



VINTAGE

THE CONSEQUENCES OF LOVE

SULAIMAN ADDONIA

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About the Book

It is summer in Jeddah but Naser's life seems bleak. An immigrant in an unfriendly land, his friends have fled town for cooler climes and left him to his dead-end job and the scrutiny of the religious police, who keep watch through the shaded windows of their government jeeps. He spends his time writing to his mother in Africa and yearning to meet a woman - but in a country that separates men and women with walls and veils he feels increasingly trapped. Then, one of the black-clad women drops a piece of paper at his feet, instructing him to follow her pink shoes and suddenly his black and white life blooms into colour.

But relationships between unmarried men and women are illegal under the strict Wahhibism of Saudi state rule - and it's not long before their forbidden love must face the hardest test of all ...

About the Author

Sulaiman S.M.Y. Addonia was born in Eritrea to an Eritrean mother and an Ethiopian father. He spent his early life in a refugee camp in Sudan following the Om Hajar massacre in 1976, and in his early teens he lived and studied in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. He has lived in London since 1990. *The Consequences of Love* is his first novel.

This book is dedicated with so much love to my mother, my maternal grandparents and in memory of my father

SULAIMAN S.M.Y ADDONIA

The Consequences of Love

VINTAGE BOOKS
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For a brief glossary, please [see here](#).

WHATEVER DREAM I had for myself in the future, my mother was always central to it. But now that dream was escaping my grasp. She was sending me away: me, a ten-year-old, and my brother, only three.

We were in a makeshift café at the armpit of the river. At the side of the hill lay a bush and in the bush was a hidden route from our village in Eritrea to east Sudan; a route that was so narrow and arid that it could only be travelled by camel.

Some of the smugglers had already arrived. I watched the flickering oil lamps bounce against the flanks of their camels. There were many people standing around, but not everyone was there to flee the war. Some, like my mother and the other women who lived on Lovers' Hill were there to say goodbye. But most, like my brother and I, were there to escape. My mother was all I had in the world, and I dreaded the moment the oil lamps would be blown out and the camels would set forth in the bush to begin our journey. The world I had known and loved so much would be over.

I was standing next to Semira, my mother's best friend. My mother was just a few yards away buying warm milk for Ibrahim from the tea maker, with her back towards me. The tea maker scooped milk from her pot and put it in a tin cup and gave it to little Ibrahim.

More camels arrived. The men were walking behind the camels, hitting them now and then with a long stick. They were famous smugglers, Beja men from the Beni Amir tribe. They all had knotted hair and were wearing white *jallabiyahs* with blue waistcoats; swords swung over their shoulders.

My mother came back towards where I was standing with Semira. It was strange that there weren't many tears now. Everyone - Semira, my mother and even me - seemed to have cried all day long and now the only thing left to do was say goodbye.

As I saw my mother approaching, I looked at her face. She was wearing a long black dress and her favourite red Italian-made shoes, a gift from Semira. My mother was tall but the shoes made her even taller.

When she came by my side, she gave Ibrahim to Semira and held my hand. Semira joined the other women who were waiting close to the camels and the light of the oil lamps, waiting to say goodbye to us.

Suddenly I heard a loud thundering noise. I looked up at the sky and saw an Ethiopian fighter plane over our village. I squeezed my mother's hand and pressed my head against her. I closed my eyes, and said a prayer, 'Please *ya Allah* make these planes go away for ever. Please *ya Allah*. Please *ya Allah*.'

When quietness returned to the sky, one of the smugglers came to my mother and said, 'The camels are ready, Raheema. Don't worry. Nothing will happen to your children.'

My mother picked up our oil lamp. She clutched my hand and started walking towards the caravan. But I pulled her back, planting my feet firmly in the sand. 'I am not moving, Mother.'

She stooped in front of me. Her earrings dangled and swung in the breeze. A beautiful odour arose from her neck like swirls of frankincense gum from an incense burner. I looked at her long black hair. I rested my head on her chest. She wrapped her arms around me. I wished I could stay like this for ever.

My mother whispered, 'My sweetheart, I am doing this because I love you.'

I begged her one more time, 'Please, Mother, don't send us away. I want to stay here with you. Please, Mother.'

She gently pulled herself away, and said, 'I want to look at you, my sweetheart.'

She held my face.

'Let's make a promise to each other,' she said in a soft breaking voice, the silent tears rolling down her cheeks.

'Let's make a promise that we will always be like this wherever we are.' She wove her fingers between mine and bowed her head to kiss my hand.

The smugglers made their final call for our departure. I hugged my mother and her oil lamp fell to the ground, lighting her red shoes in the darkening night.

As the camels started walking, I looked up at her face. I wanted to see it for the last time. But the light at her feet died slowly and my mother disappeared from view.

PART ONE
THE BLACK AND WHITE MOVIE

THE EVENING OF the second Friday in July was an evening of departures. It was 1989 and Jeddah was about to be abandoned by all of those who could afford a holiday. I had left my window open to let the humid breeze into my room. I breathed in the spicy *kebsa* meat mixed with the spice of men's cologne; the smells of the day turning into night.

The phone was ringing. After six rings I picked up. It was Jasim. He wanted me to come to the café to say goodbye. He was off to Paris the following day. He regularly travelled abroad and always came back from his trips with presents; he claimed they would encourage sensuality in those he loved.

He also said that I needed to collect the latest of my letters to my mother. I had tried many times to send letters home but they were always returned to sender. I had used Jasim's café as my return address ever since I had known him.

At that time I lived in a tiny flat in a small two-storey building. It was all I could afford, given that I was earning just four hundred riyals a month at the car-wash. The flat was at the poor end of a long street that swelled at the middle, like a man with a big belly and long thin legs. At the roundabout it was surrounded by shops and restaurants, before it stretched thin again all the way to Kharentina.

By day, its rows of white-painted buildings glistened under the sun and men in white *thobes* outnumbered women in black *abayas*. The scene made you feel like you were in an old black and white movie.

I walked past the villas, where the breeze had turned the garden trees into slow-moving ballerinas. Peering down

Al-Nuzla Street, I could see the tallest building of our neighbourhood. It stood out because of its nine floors and was well known for the rich people who lived in it.

In front of me, on the pavement, two young men were strolling, holding each other's hands. They made their way into the Yemeni shop. A few moments later I stopped to let a man past, dressed in *jallabiyah* and *tagiyah* and carrying a box full of plastic Pepsi bottles. I tucked my T-shirt into my tracksuit and continued.

The fragrance of musk filled my nostrils. It meant I was getting close to the biggest mosque in the neighbourhood. At one time I had been living with my uncle right next to the mosque; my new home was a few blocks away in the same street, but this mosque was still the nearest.

I saw a group of six bearded men standing outside. They stood so close to each other that they looked like they were joined at the hips and shoulders.

They stepped aside to give way to the blind imam who was leaving the mosque. It was because of him that I no longer attended prayers. He was clutching the arm of a tall man who was holding a black leather bag. Their long beards quivered softly in the wind.

I quickly crossed the road and bowed my head as I started to walk in the opposite direction to where they were heading.

Then suddenly, a familiar Jeep with shaded windows swerved towards me and screeched to a halt. I froze. Religious police. I wanted to run but my legs felt heavy. Three bearded men jumped out and came towards me. I couldn't move an inch. But they passed and entered the building behind me.

Seconds later, they came out of the building with Muhssin. Although I had never spoken to him, I recognised him from school. Muhssin was unmistakable – he modelled his look on the romantic style of Omar Sharif, the Egyptian actor from the Sixties. I pulled myself back to the wall.

Muhssin's mother followed them, weeping, begging them to spare her son for the sake of *Allah*.

'Please forgive him, he is my only son, my only breadwinner. *Allah* is merciful. *Allah* is love.' The religious policemen bundled Muhssin into their Jeep and turned to his mother.

One of them brandished a stick and ran towards her, yelling, 'Go inside and cover your face, may *Allah* curse you.' He hit her on the back and buttocks as he herded her inside the building.

A moment later the Jeep sped off towards Mecca Street. I hurried into the building to find Um Muhssin. Through the small window pane, I could see that she was sitting on the staircase weeping. Her hand was shaking when she tried to get up. I knocked on the door but she didn't look up.

When I reached the junction of Al-Nuzla and Mecca Street I paused to consider my route. I didn't want to pass Abu Faisal's villa and face the possibility of a chance meeting with Jeddah's most prominent executioner. He was the father of Faisal, my school friend; but when I looked down the road and saw the white Cadillac parked outside his house, I immediately went the other way.

Jasim greeted me, a smile decorating his face. His trimmed goatee curled upwards, accentuating his grin. He was wearing Saudi dress, with the sleeves rolled up, his hairy forearms resting on the counter.

Some of the customers craned their necks to look at me. The smell of *shisha* - smoky, sweet - was gradually overlaid with the smell of hot coffee prepared with plenty of cardamom. Jasim was busy, so I sat down and waited.

I scanned the room and got a glimpse of the new waiter. He was young and agile and he glided through the tight spaces between tables as if his lower half were made of jelly. He squeezed past me and I watched as other

customers reached out to touch him. He brushed aside their hands as though they were soft curtains.

The tables were deliberately close together: Jasim wanted men to rub against each other and produce a fire. 'There is nothing sweeter than seeing two men caressing each other with their bodies,' he once told me. 'It makes me imagine that flames of love might be created.'

Back then, I hadn't understood. 'But if the men think for a second that they are touching each other for any other reason than lack of space, then surely they will burn down the café?'

Jasim shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

Jasim's café was full of colour. And his obsession with colour co-ordination extended from the walls to the tablecloths, to what the boy was wearing.

The walls were painted in two sections. The top half was a misty rose, and the bottom half, with sporadic wild flowers sketched by Jasim, was a warm grey.

At the table always reserved for Fawwaz and his cronies - their whispers muffled by their thick moustaches - the boy stretched across to clear the small coffee-cups. He put the cups on a tray and sped to the furthest corner of the room to seek the shelter of an air conditioner. He stood facing the wall and he slowly circled his head as he lifted the hem of his *thobe* to wipe his face. I could see his tight beige velvet trousers contrasting perfectly with the blue tablecloth next to him.

The men were setting up a game of dominoes. Fawwaz placed his chin on his hand and peered at the boy. His stern expression could not hide the lust in his eyes. He leapt to his feet and went towards the boy.

Fawwaz stood in front of the boy and held his hand. I stared through them. Memories were starting to come back to me from my time as a waiter.

Jasim was sitting at the table with Omar, one of his closest friends. I loved those early smoke-free hours of the morning, when the café was quiet and the warm colours of the walls wrapped you like a silk robe.

I was polishing the counter while listening to an interview that my *kafeel* – the Blessed Bader Ibn Abd-Allah – was giving on the radio. He was a police chief in the Jeddah region and he was talking about young people and morality. He suddenly broke off from the calm one-to-one chat with the interviewer and steered into a sermon, quoting from the Qur'an and the Prophet's sayings to warn youth against malevolent behaviour. 'But,' the *kafeel* said, 'we are working together with the religious police to combat immoral behaviour. *InshaAllah*, Allah will bless our important work.'

I shut off the radio, went to the kitchen and lit a piece of charcoal. Holding it with the clamps, I brought it over to Jasim's table and placed the burning coal on the edge of the clay bowl. I pulled up a chair and sat down. Jasim passed me the pipe. I put the mouthpiece on my lips and as I inhaled I moved the charcoal around using the clamps. Omar was talking about a local controversy: a teenage boy had been arrested by the religious police for receiving a note from a girl while walking to school one morning.

'To my knowledge,' said Omar, pinching his left cheek as he talked, 'it is mostly princesses and rich girls who go around and toss notes at boys' feet. They do it for fun and to ease their boredom. Then when they have had enough these girls disappear back to their hidden world as quickly as they came; leaving behind heartbroken boys.'

'So how come I never had notes dropped at my feet?' asked Jasim.

'Well,' said Omar, 'I am telling you that these are rich girls and princesses, and they have a fine taste.'

Jasim stood up, surrounded by smoke and shouted, pretending to be offended, 'Are you saying I am not a

handsome man?’

Omar laughed and pulled Jasim down. ‘Just sit. You know you’re not. Plus, you’re smart, and smart people don’t risk the consequences.’

I was woken from my reverie when Jasim called my name. I looked up. He indicated that I should join him at the counter.

‘I am going to miss you but you will get a great present from Paris,’ he announced as he kissed me on both cheeks. His eyes were bloodshot, streaks of red crossing the white of his eyes.

‘Don’t you ever get tired of travelling?’

He thought for a moment and shook his head, giggling.

‘How long are you going for?’

‘Shush,’ he said, ‘you are like a fire-breather. You burn me with what you say.’

It was as if every word he spoke were saturated with an expensive fragrance. I brought my face closer to his and inhaled deeply.

‘Have you been drinking perfume?’

‘An exclusive one from France,’ he responded.

His eyes lingered on mine. Sweat started dripping from his face as if I was truly breathing fire on him. But I was only watching him silently.

He turned to the small stereo behind him, slipped in a tape and adjusted the volume. Um Kalthoum began singing one of her melancholy songs. A customer yelled at Jasim, begging him to turn the sound up. Some men were up on their feet, their eyes shut and their heads swaying.

I looked at Jasim, surprised. He was shorter than me but his shoulders were broader. As he softly swung his neck and head to the music of Um Kalthoum, his *ogal* fell slightly out of shape.

‘Since when do you listen to Um Kalthoum?’

He didn’t answer.

Instead he looked at the reflection in the mirror behind the bar. Our faces met. His deep voice was bouncing off the mirror, 'What a beauty you are, my dear Naser. I have watched you grow taller, your eyes swell into the size of oceans, your cheekbones rise, and ah, your neck ascend to the height of the sky.'

I followed Jasim into the kitchen and through the crowded corridor to his private room.

The room was full of the dreams and fantasies of the kind of life Jasim was after. Painted red, it had enough space for a single bed, a chair, a TV, a VCR and video cassettes piled on top of each other. The walls were lined with posters, photos and handwritten poetry.

He closed the door, then grabbed my hand and rested his head on my chest.

'Not a single beat,' he muttered. 'Maybe one day. Maybe?'

I didn't answer.

For a while we didn't say anything to each other. Then he gently directed my hand to his chest and placed it on top of his heart, and asked me, 'Can you feel?'

His voice trembled. 'If I were to put the whole earth on top of my chest, Naser, I would cause the greatest of earthquakes.'

He threw himself on his bed and rolled over to face the wall. He then rolled back and with his chin facing up, he looked into the cracked mirror on the ceiling. He sighed deep and long and said, 'Oh Naser, you looked beautiful when you lived in that mirror. You were free, sexy and sensual. It was your world. And what a world it was.'

He closed his eyes and said, 'Your mother's envelope is on top of the TV. Please leave and switch off the light.'

Outside the kitchen, I bumped into the new boy.

'Can you get me some mint tea?' I asked. I glanced down and saw the boxes full of perfume bottles. I helped myself to a few and went to find a table outside.

The cars were gliding down the hill and speeding along Al-Nuzla Street. I lit a cigarette and watched them.

The boy came out of the café.

'Here is your tea,' he said. He put the little tulip-shaped glass on the table next to me and poured the tea from the large pot.

'Naser?'

'Yes?'

'I've got something to tell you.'

I leaned closer and he whispered rapidly, 'I spent last night over at Fawwaz's house. His parents are not here. He told me the usual thing: "What we are doing is *haram*. But in this country it is like we are in the biggest prison in the world, and people in prison do things to each other they wouldn't otherwise do." He asked me to be his boy until he gets married. Anyway, the café will shut soon for prayer time and so he will take me on a date to the shopping mall.'

Not waiting for a response, the boy went inside. Not long after, he and Fawwaz came out of the café and walked down the street hand in hand.

When I was sixteen, and had been working in the café for about a year, I was taken to the shopping mall in central Jeddah by a man called Abu Imad, whom I nicknamed Mr Quiet. He was about forty years old. When we arrived at the mall, there were lots of men strolling across the hall, chatting and laughing, holding hands or arm in arm.

The air-conditioned shopping mall was built to a foreign design. Its five floors were full of shops that sold Western products. 'This shopping mall,' Jasim once told me, 'is like the glossiest of shopping malls you can find in Paris or London. You can buy all European and American brands of

electrical goods, designer shoes and clothes. You can even find Armani and Calvin Klein.'

Right outside the mall was Punishment Square. It was here that heads and hands were cut off and lovers were flogged, beheaded or stoned to death. This was the place where Faisal's father did his job.

Inside the mall, my companion bought us both a drink and we sat by the fountain. Two religious policemen strode past us. They were both holding sticks, and they were turning their heads left and right, calmly and deliberately.

'Look,' Mr Quiet said, 'they are searching for secret encounters between men and women.' Then he leaned closer to me and whispered, 'Only the other day I witnessed a scene where a young man and woman were caught by the religious police. Thanks to *Allah* you are a man. Otherwise, we would be heading towards that Jeep now and *Allah* only knows where to after that.'

The waiter and Fawwaz disappeared from view. My eyes panned to a woman in full burqa exiting a shoe shop just opposite Jasim's café. Just then the religious police Jeep approached slowly and parked outside the shoe shop, hiding the woman from view. It reminded me that I had been in this country for ten years, yet I had never talked to a girl or held a woman's hand.

The woman emerged again from the shadow of the Jeep, crossed and walked down the road. The Jeep remained parked with the religious policemen still inside it, no doubt observing the street from behind its shaded windows, making sure that Jeddah remained a world of black and white.

I drank my tea in a single gulp and opened the envelope. It contained all my recent letters to my mother and as I flicked through them I noticed how the black ink still sparkled. I felt the need to run, to run a long way from Jasim and the memories of his café.

I WAS TEN years old and my brother, Ibrahim, was three, when our uncle brought us to Jeddah from the refugee camp in Sudan. We had been living in the camp for five months. My uncle, the elder brother of my mother, worked as a chauffeur for a Saudi family in Jeddah. He had heard about us being in the camp because someone from our village had met him in a café where Eritreans meet and told him about us. The man had told my uncle where in the camp to find us.

When my uncle arrived and said he was here to take us with him to Saudi Arabia, I refused. I wanted to wait in the camp with my mother and stay as close as possible to her. My uncle argued that Jeddah was not so far away. 'You see, you will not be far from Eritrea, which is just opposite Jeddah, across the sea.'

He finally managed to change my mind when he said that Saudi Arabia was one of the richest places on earth and that I could earn mountains of money to send to my mother.

We were taken to Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, and from there we flew to Jeddah.

Our plane landed at Jeddah Airport, in the early evening just a few days before Ramadan, 1979. From the very start I fell in love with the city.

We took a taxi to our uncle's house. The roads were wide and well lit, and my eyes flicked from one building to another, from one street to the next. Back in the refugee camp, at this time of night, the moon and the stars would shine giving us just enough light to move around. But in Jeddah, there was no need for the moon or the stars. I peered out of the window and saw lamps that hung above

the street from tall posts. They were like goddesses aiming their generous light towards the city.

'Oh *ya Allah*, and the streets are so smooth. There are almost no bumps in the road,' I said to my uncle.

There were tall buildings on all sides, much higher than the one-storey houses I had seen in Khartoum. As we drove alongside the coast road, I hung out the car window and inhaled the breeze that smelt of fish and salt.

The taxi entered a tunnel that went deep in the ground. 'Uncle, we are going under the earth,' I said. 'Only dead people go there.' When we exited the tunnel, I cheered, 'We are still alive.' My uncle smiled and rubbed my head.

When the car stopped at some traffic lights, I looked across to a plaza where there was a huge sculpture of a bicycle. In my imagination, I could see someone riding it. I closed my eyes for a moment and saw two feet on the pedals, wearing red Italian-made shoes; slim legs in blue jeans; and long black hair falling back from a woman's face.

As the traffic lights turned green and the car engine roared into action, I saw her head tilt slightly and she looked at me. Then a wink. That was definitely Mother, I thought to myself. I held my brother's hand and lifted him from my uncle's lap. I pulled him closer to me and kissed him on the cheek. But he leaned his head back against my uncle's chest: he had fallen asleep.

'Ibrahim?' I urged him to wake up. 'Look, look.' I was distracted by the street with its large villas, trees, and beautiful cars in different types, colours and sizes. 'Ibrahim, look, look at these cars.' I pushed my head through the space in between the two front seats to take a better look. Then I retreated and whispered in Ibrahim's ear, 'We will have a car like that one day.'

As we continued driving, there was something that puzzled me. Alongside the men in their white *thobes*, there were figures in black which, under the street lamps, looked

like the men's shadows thrown against the white walls of the houses. They reminded me of the stories about invisible spirits my mother used to tell us, only here, you could actually see them. I knew that Saudi Arabia was a holy country and miracles could happen all the time here. But because I hadn't seen any women in the street, I had worked out who these figures in black were.

'Uncle, can I ask you a question?'

'Yes, son,' he replied.

'That's a woman, isn't it?'

'What?'

'There, look, there.' I pointed to the shadows.

My uncle smiled and said, 'Yes. Oh, blessed childhood ignorance.'

'Why are they covered so much? It is not cold here.'

'The women are wearing *abayas*.'

'Uncle?'

'Yes.'

'Don't they get hot dressed like that? How do they breathe?'

'It's *Allah's* request. But He, the Greatest, will reward them in heaven, *inshaAllah*.'

'So, will the girls in my school look like this too?'

'You will be going to a boys' school. The girls have their own school.'

I thought back to the small school in the refugee camp. All my friends there were girls. In fact the boys would beat me up because they were jealous whenever we played the wedding game because all the girls would choose me. I told my uncle the story.

'Oh *ya Allah* we ask your forgiveness. I will have hard work on my hands with this one. Listen, Naser, it is bad for boys and girls to mix.'

'Why?'

'It's *haram*, son.'

'Why is it *haram*?'

'Grant me your patience, *ya Allah*. Because -' He stopped and looked away. After a few seconds, he added, 'Because we are like fire and oil, and if the two of us come together, there will be a big flame and thus hell on this earth and in the afterlife. So you see, son, *Allah* is trying to protect us for our own good. OK?'

'OK,' I said, leaning against the window, not understanding a thing.

'Here we are,' my uncle said, as the taxi parked next to a tall white building. 'This area is called Al-Nuzla.'

It had only been a few days since we left our tent in the refugee camp. But it already seemed as though we were on a different planet.

My uncle opened the front door. When I saw the TV, the large black sofa with red stripes, the thick blue carpet, I turned to my uncle, my eyes wide. I kissed his hand and cried, saying, 'Thank you, Uncle, for bringing us to this beautiful city.'

But then I imagined my mother all on her own having to hide under her bed from the bombs, like we used to do whenever the fighter planes came over our village at night. 'Please *ya Allah* help her stay safe,' I prayed silently, vowing at the same time that I would study and work hard to bring her and Semira to safety.

*

But that night, as I ran away from Jasim's café, Jeddah felt different. It didn't feel like the same place any more.

In the old days, when the place was only an arid landscape on the fringe of the desert, the inhabitants had called the place Jeddah, the implication being that *Jaddah Hawwa*, the mother of humankind, was buried in their midst. But that night I thought this was nothing but myth-making.

I remember thinking how the modern city planners had continued with their ancestors' habit of burdening the city with an oversized name. They started calling Jeddah 'The Bride of the Red Sea'. And they dressed her accordingly with the most expensive things. There were bronze sculptures decorating every major street; the bride glowed with jewellery. There were the elegant bridges that cut across the city from all directions, like henna drawings on a bride's hands. And there were the tree-lined avenues that were the petals sprinkled at the feet of the bride.

But despite all this, I thought to myself, Jeddah couldn't be known as the Bride of the Red Sea. It lacked the overwhelming happiness of a woman about to be married. In Jeddah there were too many people whose days and nights merged into one long journey of sadness. I was one of them.

But back then I didn't know that my true love was waiting for me in the folds of Jeddah's wedding dress.

IT WAS ALMOST 8.30 when I got home from Jasim's café. I had arranged to meet my friend Yahya later. He was about to leave for a camping holiday in the mountains of Abha and we decided to spend his last night in Jeddah at our regular place, the Pleasure Palace.

I had some time before our meeting so I decided to do some reading. I sat at my little desk facing Jasim's sketch of my mother. When Jasim, who was trained as an artist agreed to draw a portrait, he sat in front of me with a large blank paper and a tin of drawing pencils. As best I could, I described every feature of the beautiful face I had missed so much.

I told Jasim that she loved the colour red so he framed the drawing in flames, which made her look like a speeding star. I never tired of looking at this picture.

As I was about to take out my book from the drawer, I noticed my diary. I put the book aside and took it out.

I opened one of the perfume bottles I had brought back from Jasim's café and sat on the floor. I put the diary next to me and took in a mouthful, holding it in my mouth for a while before I swallowed it. The sparkles on my tongue engulfed the back of my throat and my nose. I could smell the chemical in my nose, and my lips and tongue felt as if they were burning slightly. I grasped my nose and squeezed it tightly in an attempt to control the sensation. Slowly, I started feeling dizzy as I drank more of the alcohol.

*

Ever since I arrived in Saudi, I had been writing in my diary. As Mr Quiet once said, 'I feel you never want to say anything because you are waiting for a special person. Someone who will understand the trapped mutterings

inside your chest. Until you find that person, you should write it all down. Diaries are made for people like you.'

It's true to say that I had no woman to share my life with, no woman to make plans with. In Jeddah there was only the unrelenting drudgery of a world full of men and the men who controlled them. My diary was a link to my hopes, the keeper of my secrets, a sacred place where my heart beat with a soft, hopeful murmur.

I opened it at a random page. The entry said, 'Spring, Saturday, 21st April, 1984.' I took another sip of the perfume and my mind travelled back to that day, when I was fifteen.

That Saturday I woke as usual at six o'clock and was getting ready to go to school when my uncle came into our room. My uncle was a religious man and a conformist who hated my mother. But he was also the only person in the world who cared enough to help my brother and me - still, living with him was only slightly better than our days in a tent in the camp.

'Is Ibrahim taking a shower?' he asked me.

'Yes,' I replied, with some weariness.

'You're not going to school today,' he said. I didn't know how to respond to the news. On the one hand, I hated school and was about to jump with happiness at the thought of spending a day away from lessons. But at the same time, it was too good to be true. My uncle hit me whenever I suggested to him that I would rather miss school than sit through some classes which taught me to hate others who didn't have the same religion or the same interpretation of Islam.

I was far more suspicious than joyous, and I asked him, 'Why's that? What's the special occasion?'

'Because -' He was interrupted by my little brother barging into the room, washed and dressed and looking

just like a good Saudi boy. He already looked a lot older than his eight years.

'Ibrahim, wait outside. I am talking to Naser now.'

'OK, Uncle,' Ibrahim said, the good little soldier. As he turned to leave, he looked at me and shook his head as if to say: 'And what have you done now?'

Uncle continued, 'I want you to take our *iqamas* to our *kafeel*, the Blessed Bader Ibn Abd-Allah. He asked that you bring it yourself. We need to renew our residency permits.'

I had long known that every foreigner in Saudi Arabia has to have a *kafeel* - a Saudi man sponsoring their stay in the Kingdom in return for an annual payment. But it only became clear to me that day that the *kafeel* therefore has full control over the lives of those he sponsors. I found this out when I said to my uncle, 'Why don't you go? You always do it.' I was about to storm out with my schoolbag, when he pulled me by my arm. He began to sweat.

He let go of my arm and said, 'Please don't be stubborn, Naser. We have to obey our *kafeel* and do as he asks. I need you to renew our residency permits, please. He asked for you to go. If we don't do as he says he will be angry and that will be the end for us in this country. Please, Naser. I am begging you.'

I hesitated. He had never begged me like that before. My poor uncle, burdened with the sons of a sister he despised, working as a migrant in this rich country, yet barely able to make ends meet.

But then I thought to myself: Why am I resisting? When I come back, I will have the rest of the day to myself.

'OK,' I said to my uncle. 'I'll go.'

He handed me the *iqamas*.

'What about the money?' I asked him.

'Sorry?'

'The two thousand riyals that I need to pay him when we renew our *iqamas*.'