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His scent of sandalwood.

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HIS SCENT OF SANDALWOOD

By

Lujain Almulla

A Thesis
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By

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ABSTRACT

HIS SCENT OF SANDALWOOD

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This creative thesis is a collection of fictional stories, connected by a common geographical and cultural thread: Kuwait. The stories unravel across a span of four thousand years. The poetic-prose style of the opening vignette is a nod to the earliest form of writing that makes up the bulk of Kuwait's literature: poetry. The abstractedness of the two opening pieces reflects the lack of a deep-rooted national identity, and a brevity in Kuwait's historical record. The remainder of the thesis explores the evolution of this national identity, as well as the infiltration of Western culture into modern Kuwait, and its effect on the lifestyles of its youth. The stories also study familial relations and taboo in Kuwaiti society, both past and present. Each piece stands as an individual tale, but there is also an interconnectedness between them that functions as a metaphor for the lives of Kuwaitis. JPG images have been used in "Almighty" to enhance the story.

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VIGNETTE OF WHAT WAS

The Garden of the Gods lies supine under the Sumerian sun. Its dunes shift, and it rolls with the rocking of the swash like a fetus washed up at shore. The Garden has long been deserted, but the warnings of its last inhabitant still reverberate in the sea-salted breezes.

The voice belonged to an alewife who spent her final days at the cusp of the Garden's bay like a forgotten fortress. For sixty-seven days before shriveling away, she licked palm sap off her fingers, and guzzled the last of the date-wine, watching the sun drift across the waters and behind her, to Babylon and beyond. Her sticky arms clasped her shoulders, or her knees, or anyplace else that the solitude hurt. Hermit crabs abandoned their shells and hid in her thick tresses. Long and silver-blue, they curled and coiled down her barnacled back, imitating the frothing swash that reached for her down the shoreline—reaching, but always just short of tasting the molasses on her pruning toes. She was a beacon of warning for the vagabonds who sometimes passed through. “You will never find that life for which you are looking,” she repeated to all who stopped from a distance to listen, then dismissively unlisten. Her eyes drooped unevenly at those who caught sight of them; despite their earnestness, the wanderers ignored the ramblings of an alewife drunk on date-wine. Most never noticed her there, only hearing her ominous voice; she was easy to miss, covered and caulked with syrup and silt.

On the sixty-seventh day of her solitude, she disappeared—an encrusted sun-dried fruit for the ebbing tide to finally engulf. Save for the palm trees that dispersed across the

land, to each mourn the loss of her on their own, the Garden was barren of the verdure it once thrived in.

Nowadays, when those old winds return, and pass through the swaying palms—when the spaces between their fronds mimic the spaces in her voice reeds—you can hear the alewife again, whistling like a carnelian flute, “You will never find that life for which you are looking.”

THE BEDOUIN

When the wailing of the sandstorm died down, the Bedouin unraveled the ropes that secured the tent's opening, and rolled the flaps up diagonally, letting in a cool gust of air and dust-speckled light. Fine sand had gathered outside, and leaned against the entrance, forming small-scale dunes that now collapsed indoors. Earlier, at daybreak, most of the sky was a solid azure, broken by a colossal cloud of turmeric orange in the far West. As the sand cloud crawled closer, the tribesmen took shelter, and waited for the storm to pass. Families huddled together in the bellies of their camel-hair tents. The tents swayed violently, tugging at the guy ropes, which pulled them back, but just barely.

“You should have kicked the sand behind the flaps first before rolling them up,” his wife tutted, *but you're not sweeping that out, so what difference is it to you*, her scowl insinuated. Now that there was light in the tent again, she shifted to her loom.

She was going to weave dunes into her pattern today, she decided—tiers of isosceles. Her spindle was spun with a deep red wool dyed with henna. Her palms were colored with henna as well, and as she worked—thoughtfully and seamlessly—it looked as though the blood of her hands was being weaved into the warp.

The Bedouin put on his thick sheepskin cloak, and picked up two deflated waterskins. “I'm going to the wells.”

“What about the council?”

“The vote was meant to take place at midday.”

Neither one faced the other as they spoke.

She knew why her husband was avoiding the council. Finally electing a tribal leader meant the tribes were solidifying their prospects to settle on this sickly plot of land, and he saw no future in abandoning their nomadic lifestyle for a desert more desolate than most they'd stopped at or passed through. Its proximity to the waters of the Gulf was an asset, but they, being desert dwellers, knew little of how to approach the sea, let alone exploit and survive off its resources. The desert was harsh, but mostly predictable; the nomads negotiated with the desert, like a wild dog that could be tamed with patience. But the sea, to them, was a silent predatory beast—a dreaded gray wolf.

“No one saw the storm coming. I think you should wait for word about the council.”

He swung the waterskins over his burly shoulders, “The tent’s slack. Pull the ropes, and push the stakes in when you’re done weaving.”

She turned to him and gestured for him to come closer, “Let me braid your beard before you go out.” He dropped the waterskins, kneeling down to his wife, and she pulled his beard taut.

“The storm was an evil omen. This land is no place to live,” he sighed.

“I know,” she said softly—her fingers twisting and pulling tighter.

The Bedouin trudged through a menagerie of goats, sheep and, finally, a herd of twenty-some bleating and groaning camels that surrounded the well. The well had already been there when their caravan arrived. It had been a neglected, shallow hole, containing a stagnant reserve of muddy water; the tribesmen dug deeper for a cleaner supply while the women erected the tents.

Various receptacles had been tied to the stony rim and wooden frame of the well; some were predictably swept away by the cloud. The Bedouin set his waterskins down on the ground. He picked up a bucket of hardened leather attached by rope to the frame. He emptied it of the fine sand it had collected. Dust whiffed by like a menacing memory of the storm.

Before he could hold the bucket over the well, a feminine voice, low and husky, wafted into his ear, blowing his wool headdress open. The words sounded foreign, ancient—he looked around at the faces of the camels—*and impossibly human*, he thought, dismissing the idea. He threw back the tasseled tail of his headdress over his shoulder, and was about to lower the bucket by its rope. Then, there was the voice again; it cackled, and the Bedouin swung round, his eyes quickly scanning his surroundings—still only the bleating, groaning camels.

“Who’s there?” he asked—hesitant. He waited a minute, and just when it seemed as though what he’d heard, or imagined to hear, had passed, a breeze carried it back.

“You will never find that life . . .” it said over the sound of crackling dust. The Bedouin, shaken, squinted through the shifting interstices between the camels’ legs. “Who’s there?” he now demanded. There was no response nor sign of anyone around besides the labyrinth of animals.

He turned back to the well, and wondered whether the sound had come from its pit—a ludicrous suspicion. He peeked over the mounded stones that made up the rim. There was only a deep graduating darkness. He held the bucket over the hollow, and bent forward right before a loud growl bellowed behind him. The strong nudge of a camel’s

head pushed him over the edge before he could turn back, toppling buckets and stones down the hole with him.

He still held on to the rope of the bucket, and it broke his fall before hitting the water. He gripped the rope tightly, suspended down the well, and yelled for help, praying someone would hear him calling. At that level in the well, the bucket should have hit water, but, oddly, it didn't. He tried to latch on the walls with his feet, but the hardened clay that surrounded him only crumbled underneath them. The Bedouin peered down; it was pitch black. Two feet above him was another bucket slowly oscillating. If only he could swing a leg up and over it, then maybe he could stand a chance of holding himself up for longer. He pulled the rope down as he attempted to scale the wall once more, and try to gain a foothold in the bucket above. But, no longer able to hold his weight, the wooden frame of the well snapped, and he went down a quick drop to another jarring stop five feet further below. He screamed hoarsely for anyone. His sweaty palms slid, and the rope slipped out between his hands.

He plummeted further down—down—an unobstructed freefall. No water pit, no ground—nothing stopping his descent and breaking his body. He lost his headdress, and his cloak flapped above his shoulders like open wings. Screaming only made his cheeks inflate and dry out; there was nothing he could do, but fall. He reached around unsteadily with his arms—no walls. Instead, he was surrounded by a reddening iridescent black—the color that blooms when pushing one's eyelids shut with one's palms—a night-terror red. A dizzying tessellation of shapes blurred in and out of focus, churning his stomach. Then, images became more conspicuous. The shapes morphed into vivid patterns on an expansive loom that stretched infinitely before him—rows upon rows of what looked like

his wife's dunes. He read the loom like a scroll as he descended. Red, orange, yellow dunes repeated, then abruptly stopped, transforming into triangles of black tents, regularly interrupted by triangular-humped camels. The weft threads were being woven and unwoven continuously by thousands of invisible hands, creating an effect of motion—making the camels gallop across and down the tapestry. The tents disappeared, and the camels gradually expanded into yellow squares. Figures walked in and out of the squares' doors. Scattered green acacias sprouted—date palms, faceless children playing. Further along, rows of brown planks stacked up—lumber that figures of men were using to build upturned triangular ships.

Now, men walked across and down the tiers, red blotches slowly being woven into their skin. Lapses in the interlacing created irregular growths that projected from their bodies. They trudged across and piled onto a mound of corpses—mounds that slowly flickered with orange flames. The Bedouin reached forward, gravitating toward the loom. His fingers latched onto the wool and it immediately unraveled—a disruption in the continuum. The threads collapsed into a disentangling stringy grey. The time warp and weft fell like tempestuous rain. A thunderclap boomed, and he let go; the invisible hands wove the collapsed threads back into a solid grey mesh before him—a flood, half drowning the trees and washing houses away across the waterline. He continued to dive deeper before it.

But the flood eventually drained off, and was replaced by another solid block in the tapestry, but of black. The air spiked with a sudden putrid odor unlike anything he had experienced before. An intense stench, like the fetor of rotting carcass—only it was as violent as having one's head buried inside the festering organs of the carcass, and he

grew increasingly nauseated. The figures of people reappeared and travelled fast across the block inside colorful squares—too fast for his eyes to keep up with. The speed of the images, and the overwhelming odor made him sick—heaving and sending a trail of his stomach’s content spiraling above him. The powdery black dye of the tapestry appeared to diffuse into the atmosphere and toward him like smoke. Rancid black sludge engulfed the loom’s iridescence and what little visibility it had allowed.

The momentum of the Bedouin’s drop gradually decreased, and the air around him thickened, becoming more difficult the move in. It was as though he was now sinking rather than falling—slower until he floated in place. The atmosphere was a dense fluid. He drifted in a dark timelessness, but wouldn’t be alone for long.

THE PEARL DIVER

A hundred screaming thoughts instantaneously pierced Rashid's mind as he continued to twist and unsuccessfully pull his hand out of the grip of the coral. One thought he now considered was to saw his left hand off at the wrist with his oyster knife. A minute earlier, he had frantically unknotted the rope that his nephew and shipmate, Khalid, had tied around his waist, freeing himself from what felt like a torture rack; the men aboard the *sanbouk* had responded to Rashid's tug, and tried pulling him out of the water. Their pull and the coral's relentless hold on his hand stretched and snapped his arm's joints, once at the wrist, then agonizingly at the elbow, and almost at the shoulder had he not managed to one-handedly untie himself. Fortunately for him, Khalid was a fifteen-year-old pearl diver's apprentice, and tied a flimsy knot. Rashid's lungs knew better than to interject then, and remind him that they were desperate for air. Twelve years of diving had trained him to hold his breath for several minutes at a time. He now was down a dangerous two.

First, his free hand, then his legs, struggled to push off the fallen coral debris that ensnared him. His muscles were failing—starving for oxygen. His fingers involuntarily let go of the knife which had been too blunt to cut through his rope, and would have done no more than gnaw at his wrist's flesh anyway. It sank and slipped into the grooves of brain coral. His head now pulsed with a single thought that urged him to recite the *shahada*, and succumb. He couldn't remember the words.

One word did cross his mind—*moza*. He held his free hand to his face, and wanted to exhale the word into his palm with what little breath he still held in, and feel it purl through his fingers. A *moza* was an eccentric cut of pearl—a rare baroque. It was medium-sized, but had a contorted, oblong shape that sometimes bent and lustered like a crescent. During his twelve years of diving and scavenging, he had come across pearls of all peculiar shapes and sizes. A *moza* was by no means the most precious; the *dana* was. *Danas* were the prized pearl—the largest, and most perfectly spherical and opalescent. The *dana* was subsequently the most expensive, with a bounty for its finder that could feed his family for months. Then, there was the *qemasha*, round but smaller—common among the uncommon pearl, but lustrous nonetheless. There was the *hessa*, the *fus*, the *farida*, the *majhoola*, the *ras*, the *yekka*—those the size of a grain of sand, those that stuck tenaciously to their shell, those that were disappointingly dull—some that were blue, some grey, cream or pale pink. But every time Rashid had cracked open a promising oyster, he hoped to find a curved *moza* laying seductively on the oyster’s ruffled mantle.

Three minutes had passed, and Rashid was on the verge of losing consciousness. He could faintly hear the voice of his wife tell him that coral reefs were the sea’s lungs, just as his own were about to surrender. He had heard that from her when they were both children, and he only grew fonder of her then for saying something so whimsical, and yet so true. Her name being *Lulua*, pearl, played in his mind the day they first spoke; it was the same day he had decided to join the next pearling expedition as a diver’s apprentice.

Rashid and Lulua were both ten then. He had noticed her before in the neighborhood, but had never approached her. He knew her as the girl who hobbled on a

crooked leg, and sat on the sidelines while the other girls skipped over boxed numbers drawn in the sand. He had probably played a game of marbles with her once or twice outside, among a big group of bare-blister-footed boys and girls, when they were younger. At the age of ten, though, it wasn't proper for boys and girls who were unrelated to play together anymore, especially when she belonged to a prominent sea captain's family, and he, the family of a lowly ship's cook.

The day they first spoke, the women of the neighborhood had been gathered at the beach—the women whose husbands were still at sea. It was nearing the end of September; three months had passed, and pearling season had ended days before, but the men were still at the mercy of the waters. At daybreak, they congregated and performed rituals to communicate their distress with the sea, and demand their husbands back. The women were covered in silky black *abayas* from heads to gritty toes, and all faced the horizon like identical domed pieces in a game of *dama*; it was now their move. They had plucked and twined the low hanging fronds of date palms. The leaves were kindled and cast aflame into the water as the women ululated and scolded their husbands' captor. A southing wave swashed at their feet and retreated.

Lulua and her cousins sat on the crusted sand some feet away from their mothers and watched, taking note of rituals they may one day have to emulate. Rashid and his older brother, Ali, stood a distance further behind. Ali carried a kitten in his arm; his mother had asked him to look for a cat, but all he could catch was a wart-ridden kitten. The kitten purred, and rubbed its head on Ali's chest, oblivious to the ritual it was about to be a part of. One of the older women, a rope-hauler's wife, signaled to Ali to bring the cat forward.

She inspected the frail thing. “It’s all I could find,” he told her. She grunted, the lines on her forehead deepened, but she took the kitten from his arm anyway. The kitten dangled between her hands, oscillating left to right, as the woman waded into the water. The woman was to dip the kitten underwater repeatedly, and if it made a certain shrill caterwaul, the women would take it as a sign that the sea was going to acquiesce and send their husbands back.

The kitten was lowered, its head was submerged for a few seconds, and lifted. It yowled and swiped its claws at the air, but the rest of the women muttered amongst themselves, determining that that wasn’t the caterwaul they wanted to hear, and signaled for the kitten to be lowered again.

Rashid watched Lulua react to this part of the ritual. The damask in her cheeks paled, and her nostrils flared; she jerked forward, now on all fours. The kitten’s paws flailed at the surface of the water. Lulua picked herself up and continued to watch—hands to her mouth, holding back something she wanted to shriek. The kitten was lifted again. This time it made a high-pitched cry that forced Lulua to stand and take a few limp steps forward, but elicited no reaction from the women. The kitten was lowered a third time—for longer. Lulua convulsed in horror and ran toward the foreshore—hobbling and cheeping like an injured plover.

“Stop it!” she screamed. She splashed through the shallow water, threw herself on the older woman, and they both collapsed. They came up for air—the kitten still underwater. “You’re drowning her, you witch,” Lulua cried, and snatched the kitten from her hands, picking herself up and struggling to run back out through the loose wet sand.

“Lulua!” her mother, mortified, yelled after her, “What are you doing?” But Lulua kept limping away from the congregation, up and across the shore. “Lulua!” Her mother screamed again; the women on either side of her held her back. Others scrambled down to the older woman who was now cursing at the wild devil of a child. Lulua’s cousins giggled and rolled in the sand, but the rest watched on, tutting, and shaking their heads unamused. Rashid stood dumfounded, a smile stretching across his face. Lulua’s mother tried one more time, louder, “Lulua, come back here right now!”

Go, go, go, Rashid silently urged on, and soon he found he was following her, quickly catching up and running alongside her.

“Get away from me,” she panted, struggling up a sand dune. The kitten hissed.

“I’m not trying to stop you.” He looked back as he climbed up and over the soft, hot sand, and laughed. And then, she laughed too. The women disappeared behind them. Rashid slowed down to Lulua’s pace. Her hobble made her look like a doll being bounced by invisible hands, he thought. The white ribbons in her hair were coming undone, slipping down her long braids. The kitten quieted—curled up into a ball in Lulua’s arms. When Rashid was certain that they were now a safe, concealed distance away, he pulled Lulua’s elbow back, slowing her down, and they walked, breathless, round a deep pocket in a tucked-away beach. They plopped down simultaneously, digging their feet into the wet sand to cool them. Lulua let go of the kitten, and pulled the hem of her drenched cotton dress over her knees. Rashid, face forward, pretended not to look. The kitten shook the water out of its fur, then circled Lulua’s legs in a figure eight. Lulua swung her uncoiled pleated tresses forward, wiping the sweat off her nape.

“I’m going into the water,” she said, immediately standing, and walking forward—shin-deep against the swash before looking back, “Are you coming?”

Soon, they were both in; the waves gently patted their shoulders, but the trembling in Rashid’s chest could not be assuaged. Lulua looked sternly at the horizon, and stood perfectly still for the sunrays to repaint the deep damask in her cheeks. “Coral reefs are the sea’s lungs,” she sang, turning back to Rashid, “Did you know that?” Lulua smiled, took a deep breath, and immersed her head in the warm water. Rashid followed suit. His eyes were still very sensitive to the salt, and he sealed them shut. Lulua clasped his right hand, and brought it up between her face and his. She breathed out, blowing bubbles through his fingers, making them quiver like seaweed. They both returned to the surface, coughing and laughing.

“I love the sea because I can walk easily in the water—” She spun around, fluttering a dress of ripples, “and no one can see that there’s anything wrong with my leg.”

“Your leg isn’t wrong,” Rashid said, “It’s just a different shape, like . . . a *moza*. Some are bent out of shape,” Rashid stared at her face—dewy and pearlescent, “but they’re still precious.” Lulua smiled, and threw her head back, dipping only her hair into the water. “I’m going to call you that,” Rashid said.

“Call me what?”

“Moza. I think it’s more accurate than Lulua.”

The kitten kneaded its paws into the sand.

Rashid was ready to drown now, but his throat contracted, and wouldn't let his lungs gulp for water, though they ached to. His eyes rolled like olives being swirled in brine, but steadied when they caught sight of the angel of death floating toward him through the murky teal.

The angel looked nothing like he had imagined him to be. When Rashid was a boy on tip-toes, peering over his grandmother's death bed, his father had told him that the angel would be arriving any minute then. After his grandmother was buried, he asked his father why the angel never came. "He did, Rashid, but we couldn't see him."

So, Rashid imagined the angel to be a speck of a creature, an insectile dot that floated like pollen, undetected. What he now saw, however, looked more like himself. It was a young man, tall and fully bearded, dressed in a sheepskin cloak. His beard was braided into two ropes that floated in opposite directions, and his thick, long brows moved like black anemones above squinting eyes. He looked like the Bedouins who often stopped by his village to barter their goat's milk and hand-woven *sadu* carpets for food and various supplies.

The angel prostrated and began to swim closer, kicking his legs with strong arms stretched forward. His cloak opened and undulated above him, and he almost seemed to transform into a giant manta ray—more devilfish than angel. Rashid was entranced, and in those moments no longer felt pain nor hunger for breath, but a strange, serene calm—a breathfulness. The angel now hovered close enough for Rashid to touch his face, and he did. His skin was soft and human. Angels weren't meant to be human.

He clasped the coral that crushed Rashid's hand and lifted it with ease, rolling it over to tumble down the reef. Rashid's hand was shattered, but free. They both looked at

the oyster Rashid had been reaching for before the coral collapsed. The angel twisted and detached it, slipping it into Rashid's net satchel. Suspended in place, they stared at each other. Rashid reached forward with both hands, the good and the disfigured, but before he could hold them to the hands that saved him, a violent force yanked Rashid back. The force pulled him from the torso, and hauled him up seven fathoms toward the surface. His surroundings became a blur of frothy green, and then black.

When Rashid regained consciousness, he was on deck of the *sanbouk*—his nephew, Khalid, by his side. He couldn't see him—his eyes were cloudy and too painful to keep open, but he could feel a small unroughened palm stroke his forehead. A hot pain radiated up Rashid's arm from his hand. He couldn't feel his fingers, and wasn't sure if his nerves had been crushed dead or if his left hand was altogether no longer there.

His nephew patted a wet piece of cloth on his temples. Khalid was Ali's son, but looked up to Rashid like a father. Rashid had no children of his own—but was about to any day now; perhaps Lulua had already given birth. Her belly was perfectly spherical the day he kissed it goodbye and set sail to sea.

Lulua and Rashid had married quietly, a decade after they had first spoken, meeting secretly in the years between—smiling coyly across rooftops, sighing through cracks in the walls, hiding among the shushing acacia. The ceremony was also held in hush-hush, and news of it only travelled in whispers around the village. After approaching her family three times, they only gave their consent because their daughter was a cripple—a sick child with a crooked leg, who was otherwise destined to live a spinster's life or die young if her disease crept back. She was also unruly—endearingly to

Rashid. “It would be a greater shame for that beauty to go to waste,” the matriarchs of her family agreed before reluctantly stooping, and blessing their daughter’s marriage to a cook’s son. “That girl’s going to bring another cripple into the world, you know.” Sometimes they said it when Lulua was close enough to hear, “That’s for certain with a husband like hers. His breed won’t purify their children’s blood.”

It hurt to hear, and Lulua cried about it in bed—eight moons before pearling season. And when she cried, Rashid held her like nacre—ready to envelop and soothe her. “Moza,” he cooed, kissing layers of nacre over her skin, “You know what makes our pearls the best in the world market?” His fingers brushed nacre on her supple hips in gentle strokes, “Freshwater and seawater gush toward each other at a certain point in the gulf. And there, where the warm currents meet, the loveliest pearls are born.”

Khalid called out to the crew when he felt his uncle stir, “He’s awake!” The men gathered round Rashid, sighing out prayers.

“Rashid, can you hear us?” a voice he struggled to recognize asked.

“I saw a Bedouin down there,” Rashid croaked, eyes still sealed shut.

“A Bedouin?” various voices reverberated around him.

“He saved my life.”

“You were hallucinating, son,” someone said, “You rest, now.”

“No, I saw him,” Rashid insisted, pulling himself up, “A Bedouin in a sheepskin cloak.”

Numerous voices laughed, then that of the *sanbouk*’s captain interjected, “Son, men have seen jinn take many forms in the water,” Rashid was pushed gingerly back

down, “—three-headed monsters, women carrying cutlasses. There’s no Bedouin down there. Rest, now.”

The men returned to their duties, but Khalid stayed. He brought his mouth closer to his uncle’s ear and whispered, “I opened the oyster in your satchel, uncle Rashid.” He smoothed Rashid’s beard, “You found the big one. I don’t think I’ve seen one so big, and so perfectly round. It’s a perfect *dana*.”

Rashid spent those final weeks of the pearling season on deck convalescing. The nine other divers continued to plunge into the sea, the rope-haulers continued to pull them out, and the ship’s *nahham* continued to wail the songs of sea folk, abating the waters.

HIS SCENT OF SANDALWOOD

Wash the face, get the morning hiccoughs, brush the teeth, and get rid of the hiccoughs—the usual morning ritual. The nape of my neck, warmed by intruding sunlight from the bathroom window, tells me it's past eleven already. Hang a bell-sleeved black *abaya* and black chiffon scarf on the knob of the cupboard's mirrored door, pull them down taut and steam-iron them for later—the usual mourning ritual. I hop downstairs to where my mother and grandmother are clearing the kitchen table of date cake, rusk and a pot of saffron tea—now cold, I learn to my disappointment.

“Well, good morning, sleepyhead. Always late for breakfast on the weekend.” My grandmother quietly disappears out of the kitchen and to her room, most likely to get her daily dose of radio—to listen to the Kuwait News station, then turn the dial to wavelengths carrying seafarer folk music, reclining this way in bed until lunchtime—her every afternoon.

“There's a hardboiled egg in the fridge.” My mother follows suit, heading back up the stairs to her room, I'd imagine, finding a comfortable posture in the direction of Mecca with a copy of the Qur'an in her lap, picking up from where she had left off reading last Friday. I take my exit cue as the third generation down this line of women, finding that I've no real appetite for food after having just woken up.

Out the hall and into the living room, I find my grandfather, sitting in his usual spot, watching TV—a cooking show of sorts, preparing a summer fruit smoothie. Cooking is not exactly a pastime my grandfather is known to engage in; he's most likely

brewing over a concoction of his own in his head—the news he received two nights ago being the main ingredient in his pot of thought, I imagine.

"Granddad!" I say with a big smile, interrupting the perky fruit-juice lady on screen. I walk up to give him a peck on his forehead, but he pulls my head down before I get the chance to, giving me a wet kiss on mine instead.

"Sit down, Lulu," he tells me. I do, right next to him, taking in the mild scent of sandalwood he has always smelt of.

"How about a hand massage, granddad?"

"You what?"

"A hand massage," I repeat louder, "like the one I gave you last week. Rub your hands?"

"Right. If you'd like to," he mumbles back.

"I would. I'll go get the lotion."

I walk into his bedroom and look for the bottle of lotion on his dresser. I find it, but before I leave, I stay for a minute, looking around at all the family photos he has framed on the walls and displayed on dusty shelves. Old photos of my mother, aunts, uncles—baby photos of cousins upon cousins. I know he has a few up there of me, so I look around, scanning face after face, and there! A three—maybe four-year-old me sitting on my grandmother's lap, pulling her glasses off her face. An opaque orange tint is smeared across half the photo from when the film may have caught light. It hides a third subject in the frame, and I can't quite make out who it is. A cousin? A brother? A shame. Or perhaps not. The selfish little granddaughter inside me is glad I have my nan all to myself in this still. I feel I could spend the rest of the day staring at every photo in this

room. I almost forget why I came in here to begin with. I take one last inclusive look at all the pictures and walk back out.

My granddad, still in his spot, is struggling to point the remote at the receiver. He manages to finally turn it off. I sit on the giving carpet, leaning on his chair, taking his hand in mine. I study the back of it for a few seconds. It's a leathery canvas depicting a blossom tree, painted with green veins and flowered with age spots. I could swear a few more buds have blossomed since I'd last rubbed his hand. I feel a sharp urge to cover it with kisses, but I don't. I dab on the lotion instead, and begin the amateur massage session. I think I get more therapy out of it than he does. I don't usually sit down for chats with him. Any conversation we engage in lasts no more than twenty seconds including the extra time I take to repeat what I'm saying a good three times for him to hear. I wish we did have longer ones where I could share things deeper than my class schedule for a given semester or what's cooking for lunch on a given day, but he's a reserved man. I just can't help but feel an urge to gain access to his mind and be let in where his memory is. It's a saturated compartment, I imagine, too full to let short-term intrusions settle in since we've been noticing that, recently, he forgets the small things more and more. But I'm sure that only means that the significant memories are still stored in there: lucid and in abundance. I look into his smoke-grey eyes for a second, trying to penetrate through them, to get a glimpse of his past, his childhood, his teenage years.

“Granddad?”

“Hmm”

Go for it. Ask him. “What was it like growing up?”

“Huh?”

“Am I pressing too hard on your hand?”

It takes him a few seconds of furrowing his thick ashy brows before shaking his head. He stares back at nothing, and I secretly grimace at the ditz that I am and mentally slap my forehead. Why I find it so difficult to ask him such a trivial question, I cannot explain. *Give it another go.*

“Granddad?”

He grunts.

“When did your father pass away?”

Now I've done it. Yes, death is the ideal way to begin this conversation—naturally. I scrunch my face, and hope his hardness of hearing buys me a few more seconds to come up with another neutral question. I'll ask him if he's seen my father today. I wait for him to cue in my question again, but he says nothing. As still as he was, he stares straight ahead. The room falls silent again except for his throaty breaths, which have now become slower. I squeeze another spot of lotion on the palm of his hand.

“A long time ago. Long, long time.”

I don't press him for details. I just smile to myself and shift to the other side of his chair, now taking his other hand for a rub.

“Your mother was only a baby when”—he gestures with his hand, sending off an imaginary soul to the ceiling—“when he died.”

I look up at him, wide-eyed, like a child hearing about the orphaning of a princess in an age-old fairy-tale. He looks down at me with a wrinkled smile. “What was he like?” I urge on.

His smile disappears. His hand recoils into a fist, and he pulls it away from mine. “That’s enough, now. My hands feel better. Thank you.” He looks away again.

I’ve struck a nerve and, looking at his forehead now, I spot that distressed nerve meander down his temple. I fasten the lid back on the bottle of lotion, and just when I think I’ve gotten more out of him than I would probably ever get again, I see his lips part, taking in a quick breath like he’s about to say something. I wait.

He finally starts. “We had nothing back then. He was ... the way he was because we had nothing. He was bitter.” Gazing at the adjacent wall, his eyes take a new hue. A sheen glazes over them, and I think I can make out inverted images in his irises, like those in the lens of a projector. I almost look at the wall he’s facing to see if the reel is cast on there.

“He was a reader. He had books. He would lock himself in this room. A room piled with books and books.”

Go on. What else was he?

His heavy tongue and near-toothless gums muffle his words. “He was—”

An intellect, I think I hear him say—a man who devoted every waking hour to erudition.

“He had books on—”

History! Philosophy! Politics! And literature! I don’t really hear him say this—what I actually hear is an incoherent mumble—but with piles and piles of books, he surely must have owned volumes that told of the Great War, quoted Ibn Sina’s metaphysical doctrines and translated all 154 of Shakespeare’s sonnets. *And wistful Middle Eastern poetry*, I muse. I imagine the words “Layla’s Madman” calligraphed on

the spine of a book wedged tightly on a shelf—a book in which he'd have come across the verses Qays carved on the grave of his beloved Layla. For a student of literature, discovering that my great-grandfather was a bookworm sent a calligrapher's pen tingling up my own spine.

“He never went out. Never met with friends. Never visited family. He only read.” Granddad says this with a hint of scorn—just a hint. He stops again, and I take this interval of quiet to further rummage through my great-grandfather's book collection in my own imagination. I push aside a much younger version of granddad—a boy in his preteen years—and take my turn peeking through the keyhole of the forbidden library. He's not kidding. The books pile up higher and higher. So high, in fact, I can't seem to see a ceiling to this room.

And why did he not go out?

“Not to be pedantic,” says another figment of my imagination—a roguish looking man in an old coffee shop in early 20th century Kuwait—“but your politics are absurd.” He goes on to blurt out a heretical doctrine he'd read in Marx's *Das Capital*. The men he sits with put down their hookah pipes and glare at him behind apple-flavoured smoke, cast him out, and he decides never to go out again. He would rather read than engage in uncomfortable social situations. Yes, that would be a plausible scenario—the moment my great-grandfather decided he would rather be a recluse.

Now, I want to know more. “What was your mother like?”—the matriarch who infused a trickle of Bahraini blood in me—“Tell me about her.”

If ever there was a smile that can send a silver fish fluttering across a pond, I am looking at it. A ripple of wavelets stretches across his sun-spotted cheeks and the sides of his pool-grey eyes.

“My mother,” he begins, but then stops. I can tell he's thinking of where to start. “My mother ... When we were younger, we would only see her when we went to Bahrain. That's where she lived. She and my father divorced when we were little”—a separation I am aware of—“I was five, Ahmed was four and Abdulrahman was three.”

A grimace on his face tells me he's trying to swallow a lump in his throat. I feel guilty for bringing back a hurtful memory. He goes on, but his words are barely coherent. Fourteen, I think I hear him say, was when she married.

At fourteen, I was being told off for not making my bed in the morning. I was rollerblading in circles up and down the driveway until I was dizzy. I was sneakily playing videogames on my father's laptop on a school night while mum thought I was fast asleep. Marriage—or the thought of marriage—was not remotely part of that routine.

At fourteen, my great-grandmother became a wife. At fifteen, she gave birth to my granddad. He says his father was a harsh husband and goes on to describe the crumbling of their unhappy marriage with muffled detail I wish I could make out. A relative—her brother, it sounds like he says—took her away, back to Bahrain. Despite her pleading to take her children with her, she was kept away by what I guess was some undisclosed threat, and that was the last they saw of their mother until my grandfather's late teens.

“She was quite the opposite of my father. Warm. May she rest in heaven.”

“Is that why they separated?” I blurt out.

“I suppose so. Family and fatherhood didn't come naturally to my father.”

Engrossed by all I am hearing, I don't realize that my right leg has gone semi-numb until a cold tingle patters through it. I adjust my posture and listen on.

“I only learned much later—when we reunited—how much she'd suffered when we separated. How she'd suffered emotionally, you see. She was quickly married off to a Bahraini—with no choice in the matter. But this time, she was joined with a good man.”

This time, she was joined with a good man. Last time, a terrible man. Was he really that bad? So far, all I've really heard him described as is “harsh” and “bitter.” But he separated little boys from their mother. He *was* a terrible man. But there has to be more to the story. “What did your father do?”

He looks at me and answers, “He read.”

“As a job, I mean.”

“Nothing!” He snorts sardonically.

“Nothing?” I echo, eyebrows raised.

“Nothing I remember, except maybe a little tutoring. Back when young boys went to *mullas* at their homes instead of schools. Somewhat like your father's grandfather and great-grandfather did. It's where you get your last name from, you know. But I couldn't describe my father as a *mulla*. He dabbled at tutoring. He had the knowledge, you see, but never the skill.”

“Where'd you get any money from, then?”

“Hmph! Money,” he scoffs. “I was made to work when I was about your sister's age. How old is she now?”

“Twelve.”

“Yes, I'd say twelve is about right—in construction.”

My heart sinks. Only yesterday, I was helping my sister with construction. It was her geometry homework—a very different kind of construction.

“You know, old buildings—mud houses, I'd help build. What little money I made from working, I used to pay for Ahmed and Abdulrahman's tuition. *Mullas* back then charged a meagre amount, but I had a meagre salary. I could only afford tuition for two.”

He continues, and I listen attentively. My imagination fills in the spaces of detail that his heavy tongue muffles and his abridged manner of speaking leaves out.

One hot summer dawn, a twelve-year-old Mohammed woke up to the sound of the first call to prayer reverberating through the neighbourhood from the minaret of its mosque. He turned over on his damp mattress, moist from sweat shed in the night's still air. Gazing at the deep indigo sky overhead, he stretched his arms, then gingerly shook his brother, who lay dreaming next to him, lightly tapping his shoulder.

“Ahmed,” he whispered. “Wake up. It's time for dawn prayers.”

Ahmed rubbed his eyes and let out a yawn, interrupted halfway by morning hiccoughs.

I sneak that detail in to account for my almost-daily ailment. Heredity explains it.

Mohammad and Ahmed got up, careful not to wake Abdulrahman from his slumber, being too young to pray and having only recently learned the ritual's steps from his older brothers. The little one only stirred. The two boys trudged down the mud stairway from the roof to the enclosed yard. Using water in a tin basin, they washed their hands, faces, arms, and ears, splashed water on their hair, and wet their feet. They refilled

the ablution basin for their father from the clay water-pot, put on their *dishdashas*, and headed out to the neighbourhood mosque.

Back from prayers, Mohammed prepared a slightly stale loaf of bread and honey for his father and brothers. He set tin cups around the straw-woven mat and poured into each some hot tea, soaked with the same leaves used the day before.

After a few morsels and three sips, he left for work. He worked under the supervision of a family friend, setting as many mud-bricks as possible along an unfinished wall before midday's scorching sun showed up. After work, he rushed back home, running into his aunt—who stopped him for a quick kiss on the cheek—dodging the dangling cans of the local water-carrier, and running over hopscotch lines drawn into the sand by girls who then yelled after him.

He rapped at the door and a smiling Ahmed and Abdulrahman appeared, their notebooks in hand. He walked them to the *mulla's* house and, being a Thursday, paid for their weekly tuition charge—rupees coated in his palm's sweat. Closing the front door behind him, he snuck around the house to where a mud-seat projected from its wall in a deserted alleyway. He stood on the ledge and heard the *mulla* over the wall. He closed his eyes and listened. Using his fingers to count, he tried keeping up with the day's math lesson. He closed his eyes tighter and stood on his tip-toes.

“That was the schooling I got,” he tells me. “What I couldn't learn by listening, my brothers would recap to me after class.”

“Your father never pitched in?”

“Never a single rupee.”

“How could you afford clothes and food if you spent all your money on tuition?”

“Clothes? Why, all we owned was that one *dishdasha* on our backs. And food—relatives sometimes spared what food they could for us.”

“You never kept any of the money for yourself?”

“I tried, but that never ended well.”

One chilly night, as he was resting at home before another workday, he woke up to an uncomfortable wetness on his side. Cold, he shuddered. He got up and fumbled about his mattress, tracing its source. His hands reached his little brother, who was softly snoring. Still unsure of what his side was soaked in, he became aware of a sharp stench, and then it was clear; Abdulrahman had wet himself in his sleep. His eyes widened and he let out a curse, yanking his *dishdasha*—which he had been sleeping in—off his shivering body. He cursed again and again and sat back down with a thud in the dark. He looked back at his little brother still slumbering in the half-darkness. He huffed, took a minute, then set to washing his garment in the yard just as the dawn was breaking, still cursing as he scrubbed. His father and Ahmed soon appeared, up for prayers at the mosque. Ahmed snickered at his brother and was off. Abdulrahman came out of the room soon after and walked up to his brother with embarrassed eyes, biting his lower lip.

“Take off your *dishdasha*,” Mohammed sighed. “Come on, hand it over.”

He washed it along with his own and hung the garments up to dry. Being a cold, humid day, he realized his clothes would never dry in time for him to wear to work. He kindled stalks of wood at the stove and tried drying his garment over a fire instead. By then, Ahmed had come back from the mosque.

“I got a good smack for giggling to myself at prayers ’cause of you,” he chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Serves you right, stupid.” Mohammed stretched his leg out to give his brother a kick on his backside, but lost his balance and missed. Hopping away, Mohammed called after him, “Just you wait. Let me get this dry first and—” He stopped mid-sentence, realizing that his clothes had caught fire when he'd lost balance, and a hole was burning right through them. In a panic, he swung them onto the floor, stomping until the fire was out. He held them up and, through the hole, saw his brother in a breathless fit of laughter.

Frustrated, Mohammed crumpled up what was now a useless rag and tossed it at Ahmed. “You go on and laugh—laugh until you wet your own clothes!”

Ahmed had to wear his *dishdasha* to school and wasn't giving it up for his older brother, so he had no choice but to stay at home with Abdulrahman and glumly listen to a recap of what he had recently been learning. The sun towered high above as they sat on the mud-brick bench just outside the front door where it was warmer, Mohammed in his cotton undershirt and longs. Abdulrahman had been reciting his times tables when they saw their father sluggishly trudging along the avenue. He stopped short of entering the house before turning to the boys.

“You're not at work.”

“I've nothing to wear to work. I burnt a hole through my clothes.”

“Three and three is nine ...”

“Why's he not in school?”

“I don't have enough to pay for his tuition this week.”

“Three and four is twelve ...”

“Is there any lunch?”

“There’s some rice.”

“Three and five is fifteen ...”

“Wear one of mine until you get yourself another.”

“Thank you.”

“Three and six is twenty-four ...”

“Eighteen,” he corrected and entered the house.

The next day, Mohammed skipped breakfast and hurried off to work. He pulled up his over-sized sleeves and lifted his long *dishdasha* off the ground, running to the construction site. His overseer asked him why he had skipped work, and he coyly explained what had happened. He assured him that it would not happen again. “No, it definitely won't,” the overseer retorted, but his stern expression soon faded, and with kind eyes he continued, “because I'm giving you the money for a new *dishdasha*—enough for two. Now, you'll have no excuses in the future.” Mohammed was a hard-worker and the overseer had grown fond of him. He was handed the rupees to buy new garb and a little more to spare. He passed by the tailor after work, paid him, and told his family back home what had happened. His father made him hand over what was left of the rupees and, dishearteningly, he did so—money he'd have spent on Ahmed and Abdulrahman's tuition.

With eyebrows furrowed, he tells me this.

“That's terrible,” I say.

“That's how it was, baba, but I managed. I took up work wherever I could. I got myself into a right little fix this one time,” he half-laughs, half-coughs. I giggle too, and I’ve not even heard the story yet. I’m just so smitten by his story-telling smiles.

Abdulrahman raced barefooted across the neighbourhood court to where his eldest brother was playing a game of marbles with friends. “Aunt Fatima's is over,” he panted, “and she's asking for you.”

Mohammed picked up his winnings—three sapphire-tinted marbles—and followed his brother home. He found his aunt taking her veil off and untying her long, oily braid. Eyes as brown and syrupy as date molasses smiled eagerly at her nephew.

“Mohammed! I found a job for you,” she beamed, turning her back to him to face the hanging mirror.

Her nephew listened to what she had to offer, looking at the reflection of her twisting locks, unraveling like a worn rope.

“It seems a fellow from India has moved here with his family to work at the docks. I'm not sure what it is he does—what it’s called. It's some long word. He takes care of shipments, I suppose—some fancy business. Anyhow, you’re going to help him at the docks, run errands, load cargo onto trucks and deliver it to the oil fields in Ahmadi. You’ll spend a few nights a week at Ahmadi and work for the Brits there at the oil company—kitchen work, more errands, whatever they ask for. What do you say? It pays—not much, but it pays.”

Mohammed stared blankly at his aunt. She bent down to him, held his hands in hers, and grazed the cracks in his flaky dry palms with her thumbs.

“It's miles better than laying mud-bricks.”

He pulls his hands away and thumbs two marbles in his pocket. “Alright.”

“I divided my weeks between work at the docks and logistics office under the Indian’s supervision,” granddad says to me—I smile to myself when he says “logistics,” it being the word his aunt couldn't recall in my account of his past—“and two or three nights at the oil fields for the British expats.”

“Do you remember the Indian man's name, granddad?”

It takes him a few seconds and then, with a hint of pride and a near-toothless smile, he says, “Fernandez”—proud for remembering his foreign name and smiling because I reckon it's the first he’s said it in a very long time. It tickles me to hear him pronounce such a foreign name with his thick Kuwaiti accent.

“I wouldn't call him that, though. I addressed him as *Sahib*.”

“Why's that?”

“*Sahib* was a title we used to address people from India—sometimes any foreigner—out of respect. His wife I addressed as *Memsahib*. Her real name I don't reckon I ever knew.”

The door behind me creaks and startles me. It's Monica, the household cook of twelve years. She lays down a tray of water, fruit, a small bowl of oregano, a cruet of olive oil, and Lebanese bread for my granddad to eat before taking his medicine.

“Anything for you, Lulu?” Monica pets me—both by name and by smoothing my hair under her palm.

“Thank you, Monie, no.”

Granddad nods to her with a smile, and her gold anklets jingle softly as she walks back out the room. I ponder at this for a minute while granddad plucks grapes off a stalk. Strange—how, nowadays, most household help here are expats from Southeastern Asia: India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia. Monica is Goan herself. Yet the patriarch of this household once served an Indian family. It strikes me how Kuwait and Kuwaitis have transformed in such a short period of time.

“Oil,” granddad says, pointing at the cruet. “Add some to the oregano, baba.”

Oil indeed. I mix some in and cut up his bread.

“So, yes. What was I saying? Yes, the first time I went to the oil fields,” he continues, oblivious to the crumbs he sputters back onto his plate—like the

dust
and
gravel
sputtered behind

the hot tires of a rickety truck that set out in the middle of the night on a long ride to Ahmadi. Come morning, Mohammed had arrived in the oil fields and so began his first day of work there.

The next day, though, he arrived quite early at the dockyard. Puzzled, the agent asked the young boy why he wasn't in the fields. He was supposed to spend the night there.

After a long pause, he timidly answered, “I can't go, *Sahib*.”

“And why on Earth can't you?”

“Well, it went fine to begin with and, erm, I was given a hot pot of soup to serve, you see, and, uh, I ...”

“Yes?”

“I tripped and spilled the soup on an Englishman,” he blurted out. After gulping and biting his lip, he admitted, “I was suspended, *Sahib*—but only for the day! I can go back next week. They said so.”

The moustachioed agent shook his head and stroked his thick whiskers. “Since you're here, there's no point in having you mope around, is there? Here.” He picked up a box wrapped in brown paper, riddled with stamps on every face. “Take this parcel to the post office.”

“Right away!”

“And try not to get into anymore hot water, boy, *or soup* for that matter!”

And Mohammed was off.

“I kept the job at the fields for a while. There was this one Englishman who was stationed there. I remember he was about to leave—go back home to England. He didn't know me well, but the good man handed me and another boy ten rupees each. My month's wages were only seven. I don't quite know what made him do that, but I wasn't about to argue.”

“That was kind.”

“It was. I didn't keep the money for long, though. The other boy lived in my neighbourhood, saw my father, and told him of a funny thing that happened to us at work.”

“He took the money away?”

He smiles, bitterly. “Yes, he did. He asked if I had spent any of it already, and I said I had, on a headdress and watch—said that was enough splurging.”

I ask him what the watch was like, pegging down a positive.

“Grand!” He grins and holds his smile longer, looking up at the hanging clock. “It had a square little face and a scaly bronzed chain.”

“I’m glad he let you keep it.”

“He would’ve had to chop my wrist off to snatch that watch from me; but yes, he let me. And anyway, my brothers later took up jobs themselves. Even Abdulrahman started bringing in some money serving at a coffee shop. I reckon he was ... maybe thirteen then. Everyone, from the country's merchants to its cobblers, met at that particular shop. Even sheikhs would often spend their evenings there.”

A labyrinth of wooden benches clustered outside the mud-built coffee shop with just enough room to set up folding tables and let the young servers scurry and edge through, carrying hot coals and hot beverages with nimble athleticism. A number of benches were marked territory, known to be occupied by merchants and men of the extended royal family who frequented the shop—the more affluent of its customers. It was no intentional segregation. These groups of acquaintances were simply used to congregating at their usual spots, so the benches were always cordially left vacant for this class of men.

In the days since Abdulrahman had been assigned to tend to these benches—an appointment he felt was a promotion up the servers’ ladder—the tips he received had generally and gratifyingly increased. He had taken to keeping the tips for himself, handing only his salary over to his father. He leaned a shoulder against the wall and

slipped a rusty coin into a little pouch that peeked from his chest-pocket. He looked up at the dust-peppered sky and susurrated soft words of thanks.

A gentleman dressed in a tan *dishdasha* and black vest observed the boy's gesture from an adjacent bench. His left foot was bare of the slipper he had tucked under his seat. He propped his left leg on the seat's cushion. His bent knee supported his left elbow, pivoting an arm at the end of which dangled a long string of lucent mother-of-pearl prayer beads. With his right hand, he beckoned for the young boy to come closer.

The youngster did so. Abdulrahman had seen this man at the coffee shop many times and had waited on him before. He and his company were a circle of highly esteemed merchants. Abdulrahman had sometimes mused at the man's odd moustache while setting up hookahs at his table. It was peculiarly trimmed, no longer than the breadth of his nose—squarish and the darkest of blacks. It gave him a comical countenance, though he seemed a serious man. Standing before him now, Abdulrahman struggled to keep his gaze off that well-kempt growth of hair. The string of prayer beads oscillated.

“Whose son are you?”

“Yousef Abdulsalam, sir.”

“Never heard of him,” he dismissed. “Tell me your name and your story, boy.”

“My name's Abdulrahman.” He puzzled over the latter part of the question. “My story, sir?”

“Yes, yes, your story.”

Abdulrahman said nothing, not understanding what the man was getting at.

“Let me be more direct. You’re saving up for something you desperately want, aren’t you, son? Tell me what it is.”

“Why do you say that, sir?”

“Every time anyone tips you, your lips repeat a prayer and you count the coins in that pouch of yours.”

Abdulrahman’s cheeks flushed. He was taken aback, having never realized that he was being watched. “I’m...” he hesitated, “saving up for a trip, sir.”

“A trip to where?” the man pressed on.

“It’s a trip to Bahrain,” he answered, almost embarrassed. It was the first time he’d admitted his plans to anyone.

The gentleman grinned; the ends of his moustache reached the far flares of his nostrils. “What business have you in Bahrain, boy?”

Abdulrahman grew agitated by the stranger’s incessant questions and ridiculous moustache. “I haven’t seen my mother since I was very little, and I wish to visit her there. Sir, I really must get back to work. It looks like your charcoal is burning low, so let me get that for you.”

“I’ll tell you what, son,” the man interrupted, “I have a shipment due to leave Kuwait in six days. My ship will be carrying goods to Bombay, and it stops at Bahrain on its way there to pick up some freight. You can sail with my crew for no charge.”

Dumfounded once more, Abdulrahman said nothing. The man continued. “It leaves at seven in the morning. Bring your own provisions.”

“I’ll ... think about it, sir,” Abdulrahman said after a tentative pause.

“What’s there to think about? I’m offering you a free trip. You can spend some of that money you’ve been saving up to buy a pretty pearl necklace for your mother. She would like that.”

“I’ll need to run it by my father, you understand.”

“Yes, yes, of course. Now, I thought you said you were fetching me some lit charcoal. Go on! Don’t tarry, boy, or I’ll change my mind!”

He spent the rest of his working hours rehearsing how he would approach his father about the trip. He went over it in his head. There would be no need to explain how he’d come up with the money for it now, he thought with relief. His hand trembled as he poured coffee for trade-talking men and guffawing sheikhs. He didn’t even know the merchant’s name, he realised.

The next day was Abdulrahman’s day off, but he still made his way to work—or rather, his way was being made for him. His short legs hurried to keep up with the brisk pace he was being pulled at by the wrist. He reluctantly pointed out the merchant whose condescending offer he had so stupidly considered the day before, or so was his father’s reproach on his doing.

“Who gave you the right to trick my son into going on your damned boat of Charon?”

The merchant, not an avid reader of Greek mythology, was not sure what to make of the man’s allusion to the underworld river crossing or how offended he should be by that obscure genitive. Nevertheless, the man, who he took to be the boy’s father, dared to wag a finger and damn his vessel in front of all to see and hear, and that was enough to get him up from his bench in a frenzy. “I beg your pardon? If you could lower your

voice”—he struggled to keep a steady tone while his left foot felt about the sand for its slipper—“Then perhaps we can clear up whatever issue you have with me in a civil manner.”

“We don’t need your charity, so you can get off your high horse.” Though he did bring his voice down, the scorn in his eyes grew wild.

The merchant spoke more calmly. “I assure you, it was not an act of charity, but coincidence. I found out from the boy that he’d been planning a trip, and I just so happened to have a cargo ship leaving for Bahrain with plenty of room to spare. He’s a good worker who deserves a break is all!”

“He is a child!”

“If he were a child, he wouldn’t be here making his own honest money, now would he?” The gentleman did not intend to sound cynical of a social class whose adolescents are pressured into providing for their families, but it was certainly received that way, telling by the rekindling flare in his accuser’s eyes. “Don’t misunderstand me,” he quickly interjected.

“How much for the trip?”

“I already said...”

“*How much for the trip?*” he repeated sternly. “You’ve got room to spare, we’ve got the money to spare. How much?”

Aware that he had offended the man and that there was no use in continuing an unpleasant scene—besides the men at the shop who had been avidly listening to the strange exchange, passing onlookers were now stopping to hear—the merchant agreed to accept a paltry fare. He thumbed his prayer beads across the string in contemplation, as if

he were calculating his quote on an abacus. He sighed in resignation. “If you insist, it’ll be two rupees.”

“Well, boy...” The father looked to his son who, up until that point, dared not speak. “Do you have the amount?” With one hand still shackled in his father’s unyielding grip, he pulled out the coins with the other, nervously, for his pouch had been a secret. He gave them to the merchant. “Sneaky,” his father sneered under his breath, “and one more thing.” He turned back to the merchant. “When does this ship of yours transit in Bahrain on its way back?”

“Let me see. About twenty days or so.”

“In writing, I want you two to sign an agreement binding my son to be on that return trip to Kuwait.”

“Fine.” He conceded for the sake of Abdulrahman, whom he warmly felt sympathy for.

“And I’ll also see about getting an official to review and sign the guarantee.” He looked back at his son. “You want to see your mother, so be it! But that woman isn’t coaxing you into her trap—not if I can help it.” The boy’s wrist was finally released.

“But he went, though!” I interrupt.

“He did, yes. My father knew he couldn’t stop him.”

“You didn’t go with him?”

“No. I didn’t want to push it. Not yet. Although I wanted to more than anything. Instead, Ahmed and I waited for him to come back and tell us all about it.”

He stayed at the port for what felt like two hours, as petrified as the palm tree stump he had found to sit on. Evaporated seawater had left a thin film of salt on his sun-charred cheeks, and they smarted. They had landed on the Bahraini island of Al-Muharraq—“the incinerated.” The name made him wince in the heat. He craned his neck back and looked to where he had disembarked the ship. It was still anchored there. He observed two burly men struggling to balance a crate on deck, lowering it into the vessel’s hold. It occurred to him that he had not even thought to ask what the ship was carrying. For the past two nights, he would lie supine on deck, blanketed in sultry moonlight, and wonder what his mother’s embrace would be like. If he had felt it before, he had been too young to evoke the feeling now. He mused at what her voice would sound like, straining his mind to remember hints of it. He tried, but was unsure. Did her eyes still smile in melancholy the way he envisioned them in a distant memory? Did she think of him? Would she want to see him? Would she love him? And as the ship rocked on the respiring crests and the sighing troughs, he pressed his eyelids shut and forced himself to remember a time when she would rock him to sleep, and dwelling on that thought, he could finally slip into slumber.

He stood up from the palm tree stump and hesitated. He loitered about the vicinity. He didn’t know which direction to take or where to begin looking. All he was told was that his mother lived in a place called Al-Hidd, “the boundary” or “the furthest limit.” To get there, he would need to travel until there was no more ground to travel on, he deduced. How inconvenient it would be, then, if he ventured all the way to one outer boundary only to discover that he ought to have headed the other way.

An elderly gentleman who had been walking past felt compelled to stop when he caught the look of anxiety on Abdulrahman's face. He tapped the distraught youngster on the shin with his walking stick. "Are you alright, son?"

"Hidd!" was the unfiltered monosyllabic thought he blurted out to the man. He scrunched his face and quickly tried forming a more coherent sentence. "Please, sir, which way is Al-Hidd?"

The kind stranger's directions led him to a spit in the sea. Houses in this narrow projection of land were in a two-row lineation, with each row of buildings overlooking the placid gulf waters down to the tip. They were built in the same fashion as Kuwaiti mud-houses. A few shops dotted the base of the spearhead where Abdulrahman now stood, his bundle of provisions at his side. He decided to try asking at the nearest shop—a stuffy shoemaker's, as it turned out to be. He asked the man cobbling at a station piled with slippers if he knew a Shareefa Alammadi. The cobbler slid his spectacles down his pointy nose and observed the dishevelled youth with a suspicious eye. "Who's asking?"

A lump in his throat made it painful to utter the words. "I'm her son ... from Kuwait." He finally swallowed the lump to cordially dot his introduction with "sir."

The cobbler's jaw dropped. He stood up, his head an inch short of hitting the low ceiling. He held the slipper he had been mending to his heart. "Heavens," he whispered. He moved closer, wide-eyed. He took a long look at the visitor and, with a quivering lip, asked, "Mohammed?"

"No, Abdulrahman."

The cobbler held a fist to his mouth muffling what would have been a cry. "The little one." He let go of the slipper and took the boy's face in both palms, grazing his

cheeks with chafed thumbs. “Yes, I know Shareefa Alammadi. I’m her brother, dear boy.”

In opposite directions, two girls raced down the dirt road, knocking on doors of relatives. Upon being told by those who answered that their mother was not inside, the girls scurried to the next possible abode in line.

“What is the meaning of this?” snapped a cousin-in-law who had apparently been awoken from a nap. For the fifth time, the little girl asked if her mother was visiting.

“She’s not. Is it urgent? What do you need her for?”

“Uncle Ebrahim asked for her,” the girl explained, “and I said that Mama was not home—she was having tea, but that I didn’t know at whose. And uncle turned cross, telling me to go look for her. And I said I couldn’t because I was looking after the baby. And he began yelling, and pushed me and my sister along to look for Mama. So, I’ve been—”

“I see, alright! Your mother’s not here, child!” Then the door was fastened shut.

The other girl left the fourth door with no luck. She darted across to a second-cousin’s home, her two braids swinging in time with her little legs. Her mother was in the living room, she was told to her relief. “Mama!” she panted, plopping down next to her on the low-lying lounge mattress. “Uncle Ebrahim told me to come fetch you and bring you home.” Her mother instinctively reached for her headdress before asking what she was wanted for. She expertly wrapped the long black fabric round her head twice, tucking its end under her narrow chin. “He says your son is here from Kuwait.” Shareefa stopped

short of slipping into her tulle over-garment. She blinked at her daughter in blank disbelief.

“What do you mean?”

Her daughter explained. She took a few seconds, trying to grasp what had been said to her—head whirling like a spinning top. She made her daughter repeat herself. She was visibly disoriented, knocking over her untouched tea as she got up. Oblivious to her blunder, she stepped over the small glass cup, crushing it under her bare foot. She looked down at her bloodied sole in a daze. “Child,” she rasped, wiping her foot on the floor, senses astray, “bring me my slippers. They’re over by the—over there—my... slippers.”

The sun was just about to tuck itself into the lulling sea, but the heat outside remained relentless. She stepped out onto the long beaten lane that parted the two rows of mud-buildings. She could make out two figures some distance away from where she stood, waiting at the doorstep of her home. One she recognized to be her elder brother. The other was a mirage. She took a few steps forward. The other could not be real. Her heart and head pounded. The other was a figment that had long dwelt in her imagination.

In her youth, she had run down this stretch of road many a time. She ran with friends, rolling hoops along the lane with wooden sticks. She ran when she was called in for lunch in late afternoons. She ran barefoot in muddy puddles under chance showers of winter rain. And now, all these years later, a slender woman in her mid-thirties, she found herself running once more.

“Abdulrahman told us exactly how it happened. I never tired of hearing it.”

She hurried a little further down the lane, and as the features of the suspicious figure sharpened in view, she saw it was no apparition. Her knees weakened. Her strength had impatiently outrun her, fleeing from her limbs. Unsupported, faltering, she collapsed to the ground.

“He tried bridging the gap, to meet her halfway, but found he couldn’t move.”

No sooner had she picked herself up and run, eyes welling up, than she lost balance once more, stumbling back down—nose and tears in the dirt.

“She fell three times, I was told, until Abdulrahman finally went to her.”

He approached her. She clutched his shoulders—both for support and testimony—confirming that he was truly, physically there. She tousled his hair, ran her fingers down his face. “Abdulrahman,” she sobbed, breathless. She repeated his name between unrestrained kisses and choking whimpers. She repeated it for all the times she missed out on calling it in the early bright of schooldays, singing it in an improvised lullaby, yelling it at a young boy’s antics. The more she said it, the saltier his name tasted in her mouth. “Abdulrahman,” she mouthed now, voiceless. She wrapped longing arms around her child. She was holding fast to a chamber in her heart, restored after being long obstructed, now quickening floods of warmth through her veins.

He was finally feeling her embrace, finally understanding what it was like. It was singsong and springtime and the glow that fluttered through him when he laughed. Being cradled, he—a frail nursling—the boy dissolved into tears.

And those from granddad's eyes purl down sinuous ravines marked on his cheeks. I share mine, bite my lip. I don't know what to say. I say nothing. My mother comes in with granddad's walker. She notices his tears and gives him a long kiss on his forehead. "He's at peace now, dad." She dries his face with her sleeve. "He's in no more pain. No more hospital drips."

"I know, baba. Take me in to get changed for the funeral." We follow granddad to his bedroom and help him into the bathroom.

"Let me know if you need anything, dad." Mum picks something out for him to wear. His cupboard is lined with *dishdashas*: black, grey, white, beige.

"He was telling me stories of when he was younger."

"Was he now?" She sets a crisp ashen one on granddad's bed.

"Yes. He was telling me about your uncle Abdulrahman before you came in—about how he first went to Bahrain to see his mother."

"Oh, yes. God rest his soul. It's hard to think he's really gone. He linked the family together. Speaking of which, my cousins are flying in from Bahrain today for the service. I think they land at seven. Will you pick them up from the airport?"

"Sure."

"Right, I'll go get some coals burning for the sandalwood."

I linger a little longer, waiting for granddad. I have one last question for him. I watch as he takes gentle steps toward his dresser. In veneration, I observe a figure of greatest strength so unjustly stiffened by time. He sets his walker aside. Before leaving him to get dressed, I ask “Granddad? What happened to all your father’s books—his library?”

He looks fixedly at his reflection in the mirror—a mirror framed with birthdays, weddings, and gatherings, huddled groups and individual portraits, prepped smiles and off-guard expressions of a family to be proud of and loved.

“We burned them.”

“*Burned* them? Why would you do that?”

The fragrant incense mum brings in evenly permeates granddad’s clothes and diffuses about the bedroom. I gladly breathe in a whiff of its familiar aroma.

Three brawny men sat in the cargo bed of a rusty pickup truck. Their sleeves were folded up to the elbows and the hems of their *dishdashas* were rolled and tied around the waists, revealing long cotton trousers underneath. Sweat gleamed on either side of squinting eyes. Their eyes felt hot like eggs boiling in their sockets as they looked intently at the five-metre flames that blared across from them. They shared a cigarette, then flung the stub in the direction of the fire before driving back through the arid expanse. They said nothing as the eldest drove towards a dying sun that was easier, cooler on the eyes.

It's like sandalwood, granddad describes to me. The woodchips are potent, soaked in fragrance, but useless if not lit. And those books were loaded—stagnant but soaked in the enmity and frustration of three young boys denied the childhood they quietly yearned for. In their kindling, they found release.

DESERT TRUFFLES

When I, sitting, heard the astronomer, where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,

How soon, unaccountable, I became tired and sick;

Till rising and gliding out, I wander'd off by my myself,

In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,

Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars (4-8)

— Walt Whitman

from *Leaves of Grass*

I half-listened to this man in front of me, half-doodled asymmetric stars in my notebook. His hand gestures were so tormentingly delicate that even the loose sleeve of his crisp-white *dishdasha* stayed in place around his wrist as he moved his arm about. He displayed his neatly-trimmed nails to the class one by one as he counted the three main tribes that caravanned from the arid midlands of the Arabian Peninsula to the arid acute cusp of the Persian Gulf where they settled to build mud-houses, fish and pearl-dive.

I'd heard his monotonous lecture before—the first time I'd taken his class—before he flunked me. I didn't deserve it. I knew, too, exactly why he had spitefully given me a grade a fraction below passing. I had been a straight-A student, but that didn't matter to the committee I complained to. It wasn't only me. So many before me had failed because of his own failure as an instructor and petty grudges. The former I made up for by self-teaching, really. I was more the victim of the latter. People argued their

grades, complained, but nothing was ever done. He kept his job. Because of who he was. The man was the embodiment of nepotism.

He monopolized this course that I was required to take. On the first day of classes—the first time I had registered for his Kuwait History 102—he went through the roll call and got to my name; he called out my first, then paused before saying my second and last, which were also my dad’s first and last names. I could see that he had immediately recognized who I was—could almost hear old wounds unstitching. It may have been the sound of his teeth gritting. He asked to check.

“Yes, I am.” I was the daughter of a man whom my mother had chosen over him. My father wasn’t as educated as he was, wasn’t the son of an oil-rich tycoon and the president of a university, didn’t drive a fancy car or live in the nice part of town where he was pampered and raised. The women of his family had approached my mother’s as per tradition—visited with their designer purses, diamond studded jewelry and a marriage proposal with assured air. It was a no, and a month later, to his and his pompous family’s greater insult, she married a man like my father. My mother grinned whenever she retold that story—more giggle-inducing detail with each retelling.

“Ah, I knew your mother,” he said revealing only his bottom teeth.

“Yes. . . I know,” I inadvertently smirked with the same curl of lip I had inherited from her; it didn’t help that I was the spitting image of my mother, either. And I was blacklisted just like that.

Now, here I was, Kuwait History 102 again, doodling away a fifty-minute lecture I’d already suffered through. And there he was, a man who wouldn’t let go of history in all its forms, with his fingers that counted and arms that delicately gestured about. “And

then there were those who stayed inland—the nomadic Bedouins—herding sheep, camels, goats,” again with the fingers, “for food and drink and clothing.” My pen had somehow smudged my hand with blue ink and I tried to rub it off, only now I was smudging it on my left hand, too, so I put the pen down and sighed.

“Food was scarce, of course. Other sources of nutrition...you tell me... where else do you suppose they got their protein from... other sources?” Half the class probably knew the answer already, but no one budged, no one bothered to participate. He propped his arm up using the other, adjacent, for support, and pinched his goatee.

“Anyone?”

No one.

“Truffles,” he answered himself. “Desert truffles grow naturally in this area. It’s truffle season now as a matter of fact. Miracles of the desert. See, they only grow if there’s been a lightning storm. If there’s rain and no lightning—no truffles. It’s true.” He looked around at our faces with a slight grin as if he were pleased with himself, as if he were bestowing upon us the most fascinating fact we would hear for a good while. We looked back at him blankly. “Why lightning? Well, it’s quite the mystery, praise be to God—a miracle of the desert for our ancestors.”

I went digging for truffles once, years ago, with my family. I was maybe five—six. It must have been in the springtime. We’d travelled down unmapped dirt roads in my dad’s big black Yukon for what felt like hours, finally reaching what, by dad’s keen judgement, promised to be a generous truffle-picking spot.

I remember running on the flat, hardened floor of sand, rock and shrubbery. I instinctively picked the little daisies that were in bloom and in my way. I went from one patch of flowers to the next. They dispersed endlessly across the dry expanse in all directions.

“Lulu, don’t wander too far off!” dad called.

“Scorpions will get you!” my brothers added.

I let the flowers fall to the ground and scurried back.

The land was pregnant with the tubers we’d come hunting for, and we were slowly filling up our plastic bags. Dad also picked and washed a bundle of succulent seablite. We all sat around on a tweed carpet. Mum washed all our hands, one by one, with bottled water, and we ate the grey-green spindly leaves. They were salty and delicious. Mum rinsed and drained, rinsed and drained, rinsed and drained a bowl of fourteen carefully-counted and inspected truffles—two for each of us—turning the water mucky and brown each time. She rubbed off residual dirt and sliced our truffles for us. I dug my little jagged-edged teeth and teething gums into them, and it was like biting through rich butter. They were so good, we didn’t much mind crunching on the sand in them, either; the granules were like pop-rocks in my mouth, only they weren’t sour nor sweet, but earthy—dirty—wonderful. I tried to savour the taste around my tongue and between my uneven teeth—a taste like they had once been little potatoes that were overwatered with cream-of-mushroom soup. We all quietly enjoyed the truffles, then asked for more, please.

It was getting humid, and we got ready to leave as the sun made its decent. My brother showed us the carcass of a desert monitor he’d found. We scrunched our faces,

and dad made him get rid of it. We all helped fold up the carpet, stacked our bags of truffles in the trunk and walked round to get in the car. Dad handed mum desert daisies and white chamomile that he'd bunched together. She carefully put one of each in my hair, smiling. I sat between my parents in the front seat that ride back and rested my head on mum's lap. The car bumped and veered on and off the rough desert trail, and she gently stroked my side; I remember the warmth of her soft hand feeling nice as I grew drowsier. She stopped when dad placed his on hers, the road flattened into a city-bound highway, and I suppose I fell right asleep then.

I raised my hand. He gestured for me to speak. Eyes looked to me.

"Truffles don't grow out of no— . . . The heat that the lightning sparks causes the oxygen and nitrogen in the air to react . . . forming nitrates." I could feel eyes turning from me to him and back to me. "The nitrates mix with the rainwater and get the truffles to grow. That's why they're so rich in protein. That's why you need a lightning storm."

"Is that so?" he mused, flustered.

"Yes. But that's simplifying it, of course."

"Ah, where'd you learn that? You must be a science major."

"No. I'm not," I said truthfully, "My father taught me that," I lied.

He smiled.

"But he wasn't a science major either," I added.

He brushed this off and continued his lecture. I picked up my things, dropped my pen in the bin, and left.

ALMIGHTY

Along either side of the asphalt path, the trees race with him. They lift their roots and follow him down the track. He sees the silhouettes of date palms and acacias picking up speed as he pushes past. The shrubbery shakes, and he sees this all—he *sees* it—and he feels almighty. Relentlessly, his left leg propels his body forward on his skateboard, and he goes faster and further down the path. It is grimly dark; the occasional lamppost is barely luminous in the dusty air. He needs no light. Dust darting into his eyes—lashes struggling to keep out—doesn't faze him. It's 3 a.m., but the heat, remnants of the earlier August sun, lingers, stagnant. Droplets of sweat fly from his forehead as soon as they form and grime sheathes his face. He feels all-powerful. He is—he must be—floating. The trees urge him onwards. He presses on, pushes on, front wheels catch in a crack, and he is sent tumbling hard to the charred asphalt. All is maddeningly still. Prostrated, he breathes in sediments of dust and coughs them out. He turns over, lies there, panting, limbs extended. He doesn't mind that the ground sears his back through his thin t-shirt—the back of his arms, his hands, his head. He likes that he feels a twinge of pain in his left palm and digs his nails in where skin has scraped off. The trees don't mind that he laughs in euphoria, in the dark umbra of impending dawn. The date palm extends a replenishing fruit that he finds next to his head. Ahmed accepts it—thumbs its shriveled husk.

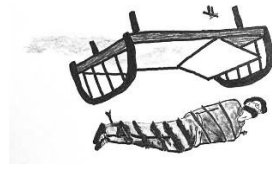
Almighty.



Yasmine had left the glass and wooden lattice cracked open and she gets up now to latch them back in place—gingerly, so no one suspects that she'd been eavesdropping. As she does so, she peers down through the arabesque lattice to the living room where her mother is still trying to get her brother to calm down, standing in the middle of the marble floor while he circles her on his skateboard, yelling incomprehensible streams of thought—the same as he'd been doing for the past three hours, give or take.

He's going through threats again now, against everyone who'd "wronged" him. This and that—horrors. She tries not to think of *this* and *that*, wishes she hadn't heard them. Before she leaves the window, she observes her brother, her eyes trailing him round the large flower etched in the hard marble, how he looks so frail—muscle and bone. He hasn't slept for days. She puts a hand to the glass. He used to be so . . . healthy. Disheartened, she returns to bed, presses pillows to both ears, trying to muffle the incessant din. *How is he still at it? For the love of everything that is mighty, shut up, shut up, shut up!* She presses the pillows tighter. She can't help but think of *this* and *that*—against everyone who'd crossed him. *Please, make it go away.* Ripping car tyres—this. *Please, stop doing this to mum, to all of us.* Throwing cows' heads at doorsteps—that. *To yourself.* Buckets of blood—this. *How has he not passed out yet? I wish he would.* He wouldn't, she reminds herself. He wouldn't actually do any of it—that gore. *For his sake, I wish he'd pass out.* They're only empty unfulfilled threats, she knows *this—that* it's just a symptom of the disorder. He slips in and out of delusions so much, it's hard to tell when he's being literal. It's only, only the disorder. She whimpers until it stops, until she sleeps.

But before it stops, before she sleeps, her mind revisits a time when he first made her feel this terrified—more so. It was about ten years ago—back when no one had suspected that he was different. She was thirteen, and he was developing into a stronger young man of fifteen. It happened so quickly—over something so stupid—over a broken skateboard she had played with without asking. She looked at him, hands hiding her face and cowering body; she looked at him through her fingers, and his eyes didn't seem like his. As he yells from the living room now, she thinks back to that time—when his rage sent her to the hospital with a swollen thumb, “and over something so stupid!” her father yelled. She was in her bedroom with a throbbing bandaged thumb—her father and brother in the room next-door. “You could have broken it! A hand is not a skateboard!”



“You thank your stars you didn't break it. I'm taking your skateboards away.” Nasser thinks back to that instance and others that make him question whether he had failed as a parent: the day he dragged Ahmed—then twelve—by the collar down from the roof to his bedroom, and made him give over the rest of the cigarettes he hid in there; the time he slapped him at fourteen—once across the face, twice on the nape—before driving home from the police station at 2 a.m. in a wrecked car; that moment, two years later, when shards of flying glass cut them both after he'd smashed a vaporizer on Ahmed's bathroom wall—two Ziplocs of hashish swirled down the toilet. As he sits by his son's hospital bed now, where Ahmed, twenty five, lies groggy and quiet, he wonders if this might all have been reversed had he not been so chiding. Or was it all inevitable? His son

stares into the empty paper cup that the nurses administered his lithium capsules in and crumples it before tossing it at the wall.

“Two weeks down. We’ll be out of here soon, son.” Nasser puts a hand on Ahmed’s head and smooths his long curls. *He has my curly hair. Back when I had hair on my head*, he smiles to himself, *and my stubbornness*. He has also carried down a recessive disorder that manifested in his son—one that no one saw coming.

A drawing on A4 paper is propped against the window pane. His son is drawing again, which is good—probably. It’s a self-portrait—most of his drawings are: a quick sketch in black felt-tip of a crocodile pushing itself out of his son’s mouth. His thick brows furrow as he tries to construe what Ahmed might have been expressing when he sketched this. Anger? Frustration? Suffocation?

A week earlier, when his son was at the height and depth, and exhilaration of a manic episode, Ahmed only yielded to Nasser’s pleading to see a doctor when he cried. He never cried. But he had never felt so terrified for his son, either. The incessant yelling, the threatening, the nonsensical jabber, the ludicrous conspiracy theories and hallucinations—no eating, no sleeping—constant moving, disappearing for days, coming back scrawnier, and yet more energetic than ever—it had all reached a crescendo. And it wasn’t only sleep and appetite that he had lost; he lost his job, his fiancé and his mind. Nasser wanted his son back. It was only when he looked into his son’s hollow eyes, clasp his shoulders, and heaving out a teary desperate plea, that Ahmed finally acquiesced. He drove. His wife, in the passenger seat, contorted her body so she could face her son in the back seat and hold his hands on the way to the clinic. The emergency clinic was only a three-minute drive away; it felt much much farther then.



Mariam finally found a buyer. She takes one final look at the white lace peeking out of the garment bag before zipping it the whole way up. She doesn't want to cry this time, but she can't help it. She quickly folds a tissue and dabs it under her kohl lined eyes, careful not to smudge, mouth gaped for no practical reason. A lace wedding dress is what she always wanted. This one has long lace sleeves, too, and a deep-V back, exactly the way she had imagined her wedding dress to be. She had made sure not to buy one with a long dragging train; that would be very inconvenient to move in during the bride's dance. She also wanted one that hugged her lean figure and only flared below the knees, so Ahmed could see her hips sway to the rhythm of the music as she danced back towards him. He would give her a single rose and a kiss when the dance was over, and help her back into her seat next to him. This is how she imagined it. How it could never be.

She takes a final glance at herself in the dressing table mirror, carries the garment bag over her shoulder, and leaves to meet the woman she had spoken to on the phone. They had agreed to meet at a small coffee shop that overlooks the placid waters of the Gulf. Mariam used to go to this shop regularly. It always had the perfect sultry lighting, soothing music and dreamy ambience; her stomach churns as she drives there now—she should have picked a different spot to meet the buyer. She gets there first; the tables are all unoccupied. Good—she has managed to avoid that awkward situation she sometimes finds herself in when meeting a person for the first time, trying to catch people's eyes until someone stares back long enough to indicate that they're expecting to meet a stranger, too. At the counter, Mariam orders an espresso—almost orders two. She finds a

three-seat table next to the window, drapes the garment bag over a chair, and sits herself down next to it. She sits next to a ghost bride. As she takes her first sip of coffee, she hears the tingle of the shop's door and turns back to see if the buyer has arrived. A young woman steps in—one whom Mariam immediately recognizes; her stomach sinks and she turns back around—pretends she hasn't noticed her—but the woman comes straight to her table. She realizes what's going on.

“It's the only way I could get you to meet with me, Mariam.”

“I don't want to hear it, Yasmine.” Avoiding eye-contact, Mariam gets up to leave.

“Please, Mariam. Hear me out. There's a reason why this all happened. We didn't know what—”

“I don't want an explanation from his sister. Please, move out of my way.” She picks up the damned garment bag and swings it over her shoulder.

“Mariam, I swear I can explain—”

“Explain what?” That she was jilted a week before her wedding day without so much as an apology? Why Ahmed refused to see anyone from her family who went over to speak with him? Why she heard *nothing* from him except a lousy text message telling her they shouldn't be together anymore? No explanation would suffice. Yasmine stood still and said nothing. The baristas all stood still and said nothing, either. “I took a lot of shit from him, Yasmine. For years. He treated me like dirt—loving me one day, then ignoring me for weeks. I don't know why I loved him, but I do. I did.” She looks out the window and bites her lower lip. Her cheeks flush into a hot red. “Goodbye, Yasmine.” Before she makes it out of the door, Yasmine calls after her.

“He’s been diagnosed bipolar.”

This takes Mariam aback and she stops momentarily before continuing to leave. The garment bag gets caught in the door and yanks her back. She pulls at it, but the peaking lace has latched on to the aluminum threshold. She frantically tries to free it without tearing the delicate lace, but it won’t budge. She can see people in her peripheral vision waiting to enter the coffee shop now stand around and watch. Her face feels hotter, she pulls, and no one offers to help, which frustrates her more. It frustrates her so much that she drops the lace and starts slamming the door on the dress and bag repeatedly, each bang of the doorframe obscuring the expletives she yells.



“What’s bipolar?” Sami’s friend asks before sliding down the playhouse pole.

“I don’t know exactly, but mum says we have to be very patient with Ahmed.”

“Because he’s crazy?”

Sami begins to regret telling his friend about the situation at home. “No, he’s not crazy. He’s bipolar.”

“That sounds like another word for crazy.” The boy slides down and Sami follows. He doesn’t realize that his friend has landed on his backside and is still at the base of the pole, and so he topples down over him.

“Shut up. It doesn’t mean that.” Sami checks around to make sure there still isn’t anyone close enough to hear. “Don’t tell anyone else in class, okay?”

“Okay, whatever. Get off me.” The boys get up just as the bell calls them back to their classes. “So what are his bipolar abilities?”

“Well, he doesn’t have them now. Mum says he’s in depression.”

“What’s depression?”

“Are you stupid? Depression is a phase.” The boys pat the dust off their maroon trousers and head to class.

At home, Sami eats his lunch with his parents—saffron rice and fried chicken. He leaves the vegetables last, scraping them away to the edge of the plate. Some are accidentally tipped over the rim. No one notices. Yasmine comes in through the kitchen door, leaves her scarf on the counter and tousles Sami’s hair.

Their mother turns to smile at her. “Hey, how was work, honey?” She gets up and reaches for a casserole dish on the counter. “I made a vegan pasta for you. And, Sami, honey, could you take that plate up to your brother?” Gladly. He leaves his veggies behind and climbs up the stairs to Ahmed’s bedroom. He knocks, but gets no reply.

“Ahmed?”—nothing, so he lets himself in. The room smells of sleep and cigarette. The T.V. is on, but it’s on mute; a lady is selling a set of dishes that she seems too excited about. Ahmed is sitting on his bed in his boxer shorts—his blanket and pillows are in a mound on the floor. He stares at the T.V. screen and his face is the darkest shade of sad; it’s like the lady on T.V. has sucked out all the energy from him so she can sell her dishes. *He’s so lucky he gets to have a T.V. in his bedroom, though*, Sami thinks. It had been installed a month earlier. His parents thought he should have one in there so his room wouldn’t be so gloomy.

“I got you your food.” Sami puts the plate on the night stand, and his brother mumbles something incoherent—his eyes are still focused on the T.V. screen.



Muneera is prostrated and thinking of her eldest. Three times, she glorifies God: *subhan rubbi al-a'la, subhan rubbi al-a'la, subhan rubbi al-a'la*—hallowed be my Lord, the most high; hallowed be my Lord, the most high; hallowed be my Lord, the most high. The mat gives where her furrowed forehead rests and absorbs tears that fall from pinkened eyes. She presses them shut and prays for her son. She prays for patience, for understanding, for guidance, for ease-of-mind. She prays for acceptance. But most of all—with a pang and heavy heave of heartache—she prays for a cure, as hopeless as she knows it is. She lifts her weary self up, legs tucked under her knees, and picks up her string of prayer beads. She thumbs the smooth hematite, and in steady intervals, slides all ninety-nine veined spheres round the thread, repeating three phrases with each one: *glory be to God, praise be to God, God is almighty*. By bead thirty, her mind wanders while her lips continue to mouth the phrases unconsciously.

She thinks of the plump pink cheeks of her boy at two, stretched to make way for a newly-teethed smile. He was showing her a worm he had dug out of the dirt, clumsily squishing it between the tips of his pudgy fingers, then waddling back to the sand-pit to find a replacement. Maybe she should have been easier on him when he struggled to do well in secondary school. Maybe she shouldn't have moved him to another school. Why did she listen when they told her it would be easier for him? Why did she single him out—treat him differently from his sister? Was it because of his disorder—dormant

then— that he fell behind, or did her decision instigate it in him? Could she have prevented this? There's no use in reflection now.

Right before she reaches bead sixty, she hears the door behind her creak open. She can feel her husband walk to the closet, routinely take out his wallet and slip it into the pocket of an old coat before undressing. He lets out a troubled sigh. She turns back to face him.

“Nasser. Did you see your cousin? What did he say?”

Her husband rubs the bald spot on his head. “He says he'll talk to Ahmed's director again and get back to me, but he can't promise anything.”

“Well, did he sound understanding? Did you tell him Ahmed's on medication now?”

“They're not going to let him keep the job, Muneera; let's just face it already.” After a painful pause, they both turn their backs to each other; Nasser puts a robe on before stepping into the bathroom, and Muneera presses bead sixty so tightly between her thumb and index finger, it might break. She lets out an audible cry, quickly collects herself, then carries on. *Glory be to God, praise be to God, God is almighty.*

She had susurrated the same phrases the night they drove him to the clinic months before—stroking his hands and sometimes squeezing them. Before seeing the doctor together, she told her son and husband that she had to get her prescription refills first and would only be a minute; she actually went in to see the doctor before he saw Ahmed. She explained the situation as briefly as she could.

“I think it's bipolar disorder. He has all the symptoms listed online. We just need a referral to the psychiatric hospital.”

“Where’s your son?”

“He’s outside. I just wanted to warn you before he came in. Please, don’t take anything he says personally. He’ll try to defy you—insult you.”

And he did. He called the man a joke—a fraud—and the doctors at the psych ward, incompetent conmen. He made a scene and had to be sedated.

He is all she thinks about—a time bomb that is set to explode any minute now. It’s that switch she’s most terrified of—that moment he flips back to mania and gets the energy and willpower to do what his mind has been urging him to commit during depression. She reaches bead ninety-nine, puts the string down and her face in her palms. *If this is a dream—God, please, if this is a dream,* “Wake me up,” she rasps, “Wake me.”



* Illustrations in “Almighty” are credited to Ahmed Almulla

RAWAN AND DANIEL'S

Daniel Carver

June 3, 2015 at 10:48 p.m.

Wanna be my pen pal? I don't know if I'll ever leave this country. I want to know about people and their life, from all over. I've never known anyone from Kuwait before. Does that sound fun to you?

She had read the text as soon as he'd sent it to her inbox, but didn't want to answer immediately, and seem too eager.

June 4, 2015 at 12:37 p.m.

Absolutely! I'm actually moving to the States in August for school 😊.

This was Rawan and Daniel's first conversation. He had started following her on Instagram in March, stumbling upon her page through a Ben Howard hashtag; she had posted a fifteen-second video she'd filmed of a butterfly in the desert, fluttering from one *arfaj* flower to another, and spliced her favorite fifteen seconds of the British songwriter's "Old Pine" to the background. "Old Pine" was Daniel's favorite, too. Up until that text, he and Rawan had only ever ♥ed each other's posts—silently.

To Rawan, Daniel was a godsend. She was at an emotional low-point then. Her Instagram posts showed her being happy, yes—camping in the desert with family on holidays, going out with friends on the weekends, drinking good coffee at work in between. Her last post was a photo taken by a coworker, of her clearing her desk on her final workday, and piling her belongings into a big cardboard box. "Will miss this place,"

it was captioned, “but now it’s on to bigger, better things!” What her social media didn’t reveal was that she was pining quietly over her first break-up—one she was not able to come to terms with. One way of moving on, she had decided, was to apply to graduate schools as far away from home as possible, to quit her job at the bank, and remove herself from the lukewarm standstill of her life. It was time she stepped out of the murky pool of melancholy she had been marinating in for the past six months. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was far enough; she turned in her resignation as soon as the acceptance letter came through the mail. She was going to delve back into schoolwork, a master’s in translation and interpretation, and leave her heartbreak on her nightstand back home. Everything was now set for her relocation in August; in the meantime, this unexpected attention from a handsome American stranger was new and exciting—a fresh wallow she could wade in before the big move could finally haul her out of the swamps.

Daniel was a man *discovering* himself in wild-and-free American fashion, rambling through a biology degree he was not fully decided on, and fixing motorbikes at an auto-repair shop to get by. He was the romanticized Hollywood image of rugged-bearded, side-grinning, beer-can-crushing, plaid-shirted Americana that Rawan had been fed through television—a twenty-seven-year-old man from South Carolina, currently living in Provo, Utah, where he had moved for a girl who eventually left him for another man. Rawan learned this about him three weeks into their virtual pen-friendship. He held back no detail about his personal life, and, gradually, she opened up to him, too; it was cathartic, sharing private thoughts with a stranger, telling someone she barely knew that she was still in love with a man who didn’t feel that way about her anymore. Daniel could relate, and told her that those feelings would change with time; it felt reassuring to hear it

from someone who wasn't a close girlfriend, and only said things they assumed she wanted to hear.

They texted every day, for hours on end, about anything that crossed their minds. Daniel was especially curious about the culture she was surrounded by—of which he knew very little. Through American cinema, Rawan had the advantage of being very familiar with his, but he knew only sparsely of what growing up in Kuwait entailed. He showed interest in the microscopic day-to-day to the macroscopic detail of her lifestyle, seven-thousand five-hundred miles away from him. His attraction to her fueled his curiosity—an attraction he blatantly expressed and a curiosity she openly welcomed.

“You look stunning in that dress,” he wrote back after she'd sent him a photo of herself in a gold-embroidered black tulle kaftan she wore on the first day of Ramadan, mid-June then, “You look like Stevie Nicks”; he sent her an image of the album cover he was referring to—Fleetwood Mac's Rumours, on which Nicks' arms outstretched like hers, showing off the winged fabric of her outfit. She explained what Ramadan was, and documented hers for him in photos of the food her family made for their breaking of fast, the colorful traditional dresses she wore in celebration of it, and in videos of children chanting songs for candy mid-Ramadan in Halloween-fashion.

Daniel Carver

July 10, 2015, at 6:15 p.m.

I tried fasting today. Couldn't make it to sunset, though.

You did! Haha, what made you decide to do that?

Wanted to see what it was like.

I can appreciate how it might build a hyper-awareness of your spirituality, but probably wouldn't try it again, LOL.

I wouldn't expect you to 😊. It's not easy!

7:05 p.m.

So, Eid is next week.

It's like the equivalent of Christmas day you could say.

I just bought this outfit for then. What do you think?

She sent him an image of herself trying it on in a shop's fitting room earlier that day. He gushed over how beautiful he thought she looked, and she blushed, veiled by the screen of her phone. An unexpected afterthought made her wonder what her ex would say about the way she looked; she quickly dispelled it, dissipating the pinching pangs it triggered in her chest. *Daniel* was talking to her now, complimenting her, showing interest in her—giving her the type of attention she had yearned for in the final months of her broken relationship. She heaved and reminded herself that she had to detach herself from that shattered place. She shifted her focus back to Daniel, who now texted that he wanted to see her in a video-call. She smiled coyly at her screen, and said okay. She tied back her long hair and grabbed a scarf, wrapping it loosely round her head. They had seen each other in pictures before, and heard each other speak on the phone—her, with a faint Kuwaiti accent, and him, with a South Carolinian drawl she found endearing—but a video-call, combining the audio and visual, was new, and felt like a step forward in their online relationship.

Rawan was not usually drawn to lighter, softer features in a man before. Daniel's chestnut blonde hair twined in unbridled curls, which he often pulled back with a

hairband or hat. He groomed a full beard around thin pink lips, and cheeks that rouged in the summer heat. His downturned eyes were an almost penetrable crystalline blue—a mismatch when paralleled with her upturned big browns. Rawan’s thick dark eyebrows gave away the color of the hair she covered with a headscarf. Her features were bold and symmetrically structured—a sharp proud nose, dimples on both cheeks and cleft chin, full lips marked by a well-defined cupid’s bow, and a bright olive complexion pulled taut by high cheekbones. He told her how those details in her face mesmerized him, and she told him, coquettishly, that she liked how his contrasted hers. She secretly wished he would take out the eight-gauge tunnel that stretched his earlobes, though, and he secretly wished she would take off her scarf and let him see her hair, but neither mentioned it to the other.

July gave way to a blistering hot August in Kuwait, and the suitcases Rawan had lay open in her closet were slowly filling up with clothes, kitchenware, books, and various belongings she wanted to take with her to Pittsburgh. She paid for her first semester online with money she had been saving up during her three years of employment as translator of financial reports at the bank—a position she was glad to leave; she picked up her visa documents at the American embassy when they came through, and finalized her flight tickets for the thirteenth of the month.

Daniel Carver

August 5, 2015, at 3:22 a.m.

So, Ben Howard is performing at the Red Rocks Amphitheater in Denver on 10/2.

I think I’m a drive down there from Provo. I was hoping we could see him live together.

If you can.

at 10:04 a.m.

Hey! Sorry, just woke up.

That would be a dream! I'm in as long as school isn't in the way.

I guess I'll know for sure when I've started classes and have a definite schedule.

Mornin' 🙄.

I'm gonna buy two tickets tomorrow, anyway. I have a good feeling about this.

Something tells me we'll finally meet there 🧑🧑🌟.

That would be something special 😊.

On the night of the twelfth, hours before her two-a.m. flight to Pittsburgh by way of Frankfurt, Germany, and domestically through Chicago, it all started to feel dauntingly real. Up until that moment she sat cross-legged on the floor, packing her toiletries in one of four overstuffed suitcases, the move had felt like pretend. Kuwait was the only home Rawan had known. She had always lived with other people—her mother, father, younger sister. Her grandparents lived a block away. Aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends were always nearby. Her world was an intimate, familiar one. She was now going to live alone, thousands of miles away, in a strange place, and it was going to be real. She had visited the States before, but being a tourist and resident there were entirely different experiences. Her mother hadn't come into her room to help her pack, which frustrated Rawan when she was scrambling her things together in disorderly compact stacks, but she now understood why; it was all happening—all as tangible as the strain she put into zipping the final suitcase shut. Her mother wanted to pretend a little longer before their teary hug goodbye. In the room next door, Rawan kissed her sister's forehead softly, careful not to wake her up, then carried her suitcases down, one by one.

“Take care of yourself, sweetheart,” her mother wept at the front door, “Call me as soon as you land, okay?” Her mother held her tight and long, and, although she was a twenty-three-year-old woman, in that minute’s embrace, Rawan felt like a helpless child again before they let go. Her parents then kissed goodbye; Rawan’s father was going to spend two weeks with her in Pittsburgh to help his daughter resettle before flying back.

Emotions reached a crescendo when her airplane took off, staring out at the vanishing tarmac. She wondered, again, what a goodbye with her ex would have been like. There wouldn’t have been one. She wouldn’t be moving away from him. Had he heard or cared that she was leaving? It shouldn’t matter; she wasn’t moving so he could miss her, and want her back—was she? She was doing it to forget—to move on. She was doing it for herself; she was going to get a master’s degree, move up the ladder. Wasn’t she? She was. Out the window, the tips of the three Kuwait Towers flashed faintly in the dark distance. But, had he heard?

Rawan took her phone out of her backpack to switch it to flight mode. The display showed a text from Daniel: “Have a safe trip. I can’t wait for you to be closer to me.” She wanted to be, but was still not sure she could.

Daniel Carver

August 17, 2015, at 5:19 p.m.

Hey! Hope ur settling in ok.

Hey, you!

I am. Just opened a bank account here 💰💰💰.

Dad and I are driving around in a rental, exploring the town.

Neat! You like it so far? You like the campus?

Yep, it's pretty nice. People have been super friendly.

School's a ten-minute walk away from my place which is convenient.



So, listen...

I was thinking, if ur still on for the Ben Howard show, how would you feel about flying into Salt Lake instead of Denver, and then you and I can drive there together?

Hmmm...

Let me think about that!

No rush. I just think it would be very cool if it worked out that way.

I guess I could.

I'll get back to you as soon as I know if I can afford to make that trip at all.

She could, but was already apprehensive about meeting him in person at all.

Exposure to American pop culture introduced her to concepts like catfishing—horror stories about online acquaintances meeting in real life, and finding out that one of the two had adopted a fake identity. How could she be sure that Daniel was who he said he was? What if he was a serial killer who baited women online, and then slaughtered them in a motorbike junkyard?

She was being ridiculous. She spoke to him every day for months—saw him in video-calls. He introduced her to his friends, his cat and dog. He couldn't possibly be catfishing her.

at 7:45 p.m.

What if you're a serial killer who baits women online 🤖.

And then slaughters them in a motorbike junkyard 🤖?

Darn, my cover's been blow. How'd you figure that out?

You would've made a pretty addition in my human taxidermy project 😏.

Haha! I'm sorry, I'm being an idiot.

Not at all. My international collection is missing a stuffed Kuwaiti girl 🖋️✂️.

😬 Okay, now you're just being creepy.

But, there were real concerns, as well—like having to lie to her parents, which she would feel terrible about. Telling them that she was going to fly to Colorado to meet a strange Caucasian man she had never seen in person before was out of the question. Now, possibly meeting him in Utah, and spending eight hours in a car alone with him—driving through the open desert—where it was easy to dump and hide a body; she was being paranoid again, and digressed.

A titillating opportunity was presenting itself to her; the idea of meeting Daniel was exciting, but also terrifying. What if they meet, and she falls for him? The prospect was one she both flirted with, and dreaded. She had loved one man for years, and couldn't fathom giving herself to anyone else. The possibility, now, of loving another man was one she was willing to grapple for—if only to let go of the past. But, *what if* they meet and she falls for him, an American, a non-Muslim, a motorbike repairman with no college degree—everything her family would disapprove of. It was nothing more than a whimsy. Rawan didn't want to begin considering the sacrifices she would have to make.

Then, there was also the scenario she would try to push for; she and Daniel would meet, they would have a great time at the Ben Howard concert, singing, dancing, suppressing any possible romantic feelings, and consolidating a forever-friendship. They

would then each travel back to their respective states—no stress, no sacrifices. No murders on the Utah/Colorado plains, either. She still needed time to decide.

Daniel Carver

September 1, 2015, at 8:55 p.m.

Hey, Daniel.

Hey, beautiful.

I'm all booked 😊 ✈️.

You are? 😍

To SLC or Denver?

Salt Lake! I'm doing it!

You just drew a big goofy smile on my face, woman!

Rawan thought long about it, and had finally decided she couldn't live with the regret of not knowing what their meeting would be like. She was going to fly in to Salt Lake City, late on the first of October, missing a three-hour lecture she had the next day, in time to head out on the road with Daniel in the morning, and make it to Denver right before the show. She was going to be a spontaneous woman. It was going to feel liberating—but not too liberating. She was going to make sure that she and Daniel would remain *friends*. She was going.

September had never felt so long; all thirty days were drawn out into tedious tick-tocking hours—intentionally, to tease her, she felt. Ten different scenarios of her and Daniel meeting played out in her head—during her lectures, in the shower, as she

nodded off to sleep. In most of the scenarios, they did not part as friends, taking a leap in their relationship, but there was no harm in imagining.

A week before meeting, Daniel brought up the subject she had been hoping to evade as long as possible. At that point, they had been talking daily for months; they often chatted about their plans for their futures, when the notion of a future together was brought up.

Daniel Carver

September 24, 2015, at 4:06 p.m.

Let's just call it and go ahead and get married. Bad idea . . . who's to say, haha.

Naw naw, just kidding.

Oh, my! Where is this coming from?

You think? 😊

I say yes, but that would be ridiculous.

I don't think you could handle me. 😊

Well, I am a traditional Kuwaiti girl, Daniel.

Either marriage is in the picture or good bye!

TEASING!! 😊

Wow! Okay, well, let's do this, haha!

The conversation took a more earnest turn she wasn't prepared for.

But you have to be okay with knowing that I may never be a Muslim.


I will forever respect and honor all your religious choices, but I can't say that I would ever convert, only because I would never want to live a lie no matter how much I fall in love with you.

The mention of love took her aback. She was not ready to invest deeper emotions into a relationship she would have to struggle to sustain. Daniel was a sweet daydream up until that stage. When she wasn't in that daydream, she was a girl bound by morals she was taught to respect—conditioned to. If they met, she may be able to repress her feelings, but could he?

It was easier for him to love what he wanted—an American, carefree and unbound by the restrictions of a conservative society. She was jealous of that, but it terrified her to think of the possibility of crossing the line over to his way of life, and abandoning the one she'd always known, along with the people in it.

I realize that.
But let's not get ahead of ourselves, Daniel!
Yeah, I'm sorry. You just make me feel a certain way. I get carried away.
Don't be sorry.

She had to tell him that they needed to just be friends—that, if they met, they couldn't be intimate. It wouldn't be fair to lead him on, and now was a good opportunity to let him down easy.

I feel the same. I wouldn't be spending money and time on a trip
if it weren't for someone I thought was special, too.
I wish September would end already .

September did end, and Rawan sat cross-legged on the floor of her apartment, scrambling things together in disorderly compact stacks again—this time, into a smaller carry-on. She had yet to decide what she was going to wear to meet Daniel. Her outfit had to be cute, but also comfortable for her flight—she had to make sure it didn't look

like she was trying too hard, but also, she couldn't look frumpy. A little mascara, and a hint of lip-tint, and Rawan was ready to order a taxi to the airport. Her mother called right before she left, and Rawan told her first lie—she was getting ready to go to the library. At the airport, her father called, and she let it ring; Rawan couldn't risk him hearing a public announcement about gate changes or departing planes, so she texted that she had to be quiet at the library, and couldn't talk. She had never lied to her parents before—nothing this serious. It felt slimy, but she didn't want them to be sick with worry, either. She had let her best friend know she was flying to meet Daniel—in case anything went wrong—in case one of the least likely, catfishing scenarios she had imagined played out. She waited for her group number to be called out for boarding, and bit her nails, which she hadn't done for years.

Daniel Carver

October 1, 2015, at 6:25 p.m.

Where are you now?

Just landed in Charlotte, NC. Next flight's in two hours-ish.

When I started talking to you, I never really thought we would ever meet each other.

And now ur just hours away from here.

It's just surreal.

Can't wait to get there!

Can't wait to see me? 😊

See you, spend time with you in person.

Ben Howard on the side, lol.

Aww, ur going to fall in love with me.

You're confident about that, I see. I think you will first.

What makes you so sure?

What makes YOU so sure? 😊

Cause I feel like we're just meant to be.

I honestly wanna tell you that I love you. I feel like I do,

But I only know so much about you.

So, at this point, I guess I'm in love with an idea of you.

I think it's that for me, too. I need to be physically around a person to develop feelings.

I understand, but I don't have to be around you to know that I love you,

But I can only go by what I know of you, and that's only what you've told and shown me.

It was time to say something.

I also don't want to kid myself (or you),

and then for nothing to come out of all this after potentially developing feelings for each other.

Because of the way I choose to live my life, my traditions, my religion.

Was she too ambiguous? Did she upset him? Daniel was quiet for five minutes, and she caved.

I also don't want to not try... 😊

I understand where you are coming from.

I can tell you this with 100% honesty...

If you can't be with a non-Muslim, and I love you the way that I think I do...

I will try with all my soul to find my way to your faith, but I can't promise you that I will.

I would never impose my faith on you anyway.

Let's not put too much pressure on ourselves! This is becoming too serious 😊.

And, hey, maybe you meet me and decide you want to be just friends.

Haha! Yeah, right.

By the time Rawan's flight made it to Salt Lake City airport, she'd let another person in on her secret—the woman in the seat next to hers, a stranger flying to Utah on a business trip. Rawan couldn't contain herself; she was anxious, and being anxious made her chatty. The woman told her to look out for herself before they separated down the arrivals' walkway toward the exit doors. Daniel was going to meet Rawan there, and the fluttering in her stomach made it difficult to walk steadily. She took a sharp right into an empty bathroom, and stared at her reflection in the mirror.

"Hi!" she smiled perkily to herself, "Hey, you! Ugh, no. Nice to finally meet you. No. Hey. Hey!" She smiled and unsmiled ten times before reapplying her pink lip-tint, taking a deep breath, and walking toward the exit doors again.

"Oh, crap. Crap, crap," she repeated under her breath when she spotted a figure who looked like Daniel in the distance. "Crap, shit. Oh, shit. Okay. Okay." She let out some expletives in Arabic before she was close enough for him to potentially hear.

"Hey!" he spared her the awkward 'hey' she had practiced, "Come here!" He opened his arms as she approached him—Daniel, physical, as real as the phone she saw him through for months and now gripped almost to the point of shattering.

"Hi," she smiled, and went in for a one-armed embrace.

"Wow, this is nuts. You're here!"

“It is,” she agreed, “I am.”

“How was your flight?”

“It was all—kay.” Her tongue was forgetting its English, and she bit it—a Freudian jab back.

“You look so nervous,” he laughed. Rawan only smiled back, concealing her bleeding tongue. “I am, too. Let me take your bag for ya.” She let him, and followed one step behind to his car. He was taller than she expected—six feet and some, she guessed; his shoulders were broader than his photos suggested.

She wasn’t any less nervous during the ride. It had been so easy for them to talk on the phone for hours at a time, but said barely anything to each other that hour’s drive to Provo. Daniel connected his iPod to the car’s sound system, and filled the silence with music.

“Wanna listen to some Ben Howard—get us hyped for tomorrow’s show?”

“Yeah, do it.” *Do it?* Was that the right phrase to answer his question? She was overthinking and sweating. She hoped he was, too.

Provo’s streets were practically empty, eerily quiet, and the single-floored buildings they passed all seemed abandoned. She could sense Daniel stealing looks at her in the dark—right hand on the wheel, and the other propped up to his chin—but she looked straight ahead until they were at the motel she had booked the night at. He stayed with her until she checked in at the lobby, and then hugged her good night.

“See you in the morning. I’ll pick you up at nine?”

“Sounds good,” she smiled.

She was finally able to relax. Her room was small, ramshackle, but she didn't care. She took off her shoes and headscarf, and threw herself back on the creaking bed. She smiled to the ceiling for a minute, then took her phone out of her purse. After texting her girlfriend that she was at the motel, she started filming, "Hey!" she said in Arabic as she filmed around the room, "I'm finally here—safe. The room's a little gross, but all's good." She recorded herself in the reflection of a mirror, "Daniel's cuter in person, which actually sucks for me. It makes this harder." A banner notification of a text from him appeared at the top of the screen, asking if she got to her room yet. "Anyway, that's my update. Miss you!" She stopped the recording, and sent it to her friend, realizing a minute later that she'd accidentally sent it to Daniel.

"No... No, no, crap!" Her fingers frantically texted Daniel to not open the video. What she said in it didn't matter—it was all in Arabic—but her hair was down in the mirror.

Daniel Carver

October 2, 2015, at 12:34 p.m.

Dniel pls don't open vid

Please delete the vid I jst

sent

It was meant for a friend of mine

Daniel please dpn't play it

I started but quickly noticed what was going on, and stopped it, promise.

It's deleted.

Thank you!

It was kind of weird, lol, like walking into a girls' locker room.

I actually almost didn't recognize you.

Rawan hadn't shown her hair to a man who wasn't a relative of hers for seven years. Not even her ex-boyfriend had seen it. It was an odd feeling—not quite embarrassing, but still uncomfortable. Women around her showed their hair all the time; it wasn't anything Daniel hadn't seen, but, in a way, showing hers did feel like being caught naked in a locker room. *I could have run a brush through it first, at least, she laughed to herself.* A part of her wanted to ask him what he thought, but she didn't. She doubted that he had really deleted it.

Daniel Carver

October 2, 2015, at 8:52 a.m.

Mornin!

I'm out front. Ready when you are.

I'm ready! Just checking out at the lobby.

I'll meet you outside in a bit.

Take ur time. I got us breakfast burritos and coffee for the road 🌮☕.

Rawan pulled her carry-on, and walked outside to where Daniel leaned against the hood of his jeep, smirking—his eyes sweeter and bluer than she knew they could turn in the sun.

“Sleep well?”

“I did.” Was he smirking because of the video? No, he always had that side-grin. They both got in, and munched on their breakfast. The sun was mild, so she cracked the window open, letting the breeze cool her hot blushing cheeks.

“I’m really glad we’re doing this, Rawan.”

“Yeah, me too.”

He played music they both had shared with each other before, and talking became easier, more natural as the miles they covered disappeared behind. Three hours in, Daniel took an exit off the freeway, and turned to her, “I want to make a quick stop—show you something.” He took a sharp, off-road turn and drove on a beaten dirt trail that crunched under the wheels.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“You’ll see when we get there.”

The trail became bumpier and dustier the further they drove away from the freeway. Utahan desert stretched to the horizons on either side of the rattling windows, and Rawan grew skeptical. The car zigzagged down a gentle slope, and stopped at the bottom of a canyon. Daniel waited for the dust to dissipate before opening his door. “Come on,” he gestured.

She stepped out, and looked around. One other car was parked a little further along the trail. “What’s this place?”

“This is where I kill you, Rawan.”

“Don’t make jokes like that,” she giggled nervously.

“Sorry, that was not funny,” he wrapped an arm around her shoulder reassuringly, “This is Sego Canyon. I wanted to show you the pictographs on the rock here.”

He took her hand, and led her to the canyon wall; she was not prepared to hold him, and hoped her palm wouldn’t sweat in his. They meandered between high bushes speckled with pale yellow flowers, and she struggled to keep up with his pace. They

finally stopped before the towering wall, and faced the ancient illustrations on the rock. Daniel took his hat off, and they both looked up. Anthropomorphic figures of broad-shouldered, hollow-eyed people lined the wall—some with horns or antennae on their heads—uncannily alien-like. Several figures wielded shields, and other objects Rawan couldn't quite make out. Her palm was hot and had dampened, but it was Daniel's that was sweating.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“Incredible. A little scary,” she whispered.

“Yeah. Pretty cool.”

She let go of his hand, and went to read an info-board on the rock art. The pictographs were produced by the Utes, it said.

“Is that where the name Utah comes from?” she asked, “The Ute people?”

“No idea. Plausible conclusion, I guess.”

“I'm disappointed you don't know.”

“I'm a Carolina boy, you forget”—that side-grin again. He put his hat back on and stepped back, taking one last inclusive look at the canyon and at her, “Let's get back on the road, shall we?”

They made four more pitstops for restroom breaks and gas, and had lunch one final stop before driving the rest of the way directly to the concert's venue—ten miles shy of their motel in Denver. Red Rocks Ampitheatre was tucked away between colossal boulders—deep red outcrop that shot skyward every which way. In a moment of envy, Rawan compared the landscape to the desert back home. How both could be called

deserts perplexed her. Kuwait's terrain was flat and barren—lifeless to its skeletal core. Here, even the dead rock seemed to come to life like fiery phoenixes around her.

They found themselves a place to sit ten rows from the stage and to the left. “Do you mind if I got me some alcohol?” he asked.

“No, I don't mind at all,” she smiled, “but I appreciate you asking.”

“Want me to get you something?”

“If you find a vendor selling posters, get me one of those.”

She waited for Daniel to get his drink, saving his seat with her purse. A young man in front of her turned back, “Hey, would you mind buying beers for us, and keeping the change?”

“Me?” she scrunched her face, and almost laughed, “Umm... I'd rather not.”

The evening was getting chillier, and she closed her jacket tight. Daniel returned with his drink, and scooped close to her. They exchanged their bodies' warmth between their sides. The air was crisp and ready to be saturated with music. The auditorium was now packed to its very back rows, and the lights around it dimmed; nine-thousand-some people awaited a single man to perform, but this concert was theirs only—Rawan and Daniel's—and the British crooner confirmed it by opening with “Old Pine.”

Thousands screamed and clapped. Rawan's mouth gaped and eyes widened; it was all overwhelmingly dreamlike. They stood up along with everyone else, and she mouthed lyrics that sang of *memories* and *dust*—being *far from home*, and *echoed stone*. Daniel held her, and they swayed to the music. Was it her heart pounding or the bass of the speakers that throbbed in her ears? They both sang the final verse aloud; the words


reverberated across the auditorium, entirely off-key, “We stood steady as the stars in the woods, so happy hearted, and the warmth ran true inside these bones.”

Daniel Carver

October 3, 2015, at 2:10 a.m.

They were out of posters.

I forgot to tell you.

You must be asleep by now. Sweet dreams, beautiful .

Rawan wasn't asleep, but was in bed, in the room next door to his, nodding off to thoughts of what had all finally happened. The night exceeded all the scenarios she had dreamed up, except it missed the hypothetical kiss good night she often added to the end; it was nice in a whimsy, but she consciously avoided it now. She felt a tinge of guilt for quickly saying good night to Daniel outside her room, so he wouldn't get a chance to lean in for kiss. Although she felt like she owed him at least that much for being who he said he was—just as kind, understanding—just as much a gentleman—they were still just as much wrong for each other. She couldn't afford what she felt she owed.

They met at the motel lobby in the morning, and he looked better than ever in a well-pressed red and blue checkered shirt, and an olive back-turned hat; “Salty Bike Revival,” it said in cursive white.

“I'm thinking we have breakfast here, then go to Colorado Springs,” he suggested, and she nodded agreement. “Just over an hour's drive. It's supposed to be beautiful out there,” he went on before pausing for a moment, then revealing a leather

wrist cuff in his palm. “I felt bad about not getting you a poster. I went and got you this—something to remember this trip by.”

“You really didn’t have to,” she gushed. He helped her put it on, and they headed for the motel’s scant breakfast spread. Rawan played with the cuff under the table as they ate—turning it round her wrist, and digging into the leather with her nails—then grabbed an apple for the road when they were done.

Outside the car window, the western landscape was an object of veneration—transcribed across the vista like scripture. A haphazard draping of autumnal yellow and grey trees softened the bright red of jagged boulders. You didn’t get that in the East. Sure, there were the beautiful Smokies that Rawan once drove alongside of on a road-trip with her father, but the rocky terrain of the West was something else—majestic—heart-fluttering. Perhaps the fluttering was more the doing of her closeness to Daniel. Either way, the feeling was different, and one she consciously tried to savor. It also saddened her—the realization that these moments of perfect contentment were transient.

They approached a visitor’s center, where they parked the car, and grabbed pamphlets on the park they were about to explore. Daniel’s arm linked with hers as they walked toward the entrance sign. The stratified rock that surrounded them looked regal, crowned with spires that reached for the clouds. The sign was impressive—a giant stone tablet that looked like it had dropped from the sky, as though a celestial being had meant to mark its territory; carved into the rock in large lettering were the words, “Garden of the Gods.”

Beyond the sign, Daniel and Rawan hiked the marked trails to the rocky landmarks, standing in awe of each formation, taking photographs, and moving on. They

climbed a boulder they weren't sure they were allowed to climb, and sat on a flattened ledge that overlooked the entire park. Rawan pulled out the apple from her purse, and took a bite, offering the next one to Daniel. He shared the apple with her, wiping the juice that slid down his beard, and she rested her head on his shoulder. The garden was pristine, and Rawan breathed in its essence in one long inhalation, trying not to lose any of it as she breathed out.

It was now dawning on her, that she and Daniel were never going to share experiences like this together again. If she continued to hold traditions that dictated the life she was preordained to live—to graduate, and move back home; get another, higher ranking corporate job; live with her parents until the right suitor came along—this was it. Her choices of suitor were either someone in Kuwait she would have to discretely develop a relationship with—at work, at a gym, maybe online, meeting at quiet cafes, avoiding taboo—or, more typically, a person from a respectable Muslim family, preferably well-to-do, with clean-cut dark hair, dark eyes—no tunnels in his earlobes—who would approach her parents through his as per tradition. The former type had crushed her once, so she had to be open for the latter option to come along. In either case, Daniels were out of the question.

In that moment, though, Rawan and Daniel had the Garden of the Gods, and the Gods didn't seem to mind them being there together.

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“The Conscious Ignorant”
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“Colors of a Mumbaikar Wedding”
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