MY NAME IS SALMA

FADIA FAQIR

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

When Salma becomes pregnant before marriage in her small village in the Levant, she is swept into prison for her own protection and her new-born baby is snatched away.

As an asylum-seeker in the middle of the most English of towns, Exeter, she rebuilds her life and settles down with an Englishman. But deep in her heart the cries of her baby daughter still echo. She decides to go back to her village to find her.It is a journey that will change everything – and nothing.

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Ramesh, Gul and Harry, absent, present friends, this one is for you

Where the River Meets the Sea

THE WHITE SHEEP dotted the green hills like teased wool and the lights of the solitary mill floated on the calm surface of the River Exe. It was a new day, but the dewy greenness of the hills, the whiteness of the sheep, the greyness of the skies carried me to my distant past, to a small mud village tucked away between the deserted hills, to Hima, to silver-green olive groves gleaming in the morning light. I used to be a shepherdess, who under a barefaced sun guided her goats to the scarce green patches with her reed pipe. The village of Hima at this time of year would be teeming with camels, horses, cows, dogs, cats, butterflies and honeybees. Horses raced, their hoofs releasing clouds of dust on the plain. It was springtime, and the season of engagements had already begun. Wedding celebrations would be held just after the harvest. I was one of the girls of the village who were ripe and ready to be plucked. ‘Mother, I saw the moon at night,’ I prayed for my black and brown goats, ‘up there in the sky. Forgive me, Allah, for I have sinned. The heat of passion had made me bend.’

I stuck a liner to my pants, pulled them up my shaved and oiled legs and realized that I was free at last. Gone were the days when I used to chase the hens around in wide pantaloons and loose flowery dresses in the bright colours of my village: red to be noticed, black for anger, green for spring and bright orange for the hot sun. If this small glass bottle were full of snake venom I would drink it in one go. I dabbed some perfume behind my ears and on my wrists, took a deep breath, tossed my no longer braided and veiled hair on my shoulders, pulled my tummy in, straightened my

posture and walked out of Swan Cottage, which was the name Liz had chosen for her semi-detached house. I filled my chest with the clean morning air, inflating my ribs until my back muscles were taut and raw. I could see shreds of blue sky between the luminous white clouds that stretched out in different shapes: the mane of a horse, a small foot, a tiny, wrinkled hand like a tender vine leaf that has just burst open.

The cathedral in the distance looked dark and small. The feeble English sun was trying hard to melt away the clouds. I walked past the student residences, past the large white houses with neat gardens and barking dogs, past HM Prison. I looked at the high walls, the coiled barbed wire, the small barred windows, and realized that this time I was on the wrong side of the black iron gate despite my dark deeds and my shameful past. I was free, walking on the pavement like an innocent person. My face was black as if covered with soot, my hands were black and I had smeared the foreheads of my family with tar. A thick, dark, sticky liquid dripped from the iron railing I was holding all the way to the walkway. I shook my head trying to chase away the foul smell and looked towards the Exe. Some seagulls were flapping their wings, encircling their prey then diving into the water for the final kill. My number was up a long time ago, but for some reason I was living on borrowed time.

My nose followed the perfume of flowers in bloom, but the smell of the honeysuckle travelling down the hill was suddenly overpowered by the smell of grease, which was the first indication that Peter’s Plaice, the fish-and-chip shop on the corner of the Clock Tower, was too far. I sniffed the air. A group of young students stood there shouting, ‘Time is running out for education.’

‘Time is running out,’ I repeated.

A few years ago, I had tasted my first fish and chips, but my mountainous Arab stomach could not digest the fat, which floated in my tummy for days. Salma resisted, but

Sally must adapt. I kept looking up *adapt* in the *Oxford English Dictionary: Adapt: fit, adjust, change*. Apparently in England the police stop you in the street and check your papers and sense of belonging regularly. An immigration officer might decide to use my ability to digest fish as a test for my loyalty to the Queen. I chewed on the parts that were still frozen and said to the young man who bought them for me, with tears in my eyes, '*Yumma!* It delicious!'

'Yummy!' he said rebuking me.

In Hima my mother used to rebuke me all the time. Salma, did you feed the cows? Did you clean the barn? Why didn't you milk the goats? *Yumma*, I did. Every God-given morning I stuck the end of my embroidered peasant dress in my wide orange pantaloons and ran to the fields. I held the golden stems of wheat in one hand and the sickle with the other and hit as hard as I could. All that holding of dry maize and wheat chipped my hands and grime lined my fingernails. Rough, dirty hands, I had. That was before I ran to freedom. Now I stood shaking my head and rubbing the big fake yellow stone on my ring with my smooth hands, which were always covered with cocoa butter, and sighed. Gone were the days when I was a farmer, a shepherdess, a peasant girl. I am now a seamstress, an assistant tailor in a shop in Exeter, which a few years ago was voted the most beautiful city in Britain. Now Salma the dark black iris of Hima must try to turn into a Sally, an English rose, white, confident, with an elegant English accent, and a pony.

Liz, Elizabeth, Queen Elizabeth I, Her Highness, my landlady was still asleep. The smell of cheap wine clung to everything: the sofa, the armchairs, the kitchen table and chairs, the curtains and the musty carpets. When I first met Liz she looked tall in her navy jumper, blue shirt, cream riding breeches and flat, black leather boots. Her long, straight grey hair was gathered neatly in a ponytail and the

puffiness of her eyes was concealed with compact powder. She stood erect as if inspecting her guards. I was looking for a room to rent. After walking all the way to Cowley I was able to find King Edward Street. I knocked gently on the door of Swan Cottage. When she opened the door I was wet and trembling in my thin shirt and fleece. It was my first attempt to get out of the hostel into the outside world. I tried to say good morning, but I could not control my quivering chin. I stood there thin and dark, shifting my weight from one foot to another, gazing at the tip of my shoes until I was finally able to say, 'The sun shining,' although it was pouring with rain. She asked me to come in.

When I got back Liz was snoring so I sneaked into the bathroom, shut and bolted the door. The sound of a gate being shut, footsteps, and walking on cold paving stones looking and looking for her. The tub was full so I added a few drops of bath oil to the hot water. The smell of sage filled the small bathroom and reminded me of the long afternoons in Hima, when we used to drink sage tea and spin and weave. Instead of walking up the mountains looking for sage bushes, picking the soft green leaves, washing them then drying them, there they were: cut, squeezed and stored into little dark blue bottles for ma lady's convenience. With a lubricated razor, I shaved my legs and underarms carefully. Before your wedding night they spread a paste of boiled sugar and lemon between your legs and yank away the hair. My grandmother Shahla said, 'When they finished with me I was covered with bruises, but as smooth and hairless as a nine-year-old girl. Your grandfather preferred it clean. I looked so pure and innocent, he said.' The painful and sticky sugaring belonged to the past, together with marriage, my black Bedouin madraqa robe, and silver money hats, all shelved there at the end of the horizon, overseas. Foam on the legs, then shave – puff – no hair. Nice and easy and

washes away instantly like love in this new country, like love in the old country.

I got out of the bath and cleaned the tub with hot water, making sure that every black hair was sliding down the drain. Liz did not like to see any black hair around the house, but my hair was falling everywhere: in the sink, bath, washbasin, on the carpet, on bed linen, on the back of the armchair, which I used to sit in when Liz was out of the house. ‘You have been sitting in my chair. Look! Your dark hair is everywhere.’ A thin olive-skinned fractured reflection, with big brown eyes, a crooked nose and long dark thick frizzy hair, looked back at me in the broken mirror. If I did not know me I would have said that I was Salma, whole and healthy. ‘I called you Salma because you are healthy, pure and clean. Your name means the woman with the soft hands and feet, so may you live in luxury for the rest of your life. Salma, my little chick, my heart, may God keep you safe and sound wherever you go, darling!’ If I did not know me I would have said that I was Salma, but my back was bent and my head was held low. I wrapped my trembling body with the warm towel and sniffed the air.

‘Your breasts are like melons, cover them up!’ my father haj Ibrahim said.

‘Your tuft of wool is red,’ my mother said, ‘you are impulsive.’

My brother Mahmoud kept an eye on me while brushing his horse; I started hunching my back to hide my breasts, which were the first thing Hamdan had noticed about me. When I first met him I was walking along the stream looking for bugloss which my mother brewed and drank to ease her backache. I touched the clear water with my fingers, then I saw Hamdan: a reflection of a dark face, white teeth and dark curly hair covered with a chequered red-and-white headdress. I fell in love instantly when I saw the reflection of his shoulders in the water. When I started watering the

vegetable beds three times a day and fondling the horse my mother shouted, ‘Salma, you stupid child, are you in love?’ I fixed the white scarf on my head, pulled my loose pantaloons up and nodded.

The film star, in her short tight skirt and long black leather boots which went up her thighs, was still holding her Prince Charming under the glass display of the bus stop by the White Hare, where they played hard rock music for skinheads all the time. Love in this country came wrapped in chocolate boxes, in bottles of champagne, in free drinks. It came in pubs, buses and discos, even on British Rail with the wings of its ever-flying red eagle. Savage love, like the one I used to have for Hamdan, was now a prisoner of silver screens. It rarely happened in real life. You saw it in old black-and-white films shown on Sunday afternoons, and you heard it in the trembling voices: ‘Oh! Don’t go. Please don’t leave me.’ The flickering screen, the sighs, the white handkerchief, the sobs, ‘I love you the length of the sea and sky, the height of the Sheikh Mountain and the width of the Sahara.’

My black Bedouin madraqa, embroidered with threads so colourful they would make your eyes water, was tucked away, like my past, in the suitcase on top of the wardrobe. The Indian corner shop sold ethnic clothes, fabrics, jewellery and rugs. The red elephant above the main door carried a howdah on its back. Through the shop window two Indian goddesses made of carved wood with hands all over the place were always looking at the passers-by. The embroidered silk was so colourful, bright and uplifting it took you all the way to the Taj Mahal. The shop was full of Englishwomen in their flowery dresses and missionary sandals, fingering the cascading Indian fabrics. ‘When in India, sitting under frilled parasols, they used to watch their men in white playing cricket on the lawn, while Indian

waiters ran around serving cold sherbet.’ My Pakistani friend Parvin blew her fringe off her face and added, ‘What is left of the Empire are those little islands of nostalgia.’

One afternoon while I was still in the backpackers’ hostel lying in an ex-army bed I heard the forceful knock of the porter on the door. I looked around me: the curtains were drawn and my shoes, trousers, shirt and underwear were scattered on the dirty floor. I was a hedgehog hiding in dark tunnels exhaling and inhaling the stale air.

Using his master key, the porter opened the door and let in a short, thin, dark young woman. I covered my body and half of my face with the grey sheets.

When she looked at me she could only see the slit of my eyes and a white veil so she turned to him. ‘Where does she come from?’

‘Somewhere in the Middle East. Fucking A-rabic! She rode a camel all the way from Arabia to this dump in Exeter,’ he said and laughed.

‘I am not going to share the room with an Arab,’ she spat.

I pretended that I was asleep and that I could not hear a word.

‘This is the only decent hostel in Exeter. It’s the only empty bed we have, Miss P-a-r-a-f-f-i-n,’ he said carefully.

‘Parvin,’ she screamed.

‘Yes, miss,’ he said.

‘She is also covered with sores. It could be contagious!’

‘It is not serious. It’s the only bed we have, miss.’

‘All right! All right!’ She put her rucksack on the floor and sat on it, looked around then said, ‘What a dump!’

I looked at her straight hair and long fringe and turned in my bed. The smell of hurt and broken promises filled the brightly lit room.

She was emerald, turquoise encased in silver, Indian silk cascading down from rolls, a pearl in her bed, pomegranate,

fresh coffee beans ground in an ornate sandalwood pestle and mortar, honey and spicy ghee wrapped in freshly baked bread, pure perfume sealed in blue jars, rough diamonds, a dew-covered plain in the vast flat open green valley, a sea teal at the edges and azure in the centre, my grandmother's Ottoman gold coins strung together by a black cord, my mother's wedding silver money hat, a full moon hidden behind translucent clouds.

That evening I had a shower, covered my scabs with cream, washed my dirty clothes and cleaned the room, while Parvin was lying in bed watching me. I tried to make the room look cheerful, but with two ex-army beds, a chest of drawers, an old wardrobe and a dirty grey carpet it was impossible. When I pushed the window open Parvin turned around and went to sleep. I switched on the bedside lamp and began inspecting local papers for jobs. *A sales girl required. Presentable with good command of English* . . . I looked up 'presentable' and 'command' in the dictionary. I was neither presentable nor able to speak English well. Nothing that would suit a woman like me with no looks, no education, no experience and no letters of recommendation. I was also ill, very ill. I took my reed pipe out and began blowing until the soft hoarse sound filled the room, the city, and travelled overseas all the way to my mother's ears. Parvin looked up then went back to sleep.

I found myself standing in front of the shop that sells baby clothes, something I am not allowed to do under any circumstances. The doctor said, 'You have to cut your ties with the past, you are here now so try to get on with it.' I pulled my foot back, put the other foot behind it and made myself walk away, but not before I had a glimpse of a white satin and chiffon dress. A line of pearls was stitched carefully above each frill. It looked like a luminous white

cloud, like dawn; the pearls shone like tears of joy. It was a promise of a reunion, a return. That white dress was home.

Liz was confused when I moved in with her. Was I a lodger, a confidante or a servant? Her state of mind altered according to the amount of alcohol she had consumed. She regulated my access to the kitchen to half an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening and she would get upset if I washed the wooden cutlery and crockery. ‘I have coated them with olive oil and I would like it to stay to protect the wood, thank you very much. Look what you’ve done!’ What she did not know was that as soon as I arrived in her dirty house I wanted to boil some water, put it in a bucket, add some washing-up liquid and walk around scrubbing clean every glass, every piece of china, every utensil. I also wanted to wash the floor, the walls, the ceiling and above all the toilet seat, which had some dry excrement stuck to the wood. I was a goddamn Muslim and had to be pure and clean. My bum was not supposed to have any contact with urine, which was *najas*: impure, so I either pulled the toilet seat up and squatted, but made sure not to have any contact with the toilet, which was a great balancing act, or washed my lower part in the tub with freezing water because hot water was only available between seven and eight in the morning on weekdays. So most days I would walk to work, my private parts frozen, looking for the warm mist of human breath.

Sadiq, the owner of Omar Khayyam off-licence across the road, was dark, thin and tall, with supple fingers. Before he started talking he would jerk his chin sideways as if looking for words, then say, ‘Excellent also.’ He prayed five times a day. Whenever I walked past his shop his mat would be spread on the floor and he would be standing, hands on tummy, eyes closed, muttering verses from the Qur’an. My father haj Ibrahim did not pray regularly. The mat was out

whenever a goat was stolen or we were having a long spell of drought. One evening while I was sitting in his lap, stroking his beard, he told me that last winter they had no rain whatsoever, not a single drop, so they asked all the men of the village to gather together in a field to do the Rain Prayer. They all knelt in unison before their maker and pleaded with Him to send in the rain. Before they finished the skies opened and the rain pelted down. That afternoon, cold and soaking wet, they marched through the village repeating, 'There is no God but Allah, and no prophet but Muhammad.' When he finished talking he looked at me with his dark eyes, ran his flaky hand over my head then kissed my forehead. 'You are lucky to be born Muslim,' he said, 'because your final abode is paradise. You will sit there in a cloud of perfume drinking milk and honey.'

He smelt of Musk Gazelle, which he used to keep in a hairy leather pod. 'Praise be to Allah,' I said and settled in his lap to soak up his warmth and feel his ribs rising and falling against me.

A cloud of perfume. The chemists promised that their dye would permanently cover grey hair, their body lotions would turn skin to smooth silk and their facial creams would iron out any wrinkles. Englishwomen were promised they would look 'ten years younger'. I always went to the most expensive counter and tried eye-shadows, eye-liners, creams and perfumes on my face and hands. 'Do you have a sample of this perfume?' I was pointing at an expensive perfume called Beautiful. The heavily made-up sales girl fluttered her eyelashes, which were caked with mascara, and looked suspiciously at me. She'd made up her mind. I was not the type of woman who would buy her new exclusive summer range. 'No, we don't do samples for this perfume,' she said dismissively. The sample-size bottles shone on the glass shelf under the spotlights like crystal. I looked down at my worn-out walking shoes and bit my

tongue. You know, if I were her I would have thrown me out of the shop, a woman like me, trash. My tribe had raided her country seeking cheap booty. I would have got me arrested if I were her.

Noura was holding a small dark bottle full of green liquid which looked like poison under the cold moonlight. She pulled the cork, tilted the bottle and let one drop fall on the back of my hand. The cold sticky liquid spread on my skin and then was absorbed. It had a strong smell, as if I were sitting in a big farm where the orange, lemon, almond, apple and pomegranate trees had flowered at the same time. I sniffed the back of my hand. She was weaving her long shiny black hair into a braid, her large luminous brown eyes fixed on the iron bars of the small high window. 'We were given this free by the old man who runs the brothel, to massage our customers with. Satisfied customers used to call our barn "the house of perfume"; dissatisfied ones used to call it "the house of poison".' She bit her generous outward-tilting lower lip, rubbed her pointed nose, ran her forefingers on her perfect arched eyebrows and said, 'I used to like the density of it, the fact that it might suffocate you, it might kill you at any moment.' She held my hand, sniffed the perfume and said, 'All I want now is to be able to forgive.'

My dearest friend, Noura,

Forgive me for writing to you all these letters. You probably cry when you see another letter from me. But do you receive my letters? Is the address complete? I stand in this new country alone wondering about the final destination of migrating birds. Wondering about us, why are we here and what is it all about? What is it, Noura? A heart made slightly larger than the ribcage or too small to handle life? A mother who allowed you to swim in the spring? A tuft of wool dyed crimson rather than green, the colour of the village? Why am I still alive and what brought me here?

With love and gratitude,
Salma

I grabbed the tester bottle and sprayed myself abundantly under the mascaraed disapproving look of the sales girl. In a cloud of perfume I walked back to St Paul's, the place for the 'upworldly riff-raff', and sat down on one of the white chairs of the pavement café. The Algerian waiter, who pretended to be French, came running and asked me, 'What you like drink, madam?'

'Some water *y'ayshak*: may your life be long.'

He smiled, pretending not to understand the Arabic, and disappeared. After all, he was supposed to be Pierre, whose grandfather had served in the French army. Parvin told me that North Africans were known for forging army documents to gain entry into fortress Europe.

'What is your address?' the immigration officer had asked.

I did not understand him so I kept pulling the end of my headscarf.

'Where will you live?'

'Heengland, think,' I said.

'Where in England?' he asked patiently.

'The river meet sea,' which was the way Little Sister Asher had described Southampton to me.

'Oh! For God's sake!' he said.

'Yes, for God sake!'

Exeter was famous for its cream tea. When you saw a pot of tea, scones, some jam and clotted cream on a table then the person eating them was bound to be a local. Tourists and foreigners could not handle the richness of the cream so they ordered espresso or cappuccino instead. Cream tea I could not stomach; cream tea I did not deserve. If you had crossed lands and seas looking for answers, looking for a daughter, looking for God you end up drinking bitter coffee out of a small cup. It was my shopping day, I reminded myself. It was the most enjoyable day of the week, when I would picture myself in Parisian make-up, expensive hairstyles and a glamorous dress drinking mineral water and

reading *Marie Claire* in a seaside café. It took me ages to twist my tongue and pronounce ‘Marie Claire’ with a faint French accent. My broad Bedouin Arabic had to be hidden over there at the end of the horizon. I used to say to Hamdan, ‘Your love in my heart is kicking and shoving like a captured mule.’ He used to hug me and say, ‘Love me!’ meaning squeeze me tighter, pull me closer.

I sat, back straight, tummy flat and sipped my sugarless coffee to the very end. Here things were different. You measured everything in tiny spoons. If you fancied somebody, you never mentioned mules, you just whispered over coffee or fizzy mineral water with thin slices of lemon, ‘Would you like a cup of coffee?’

I offered coffee to everyone: immigration officers, policemen, the milkman, the postman, sales girls. My tent was open and coffee with cardamom was being brewed all day, its aroma calling friends and neighbours. One morning I opened the door for the postman to deliver a parcel for Liz. Instead of Jack, a young man with short dark hair, big blue eyes and sticking-out ears stood there. It was frosty that morning so after I signed my name, Sally Asher this time, I asked him whether he wanted a hot cup of coffee.

‘Are you sure?’ he asked.

‘Yes, must be cold out there,’ I said.

He said that he would come back for it at six o’clock in the evening. I wiped the coffee table clean and bought some English tea biscuits and put them on a plate. He arrived at six on the dot, but I did not recognize him. His dark hair was swept back with gel, his shirt was bright and clean, his mouth smiling, and he held my hand a bit longer than he should. I asked him to come in and directed him to the sitting room and brought the coffee and biscuits on a tray. He had a sip of his coffee and then said, ‘Why are you sitting there? Come sit next to me on the sofa!’

‘I am fine,’ I said and smiled. He was my first guest.

He got up, stood in front of me, placed his fingers under my chin and tilted my face up towards him.

I jumped up and said, ‘No.’

‘What do you mean “no”? You asked me to come.’

‘No, sorry,’ I said, hugging myself.

‘What do you mean sorry?’

My lips were trembling when I said, ‘More biscuits?’

He pulled his shirt down, pushed his hair back, rubbed his nose then walked out of the room. He opened the front door while shouting something that sounded like ‘Coke tea man,’ then left, slamming the door behind him. Maybe I should have served him Coke. Liz would be home soon so I got up and with trembling fingers I began chasing biscuit crumbs and stray dark hairs.

Hamdan and I had been playing hide and seek for weeks now. His mother complained to my mother over morning coffee that her young son seemed to be revolving around himself like a well-mule. My mother sipped her coffee and said, ‘Brew him some camomile.’ I was lying on the grass under the fig tree, my hair spread like a halo around my head, blowing my heart’s desires into my reed pipe when Hamdan walked into my view. I stopped and looked at the praying expression on his face. Sunlight flickered through the leaves, the smell of jasmine filled the evening air, and I could hear the barking of shepherds’ dogs coming home. I closed my eyes, bit my lower lip and held my breath. He ran his fingers through my hair, tightened his fist and walked away to come back later and claim what was his already, releasing me and imprisoning me for the rest of my life.

‘AMERICAN MOTHER PAYS GUNMAN TO KIDNAP HER DAUGHTER’. I put the newspaper down and had another glance at the dark Italian sitting alone sipping his espresso. Hamdan, but instead of the wide white robe, he was wearing a white T-shirt with a sophisticated pattern and blue jeans. He smiled to me and I

smiled back. Italy is fine, I thought, while trying to decode the latest poll in the paper. Conservatives behind. Labour five per cent lead. I tried to understand the politics of this country.

‘You cannot go on being an ignorant Bedouin,’ Parvin said. ‘You have to learn the rules of the game, damn it.’

But I kept my head down, hopes up and supported victors: that was what my immigrant *A–Z* guide advised. My knowledge of British politics began and ended with *Spitting Image*, where I couldn’t tell which dummy was who in real life. It was a rare occasion when I was watching television with Liz.

‘Was that the shadow Chancellor?’ I asked Liz.

‘No, the Prime Minister. The Chancellor does not spit,’ she answered and looked at the television screen, not wanting to be interrupted.

‘Who are these puppets?’ I asked.

‘Foreigners! Aliens like you,’ she said and smiled.

‘Like me?’ I asked.

‘Yes, illegal immigrants,’ she said.

‘I no illegal,’ I said, suddenly losing my English.

‘Yes, you are. You must be,’ she said.

‘Would you like a cuppa?’ I asked, imitating my friend Gwen and trying to change the subject.

‘No, thank you,’ she said, sounding more annoyed now. She did not like Gwen and her Welsh influence on me. ‘A cuppa? Honestly!’ she said, shaking her head.

Liz was right, I was scum.

Whenever I used to climb Rim, the highest mountain in Hima, with my goats, Hamdan would be following me discreetly, leaping behind rocks and shrubs. His shoulders wide, his brown cloak fluttering in the air, his white-and-red-chequered headdress hiding some of his curly thick dark hair, he would be running trying to catch up with me. One day it was so hot the haze of the heat descended on our

valley. Playing my pipe I was guiding the goats to the Long Well. I filled the trough with cold water and instantly my goats began drinking. I pricked up my ears listening for the neighs of Mahmoud's horse. Not a whisper. I dropped the rubber bucket in the well again and heard it hitting the cold water, splitting it open then sinking deep. I screamed with excitement knowing that the brown eyes of Hamdan were watching me, his ears tuned to my cries. Behind the bushes Hamdan had gone quiet when I poured the contents of the bucket over my head. While washing my body, I sang one of my grandma Shahla's old songs. '*Hala hala biik ya walla, hey ya halili ya wala*: welcome, welcome, oh boy! Hey! My love! Oh boy! Welcome my soulmate! Welcome my husband-to-be.' When her husband took on a second wife my grandmother died of heartbreak. A few months later my grandfather died too.

It was getting dark and the pavement café was about to shut down for the day; no encounters after five. At five o'clock the English normally rush back home to their cats and dogs and empty castles. I could see them in their small kitchens sticking the frozen chicken nuggets in the oven and frying frozen potato chips. In the early evening the city belonged to us, the homeless, drug addicts, alcoholics and immigrants, to those who were either without a family or were trying to blot out their history. In this space between five and seven we would spread and conquer like moss that grows between the cracks in the pavement. I sipped the dregs and put the small espresso cup in the saucer.

'You know, Salma, we are like shingles. Invisible, snakelike. It slides around your body and suddenly erupts on your skin and then sting, sting,' Parvin said and laughed.

I was lying on the ground when Hamdan walked through the vines and stood still above me. I was not hungry, but all the same I picked some grapes and began stuffing them in my

mouth. When I looked up, his silhouette was squatting right in front of me. I held my breasts with both hands. An intake of breath was followed by a brisk kiss on my lips. The cool dusk air was whirling in my wide pantaloons, reminding me of the code of honour in our village. No. ‘Have you gone mad? Do not be impulsive!’ I could hear my mother shout in my ears. No. ‘They will shoot you between the eyes.’ Yes. No. No. No. I pushed him away. ‘You will be full of regret later, oh beautiful,’ he said, pulled a hair from his dark moustache and walked away. When his back disappeared between the vines I began shaking. The sun had set and it was getting cold. I wrapped my mother’s shawl around me and walked back home.

The rooftops and glass windows of the red-brick buildings picked up the glow of the setting sun and sent it back golden and fading. I walked to the cathedral close, where among the pigeons and hymns the dark-haired man might feel comfortable to approach me. He might be Arab. A congregation of priests crossed the lawn and entered the cathedral. They looked bizarre in their long black robes and white collars. I could hear the doors of the dorms being shut. The turquoise silver necklace Sister Françoise had given me was in the Chinese satin box.

Pointing at me, the dark-haired man said, ‘Hi?’

I looked behind my back to see if I was being watched. If my brother Mahmoud sees me talking to strange men he will tie each leg to a different horse and then get them to run in different directions. He was nowhere to be seen. I stuck my feet firmly on the ground to stop them from walking away and smiled. Here in this new country, only men spoke to me.

The Sisters would be bolting the heavy gates of the convent and the sound would echo in the hollow space inside. I would be running around barefoot on the cold cobbled floor looking for her.

‘I am David. Call me Dave.’

‘Sally,’ I answered, using my English name and enjoying the sound of a human voice.

‘Will you have a cup of coffee with me?’ he said in a strong Devon accent.

‘Yes,’ I answered folding my newspaper and with it my hopes of meeting an Arab here, who would report me to the police or kill me instantly.

We walked down the road towards a shop that sells ethnic artefacts and doubles up as a café. A man with a ‘Can’t Pay Won’t Pay’ placard was shouting abuse at passers-by. David shielded me with his left arm and guided me through the doors. He insisted on paying, so I treated myself to a glass of fresh orange juice and a bottle of sparkling water. David ordered cream tea in a café that tries hard to sell itself as a trendy jazz club.

‘Do you live in Exeter?’ he said.

‘Yes,’ I said while looking at the handsome young waiter.

‘I work in a health club,’ he said.

‘Oh! How interesting!’ I said, trying to imitate the accent of the Queen. Liz, my landlady, would be proud of me.

‘Where do you come from?’ he asked.

If I told him that I was a Muslim Bedouin Arab woman from the desert on the run he would spit out his tea. ‘I am originally Spanish,’ I lied.

‘I have visited Spain many times. Where in Spain?’

‘Granada,’ I said. At school we were taught so much about the glories of Muslim Spain and the Moors in Granada.

Watching darkness descend layer upon layer through the French window suddenly I got really tired. I could not carry this through. It had to be the look on David’s face, full of hope and fascination. Salma ate the grapes, angered the tribe and paid a heavy price. I was too fragile for closeness, my skin was still tender and bruised. If I were him I wouldn’t give me a second glance. The stupid plants were getting larger and larger, turning the café into a greenhouse. I could

hear the clinking of cutlery downstairs and the thudding of chairs being stacked up on tables. The waitresses were getting impatient. I could not carry this through. I was not the granddaughter of my grandmother Shahla, who was made of a different metal altogether, who was shameless and fearless.

Shahla, my grandmother, used to weave her long thin white hair into braids and say, ‘Follow your heart always, daughter of mine.’ Her marriage was a love match. She belonged to the ferocious Udayy tribe and he belonged to the Fursan tribe, which was constantly at war with hers. He saw her by the spring one morning filling her clay jar with water and he felt a tremor run down his spine to the small of his back. ‘Good morning, young gazelle,’ he shouted from the distance, afraid to cross to Shahla’s tribe’s territory. From the way he had arranged his kufiyya tilting to the right and covering his right eye she realized that he belonged to the Fursan tribe. He began waiting for her early in the morning when the wheat sheaves sparkled with dew under the morning sun. Shahla looked at his wide shoulders, his dark thick moustache, his long strong dark hair woven into two braids and decided that she had to go to the well every morning to make sure that their horses and camels would never go thirsty. It was really early one morning when his silhouette shouted at her, ‘Tonight I will come to kidnap you. Prepare yourself!’ She shielded her eyes and looked at his outline in the distance. He stood tall, dark and awesome, blocking the sunlight. Their *bait al-sha’ar* was four tents made of thin goats’ hair so she chose to sleep in the guests’ tent in order not to disturb her mother when he arrived. Her mother’s mattress was positioned across the entrance to the tent as if she were a guard, so Shahla pretended that she was cleaning the brazier in the guests’ tent until she could hear her mother snoring. She sat fully dressed waiting for him and when she was too tired to keep her eyes open

she heard the sound of the galloping hoofs and the whining of his horse so she ran out to meet him. That masked man with a rifle swinging on his shoulder stretched his arm to her and she grabbed it and was swung in the air then placed firmly on the saddle in front of him. She looked back at their *bait al-sha'ar* with the flaps wrapped tightly around their tents, their horses tied to the pole, their camels' front legs tied together, the goats asleep behind their dwelling. Shahla sucked at her last tooth when she said, '*Tzz*' that was the last glimpse I ever had of my dwelling and tribe.'

What would Shahla have done in this dwelling? Would she have dinner with David and allow him to 'ride her until her brass hand and ankle bracelets get jumbled up'? Would she stretch her arm to a total stranger and ride away with him in the dark? Would faith outweigh doubt? And what about the past, that dark shadow stalking you?

Holding my shopping bags firmly, I headed towards the main door. He followed me and said, 'Will you have dinner with me?'

'Thank you so much, but I don't think so,' I said.

'Why not?'

'I am busy. I must go, Dave.'

I lowered my head and walked through the shop under the dry palm trees. Among the Indian peacocks, Buddhas, Mexican parrots and quilts and Chinese tables a new sound was being formed inside my head: 'No', which my immigrant *A–Z* had always warned me against. A brass unicorn leaping into the air trying to reach the sky caught my eye.

I said to David quickly, 'No. I am sorry.' And before he could answer I rushed out through the African door to the cold street sniffing the air for the aroma of home. The smell summoned me and I obliged as if in a trance. The smell of rich food being fried was mine.

I sniffed the smell of familiarity, freedom and home and listened.