

Seven

Baba didn't often share his wishes with us but he did that day. We were at the farm and he was wearing a safari shirt. He was irritated a little because he did not like the family gatherings that my mother organized. He preferred meetings with business friends, useful contacts, to day-long picnics spent playing cards and eating nonstop. Leaning back on his deckchair, he looked up as a small plane flew past, spraying pesticide. `One day,' he said, `I'm going to have my own private jet. Three more years at the maximum - I've got it all planned!'

`Wow,' Omar and I said at the same time. We were sitting on a picnic rug on the grass.

`Think of your father, kids. I started out with nothing, not a father, not a good education, nothing. Now I'm going to have my own private jet.'

`I'll learn to drive it,' said Omar. `I'll take lessons.'

Baba looked at us over his gold-rimmed glasses and asked, `So how old are you now?'

`Nineteen,' Omar chanted.

`Nineteen, already? And you too, Najwa?'

`Yes,' I smiled.

He was teasing us. `I thought you were eighteen.'

`That was last year,' said Omar. I laughed. It rarely happened but today Omar and I were dressed in identical colours. We were both wearing Wrangler jeans and I was wearing a beige polo neck and he had on a long-sleeved beige shirt. Mama came and took a photo of us. Years later, after everything fell, that photo remained. Omar and I smiling, a pink flower wedged in my hair, my legs crossed, my elbow on my knee and hand on my chin. Omar close, his back against my arm, his eyes bright, legs stretched out, hand resting lightly on the tape recorder, the cassettes scattered on his lap and on the red-check rug. Years later, when everything fell, I would narrow my eyes and try to distinguish by colour

and words the tapes on the rug, tapes we used to buy on our summer holidays in London: Michael Jackson, Stevie Wonder, Hot Chocolate and my own tapes of Boney M.

Everything started to fall that night, late after the picnic, after the barbecue, after the guests had gone home and we also had gone home. After grilled kebab and peanut salad, boiled eggs, watermelon and guava. We drove back home and we were quiet, we were all tired. I washed my hair that night because of all the dust that had got into it. I examined an ant bite on my elbow. It was swollen and raised and I could not stop scratching it. The telephone call came late at night, close to dawn. I heard it and I thought someone had died. It had happened before, someone dying, a close friend or relation and Mama and Baba having to leave the house in the middle of the night. Over the next days of mourning they would say, 'We came as soon as we heard the news ... we came at night.'

I didn't get out of bed. I was not curious enough. I heard Baba's voice on the phone but I could not distinguish his words. I could hear his voice and something about it was not right. There wasn't the bite and shock that came with death. I sat up in bed, saw the outline of the room slowly come to focus as my eyes adjusted to the dark. The nights were still cool; we did not need air conditioners. If they had been on, I would not have heard the phone.

The door to Omar's room was closed. I walked down the corridor to my parents' room. Their light was on and the door was ajar. I saw the suitcase on the bed. I saw Mama tucking some of Baba's socks in the suitcase, which was already nearly full. He was getting dressed, buttoning his shirt. He turned and looked at me as if he couldn't see me, as if it was the most natural thing in the world for him to be going out in the middle of the night.

'Are you going away?' I asked but neither of them answered. N/lanma continued to stalk the room, packing, distracted, as if she was listening to a voice in her head, a voice that was listing things for her, telling her what to do. 'Go back to sleep,' she said to me.

Wide awake, I went to the bathroom. I stared at myself in the bathroom mirror, smoothed my eyebrows, admired how the yellow of

my pyjamas suited my skin and forgot about Baba.

When I got out of the bathroom, I heard him starting the car. It had to be him starting the car because Musa didn't sleep over. Musa went home every night. I wondered where Baba was going, where was he travelling to. Why didn't they tell me that someone important had died abroad? I went into Omar's room and started to wake him up. He woke but didn't come with me to the window. I looked through the curtains. I saw Baba easing the car out of the garage, over the pebbles towards the gate. I saw the night watchman drag open the gates for him. Then I saw the headlights of a car coming fast down our road. It stopped with a screech in front of our gate, blocking Baba's car. Two men got out. One hovered near the gate and the other went and opened Baba's car door, like Musa opened it for him every day but not like that, not exactly like that. Baba turned the ignition off and got out of the car. He spoke with the man, gestured towards the hood of the car. The man said something to his friend and the friend opened the hood and took Baba's suitcase out. They started to walk towards their car and just left Baba's car beached in the parkway, neither in the house nor out of it. Baba took out something from his pocket, probably money or the car keys, and gave it to the night watchman. Then he got into the car with the two men. He sat in the back seat and that was wrong, I knew. He shouldn't be in the back seat. I had never seen him sitting in the back seat, except in taxis or when Musa was driving. And Mama was next to me; she frightened me. The way she ground her teeth, stopping herself from crying, and banged the window softly with her fist frightened me. Omar came and put his arm around her, led her away from the window.

'What's wrong?' he said. 'What's wrong, Mama?'

His voice was calm and normal. I looked out at the dark empty street, at Baba's abandoned car, at the watchman trying to close the gate and realizing that he couldn't. He couldn't move the car because he didn't know how to drive. It would have to wait for morning, for Musa to come.

'What's wrong, Mama?' Oniar's voice was patient. They both sat on his bed.

'There's been a coup,' she said.

Eight

Our first weeks in London were OK. We didn't even notice that we were falling. Once we got over the shock of suddenly having to fly out the day after Baba was arrested, Omar and I could not help but enjoy London. We had never been there before in April and the first thing we did was go to Oxford Street and buy clothes. It was fun to do all the things we never did back home; grocery shopping, pushing the Hoover around, cooking frozen food. It was fun to do all the things we usually did in the summer. Omar went to the cinema in Leicester Square and I don't know how many tapes he bought from HMV. I went through Selfridges trying the perfumes and getting my face made up at the Elizabeth Arden counter.

But Mama was not herself at all; she was in a daze, sometimes crying for no reason, muttering to herself in the middle of the night, immune to the excitement of London. She refused to go out shopping and constantly followed the news of the coup; surrounding herself with all the Arab papers as well as The Times and the Guardian, phoning round and leaving the TV on all the time. Our flat in Lancaster Gate was constantly filled with other Sudanese: businessmen passing through London, anxious Embassy staff who were awaiting the inevitable changes that would come about with the new government. They all reassured Mama about Baba. 'They'll soon let him go and he'll join you here,' they said. 'It will all die down,' they said, be patient, they'll flex their muscles at the beginning and then they'll slacken.' She listened to them quietly and I helped her serve coffee and tea. Her face was harsh without makeup, her hair out of the way in a bun because she no longer went to the hairdresser; the jumpers she wore under her tobe were in sombre colours.

Randa called me from her college in Wales. 'I can't believe it, you're really here!' she shrieked.

'I can't believe it either - I was just saying bye to you a while back

...'

What are you going to do now?'

'We're waiting for Baba to join us - we're worried about him.' I swallowed and there was a burning in my forehead.

'And then what, how long will you stay here, what about your university?'

'I don't know Randa. I brought all my notes and books with me ...'

But this new government seems like it's here to stay, the coup was a success. I suppose you'll just stay here on political asylum . . .'

They might allow us to go back. I don't know.' I had not thought things out.

You can come here you know.'

'Here where?'

Here in Atlantic College with me.'

The idea for some reason horrified me. 'Omar would love that - but Randa tell me about VOLJ. Tell me what's it like for you. Do you like it in Wales? Is the work hard? Have you done the mountain climbing?'

'I'll tell you all about it in a letter. I can't stay on the phone for long.'

'OK. Give the letter to Samir, he's coming down to see us at the weekend.'

'Yeah, OK I will. I do bump into him frequently.'

'Randa I forgot to tell you - Sundari's pregnant ...'

'Whaaat!' she hissed.

'It's a big scandal; even the American Embassy is involved. This is not why marines are posted to Sudan.' I tried to laugh at my own joke but the sound that came out was more like a lumpy cough.

Samir came at the weekend, wearing faded jeans and a leather jacket. He had on a new pair of glasses. He hugged Omar hard and I felt again that burning in my forehead that had started to come to me from time to time. He kissed Mama and she started to cry, embarrassing us all.

'Any news?' Samir sat down in one of the armchairs, Omar in the other. I sat on the sofa with Mama. The TV was on, as we sometimes had it these days, pictures without sounds.

`They are going to try him,' Omar said. Mama dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief, her mouth stretched open.

`Insha' Allah it will all be OK.' Samir shifted in his armchair. He looked smothered by the deep, soft cushions.

But what if it didn't turn out to be OK, I wanted to say. What if they found him guilty, what if he was guilty, what then? As if I understood what they were trying him for ... Corruption. What did that mean? How could that word have anything to do with my father? We shouldn't have left him, we should have stayed with him. What were we doing here? It was Uncle Saleh who decided that we should come here. He had sorted everything out, all in a few hours, getting us on the last plane out before they closed the airport. But maybe he was wrong, maybe we should have stayed, maybe us running away would make Baha be found guilty. Weren't we acting as if he were guilty? But I didn't say anything; I stared at ITV - ads for chocolate biscuits, coffee, a new drama serial. Whenever I watched television, I forgot all about Baha, the food he must be getting in that `special' house he was held in, the coming trial. The President was now in the US. He had called last night and spoken to Mama. `It's all his fault,' she said afterwards, `it's all his fault.' But on the phone she had been all nice, respectful in the same way she had always been with His Excellency.

`Samir, will you drink tea or something cold?' I smiled at him, happy to see a familiar face.

He said, `I've got a letter for you from Randa.' I took it from him and went to read it in the kitchen.

`Where's that tea?' Mama called out. I stopped in the middle of a description of Randa milking a cow (how absurd that that was part of her course!) and switched the kettle on.

Pizza Hut was warm and they played all the latest songs, songs we were just getting to know. The three of us shared a large seafood pizza and Samir ordered something I had never had before - garlic bread with cheese. It was very nice. Outside in the cold, Leicester Square was full of lights and so lively that I forgot it was night. People were coming out of the theatres heading towards the restaurants and the tube station, bouncers stood in front of nightclubs wearing check waistcoats. In one

of the smaller cinemas Saturday Night Fever was still playing. We stood in front of a disco. We could hear the heat of Michael Jackson's 'Billie Jean' and the glimmer of red and flashing lights.

'Are you mad? How can we go to a disco?' I glared at Omar.

'Why not?' He did his imitation of a moonwalk. It was good but I was not in the mood to praise him.

'Tell him why not.' I looked at Samir but he shrugged and moved away from us. He seemed guarded, stiff with a new formality.

'We can't go to a disco because of Baba,' I said to Omar. 'What do you want people to say? The man's on trial for his life and his children are dancing in London.'

'What people? Who do you think is going to know us in there? Don't be silly.' He turned to Samir to get support but he was busy examining a shop window.

'There just might be someone in there who knows us. It might just happen. Why take the risk?'

'You're obsessed with what people think of you!'

'I'm not obsessed. I am just sure that if we were in Khartoum, we wouldn't be at a disco.'

'We are not in Khartoum. Look, just go home.'

'Right, I will go home.'

Omar turned and started to walk towards the disco. 'Samir, come on,' he called out.

'Look, I'll take you home first,' Samir said. He didn't want to take me home. It struck me that he was bored with us. As if something had happened to make us less than him. As if he was all grown up and we were still little.

'No,' I said, 'stay with Omar. I'm OK by myself.'

Our flat was only a few stops away by underground. The floor of the train was littered with cigarette butts and empty cans. The passengers were sleepy and tense, I felt as if we were moving in stale, unfulfilled time. Baba was going to be found guilty. Why else would they try him? That would be the justice the papers were crying out for. The new regime was supported by the Democratic Front. It was a populist regime, a regime of the people: no more old feudal ways, no more accumulation

of wealth and power in the hands of an elite. Members of the Front were now offered places in the new government. My communist lecturer who had taught us about Rostow's take-off was now the Minister of Finance. I read all that in the papers, after Mama discarded them. I read an article about Baba's trial written by a student - because the students were the vanguards of the revolution. The article said that justice would be met and nothing was a fairer punishment for corruption than sequestration and the noose. The article was written by a student I knew well. The article was written by Anwar.

There are all kinds of pain, degrees of falling. In our first weeks in London we sensed the ground tremble beneath us. When Baba was found guilty we broke down, the flat filling with people, Manna crying, Omar banging the door, staying out all night. When Baba was hanged, the earth we were standing on split open and we tumbled down and that tumbling had no end, it seemed to have no end, as if we would fall and fall for eternity without ever landing. As if this was our punishment, a bottomless pit, the roar of each other's screams. We became unfamiliar to each other simply because we had not seen each other fall before.

Part Two

London, 2003

Nine

Lamya, my new employer, stands holding open the door of her flat. There is a light above her head and she is more relaxed than when I saw her at Regent's Park mosque. Her voice, when she returns my greeting, is thick as if she has just got up. She is wearing jeans and an attractive cardigan. Her face is not pretty but her figure, clothes and hair compensate. I keep my eyes and head lowered like I trained myself to do. This is not my first job; I know how deferential a maid should be. I take off my shoes and leave them near the door. I take off my coat, fold it and put it over my shoes - it wouldn't be polite to hang it over the family's coats on the coat-rack. I know I must be careful in everything I do; I mustn't slip. The first day is crucial, the first hours. I will be watched and tested but, once I win her trust, she will forget me, take me for granted. This is my aim, to become the background to her life. She closes the door behind me and I hear the television; the sound of a toddler and an older woman's voice.

I follow Lamya down the corridor towards the television sounds. The flat is modest, subdued - I had expected it to be more luxurious given the posh area and the fine building. Lamya pushes a door open, a thick wooden door. It is stiff and rubs against the wool of the carpet. The living room is spacious, with large windows overlooking the autumn trees of the park. Shadows of leaves flicker over the carpet and the light in the room is orange. It glows on the green upholstered furniture, on the mahogany dining table and sideboard. I try and stop my eyes from wandering too much. Surveying is disrespectful and likely to give the impression that I am the type who steals. I take in as much of the room as I can with lowered eyes. A little girl with soft curly hair is sitting on the floor surrounded by bricks and dolls, her eyes fixed on the television. A large middle-aged lady is sitting on one of the armchairs, eyeglasses sliding down her nose; she is reading the characteristic green pages of Asharq Al-Awsat. She looks up and studies me, her eyes bulging and

serious above her glasses. The newspaper rests on her lap. Her hair is short and severely cut, but softened with the colours of henna.

`Salaamu alleikum,' I say

`Mama, this is Najwa,' Lamyia says, and then to me, `Doctora Zeinab,' introducing her mother.

`Ahlan, Najwa,' the Doctora says lightly, `I'm leaving tomorrow for Cairo, insha' Allah, and the responsibility of all this house is going to be on you.'

I smile, slightly taken aback by her husky smoker's voice. I go towards my prime responsibility. I kneel and sit next to her on the floor.

`Mai,' I say, `Mai, how are you, what are you watching?' She doesn't respond.

Lamyia's sleepy voice. `Mai, say hello to Najwa. She's here to play with you.'

The little girl looks at me once without interest and then back to the Teletubbies. She has her grandmother's eyes.

`Leave her,' the Doctora says, `she's concentrating on the television. It's a sign of intelligence when a child concentrates so well.' And as if to demonstrate concentration, she goes back to reading her paper.

`Come, let me show you the rest of the flat before I leave,' says Lamyia.

Another room, a bedroom also overlooking the park. It is in ivory with two beds and a cot. This is my room and Mai's,' says Lamyia. `My husband works in Oman and comes every six weeks or so for a holiday. He just left so it will be some time before he comes again.'

Were you living before in Oman?' I venture, curious but aware that I have no right to ask her questions. She intrigues me, as does her mother. The mother's accent is clearly Egyptian and she is going tomorrow to Cairo but Lamyia's accent has traces of the Gulf and she is much darker than her mother.

`Yes, we were in Muscat ... Let me show you Mai's clothes.'

She shows me Mai's clothes and where the nappies are kept. `Change her on the bed,' she says. `I'm trying to toilet-train her but she still wears nappies. She just turned two, she really should be toilet-

trained.' Her voice trails in a dreamy way as if she is thinking of other things. She must be clever, I think, to be doing a PhD.

'Here is the kitchen.' It is slightly dark, with a large rectangular table in the middle, cluttered with Mai's highchair.

'You have to put on this tape for Mai when she eats, otherwise she won't eat.' She gestures vaguely towards a tape recorder on the kitchen counter. 'Unfortunately we don't have a dishwasher.' A pile of dishes stands up in the sink.

She shows me the washing machine, which is also a dryer. She shows me how a slim kitchen drawer opens out into a folding ironing board. Underneath is a cupboard full of clothes waiting to be ironed.

She shows me where the vacuum cleaner is kept, the brooms and mops. 'This floor,' she trails her toes on the clay-red plastic tiles, 'is so difficult to clean. Me and Mama are fed up with it.'

We walk down the hall. There is a washroom and a bathroom. The bathroom is all in brown tiles, 'These brown tiles are troublesome,' she says. 'We have to wipe every drop of water, otherwise the stains show.'

At the end of the corridor is a small dark room. We need the light to see. There are two beds, a dressing table and a small washbasin in the corner. 'Mama's room and my brother Tamer's,' she says. 'You won't see him much. He has lectures early in the morning and he comes home late.'

Something in her voice makes me guess that her brother is younger than her, rather than older. I wonder if he is the youth I met in the lobby.

'When Mama leaves tomorrow, Tamer will probably turn the dressing table into a desk. So far we've both been using the dining table in the evening. He's so untidy,' she says, her eyes falling on a T-shirt discarded on the floor. I smile, remembering a young Omar, the Omar of Khartoum, not the one he became in London.

When she leaves to go to her university, I spend a long time in the kitchen, washing the dishes, tidying up and then tackling the ironing. Doctora Zeinah and Mai remain in the sitting room until eleven o'clock.

'Oh, you've done a lot of ironing, very good,' she says when she sees the ironed clothes draped all over the kitchen chairs. 'Go get hangers from the cupboards, so you can hang them up.' I go back and

forth between the bedrooms and the kitchen in some confusion, until all the clothes are in the correct cupboards. Tai's clothes are of course the easiest to sort out. I can tell which are Lamya's clothes and which are Doctora Zeinah's, but the men's shirts confuse me. It turns out that some belong to Lamya's husband and need to go to her room. Some belong to Tamer and need to go to his room. And a few shirts belong to the father who had not been in London for several months. Their ironing has certainly been piling up!

Doctora Zeinah shows me the airing cupboard where clothes, damp from the dryer, are hanging up. It is right outside her room, in front of the bathroom. She stands with the cupboard wide open and starts to pull the clothes out while I sit on the floor folding them as fast as I can, sorting them into piles. They fall around me as she pulls them out one by one. Mai has trailed after her grandmother. She messes up the pile of clothes I have folded. I smile at her and move the clothes out of her way. Doctora Zeinab scolds her but I know better than to object to anything the little one does. I know from experience that employers don't like maids scolding their precious children, no matter what damage the child does. So I keep on smiling and folding. 'Look Mai, this is how you do it,' I say. I show her how to fold a T-shirt.

'Ta-ma, Ta-ma,' she says urgently, patting the shirt on the carpet.

'Yes, it's Tamer's shirt,' her grandmother says. 'You're a clever girl. And whose is this?'

'Ma-wa, Ma-wa,' she says reaching out for her own red jumper with a picture of a bear on the front.

'Now that pile, which needs ironing, goes to the cupboard in the kitchen. Take it there but you did enough ironing today, leave it for tomorrow.'

Back in the kitchen, she announces, 'It's time for my coffee,' in such a way that I move to make it for her, but she is already pressing the button on the kettle and scooping Nescafe into a mug.

'Now it's time for Mai's nap. I give her juice and take her to the bedroom and she sleeps for about an hour and a half, sometimes two. While she's asleep, you should do the cooking. Later in the afternoon she gets a bit troublesome and you won't have time. Also in the afternoon, if

the weather is good, you must take her out to the park. She enjoys playing on the swings and seeing other children. What can you cook? Tamer loves macaroni.' She says her son's name with fondness.

In the afternoon, the three of us go to the park - Doctora Zeinab grand in a dark coat and bright lipstick, her hair the perfect autumn colour; Mai bundled up in her pushchair. I had thought park meant Regent's Park and that we would cross the big roundabout with the statue of St George slaying the dragon, pass the mosque, and turn left into Regent's Park. But by park Doctora Zeinab means the small park across the road. It also has a children's playground, but is quiet, more relaxed. We walk under the same trees that are visible through the sitting-room window. It is slightly windy but not too cold. The early morning sun has given way to greyness, but still the autumn leaves on the ground are dry and crunchy.

I have been trying to draw close to Mai and win her trust. It is difficult because of the presence of her grandmother. They are attached and Mai does not even let me push her pushchair. So Doctora Zeinab pushes and I walk along feeling sheepish and anxious that come evening time, the verdict to Lamyia will be, she wasn't any good with Mai'.

'Are your family here or in Sudan, Najwa?'

'I have a brother here.' I try to sound open, natural. Yesterday I received a visiting order from Omar. He is allowed to write letters but he rarely writes to me.

'Do you have children?'

'No, I'm not married.'

'Were you living in Khartoum?'

'Yes, in Khartoum.'

'Lamyia was born in Khartoum,' she says. Her father is Sudanese.'

'Really?' My heart starts to pound as it always does when there is the threat that someone will know who I am, who I was, what I've become. How many times have I lied and said I am Eritrean or Somali?

'My children are Sudanese in name only,' she goes on. They don't remember the Sudan. We spent years in Oman - my son, Tamer, was born there, and now we're in Cairo.'

'Do you go back to the Sudan for holidays?'

`My husband doesn't have any brothers or sisters, maybe that's why we don't go back often.'

Her words reassure me. Their ties to Sudan are obviously fragile. Even if I were to reveal my last name, they might not know it. They might not remember my father. At any rate, Doctora Zeinab is much younger than my father's generation. She must be no more than ten years older than me - even though I feel she is older. If I feel young it is because I have done so little. What happened stunted me.

'Who were you working with before us?' She stops walking and silently gives me the pushchair to push. I am grateful to end the embarrassment of walking next to her, swinging my arms while she pushes. However Mai is sensitive, she looks back, sees me and starts to holler. Doctora Zeinab takes hold of the handle of the pushchair again.

'I worked with a Lebanese lady who lived near Swiss Cottage tube station. She had two children. She was a second wife to a Saudi businessman who lived with his first family in Riyadh. He came for visits and it was then that she needed me most. They entertained regularly or they went out in the evening and she left the children with me. Her husband eventually got her a Sri Lankan maid from Saudi Arabia.'

An elderly couple smile and stop to admire Mai. I look beyond the park and see, between the trees, the Humana Wellington Hospital. I have never seen it before from this angle. It looks unfamiliar, yet I had stayed there with Mama for weeks. I remember the colour of the carpet, the telephone in my hand, the way the television was high up on the wall. If I tell Doctora Zeinab that my mother died in such an expensive hospital would she believe these words coming from her granddaughter's new nanny?

Near the children's playground, Mai sees the swings and starts to get excited. She points and babbles and wants to be taken out of her chair. I undo her seatbelt.

'Shall I take you to the swing Mai, shall I?' I sound desperate as I crouch near her chair trying to meet her eyes.

'Mai, I will go for a walk,' the Doctora says, 'and Najwa will take you to the swing. OK?'

The plan succeeds. The pushchair is parked near a bench, Doctora Zeinab strides off and Mai allows me to put her on the swing and push her. We are soon having a fun time.

Rain drives the three of us back home. The flat is cosy and, with the curtains drawn, the light in the sitting room is mellow. I read Mai a story while Doctora Zeinah goes to her room to finish her packing. But Mai's concentration is limited and she wants to run out of the room to her grandmother. It becomes a hattle between us with me doing my utmost to keep her in the room and she wanting to leave. I try the television, a make-believe game with her teddy bear and her Rugrat doll, a snack, but all these things succeed for only a few minutes. She is very irritable.

The sound of the key turning in the lock is a relief. Lamya is home, a little breathless, her jacket splashed with rain but her eyes merry. She kisses and hugs her daughter, saddles her on her left hip and walks around with her. Mal is beaming now and Lamya is livelier than she was in the morning. She asks me lots of questions, inspects the dinner I cooked, lifting up saucepan lids. She seems impressed, her heavy features alive. Is this how a young affluent woman feels, fulfilled in her work, coming home to a young child? I owe myself an absence of envy; I owe myself a heart free of grudges.

Ten

It being a Monday, I have my Qur'an Tajweed class at the mosque. So, instead of going home, I go to the halal restaurant on the other side of the road from the mosque and eat my dinner there. Their dal tastes good and the pitta bread is warm. Always new places and new people make me tired. It is a good job, I tell myself. Once I get into the swing of things, it will not be too much work. They seem to be nice people. Tomorrow Doctora Zeinab will leave and I will have more control over Mai. I will be alone and that will be less stressful. I eat quickly so that I can get to the mosque and lie down a bit before the lesson starts. I need to stretch out.

The ladies' area is empty when I arrive. It doesn't surprise me. Soon the others will come for the class, and later more sisters will come accompanying their husbands for the Isha prayer. I put on the lights and pray two rakas' greeting to the mosque. Then I roll my coat like a pillow and stretch out. My legs burn slightly; my back aches but not too badly. I roll my ankles, stretch my toes and flex them. Alhamdulillah, it's a good job, I tell myself and people take ages to complete their PhD. It is a job that can last me a number of years, insha' Allah.

I close my eyes. I can smell the smells of the mosque, tired incense, carpet and coats. I doze and in my dream I am small and back in Khartoum, ill and fretful, wanting clean, crisp sheets, a quiet room to rest in, wanting my parents' room, wanting to get up and go to my parents' room. Men's voices come from downstairs, a low rumble, a cough. I wake up and the cough reminds me of my father, the dream of my parents' room. I don't want to be vulnerable today. Fatigue does this to me. I sit up and feel utterly relieved to see Shahinaz come in, carrying her baby, surrounded by her three children.

I stand up to hug her, bend down and kiss her children, help them take off their coats. The eldest girl sits away from us with a Game Boy. The two boys run off, the whole mosque is their playground.

`Are we the only ones?' asks Shahinaz. Her eyes are bright black, round. She hands me her baby, takes off her coat, and underneath it she is wearing green.

`You're starting to get your figure back.' Her face is still puffy from pregnancy, her stomach still bulging, but every week she is slimmer, more and more like her old self.

She pulls the material of her dress against her stomach. `Not yet,' she says, `it's taking longer this time.' She sits cross-legged next to me, our backs against the wall.

`Shall I take off Ahmed's coat, it's warm here?'

She nods and I begin to unzip the baby's jumpsuit.

`I should have got his chair,' she says.

`Don't worry, I'll hold him for you.' I put him sideways on my knees. He is so sweet, fast asleep with a finger against his cheek, as if he is serious and thoughtful. I push his hood away from his head. His hair has recently been shaved, but it is growing thick again, straight and black. I run my finger over it.

`Ya habibi ya Ahmed,' I say to him. I feel that I know him. I've known him since Shahinaz was pregnant, I saw him at the hospital the day he was born. Every week I see the changes in him.

`Ya habibi,' says Shahinaz rummaging in her bag, `you Arabs always say that.'

`Wait till Um Waleed comes,' I say, `she says it more than me.' Um Waleed is our Syrian teacher. Everyone is `ya habibi' or `ya habibti' to her. Even the Prophet, peace be upon him, is, `ya habibi ya Rasoul Allah', said in such a heartfelt way.

`I smell of oil, don't I?' Shahinaz sniffs at her sleeve. `I was frying and there wasn't time to change.'

`No, you don't, you're imagining it.' I am mesmerized by her baby. I hold his hand and his fist curls around my finger. He is so deeply asleep. `His hair is growing.'

`I know. We didn't really give him a close shave. A zero with the hair clippers.'

Um Waleed bustles in now with her twins. She always looks alarmed, I don't know why. I've stopped expecting her to impart any

dramatic news, as her excitement seems to come from within her or from perhaps a turbulent domestic life I know nothing about. Her twin daughters are neat, pretty-looking girls, their brown hair fashionably cut. They copy their mother and automatically hold out their cheeks for me to kiss. I am taken aback at how businesslike they are.

'Two of you only for the class - where are the others? What am I going to do? What happened to them?' Um Waleed glares at the two of us as if the absence of the others is somehow our fault.

Shahinaz rolls her eyes.

I shrug my shoulders. 'It's still early.'

'No, it isn't early. This is the time. And I'm in a hurry thinking I'm late.' She starts to take her notes and books out.

Suddenly five young ladies stroll in.

'Masha' Allah,' beams Um Waleed, transformed. 'I thought you'd never come'.

The next few minutes are taken up with more kisses and laughs, squeals of admiration for Shahinaz's baby. He is taken from my arms and passed around. One of the young girls, who is still holding her car keys, says sonle- thing about 'pass the parcel' and laughs. Another comments on the new way Um Waleed has tied her headscarf. Always the teacher, she unties and starts to demonstrate. 'The usual square folded into a triangle but when you put it over your head leave one end longer than the other. See. You pin it under your chin. Then you take the longer side - hold it like this under the pin, lift it sideways over the pin and tuck it under your ear.'

'It's that simple?'

'It's how the Hizhullah women tie their scarves,' says Um Waleed. 'I see them on the satellite.'

'Cool,' says the girl next to me. She has rosy cheeks, dreamy eyes. I like the way she wears her hijah, confident that she has the kind of allure worth covering. Usually the young Muslims girls who have been born and brought up in Britain puzzle me though I admire them. I always find myself trying to understand them. They strike me as being very British, very much at home in London. Some of them wear hijah, some don't. They have individuality and an outspokenness I didn't have

when I was their age, but they lack the preciousness and glamour we girls in Khartoum had.

I leave the gathering and go downstairs to the bathroom because I need to renew my wudu. Sitting on the row of stools that face the taps, there are a few women whom I never met before. They look Malaysian but one looks like she is Sudanese. She reminds me of a girl I once knew in Khartoum University. A girl who was not my close friend, but only a mild acquaintance, someone I said hello to as we passed each other to and from lectures. She was cute, with dimples. I don't know if I ever told my father how much I loved the university he chose for me. I don't think I spoke to him much. I know he didn't think a lot about me, not because he didn't love me but because I was a girl and Mama's responsibility. He had detailed, specific plans for Omar's future, while I was going to get married to someone who would determine how the rest of my life flowed. I am glad Baba didn't live to see what happened to Omar. Or even to me.

There's the sound of rushing water and I realize that I am alone in the wudu area. I am staring at my wet feet, facing a gushing tap. I close the tap and, not finding any paper towels to dry myself, walk upstairs, leaving damp footsteps on the carpet. The lesson has already started; everyone is sitting in a large circle. Um Waleed is sitting on her knees, which makes her a little bit higher than the others; her voice is clear and loud. She is someone else now, someone I love, my teacher, specific in everything she says, sharp and to the point. The Qur'an is open on her lap; she pulls her scarf over her forehead, and pushes back strands of hair that have escaped. She is in her element and she doesn't look alarmed any more.

I take a copy of the Qur'an from the shelf and Shahinaz shuffles sideways and makes room for me. She is breastfeeding Ahmed and, with a free hand, helps me find the correct page, points to the verse Um Waleed is now discussing. The Tajweed class is my favourite. I learn how to pronounce the letters correctly, when to blur two letters together, when to pronounce the n in a nasal way, for how many heats to prolong a certain letter. This concentration on technique soothes me; it makes me forget everything around me. Um Waleed is a qualified teacher, with

a degree in Sharia Law. Many of the sisters say that her other classes on Law and History are more interesting - they generate a lot of discussion and the sisters, especially the young British-born ones and the converts, like to discuss and give their opinions. But I become fragmented and deflated in discussions; I never know which point of view I support. I find myself agreeing with whoever is speaking or with the one I like best. And I become anxious that someone's feelings will get hurt, or worse take serious offence, as sometimes happens, and stop coming to the mosque. Here in the Tajweed class, all is calm and peaceful. We practise and practise until we can get the words right. I want to read the Qur'an in a beautiful way.

After the class, I have a new energy. Shahinaz's baby is awake and I hold him, my hand supporting his head. I talk to him, nod and smile. He rewards me with a lopsided twitching of his lips; he is only six weeks old, too young to smile.

Shahinaz carries him when we all pray Isha. She puts him down on the floor whenever she bends down and then picks him up again. I stand next to her and I realize in the middle of the prayer that I don't know who is next to me on the other side, whose arm is brushing my right arm, whose clothes are brushing my clothes. I pull my mind back and concentrate.

Outside the mosque, the night air is cold and crisp. Shahinaz offers me a lift. 'It's late for you to be going home on your own.'

I shake my head. I think of their car. Shahinaz and her husband in front, Ahmed in his baby seat at the back plus the other three children - it will be a crush.

'I'm not on your way.'

She protests but the children demand her attention. I leave her and walk to the bus stop. Cars swish fast on the relatively empty roads, taxis brake at the traffic lights with that peculiar whistling sound that London taxis make. The first bus I take is the old-fashioned kind with the permanent open door and a conductor. He is glum but I feel safer in his presence and in the knowledge that I can hop out at the traffic lights if I need to. The second bus has no conductor. I show my bus pass to the driver and the doors swing shut behind me. I stifle the feeling of being

trapped. At the next bus stop, three young men stagger in. I know just by glancing at them that they are not reliable, they are not harmless. I start to recite Say: I seek refuge in the Lord of Daybreak. I recite it again and again.

As they walk past to the back of the bus, one of them looks at me and says something to the others. I look away out of the window. I tell myself that Allah will protect me so that even if they hurt me, I won't feel it too badly; it will be a blunted blow, a numbed blow.

Laughter from behind me. Something hits the edge of the seat next to me and bounces down the aisle; I don't know what it is. He has missed his target this time. Will they move closer, and what if they run out of things to throw? I look up at the bus driver's face in the mirror. His eyes flicker and he looks away. I stare out of the window but I see my reflection staring back at me. It is best to look down at my shoes. The smooth night traffic means that the bus moves fast. It shouldn't be long now, a couple more stops. I hear footsteps come up behind me, see a blur of denim. He says, 'You Muslim scum', then the shock of cool liquid on my head and face. I gasp and taste it, Tizer. He goes back to his friends - they are laughing. My chest hurts and I wipe my eyes.

The bus stops and the doors swing open. A couple walk down the stairs and towards the exit. I make a quick decision and follow them out of the bus. The wind hits against my wet scarf, it makes my scalp feel cold. I use the dry edge of the scarf to wipe my face. I breathe in and out to make the anger go away, to let it out through my nose. My cheeks are sticky. I lick my lips and they taste sweet. It could have been beer but I've been lucky. I blink and that's uncomfortable because my eyelashes are twisted and stuck together. I didn't know that eyelashes could ache. I walk the rest of the way home thinking about my eyelashes and that I will have to wash my hair. I don't like washing it at night. My hairdryer doesn't work anymore and I don't sleep well with wet hair. It irritates me, damp and sprawling over the pillow.

Eleven

My second day of work and I almost arrive late. I reach the door of the flat to find Lamya already on her way out. Doctora Zeinab is at the door too, wrapped in a dressing gown, bright blue under the light of the hall. Lamya lifts her hair out of her jacket, bends to pick up her umbrella. I stand outside the doorway, waiting for her to leave so that I could enter. She has those same sleepy eyes and slow movements I remember from yesterday morning. Her eyes flicker over me, without expression. It must be that she is an evening person, not at her best in the morning. She kisses and hugs her mother, rubs her back in a friendly way. I remember that Doctora Zeinab is leaving this afternoon for Cairo.

When Tamer takes you to the airport,' Lamya says to her, 'don't forget to give him your set of keys.'

'I will. He shouldn't be missing his lectures. I can go on my own.

Lamya shrugs. 'Don't forget to order the taxi. Early.' She kisses her mother again and sweeps past me. Doctora Zeinab stands still for a few seconds watching her daughter walk down the stairs. The goodbye seems to have made her subdued, flabby. 'Come in, Najwa,' she says and shuffles back to the sitting room.

I close the door of the flat behind me, take off my shoes and put them near the side of the door. I roll my coat and put it over my shoes. The day begins, less daunting than yesterday, the tasks more familiar. Mai remembers me in a grudging sort of way. I smile and act the clown for her. My work will be easy when I win her trust. I talk to her about going to the park, jog her memory of how yesterday I pushed her on the swings. She is still in her pyjamas so I change her, take her to the toilet and cajole her into brushing her teeth. I discover that, Unlike yesterday, Lanlya hasn't given her any breakfast. I pour hot milk over Weetabix and sprinkle a bit of sugar. The Weetabix softens into a smooth paste and I scoop one teaspoon after another into her mouth. She drinks milk by herself from a special cup.

Yesterday's dinner plates are piled high in the sink - no one had bothered to wash them. If they had at least rinsed them, it would have been a help. Instead, bits of food are congealed and sticky on the plates. I run the hot water over them a long time, till they become unstuck. I enjoy being in a home rather than cleaning offices and hotels. I like being part of a family, touching their things, knowing what they ate, what they threw in the bin. I know them in intimate ways while they hardly know me, as if I am invisible. It still takes me by surprise how natural I am in this servant role. On my very first day as a plaid (not when I worked for Auntie Eva - I didn't feel like a maid with her - but later when I started working for her friend) memories rushed back at me. All the ingratiating manners, the downcast eyes, the sideway movements of the servants I grew up with. I used to take them for granted. I didn't know a lot about them - our succession of Ethiopian maids, houseboys, our gardener - but I must have been close to them, absorbing their ways, so that now, years later and in another continent, I am one of them.

I remember an Ethiopian maid who told me that her friends called her Donna Summer because she resembled the singer. She laughed when I too started to call her Donna. Donna put egg yolk in her hair, egg white on her face, rubbed her legs with BP petroleum jelly. She wore a short pink corduroy skirt on her day out. She was a refugee in Sudan. She would talk about Ethiopia, about the cool mountains and the rains and the good schools they had there. She said she would go with her boyfriend to the States and, once she got there, escape from him at the airport, run. Why? I asked her and she said because he was not qualified, he wasn't even a mechanic she said; he just washed the glasses in a juice counter. She was fun to be with - sparkling, pretty, swinging her hips in the kitchen. She always wore a necklace, a little bronze cross shining between her collar-bones. One day she was ill and Mama and I visited her. Her home was a wretched mud house, wide and sprawling, almost like a compound. It was full of men and women, all young, all Ethiopian, all refugees. We didn't know if they were related or not. Donna was lying, thin and feverish, on a low cot. I didn't know if she was glad to see us or not. When she recovered, she stole Mania's Chanel No 5, a nightdress and a pair of sandals Mania had never worn. We

never saw her again. Mama could have called the police and told them where Donna lived but she didn't - she liked her too much - and, feeling hurt, she even hid the theft from Baba. We got another Ethiopian maid - dull and untalkative, she took no pride in her looks or her figure. I like to think that Donna made it to the States; made it to that better life she felt she deserved. I wish I could meet her now, hug her with my dripping gloves which I wear because, like her, I pride myself in keeping my hands smooth. I would tell her, 'Look what happened, I'm washing dishes like you did,' and we would laugh together.

'It's time for my coffee,' Doctora Zeinah says as she puts the kettle on, scoops Nescafe into her mug. I know now that I am expected to continue ironing - I push a button and steam heaves out, I manoeuvre the iron around the buttons.

She surveys the kitchen. 'I took that chicken out of the freezer last night so that it would have time to melt. Otherwise, how would you cook it? I told Lamva she has to remember every night before she sleeps to take out meat or chicken so that you can cook it the next day. I hope she remembers.'

Insha' Allah,' I murmur.

My children grew up in Oman where we always had maids. They're very spoilt and can't look after themselves. Tamer can't even make himself a cup of tea! I wouldn't mind if he ate out, Mcl)onald's or at his college, but none of that is halal here and he's always been strict. He will only eat halal meat. I don't know where he got his religiousness from, none of us is as observant as him.'

I don't know what to say to that - so I continue ironing.

'Anyway, albaindiillilah, Lamya found you. It was a good idea to ask in the mosque.'

Yes,' I say.

She pours the hot water over the coffee granules in her mug. 'I would stay with them longer but I need to go back. I came to settle them in and they seem to be settled now. Tamer didn't like it here at first but his father wants him to study like he did in England. As soon as Tamer finished school last year, his father applied for him to come here.'

I am flattered that she is chatting to me; I hang on to her every

word, enjoying her Egyptian accent. Mama and I used to watch the Egyptian soaps every day - even when we were out visiting we would ask our hosts to please, put on the TV.

It is the first time for me to put Mai down for her nap and it is a challenge. I follow Doctora Zeinab's instructions - the ritual of carrying her to the kitchen, pouring sugar-free Rihena in her favourite cup, adding Evian (none of the family, to my surprise, drinks tapwater). Then carrying Mai to the bedroom, closing the curtains, settling her in her cot, giving her the cup to suck on. I sit on the floor next to the cot. She bounces up and stands in the cot, wide awake. 'Lie down, Mai, go to sleep.' I take the cup away from her. 'Lie down, then I'll give you your cup.' She starts to scream. I have no choice but to give her back the cup, afraid that her cries will bring Doctora Zeinab to the room.

'Lie down, Mai, see, like me.' I stretch out on the floor and close my eyes. In a while, I hear a gentle thud on the cot mattress. I open my eyes and find her lying with a foot resting on one of the bars of the cot. One hand holds the cup, the fingers of the other twists and plays with the tassels of her cover. She seems content. Her eyes meet mine and she lifts her head, perks up. I quickly close my eyes again, telling myself I must remain perfectly still so as not to disturb her. Soon I began to hear her steady breathing. I agonize over whether to remove the empty cup from her sleeping fingers or leave it. Perhaps, in the middle of her nap, she will want another sip but then she might knock her cup against the bars of the cot and wake up. I take the risk and ease the cup away from her grasp. She stirs and rolls over. I freeze, afraid that any movement, any sound will wake her up. But I am safe, she is deeply asleep.

In the afternoon, Doctora Zeinab sits in the armchair in the living room, waiting for the taxi she has called. She looks elegant in a brown two-piece suit, full make-up and shiny high-heeled shoes. Earlier I carried her two suitcases from her bedroom to the door of the flat.

Now I sense a tension in her as she waits, rustling the newspaper, an impatience to be off. Her good clothes make her reluctant to hold Mai and so my role is to occupy and amuse Mai, prevent her from messing up her grandmother's clothes. It is raining outside and that is why Mai and I can't go to the park. I hold Mai up to the window to watch the rain.

The ledge is wide enough for her to stand on and the window is safely closed with a child lock. The trees in the park sag under the weight of water and the leaves have lost their crisp shine. Below us, people hold up strong umbrellas, the windscreen wipers of the cars swish back and forth. The room darkens and Doctora Zeinah puts on the light. The telephone rings and she picks it up.

Her hoarse hello softens into, 'Tamer, babibi, what's wrong, you're late?' A pause. Of course I don't mind. I told you this morning that you needn't conic. I can go to Heathrow on my own - you never listen to me.' I sit on the window ledge and Mai settles in my lap - we are becoming friends now.

No, it isn't a problem getting my suitcases downstairs. Of course not.' A pause and she smiles. 'I'm glad you're not going to miss your lecture.'

I hear the key in the door of the flat, it opens and the young man I had met in the lobby walks in. I can see him down the corridor in the hall, but Doctora Zeinab can't. He is talking into a mobile phone and his voice reaches me in a whisper. 'So Mama, you're sure you don't need me to come home? You're going to manage going to Terminal 4 all by yourself?'

He walks into the sitting room as she is saying, 'It's too late now anyway for you to come home ... Tamer!' They both start to laugh. He switches his phone off and puts it in his pocket. I notice that he resembles her; those large slightly protruding eyes, the curve on the nose, but these features are handsome on him. His mother stands up and they hug. She is shorter than him and he is languid in his show of affection. They laugh; there is an ease in their relationship, a carelessness I did not notice between mother and daughter.

Mai squeals, 'Ta-ma, Tama.' And he turns towards her. He notices my presence for the first time and is a little embarrassed, more restrained. I look away, out of the window. He must have made a face to his mother, for I hear her say, 'Come, let's go to my room.' But Mai slips from my arms, rushes to him. He is on his knees now, arms wide open. She is lifted high up. The whole room is different. Some people do that, they can enter a room and change it.

From the window, I see a black taxi park; the driver gets out and rings our bell. Tamer heads towards the entryphone. His accent strikes me as being slightly American. It must be the kind of school he went to in Oman.

'I'll take the suitcases downstairs,' he calls out to his mother who had gone into the bathroom. I hold the door open for him, run and call the lift. He picks up his mother's suitcases, both at the same time. I almost laugh at the effort he makes to pretend that they are not heavy. He is heading towards the stairs, but I call out that the lift is here. I stop Mai from walking into the lift after her uncle. She is charged with the excitement of too many things happening all at the same time. The elevator descends and I catch a glimpse of a small smile aimed at me, a vivid picture of him standing between the two suitcases; jeans and Nike trainers, his light green jacket spotted with rain. 'He'll come back,' I tell Mai. She is totally confused. One minute Tamer was tossing her in the air; the next minute Uoctora Zeinab is kissing her goodbye.

In a while, he is leaping up the stairs again. Now that the suitcases are in the taxi, he is impatient to get going. I dither at the doorway with Mai in my arms, wondering if it would be presumptuous to kiss Doctora Zeinab goodbye. She puts her coat on slowly. He is almost bouncing up and down. 'Come on Manta, come on.'

'Tamer,' she says, 'Lamya told me to give you my set of keys but how would Najwa get back into the flat if she takes Mai to the park?'

He looks at me when she says my name and looks at his mother. He is bored with what she's saying.

She continues, 'My set of keys has to remain in the flat - for Najwa to use whenever she goes. There it is.' She plonks the set of keys on the shelf near the door. The key chain is a flat green picture of Harrods.

'Don't forget Najwa, to take it with you if you go out.'

'I don't need it today,' I say. 'Today we won't go out because of the rain.'

'If it stops raining .' She is irritated now. And tomorrow and the day after - if you don't take the key with you, you and the girl will be stranded outside.'

Tamer groans and heads for the stairs. They are both obviously fed

up with my stupidity.

`Look after the house,' Doctora Zeinab says more gently, `I will be coming back again, insha' Allah, and I will be phoning. This girl is your biggest responsibility.'

`Insha' Allah, you will come hack to us soon, Doctora,' I say knowing I will not kiss her goodbye, knowing she does not expect me to.

I watch her walk briskly down the stairs. Only when she is out of sight do I close the door of the flat.

I take Mai to the window and we watch Tamer and Doctora Zeinab get into the taxi. They look up at us and wave. Tamer pushes down the window and grins up at us. Mai starts to cry. She bawls and stamps her feet on the ledge and, though I am propping her, she loses her balance and tumbles. I grab her in time and hold her up again to the window. We must be a sight - Mai having a tantrum, and me with a dumb expression on my face, incompetent.

Twelve

The train comes out of the underground tunnel. There is sunlight and grass now, the houses of outer London. Every time the train stops more people get out and hardly anyone hoards. We are nearing the end of the line. I am closer to Omar now.

A bus takes me from the station to the prison. It is an ordinary building set well back from the road with spacious grounds and a car park. Omar has not always lived here. There were other prisons before, ones that were darker and rougher. Now this benign one is a graduation. Inside the building I show my VO to the guard. He takes my handbag and keeps it. I am on time. Already a small group has started to gather: a blonde woman with her two black sons, several middle-aged couples, another woman with a baby. We are ushered into a lift by a jolly guard in a dark blue uniform. He chats with the small boys and their mother laughs. She is excited, looking forward to seeing her man. As I do every visit, I reach out for a sense of shame, for a sense of guilt or even sheepishness but there is nothing. Everything is ordered and ordinary - we might as well be visiting innocent patients in an asylum or teenagers in a boarding school.

The room we are led to has a snack shop along one side. The little boys and their mother head there. There are round tables surrounded by immovable stools - three white stools for the visitors and one blue stool for the prisoner. We sit on our white stools and wait; the guards stand in pairs along the doors, chatting. It is only a few minutes but it feels like a long time. They come out individually, not in pairs nor in clusters nor in single file but aloof as if there is neither camaraderie nor shared experience between them. Yet they all wear the same pale blue shirt, slight variations in trousers. A man in dreadlocks struts into the arms of his sons. He and the mother kiss. This family is noisy while the rest of us are more subdued.

When I see Omar I know I must have aged too. Time has passed,

taken us by surprise. 'Hey, Nana,' he says, the only one in the world now who still uses my nickname. We shake hands, pat each other on the back and eventually hug. Over the years his hair has thinned, his hairline receded. Now he is almost bald and I can remember luxuriant curls greased in imitation of Michael Jackson on the cover of Off the Wall. He wears glasses now - unfashionable ones that the prison services have given him. His health isn't very good. He has stomach ulcers, kidney problems, colds that take ages to clear up.

'It's been ages since you sent me an invite. You know I would come and see you every weekend. You know that.' It irks me that I cannot visit him whenever I want to, that the initiatives have to come from him.

He shrugs, 'It's too far away for you.'

'I don't mind.'

'You were here a couple of weeks ago, weren't you?'

'No, a whole month.'

'Has it been a whole month?' He looks confused. His memory is not as accurate as it used to be. Sometimes I think he is not well, not himself, will never be. As if to reassure me, he leans forward. 'So, what's your news?' His interest in me is highest at the beginning of the visit. It will dwindle as if I disappoint him, as if I don't bring him what he needs. I tell him about my new job. I describe St John's Wood High Street where the clothes in the shops are so expensive that they don't even display the prices in the windows. I tell him about Doctora Zeinab, Mai and Lamya. 'Her brother,' I say, 'is only nineteen and is so devout and good. No cigarettes, no girlfriend, no clubbing, no drinking. He has a beard and goes to the mosque every day.'

'What a wimp!'

No, he isn't a wimp! I sound possessive.

Omar shrugs as if it doesn't matter to him either way. He changes the subject. 'Do you have any news of Uncle Saleh?'

'I've just got a letter from him. He sends you his regards.'

'How is he?'

'Fine, alhamdulillah, getting used to being a senior citizen in Toronto.'

`And Sarnir? He's dropped us like a hot potato.'

`He's not the only one, Omar.' But I wonder if our old friends have dropped us or merely drifted off, lost touch.

`I expected more of him, being a cousin and all.' His voice is a little hiter, only a little.

Once, when Samir was still in Britain, Omar had sent him an invite. Samir had not visited him, nor sent an apology, nor written.

`Well, he's very high up in ICI now. His children are getting big - Uncle Saleh sent me a few photos. The eldest girl looks like Mama so much you wouldn't believe it.'

We talk of the past, before Mama died. We talk of the pop music we liked and how nowadays the new hands are no good. We remember a Bob Marley concert we went to in Earls Court. We remember buying vinyl records and the evening Baba took us to see the musical Oliver in Shaftesbury Avenue.

`Do you remember ice skating in Queensway?' Omar smiles. 'I loved that place. There was a jukebox in the cafeteria. The first jukebox I had ever seen. We would put in ten pence and press a button, choose the song we wanted.'

`How did we learn how to skate? I can't remember!' I laugh - children from hot Khartoum coming to London every summer - walking into an ice-skating rink in Queensway as if they had every right to be there. Money did that. Money gave us rights.

`I wanted to stay here the whole year,' he says, `I wanted to stay in London for ever.'

I am relieved that he is relaxed today and talkative. Sometimes he never unwinds, stays moody until the end of the visit. I say, `You used to get ill on the last day of the holiday when we were due to fly back to Khartoum.'

`Did I? I don't remember.' There is pleasure in his voice as if he admires his childhood love of London.

`You would get a stiff neck. You wouldn't be able to move your neck. Mama said it was psychological.'

He laughs a little and starts to tell me the prison library has improved and he spends more time reading books. He likes books about

pop music and the biographies of film stars. I tell him he should read the Qur'an. It is the wrong thing to say. He shrugs and says, 'These religious things - they're not for everyone.' He takes his glasses off to clean them on the edge of his shirt. One of the guards turns to look at him and then away.

I start to speak but he interrupts me. 'Don't nag me, Najwa.' There are dark shadows under his eyes.

'I'm not nagging.'

'Every time you visit me you go on about the same thing.' He is right. For twelve years now I have been trying to tell him the same things in different ways. Ever since I started to pray and wear hijab, I have been hoping he would change like I've changed. He puts his glasses back on. The guard's eyes flicker over him again.

'Look,' I say, 'I know how you feel. We weren't brought up in a religious way, neither of us. We weren't even friends in Khartoum with people who were religious.'

'The servants,' he says, 'I remember them praying. Musa, the driver, and the others - they would be praying in the garden.'

Our house was a house where only the servants prayed. Where a night-watchman would open the gate for our car arriving late after a night out, then sit reciting the Qur'an until it was time for the dawn prayer. I remember him sitting cross-legged in the garden, dark as a tree.

'If Baba and Mania had prayed,' I say, 'if you and I had prayed, all of this wouldn't have happened to us. We would have stayed a normal family.'

'That's naive ...'

'Allah would have protected us, if we had wanted Him to, if we had asked Him to but we didn't. So we were punished.' I cannot talk fluently, convincingly. Always I come on too strong and fail.

'Don't be daft. You make it sound like Baba did something wrong. They lied about him. Where were the millions they claim he embezzled and took abroad? We came here and there was nothing.'

'You're right but that is all in the past now. It's you I'm worried about. I care.'

'I know,' he says but he sounds distant.

`Those people who put you in prison - they don't care about you. You think that if they forgive you they will let you out of here, but it's more important that Allah forgives you. Then He will do wonderful things for you and open doors for you. Doors you didn't even know existed.'

`This is way over my head Najwa, way over my head.' He shakes his head from side to side. `I don't have a clue what you're on about.' He puts on an accent now, continues to shake his head, pretends to look awed. `Doors I didn't know existed. This is deep, man, real deep.'

`You're hopeless.' I can't help but laugh. He wants me to laugh. Then he looks straight at me. `Najwa, listen, you obviously feel happy being devout - that's your business. But I'm fine as I am.'

How can he be fine as he is? His youth wasted and he tells me he's fine.

Thirteen

I like my new job. As the days pass, Mai warms to me. She takes my hand as we walk from her room to the bathroom, she smiles when she first sees me in the morning. The days follow a rhythm. Lamva's grumpiness in the morning, her barely whispered greetings, and how she comes home in the evening radiant, refreshed. She must love her studies. I take pride in ironing her elegant clothes, in arranging the bottles of lotions on her dressing table. She has many necklaces, which she hangs on a special stand shaped like a tree with bare branches. I hold up a string of multi-coloured beads and admire them. I hold her pearl necklace in my hand. I once had one too but Omar took it and sold it to buy drugs. Her silk scarves are for her neck not her hair - but sometimes I try them on as headscarves, look at my face in the mirror. There was a time when I looked good and it didn't matter whether I was ill or not or what time of the month it was. Now my looks are inconsistent as if they are about to slide away.

Every morning I face a mess in the kitchen. It has worsened since Doctora Zeinab's departure and a considerable part of my day is spent cleaning up the kitchen from the misuse of the night before. It saddens me when they leave cooked food out all night. More often than not it spoils and I can't eat it. I have been eating their leftovers ever since Lamya said, 'We don't eat food unless it's freshly cooked - you can have it.'

The light in the sitting room changes every day as the trees in the park become more bare. When Mai has her nap, I sit on the armchair where Doctora Zeinab used to sit and enjoy the light in the room or watch the Arabic channels on TV. I see the Ka'bah and pilgrims walking around it. I wish I were with them. I see teenage girls wearing hijab and I wish I had done that at their age, wish there was not much in my past to regret. The religious programmes make me feel solid as if they are telling me, 'Don't worry. Allah is looking after you, He will never leave you, He knows you love Him, He knows you are trying and all of this,

all of this will be meaningful and worth it in the end.' I learn from these programmes. Bits and pieces: everyone in Paradise will be thirty-three years old regardless of what age they were when they died. Eve was the most beautiful woman Allah created; the second most beautiful woman was Sarah, Abraham's wife. The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, stopped in the street to chat to a mad woman. They spoke for a long time and everyone was surprised that he had time for someone as insignificant as her.

This kind of learning makes sense to me. That's why I go to talks and classes at the mosque. It surprises me that what I learn stays with me. At school I used to forget everything immediately after the exams. Once at an Eid party in the mosque there was an Islamic knowledge quiz - I got all the answers right and I won a box of Cadbury's Milk Tray.

There are books about Islam in Lamya's flat but I doubt that they belong to her. She does not strike me as religious and there is not even a prayer mat or tarha in her room. The books are in Tamer's room so they must be his. Books about Sufism, early Islamic history, the interpretation of the Qur'an. He reads them; they are not just there to fill shelves. I can tell that he reads them because he sometimes leaves them open on his mother's dressing table, which has now become his desk, or they are stacked on the table next to his bed.

His room disturbs me. It is dark; the only window looks out over the service stairs and brings sounds of clattering on the metal steps, voices of workmen and the garbage collector going about his work. I have to put on the light in order to clean the room. He folds his prayer mat neatly on the chair but leaves the bed unmade. Empty cartons of juice and chocolate wrappers lie around the wastepaper basket as if he has thrown them and missed. I pick up his clothes off the bed; they smell of him and make me feel self-conscious. I wipe his desk. I stack his university books in one pile, his other books in another. I put his Amr Khalid tapes in order. I always leave cleaning his room last, after all the other chores. I read that piece of advice long ago in *Slimming with* regard to exercise. Save your favourite stretch for last so you can be motivated to start with the ones you don't like and get them over with. Sometimes, I take one of his books out of the room to read. While Mai

naps, I read what he has been reading. The flat becomes quiet without the TV. Not all of the books are easy for me to read. I sift through them and if I understand them I keep reading, if I don't I put them away.

I hardly ever see him in the mornings. He is out before I arrive. It is in the evenings that we usually meet. Sometimes he arrives just I am leaving. In the hallway he takes off his shoes while I put on mine. He is always polite, always smiles when he says, `Salaamu alleikum'. There is a modesty in him which his sister doesn't have. Sometimes I meet him on the stairs. He takes them two at a time and perhaps I walk too softly because he always seems taken aback to see me. I step to the right to let him pass, while at the same time he moves to his left. I then step to the left only to block him again and we both laugh. The silliness of it and the laugh stays with me until I reach the bus stop.

Sometimes we meet on the landing, our reflections in the mirror making it seem as if there are four of us. The mirror in the landing is compassionate: it makes me look young, makes me look better than I feel though I always feel uplifted when I see him. It is natural; a beautiful, devout youth with striking eyes.

One day the weather is exceptionally warm and Mai and I spend a long afternoon in Regent's Park. On the way home, in front of the mosque, we meet Tamer. He comes up to us, greets me and ruffles Mai's hair. For a few seconds, she does not recognize him. She has been dozing in her pushchair, tired out from playing in the sandpit and the slides. `It's me - Tamer,' he says bending down, sitting on his heels. He picks up her hand and kisses it. The three of us are blocking the pavement and around us people start to get irritated. I push Mai again and he falls in step with us.

`I wanted to take Mai to the zoo on Sunday,' he says, `but it was raining.' His voice is a little loud and, as we walk towards St John's Wood, I sense the slight unease he inspires in the people around us. I turn and look at him through their eyes. Tall, young, Arab-looking, dark eyes and the heard, just like a terrorist.

He disarms me by suddenly saying, 'Your cooking is very nice. Thank you for cooking for us.' His sister has never thanked me. But she pays me well and on time, which is more important than words of

thanks.

Instead of acknowledging his compliment I say, 'At night please put any leftovers in the fridge. Because the kitchen is warm, the food sometimes goes bad and that's a waste.'

He looks ashamed. He ducks his head and says, 'Yes, it's a sin to waste food.'

Perhaps I have spoken too harshly. To make amends I start to speak to him as I imagine all alllty would speak: 'How are you getting on at university?'

'I don't really know many people.'

'Well, you're still new. In no time you'll make friends.' We stop at the zebra crossing.

'I've joined the Muslim Society. They organize Friday prayer at the college so we don't have to go far and skip lectures.'

'That's nice. And the course itself - how are you getting on with your studies?' I don't usually talk like that to my employers. I would never talk like that to Lanlya.

'I don't particularly like what I'm studying,' he replies. 'It's illy dad - he wants me to study Business.'

A silver Peugeot and a taxi come to a stop. We cross.

'What would you have liked to study?'

wanted to study Islamic History.'

'That's nice that you have this interest'. We start to walk down St John's Wood High Street.

'That's what illy moll and dad say - it's all interest, a hobby. They say I have to be practical and study something that would get me a proper job.'

any sure Allah will reward you for trying to please your parents.'

'Insha' Allah,' he says and smiles as if I had paid him a compliment.

My hands don't tremble when I make his bed, when I smooth his pillow, when I empty the pockets of his jeans before I put them in the washing machine. In his pockets I find receipts from the university cafeteria, a piece of gum, coins, a leaflet about a rally in Trafalgar Square for Palestine. I tidy his desk, pick up pencil shavings, wipe a

smudge of ink. I unfold a piece of paper. It is his timetable with the room numbers of his lectures. Perhaps he has forgotten to take it or now knows where to go. On the corner he has written, 'Studying sucks'. I smile as if I can hear him breathing the words. I leaf through the books he studies from: Economics, Accounting, Business Management. Once a long time ago in Khartoum University, I struggled with these subjects. I was in university to kill time until I got married and had children. I thought that was why all the girls were there too but they surprised me by caring about their education, forging ahead with jobs and careers. I surprised myself by never getting married.