to a male who was not related to me by blood caused unusual sensations to flood through my body. As we made our way through the rest of the valley, he told me funny stories about his childhood in France. I was only half listening. My mind had become fixated on the feel of my chest pressed against his back. The pathway was uneven and with each sudden jerk of the donkey, I squeezed my arms tighter around his waist. My heart trembled the whole way. I was a wary of being seen with him. The villagers would talk.

By the time we reached the main road, the skies had finally cleared up and my dress was beginning to dry off. I would walk the remainder of the way to Miriam's.

"I want to see you again. Where can we meet?" he had said to me.

"And what makes you think that *I* want to see *you*?"

"Of course you do. I'm irresistible."

I laughed. "You're so cocky."

"No, just confident. Come on, you were laughing at all my jokes. Admit it. You like me too. Don't you think I noticed the way you look at me? And how red your cheeks –"

"Not true! You're imagining things...crazy pomegranate thief!"



“Oh Layla, give this Majnun a chance. You won’t regret it. I won’t steal any more pomegranates, I promise. But I can’t guarantee that I won’t be stealing other things, maybe your heart.” He gave me one of his mischievous smirks again.

I wanted to say no. I didn’t have time for silly village boys. But he wasn’t *really* from the village. He was a city boy with hypnotizing eyes. His lips formed a perfect bow. I imagined pressing my mouth to his. Maybe I should give him a chance, I told myself. He could be my ticket out of the village. I imagined him taking me to France. Would my parents accept a suitor who was only half- Lebanese? I remembered how the Aunties had gossiped about his mother. We could elope, I thought, like my neighbour Sarah did, but her family had disowned her. Would my family disown me too? Either way, I would be free! I would be able to sing. I would be famous. They would have to forgive me for disobeying them then, eventually. They would be proud of their beautiful, talented daughter. Mama had always gotten me to sing at family weddings. *Mashallah, she has the voice of an angel.* None of the other village girls had accomplished anything. Popping out babies, that was all they were good at. The world deserved to hear my voice.

“Okay. I’ll think about it.”

“Please? I’ll wait for you, tomorrow evening. Under those pomegranate trees.”

“No, I can’t tomorrow. I have a wedding.”

“The day after?”

“I can’t in the evening. My family will get suspicious. I’ll sneak out after dawn prayers. Everyone will be asleep then.”

“I’ll be awake, waiting for you.”

Before we parted ways, he bent down and kissed my hand. The feel of his lips on my skin was exhilarating. I knew it was *haram*; technically he shouldn’t have been touching me at all. I didn’t think anything of it then. A kiss on the hand would soon be the least of my worries.

\*

## Chapter 2

I carry the youngest lamb out of the pen, the one Sajira had dubbed Lola, and bring it to a water trough. Sajira will be very upset to know that her young friend will be settling at the bottom of the men’s’ bellies tonight. The thought makes my own stomach churn. Not that I have any say in the matter. The lamb, after all, does not belong to me. Abu Khairy and Om Khairy were benevolent enough to take me in all those years ago, but I, unlike the poor lamb, *did* have a choice in my ill-gotten fate. *Drink up, Lola! At least you shall receive an honourable death.* My demise would have been much less dignified if I had not escaped. Would my family have made sure I had enough to drink before slaughtering me? As soon as I fold Lola’s ears over her eyes, she begins to struggle under my grasp. Sheep can be such cowards. I take a deep breath and say “*Bismillah.*” It’s all over within seconds. How easy it must be for the angel of death to extract the soul after someone else has cut off the innocent being’s

lifeline. I release Lola and allow her to move freely as she dies. *Maktub*. Perhaps we are all sheep in the end, awaiting our slaughter. I wait for the blood to drain and then make an incision below the lamb's ribs. The innards must be removed. My own heart and lungs are still safely intact inside my ribcage but they may just as well go in the bucket with these bloody organs. Do I dare blame my heart? It simply pumps blood, but my brain... my brain is where the true corruption sprouted. I place the lamb's gutted carcass in a separate bucket and balance it on my head as I walk to the kitchen. Blood slowly drips from the knife in my hand, leaving a scattered trail of red behind me on the dirt. No matter, the rain will soon wash it away. Before I step inside, I rest the buckets on the ground, and kneeling down, I raise my hands towards the sky. The clouds have begun to darken. I hope Sajira returns before the storm starts. *Allah, thank you for the sustenance...although, I wish You had forbidden the sons of Adam from devouring the flesh of Your innocent creations. Please protect my daughter better than You protected Your lamb. Do not allow humans to harm Sajira the way they harmed me. Amen.*

By the time I've finished skinning the lamb and chopping it up, the *Azan* for *Salat al Duhr* begins to flow in through the open window. Sajira has not yet returned. What is taking her so long? I told her not to dawdle in the *souq*. I go into the small bedroom Sajira and I share, remove my blood-stained dress and replace it with my white prayer robes. As a young girl, I did not have any misgivings about delaying prayers or skipping them altogether. Now, I worry that God will be angry with me if I am even a few minutes late. Atonement comes at a hefty price. Mere supplication cannot help me compensate for my mistakes. I must show Allah that I have transcended

beyond the trials life has flung upon me by raising Sajira well, by not allowing her to go astray.

Using water from the well, I perform my ablution. Once I am physically cleansed, I bow down to my Creator in hopes that today shall be the day I am spiritually purified as well.

I return to the kitchen to finish preparing tonight's dinner. The weather outside is more volatile now; thunder and lightning cackle like the old hags that beg in the market square. Perhaps I should not have sent Sajira after all. She will catch her death in the downpour. My hands begin to shake as I mince up the parsley for the *tabouli*. Maybe she is still in the *souq*, safe from the rain in one of the shops...but what if she's talking to that boy? Would he offer her tea? He could put something in there, and of course the shops will all close because of the rain and he could...or *ya Allah*, knowing that there's a storm, that insolent boy, the barber's son kept chatting with her on purpose. That way he would have a perfect excuse to give her a ride in his father's Mercedes. The entire village had gossiped endlessly when they purchased the car. I haven't seen it yet, but I've seen enough cars to know that there's plenty of room for him to take advantage of her in there. Nobody would hear her scream. But...what if she goes willingly with him? What if she wants that boy to touch her? I drop the knife. I have to go find her.

\*

Sneaking out nearly every day at dawn to meet with him meant that I had to be extra vigilant. Luckily, the land my family owned was vast so it was considerably easy to

remain concealed within the seemingly endless range of pomegranate orchards, fig orchards, olive groves, grape vineyards, and other fields lush with fruit. It was unlikely that anyone would catch us so early in the morning but still, caution was necessary. I knew that there were serious risks associated with having secret relations. An innocent flirtation could end in a series of shameful lashes.

At first, our rendezvous simply consisted of silly bantering and harmless games. We would chase each other around the orchard and play hide-and-seek, or climb up the trees and throw leaves at each other. Sometimes, he would ask me to sing for him. I would stand up on an old tree stump, pretend it was a stage, and perform my favourite melodies. Afterwards, he would take my hand and brush his lips against it. I enjoyed the feel of his lips on my skin more than I cared to admit.

“Bravo! Ma chérie, that was beautiful.”

“You really think so?”

“Your voice is ethereal. I’m afraid that you might enchant me with it, bewitch me into doing mischievous things.”

“I’m no sorceress.”

“No, but you’ve charmed me just the same.”

Often, he would bring small treats for me: sugared almonds, Turkish delights, bonbons, chocolates, éclairs, and any French pastries his mother made. I had little appetite for sweets even then. Most of the time, he would end up eating the treats

himself. One morning, though, he surprised me with something I had long held a desire for. He gave me his portable radio.

“Take this, ma petite rose. Now you can listen to all your favourite stars whenever you want and learn new songs.”

The radio itself wasn't very fancy and it was scratched in some spots, but I didn't care. I would no longer have to fight with my father to borrow the family radio. Sometimes, when Baba wasn't home, I would turn the radio up and let my voice drift with the different melodies. Singing along to the radio made tedious chores like sifting through lentils or churning butter much more bearable. Baba was adamantly against my passion for music, and when he caught me listening to the radio he would chastise me for lending my ears to “such noisy nonsense.” Later, Baba would discover the gift and smash it, but in that moment sitting amongst the pomegranate trees with an entire world of music in my hands, I was absolutely overjoyed by the prospect of autonomy. Indeed, the gift elevated my spirits so much that instead of just verbally thanking him, I flung myself into his arms and gave him a small peck on his left cheek. When he leaned closer and caressed my mouth with his, I closed my eyes and made no objection. Our lips met and it was like rose syrup dissolving into *ashta* cream; the frantic fervor that sparked between us was enough to burn down the entire orchard. As we kissed, he gently massaged my breasts, and I began quivering all over. In the back of my mind, I knew it was wrong, but I made no effort to stop him. Somehow we ended up on the ground, and as he lay on top me, his body pressed to mine, his tongue exploring my mouth, pleasure overtook my senses.

Perhaps the memory would be less shameful if he had forced himself upon me.

As it was, I myself had readily transgressed beyond the limits placed by God. It might not have become a serious issue if we had been satisfied with merely kissing and fondling. No. That first kiss ignited an insatiable desire in us both, and soon our witty verbal exchanges were replaced by conversations of the bodily kind.

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My heart trembles as I rush through the muddy garden towards the gate. I should not have let Sajira out alone. No. *Calm down, you're being ridiculous. You can't do this every time you send Sajira on an errand. She's safe. Oh ya Allah please let her be okay.* Humans cannot be trusted. Stubborn child! She might have removed her veil. Someone from my family might have spotted her and, noticing the resemblance to me, kidnapped her. They would kill her... my beautiful, innocent child...butcher her with not even a morsel of mercy. Even after all these years, they're probably still looking for us. For me. The hunted can never be free, can never relax. *Ya Allah*, have I not paid my dues to You? Why must You continue to torment me? A lifetime of suffering for a single moment of girlish tomfoolery, of naïve desire. What is the point of regret? The past can never be erased, just as this rain can never wash away my Sin. It is ingrained in my heart, scalding and black, stitched between flesh and sinew, scraping against the bones of my ribcage. The dribbling of my infected heart competes with the pelting of the rain.

“Mama, Mama! What are you doing out here?” By the time I arrive at the back gate, my cloak is dripping wet and I am shivering but in my frenzy at finding Sajira right in front of me, I may as well be burning in the desert. I envelope her in my arms.

“*Alhamdulillah!* You’re still alive.” I kiss her on both cheeks.

“Yes, why wouldn’t I be, Mama? It’s not like I was out smooching the angel of death. You do this every time. I don’t get it...”

“Shut up you insolent girl! I was *so* worried about you. What took you this long? Didn’t I tell you not to loiter and come straight home... and where is your face covering?”

“Mama, I can explain. *Wallahi*, it’s not my fault, I got the spices like you said, and I even kept that stupid thing on my face but then it got really windy and started to rain and it blew off my face and then this lady she...”

“Didn’t I tell you NOT to talk to anyone?! I can’t believe...”

“...she insisted on driving me home.” Sajira points behind her, and that’s when I notice the blue car parked on the gravel outside the gate. There is a tall, slender lady with permed hair wearing a short yellow dress, standing outside the car and holding on to a massive umbrella. She looks like those fancy women displayed on screen at the cinema. I am so startled by her presence that I completely forget what I was about to say to Sajira.

“Ahem. Excuse me, sorry to interrupt but it is entirely *my* fault. I made this *amurah* here late.” The woman walks over to where we are standing by the gate, her heels digging into the mud. She grabs on to Sajira’s arm. “I couldn’t resist, I *had* to follow her. I was driving and then the wind blew that thing off her face and wow, I literally hit my breaks... I thought to myself, what a beautiful angel! Exactly what I’m



looking for. What a shame to have such beauty covered. But yes ah, I am getting ahead of myself again. Ahem, so yes what was I saying? The poor girl was half frightened to death and naturally refused to get into the car at first. But you see, sometimes I can be rather influential so it's really entirely my fault." She gives me a sheepish smile.

I stare straight into her eyes. They are buried under layers of makeup.

"Who are you? And what do you want with my daughter?" I pull Sajira away from her. "Sajira! Go inside now."

Sajira looks at me but doesn't move. "I said now. GO!" My voice sounds shrill even to my own ears. "Make sure you dry off properly," I say more gently as she walks away. The downpour is beginning to settle into a light drizzle.

I turn to the woman. "Again, I ask: who are you? And what do you want? You have no business approaching my daughter or offering her rides."

"I'm Salma Yousef, Om Abdullah but you can just call me Sally. And of course you're Om Sajira, I understand you have no sons which is such a pity but I suppose having such a lovely daughter makes up for that." Giggling, the woman moves closer to me and extends her hand. I don't take it. "*Habibti*, I understand, you may not want to shake my hand on account that yours is all muddy but *Wallah* I don't mind, not at all. I assure you, I'm extremely humble."

I don't know how to reply to this woman. Clearly, she does *not* understand. I try again. "What do you want from my daughter?"

“It’s all *khair inshaAllah*, I shall explain everything! Oh. You don’t know how happy I am, lucky lucky day today. Now, if you’d be so kind as to invite me inside for some chai? It is a bit chilly out here. And ah! How rude of me... I should have shared my umbrella with you! You’re soaked. What shall you think of me now? I assure you I’m not a selfish woman, on the contrary, I am very charitable. In fact, I just sacrificed a generous portion of chicken and sheep at the butcher’s. They’ll be handing the meat out to the poor tomorrow...have to give back to my country folk you know. It’s my first time visiting in years and just oh my...has this village gone downhill or maybe that’s just me... so spoiled back in Canada... none of this having to boil water to shower thing...”

I simply glare at her. I don’t have time for idle chit chat. Abu Khairy will not be pleased if I don’t have dinner completed on time. Besides, she’s speaking too quickly. I can’t catch everything she’s saying.

“...we aren’t dependent on rain water either. Of course, this has just made me appreciate what I have even more...wouldn’t like to move back here, even though it is so very gorgeous. So much greenery everywhere! And my back has been aching from all the hills, it’s practically impossible to walk around. That’s why I rented a car you know. Sorry, will you look at that...I’m still babbling away ...Forgive me *Wallah*, I am not usually like this but I could not contain my excitement when I spotted Sajira . It’s made me quite chatty. She’s absolutely perfect! A dream. Of course...that veil thing would have to go but ... *yallah* shall we head inside?” She staggers towards me.

“No. *I* am heading inside. *You* are going back to your car and leaving us alone. I don’t know what schemes you’ve thought up for my daughter but I do not have time to entertain strangers. *Assalamu Alaykum.*”

“Of course, I completely understand. You’re busy right now, that’s perfectly alright. I will only intrude upon your hospitality for a few more minutes...please wait, I’ll only be a moment.” She wobbles to her car and waves at me. I sigh.

Salma-call-me-Sally is either an insensible lunatic or she’s feigning obliviousness. I watch her as she rummages through a big yellow bag in her car. The rain has come to a complete halt now, but my cloak is still sopping wet. I need to head back inside and dry off. Then, Sajira and I are going to have a long chat while I cook, because if Sajira had been obedient and tied the veil on properly, Salma wouldn’t have followed her. I was anxious about men trailing Sajira, but now it looks like I will have to start worrying about women as well. It’s too risky to reveal our faces in public. I must be more cautious from now on. Today’s mistake cannot be repeated. Salma seems pretty harmless but there are many people out there who are not. I’m sure my family is still searching for us. They will not stop until they’ve restored their honour, until they’ve erased their disgrace by killing both me and my daughter. Sajira’s life must not be put in jeopardy. How do I make her understand the importance of concealing herself? We cannot afford to draw attention to ourselves.

Salma slams her car door and walks back to me. “I could not leave without giving you this.” She hands me an envelope. “Forgive me for getting so carried away. I simply wanted the honour of your acquaintance to ask for Sajira’s hand in marriage.

You see, I came here to find a bride for my son ...and so far I've had terrible luck...but Sajira, why Sajira is exactly the kind of girl I'm looking for. Look at the envelope, my number is in there. If you're interested, ring me up. I leave in three weeks, and I'd hate to leave empty handed. I suppose it is all just *naseeb*...I really do hope my son's *naseeb* is with Sajira." She has a massive grin on her face. "*Salaam* for now."

I'm too dumbfounded to reply. Instead, I study the envelope in my hand. It's bright white, as white as bride's veil. Bride? Veil? She wants Sajira for her son. She wants her son to marry my daughter, Sajira. My Sajira- a bride for her son? Why Sajira? *Zahra, your daughter is so beautiful, so light skinned, and those eyes, Mashallah, so blue, does she take after her father?*

*"Congratulations to the groom*

*And also to the bride-*

*Oh lady of beauty, light of the eyes"*

Isn't that how the wedding song goes? Would Sajira agree? Does she already know? Did Salma tell her?

*"Girls, let's congratulate our bride.*

*She decorates our village.*

*Play the music. Tell me, for who?*

*For the lady of beauty, oh the light of the eyes."*

I wait until Salma's fancy car fades into the distance before ripping open the envelope. There are three photographs. They are all of the same round faced, dark haired, dark eyed young man. Would Sajira find him handsome? Salma seems to be very well off, which means her son will have lots of money too, *Canadian* money. Sajira's future would be secured. I can't just throw away my daughter at the highest bidder. But this might be her only chance. My brain is whirring. I need to cook the lamb, yes, little Lola is waiting for me to spice her up. Two spoons of turmeric. Three spoons of paprika. It's Sajira's eyes – those strange unearthly eyes. I told her to cover them. Twelve cups of rice. Six onions. Two spoons of cumin. *Naseeb?* Does a bastard girl really have a chance at marriage? *It's such a misfortune, Zahra, that your baby is a girl. Girls take after their mothers. She will inherit your shame...* Two cups of ghee butter. A pinch of salt. *...but the villagers here don't need to know...Abu Khairy and I will guard your secret.* One spoon of cardamom. Two and a half a cups of pine nuts. Sajira really doesn't have many prospects. Marriage would keep her safe. A man to protect her from other men. *No, unfortunately Sajira and I were the only ones to survive the bombings ...Abu Khairy was kind enough to take us in...a lone widow and her newborn daughter...yes, I am eternally grateful to him...I must be on my way now, Om Khairy is watching Sajira for me, she doesn't like it if I loiter in the souq.* Two spoons of coriander. One spoon of cinnamon. Three cups of almonds. And Canada, that's on the other side of the ocean. They wouldn't be able to get to her there. One cup of raisins, and two cups of pomegranate seeds.

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## Chapter 3

Months passed. We continued to meet in secret under the pomegranate trees. While my body welcomed the physical pleasure, my heart was dissatisfied. What I felt for him was not love. My mind was fixated on one thing: my dream of becoming a famous singer, and to do that, I needed to venture beyond the confines of my village. Marrying him would ensure my freedom. I knew he wasn't planning on settling in the village. His father was in the midst of setting up a tobacco plantation. They would be returning to France once their business was fully established, and when they did, I wanted to go along with them. When the pomegranate tree began to bloom again, months after our first encounter, I began to worry that *our* relationship would not blossom into a proper engagement, that it would amount to nothing more than a short-lived affair. Worst of all though, I feared that I would lose what seemed like my only chance of escaping from a mediocre country life. As more time elapsed, my agitation rose.

“We can't keep doing this,” I finally said to him one day.

“What do you mean?”

“You know perfectly well what I mean. Us. Doing stuff in secret. It's not right.”

“You never cared before.”

“Well, I do now. If my family finds out you've touched me, they'll –

“They’re never going to find out. Stop being ridiculous. Come on, we’re just having fun. Nobody has caught us yet, what makes you think they will now?”

“ Perhaps we’ve just been lucky. They could...”

“They won’t. We’re very cautious.”

“What about Allah? Don’t you think He’s going to be very angry with us if we carry on like this?”

“*Habibti* Zahra, ma chérie, don’t *you* think God has better things to worry about than two young lovers stealing a few kisses? Besides, our intentions are completely pure. We’re going to be husband and wife. I’m sure Allah doesn’t mind.”

“ I don’t know, we aren’t married yet. We aren’t even officially engaged.”

“Don’t worry. We will be.”

“When? You’ve been saying this for the past few months...I don’t believe you anymore.”

“I told you already. I’m waiting for my father to come back from Beirut.”

“You’re just making excuses.”

“He’s very busy with plantation matters right now. It’s not a good time to bring it up.”

“Fine.”

“Zahra, look at me. I promise, I will marry you. Not being with you...it’s not an option. You’re the only girl I want, okay? Now, stop pouting, and come give me a kiss. I miss the taste of your sweet lips.”

“How do I know you’ll keep your word?”

“I am a man! Of course I will keep my word. Do you really think I would joke about something so serious?”

When I didn’t answer him, he took my hand and set it over his rapidly pulsating heart. We gazed at each other in silence. His eyes, as usual, held me captive. Something in the calm blueness of his irises made me feel as though I was being immersed in a basin of clear spring water.

“Zahra, ma petite rose, je t’aime. *Wallahi*, I love you. Stop worrying. *Wahyatik* , with Allah as my witness, I swear upon His Holy Books, I will not give up until you are mine. *Wallahi*, we will be married soon. Trust me. ”

His pledge appeared so sincere, so genuine that all my apprehensions immediately disintegrated. Perhaps it was because I had wanted so desperately to believe him that it did not occur to me to question the authenticity of his oath. He had sworn in the name of God, and to vow falsely is a terrible sin.

My faith in his sincerity was reinforced even more when, a few days after he’d pledged to marry me, he brought me a “pre-engagement” gift. It was a *nazar* amulet. On the amulet’s golden chain hung a heavy diamond encrusted eye pendant with a lapis lazuli iris in the middle. He said he’d inherited it from his grandmother.



“To protect you against the evil eye, ma chérie. I wouldn’t want anyone looking at my beautiful wife and jinxing her. ”

“ I thought you didn’t believe in such superstitions.”

“It doesn’t hurt to be safe. Also, *you* believe in *hasaad* and evil eyes so I thought you’d like a new amulet since your glass one broke. I will protect you with the blue of my own eyes once we are officially married, but until then, wear this. Think of it as me always watching over you.”

Nobody had ever gifted me with something so lavish. My family was frugal, and rarely gave me expensive presents. When I would complain to Mama about it, she would chide me. *Don’t be so greedy, Zahra, Alhamdulillah the harvest was good this season but we cannot be certain of next season’s yield. We will not squander our money on fancy dresses and jewels for you. If only you’d listened to me and married the rich merchant who proposed last time, you’d be cloaked in gold from head to toe right now.* Mama may not have been entirely wrong, but at the time, I was too engrossed by my ambition to be a singer to consider other alternatives. It wasn’t exactly gold that I wanted; I dreamt of the glamour and fame that would come with being an affluent songstress. I did not want to spend my life namelessly toiling in the fields. Instead of becoming a mere instrument for menial labour and childbirth, my body would be wrapped in soft silks and rare furs to be admired.

My dreams of splendor were short lived. Our affair was over by the end of the week. Wanting to surprise me, he had secretly arranged a meeting with my father to formally ask for my hand. My father had vehemently refused.

“ But I don’t understand why you can’t just try asking him again. You promised me you would do anything to be with me.” I was on the verge of tears. We had been arguing all morning.

“What part of ‘your father kicked me out of his shop’ don’t you understand? He was welcoming at first, but as soon as I brought up the topic of marriage, he got unbelievably angry. And he spat at me! Spat. At. ME. You really expect me to go back and speak to him after he not only insulted me, but my *mama*. Nobody insults my mother. Nobody. You know what he said to me? ‘Your people took our land and now you come wanting our daughters too. I wouldn’t even give you my daughter’s toenail, you filthy French bastard.’ Look, I’m sorry Zahra, but your father’s insolence is inexcusable.” His face was bloodshot. I had never seen him look so flustered before.

“How is that my fault? I have never offended you. I gave you *everything*, and now you’re going to leave me, just like that? Because of a few words?” My lips were quivering. I was trying my hardest to contain the tears. “What about your promises, did those mean nothing too?”

“It’s a matter of honour, or you think that just because I love you, I will allow your father to step all over my dignity? I will not lower myself like that again. Who knows, next time he might stab me with that sword he has hanging on the wall. No, what you’re suggesting is beyond impossible. ”

“Fine. But you can still marry me anyway; you don’t really need my father’s permission. It’s *haram* for him to reject you just because you aren’t fully Lebanese. I

don't see why my father should decide my future. I want to be with you. We won't stay here; we'll go to France and live with your family there. Please. Just think about it."

"No, Zahra, I have made up my mind. We are over. Forever. I cannot and will not marry the daughter of a man who has humiliated me." His eyes were on the ground.

"NO. Look at me. You *have* to marry me. I was pure before I met you. You snared your way in and corrupted me, you took away my innocence. You can't do this to me."

"I didn't force you into anything. You chose to do all those things. I am sorry it had to end this way, Zahra. I truly am, but I can't let this continue any further. We aren't meant to be together. *Allah* has written it that way. You will find a more suitable husband someday, someone your father approves of, someone one that won't steal your pomegranates."

Without saying good bye, he walked away, leaving me alone in the orchard. I collapsed on the dirt and wept. I wept for my shattered dreams. I wept at the loss of my maidenhood. I wept at the misfortune of being born female.

My father never mentioned the proposal to me. Only suitors deemed eligible by my parents were ever brought to my attention. How foolish of me, to think I could have a choice in who I married. After he broke off our affair, I began to dread the future, which from that vantage point, seemed to be very grim. Even though my chances of ever escaping the village had been drastically diminished, I was determined not to give

up on my dream. Another route would need to be chartered, but before I could even begin formulating alternate plans, they were thwarted by one of my worst fears.

There was a creature growing inside of me.

My first instinct was to get rid of it. I knew what happened to girls who became pregnant out of wedlock. They were erased from the family tree, their names shoddily engraved upon a tombstone and never spoken of again. As if they had never been born. Nobody would recite the *fatiha* at their graves, or offer prayers for their soul. Damned in this life and damned in the next life.

Shortly after I'd begun my first menstrual flow, Mama and Amtu Salwa took me on a trip to the village cemetery. We would routinely visit our ancestors' graves during the holidays and entreat God to bless their spirits. That time, however, instead of taking the usual path to the enclosure where all our ancestors are buried, Mama and Amtu Salwa had directed me towards a neglected section at the back of the cemetery, reserved for deceased criminals. They hadn't brought any flowers or rose water to sprinkle on the graves. We were not there to offer any supplications.

"You must never tell anyone what we're about to tell you, not a single soul, and especially not your father," Mama said when we'd finally stopped in front of a demolished tombstone overgrown with vines, and wildflowers. Clearly, it had been long abandoned by the living.

"This is my sister's grave," her eyes welling up with tears, Amtu Salwa crouched down and stroked the tombstone.

I was confused. “You and Baba had another sister? But you never...”

“We do not speak of her. She dishonoured the family,” Amtu Salwa said, wiping away her tears. “Bushra, tell your daughter, I’m afraid I cannot bring myself to say anything. Even after all these years, the wound still bleeds.”

With a somber face, Mama told me the story of my forgotten aunt.

“Your father and Uncle Rashid had a younger sister. She was older than Salwa by a few years. One day, while plowing in the fields she collapsed over and passed out. At first, everyone thought it was because of heatstroke or exhaustion, but when she kept getting violently sick all week, your Uncle Rashid brought in a doctor to examine her. She was pregnant. But she shouldn’t have been pregnant, she couldn’t have been pregnant. She wasn’t yet married. Now, when your grandfather found out, naturally, he was furious. He loaded up his rifle to wipe away the dishonour his daughter had brought upon the family. But your grandmother stood in his way, and begged him to let her daughter live. While your grandparents fought, their daughter took a knitting needle and pushed it up her private area in an attempt to get rid of the child. She bled to death.”

Mama stared at the grave with a look of contempt, and sighed deeply. “Your grandmother died three months later from a broken heart.”

Amtu Salwa gave her sister’s tombstone a final stroke and wiped away what remained of her tears before walking over to me. I stood silent and dumbfounded. She clasped her right hand in mine and squeezed tightly, “We’re telling you this, Zahra, because you have begun menstruating and if you’re not careful, what happened to my sister, could happen to you too. You must guard your honour. It is the most precious

thing you possess. Once it is lost, you can never regain it. What my sister did was selfish. She put our heads in the dirt and then she killed herself and killed our mother. But she also killed me too. Men do not marry into families that have been steeped in humiliation and disgrace. Do you understand?" I gave her a small nod. I was in too much shock to speak.

Before we left the cemetery, I had silently recited a prayer for my aunt. My head was full of questions, but I was too scared to ever ask, and I'm sure, if I had, neither Mama nor Amtu Salwa would have been pleased. The story had resonated with me, but not for the reasons they'd intended. The punishment that had been exacted on my aunt was too cruel. For a long time, I wondered what she had looked like, what her name was, and whether or not I'd inherited any of her traits. Even though I had considered visiting her grave again by myself, I did not go back until the morning I realized I was pregnant. I do not know if the dead can hear us when we call upon them, but that day, I wept on the dirt next to my aunt's deserted tombstone and implored her spirit to help me. If the dead were listening, then my weeping and wailing would surely have awoken them from their slumber.

*Did you think that by forcing out the alien occupation from your body that it would resolve everything, that your father would spare your life? Or did you know that the only way out was to die? Do I kill it or do I let them kill me or do I kill myself? I do not want to be like you. Forgotten for all of eternity. I wish that I had never been born. Who was the man? Did you love him? I don't love him. Why did you let him get that close to you then? Didn't you know what would happen? Why didn't you try to run away? Why are you dead? Answer me. Answer me. You should still be alive. We could*

*trade places; I don't want to live anymore. Allah, just take my soul now. What is the point? Everything is ruined. But I am not brave like you, I cannot do it. How did you do it? Was the needle sharp? I could drink something, get rid of it that way, but then I might die too so it's all the same either way. I will end up here, next to you.*

I lay in the cemetery for hours talking to my aunt. At some point I must have passed out, because when I came to it was past nightfall. While neither God nor my aunt had answered me, I had reached several resolutions on my own. Terminating the pregnancy was out of the question. I was not willing to risk it. It would have resolved everything, but there was no safe way to do it. Other women had met the same fate as my aunt when they had attempted to get rid of their babies. I had overheard my mother and aunts gossiping about this topic on several different occasions. There were special herbs and tonics, and corrupt midwives who would do anything for money, but in any of those options, death was a huge possibility. I would have to expel the creature from my body the natural way by birthing it. It had seemed to me then, that my only salvation would be to convince him to wed me. I had also considered fleeing in the middle of the night, but I had no money, and I wouldn't be able to get very far.

It took me nearly two weeks to face him with the news. We hadn't spoken to one another since the final confrontation we'd had in Uncle's orchard. When he would see me walking alone in the market or around the village, he would avert his gaze and hasten his stride. If he encountered me with other people, he would greet them and look right through me. As far as he was concerned, I didn't exist anymore. His presence, however, inhabited me. I was consumed by him. Visions of our time together had been permanently compressed behind my eyes. His voice continually

echoed in my ears. My skin had been so absorbed by the memory of his touch that even the slightest caress of the wind would have me shivering.

I knew that he attended *Jummah* prayers at the *masjid* every Friday afternoon so I waited for him outside in a black chador. I had my face covered. Nobody would recognize me. When I saw him walk out of the *masjid*, I rushed in front of him and purposefully stumbled at his feet. Thinking that he had tripped me, he stopped to make sure I wasn't hurt.

“I'm sorry! Are you alright sister?”

“ I need to talk to you.”

“Zahra?”

“Yes, hush. I need to talk to you. It's important.”

He began to turn away. “Please, just take this then,” I said, shoving the letter I had written earlier into his hand. It wasn't a long letter. *I'm pregnant. Meet me at the orchard tonight. We need to talk.* “Read it.”

Reluctantly, he had unfolded the letter. After looking at it for a few seconds, he crumpled it up and threw it at me. “Liar,” he hissed.

“ It's your child!” I said, my voice cracking. I was glad for the face covering then. It concealed my tears.

“Your womanish schemes won't work on me. If you think that faking a pregnancy is going to make me marry you, you're mistaken. And even if you aren't



faking it, there's no evidence that the child is mine." He spat at me. "Have a good day, ma chérie, and do yourself a favour, if you actually are carrying something in your womb, dispose of it."

I detested the uninvited parasite growing inside me for leeching away my youthful vitality and blotting out my future, but I detested him more for placing it there. My belly began to protrude and my mother became suspicious. *Zahra, why are you gaining all this weight? Are you overeating? Watch that you don't get too big or no one will want to marry you. Men do not like thick girls.* The loose dresses and cloaks I was wearing would soon cease to be sufficient to conceal the bump. In desperation, I made a second attempt to sway him.

This time, I went straight to his house. I was willing to risk being seen if it would save my life. I found him in the garden watering his mother's roses, the same roses he had often gifted me with during our affair. *A rose for a rose, but you're far more beautiful than any flower.*

"Please, my pregnancy is beginning to show, soon everyone will know I'm with child."

"Stop being ridiculous. All you have to do is get rid of it." He did not turn around to look at me, but continued to water the roses as if I was not there.

"What are you saying? You want me to kill my baby? *Our* baby! I could die. Have you no mercy? Please, let us fix this. Marry me anyhow. We'll go away like you

said, to the city, to Paris, anywhere, we'll escape together. Isn't that what you wanted?" I buried my face in my hands. Tears were welling up in my eyes.

"What I want is for you to get out of my sight and never come back you filthy whore. That thing growing inside you isn't mine. God knows how many men you've been fooling around with. I will not let you ruin my reputation." He spun around and glared at me. His face was twisted with disgust and flushed red. Angrily, he flung the watering canister on the ground and kicked it to the side. Water spilled everywhere, splashing at my feet.

"You dare call me a whore? And what are you? One of the Lord's angels? I swear upon Allah's Holy Books, no other man has ever touched me. You know that. You know that. I gave myself to you, to you only. The baby is *yours*. *Wallahi* it's yours." I was shaking. "You have to marry me... please. They'll kill me." The monster in my womb was kicking me. The sun was burning holes in my skin through the black veil. My heart was thundering, and my lungs had forgotten how to take in air. I wanted to stab him with the rose thorns.

His hands trembled as he picked the water canister back up and placed it gently on the side of the adjacent water fountain. He splashed some water on his face, then turned around and grinned at me. "Zahra, ma chérie, you're blowing this entire issue out of proportion. I already told you. The solution is in your hands. Abort the baby."

"No... I cannot believe you. How could you be so cruel...so heartless? What you're suggesting is ...is ...it's evil and I could *die*. Stop being a coward. They'll kill me, you know they'll kill me and the baby. You can save us. Marry me. Please. For

the love of God, I don't care, you can divorce me after. You don't even have to marry me; pretend you did, but just let them know our baby was not conceived in sin. Help me run away, and then you'll never have to see me again," I sobbed.

"I'm sorry. I truly am, but I cannot do anything for you. I cannot soil my reputation for someone like you. Beautiful as you are, there is a world full of pretty maidens whose families would beg to have me. If we elope, your family will disown you, which means you won't be getting any inheritance. And of course they'll come after me. Not a very promising future at all. You can whine day and night, but I will not help you, and I will definitely not marry you." He began to pull weeds from around the roses and angrily strew them on the dirt. The rose thorns scraped his skin.

"You're a selfish bastard. This is all your fault. What about the vows you made? Empty words, weren't they? You are not a man. I hope you burn in hell. Allah, please remove Your mercy from this jerk."

"My fault? It's not my fault that you're a *shlickie* who went and got herself pregnant. Has anyone ever told you what happens to roses when they've been deflowered?" he hissed, accidentally yanking a bright pink rose out by the roots. "They wither and wilt away."

When Mama questioned me about the loose dresses and *abayas* I had begun to wear, I attributed my change in attire to a newly acquired sense of religious modesty. It wasn't uncommon for even younger village girls to be covered from head to toe. Mama congratulated me on my devoutness, but she was not pleased and did not fully believe me. *I don't like the way you're dressing these days, Zahra. You're too young*

*to be this wrapped up. You've gained some weight, are you sure you're not just trying to hide yourself? Men don't always like girls that cover too much. Don't you think you'd get more suitors if they can see how beautiful you are? You didn't even ask me if you could start wearing abayas, always making decisions for yourself. May Allah guide us all towards the straight path but I hope this isn't just a phase. It would look bad if you were to go back to the way you usually dress. People will think you're a hypocrite.*

When I felt too queasy or ill to be around my family, I stayed in my room and pretended to be performing extra prayers. Everyone was puzzled by my unusual behaviour, but Mama was the most disconcerted.

One morning, nearly five cycles into my pregnancy, she found me puking violently in the bathroom. She stood with her hands crossed and watched me as I washed the vomit out of my mouth. When I was done, she silently handed me a towel from the pile of dirty laundry. I did not take it.

She began to laugh. Her laughter was harried and frantic. I had never heard a more awful sound escape from my mother's mouth until that instant. "That's right, Zahra, we only allow *tahir* things to touch our bodies. I taught you to be clean, to keep yourself clean. But have you been obeying me? Have you been a good girl, Zahra? Lift up your *abaya*."

"Why are you acting like this, Mama? What's wrong?"

“Shush. Not a word.” She grabbed the bottom of my *abaya* and with a swift motion raised it up herself. She began tapping at my bloated stomach. I was shaking. My secret was exposed.

“Did you think you fooled me with your religious girl act? I wanted to be wrong. I wanted to be wrong. How long have you been hiding it from me? Tell me it isn’t true.” Her voice was raspy.

“Mama, please. I can explain. It was a mistake...”

“You cannot be my daughter, no. I didn’t raise you this way. How could you do this to me? How could you sell yourself so cheaply? I wish that I’d been buried alive and not come to see this day. Where am I to hide from people’s lashing tongues? You’ve brought humiliation and disgrace to us. I should have known that you’d inherit that *sharmoota’s* dirty blood, you look just like her. *Tfu a’layki.*” She spat at me. Her eyes were red and watery but she did not shed a single tear.

“Mama, please, I...”

“Not a word. Don’t you dare call me Mama. You’re no daughter of mine. The girl I gave birth to is dead.” Her eyes were burning coals. Clasp ing her hands around my throat, she began shaking me violently, squeezing the air out of my lungs.

“I would strangle you right here right now, but that would be too merciful.” She spewed, loosening her grip. “Your father will deal with you later...but I cannot have you soiling the purity of this house with your *najis* being any longer.”

She pulled me by my hair to the small chicken coop in the barnyard, shoved me inside, spat at me and locked the door. I was too weak and much too stunned to protest or fight. The chickens began pecking at my bare feet. My own mother had abandoned me; there was no hope left. The chickens persisted in prodding my vulnerable body with their beaks. Perhaps it was their way of comforting me. I wished that the birds would suddenly grow as carnivorous and blood thirsty as humans and devour me. It no longer mattered to me whether I lived or died, it was all the same. *Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un*. We all return to Allah in the end. What difference would it make if I was to join Him sooner? I buried myself in the filth- infested straw and waited to be slaughtered.

Time became hazy. I was repeatedly passing in and out of consciousness. My panties were soaked in urine. My dress was soiled with chicken excrement and dry vomit. The nicks on my feet were burning. Oblivion seemed inevitable.

Then suddenly there were hurried footsteps and angry voices. The chickens scurried around me in a frenzy, squawking shrilly. I lay motionless and mute. My father had come.

But he wasn't alone.

“You've always been a sappy coward Rashid, get out of my way or else.”

“Brother, stop. You are not acting rationally. History often repeats itself but there is no reason we should let it. We cannot make the same mistake twice. How will you face Allah on judgment day with both the blood of your sister and daughter on your hands?”

“Allah will not punish me for restoring my honour. The lives of the likes of her are *halal* to take. If I’d known what she’d become, I’d have killed her the moment she came out of her mother’s womb.”

“*AstighferAllah wa audhu billah mina 'shaytani 'r-rajeem*, you’re not thinking straight. Seek refuge from the Devil; he is clouding your judgment. Don’t be so rash. Even if Zahra is at fault, even if her crime warrants death, which I assure you it does not, there is no justification for ending the life of the innocent child. Do you not know the verse in the Quran where Allah says: ‘whosoever killeth a human being for other than manslaughter or spreading mischief in the earth, it shall be as if he had killed all mankind, and whoso saveth the life of one, it shall be as if he had saved the life of all mankind?’”

“Get out of my way.”

With a loud bang, my father kicked the open door to the chicken coop.

I couldn’t see or hear anything after that.

When I opened my eyes, I found myself lying underneath a pomegranate tree in Uncle Rashid’s orchard. Light was just beginning to emerge from the horizon. Had I survived or had Allah placed me in some sort of purgatory? Would I be forced to suckle on pomegranate seeds until Judgement Day? *This is where you committed your Sin and this is where you will be punished.* My mind was frayed. My body ached. I closed my eyes again.

“Zahra... Zahra... wake up.”

Someone was shaking me gently. I kept my eyes shut.

I never wanted to wake up again.

Then, a sudden splash of cold water on my face caused me to yelp in fright. Had the torture begun already?

To my great relief, it was not a netherworld demon who had come to torment me, but Uncle Rashid with a clay jug in his hands. There was a large gash on his left cheek and his shirt was covered in blood. I looked at him hazily. My head was throbbing.

“What hap-?”

“Shhh, don’t be scared my child, it’s nothing serious... I couldn’t let him hurt you...I just barely convinced them to spare your life until you’ve given birth ...we don’t have much time though, they might change their mind at any second. But first eat this,” he said, handing me a *za’taar manouchie* from the burlap sack at his feet.

“You don’t know this, but I once had a younger sister who made the same mistake you did, or so everyone thought. She was a clever little thing, spent most of her spare time reading. When our father wouldn’t allow her to finish her schooling, she continued to study in secret. Then one day, she became ill and we discovered that she was pregnant. I knew she was innocent. My sister was incredibly prudent, there was no way she would have been so reckless. One of the village boys had intruded upon her honour, but her blamelessness in the matter made no difference. Our father, your grandfather, was a stubborn and hardhearted man. He could not be reasoned with. He, along with your father were determined to kill her. I was going to take her away, but out of fear I didn’t



act until it was too late. I found her lying in a pool of her own blood... she'd taken her own life before the monsters could get to her. I couldn't save Sajira, but God willing, I can save you, Zahra, and the child that you are carrying. I am not going to let them kill you like they killed my little sister." Uncle Rashid's eyes, which were usually so bright and jovial, had looked dim and devoid of life. His face was pasty white.

I was too stunned to reply with anything intelligible, so I took a bite of the *manouchie* instead. My stomach welcomed the much needed sustenance with a gurgle. Even fasting in the month of Ramadan did not leave me with such a ravenous hunger. I devoured the whole thing in a few bites. As I washed the *za'taar* down with cold water from the jug, Uncle Rashid reached into the sac again and took out a small basket of figs.

"Thank you," I whispered, shoving an entire fig in my mouth. It was plump and juicy, and sweet- I didn't quite realize it at the time, but those figs would be the last thing I would ever eat from my family's orchards.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't able to pack much food. There's an *abaya* in here too, it's Om Rashid's so it might be too big. There's also enough money here to last you a few months until you've given birth, if you use it sparingly that is. You will have to work. There is an affluent old couple, Abu Khairy and Om Khairy. Their son, Khairy was killed in the war, and they've been running charities ever since. I've explained the situation to Abu Khairy over the phone, and they've agreed to take you in. They live in the mountains. I cannot drive you there myself, everyone will be watching. I've arranged for

a cabbie to drive you to Beirut. You will then have to take another taxi to the Khairy manor.”

“But Uncle Rashid, what if they catch me trying to escape?” My head was spinning. That was not at all how I had imagined my grand departure from the village to be like. At that moment, I wasn’t even sure I could stand up on my own two feet, much less flee to the other side of the country all by myself.

“Don’t worry, my child. If we are quick and quiet, they will not,” Uncle Rashid said, giving me a reassuring smile. It was a sad smile, but a hopeful smile. “The mountains are a long way from here. They cannot get to you there. You should be safe. *Insha Allah.*”

\*

Sajira will be much safer if she marries Salma’s son, and goes to Canada. They cannot get to her there. When the dinner party is over, I will ask Abu Khairy if I can use the telephone. I must choose right this time.

# Sharbat

I am not from the East or the West, not out of the ocean or up  
from the ground, not natural or ethereal, not composed of elements at all. I do not exist,  
am not an entity in this world or the next, did not descend from Adam or Eve or any  
origin story. My place is placeless, a trace of the traceless. Neither body or soul.  
I belong to the Beloved, have seen the two worlds as one and that one call to and know,  
first, last, outer, inner, only that breath breathing human being.

-Rumi

# Chapter 1

*-Canada, 2012-*

When I was ten, Moma gave me a towel to stuff between my teeth so that, as she kneaded a wad of sugar wax across my skin, I wouldn't scream.

“Why did Allah make me so hairy Moma? It isn't fair!” Moma did not know how to comfort me. What satisfactory answer could she give to the ten-year-old sobbing in her arms? Girls shouldn't even have to ask such a question at that age.

“*Habibti*, everyone has body hair, yours is just more noticeable because you have darker skin like your father. If only you were light skinned like me...”

The kids at school had been teasing me about my body hair all year. They were ruthless. They told me my eyebrows were creepy caterpillars and made monkey noises when I passed by. *Ew, look at Aaliyah's moustache...so gross.* Ashamed of my skin, I would retreat into the library during recess. None of the beautiful, pale kids wanted to associate with an ugly, Arab primate like me. Fantasy novels where warrior princesses and clever sorceresses battled mythical creatures became my close companions instead. *I don't need real friends*, I had convinced myself. *I have my books.* The heroines in my novels were fearless and strong, and it was their strength that I drew from as I bit into that towel.

As Moma dragged the wax off my legs, I felt as though she was flaying my skin. With each hair pulled out, my soul, too, was ripped from my body. My eyes watered. Small orbs of blood formed where the hairs had been. I wanted to yank the towel out of

my mouth, to vocalize my agony. My body was shaking. I was angry and upset at God for creating me like this. I pulled the towel out.

“*Khalas* stop! Stop! Stop. *Ya Allah*, please. I can’t breathe. Please. Just for a second. It hurts too much. I can’t. I can’t anymore. I need a break.” I was trying my hardest not to cry out loudly.

“Shhh *habibti*, I know it hurts. Shh, I am sorry,” Moma whispered. I clutched her free hand tightly. I needed to be strong like Alanna from the novel I was reading, Alanna who wanted to be a Knight but is bullied for being a girl. She is urged by her mother to bind her breasts and pretend she’s a boy, but she defies her bullies by studying alongside the male pages, breasts unbound. I did not know then that to mirror Alanna’s strength, I would have to defy my own bullies, and not merely endure the pain.

“The first time is always difficult. It will get less painful as your body gets used to it. Just be patient Aaliyah. Please, your father and brother will hear.” Moma was firm in her orders. I was not to make a sound. The towel went back in.

Earlier, I had stood silently by the stove and watched as the acid from the lemon juice formed bubbles in the melting sugar. I had imagined it burning holes in my skin, but Moma had said the store-bought kind would hurt even more. Her formula was better, passed down through generations of thick-haired mothers. *All the way back to Cleopatra*. As the mixture fizzled in the pan, the sweet scent of burning sugar filled the kitchen. It had reminded me of the home-made honey nougats my grandmother, Sitto Zahra prepared for us on holidays. Moma had twisted the auburn syrup around a wooden spoon.

We needed to wait for it to cool. I wanted to swirl the sugar around my fingers, lick it off like Sitto's candy, but this wasn't meant to be a treat.

*Body hair on women is so gross, you look like a man. Why don't you shave? Are you a lesbian? Wow, that leg hair is scary... monster eyebrows. Guys don't like hairy girls....That's so unhygienic....She has man- beard, yuck... Ew, look at her unibrow.... You need to shave down there. No man will fall in love with an orangutan. ..You should do something about that moustache, it's disgusting...Gross... Dirty. ..Disgusting. Disgusting...*

The insults became more creative as we got older. Despite Moma's best efforts to keep my skin hair-free, on many occasions I would refuse to have my body waxed. I did not want to go through the pain.

I earned a two-day suspension for smacking a boy named Justin with my science textbook. He had called me a "hairy ho."

"You'll feel better after. I promise," Moma tried to convince me after I came home in tears. "Your skin will be nice and smooth. You can wear t-shirts and shorts outside again. Think about that."

It wasn't fair. I knew his malicious words had hurt me much more than my physical retaliation had hurt him. "Shhh, I am sorry, so sorry. Don't you want to be clean? I know it's painful but you'll be whiter, cleaner. Beautiful." Moma's words continue to echo in my subconscious. When she finished sugaring my body that first time, my raw

skin was warm, soft, pink, and the wax was cold, hard, black. I never screamed. Not that time, and not the countless times after.

Now, twelve years later, I no longer need to bite into towels to stifle my screams. I've learned to subdue my vocal chords. A useful skill, but one that I don't use often any more. With the veiling of *hijab* came the freedom of allowing my skin to grow into wild, grassy meadows, rather than torturing it into clear-cut forests.

My cousin Ranya's wedding shower is in an hour and although I am planning to escape half way through, I am still dreading it immensely. Aside from having to subject myself to the torture of waxing, I will have to deal with all the ravenous aunties looking to find a wife for their sons. Female-only events are the worst. There is no escape there. The women at these parties are more ruthless than any school bullies. Perhaps I should keep the leg hair to scare them off. I'm not in the mood for the berating I'll get for being a yet unmarried 22-year-old girl. As Moma loves to remind me- *Your sister Sahar was already married with three kids at your age.* I cannot fathom having one baby, let alone three. Of course, what none of them know is that in just a few hours, I too will be on my way to "matrimonial bliss." Not that they would ever approve of my husband-to-be. Jaavaid is the furthest thing from their idea of an eligible suitor. I can just see their overly made-up faces squishing in disgust at the thought of me marrying a man who isn't even Lebanese, let alone Arab.

Ranya's fiancé Mehdi, on the other hand, is, of course, the epitome of perfection. Not only is he Lebanese, he is also from the same village as Ranya's father. Moma and her friends have been gossiping endlessly about Ranya ever since Mehdi proposed.

*I heard that he owns a beach house back in Lebanon...oh ya? I heard he drives a Lexus and just put a down payment on a riverfront condo...did you know he's taking Ranya to the Maldives for the honeymoon...lucky girl, did you see her engagement ring? 10 carat diamond! I heard he also bought her ten gold bangles, a gold chain, a set of pearls, diamond earrings...*

With most of the attention on Ranya and her jewelry, it won't be too difficult to slip away from the party. I still cannot believe she agreed to marry him. Mehdi is twelve years older than her, and dreadfully boring. They barely have anything in common. Other than his fat paycheck, I can't fathom what she sees in him. His head is balding, he's got a protruding belly and his clothes reek of tobacco. Imagining Ranya being intimate with that man – or any man really – is simply impossible. I can't help but giggle every time I think about her prudish fiancé leading her away on their wedding night.

When Ranya and I were in our prepubescent years, she was repulsed by the idea of sex. Shortly after Sahar got her first period (and Moma had naturally told all our Aunties), Ranya was visiting and a hilarious dialogue on the topic had ensued.

Ranya: Sahar, I overheard Khalto Om Ahmad telling my mom that Sahar started her men-is-trail cycle last week and that she's on her way to becoming a beautiful "aroos", and my mom said, you'd better be careful, the suitors will be flocking to your doors soon. Sahar, what does she mean? Are you getting married? Please don't leave us for a guy.

Sahar: No, *habibti*, I'm not going anywhere. Don't worry about it.



Ranya: What's your men-is-trail cycle then? Will men be trailing after you now?

Me: It means she's started bleeding out of her you know what down there so she can have babies now, isn't that right Sahar? Like if you let a guy put his penis inside of your vagina, you'll get pregnant.

Sahar: Shut up Aaliyah, who told you that?

Me: I read it in a sex-ed brochure.

Sahar: I'm telling Moma you're reading baaaad stuff.

Me: It's not bad. It was in a science pamphlet, besides everyone in my class knows.

Ranya: Wait, are you saying that if a guy puts his – his...thingy inside of a girl's um thingy that she'll have a baby?

Me: Yup.

Ranya: Ew. But my mom told me Allah puts the baby inside the mother's tummy...

Sahar: Aaliyah, you're going to be in SO much trouble.

Me: Whatever. You know I'm right.

Ranya: But my parents didn't do that. That's so bad and like *haram*... isn't it *haram*, Sahar? Only *ajanib* do gross stuff like that. We don't. My parents have never

even kissed before. Aaliyah, you're going to hell for saying *haram* stuff and lying. Allah puts the baby inside the mother's stomach.

Me: If you don't want to believe me then fine. Also, for your information, babies aren't in the mom's stomach. The stomach is where your food goes, dummy.

Ranya: Aaliyah, I really think you're confused. Like maybe white people do gross *haram* stuff like that but I'm sure Muslims don't because like ew, ew, ew!

Me: Look, I'll get the brochure and show you, there's pictures.

Sahar, completely flushed, had left to tattle on me at this point, but I didn't care. I had always loved knowing more than Sahar did. I didn't get a chance to show Ranya the pictures because Moma came storming in, confiscated the brochure, and tore it to shreds. She was outraged.

“Who gave you this?”

I was silent.

“Aaliyah! Who gave you this?”

“I got it from school.”

“Didn't Baba and I warn you that if your school does a unit on... on inappropriate topics like this to TELL us so we can get you out of class?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn't you tell us?”

Despite the harsh lashes I received from my father's belt later that night, I barely made a whimper. After all, I was immune to physical pain. No punishment that my parents could have exacted would remove the knowledge I had acquired. It didn't matter if my skin was blotched with red welts, my brain was well guarded inside my skull, and I felt secure knowing that my thoughts, at least, were safe.

I grit my teeth as I knead the sugar wax across my skin. I should have asked Moma to do it for me – she's much quicker at it – but then I'd have to listen to her ramble on about how I've failed to secure a good husband, while Ms. Perfect-Ranya has. I'll be getting enough of that at the party. No doubt, the Aunties will discuss the future of my hymen in between sips of *sharbat*, and lament its yet unpenetrated state. Of course it has been perfectly preserved for my future husband.

The brochure had a diagram of female genitalia on it. All the parts were labelled. What Moma and Baba didn't know is that I had already carefully memorized each of those anatomical terms for a test, on which I'd scored perfect. I had especially loved the words *vulva* and *labia*. The way the letters would melodiously roll off the tongue was very satisfying. It had seemed to me then that those terms referred to some wondrous scientific entities, not parts of my own body.

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# The Forbidden Zone

MARCH 22, 2010 / 37 COMMENTS

Nineteen is a milestone for many Canadian teenagers because it's the legal drinking age. I, however, never quite understood what the big deal was. Most of my classmates had been illegally drinking and clubbing long before their nineteenth

birthdays. Nineteen was a milestone for me as well, but not because I was legally free to party -despite what secular law dictated, Islamic law still irrevocably forbade alcohol consumption.

Nineteen years old was when I saw my vagina for the very first time.

Now that may seem absurd. I know that some of you are rolling your eyes right now, and going "Aaliyah is such a loser" or "She's got to be kidding" or "How is it possible that a girl has not seen her own vagina?" Or perhaps, some of you stopped reading when the word vagina shot burning acid into your easily offended eye sockets. Oh the horror! How can a modest hijabi utter such a vulgar word!?

Disclaimer: I am not responsible for any injuries you may incur from deeming this blog post highly offensive. Also, there is no need for you to comment and tell me I am going to hell for being immodest on the World Wide Web. I refuse to argue with ignorant fools. I will delete your comments straight away. I'm talking to you creepishly conservative Ayatollah wannabes. Repeat after me, talking about vaginas is not immodest. Talking about vaginas is not immodest.

Vagina. Vagina.

Are your eyes still okay? Alright then, you may continue reading.

So how does a girl not see her vagina until she's nineteen? Well, first of all, vaginas, unlike penises (oh no, I just said another bad word, oops) aren't visibly (or vulnerably) hanging out from between a female's legs. Vaginas are securely tucked away, protected by soft labia and surrounded by mounds of pubic hair. (Thou shalt not pass!) The only way then, to actually see your own vagina is to get a mirror and look at a reflection of it. Simple, right?

Wrong.

My vagina has always been a forbidden zone. Growing up, my mother had been quite adamant about the impermissibility of touching genital areas.

It started when I was about six years old. I would splay my legs open and massage my vulva with the palm of my hand. At that age, I had no concept of sexuality. Heck, I didn't even know what a vagina was (that entire area was simply

known as the pee-pee region). I had accidentally discovered that touching myself down there felt really good and began experimenting. When Moma caught me doing this, she got very angry and scolded me. Obviously, I can't remember it all perfectly, but Moma said something along the lines of "Aaliyah, it's *3ayb* (inappropriate) to touch your private parts. You must not put your hands down there unless you are washing yourself."

But, of course, kids don't listen.

I continued to play with my vulva. When Moma caught me a second time, she didn't chastise me with words. She slapped me hard with her *shahata*. When Moma takes off that rubber shoe and slams it down on your face, you're not just in trouble, you're in super-mega trouble. Isn't that right, my dear Arab/Desi followers? (Unfortunately, this shared stereotype is often truer than not. If you're Arab/Desi and your parents did not beat you with miscellaneous household objects like shoes, belts, and wooden spatulas or shove hot peppers down your throat, Alhamdulillah, you were spared). Anyway, so Moma beats me. I cry. I feel ashamed. I never dare to touch my garden of peach blossoms ever again. Moma's beating served its purpose. My vagina remained completely off limits... until I got my period, and tried experimenting with tampons.

All the girls at school were using tampons. They exchanged them like drugs in the bathroom during recess. (Why do scented tampons even exist? ) Only losers used maxi pads because diaper-like-sanitary napkins and sexy panties don't mesh, right? Well, Moma refused to let me use tampons. "Aaliyah, you're still a *bint* you cannot use those."

(Let me take a moment here to explain something to all you non-Arab speakers. The word *bint* translates to "girl" or more accurately, "maiden". So, technically you could be a 70-year-old virgin female, and you'll still be considered a *bint*. The word *mrraa*, which means woman or lady, is reserved only for married non-virgins. Congratulations! Once a penis penetrates through your hymen, you officially become a lady. Your womanhood can only be validated once a man enters you. Yet, virgin males are still referred to as men, not boys. Methinks that is incredibly sexist, but I digress. This topic needs a whole blogpost on its own. Let us return to my vagina monologue.)

There was no further discussion to be had with Moma. Tampons were forbidden. They were evil hymen-breaking devices meant to lure innocent girls down a path of lustful debauchery wherein their precious virginity was lost forever.

I was a rebellious young lady (take that sexist language – I’m a lady whether you like it or not). I managed to procure some tampons via the bathroom tampon exchange. I couldn’t figure out how they work. This is your cue to laugh at me. After several failed attempts at sticking those cylindrical shaped thingamajigs up my vagina, I gave up. I was scared a tampon would somehow get stuck up there because I inserted it incorrectly. Moma would find out, and my life would be over. I avoided any intentional exploration of my vajayjay (Are you enjoying all these euphemisms for vagina? Ridiculous, isn’t it? The lengths people go to in order to avoid saying the word vagina) for several years after the tampon fiasco.

Then, one day when I was nineteen, I felt an unusual amount of pain coming from my lady bits. After some google searching, I had a great panic where I convinced myself that I was dying from ovarian cancer. To dispel my fear, I decided to take a look down at the forbidden zone. What did I find? My labia majora, my labia minora, my clitoris, my urethra, and the opening to my vagina.

\*Insert fireworks\*

For the record, it turns out the pain was just a really horrible bout of menstrual cramps. I took some Midol, and all was well.

Do not fear your vulvas and vaginas, my beloved readers. God may have asked us to guard our genitals from others, but there is no need to barricade your privates against your own self.

*Embrace that pink fortress of wonder! Go on. I dare you.*

\*

## Chapter 2

After I’ve finished waxing my legs, I turn on my hair straightener and wait for it to heat up. It’s been ages since I ironed my hair. Before I wore the *hijab*, my hair was the

most important part of my morning ritual. I had destroyed my natural curls in the process but back then I wasn't able to face the world with a poufy mess on my head.

*“Aaliyah had a little lamb, little lamb, Aaliyah had a little lamb and it was as dark as a nigger. Hey Samantha! Doesn't Aaliyah's hair look like a big fat black sheep?”*

*“Justin, shh, that's mean. And don't say the N word. Miss might hear you.”*

*“I don't care. I can say whatever I want. Baa baa black sheep.”*

*“You're a pig Justin. Come, Aaliyah, sheep are cute. I like your hair; but it'll be prettier if you let me straighten it for you.”*

Samantha didn't think of Justin as a pig for long. He asked her to go with him to the school dance later that year and she said yes. I sat alone in the library while my classmates shook their bodies to pop music in the gymnasium. I was never allowed to attend school dances. Afterwards, Samantha assured me that I hadn't missed much; the gym still smelled like sweaty socks, plus Justin had tried to grab her butt so she threw her fruit punch at him because it was “too gross to drink anyway.” A few years later, Samantha would call me on the phone, crying. Justin had cheated on her. *He said my pubic hair looks like stringy spaghetti and that I smell like rotten fish down there so he's hooked up with some ho from Church. Supposedly, she has a better pussy. He's always been such an asshole; do you remember how he used to make fun of you when we were little? What a jerk.*

I turn the straightener off. Screw it. My hair is perfectly fine the way it is. The locks have grown out again and the thin spots on my scalp have filled in. It's as voluptuous as ever and I'm sure Jaavaid will love my curls when he finally gets to see them. If the vain aunties are going to comment on it then so be it. I'm not interested in their sons anyway.

Sigh. Parties. I absolutely detest parties. Not that I've been to many outside of family events. In fact, I've only ever attended one party that wasn't hosted by family. Hilary's prom after-party: also known as one of the worst nights of my life.

\*

"Hey girl! How are ya? Listen, prom night Friday, so I'm thinking after party at my place. Around eleven-ish. You *have* to come babe," Hilary's squeaky voice blared through my phone.

How was I supposed to get out of that one? "I don't think I..."

"No dumb excuses 'kay... like I don't care if you have to study for finals 'cuz everyone's coming! Everyone. So you've gotta come, Aaliyah. And *puh-lease* don't give me that I don't drink alcohol so it'll be awkward shit, like yeah we're gonna get wasted obviously, it's PROM, but like you can just chill with us anyway, ya know, you don't have to drink. We'll get you some orange juice or something. Promise I won't spike it."

I should have just told her I would go and then cancelled at the last minute but instead I said, "Hilary, thanks for inviting me. I really appreciate it and I would love to



come, but I really don't think I can. I honestly do have tons of work. I mean I haven't even started on my final essay for English yet and that's due Monday...I'm so sorry."

I had already finished my essay the week before but revealing the truth was out of the question. There was no way I was going to tell her that my parents would probably kill me if I went. A party with alcohol *and* boys pretty much tops the *haram* list.

As far as Hilary and my other high school friends had been concerned, I was Aaliyah Yusuf, the vegetarian artist who didn't drink. They had chalked up my abstinence from meat and alcohol as another quirky "hipster" thing. I wouldn't begin observing hijab until a few years later and so there was nothing to concretely give away my religious background.

Hilary and I had become friends due to our mutual love of theatre and film. She wanted to act in plays and movies, I wanted to write them. That was pretty much where our similarities ended. She ate pepperoni on her pizza at lunch time, wore short-shorts to gym class and made out with her boyfriend in between classes. I picked onions out of my tabouli salad during lunch, dressed in sweat pants for gym, and daydreamed about my forbidden crush, Michael, in the hallways. For the longest time, homework had been my go-to excuse for refusing invitations to social functions. Most people just took that excuse at face value, but Hilary always liked to probe me further.

"Girl, don't give me that shit. We *all* have homework. Come on, just this once. Oh you know what? Michael is coming! *Perr-fect* chance for you to make a move. You *have to* come!" The way Hilary would dramatically drag out her words was very annoying.

She would never have understood if I'd told her the real reasons why I couldn't attend her party. Or why I wouldn't be able to "make a move." I would have loved to; I had envisioned numerous scenarios during my boring AP classes. My daydreams then were something out of a cheesy romance film. In my mind, as I entered the great party hall, Michael would turn to look at me. That's when the film would start rolling in slow motion. Cue melodramatic music. Michael would see my curvy body in a black, low cut mini dress, my long hair loose around my shoulders, my smoky eyes, my bright red lips, and he would fall in love. "Wow," he would say, the camera zooming in on his face, "You're beautiful." He would ask me to dance with him. I would accidentally brush my hands down his thighs, lean in and whisper naughty things into his ear. He would pull me closer. His mouth had always looked so kissable. We would sneak away together. And Baba would somehow find out, and behead us both.

"Okay, I'll try my best to come. No promises though," I finally said. "Sorry Hilary but I have to go now. I need to study for my exams. I'll see you in English class tomorrow."

\*

When I was in grade four, my best friend Natalie invited the whole class to her birthday party at a bowling alley. I was not allowed to go. Baba was furious when Moma had asked him for permission to let me attend.

"My daughter, go to a party with a bunch of strangers? And bowling? Bowling? Who knows what these *Ajanab* people will feed her... always drinking, they're always

drinking even with their children around, they might get drunk and do something to her... they could put something in her food... Her sister and brother never asked to go to parties. You, Sajira, you and your mother spoil Aaliyah too much, but she's not getting any damn special treatment from me. No, no, she can't go, and that's final. I don't have money to buy presents anyway." I hid behind their bedroom door and listened to them arguing.

I didn't understand what Baba had meant by drinking. Drinking what? *I drink stuff all the time, juice and milk and water*, I had thought, *why is that bad? Baba drinks lots of chai too. And Natalie is not a stranger. Why is Baba being so mean? He never lets me have any fun.* I had never been to a friend's birthday party before. The only birthday celebrations I attended growing up were those of my cousins: our huge family squeezed into tiny rooms, the adults smoking hookah while the children fought over the controllers to the video game consoles. I usually sat in a corner and doodled. My cousins' birthday parties weren't anything like the parties of the happy white children I saw on television, blowing out candles with clowns and face painters and colourful balloons. Even the cake that was served at my cousins' parties was bland compared to the extravagant Superhero or Disney themed cakes the children in my favourite shows always had. The cakes Sitto Zahra baked didn't have any icing or chocolate; they were saturated with rosewater and covered in pistachios.

Natalie's birthday had been the main talk of the class for weeks and I was happy to think that I would finally be attending a real birthday party. We had already split ourselves up into teams: boys vs. girls. The girls were determined to win. Natalie wanted us to all wear pink, her favourite colour; she had even convinced the boys to wear it too. I

imagined myself wearing the rose-coloured dress Sitto Zahra had bought me for my birthday a few months earlier. I would roll the bowling ball down the lane and strike all the pins, winning the game for my team. Everyone would love me. After, Natalie would ask me to help her unwrap the presents, and we would take silly photos together. Samantha would join in too, and we would exchange best friend bracelets in the playground on Monday.

“Aaliyah is very excited about this, you know, she’s never been bowling before. And she’s such a good girl. She never asks for anything. Please, we’re going to break her heart if we don’t let her go,” Moma pleaded with Baba.

“I said no and that means no. We can’t get her used to the idea of going out with white people and boys. If we spoil her now, she will be uncontrollable when she gets older and next thing you know she’s coming home with an *Ajnabi* boyfriend. I refuse to discuss this any further. If she wants to go bowling, I’ll take her bowling.”

The night of the party, I cried myself to sleep. When I saw Natalie at school on Monday, I was too embarrassed to tell her that my parents wouldn’t let me go. I made up an elaborate lie about being in a car accident, and having to stay overnight at the hospital. *I’m sorry Natalie. I really wanted to come, but I almost died. It was scary.* I gave her one of my favourite dolls as a belated birthday present, but she returned it to me the following year when she found a better best friend, one who didn’t conveniently keep getting sick every time she was invited somewhere. Baba never did take me bowling.

\*

Growing up, Sahar did not share my resentment towards Mama and Baba's strict rules. She frequently scolded me for questioning their authority: *We have to listen to them, they know what's best for us. It's haram to disobey your parents, you know that Aaliyah. You should be grateful for everything that Mama and Baba do for us, I mean why you don't go fold the laundry like Mama asked you to instead of sitting here whining about how unfair it is that they won't let you go to some stupid party. Allah is going to be angry with you if you keep complaining like this. Don't you remember how the other day at Arabic school, the sheikh said that heaven is underneath a mother's feet, and that God will punish us really badly if we disobey Mama? Do you wanna go to hell?*

After a while, I gave up trying to confide in Sahar. Eager to please Mama and Baba and to prove that she was the superior daughter, she would often snitch on me, informing them of all the complaints I had foolishly entrusted her with. Having no one to open my heart to, I began to seek refuge in words. For my eleventh birthday, I used the money Sitto Zahra had given me and bought a locking diary from the school fair. That little red journal became my best friend. I could trust it with anything...

January 17, 2002

Dear Diary,

It's my 12<sup>th</sup> birthday today but I still feel like a 2 year old. My parents wouldn't even let me have a party. They think I'm too old. And they still made me go to Arabic school this morning even though it's my birthday. It's not fair. Then Moma ruined my day even more by making me throw out the chocolate cupcakes Sister Sheila made for me. They were so pretty with sparkly pink sprinkles on top. I ate some of them with Zeinab and Nasrin during the break.

Sister Saniya heard the girls singing me Happy Birthday and she got mad. She thinks singing is haram. I don't like her, she's really mean, and yells at us for everything.

Anyway, I was still really happy, but then I came home and Moma saw the cupcakes, and she started yelling at me too. She thinks Sister Sheila is dirty because she's Indian. I don't think so, Sister Sheila looks clean to me, and she always smells like bubble-gum. Besides, Sister Rjma told us that Muslims can't be dirty, we have to make sure we wash ourselves well and pick up the garbage or Allah will be upset with us. Sister Sheila is very religious, she's always praying with her prayer beads, and she even covers her hair with pretty hijabs, so I think Moma is wrong. She can't be dirty.

Sitto Zahra made a cake for me too. It's not chocolate though. I hope she didn't put rosewater in it because I hate that stuff, but she thinks the pretty cakes with icing from Zehrs are gross. Happy birthday to me. I wish I could have a real party with friends, and presents.

Love, Aaliyah

\*

After getting off the phone with Hilary, I sat at my desk, and opened my calculus textbook, fully intending to study, but instead I let my mind wander away from differential curves to the curves of Michael's lips. Just as I was beginning to mentally unbutton Michael's shirt, my phone began to buzz. I still remember the bolt of fire that had stabbed at my heart as I flipped open the phone to see that I'd received a text message from the very same person I had been playing tongue Olympics with in my mind.

Hey Aaliyah ☺

I was wondering if maybe u'd

like to come with me to prom/Hilary's party

Please? ;)

Hilary would later tell me that she had “accidentally spilled the beans” because she thought we’d be *freaking adorable together* and also because she was determined to have me attend her party. What I didn’t know then as I apprehensively gripped the phone with both hands and stared at the screen, was that the senior class had placed bets on whether or not Michael would be able to get into the “exotic” Arab girl’s panties. Hilary had told everyone that I was a virgin, a concept so incredible to her that she had concocted a plan to get me, in her words, “unvirginized.” *Girl, you’re eighteen, you’ve gotta live a little. You’re really missing out on all the fun.* I wouldn’t know any of that until much later but at the time, I was ecstatic to have received a text from my crush. As I stared at the screen, the lights continued to blink, urging me to reply. I didn’t know what to do. No wonder they call it a crush. I was just crushing my own heart. I was fully aware that Michael and I could never truly be together but... one night, I had thought ...would one night be worth the risk? If Baba finds out...and yet what if Baba doesn’t find out? Surely God won’t mind if I just have a bit of fun with Michael.

Ever since I was a little girl, Baba has been telling me that boyfriends are *haram*, that I would go to hell if I touched a boy. No kissing, no hugging, and no hand-shaking. Moma too would say, *remember Aaliyah we’re Muslim, we don’t have boyfriends.*

*Relationships before marriage are haram. If a guy wants you, he is welcome to knock on our door, not sneak in through the window.*

When I went to Arabic school on Saturday mornings, our teachers would also talk about how falling in love is *haram*. Sister Saniya in particular liked to scare us with stories about girls who had disobeyed God and received gruesomely severe punishments. I doubt any of her stories were actually true. At the time, though, sitting in that tiny room with the sickly pale yellow walls, it wasn't difficult to imagine that if I kissed a boy, I would indeed become infected with some sort of incurable disease.

"My dears," Sister Saniya used to say, "You must keep yourselves pure. A chaste girl is like a lollipop wrapped up in a pretty, shiny covering; everyone will be rushing to buy it at the store. But an unchaste girl is like a lollipop without a wrapper. Sisters, what happens to a lollipop without a wrapper? It gets filthy. Nobody wants to eat a dirty lollipop. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Sister Saniya", the other girls would chant, but I would remain silent. Even at that young age, I refused to believe that I was merely a piece of confectionary created for consumption. I knew though, that if I did try to do anything with Michael, in my family's eyes, I wouldn't be a dirty lollipop but dirt itself. The lights on my phone continued to blink and my thoughts kept whirling: Perhaps I should go to the party. I could just stay for a little bit, and leave before it gets too crazy. I'll tell Baba that I'm going to study at the library; no, maybe not. It is a Friday night. He would get suspicious. I could say I am going to visit my cousin Huda. She would cover for me. I've covered for her so many times. She's always sneaking out with the Sunni guy she's secretly dating.



I'd only ever snuck out once before. The summer before eleventh grade, my favourite indie band was touring the city. I really wanted to go, but I knew if I asked Baba for permission he wouldn't let me. Instead, I arranged to sleep over at Huda's that night. Her parents aren't as attentive as mine and I knew they would not check up on us. When Moma called Huda's house to wish me good night, Huda told her that I had already fallen asleep. I felt guilty for having to lie to Moma. She had inherited Sitto Zahra's great appreciation for music and she would have allowed me to attend the concert. The problem was convincing Baba. The problem was always Baba. After the concert, when I snuck back into Huda's room, I dreamt that Baba had hired a private detective to stalk me. The detective had photos of me dancing in my short dress. I woke up screaming.

A plan was slowly unfurling in my mind. I would arrange to sleep over at Huda's again. I would ask Michael to pick me up from her house. Baba would never know...but *always remember my dear Sisters, God knows everything.* I convinced myself that I would not really be doing anything *haram* if I went. There was the alcohol thing of course, but I wouldn't have any. And if I just so happened to kiss Michael, well then Allah, the All Forgiving, the All Merciful would have to forgive me, wouldn't He? I thought I had it all figured out. I was ready. I was going to experience what being a "real" teenager felt like. With my newly established conviction, I finally replied to Michael and said "yes." Yes to going to prom with him. Yes to Hilary's party. Yes to fun. Yes to freedom. But mostly yes to desire.

I didn't know how parched I was then, how desperately I longed for even a morsel of physical intimacy. Just like my imaginary mermaid friend Serena who lived in our

bath tub when I was eight, I was imprisoned by my own body. Serena loved eating sweet and decadent things, but Baba didn't want me to feed her. He said it would make her uncontrollable and dangerous, but eight-year-old me failed to see how satiating a mermaid's hunger could be dangerous. Sometimes, her hair would clog up the bathtub and Baba would get furious and beat her until the bathwater turned red. He would collect her tears into little glass jars and then smash them when they were full.

Years later, long after I had stopped sneaking food to her, Serena came to me in my sleep. She was angry at me for not feeding her any more. *But every time I fed you, Baba would hit you. No, please leave. I cannot let him hurt you ever again.* She didn't care. She continued to haunt my dreams. Then, the night before Hilary's party, I tried to sneak a chocolate cake past Baba into the bathroom, but he had turned into a giant spider with eyeballs poking out of every crevice in his body. "*Habibti Aaliyah, you must not feed her too much,*" he said, "or her appetite will become insatiable and she will eat you." I ran into the bathroom with the cake and tossed it at Serena. She refused to eat it. Her cravings were no longer for chocolate.

"I hunger for the flesh of men," she had whispered.

The flesh of men.

She had somehow grown fangs. The spider had transformed back into a man again and this time when Baba came in with his leather belt, she latched on to his neck. He fell into the bathtub like a paper doll. The bathwater was scarlet. She didn't visit my dreams after that.

\*

## Chapter 3

On the day of Hilary's party, I went to Huda's house as planned and got ready there. Michael picked me up in his blue convertible, and off to our cheaply decorated high school gym we went. Behind my freshly waxed skin, well-manicured nails, elaborately coiffed hair, kohled eyes, and cherry red lips, I was choking with anxiety. The "what ifs" were endless: *What if someone sees us and tells my parents? What if Huda gives me away?* Michael had bought dark red roses to match my burgundy lace dress. His hands were perfectly steady as he fastened the corsage around my wrist. My hands trembled as I pinned the boutonniere to his lapel.

"You look beautiful Aaliyah. Can't believe I snagged such a sexy girl to be my date. I don't think I've ever seen you show that much skin before, but damn, you've got a smokin' hot body. Where ya been hiding all this, huh?" Michael said to me as he helped me out of his car. His grasp was firm. My hand was sweaty.

I had dreamt for years of attending a school dance, but as I tried to keep up with the music in that crowded gym, I realized that my grade school friend Samantha had been right all along. I wasn't missing much. It was unbearably hot in the gym, and with the tightly laced bodice constricting my lungs, it wasn't long before I was gasping for air. My toes were squished in the stilettos. The music was too loud; I couldn't hear anything Michael said to me. Some of the students were unashamedly grinding on each other like wild apes. One of the girls at our dinner table accidentally spilled her drink on my dress.

Despite the copious amounts of hairspray, my curls were still frizzing out from the humidity. The kohl had smudged. By the time Hilary and her boyfriend were crowned Prom King and Queen, I was ready to rip my wet dress off, yank the prickly bobby pins from my hair, and hurl my evil shoes at the blaring stereo. I did not do any of that. I remained in my seat and cheered Michael on as he claimed his “Most-Likely-To-Become- Prime-Minister” award. I did not win anything.

When the whole Prom ordeal was finally over my feet were covered in painful blisters; I could barely walk to Michael’s car. I wanted to tell Michael that I’d changed my mind, that I couldn’t go to Hilary’s after all. I wanted to ask him to drive me back to Huda’s so I could scrub the entire night out , but the way his hands had fit so seamlessly around my waist as we’d slow danced, the way he laughed when we played footsies during dinner, the way my body shuddered whenever his fingers brushed against my skin, and the way my heart raced every time I thought of his lips on mine, dissuaded me.

\*

Putting the hair straightener away and allowing my curls to run free gives me more time to focus on my noon prayers. As I raise my hands in supplication, I ask Allah to *please, please let everything go smoothly. I know what I’m about to do is insane and that my family might disown me forever for disobeying them, but they gave me no other choice. You know how much I love Jaavaid. I can’t allow my parents’ ignorance and racism to stand in the way of my happiness. Please Lord, please place some mercy in their hearts, and don’t let them disown me.* My eyes are watery. Good thing I didn’t

apply my kohl yet. I roll the prayer rug away and start undoing the buttons on my *abaya*. It's time to put on my new dress.

When I showed the dress to Moma earlier, she disapproved. *Aaliyah, you're still young, don't you want to wear something a little more suitable? How will you ever attract a suitor if you're going to hide your body like that? You know there will be women there looking at you as a potential daughter-in-law. You need to show off your beauty or else they won't even notice you.*

A major issue I have with female-only events is that all principles of modesty and decency are thrown out the window. It's not just the young girls hoping to snatch a groom that flaunt their beauty; even the older Aunties will dress a bit too provocatively, and slather far too much makeup on their faces. When I mentioned this to my sister Sahar once, she said that these parties are sometimes a woman's only opportunity to look sexy for someone other than her husband. Honestly though, there's a fine line between looking "sexy" and looking like you've just stepped out of a lingerie store. Auntie Shahinaz in particular always shows up in extremely suggestive outfits underneath her black chador. She wore a leather corset to Ranya's engagement party. I wonder what she'll be wearing today.

The dress I've chosen for Ranya's party is far from anything the Aunties would consider "sexy". It's an authentic 1960's peach coloured chiffon midi with butterfly sleeves. I found it at a vintage store in Michigan for only twenty bucks. Like always, getting it across the border was a hassle though; the custom officer thought I'd forged the receipt and was lying about the price to evade taxes. It took a while to convince him

otherwise, but it was worth it. I love the way the fabric seems to almost float on my body. It's modest and classy. Plus, it's so *hijabifiable*, which is why it seems fitting to also use it as my "running-away-to-marry-Jaavaid" outfit. Once I've put on my mint green cardigan, black dress pants, and ivory silk hijab, I'll be ready to go.

\*

July 7, 2003

Dear Diary,

Şitto Şalma's brother is going to Lebanon next week so we all went to Dearborn today to say good bye to him and his family. I don't really like crossing the border to the US because the border people are very mean to us. Last time, they broke Şitto Zahra's locket while searching through her bag. Today, they made us get out of the car and go wait inside this stinky building while they searched our stuff. I don't know what they're expecting to find. Bombs? Drugs? We were stuck there for almost three hours while they interviewed Baba. I'm glad I brought a book with me or else I would have been bored to death.

By the time we got to Şitto Şalma's brother's house, I was starving. Ehsan and Khadija took us to McDonald's and I got to eat Chicken McNuggets! I hope that they'll open up a halal McDonald's here too. It sucks that we can only eat those gross fish sandwiches.

Sometimes, I really wish my family lived in Dearborn instead of Windsuck. There's a lot of halal food there, and so many Arabs everywhere, and lots of women in hijab. They even have a huge mosque with actual minarets. It's very cool inside. There are gigantic chandeliers, and the walls are covered in gold calligraphy.

But I guess it might suck to live there because Americans are mean. Oh well.

Ehsan said she is going to bring me back some Kohl from Lebanon. Moma probably won't let me wear it out, but I'm so excited. Real Kohl! Samantha and Kristen are going to be so jealous. I can't wait.

Love, Aaliyah

\*

"Aaliyah, I am so, so happy that you came!" Hilary squealed when she opened the door, even though we'd just spent hours together at Prom. She'd changed out of her ball gown and into a much shorter and much more sparkly halter dress.

"You ready for a real paaart-aaay? ...you're gonna have sooo much fun I swear." She said, first engulfing me in her arms, and then giving Michael a peck on the cheek. "Michael, I can't believe you convinced Miss Goody-Two-Shoes here to come, it's a miracle!"

"What can I say; I've got skills you haven't even heard of," Michael smirked.

"Oh, I've heard...you don't mind if I steal your date for a sec, do ya?" Hilary said, grabbing my hand. "We won't be long. Everyone's chillin' in the living room. We're still waiting on Ethan to bring the booze, but there's lots of junk food. Make yourself comfy."

"Just make sure you bring her back," he said with a mischievous grin on his face.

Hilary led me upstairs to her bedroom. I'd never been in her house before, and I was surprised at how spacious it was. Unlike my house, there was no clutter to be seen,

no randomly placed objects strewn across the rooms, or empty cups of chai on the coffee tables. There were no haphazardly placed photographs of family members; instead, elaborately framed paintings hung from the walls. Everything was so immaculately in place that it was hard to believe anyone lived there at all.

Her bedroom too looked like something out of an interior design magazine. She had a four poster bed with silk drapes and antique furniture. My single bed and second-hand dresser set paled in comparison. We had barely set ourselves down on the bed when Hilary grabbed my hand and whispered, “So, have you kissed yet?” Her eyes gleamed with anticipation.

“No.” *And even if we did, I wouldn't tell you.*

“Ohmygod, Aaliyah, what on earth are you waiting for?”

“Well, um...he hasn't tried to kiss me.”

“Look, guys are stupid, kay? You gotta make the first move sometimes. He's probably thinking you don't want him since, I'm sorry girl, but sometimes you act like such a prude you know. That turns guys off,” Hilary sighed.

“ I don't know... Maybe he doesn't even like me that way.” Despite all the time I had spent daydreaming about smooching Michael, I was worried that if he did try to kiss me I wouldn't know what to do. *What if my spit gets all over his face and he is grossed out? What if I'm a horrible kisser? What if I accidentally bite him?*

“ Are you kidding me! Can't you see the way he's been looking at you all night? Trust me, Michael is like totally into you. Totally! ”



“He was probably looking at me because I’m a mess.” I didn’t want to admit to Hilary that I was feeling both flustered and giddy because I *had* seen Michael’s lustful gazes.

“Whatever. Guys don’t notice shit like that. But okay if you’re gonna be all insecure about it, why don’t you lemme lend you one of my dresses. You can fix your hair and makeup in the bathroom, and voila, you’re as good as new.”

“ Thanks Hilary, I think I’ll just keep this dress on. The Coke’s dried off. I would like to fix my hair though, if you don’t mind.” I didn’t want to face the humiliation of trying to squeeze myself into one of Hilary’s skimpy dresses.

“Yeah, of course! The bathroom is just across the hall there. I’m gonna head back downstairs. Just holla’ at me if you need anything. And don’t worry, I’ll tell Michael you’ve had a bit of girly emergency so you can take your sweeet time,” Hilary said, winking at me.

Like the rest of the house, Hilary’s bathroom was also unusually luxurious. After kicking my stilettos off, I sat on the edge of her massive tub, filled it with hot water, and massaged my aching feet. It was such a relief to be alone for a moment, away from my rambunctious classmates. I knew Michael was waiting for me, but I wasn’t in a hurry to get back. Even through the whooshing of the tap, I could still hear the music blasting downstairs. *What am I even doing here?*

After removing the spikey pins that the stylist had insisted on sticking in my hair, my head felt much lighter. White hairstylists never seemed to know what to do with the thick mane on my head. I’d asked her to straighten it first, but she said my natural curls

would give the up-do more volume. There was more volume- too much volume. I took a scrunchie out of my purse and gathered my hair in a ponytail.

I was reapplying my kohl when someone knocked on the bathroom door.

“Sorry, just give me a minute.” I finished applying the kohl and dabbed a bit of lipstick on my lips. Much better. I gathered my things, put my shoes back on, and took one final look in the mirror.

When I opened the door, I was surprised to find Michael standing in the archway.

“Now why’d you go and ditch me like that, huh? It’s not polite to keep your date waiting, especially when you’ve been teasing him all night,” Michael smirked as he leaned in and stroked my cheek. His face was just inches away from mine. Any closer and... I took a deep breath, willing my heart to slow down.

“I was just touching up my...” It all happened so quickly. I didn’t get to finish my sentence because Michael’s mouth was suddenly clasped over mine. His hands wandered over my bare shoulders, down my back, and on to my thighs. My body quivered. I felt dizzy. Everything was hazy and weightless, as if I were submerged in a vat of warm syrup. We slipped further into the bathroom. Michael locked the door. We were pressed up against something porcelain. My eyes were closed. Neither of us spoke a single word. His tongue slid easily in and out of my mouth. My body seemed to know how to respond to his every touch. Time collapsed. Zippers were undone. My dress crumpled on the linoleum floor next to his pants. He lay on top of me in the tub, his lips grazing my naked skin. My nails itched into his back. I was floating. It was warm. My head was spinning. His fingers pried at my bra clasp. He was taking his boxers off.

“No. Wait... what are you doing?”

“Come on, babe, don’t ya want me?”

Did I want him? *We were just supposed to kiss. Aaliyah, what on earth are you waiting for? Would it hurt? What if it hurts? Nobody wants to be a dirty lollipop. What are you waiting for? It’s haram. We shouldn’t.*

“Michael, I...I do want you but...we...I’m not ...” He forced his lips on mine; his body pushed against me.

He was too heavy to shove off.

“Heeeeeeeey! Hurry UP in there. I need to fuckin’ peeeeee.” One of the girls was banging on the bathroom door.

Michael’s hands were on my breasts. “Please...someone’s at the door, let’s go.”

“Bloody hell, we didn’t even get to the good part yet.”

The banging got louder. “Whadafuck? Get out already, I’mma pee on the floor”.

With a groan, Michael slid off of me. My heart was pounding; I felt nauseous. We did not speak to each other as we put our clothes back on.

Hilary’s best friend Miranda was waiting outside the door. She gave me a dirty look when I walked out with Michael trailing behind me. He hadn’t put his shirt back on.

“What’er ya doin’ in there, ya trashy ho? Suckin’ his dick?” She giggled. The yeasty scent emanating from the plastic cup in her hand made me recoil in disgust.

I ran down the stairs, and out the front door. I did not stop to say good bye to Hilary. Huda picked me up in her dad's truck. We were more than halfway to her house when I realized that I had forgotten my shoes in the bathroom. But I was no Cinderella. My prince charming wasn't going to come chasing after me.

\*

June 18, 2008

*It's 2:00am. I can't sleep.*

*I feel lost, hurt, alone, confused and very scared . It's like someone is stabbing my heart over and over again with a dagger. Fuck, this sounds like some sappy emo kid's diary. Next I'm gonna be writing about how my eyes spill tears of blood and how my heart bleeds . But the sad thing is, I do actually feel that way - like my heart is bleeding.*

*How could I have been so stupid? I can't believe this. I haven't stopped crying since Huda brought me back. Of course, ~~Michael~~ that jerk was only using me. And I let him. I fucking let him!! It's my fault. I should never even have gone in the first place.*

*I can't breathe.*

*Oh God, my heart literally hurts. I wish I could take a scalpel and remove my heart from my chest so that I no longer have to feel this pain. Allah, are you punishing me for what I did? I won't ask for Your forgiveness yet because I know I don't deserve it.*

*Now I know why crushes are named so. They squeeze at your heart until it is as crinkled as an empty can of pop. Sahar asked me once if I had a crush on anyone. My reply was "no, of course not, crushes are silly, why would I go breaking my own heart?" I have*

*done just that now and more. I can't Ah, shit, I think I've woken Huda up with my crying. She keeps asking me what happened but I don't want to tell her.*

\*

As a little girl, whenever I was disappointed because something didn't go my way, Sitto Zahra would remind me that lots of things in life are based off of *kismet* and *naseeb*. "Don't be upset *habibti*, it just wasn't meant to be. Trust me, if Allah has written something for you, even if it is on the other side of the ocean, even if the entire world conspires to stop it from happening, you will get it. When Allah wills for something to be, it is. Remember this, Aaliyah: sometimes the choices we make take us down a very different path than the one we've dreamed of, but in the end, our *kismet* will always be secured."

Sometimes I wonder if Sitto Zahra is right, if *kismet* is inevitable. I was in my freshman semester of university, eating lunch alone in the cafeteria when a girl wearing a neon pink hijab approached me, and sparked a series of events that would irrevocably alter the course of my life.

She was carrying a silver tray full of chocolate cupcakes. "Excuse me, would you like to buy one? It's for SMSA. They're fifty cents each."

"I'm sorry, I don't have any change." I stared at the cupcakes longingly. They were covered in rainbow sprinkles.

"That's alright...Oh my gosh! Aaliyah Yusuf, is that you?" Her eyes were wide.

"Yes." Obviously she knew me, but I did not recognize her.

“It’s Zeina! Don’t you remember me?” she cried, setting the tray on the table.

Did I know any Zeinas? I shook my head. “Sorry, I don’t.”

“ Oh my gosh! How could you forget? Arabic school! Saturday mornings.

Remember? You were always causing trouble in Sister Saniya’s class. Please tell me you still remember that time she caught you impersonating her lollipop thing during break, and got super mad ‘cuz we were all laughing really hard...” Zeina spoke in an incredibly animated voice, with dynamic hand gestures to match. “Arabic school got so boring after you left,” she frowned slightly, pouting her lips.

Images from my childhood flashed through my mind. The plump, bubbly girl standing before me looked nothing like the shy and scrawny brunette I used to sneak notes to during my Arabic lessons. “Zeinab... Idris?”

“Yes!”

“Wow. I haven’t seen you in ages. Are you still in touch with the other girls?”

“ I know! Well, Lamis, Nevine, and Jehan moved away. Rola got married so I don’t see her much, but the rest of us are all in SMSA.”

“What’s that?”

“Shia Muslim Student Association. The main Muslim club pretty much hates us so we had to start our own one last year. I actually just got voted in as President! We don’t have enough support though...you know how it is...us Shias are always broke. So yeah we’re trying to raise funds through bake sales. I made the cupcakes myself,” Zeina grinned.

“Oh, I’d love to buy one, but *Wallahi* I actually don’t have any change.”

“That’s okay...I’ll give you one for free,” she said, handing me one of the cupcakes. “ Hey, you know what, we’re having a charity dinner on Friday at six, why don’t you come? The girls will be sooo happy to see you! Tickets are only ten dollars, I can save you one. It’s just right here on campus, in the student auditorium.”

It would be nice to see my childhood classmates again. “Okay, *Insha Allah*.” I smiled at her before biting into the cupcake.

\*

## Chapter 4

February 27, 2002

Dear Diary,

OH MY GOD. The craziest thing happened today. I am still in shock.

So *Sitto Zahra* was walking me and *Mohamad* home from school like she always does, and then this crazy guy tried to run us over. I am not even kidding. We were crossing at the lights, and this guy in a black car like just keeps driving even though the light was red for him. We were so close to being hit but *Sitto Zahra* pulled me and *Mohamad* away really quickly. The guy stops his car and *Sitto* starts yelling at him. Her English is not very good so she was yelling some stuff in Arabic. I don’t think he understood everything so I said “You could have killed us.” And you know what he did? He said the F word and then called *Sitto Zahra* another bad word. He told us to go back to our country and said

he wanted to “kill all the towelhead terrorists”. Sitto Zahra was shaking so bad. Anyway, he drove away and nobody even tried to stop him or ask if we're okay.

I am still shocked.

When we got home, Sitto Zahra started crying. It's not fair. We're not terrorists. Sitto Zahra has never hurt anyone. She won't even let us kill creepy insects. She says all creatures were created equal by Allah and we should respect them. She even makes us put spiders back outside.

Then, to make everything worse, when Baba came home from work and we told him what happened, he blamed the whole thing on Sitto Zahra. He doesn't think she should be covering her hair in this country. He says it's okay, Allah will understand that we can't follow all the rules here, that we need to protect ourselves, especially after 9/11. He said, if Sitto wasn't wearing hijab, the guy wouldn't have known we are Muslim. I think he's wrong. Sitto Zahra should be able to wear whatever she wants. And I love Sitto Zahra's hijabs. They're all so beautiful. She was wearing her silky white hijab today with the black swirls on it. It doesn't look anything like a towel. Why are people so mean?

Also, I hate when people tell us to go back to our country. I was born here. I've never even been to Lebanon. Besides, we learned in History class the other day that Canada used to belong to the native people so really it's their country.

I'm scared now. What if other people try hurting Sitto Zahra? Allah, I know you can see my diary so please, please, protect us.

Love, Aaliyah



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# **SURPRISE: I GOT A NEW ~~HAIRDO~~ HIJAB**

January 11th, 2010 / 72 COMMENTS

A few blog posts ago, I offhandedly mentioned that I've been considering wearing hijab full time. Many of you flooded my comment section with words of encouragement (and disapproval). In my last post, I let you all know that I am now officially a hijabi. I am quite shocked at the reactions I've received from some of you. Normally, I don't respond to nasty comments, but I feel like I need to address some this time. Note to AmericanMuslimah99: saying "WTF you're a HOjabi now?" is not very polite, especially when I can see from your profile picture that you wear the hijab yourself. And frankly, to those of you who in reply to AmericanMuslimah99's comment provided me with tips on how to remain modest and not turn into a "ho-jabi", thanks but no thanks. Do you seriously believe that if a girl plucks her eyebrows or wears high heels or red hijabs she's worthy of the title "ho"? I am appalled. You don't know me in real life, and even if you did, you have no right to exact judgement against me. Only Allah knows what's in our hearts.

Anyway, enough of that. Many of you have also requested that I tell you the story of how or why I "suddenly" decided to observe the physical hijab. The truth is, as far as most hijab stories go, mine is pretty boring. Other girls have had prophetic visions and dreams in which angels and other ethereal beings visit them and ask them to hijabify themselves, or they've had near death experiences which made them see the "light". I've had no such experiences. There are many factors which led up to me deciding to permanently wrap that controversial piece of cloth around my head. Here are some of them:

1. During my final semester of high school, I fell victim to a sinister plot concocted by my peers. I was so blinded by my own desires that I could not see what I was getting myself into. It was only by the grace of Allah that I escaped unscathed. I won't go into any details. But suffice to say, I had never

felt so violated in my life. My sacred body had been reduced to a mere sex object.

2. During my first semester at uni, I joined SMSA mostly because it provided me with a safe social network. I no longer had much in common with my old high school friends who became more interested in "getting smashed" downtown than drinking coffee at Timmy's. The girls in SMSA were all Muslim, and Shia like me. Even though most of them were (and are) far more religious than me, it was easier being friends with them than to continue being friends with non-Muslims. Gone were the days when I needed to come up with excuses as to why I couldn't do this *haram* thing or that. Also, I didn't need to pretend to be vegetarian anymore (let me tell you, that was a huge relief - yay for halal chicken!). For the first time in years, I felt like I almost fit in. Key word here is almost, because of course as a non-hijabi I didn't fully fit in.
3. Not surprisingly, hijab is rather a touchy subject for the girls in SMSA. Not all the girls in SMSA wear hijab, but the majority do. Now, among those who do wear hijab, the level of veiling differs drastically, and that is a major site of contention. Some (like me) dress in typical western clothes; others wear the full abaya or jilbab. Then there's the hijabistas (you may also know them as the modest fashionistas or for those judgmental douche bags among you, as the "ho-jabis") who wear trendy, colourful and sometimes outlandish outfits. Hijabistas are sometimes looked down upon by the more conservative hijabis who are decked out in black from head to toe. The non-hijabis, on the other hand are either given a free pass or put under a radar. At first, nobody really said anything about my non-hijabi status, but as my relationship with the girls turned from "sisters-in-Islam" to "best-friends-until-jannah", the topic of hijab began to creep up a lot more in our conversations. In order to prove the other girls wrong, and to prove that I was right (that hijab was something constructed by men to oppress women and that men should just learn control their own damn dicks instead of forcing women to cover), I began extensively researching the topic. It wasn't long before I discovered that I everything I had ever been taught about hijab was incorrect.

Some of my misinformation about hijab can be attributed to the lack of hijabis in my family. My maternal grandmother is the only other woman in the family

that observes hijab full time. I think I was about six or seven when I first questioned her about hijab. The conversation went something like this:

Me: *Why do you cover your head when we go out?*

My grandmother: *Because we're Muslim and Muslim women must dress modestly and cover their beauty.*

Me: *Why?*

My grandmother: *It's for protection.*

Me: *So if I cover my hair, will it protect me from the mean kids at school?*

My grandmother: *No, you're too young to wear hijab. It's for older girls and women, to protect them from the evils of men. You'll learn why when you're older.*

And I did learn why when I got older. I learned that men can't control themselves, that women have to cover their bodies in order to stifle men's lust. I learned that if a woman showed too much skin, she would be more likely to get raped or sexually harassed. I learned that scantily dressed women are sluts. I learned that a married woman needs to dress modestly because her husband might get jealous if other men are permitted to look upon her body.

What I didn't learn was that Allah, not men, commanded Muslimahs to wear hijab. I didn't learn that the reason for hijab is not to dispel men's desires, but to identify the hijabi as Muslim. I didn't learn that observing hijab is just one of the ways in which a Muslim woman worships God. I didn't learn that by covering her outward beauty, a woman could instead focus her energy on fostering her inner beauty. I didn't learn that hijab was so much more than a mere piece of fabric, that modesty had to be cultivated internally before it could be manifested externally. I didn't learn that there was a hijab for men too, that Muslim men are indeed responsible for controlling their own genitals.

So when I did learn that hijab is NOT for the benefit of men, that it doesn't somehow magically protect women from rape or sexual harassment by men, and that hijab is simply a way of submitting and humbling one's self and ego before Allah, I was astonished. How could I, a Muslim from birth, not have known these things?

The answer is quite simple: up until I began debating with the SMSA girls, I had never actually made a real effort to study the religion myself. I took the things my family said for granted. Not once did I bother to actually pick up the Quran and

read it. I had a few of the shorter verses memorized, and those were the ones I mechanically repeated during my daily prayers. So you can only imagine my shock, dear followers, when I finally read the Quran (and several other books on hijab) and discovered that Allah commands men to “lower their gaze and guard their private parts” before He commands women to veil themselves.

It’s mind blowing right? Yet, there are those who still love to misinterpret the Quran and sexualize the hijab. So before any of you write more ridiculous commentary about “ho-jabis”, I ask you to carefully consider the following hadith:

‘Abdullah bin Abbas, radiya Allahu `anhu, narrated: Al-Fadl bin Abbās [i.e. his brother] rode behind the Prophet as his companion rider on the back portion of his she-camel on the Day of Nahr (on the Farewell Hajj), and Al-Fadl was a handsome man. The Prophet stopped to give people verdicts.

In the meantime, a beautiful woman from the tribe of Khath’am came, asking the verdict of Allah’s Apostle. Al-Fadl started looking at her as her beauty attracted him. The Prophet looked back while Al-Fadl was looking at her; so the Prophet held out his hand backwards and caught the chin of Al-Fadl and turned his face to the other side in order that he should not gaze at her.

Important things to note:

The Prophet of Islam did not tell the beautiful woman to cover her face.

He did not tell the woman to go away because her appearance is too “tempting”

He did not tell the woman that her appearance is indecent or immodest

He averted his cousin’s improper gaze.

As always I went on all sorts of different tangents, but there you have it. I did not become a hijabi to protect myself from the male gaze. I now wear the hijab full time simply because I believe that Allah has instructed me to do so in His Holy Book. Some of you may want to argue with me that wearing the hijab is not obligatory (and in fact, I used to believe that as well) but I urge you not to waste your time. Wearing hijab was an informed decision I made after much research and soul searching. If you have any more questions for me, or if you want me to give you further details about my journey towards hijab, please shoot me a private message. I do not wish to discuss my decision on this blog any further. Either you respect my choice, or get off my blog. (I’m looking at you AmericanMuslimah99).

\*

November 19, 2008

*I used to write in here every day, sometimes several times a day, but lately I've been feeling too drained from all the papers I've had to do. Plus, my life has gotten so uneventful since I've started Uni. It's just readings, more readings, papers, more papers, and exams.*

*I took a break yesterday though, to go to that charity dinner Zeina invited me to. I got to see some of my old Arabic school friends. Oh my gosh they've changed so much. I suppose I have too. I forgot how nice it feels to be surrounded by other Shia girls. It's like I can just be myself and not have to worry about defending my beliefs every five minutes, or accidentally saying something offensive. It's also a bit weird too though because I'm so used to being the only Shia around.*

*The dinner itself was surprisingly very good. Along with the typical lentil soup, fatoush, and hummus, they served these Iranian kabob dishes with this red raisin-like thing in the rice. I asked Zeina what the red thing is called but she had no idea. It turns out the vice president of SMSA, an Iranian guy named Javid or something cooked the entire thing himself. Kudos to him because that was the best rice dish I've ever had.*

*Anyway, Zeina and the rest of the girls want me to join SMSA. I guess they're a bit lacking in memberships. Zeina kept trying to talk me into it all evening. I told her I'd think about it. I'm a bit nervous about joining because I'm no where nearly as pious as these girls seem to be. I mean yes I pray, and fast and so on, but I don't know. There were only two other non-hijabis at the dinner. It makes me feel a bit self-conscious. Like what if they're judging me? But that's ridiculous, if they cared, they wouldn't have asked me to join their club. Right?*

*Ps. I googled those red thingies, and apparently they're called Zereshk berries. I don't know where I can buy them but I'd die to have some again. I'm not exaggerating when I say best rice ever.*

\*

I try not to grimace whenever the women at Ranya's party erupt into loud ululations, their tongues wagging rapidly, like frantic snakes. It's customary to honour the bride with *zaghārīt*, but I cannot stand the sound of them. Poor Ranya looks like she wants to melt into the floor. I take a sip of my *sharbat*. It's so sickeningly sweet. How do people drink this?

Sahar keeps prodding me to get up and do the *dabkeh* with her and Huda. Moma, too is raising her eyebrows at me. "Yallah, Aaliyah, get off that chair and go join the others."

"I'm not feeling too well, Moma, something in the sweets we had earlier must not have set so well in my stomach. Do you mind if I excuse myself for a bit?" As I say this, I avert my gaze away from Moma. I don't want her to realize that I'm lying. "I'm just going to run down to the drug store and buy some Pepto-Bismol."

"Okay, *habibti*. But please don't take too long."

"I won't." I lean over and give Moma a quick peck on the cheek. How long will it take her to realize that I'm not coming back? I want to give her a hug, but that will raise suspicion. *I'm sorry Moma. I know what I'm doing is going to hurt you, but staying with Baba will hurt me.*

I gather my things and make my way through the throng of girls and women belly dancing. Should I have said good bye to Sahar? No, she might betray me. I can't risk it. Before leaving the room, I take one final look at everyone. Ranya is laughing at something that Sahar is whispering in her ear, Huda is dancing with Khalto Shahinaz, and Moma is clapping along to the music with a huge smile on her face. They all look so happy, so content. Are they really? As I stare at the women in my family, I can feel my eyes start to well up with tears, and a sharp unpleasant sensation is beginning to clog up my throat. My chest is constricted. I wipe the tears away. *I have to go, Jaavaid is waiting for me.*

\*

October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2011

*So I accidentally let it slip to Zeina during lunch that I like Jaavaid. And now I am freaking out. I'm sure she won't tell anyone, right? Ugh, shit. What if she does? I'd die of humiliation if he ever found out. Although, there's a part of me that wishes he would find out, and suddenly realize how amazing I am and like me back. Wishful thinking? I want him to like me, I really do. But are we even that compatible? He's very religious but I am still struggling with my faith, I mean I only started wearing hijab a few months ago. We do seem to agree on a lot of things though. Like whenever I chat with him on Facebook we get into deep discussions about life and theology, and our views rarely clash.*

*Today we got into a debate over some controversial issues, one of them being the legality of abortion in Islam. Most guys I've discussed this topic with in the past have straight out said that abortion is 100% haram in any and all circumstances. Jaavaid though agrees with me that if the pregnancy poses a physical or*

*mental risk to the mother's life, she should be allowed to get an abortion. Jaavaid even agreed with me that if a girl's family is going to kill her for getting pregnant out of wedlock, she would be able to get rid of the baby.*

*He didn't, however, agree with my views on gelatin. I've always been taught that it's haram because it comes from non-halal animal bones, but Jaavaid has now informed me that it is actually halal because it undergoes some sort of chemical change. I'm going to do some more research on this but oh my god, if it really is halal then I'm going to buy a huge bag of marshmallows and make smores.*

*We also talked about whether women should be allowed to work or just stay home. I asked him if he would be okay with his wife working, and he said of course. He would support her in her career and he wouldn't want her to raise the kids or do all the housework by herself. He thinks that's unIslamic. I told him that his future wife is a lucky woman and that I'm jealous of her already. He sent me back a smiley face and said that my future husband is a lucky man as well. Would he see my comment as flirting? Oh God, I bet he sees right through me, and he knows I like him. How embarrassing.*

*Oh Allah, please make sure Zeina guards my secret. I don't want Jaavaid to know I like him (unless of course, he secretly likes me too).*

\*

*April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

*I don't even know what to think anymore. Am I in love with him? Or is this just another foolish infatuation? My feelings have become overwhelming. I don't know how to handle this. I mean if I follow my brain and use common sense, I'd just forget about him. He isn't Lebanese; my family will never agree to let me marry him.*



*Plus he's way out of my league, and he probably doesn't even like me back. Most likely he just sees me as the weird girl who keeps asking him questions about Islam or perhaps more recently he has begun to see me as his younger sister. Nothing more, nothing less. I mean he still calls me SISTER Aaliyah. Surely, he did not invite me to his mom's iftar for any reason other than the sake of being nice and advancing religious obligations. And the only reason he keeps asking how I am and checking up on me is because he is well-mannered and nice, and that's what well-mannered, nice people do. I'm sure, as the VP, he routinely checks up on the other sisters in SMSA as well. Yes, I'm probably just another young Muslimah sister to him. But then why did he smile at me after the club meeting today? He usually never smiles at girls. I mean the first time I met him, he didn't even look me in the eyes. Then when he saw me in hijab for the first time, he turned bright red and stared at the floor the whole time. Hell, he still rarely looks me in the eyes now.*

*Ugh. I wish I was brave enough to confess my feelings to him. If Khadija proposed to Prophet Muhammad herself, then why can't I propose to Jaavaid? The worst that could happen is that he would reject me. And then I would have to quit SMSA and hide from him forever.*

*Allah, please, if Jaavaid and I are meant to be together, then please make it happen already. Okay? Thanks.*

\*

When I finally approached my parents about Jaavaid, the conversation did not go well at all. Baba's reaction was far worse than I had anticipated. I have never seen him so angry, except for the time he caught Mohamad kissing a white girl in our basement.

Moma and Baba were drinking their evening chai in the living room. Baba's favourite Lebanese talk show was playing on TV. I didn't want to unnecessarily provoke him so I waited until the show was over before speaking.

Me: Moma, Baba, I need to talk to you about something.

Moma: Are you okay, Aaliyah? What's wrong *habibti*?

Me: Don't worry Moma, I'm okay. It's just... well there's something I need to tell you and Baba, but I don't know how to start.

Moma: *Yee*, this sounds really serious. Ahmed, *yallah* turn the TV off and listen to your daughter.

Baba: *Tayib* but make it quick, Aaliyah, the news will be on in ten minutes.

Me: Okay, so uh...I have a suitor.

Moma: *Ya Allah!* I thought I'd never hear you say that. *Yallah*, tell us everything. Ahmed, isn't this exciting? My little Aaliyah getting married at last. What's he do? What does he look like? Do I know his mother?

Baba: Slow down woman. I haven't agreed to anything yet. And, you Aaliyah! Have you been hiding things from us? Who is this boy? Why did he not approach me first?

Me: I'm sorry Baba, but he doesn't know you. He's the vice president of SMSA, you know the Shia club I told you about? He's just finishing his masters in physics. He's very smart and religious. I swear nothing *haram* ever happened

between us. *Wallahi*. We really like each other though, and he wants to come ask for my hand, but I told him I should probably talk to you about it first so that it won't be a surprise.

Baba: What's his name?

Me: Jaavaid Mahdavi

Baba: I haven't heard of that last name before. What village is he from?

Me: Well, actually... uh...his family isn't Lebanese.

Baba: What do you mean?

Me: His family aren't from Lebanon. His father is from Iran, and his mother is from Afghanistan. Jaavaid was born here though.

Baba: See, Sajira, I told you this would happen...look where all your pampering has got us! Your daughter has gone behind our back and attached herself to an Iranian! They're not even Arab. I hope you're happy, you failed at raising her.

Moma: Please calm down Ahmed. We can discuss this rationally. I'm sure Aaliyah will listen to you.

Baba: I refuse to discuss this any further. Aaliyah, you are not to speak to this boy ever again. Do you understand? If you do, you will wish that you were never born. And if you even *think* about marrying a man who isn't Lebanese, I will *kill* you. Remember that. No daughter of mine will marry an *Ajnabi*. I'd rather you remain a spinster forever than throw you away to some foreigner. You will marry

a Lebanese man from a good village and an honourable family or no man at all.  
This is non-negotiable. Don't you dare to ever bring this topic up again. Now,  
Sajira, take your daughter and get out of my face before I lose it completely.

\*

**Aaliyah Yusuf <AaliyahY@gmail.ca>**

4:51 AM (1  
day ago)

to Jaavaid

Jaavaid,

Like we'd planned, I tried talking to my parents again about us. As expected, that did not go well at all. My dad got even angrier today than he did the first time. He just really hates you based on the fact that you're not Lebanese. I even showed him verses from the Quran, and hadiths that condemn racism, but he refuses to change his mind. You know what he did when I told him that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) says "an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over a black nor a black has any superiority over a white except by piety and good action", he spat in my face and accused me of calling him an infidel. My mom and Sitto Zahra tried to stop him, but he pulled me by the hair and started smacking me with his belt, saying that Allah is going to burn me in hell for disobeying him. I now have a bunch of nasty bruises all over my body. But don't worry, I am okay. Just shaken up.

I'm sorry I couldn't call you to tell you what happened. My dad stole my phone and when he saw all those texts between us, he smashed it into about a zillion pieces. There's absolutely no reasoning with him at all. I had to lock myself up in the bathroom until he calmed down. He's taken my car keys as well.

I don't know what to do. I've been up all night thinking. Obviously, this isn't fair. We can't allow my father to come between us. I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I refuse to bow down to my dad's ignorant, racist, sexist ideals. I know that in Islam, a daughter usually needs her father's permission to get married, but I've been doing lots of research, and (you might already know this) I discovered that if the father refuses to let his daughter marry an eligible suitor due to his race, financial situation or any other stupid reason, then his authority is automatically revoked. Basically, that means he can only reject you if you're a horrible immoral person or a criminal, which you are most definitely not. So if Allah Himself says I don't need my father's permission to be with you, then I think we should just get married anyway. I know that won't be easy, and we'll probably face a lot of hardships, but if you really want us to be together, you'll do this.

Jaavaid, I want you to make a decision, either you place your faith in Allah and marry me despite my family's refusal or we both go our separate ways because my heart is not a toy. It's not easy for me to propose like this (well it does help that I can't see you right now, and that I'm half asleep, but trust me, my heart is accelerating at an abnormally high rate). I am being honest and truthful with you about what I want, if it's

not what you want then please just tell me. Think about it first though. Do you love me or not? Do you want to spend the rest of your life with me or not? Look into your heart. But also use your brain. Don't make a choice you'll regret. So let me know what you decide. I probably won't be on campus this week. I don't know when he'll return my car keys, but I'm going to order a new phone tomorrow. I love you. I miss you. Please email me back ASAP.

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**Jaavaid Mahdavi** <JaavaidMahdavi@gmail.ca>

8:46 AM (21 minutes ago)

to me

As-salamu alaykum dearest Aaliyah,

Insha Allah you're feeling better today. I'm terribly sorry you had to go through all that. Just know that in the end, Allah's justice will prevail. Your father's cruelty will not go unpunished. Try to remain strong and patient for now. You won't have to live with that ignorant man much longer.

I know I took a while to reply back to you. I'm sorry. Forgive me. The truth is, you took me by surprise. I didn't know how to respond. I needed time to collect my thoughts.

Believe me when I say that it was never my intention to develop feelings for you. When we first met, I only saw you as my sister in Islam, but when we began chatting on Facebook, I was pleasantly surprised by your progressive views and deep connection to Allah, and my feelings towards you began to change. Our extensive conversations online unveiled parts of your soul that are hidden in person. Once I realized how beautiful the essence of your bare being is, I could no longer resist falling for you. When I confessed my feelings to you that day in the library, and said that I wanted you as my companion in this life, and in the afterlife, I truly meant it. I still stand by my word. You're the only woman for me, Aaliyah.

As you know, my parents have no issue with us being together. My mother was hesitant at first, but Alhamdulillah with your sweet and lively spirit, you were able to win her over. At this point, our only barrier to marrying is your father's refusal. What a shame. If only he could see that we're just trying to begin a life together in fulfillment of Allah's wishes.

If we're going to get married behind your father's back, then we cannot stay here. He will hurt us both. We'll have to make arrangements to live somewhere far from Windsor so that he can't get to us. I have relatives in Vancouver so that might be a plausible choice. I don't want to take you away from the rest of your family or ruin your relationship with them, but it seems as though we have no other option. Allah has brought us together in this way. We should gracefully accept our destiny.

So, atashè del-am are you truly prepared to sacrifice everything for our relationship? Certainly, my heart is willing. As verse 30:21 of the Quran says, Allah Himself places contentment and tranquility between spouses, so nothing can, nor should, stand in the path of our love. Our situation is incredibly difficult, but we have Allah to guide us through every step. You asked me to follow my heart, and so I am. It is

the only way to happiness, noorè cheshm-am. My grandmother used to say “only a heart can find a way to another heart”. Our hearts did as much. There is absolutely no turning back now. I’ll never forgive myself if what we have is shattered due to your father’s cruelty and ignorance.

Let’s meet up soon, and discuss this in person. Okay? We’ll have to make plans. Please call me as soon as you get your new phone. I’m worried about you and I miss your voice. May Allah unite us under His mercy and love. Salams for now.

-Your future husband (Insha Allah). ☺

\*

By the time I reach my bedroom, my mind is brimming with a jumble of frantic last-minute worries. It doesn’t help that I’ve been suppressing my tears the entire drive home from Ranya’s party. I keep imagining Mama collapsing from devastation when she discovers that I’m gone for good. Jaavaid and I have been planning this for months so I’ve had plenty of time to prepare, but now that it’s about to finally happen, I can’t seem to restrain my feelings. I thought it would be easy. I would just take my stuff and go but...*what if I really never get to see Mama again? Would Baba try to come after us? What if he finds us and actually kills me or Jaavaid? What if he blames Mama for it and hurts her?* I sit on my bed and recite a *dua*, asking Allah to put my heart at ease, and to help me ignore the hysterical thoughts. I can’t afford to lose any more time being sentimental, not when I’m this close to breaking free. I need to leave before Baba gets home from work, and before Mama realizes I’m not returning to Ranya’s party. Sitto Zahra will be back from her volunteer shift at the mosque soon as well.

I crammed all the things I’m taking into an old roller bag after *fajr* prayers earlier this morning. As a hijabi, it’s nearly impossible to travel lightly, but this time I do not have the luxury of neatly arranging my belongings into full-sized luggage. Except for a

few of my favourite outfits, some undergarments, a bunch of pashmina scarves, a small case of jewelry, my old journals, a family photo album, and a copy of the *Quran* that Sitto Zahra gave me, I am leaving almost everything behind. I drag the leather case out from underneath my bed. There's no way I would have been able to sneak anything bigger than this into my room. In the end though, I suppose that sacrificing replaceable objects is minor compared to my other losses. Before exiting the room, I take one final look at everything I am abandoning in order to finally be with Jaavaid. *Will Mama search my drawers, hold my things to her chest and mourn for me? Will Sitto Zahra vainly try to comfort Mama with talks about destiny and the will of God? Will Sahar try to cheer Mama up by visiting more often? When I am gone, there'll be more space for her and her kids. Or maybe Mohamad, after years of living in the basement, will decide to move into my empty room? Will Baba throw away all the things I've left behind? Will Mama and Sitto Zahra secretly save some of my scarves and smell them whenever they miss me? Will Baba tear his disobedient daughter's photos from the frames and burn them? Will I ever get to see these walls again?*

My hand shakes as I roll the suitcase down the hallway. I can't believe I'm actually doing this. I feel like a heroine in one of those sappy black and white romance films, running away to be with her lover. Except Jaavaid is not my lover yet. We have never even touched.

When I reach the entranceway, I set the suitcase down. I kick off the tight kitten heels that I'd worn to Ranya's party and put on my comfiest pair of ballet flats instead. The flight to Vancouver is only a few hours, but there's no way I am letting my feet

suffer any longer than necessary. As I take a quick look at myself in the hall mirror, and tuck in the stray hairs that have wandered from underneath my hijab, I realize that in my hurry, I've almost forgotten the letter I wrote. If it weren't for the fact that they would think I got abducted and call the police to initiate a missing-person-search for me, I wouldn't even be leaving a letter. I've only put in enough information to reassure them that I am going away with Jaavaid out of my own free will and that they shouldn't bother trying to look for me. I take out the letter from my purse, and place it on top of the shoe rack. They can't miss it there. I pick the suitcase up again, and roll it to the door.

I take a deep breath. My whole body is trembling now, and my pulse is thumping loudly. This is it. Once I'm on the other side of the threshold, I will be leaving Aaliyah Yusuf behind to become Aaliyah Mahdavi. I reach for the doorknob.

Before I've even touched it, the door swings open. My heart plummets. Sitto Zahra is standing on the other side of the door, key in hand.

"Aaliyah? *Ya Allah*, you've startled me. Shouldn't you be at that party, or have they finished already?" Sitto Zahra peers at me from behind her glasses.

"Uh, I got sick so...um I left early." How am I going to explain the suitcase now? I should have gone out of the back door.

"We had some extra helpers today, *Alhamdulillah*. The kitchen was too crowded for my liking, but we got everything done with lots of time to spare, so I thought I'd return home and rest before going back for the *Mawlid* tonight. Now, are you going to let your poor grandmother in, or what?" Shit. I wish I could make the suitcase



disappear. This is not the way things were supposed to go at all. My chest feels heavy. I can't breathe.

"Yes... of course, Sitto. Sorry." I step back and let her inside. Oh *Ya Allah*, why couldn't You make this easier for me?

"Aaliyah, what's this doing here?" Sitto Zahra gestures to the suitcase in my hand with a puzzled look in her eyes. "Are you going somewhere?"

"Oh, that...uh , it's nothing... just some old clothes and things I'm getting rid of," I say after clearing my throat. My mouth is dry. I stare at the suitcase. Sitto Zahra probably knows I'm lying. There's no way out of this. I tighten my grip on the suitcase handle.

"Let me see, perhaps there's something in there we can donate to the mosque." Before I can object, Sitto Zahra reaches down and unzips the suitcase.

I let out an involuntary gasp. My blood has turned to ice; I can feel the colour slowly draining from my face. I try to speak but my voice is unsteady and strained. "I...uh...I can...I can ex-explain..." My grip on the handle relaxes, and the suitcase crashes to the floor.

"I am not foolish. Where are you going?" Sitto Zahra's voice is firm and clear. She gives me a piercing stare. It would be pointless to deny it now, but I cannot bring myself to say it out loud. Everything is ruined. Should I just abandon the suitcase and

run out the back door? Sitto Zahra won't be able to catch up with me. I will my feet to go, but it's as if my body has lost all sense of mobility. I am perfectly still.

"Aaliyah, where are you going with this suitcase?" Apprehension is stretching across the lines on Sitto Zahra's face. She moves closer to me and grabs my hands. "Is it that boy? The Iranian?" Her gaze is sharp, but not unkind. Her hands feel warm in mine.

I nod.

"Do you really want to sacrifice everything for a man? Your parents will never forgive you. You will be an outcast. Suppose you divorce. What then?" Sitto Zahra exclaims, squeezing my hands tighter.

"I love him, and he loves me." My voice is barely a whisper.

"Love," she mutters, closing her eyes, and sighing, "Love is never a guarantee of anything. You may think you are making the right choice now, Aaliyah, but..." She pauses, and takes a deep breath.

"If I stay here then I can't make *any* choice. I'd rather choose for myself and be wrong than live like you or Mama," I cry, letting go of her hands. My voice is still shaky. Tears are beginning to flow from my eyes. Jaavaid is waiting for me. I have to leave; the plane will take off without me. If I don't escape now then I'll never be able to. Baba will lock me up; force me to marry someone I don't love. "I'm sorry, Sitto. My mind is made up. I have to go. Please."

Sitto Zahra stares at me in silence, but her dark sorrowful eyes express anguish and fear better than words ever could. I continue pleading with her, “Please, for the sake of Allah, don’t stand in the way of my *naseeb*. Sitto, I love him. I LOVE him. You know that it’s *haram* to stand between two people who want to marry. Allah is with us, not with Baba. I am making the right choice. Trust me.” The tears I’ve been holding in all day come streaming out as I speak. Sitto Zahra motions at me to come closer. I lean forward and shroud myself in her open arms.

“Shh, *habibti*,” she snuffles, stroking my back, “If Allah intends for you to be with Jaavaid then nothing can stand in your way, certainly not an old lady. I cannot prevent you from going, not when I’ve seen the grief of what being deprived from having any real choices in life can lead to. I wish it was in my power to keep you happy, and safe... I can only ask Allah to protect you wherever you go.” Sitto Zahra wipes the tears away from my face. I disentangle myself from her arms, and take her hand in mine. I bring her hand to my lips and then place it on my forehead. She pulls me in for another embrace, and gives me several frenzied pecks on each cheek before letting me go.

“Thank you, Sitto,” I say, as I pick the suitcase up from the ground. “*Insha Allah* this separation won’t be long.” My eyes are beginning to well up with tears again. I give Sitto Zahra one last kiss on her cheek before heading towards the open door.

“Aaliyah, wait!” I turn back around. Sitto Zahra is unclasping one of the gold chains from around her neck. “Take this,” she says, offering me her *nazar* amulet. I grab it from her. It’s much heavier than it looks. Does Sitto Zahra really believe that this piece of expensive jewelry is going to protect me? She gives me a half-hearted smile.” I should

have gotten rid of this thing long ago. I have no use for it; only Allah can provide protection from evil. Sell it, and use the money to buy yourself a nice wedding gift.”

I stare at the eye pendant in my hand. It’s so very blue. It reminds me of Mama’s eyes. I cannot sell this. I unhook the chain and drape it around my neck. As I secure the clasp, I smile at Sitto Zahra and say, “Thanks Sitto, but I think I’ll keep it.”

“If you wish,” Sitto Zahra replies, stepping closer towards me. She rests one hand on my shoulder and the other on my back. Then, with her eyes fixed intently on mine, she says, “Aaliyah, before you go, promise me one thing.”

“Yes, Sitto?”

“Should Allah give you sons, teach them that women do not come from the ribs of men. It is men who emerge from the wombs of women. And should Allah give you daughters, teach them to be resilient so that they are not crushed between the ribs of merciless men. This world is not like a mother’s *rahem*; it does not show *rahema* to anyone so promise me, Aaliyah, promise me that you will remain strong.”

## **Critical Statement: The Heterogeneous Composition of *Rosewater***

### **Arab-Canadian and Arab-American Literature**

Currently, there is not a significant amount of scholarly or creative publications in English which fall under the umbrella of Arab-Canadian literature. The majority of the Arab-Canadian literature that exists today was written in French by Quebecois-Canadians of Arab origin, such as *Le Printemps peut attendre* (1985) by Andrée Dahan, *Le Métamorphoses d'Ishtar* (1987) by Nadine Ltaif, *Pacamambo* (2000) by Wajdi Mouawad, *Châteaux en Espagne* (2006) by Naïm Kattan, and *Le Sourire de la Petite Juive* (2011) by Abla Farhoud. The Lebanese-Canadian writer Rawi Hage is one of the very few examples of contemporary Arab-Canadian authors who write in English. To date, he has written three novels: *De Niro's Game* (2006), *Cockroach* (2008), and *Carnival* (2012). *Of Hockey and Hijab: Reflections of a Canadian Muslim Woman* (2009) by Sheema Khan is also an example of one of the rare Arab-Canadian books written in English. According to Elizabeth Dahab, an Arab-Canadian Comparative World Literature professor at California State University, about "15% of Arabic-Canadian literature is produced in Arabic, while 60% of it is written in French, and 25% in English" (Dahab 11). Dahab has developed an original and unprecedented framework for the canonization of contemporary Arab-Canadian literature in her monographs *Voices of Exile in Contemporary Canadian Francophone Literature* (2009) and *Voices in the Desert: An Anthology of Arabic-Canadian Women Writers* (2002). In the preface to *Voices of Exile*, Dahab argues that Arab-Canadian literature is "weakly institutionalized and largely unknown to mainstream scholarship" (vii). She asserts that

prior to her own scholarship on the subject “No critical books or collection of papers had ever been written on [Arab-Canadian] writers, no literary history had ever been undertaken, and no complete bibliography of their works had ever been published” (vii). She also claims that the only work available was “a handful of interviews, a handful of slim anthologies, a trickle of articles and book reviews scattered here and there in nonmainstream journals and magazines, written mostly by fellow Arabic scholars” (vii). Furthermore, she states that when she began working on *Voices in the Desert* in 1994 that a monograph on Arab-Canadian writing “had not yet made an appearance amongst the books commissioned in the 1980s by the Canadian government on literatures of national minorities” (viii). Thus, it is quite evident that there is a considerable gap in the field of Arab-Canadian Literature, both academically and creatively. I hope that my novella *Rosewater* will contribute to the field, and will help fill at least a small crevice in that gap. Due to the scarcity of Arab-Canadian literature in English, and because I cannot undertake, in this essay, the kind of primary research that would be necessary in order to further pursue Dahab’s framework to the point of fully situating *Rosewater* within a Canadian literary context, I will be referring to Arab-American literature, which has a more extensive scholarship, instead. To provide some sense of Anglophone Arab/Muslim literary history, however, I will overview the emergence of such literatures in the United States. Since some of the assertions made by US critics are also applicable to the Arab-Canadian literary context, I will use those to address Arab-Canadian literature as well.

In “Arab-American Literature: Origins and Developments,” Lisa Suhair Majaj outlines the history of Arab-American literature, which she claims originated in the late 1800s “when Arab immigrants first began to arrive in North America in significant

numbers” (2). By the beginning of the twentieth century, several Arab-American literary societies and journals had been established. Prolific Lebanese-American writers in the 1920s included Khalil Gibran and Ameen Rihani. However, these early Arab-American writers “wrote about their Arab background with hesitation and through self-distancing narrative strategies” (Majaj 3). For years, Arab-American literature remained trapped in narratives of assimilation, but then when political events in the sixties, such as The Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the U.S, opened a space for previously silenced minorities such as African-Americans to publish their works, Arab-Americans found it “easier to write about their ethnic heritage and find publishers and audiences” (Majaj 3).

By the end of the twentieth century, Arab-American literature had moved beyond what Khaled Mattawa and Minir Akash, (editors of the 1999 *Post Gibran: Anthology of New Arab American Writing*) term “the staples of grandmotherly aphorism, thickly accented patriarchal traditionalism, culinary nostalgia, religious dogma, belly dancing and adoration for Khalil Gibran” to develop a diverse “cultural identity rather than mere ethnic identification” (61).

Also, by the end of the century, literary works such as the anthology *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* (1994) had created a much needed literary space for Arab-American and Arab-Canadian female writers to voice their concerns in regards to identity, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, culture, race, and politics. *Food for Our Grandmothers* is especially notable as it was among the first works to establish the notion of Arab-American and Arab-Canadian feminism. Subsequent works by Arab-American/Canadian feminists, such as Leila Ahmed’s monograph *Women and Gender in Islam* and Asma Barlas’s monograph

*"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* helped establish the concept of Islamic feminism. Since Arab/Muslim-North American women confront a myriad of cultural, religious, socio-economic, political, racial, and gender-related issues that differ from those faced by their Western counterparts, Arab-American feminism and Islamic feminism are necessary lenses through which to study Arab/Muslim-American women's literature. In *Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, and Belonging*, Susan Muaddi Darraj argues that Arab-American feminism is crucial when it comes to understanding the experiences of Arab and Arab-American women. She asserts that contrary to the popular Western feminist slogan of the 1960s, which states that the personal and political are one and the same, for Arab/Muslim-American women "feminism's core is slightly, though significantly different" as Arab-American feminists in contrast to Western feminists must "grapple with [both] *the political and the personal*" since they must deal with gender issues within the Arab/Muslim community (the personal) and gender plus racial issues within the larger American society (the political) (Muaddi Darraj 250). Although there is a history and politics of what constitutes "the personal," for Arab/Muslim-North American women, that political history is manifested within the public institutions of Arab/Muslim societies (such as Islamic jurisprudential laws), not within the public or private institutions of Canada or the US. Their battle against the "political" on a national scale is quite distinct from their battle against the "political" on a "personal" level within their particular Arab/Muslim community. For that reason, Darraj distinguishes between the "political" and the "personal", arguing that for Arab/Muslim-American or Canadian women, the "political" and "personal" are two separate realms. Within the "political" sphere, they



must contend with the prejudice and discrimination exacted on them due to their race and religion. For instance, female Muslims living in the West must face the ongoing political controversy surrounding the veil. Had the province of Quebec's proposed Charter of Values passed in 2013, it would have banned female government employees from wearing the veil. Also, more recently, in February of 2015, a "Quebec judge told a woman appearing in her Montreal courtroom she would not hear her case until she removed her hijab" (CBC.ca). The "personal" feminist struggle for Arab/Muslim females is dictated by very specific cultural and religious issues which their Western counterparts typically do not share. For instance, Western feminism, which is generally secular-based, does not consider Muslim women's "personal" struggle against patriarchal and cultural interpretations of Islamic discourse. As Margot Badran argues in "Islamic Feminism: what's in a name?", the distinction "between secular feminist discourse and Islamic feminist discourse is that the latter is a feminism that is articulated within a more exclusively Islamic paradigm" (Badran). One of the main objectives of Islamic feminists is to advocate for women's rights by proving that the Qur'an "affirms the principle of equality of all human beings but that the practice of equality of women and men[...] has been impeded or subverted by patriarchal ideas (ideology) and practices" (Badran).

Examples of how Arab/Muslim-American women are fighting both a political *and* personal battle are abundant in *Rosewater*. Some of the instances that can be categorized as "political" are:

- Aaliyah's classmates taunting her about her body hair: "They told me my eyebrows were creepy caterpillars and made monkey noises when I passed by. *Ew, look at Aaliyah's moustache...so gross.* Ashamed of my skin, I would

retreat into the library during recess. None of the beautiful, pale kids wanted to associate with an ugly, Arab primate like me.” (53)

- When Aaliyah’s family is harassed at the U.S border: “I don’t really like crossing the border to the US because the border people are very mean to us. Last time, they broke Sitto Zahra’s locket while searching through her bag. Today, they made us get out of the car and go wait inside this stinky building while they searched our stuff.” (78)
- Aaliyah and Zahra are nearly run over by a racist man: “He told us to go back to our country and said he wanted to “kill all the towelhead terrorists”. Sitto Zahra was shaking so bad. Anyway, he drove away and nobody even tried to stop him or ask if we’re okay.” (88)

Instances which can be considered “personal” include the following:

- Sajira not allowing Aaliyah to use tampons: “There was no further discussion to be had with Moma. Tampons were forbidden. They were evil hymen-breaking devices meant to lure innocent girls down a path of lustful debauchery wherein their precious virginity was lost forever.” (63)
- Aaliyah’s blog followers calling her a “ho-jabi” because the way she dresses doesn’t coincide with their image of a “proper” hijabi: “And frankly, to those of you who in reply to AmericanMuslimah99’s comment provided me with tips on how to remain modest and not turn into a ‘ho-jabi’, thanks but no thanks. Do you seriously believe that if a girl plucks her eyebrows or wears high heels or red hijabs she’s worthy of the title ‘ho’?” (89)

- When Aaliyah's father rejects Jaavaid as a potential suitor: "Aaliyah, you are not to speak to this boy ever again. Do you understand? If you do, you will wish that you were never born. And if you even *think* about marrying a man who isn't Lebanese, I will *kill* you." (100)

Western feminism cannot account for these specific personal *and* political issues that hyphenated female minorities like Aaliyah must face on a daily basis. It is necessary to study Aaliyah's struggles and the lives of other Arab/Muslim-North American women from the viewpoint of Arab-American/Canadian and Islamic feminism

Additionally, it was necessary for Arab/Muslim- North American women to create a new feminist discourse in order to challenge the mainstream Western discourse which depicts Arab, and especially Muslim, women as being oppressed and in need of saving, or as exotic and wild harem ladies who need to be tamed. According to Mara Munro's article "Sensationalism Veils: The Portrayal of Muslim Women in Western News Media," women from Islamic cultures "are grouped together and defined by dominant discourses of passivity and victimization" by Western media (international.gc.ca). Munro argues that Muslim women in News reports are often portrayed as "covered up, unthinking, and oppressed" (international.gc.ca). Popular culture also depicts Muslim women in a similar fashion. For instance, the Arabian princess, Jasmine, from the well-known Disney movie *Aladdin* is characterized as a scantily dressed victim of patriarchal oppression, who must in accordance with an ancient law be forced to marry a prince in time for her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. This depiction of Jasmine enforces the stereotype that Arab/Muslim women are coerced into arranged marriages by their fathers. Jasmine's sexuality is the only thing that gives her agency in the movie. At the end of the movie,

she is forced to seduce the evil character Jafar in order to save herself. Also, in comparison to Jasmine, most of the other female characters that appear in the movie are shown completing domestic tasks while wearing their veils. The portrayal of Jasmine and the other female characters in *Aladdin* are an effective illustration of Evelyn Shakir's claim in "Mother's Milk" that "According to popular belief, all Arab women can be divided into two categories. Either they are shadowy nonentities, swathed in black from head to foot, or they are belly dancers – seductive, provocative, and privy to exotic secrets of lovemaking. The two images, of course, are finally identical, adding up to a statement that all Arab women are, in one sense or another, men's instruments or slaves" (39).

Muslim women living in the West are also presented by the dominant Western discourse as belonging to the false monolith binary of "the virginal whore [vs] the submissive dominatrix" (Shirazi 44). In "The Postsecular Turn and Muslim American Literature," Danielle Haque claims that Muslim women living in Western nations are also often portrayed by non-Muslim Westerners in one of two ways: "as women who modernize and assimilate, and often publically critique patriarchal Islam or as observant women with no agency, rights, or loyalty to the nation in which they live" (Haque 805). Western stereotypes thus confine Arab and Muslim- North American women within a set of homogenizing binary structures, effectively stripping them of their individuality. Instead, these women are positioned as fixed signifiers of the cultural mythologies or Orientalist stereotypes that the West has constructed about the East. Edward Said elaborates on these mythologies and stereotypes in *Orientalism*, stating that "Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference

between the familiar (Europe, the West, ‘us’) and the strange (the Orient, the East, ‘them’)” (43). He also argues that a very large mass of [Western] writers [...] have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, ‘mind’, destiny, and so on” (2-3). Additionally, as Majaj explains it: “The portrayal of Arab men as inherently patriarchal and oppressive and of Arab women as either exotic or oppressed becomes just one more way of positioning Arab culture as inferior to Western culture and therefore of perpetuating colonial relationships between east and west”(6). While such mythologies about the subjectivity and oppression of Arab and Muslim women are rampant in contemporary Western discourse, some Arab or Muslim-American writers continue to perpetuate these myths themselves. As Samma Abdurraqib argues in “Hijab Scenes: Muslim Women, Migration, and Hijab in Immigrant Muslim Literature,” narratives about/by immigrant Muslim women typically fall into two categories: “fiction that focuses on culture and assimilation, rather than religion, and fiction that focuses on the oppressive nature of religion and assimilation” (Abdurraqib 56). For instance, Abdurraqib claims that Muslim-American Maryam Qudrat Aseel’s memoir *Torn Between Two Cultures*, “follows the same trajectory as most immigrant novels: she realizes the conflict her two cultures pose, and she navigates between them, disposing of whatever cultural/religious practices do not fit” (Abdurraqib 60). One of the religious practices Aseel disposes of is the veil, which she stereotypically illustrates as being universally oppressive. Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* also perpetuates mainstream Western stereotypes regarding Muslim women by ubiquitously representing all Iranian women as being victims of the Islamic state.

On the other hand, there are female Arab/Muslim- North American writers who aim to dispel the aforementioned Western mythologies and essentializing binaries about Arab and Muslim women through their writing. In *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossings*, Amal Talaat Abdelrazek contends that: “Recent scholarship by Arab American writers and critics has started to pull away from the pitfalls of [Western discourse’s] essentialization [of Arab/Muslim women] by presenting a different picture of Arab women that focuses on the rich diversity of their experiences and struggles” (Abdelrazek 15). Among this recent scholarship by Arab/Muslim- North American writers, Abdelrazek includes Leila Ahmed’s *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America-A Woman’s Journey* (2012), Mohja Kahf’s *E-mails from Scheherazad* (2003), Laila Halaby’s *West of the Jordan* (2003), and Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent* (2004). To this list, I add Elizabeth Dahab’s *Voices In The Desert: An Anthology of Arabic-Canadian Women Writers* (2002), Kamila Shamsie’s *Salt and Saffron* (2001), Nafisa Haji’s *The Writing On My Forehead* (2009), Mohja Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006), and my own novella *Rosewater*.

The “Hab Al Ruman” section of *Rosewater* challenges the aforementioned Western mythologies and essentialist binaries by presenting multidimensional female characters. While certain elements of Zahra’s story (such as the honour killing plot) do paint her as oppressed, that oppression cannot be rationalized as being instigated by a single, standardized cause. To simply blame the patriarchy, Arab culture or Islam for Zahra’s tragedy is too reductive. In the words of the author John Green, “the truth resists simplicity” (Goodreads.com). For instance, Zahra’s father justifies the murder of his daughter on the basis of honour, as he believes “Allah will not punish [him] for restoring

[his] honour” and that Zahra’s life is “*halal* to take” (47). Zahra’s uncle Rashid, however, who belongs to the same culture and the same religion, has an entirely different view on the matter. He doesn’t believe that Zahra’s “crime” warrants death.

When it comes to other issues that are often cited by Western discourse as being oppressive, such as the veil-which is represented by the West as both the “symbol of the oppression of women and the backwardness of Islam” (Ahmed 152)- “Hab al Ruman” shows an entirely different perspective. Zahra’s story exposes a variety of attitudes towards the veil. For instance, Zahra’s younger self is not too concerned about covering, and contrary to stereotypes she is not lashed for exposing her hair: “More often than not, as I swung my hips at the village boys, I would allow the *shayl* to slide from my head, leaving it to rest uselessly around my neck” (5). When Zahra is pregnant she uses the veil to conceal her pregnancy, and more metaphorically her “Sin”: Zahra’s mother, however, is not pleased with what she perceives as Zahra’s “newly acquired sense of religious modesty” (44). She sees the veil as an obstacle to marriage, informing Zahra that “Men don’t always like girls that cover too much. Don’t you think you’d get more suitors if they can see how beautiful you are?”(44). The adult Zahra, on the other hand, sees the veil as a kind of shield. She forces Sajira to cover so that she is protected from the “licentious eyes of men”. At this point, Zahra’s attitude towards the veil is coloured by her own experiences. She believes that if Sajira conceals herself, she won’t be tempted into making the same mistakes she did. Also, Zahra’s paranoia about being discovered by her family and killed, leads her to conclude that: “It’s too risky to reveal our faces in public”(27). Meanwhile Sajira, who does not share Zahra’s fears, feels restricted by the veil. Salma, the Lebanese-Canadian who does not wear the veil herself, remarks that it is

a “shame to have such beauty covered”(25). All of these diverse and contradictory attitudes towards the veil in “Hab al Ruman” reveal that mainstream Western discourse has set up a false dichotomy about Muslim women and the veil.

### **Hybridity and the Third Space**

While Steven Salaita argues in *Modern Arab American Fiction: A Reader's Guide* that it is difficult to draw a conclusive definition of a category as heterogeneous and diverse as Arab-American literature due to the fact that “No stable features exist consistently in the work that is described as ‘Arab American,’” he also maintains that we can still “detect some motifs and dynamics that justify the existence of the category” (7). I believe that one of these motifs is the concept of hybridity. The concept of hybridity was originally devised by Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*. Bhabha claims that the “interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (Bhabha 4). The aforementioned literary works, including the “Sharbat” section of *Rosewater*, explore the concept of hybridity as “present[ing] another way to resist essentialized identity politics, i.e., refusing to accept only one right position, breaking down the centre/margin dichotomy [of hyphenated identities like Lebanese-Canadian], and opening up spaces between the centre and margins [to form a hybridized ‘third space’]” (Salaita 69). The female Arab/Muslim- North American protagonists (including Aaliyah) in the aforementioned literary works all occupy this hybridized third space which liberates them from the binaries of culture, gender, sexuality, race, and religion that were imposed on them by Western discourses. For my character Aaliyah and the other protagonists, there is no clear-cut dichotomy of “us” vs “them”; they conflictingly occupy both spaces and



yet fully belong to neither, and so they must invent a third space for themselves, in which to craft a separate identity. A simple example of this hybridized third space can be found in Halaby's *West of the Jordan*, which narrates the story of Khadija and three other Palestinian-American women and their struggle to find their place within American society while reconciling their displaced identities:

In American my name sounds like someone throwing up or falling off a bicycle. If they can get the first part of it right, the "Kha" part it comes out like clearing your throat after eating ice-cream. Usually they say *kadeeja*, though, which sounds clattering clumsy. It never comes out my mother's soft way; she makes it sound almost pretty. (36)

"Kadeeja" thus becomes a signifier that reflects Khadija's hybridized position. The poem "My BabySitter Wears a Face-Veil" from Kahf's *E-mails from Scheherazad* also simply illustrates the concept of hybridization: "Songs from Guys and Dolls are scrambled / With the sound track of Khali balak min Zuzu and both / Are drowned out by the Monster Truck and Auto / Show-Show-Show of the Century-ree-ree" (32-33). The babysitter, Selwa, occupies a hybridized third space in which both the Arab and American cultures are "scrambled" together. The blurring of the line between Arab and American reveals a false dichotomy, and differentiating between the Arab and American aspects of Selwa's identity becomes impossible.

Similarly, in "Sharbat", the border between Aaliyah's Lebanese and Canadian identities is fluid. Yet, despite the fluidity, there still exists a tension between East and West in Aaliyah's mind. For example, she tells us how her younger self longed to attend "real" parties like "the parties of the happy white children [she] saw on television,

blowing out candles with clowns and face painters and colourful balloons” instead of family celebrations where her “huge family squeezed into tiny rooms, the adults smoking hookah while the children fought over the controllers to the video game consoles [and Aaliyah] usually sat in a corner and doodled” (68). Later, when Aaliyah attends a “real” party she discovers that she has romanticized Western celebrations:

I had dreamt for years of attending a school dance, but as I tried to keep up with the music in that crowded gym, I realized that my grade school friend Samantha had been right all along. I wasn't missing much [...]By the time Hilary Fisher and her boyfriend were crowned Prom King and Queen, I was ready to rip my wet dress off, yank the prickly bobby pins from my hair, and hurl my evil shoes at the blaring stereo. (76)

Aaliyah also feels uncomfortable and out of place at Ranya's party:

I try not to grimace whenever the women at Ranya's party erupt into loud ululations, their tongues wagging rapidly, like frantic snakes. It's customary to honour the bride with *zaghārīt*, but I cannot stand the sound of them. Poor Ranya looks like she wants to melt into the floor. I take a sip of my sharbat. It's so sickeningly sweet. How do people drink this?” (94)

The tension between East and West can only be resolved once Aaliyah fully transitions into the hybridized “third space”. For Aaliyah, the “third space” exists outside the boundaries of being Lebanese or Canadian, and instead lies within her interpretation of Islam. An example of how Aaliyah overcomes the tension between the Lebanese and Canadian binaries through her Islamic identity is manifested in her experience with beautification or bodily aesthetics. As a child, Aaliyah is pressured into removing her

body hair both by the bullying she endures from her peers, and by her mother's insistence that by removing the hair Aaliyah will be "whiter, cleaner" (55). Aaliyah claims though, that: "With the veiling of hijab came the freedom of allowing [her] skin to grow into wild, grassy meadows, rather than torturing it into clear-cut forests" (56). Before donning the veil, Aaliyah is also bullied about the "poufy mess on [her] head" (64), and as a result she "destroy[s] [her] natural curls" by excessively straightening her hair. While she is getting ready for Ranya's party, Aaliyah considers straightening her hair for the "vain" Aunties, but ultimately decides not to:

I turn the straightener off. Screw it. My hair is perfectly fine the way it is. The locks have grown out again and the thin spots on my scalp have filled in. It's as voluptuous as ever and I'm sure Jaavaid will love my curls. If the vain aunties are going to comment on it then so be it. I'm not interested in their sons anyway. (65)

While some of the tensions between the two parts of Aaliyah's identity are presented through the story's overall plot and themes, at times, the tension is also simply evoked through imagery, which contrasts Aaliyah's Lebanese self with her Canadian self. For example, "rosewater and pistachios" (68) is a culinary image associated with the East, whereas "chocolate and icing" (68) is suggestive of the West. On the other hand, "*halal* McDonald's" conjures up an image where East and West are mixed, reflecting the hybridization of Aaliyah's hyphenated identity.

### **Narrative Structure**

The heterogeneity of *Rosewater* is also reflected in the narrative structure. I have written both "Hab al Ruman" and "Sharbat" using the first person limited point of view. Both narratives are highly retrospective and introspective with the majority of the action

occurring in the narrators' minds. I have used the direct interior monologue technique to represent Zahra and Aaliyah's consciousness, which allows the reader to eavesdrop on their thoughts as they occur or, as David Lodge asserts in *The Art of Fiction*, it is "rather like wearing earphones plugged into someone's brain, and monitoring an endless tape-recording of the subject's impressions, reflections, questions, memories and fantasies, as they are triggered either by physical sensations or the association of ideas" (47). Because the bulk of the narrative is filtered through Zahra or Aaliyah's thoughts in this way, the reader cannot be certain if these two protagonists are reliable narrators.

"Hab al Ruman" which is set in the early eighties in Mount Lebanon is told through the perspective of Zahra and has a slightly less layered or heterogeneous narrative structure than "Sharbat". "Sharbat features Zahra's granddaughter, Aaliyah, as the narrator and is set in 2012 in Windsor, Ontario. "Hab al Ruman" contains two main narrative levels and storylines. One is the present, slow-paced narrative of Zahra preparing the lamb dinner, which is relayed in the present tense, and the other is the fast-paced narrative of Zahra's tragic love affair, which is recounted using the past-tense. Zahra's story takes on a more traditional structure than Aaliyah's, as the traditional, more linear form of the short story which "conventionally used a sequential plot-line"(Jirgens) better reflects Zahra's character and state of mind. Nonetheless, "Hab al Ruman" still contains less traditional narrative techniques such as narrative disjunctions, digressions, and embedded stories. For instance, after Zahra sends Sajira off to the market, she digresses from the main present-tense narrative into a flashback where she recounts the donkey-in-the-rain story. Before she gets to that story, however, Zahra digresses even further within the flashback to recall how her mother had berated her earlier that morning

for refusing suitors, and then digresses again into a fantasy about her future life as a singer. These flashbacks or analepses serve an explanatory role, developing and elaborating on Zahra's consciousness by relaying events from her past and allowing the reader to "make connections of causality and irony between widely separated events" (Lodge 75). In other words, the analepses in "Hab al Ruman" reveal Zahra to be a multifaceted and complex character, rendering her actions in the present – such as forcing Sajira to wear her veil – as stemming from an array of past experiences, and not simply from culture or religion. There are many other instances in "Hab al Ruman" that feature similar use of digression and analepses. Prolepses or flash-forwards are also used to create suspense and provoke the reader's curiosity by revealing important facts that will appear later in the story. For instance, although it is not revealed until much later how and why Zahra's family attempts to kill her, while getting ready to slaughter the lamb in one of the beginning scenes Zahra questions whether her family would "have made sure [she] had enough to drink before slaughtering [her]" (18). Embedded narratives also add to the heterogeneity of the story by introducing additional voices to that of the narrator. An example of embedded narrative in "Hab al Ruman" is the stories that Zahra's mother and Uncle Rashid tell her about the "forgotten aunt". Both versions of the same story offer different truths, which highlights the pluralistic, rather than universal aspects of silenced Arab women's realities. Was the "forgotten aunt" raped or did she engage in illicit sexual relations? The implication that she was raped further complicates the issue of honour killings, but neither Zahra nor the reader will ever conclusively know the truth.

Aaliyah's narrative is more complex and heterogeneous than Zahra's, which reflects her position as a hybridized individual. It is also reflective of the modern time

period Aaliyah is narrating from. Since modern technology has introduced new genres of writing, such as blog posts and SMS messages, it is not surprising that such texts would surface in Aaliyah's narrative as legitimate means of self-expression. In addition to blog posts and text messages, "Sharbat" also includes juxtapositions of diary entries, emails, and screen-play style dialogues. Because each of those texts subscribes to its own generic conventions and stylistics, both in form and in content, they add a visibly discernable heterogeneity to the overall narrative. That is, these diverse texts are visually distinguishable from one another on the page. Additionally, these multimodal texts also provide supplementary narrative voices that diverge from Aaliyah's main narrative voice. For instance, Aaliyah's voice in the public blog entries, which directly address a presumably Muslim audience, differs from her voice in the personal diary entries, and also from her voice in the email addressed to Jaavaid. She alters her rhetoric and syntax to cater to each of those audiences, and perhaps that challenges her reliability as a narrator. The reader might then assume that perhaps the most "authentic" or reliable narrative voice is the one found in the diaries where there is no presumed audience, and Aaliyah can freely express herself. Essentially, the diary entries give the reader a false sense of being privy to Aaliyah's unfiltered thoughts. This illusion of eavesdropping on Aaliyah's most private thoughts is shattered though, when the reader realizes that the narrator herself has purposely interjected the diary entries (and all the other multimodal texts) into the narrative.

"Sharbat" also features a non-linear, associational narrative mode that employs digressions, stories within stories, and makes spatial-temporal leaps in the form of analepsis and prolepsis. Since Aaliyah is torn between two often opposing cultures, this

narrative mode reflects Aaliyah's ruptured psyche and demonstrates the tension in Aaliyah's mind between her Lebanese and Canadian identities. While the main present-tense storyline of 22-year-old Aaliyah getting ready to elope occurs within only a few hours, memories are frequently interposed to provide the reader with insight into Aaliyah's childhood and teenage years. Memories are presented through the aforementioned multimodal texts, and through extensive flashbacks. Aaliyah's thoughts jump through time and space, relaying her memories out of chronological order, through free association. For example, while getting ready for Ranya's party, Aaliyah begins to recall other instances in her past which involved parties. She begins to recount how her high school friend Hilary invited her to a prom after-party, and then digresses from the telephone conversation with Hilary to talk about how they met. Aaliyah then digresses again to recall her daydreams about her high school crush, Michael. She then jumps back into a story about how her father did not let her attend her elementary school friend Natalie's birthday party. Aaliyah continues leaping back and forth through memories in this way for the rest of "Sharbat".

The heterogeneity of *Rosewater* is reflected in the novella's overall narrative structure as well. Including two short stories by two different narrators adds to the diversity of the text by presenting the reader with more than one narrative voice. Also, because *Rosewater* is comprised of both "Hab al Ruman", and "Sharbat", I was able to depict the experiences of two Lebanese women both in the East and in the West, which gives a more pluralistic view of Arab women's lives. A similar effect is achieved in the Arab-Canadian writer Marwan Hassan's *The Confusion of Stones: Two Novellas*, which also features two short stories or two "novellas" that offer both an Eastern and Western

perspective. The protagonist of the first story, Fahla Azlam, emigrates from Lebanon to Canada, whereas the second protagonist, Salah Abourezk, travels from Canada back to Lebanon.

My decision to skip a generation and include the story of Zahra's granddaughter Aaliyah is to illustrate that despite the generational gap, and despite the change of time and setting (from the 1980's in Lebanon to modern day Canada), the two protagonists are still struggling through similar cultural and religious issues. Zahra's story contrasts with Aaliyah's and shows that, even though Aaliyah lives in the West, a part of her identity is shaped by the same Eastern cultural and religious traditions that Zahra interacts with in "Hab al Ruman". In other words, when Zahra and Sajira immigrate to Canada, their Lebanese-based beliefs and customs are carried over and passed on to Aaliyah. In turn, Aaliyah must reconcile those Lebanese traditions with Canadian ones. This merging of these two cultures is what ultimately forms Aaliyah's hyphenated and heterogeneous identity.

### **Language Appropriation**

The heterogeneity of *Rosewater* is also showcased at the level of language through the inclusion of multilingual phrases. To illustrate how some of the linguistic techniques I have employed reflect the heterogeneity of the novella, I will be consulting the list of "language appropriation"<sup>1</sup> strategies outlined by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin in the *Empire Writes Back*.

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<sup>1</sup> Language appropriation is a linguistic technique used by cross-cultural writers. It refers to "the process by which the [Standardized English] language is taken and made to 'bear the burden' of one's one cultural experience" (Ashcroft et.al, 38). Although Ashcroft et, al employ the term within a post-colonial context, I will not be invoking a post-colonial trajectory in my essay. I have chosen the techniques outlined in the *Empire Writes Back* simply because they are also useful for analyzing language in a multilingual context.



Glossing is one of “the most obvious and most common authorial intrusions in cross-cultural texts” (Ashcroft et al 61). It is a method which privileges Standardized English over the non-English language by using parenthetical translation in the form of a word, a phrase or a clause to qualify and explain the non-English term(s). It is also useful for elaborating on the untranslatable nuances and cultural contexts of non-English words, which would otherwise be lost to the English speaking reader. Examples of glossing from *Rosewater* include:

- “*Maktub*, they say; Allah has already written out our destinies” (8). Here, the word “maktub” is glossed because its direct English equivalent “written” would be unable to convey the word’s full cultural connotations.
- “*Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji’un*. We all return to Allah in the end” (46). In this example, the entire phrase “Inna lillahi...” which is a common Islamic expression derived from the Quran, is glossed because its religious undertones cannot be satisfactorily expressed using the English translation.
- “The word *bint* translates to “girl” or more accurately, “maiden”. So, technically you could be a 70-year-old virgin female, and you’ll still be considered a *bint*. The word *mrraa*, which means woman or lady, is reserved only for married non-virgins” (62). In this example, the words “bint” and “mrraa” are glossed to illustrate their deeper cultural and linguistic meanings.

Syntactic fusion is another form of “language appropriation” and it is used “to marry the syntax of [the non-English language] to the lexical forms of English” (Ashcroft et al 67). Examples of syntactic fusion in *Rosewater* include the terms, “hijabi” (61), “abayas” (44), “ho-jabi” (90), “hijabifyable” (78), and “Salams” (102). These hybridized terms

reflect Aaliyah's own hybridized identity, and contribute to the overall heterogeneity of the novella's language.

Code-switching, another strategy of "linguistic variance in monoglossic literatures" (Ashcroft et al 75) is a common way of "installing cultural distinctiveness in [cross-cultural] writing" (Ashcroft et al 72). There are many instances where the characters in *Rosewater* "inscrib[e] alterity by the process [...] of switching between two or more codes" (Ashcroft et al 72). For example, when Aaliyah is chatting with her friend Zeina, she switches mid-sentence from Standard English to Arabic: "Oh, I'd love to buy one, but *Wallahi* I actually don't have any change" (87).

Another "language appropriation" strategy that I employ extensively throughout my novella is the technique of leaving non-English terms untranslated and unglossed. Ashcroft et al argue that this "technique of selective lexical fidelity which leaves some words untranslated in the text is a more widely used device [by cross-cultural writers] for conveying the sense of cultural distinctiveness. Such a device not only acts to signify the difference between cultures, but also illustrates the importance of discourse in interpreting cultural concepts" (65). In other words, this technique allows the cultural distinctiveness of untranslated terms to remain uncompromised. It also adds dialogism and diversity to the language used. Also, leaving the words untranslated is "a political act, because while translation is not inadmissible in itself, glossing gives the translated word, and thus the 'receptor' culture, the higher status" (Ashcroft et al 66). Since both of the narrators are Muslim, I have kept Islamic terms such as, "Insha Allah" (7), "Wallahi" (4), "halal" (47), "azan for Salat al Duhr" (19), "dua" (103), "haram" (5), and "fatiha" (36) untranslated. There are no exact substitutes in English that would convey these

terms' complete religious significance and meanings. For instance, while "haram" could be translated as "impermissible", "forbidden", "taboo" or "inappropriate", none of those English terms fully capture the term's religious and cultural connotations. Also, some terms like "Wallahi", which directly translates to "I swear to God", are used both in religious contexts and as cultural expressions to signify emotions like disbelief, amazement, anger or surprise. So, when Sajira is arguing with Zahra about wearing the burqa and says "Okay fine. I'll wear it, but *Wallahi* I look like a sack of potatoes in that thing", she is using the phrase to emphasize her frustration and annoyance. Similarly, terms that are used to refer to Islamic dress, such as "burqa" (3), "chador" (4), "shayl" (4), "abaya" (45), and "hijab" (56), do not possess English equivalents. Terms such as "veil" or "headscarf" cannot adequately express the distinctions between these various forms of Islamic clothing. For instance "abaya" is used specifically in reference to the loose-fitting full-length, long sleeve robe worn by some Muslim women, while the "chador" is a long, loose-fitting full body cloak without sleeves and is usually worn by some Muslim women over their regular clothes for extra coverage. Terms that are specific to the Lebanese cuisine also do not have satisfactory English substitutes. For instance, the word "sharbat" (60) could be translated into English as "a sweet syrupy iced drink typically made from rosewater or other flower petals and fruits", but that description is too lengthy and does not capture the cultural significance associated with the drink; sharbat is customarily served at weddings to symbolize the "sweetness" of the bride and groom's union.

Furthermore, there are a handful of deliberately untranslated terms that are in French [i.e. "ma petite rose, je t'aime" (32), "ma chérie" (33)] and in Farsi [i.e. "noorè cheshm-

am” (102)], which further add to the heterogeneity of the novella’s language structure. Additionally, because the Arabic terms are italicized, they are visually differentiated from the rest of the English dominated text. This causes the heterogeneity of the novella’s language to visibly appear on the page.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

*Rosewater* is a heterogeneous Arab-Canadian novella incorporating “many different styles, or voices, which as it were talk to each other and to other voices outside the text, the discourses of culture, and society at large” (Lodge 128). The novella features the voices of two different protagonists, who are separated by time and space, but joined through similar cultural and religious struggles. These two voices speak to each other and to the discourses of Arab/Muslim society, Lebanese culture, and Canadian culture. “Hab al Ruman” extends beyond the text to challenge Western stereotypes against Arab/Muslim women, while “Sharbat” seeks to provide a pluralistic perspective of what it’s like to be hybridized Lebanese-Canadian Muslim. The novella’s heterogeneity is reflected in the content, and in the narrative and language structures. Overall, as a Lebanese-Canadian hijabi myself, the strongest motivation for writing *Rosewater* was the need to confront mainstream Western discourse to illustrate that the identities of Arab and Muslim women are not monolithic, neatly categorized, static entities that strictly adhere to stereotypical binaries, but rather that the identities of Arab and Muslim women are heterogeneous and fluid.

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### **Vita Auctoris**

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