Bism Allah, Ar-rahman, Ar-raheem

I've come down in the world. I've slid to a place where the ceiling is low and there isn't much room to move. Most of the time I'm used to it. Most of the time I'm good. I accept my sentence and do not brood or look hack. But sometimes a shift makes me remember. Routine is ruffled and a new start makes me suddenly conscious of what I've become, standing in a street covered with autumn leaves. The trees in the park across the road are scrubbed silver and brass. I look up and see the minaret of Regent's Park mosque visible above the trees. I have never seen it so early in the morning in this vulnerable light. London is at its most beautiful in autumn. In summer it is seedy and swollen, in winter it is overwhelmed by Christmas lights and in spring, the season of birth, there is always disappointment. Now it is at its best, now it is poised like a mature woman whose beauty is no longer fresh but still surprisingly potent.

My breath comes out like smoke. I wait to ring the bell of a flat; the number is written down in my notebook. She said eight. I cough and worry that I will cough in front of my new employer, implant in her the anxiety that I will pass germs on to her child. But she might not be the anxious type. I do not know her yet. The only time I saw her was last week when she came to the mosque searching for a servant. She had an aura of haste and grooming about her. Her silk scarf was rolled casually around her head and neck and, when it slipped and showed her hair, she didn't bother to tug it hack on again. A certain type of Arab woman - rich student, late twenties, making the most of the West ... But I still did not know her. She was not herself when she spoke to me. Few people are themselves in mosques. They are subdued, taken over by a fragile, neglected part of themselves.

I hope she hasn't forgotten me. I hope she hasn't changed her mind and put her little girl in a nursery or found someone else. And I hope that her mother, who has until now been the baby-sitter, has not extended her stay in Britain and made me unnecessary. St John's Wood High Street is busy. Men in suits and young women wearing the latest fashions get into new cars and drive off to good jobs. This is a posh area. Pink hues and the expanse that money blesses people with. The past tugs but it is not possessions that I miss. I do not want a new coat but wish I could dry-clean my old one more often. Wish that not so many doors have closed in my face; the doors of taxis and education, beauty salons, travel agents to take me on Hajj ...

When someone picks up the entry-phone, I say, my voice edgy with hope, `Salaamu alleikum, it's me, Najwa ...' She is expecting me, alhamdullilah. The sound of the buzzer is almost thrilling. I push the door open and enter to find everything in wood; the past preserved and cared for in good taste. This is a beautiful building, dignified and solid. Old, cautious money polished by generation after generation with love and care. Not like my father's money, sequestered by a government, squandered by Omar. I was silly too with my share, I did nothing useful with it. There's a mirror in the lobby. It shows a woman in a white headscarf and beige, shapeless coat. Eyes too bright and lashes too long, but still I look homely and reliable, the right age. A young nanny might be careless, all older nanny complains about her back. I am the right age.

The elevator is the old-fashioned type so that I have to yank the door. It clatters in the elegant quiet of the building. I reach to press the button for the second floor but find that the first button says one to three, the second three to four, and the third four to six. I try to work it out, stare at it but I am still confused. I decide to climb the stairs instead. A door slams above me; quick footsteps descend the stairs. When he comes within sight I see a youth who is tall and gangly with the start of a beard and curly hair. I stop him and ask about the elevator.

`It's the flat numbers, not the numbers of the floor.' He speaks English as if it is his mother tongue but the accent is not local. It is difficult guessing people's origins in London. If he were Sudanese, he would be considered light-skinned but I have no proof that he is.

`Right, thanks.' I smile but he does not smile back.

Instead he repeats, You just have to press the number of the flat you want.' His eyes are liquid brown; they shine not with intelligence, not at all like Anwar's, but with intuition. Perhaps he is sensitive but not particularly bright, not quick and sharp like young people nowadays.

I thank him again and he ducks his head a little, shrugs his shoulders to adjust the strap of his bag. I have heard the saying that you can smell Paradise on the young. When he backs away and walks out of the building, everything goes back to normal again.

I ascend and open the door of the elevator to an elegant, vacuumed carpet, take hopeful steps towards the flat. I will take the little girl to the square across the road. I will take her to the mosque, time it so that I can pray with everyone else and afterwards feed the ducks in Regent's Park. It is very likely that the flat will have satellite TV and I will he able to watch an Egyptian film on ART and the news on al-Jezira. Last week I heard a talk and these were the lines that stayed with me, that touched me the most: The mercy of Allah is an ocean. Our sins are a lump of clay clenched between the beak of a pigeon. The pigeon is perched on the branch of a tree at the edge of that ocean. It only has to open its beak.

Part One

Khartoum, 1984-5

One

'Omar, are you awake?' I shook his arm that lay across his face, covering his eyes.

`Hmm.'

`Get up.' His room was wonderfully cool because he had the best air conditioner in the house.

`I can't move.' He put his arm down and blinked at me. I moved my head back, wrinkling my nose at his bad breath.

`If you don't get up, I'm going to take the car.'

`Seriously, I can't ... can't move.'

`Well, I'm going without you.' I walked to the far end of his room, past his cupboard and the poster of Michael Jackson. I switched the air conditioner off. It died down with an echo and heat surrounded the room, waiting to pounce into it.

`Why are doing this to me?'

I laughed and said with glee, `Now you'll be forced to get up.'

Downstairs I drank tea with Baba. He always looked so nice in the morning, fresh from his shower and smelling of aftershave.

`Where's your brother?' he grumbled.

`Probably on his way down,' I said.

`Where's your mother?'

`It's Wednesday. She goes to Keep Fit.' It always amazed me how Baba deliberately forgot my mother's schedule, how his eyes behind his glasses looked cautious and vague when he spoke of her. He had married above himself, to better himself. His life story was of how he moved from a humble background to become manager of the President's office via marriage into an old wealthy family. I didn't like him to tell it, it confused me. I was too much like my mother.

`Spoilt,' he now mumbled into his tea, `the three of you are spoilt.'

`I'll tell Mama you said this about her!'

He made a face. `She's too soft on your brother. It's not good for him. When I was his age, I was working day and night; I had aspirations ...'

`Oh no,' I thought, `not that again.' My feelings must have shown on my face because he said, `Of course you don't want to listen to me ...'

`Oh Baba, I'm sorry.' I hugged him and kissed his cheek. `Lovely perfume.'

He smiled, `Paco Rabanne.'

I laughed. He cared about his clothes and looks more than any father I knew.

`Well, time to be off,' he said and the ritual of his departure began. The houseboy appeared from the kitchen and carried his briefcase to the car. Musa, the driver, leapt out of no where and opened the car door for him.

I watched them drive off and there was only the Toyota Corolla left in the drive way. It used to be Mama's car but last month it became mine and Omar's. Mama had a new car now and Omar stopped using his motorcycle.

I looked at the garden and the road beyond. There were no bicycles on the road. I had an admirer who kept riding his bicycle past the front of our house. Sometimes he came past three or four times a day. He had hopeful eyes and I despised him. But, like now, when the road was empty, I felt disappointed.

`Omar!' I called from downstairs. We were going to be late for our lecture. At the beginning of the term, our very first in the university, we used to go well ahead of the time. Six weeks into the term, we discovered that the sophisticated thing was to appear at the last minute. All the lecturers turned up ten minutes past the hour, and swept grandly into halls full of expectant students.

I could not hear any sound from above so I ran upstairs. No, the bathroom was empty. I opened Omar's bedroom and the room was, as I had expected, an oven. Yet there he was fast asleep, sprawled snoring. He had kicked the covers off and was drenched in sweat and listlessness.

`That's it. I'm going to drive, I have nothing to do with you.'

He stirred a little. `What?'

I sounded angry but I was also afraid. Afraid of his sleepiness that did not stem from any illness; afraid of his lethargy that I could not talk to anyone about.

`Where are the keys?'

`Ha?'

`Where are the car keys?' I yanked open his cupboard.

`No, in the pocket of my jeans ... behind the door.'

I pulled out the keys; coins fell to the floor, a box of Benson & Hedges.

`See what will happen when Baba hears about this.'

`Put the air conditioner back on.'

`No.'

`Please Nana.'

His use of my nickname softened me a little. The empathy of twins gripped me and for a moment I was the one who was hot and unbearably sleepy. I switched on the air conditioner and marched out of the room.

I rolled up the window of the car so that dust wouldn't come in and the hot wind wouldn't mess up my hair. I wished I could feel like an emancipated young student, driving her own car with confidence. Was I not an emancipated young woman driving her own car to university? In Khartoum only a minority of women drove cars and in university less than thirty per cent of students were girls - that should make me feel good about myself. But I preferred it when Omar was with me, when Omar was driving. I missed him.

I drove slowly and was careful to indicate and careful not to knock down anyone on a bicycle. At the Gamhouriya Street traffic light a little girl knocked on my window, begging with tilted head and unfocused eyes. Because I was alone I gave her a note. If Omar had been with me, I would have given her a coin - he hated beggars. She clutched the five pounds with slow disbelief and ran back to the pavement. When the light changed to green, I drove on. From the rear-view mirror, I could see her engulfed by other children and a few desperate adults. Dust and the start of a fight.

My hands were sweaty when I knocked on the door of lecture room 101. I was fifteen minutes late. I could hear Dr Basheer inside delivering another chapter on Accounting, my least favourite subject, but my father wanted Omar to study Business and, after years in a girls' school,

I wanted to be with Omar. I knocked again louder and gathered courage to turn the knob. It was locked. So Dr Basheer had been true to his announcement that no late comers would be allowed in his lectures. I turned and walked to the cafeteria.

My favourite cafeteria was at the back of the university. It overlooked the Blue Nile but the water couldn't be seen because of the dense trees. The morning shade and the smell of the mango trees began to soothe me. I sat at a table and pretended to read my notes. They meant nothing and filled me with emptiness. I could foresee the hours I would have to spend memorizing what I couldn't understand. When I looked up I noticed that Anwar Al-Sir was sitting at the next table. He was in his last year and known for the straight As he got. Today he was alone with his cigarette and glass of tea. In a campus where most were scruffy, he always wore clean shirts, was clean-shaven and his hair was cut short even though longer hairstyles were in fashion. Omar had his hair just like Michael Jackson on the album cover of Off the Wall.

Anwar Al-Sir was a member of the Democratic Front, the students' branch of the Communist Party. He probably hated me because I had heard him speaking in a nadwa with wit and scorn of the bourgeoisie. Landowning families, capitalists, the aristocracy; they were to blame, he said, for the mess our country was in. I talked to Omar about this but Omar said I was being too personal. Omar did not have time for the likes of Anwar; he had his own set of friends. They lent each other videos of Top of The Pops and they all intended to go to Britain one day. Omar believed we had been better off under the British and it was a shame that they left.

I made sure that he didn't write these ideas in any of his History or Economics essays. He would surely fail because all the hooks and lecturers said that colonialism was the cause of our underdevelopment.

It would have been childish to move from where I was sitting. But I felt uncomfortable sitting facing Anwar. He smiled at me and this took me aback. He kept looking at me. I felt that my blouse was too tight and my face too hot. I must have exhaled because he said, `It's hot, isn't it? And you're used to air conditioners.' There was a teasing in his voice.

I laughed. When I spoke, my voice sounded strange to my ears, as if it were not me. `But I prefer the heat to the cold.'

`Why?' He threw the butt of his cigarette on the ground and, with his feet, covered it with sand. His movements were gentle.

It's more natural, isn't it?' There were two tables between us and I wondered which one of us would make the first move, which one of us would get up and move over to the other table.

`It depends,' he said. `Someone in Russia might regard the cold as natural.'

`We're not Russians.'

He laughed in a nice way and fell silent. His silence disappointed me and I thought of different ways to revive the conversation again. I scrambled different sentences in my head, fast, `I heard you have a brother studying in Moscow', `The air conditioner in my car broke down', `You know, Dr Basheer wouldn't let me in'. I discarded them all as foolish and unbecoming. The silence grew until I could hear my heart above the sound of the birds.

I got up and left the cafeteria without a glance towards him or a goodbye. It was nearly ten o'clock and time for Macroeconomics. The lecturer passed the attendance sheet. I wrote my name, then changed pens, made my handwriting more upright and wrote Omar's name.

I walked out of the Macro lecture room to find him waiting for me.

`Give me the car keys.'

`Here. Don't forget we have History at twelve. Show your face, please.'

He frowned and hurried off. I worried about him. It was there, nagging at me. When I was young my mother said, `Look after Omar, you're the girl, you're the quiet, sensible one. Look after Omar.' And year in, year out, I covered for Omar. I sensed his weakness and looked out for Omar.

Two

I took my wallet, notebook and pencil case out of my straw bag and left it on the shelf near the library door. Two girls from my class were leaving the library and we smiled at each other. I was not sure of their names. They both wore white tobes and one of them was very cute with deep dimples and sparkling eyes. They were provincial girls and I was a girl from the capital and that was the reason we were not friends. With them I felt, for the first time in my life, self-conscious of my clothes; my too short skirts and too tight blouses. Many girls dressed like me, so I was not unusual. Yet these provincial girls made me feel awkward. I was conscious of their modest grace, of the tobes that covered their slimness - pure white cotton covering their arms and hair.

In the basement of the library the air coolers blew heavily and the fans overhead twirled. I put my things on the table and looked at the shelves. Something Russian, to come close to him, to have something to say to him. Marxist theory, dialectics. No, I wouldn't understand anything. At last I took a fat book off the shelf and sat down to read from a collection of translated poems.

I understood the line `I've lived to bury my desires'. But I did not know from where this understanding came. I had a happy life. My father and mother loved me and were always generous. In the summer we went for holidays in Alexandria, Geneva and London. There was nothing that I didn't have, couldn't have. No dreams corroded in rust, no buried desires. And yet, sometimes, I would remember pain like a wound that had healed, sadness like a forgotten dream.

`I like Russian writers,' I said to Anwar next time, for there was a next time, a second chance that was not as accidental as the first. We walked together, past the post office and the university bookshop.

`Who?'

`Pushkin,' I said. He was not impressed with my reply.

`Look,' he said, `if I gave you some leaflets, would you help me pass them out?'

`I can't. I promised my father I wouldn't get involved in student politics.'

He shrugged and raised his eyebrows as if to say, `Why am I not surprised?'

`What are your own political views?' he asked.

`I don't know. I don't have any.'

What do you mean you don't know?'

`Everyone seems to blame everyone else.'

`Well, someone has to take the blame for what's happening.'

'Why?'

`So that they can pay the price.'

I didn't like him saying that. Pay the price.

`Your father is close to the President?'

`Yes. They're friends too.'

`Have you met him?'

Of course. He telephones my father at home and I answer the phone.'

`Just like that.' He smiled.

`Yes, it's nothing. Once, years ago, when I was in primary school, he phoned and when I answered I said "hello" in a very English way.' I held an imaginary receiver in my ear, mimicked myself saying, `Hello, 44959.' I liked the way Anwar was watching me, the amusement in his eyes. `Then,' I continued, `the President got angry and he said, "Speak properly, girl! Speak to me in Arabic".'

Anwar burst out laughing. I was pleased that I had made him laugh.

`I like talking to you,' he said, slowly.

`Why?' That was the way to hear nice things. Ask why.

Years later, when I looked back, trying to remember the signs of hidden tension, looking behind the serenity, I think of the fights that I took for granted. The smell of dust and sewers fought against the smell of jasmine and guava and neither side won. The Blue Nile poured from the Highlands of Ethiopia and the Sahara encroached but neither was able to conquer the other. Omar wanted to leave. All the time Omar wanted to leave and I, his twin, wanted to stay.

`Why Samir and not me?' he asked Baba as we ate lunch. We ate from china and silver. We wiped our mouths with napkins that were washed and ironed every day.

`Because Samir didn't get good enough grades,' Mama said. She had just come back from the hairdresser and her hair curled over her shoulder. I could smell her hairspray and cigarettes. I wished I were as glamorous as her, open and generous, always saying the right things, laughing at the right time. One day I would be.

`So, is it fair,' I said, in support of Omar, `that the one who gets the poor grades gets to go abroad and the one who gets the good grades stays here?' Samir was our cousin, the on of Uncle Saleh, Mama's brother. Samir was now in Atlantic College in Wales doing the IB, which was like A levels.

You too?' Baba glared at me.

No, I don't want to go anywhere. I want to stay here with you.' I smiled at Mama and she smiled back. We were too close for me to leave her and go study abroad.

'Najwa is very patriotic,' Omar said sarcastically.

As you should he,' said Baba.

`Eat and argue later,' said Mama but they ignored her.

I want to go to London. I hate studying here.' Omar meant it. I could tell from his voice that he meant it.

`It's good for you,' Baba said. `Roughen you up a hit. All this private schooling you've had has spoilt you. In university you're seeing how the other side lives. You'll understand the reality of your country and the kind of work environment you'll be facing one day. When I was your age ...

Omar groaned. I began to fear a scene. I swallowed, afraid of Baba shouting and Omar storming out of the house. I would have to spend the rest of the day phoning round searching for him.

I stood alone at the bottom of the garden. My admirer passed by on his bicycle. His clothes were awful and his haircut was terrible. It wasn't flattering to be admired by someone like him. I felt the familiar anger rise in me. But it was fun to be angry with him. I frowned at him, knowing well that any response would only encourage him. He grinned hopefully and pedalled away. I actually knew nothing about him.

`Come with me, Najwa', Mama said. She was wearing her plain blue tope and her black high-heeled sandals. They made a tapping noise on the marble of the front terrace. She carried a plastic bag full of lollipops and sweets.

Musa, the driver, came round with the car, gravel churning in the stillness of the afternoon. He opened the car door for her and went to bring out from the house more plastic bags bulging with old clothes and two pails of homemade biscuits. I recognized Omar's old Coca-Cola T-shirt and a pink dress that I'd stopped wearing because it was out of fashion.

`Where are you going?' I guessed from Mama's subdued clothes that it wasn't anywhere fun.

`Cheshire Home,' she said, getting into the back of car. She said `Cheshire Home' gaily as if it were a treat. Only Mama could do that.

I hesitated a little. The thin twisted limbs of the children disturbed me and I preferred it when she took me to the school for the deaf. There the children, though they could not speak properly, were always running about carefree, with sharp intelligent eyes taking in what they couldn't hear.

But I got in the car next to her and, when Musa started the car, she opened her bag and gave me a spearmint gum.

`If you could see the orphanage your Aunt took me to yesterday!' she said. `In comparison Cheshire is Paradise. Dirty, dirty, you wouldn't believe it.'

I wrinkled my nose in disgust. I was relieved they had gone in the morning when I was in university and so had not been able to drag me along.

`And they have nothing,' she went on. `But is this an excuse not to keep the children clean?'

She did not expect a reply from me. Musa was smiling and nodding in the driver's seat as if she was talking to him. That's how she was. That's how she talked. There were times when she was animated and other times when she would be low and quiet. And it was strange that often at parties and weddings she would he sober, preoccupied, yet in crises she had the strength to rise to whatever the situation demanded. I knew, listening to her talk about the orphanage, that she was not going to let it rest. She would pull every string, harass my father and harass His Excellency himself until she got what she wanted.

Cheshire Home was cool and shady, in a nice part of town with bungalows and old green gardens. I envied my mother's ease, how she swept in with her bag of sweets and her biscuits, with Musa walking behind her carrying the rest of the things. The nurse, Salma, welcomed her like an old friend. Salma was very tall and dark, with high cheekbones and white dazzling teeth. Her drab white uniform did not hide her lovely figure: she looked dignified, with crinkles of white in her hair. `Congratulations,' she said to me, you got into university.' She had not seen me for a long time.

You keep this place very clean.' Mama started to praise Salma.

`Oh, Cheshire was even better in the past.'

`I know. But it's still good. I went to this orphanage yesterday and it was dirty, dirty, you won't believe it.'

Which one was that?'

The room was large with a blackboard to one side, a few child-sized desks and stools.

Cots lined the wall and a few halls and toys were scattered here and there. They looked familiar - maybe Mama had brought some of them in an earlier visit. There were a few posters on the wall about the importance of immunization, and a frightening picture of a baby with smallpox. Salma brought Mama and I chairs but she sat on one of the children's stools.

The children clambered towards us in zimmers and some dragged themselves on the floor. One Southern boy was very fast, able to move around the room freely with his arms and one leg.

`One by one and I give you your lollipops,' said Mama. A faint attempt at forming a queue was abandoned in a confused flurry of outstretched hands. Mama gave them a lollipop each.

`John!' Salma called to the Southern boy. `Stop this roaming around and come and get a lollipop.'

He casually heaved himself towards us, grinning, his eyes bright.

What colour would you like?' Mama asked him.

`Red.' His eyes darted here and there, like he was scanning everything or like he was thinking of something else.

`Here. A red one for you,' Mama said. `The last red one, all the rest are yellow.'

He took the lollipop and started to unwrap it. `Is this your car outside?' he asked.

`Yes,' Mama replied.

`What's it to you!' Salma scolded him.

He ignored her and kept looking straight at Mama, `What kind of car is it?'

`Mercedes,' Mama smiled.

He nodded and sucked his lollipop. `I'm going to drive a big lorry.'

`Look at this silly boy,' Salma laughed, `How are you going to drive?'

`I will,' he said.

`With one leg?' Salma raised her eyebrows, sarcastic, amused.

Something changed in him, the look in his eyes. Salma went on, `You need two legs to drive a car.' He pivoted and dragged himself away.

'There are special cars in Europe,' I said, 'for people without ... for disabled people.' It was the first time I had spoken since we arrived; my voice sounded stupid, everyone ignored me.

Suddenly John overturned a desk, dragged a stool round the room banging everything with it.

'Stop it, John, stop being rowdy!' Salma yelled.

He ignored her. He pushed the stool straight across the room. If it hadn't collided with another stool, it would have hit Salma straight on.

'I'm going to call the the police.' Salma stood up. 'They'll come and beat you up.'

He must have believed her for he stopped and became very still. He leaned against the wall. His leg was sticking out at an awkward angle, his head against the wall, lollipop in his mouth. Suddenly still.

In the silence we heard her weeping. She might have been eleven or even twelve; she was very thin, with callipers on both legs and a pink dress that was too small for her. How would she get married, how would she work ? I must not ask these things, Mama always said, there is no point thinking these things, we just have to keep visiting.

'Why is she crying?' Mama asked Salma.

`I don't know.'

'Come and have a lollipop.' Mama called out to the girl but the girl continued to cry.

`Get up now and come and have a lollipop,' Salma shouted at the girl.

'Leave her, Salma. In her own time.' When the girl didn't move, Mama walked over to her and gave her sweets, patted her dishevelled hair. It didn't make any difference. She remained whimpering, with the sweets on her lap, until the end of our visit. Only when we were getting up to go did I see her quieten and start to unwrap the lollipop. Hunched over, she squinted, mucus dribbling from her nose over her mouth. It was a struggle for her to unwrap the lollipop, aim it at her mouth. I had thought that her legs were the problem but there was something wrong with her hands too.

Three

The party at the American club was in full swing when Omar and I arrived. We walked into the tease of red and blue disco lights and the Gap Band's `Say Oops Upside Your Head'.

'Where were you?' my best friend Randa screeched above the music. 'Come with me to the bathroom.'

'But I just got here.' I tried to protest but she grabbed my arm and pulled me.

`You look amazing,' I said to her. She was wearing a black halter-neck T-shirt and a longish swirling skirt. I hadn't made half the effort she had made. The bathroom was smelly and hot. Randa put on strawberry-flavoured lip gloss and smoothed her eyebrows. She had glitter in her hair and on her bare shoulders.

'Have you been to the hairdresser?'

`Yes I've been to the hairdresser.'

'My trousers are too tight.' An awkward twisting around to see my hips in the mirror.

`Your trousers are fine - how did you get them on?'

'Aaah ...'

'Just joking.'

`Is he here?'

`Yes, His Highness has just walked in two minutes ago and I've been here since seven!'

His Highness was the unreadable Amir whom she had been going out with for the past six months. He had lately been acting strangely.

`Tonight,' she said, `I'm going to get some response from him.'

I avoided her eyes. There were rumours that Amir had become friendly with a girl from the Arab Club. I didn't have the courage to tell Randa. Instead I said, `You really look nice today.'

`Thanks, my love.'

`Let's get out of here, I'm suffocating.'

`Wait.' Out of her handbag came the inevitable mint spray. She opened her mouth and sprayed, then turned towards me. I hated the taste but opened my mouth anyway.

Outside the bathroom, the air was fresh and some children were still in the swimming pool. Delicious smells of kebab and French fries came from the kitchen.

`I'm hungry,' I said.

`Is this a time for food?'

I caught her excitement and we giggled arm in arm down the steps and back to the tingling darkness of the party. It was my favourite song, Boney M's `Brown Girl in the Ring'. I started to sing along. In the middle of the dance floor the Indian girl Sundari was dancing with her marine. Her black straight hair swung all the way down to her waist and when she turned it flew up and fell down. I couldn't take my eyes off her. She had a way of dancing where she moved far away from her partner and with sharp high heels skipped back towards him again. He looked so like a Sudanese you could easily be fooled, but Randa and I had analysed him deeply and decided that you could tell he was American just by the way he held himself - conscious of this unglamorous part of the world he had been posted to.

I did not have to wait for long. One of Omar's friends asked me to dance and, leaving Randa, we made our way to the centre of the dance floor. White smoke rose up from the floor just like in Saturday Night Fever. I twirled around so that my earrings swayed and the arms of the others dancers brushed against mine.

Unfortunately, after Boney M came the Bee Gees with 'How Deep is Your Love' and the numbers on the dance floor dwindled to no more than five couples. Warm from dancing, I went and bought myself a Pepsi then I searched the tables exchanging 'hi's until I found Randa sitting with Omar and the ever-serious Amir. His glasses flashed in the darkness, hiding his eyes; Randa was smiling hopefully.

So how's the university?' she was asking him.

`All right,' he drawled.

'When do you get to carry that T-shaped ruler?' I asked. The Architecture students were always a striking sight on the campus, walking around with that ruler.

`Next year.' His boredom was infectious. I gave up and sat back in my chair, poured Pepsi in my glass and watched the dancers. Some couples danced very close, others moved awkwardly at arm's length. Sundari and the marine were of the very close type - his hands locked around her small waist, brushed by the fall of her hair. She lifted her head from his shoulders, moved her head hack and said something to him. He smiled. I imagined myself dancing with Anwar and then told myself not to be stupid, this was exactly the sort of thing he despised; Western music, Western ways. I had not told Randa about him. She would not understand. Yes, she would agree that he was handsome, but he was not one of us, not like us ... And a member of the Democratic Front; she would not even know what the Front was.

Omar offered Amir a cigarette. A gust of wind suddenly blew, ruffling the tablecloth. It would be winter soon, we'd wear cardigans and it would be too cold to swim.

Randa suddenly blurted out, `I'm leaving next month.'

`What!' from me and Omar, simultaneously. `Where are you going?' Question after question from me and Omar.

Amir didn't raise an eyebrow or speak. She answered us while her eyes were on him, watching his reaction, testing him.

`I'm going to England to do A levels.'

`But I thought you were going to sit your 0 levels again and try to get into Khartoum University ...'

`My parents want me to leave.'

`Just like my cousin Samir,' said Omar. `He didn't make it and gets to go abroad. And we get stuck here.' He looked at Amir for support or at least an acknowledgement of the irony. There was no response.

`Oh Randa, I'm so upset.' All through secondary school, I had hoped we would be together in university. When her grades weren't good enough, I had hoped she would try again and join me next year. I had made dreams that we would be together, that she would meet Anwar; that she would learn what the Front was.

`I can come back after A levels.' A hardness was in her voice. And suddenly her hair glitter and lip gloss weren't as nice as before.

`What do you think Amir?' She turned to him again, voice a little sharp, focused.

He shrugged. `Why not?'

`Exactly, why not?' She sat back in her chair.

That was it then, he didn't care. I hurt for her and that was mixed up with the shock that she was going away. Would she want me to go with her to the bathroom now, would she cry? There was a distracted expression on her face.

`Come on Omar, let's dance,' she said.

There was a pause as my brother registered what she was saying, and hesitated, deciding between extinguishing his cigarette or taking it with him. I looked down at the ground. They walked to the dance floor, blocking my view of Sundari and her marine. I did not watch them dance and instead surrendered to the Bee Gees' sickly lyrics. Amir didn't speak and I finished my Pepsi, crunching every hit of ice. I was waiting for the slow songs to end, waiting for Omar and Randa to come back.

After the party, I went to her house. Omar dropped us and went off to another party, a private one this time - some seedy affair he didn't want to take me too. They were getting more frequent these mysterious outings of his, and so were the places and new friends I was not part of.

At Randa's house, her parents were having a dinner. To avoid them, we went in through the kitchen door, past frantic servants and a floor sticky and slippery with frying oil and discarded vegetable peel. Randa's room upstairs was neat and the air cooler New softly. She put on a longsleeved shirt over her halter-neck T-shirt. `So that we can go and get some food,' she said. I pulled my blouse out of my trousers and, though the bottom part was all crumpled, at least that way it hid my hips and made me a little bit more respectable.

Randa's parents were a little mad according to my parents. Ever since they had studied in England, where Randa was born, they had come back with eccentric English habits. They went for walks, invited people to dinner with cards and kept a puppy. Randa's mother was one of the very first women professors in the country. For this reason, Randa's inability to get into university was a sore disappointment. Now they were going to send her to England to study - another hold move as not many girls went on their own to study abroad.

The grown-ups had finished eating and were in the garden so we didn't have to say hello and chat. Just before the servant started to clear up the dining room, we heaped plates full of food and went back to Randa's room. I think she was heartbroken about Amir so she didn't eat much. I finished my plate and ate the rest of hers.

`Did you see Sundari with her marine?' I laughed. `Things are getting serious ...'

`You know, the other day I saw her car parked in front of the Marine House.'

`You're Joking?'

`I'm not and it was siesta time!'

I shrieked and Randa laughed. She became herself again and we were soon giggling together, gossiping about everyone in the disco (except Amir of course) - what they wore, who they danced with and how close. I waited for her to speak about Amir but she didn't. She took the empty plates to the kitchen and said she'd bring back dessert.

Alone in her room, I did what Mama had tried over the years to stop me doing but never succeeded. I snooped around. I opened Randa's cupboards, looking through her drawers. I found a photo of both of us at school, wearing identical uniforms - the navy pinafore and white belt. We were arm in arm and smiling at the camera. It was nice in those days to see Randa every day, every single day; to sit next to her in class, to chat during lessons and annoy the teachers, to swap sandwiches and drink from the same bottle of Double Cola.

I leafed through a Jackie and found it childish - why did Randa keep having them sent from London? I turned the pages of an old Time magazine. Khomeini, the IranIraq War, girls marching in black chadors, university girls ... A woman held a gun. She was covered head to toe, hidden.

Randa came in with bowls of creme caramel, apples and bananas.

I put the magazine on the floor and reached for my bowl.

`Totally retarded,' she said looking at the picture and handing me a spoon. `We're supposed to go forward, not go back to the Middle Ages. How can a woman work dressed like that? How can she work in a lab or play tennis or anything?'

`I don't know.' I swallowed spoonfuls of creme caramel and stared at the magazine, reading hits of the article.

`They're crazy,' Randa said. `Islam doesn't say you should do that.'

`What do we know? We don't even pray.' Sometimes I was struck with guilt.

'I do sometimes,' said Randa.

`Yeah, when?'

In exam time . . . A lot of good it did me.' She laughed.

`When I fast in Ramadan, I pray. A girl in school told me that fasting doesn't count unless you pray.'

Randa raised her eyebrows. You spend half the month saying you've got your period and can't fast!'

`Not half the month. I cheat a hit but not half the month.'

`Last year we were in London and we didn't fast at all.'

`Really?' I Couldn't even imagine Ramadan in London, London in Ramadan.

`How can anyone fast in London? It would spoil all the fun.'

`Yes it would.' I looked down at the picture and thought of all the girls in university who wore hijab and all the ones who wore Lobes. Hair and arms covered by our national costume.

`Would you ever wear a tope?' I asked her.

`Yes but a tope is different than this.' She jabbed the Time magazine. 'It isn't so strict. With a tobe, the front of your hair shows, your arms show.'

it depends how you wear it, what you wear underneath it. The way some of the girls in the university wear it, they're really covered.'

`Huh,' she snorted and I realized I should not have mentioned the university, a sore point. I put the magazine away and finished my bowl of creme caramel.

`I didn't study enough,' she said glumly. `I just didn't take these exams seriously.'

`It's SO unfair. You're smarter than me.' The only reason I was able to get into Khartoum University was because I could sit on my fat bum for hours memorizing.

`I suppose I should he happy,' she said quietly. `I suppose I am happy that I'm going to London, though I might not he going to London. I might go somewhere outside London.'

I waited for her to talk about Amir, to complain about how he had ignored her the rest of the evening. She did and I told her the rumours about him and the girl from the Arab Club.

* * *

It was past three in the morning when Omar picked me up. I had started to worry and phoned round asking about him. Everyone in Randa's house slept and we stayed up watching videos of Dallas. It was lucky that Mama and Baba were away in Cairo; otherwise he would have got into trouble. When he finally came to pick me up, he looked tired and smelled of beer and something else, something that was sweet.

You drive,' he said and I didn't like that. I drove home and he didn't put Bob Marley in the tape recorder like he usually did. He just sat next to me, quiet and distant, but he wasn't asleep. I smelt him and guessed what the smell was. But I didn't want to believe it. Hashish? Marijuana?

We heard the dawn azan as we turned into our house. The guard got up from where he was sleeping on the ground and opened the gate for us. The sound of the azan, the words and the way the words sounded went inside me, it passed through the smell in the car, it passed through the fun I had had at the disco and it went to a place I didn't know existed. A hollow place. A darkness that would suck me in and finish me. I parked the car and the guard closed the gate behind us. He didn't go back to sleep.

'Omar, we're home ... Omar.' I leaned and opened the car door for him. He opened his eyes and looked at me blankly. We got out of the car and I locked it. There was not a single breeze. The night tight, no coolness, no flow. Still I could hear the azan. It went on and on and now, from far away, I could hear another mosque echoing the words, tapping at the sluggishness in me, nudging at a hidden numbness, like when my feet went to sleep and I touched them.

The servants stirred and, from the back of the house, I heard the sound of gushing water, someone spitting, a sneeze, the shuffle of slippers on the cement floor of their quarters. A light bulb came on. They were getting ready to pray. They had dragged themselves from sleep in order to pray. I was wide awake and I didn't.

Four

It no longer surprised my friends that Anwar waited for me after lectures. We usually went to the Department of Science cafeteria because there were fewer people there who knew us, although Anwar was a familiar face because of his political activities. He didn't speak to me a lot about politics but sometimes he asked me strange questions.

'How many servants do you have in your house?'

I started to count something I had never counted before. The cook, the Ethiopian maid, the houseboy, the guard and Musa the driver. That's all. No, then there's the gardener, but he doesn't come every day.'

'Six.'

`Yes . . . SIX.'

And there's four of you?'

We have a lot of guests.' This I said defensively. The campus was nearly empty. This was lunchtime, naptime, everyone was indoors away from the sun, but it was winter now and the sun was bearable. At four or five o'clock the light would start to soften and the campus would fill up again for the evening classes.

`Does it not strike you that it is wrong for such wide discrepancies to exist between people? There's famine in the west. This country is one of the poorest in the world.'

I fidgeted in my seat, said, `There is nothing I can do about it.'

His voice softened a little and so did the way he looked at me. `But this isn't true. It's up to us to change the system. It's always up to the students and the workers to change things.'

I told him what I'd read about the Iranian revolution in Time. He seemed amused that I read Time. Perhaps because it was in English and my English was very good because I had gone to a private school. Or perhaps because Time was American.

I wanted to know what he thought about the revolution. He talked about it for a while, approving of the deposing of the Shah but unsupportive of an Islamic government. He echoed Randa's words - `We have to go forward not back' - and was contemptuous of the black chadors.

`You're very progressive then, where women are concerned?' I smiled, pleased with the turn in the conversation that followed, the chance to flirt and prove to myself again and again that, in spite of all his disapproval of my background, he liked me.

Anwar wrote for one of the student newspapers, the one for the Front. Every week the newspapers were handwritten and stapled on to the hoard in the cafeteria. There would be quite a rush for it at first, many students crowding round, standing on tiptoes to read the top pages, sitting on their heels to read the bottom. After a day or two when the crowd subsided I would go and have a look. Most of the articles bored me, but I always read his and tried hard to appreciate them. Most times though, the colours of the letters and the beauty of the handwriting distracted me from the meaning of the words. Titles in large flowing script, red shaded with black, a hold 3-I) effect. There were sometimes illustrations too, a leaf to mark the end of an article, a flying clove. Cartoons too, sketches and a cynical joke. Within the walls of the university, free speech was allowed. The WAS of the university were sacred and even the police were not allowed to go in. But everyone knew that there were spies. With pride, Anwar told me that the secret police had a file on him.

The way he said my name. The way he said, You have an effect on me.' Sometimes he hurt me, said I was stupid, sometimes he made me laugh.

I told Mama about him. She said, 'Don't risk your reputation and waste your time on someone who is never going to be a suitable husband for you.' She could see I was not convinced and her argument became tense. Your father would never approve. And you wouldn't be able to live that kind of life, no servants, no travelling. Believe me, you'd feel had in front of your friends and the family. It would he such a humiliation for you and us.'

OK,' I said, my voice too loud, 'OK.'

Her voice became smooth, trying to explain. 'I hrought you up so that you can have a position in society, so that you can live at a certain standard.'

I walked out of the room catching a glimpse of the genuine alarm in her eyes. She was afraid that I would disobey her, afraid that I would do something rash. But I was held back by the rhythm of going day after day to the university, sometimes seeing him, sometimes not. I didn't know if I had a place in his future plans; he gave no hint. As for me, I dreamt dreams shaped by pop songs and American films. Then I would shake my head and tell myself that these were the sorts of things he despised.

His English was good in terms of vocabulary and grammar, but his accent was, I had to admit, poor. His clothes were tidy and in nice colours - but they were old fashioned and he wore sandals instead of socks and trainers. He had not gone to a private school, he had not had private tutors, he was clever just by himself, just reading and going to talks and debates. His father was a senior technician with the railways. His two uncles, one a qualified architect, had been imprisoned for membership of the Communist Party. He had seven brothers and sisters; the eldest, a policewoman, was married with one child, one brother was studying in Moscow, one brother in the Khartoum Branch of Cairo University, then Anwar, then two younger girls in primary school. One of his younger sisters was ill but he didn't like talking about it. His mother was a qualified nurse but she didn't work anymore. He had an aunt who struck lucky and went with her husband to Saudi Arabia. He lived in the hostels and rarely went home, even though his house was across the bridge in Safia. He smoked every day but drank occasionally. He smoked only cigarettes and didn't pray. He never fasted in Ramadan; he did not see the point of it. He had never been abroad but he had travelled around the country, he had been to Port Sudan and the Nuha mountains, El-Obeid and as far south as Juba. I had never been out of Khartoum.

`Why do you go to Europe and not want to see your own country? Our country is beautiful,' he said, striking a match, lighting a cigarette. When no one could see us, in the evenings when the university was poorly lit, we would hold hands or sit close together so that our arms touched.

The speaker stood on an overturned Miranda crate, under the tree. A soft wind blew and the sun was gentle but still I held my copybook over my head and squinted. The crowd was thick around me. There were girls in white tobes and a few like me holding copybooks over their heads. Some of the boys sat on the grass, others on the ledge that separated the paths from the garden. In the distance a sprinkler twirled, shooting out gusts of water at the flowerbeds and the grass. There was a good microphone today and that made a difference. It drew a bigger crowd, and the echo of Anwar's voice reached the cafeteria and inside the library.

He spoke steadily at first, almost coolly and then with a kind of controlled passion. He held himself back, waiting for the challenges and provocations that came with the questions. Only then would he give his best lines, the sharpest argument, the sarcasm, and the punch line, after which he would grin and raise his eyebrows as if to say, `I rest my case'. A joke, a good joke to ridicule his opponent, make those sitting on the grass chuckle and those at the hack smile. I felt proud of him, and the pleasure of looking and listening to him was like a treat - like ice cream when I was a child, a chocolate sundae with cream on top and wishing it would not end. But then he hurt me, and I should have expected it. I should have seen it coning, the inevitable dig at the bourgeoisie. It was his favourite word. But even worse, he was explicit now, using my father's name - my surname, so familiar, so close - and it was like a punch in the stomach, high in my stomach. My breath caught and I went cold but my cheeks were burning. A roar in my ears - the laughter rising around me - blocked out the rest of his sentence. He did not once look at me. I was invisible but that was my name in the direct accusation of my father. That was my name that made everyone laugh. I was an aristocrat, yes, from my mother's side with a long history of acres of land and support for the British and hotels in the capital and bank accounts aboard. And if all that wasn't bad enough, my father stood accused of corruption.

I pushed my way out of the crowd, deaf and not knowing if anyone was looking at me. I knew that I mustn't cry, that I must walk with dignity to my car. I sat in the car, on the hot sticky plastic seat. I released the handbrake, twisted the key in the ignition. As I started to drive off, there was a knock on the window. Omar. Omar in a good mood, smiling. Not Omar of the seedy parties and suspect smell but Omar fresh in a white T-shirt and jeans, smiling. I rolled down the window.

`What's wrong, Nana?'

How did he know? Once long ago we were asleep inside Mama's stomach together, facing each other, twisting and kicking. I would like to go back to that time. The stupid tears come now.

`What's wrong, Nana?'

`Nothing.'

'OK, let me drive.'

`But you don't want to go home now.'

`It's OK, I can come back.'

`That's silly.' I wiped my face with the back of my hands, sniffed.

`Come on, move over.'

I got out and moved around the car to the passenger's seat. I felt floppy and I didn't want to talk.

We saw an accident on the way home. We heard the glass smash as the two cars hit each other: one was a taxi, the other a blue Datsun. People crowded round and all the traffic came to a standstill. Omar turned into a side street to get away from the jam. The side street had a ditch, houses with metal doors. On one of the doors was a design of aces, diamonds, hearts and clubs. Omar put Bob Marley on the tape recorder and sang along to `Misty Morning'.

Five

I dived into the pool and the January water was a shock. I surfaced with a catch in my chest, out of breath. `Freezing,' I spluttered.

`You're mad,' Randa shouted from under the umbrella of a poolside table. She had on glamorous sunglasses and was eating a grilled cheese sandwich. My only choice was to swim, keep swimming until I warmed up. The surface of the water was warm where the sun had been hitting it all morning. It was much colder below and so I didn't swim underwater. I reached the shallow end, turned and pushed my legs against the wall, started to breaststroke to the deep end. Some foreigners were on deckchairs sunbathing, slathered in Ambre Solaire reading Sidney Sheldon, but I had the whole of the pool to myself.

It took three lengths before the stiffness of the cold melted away and I began to enjoy myself. My eyes tingled with chlorine, the familiar taste of it in my mouth. My arms and legs separated the water, making a way for me to go ahead. Yesterday I walked right past Anwar without saying hello - he was with some friends pinning up the latest newspapers. It made me feel good to ignore him. He was waiting for me when I came out of the Accounting lecture all nice and smiling as if nothing had happened. He expected me to go walking with him but I just went of with some girls to the cafeteria. I could still feel, moving in the water, a dull anger towards him.

When I got out of the pool, I wrapped a towel around my waist and sat next to Randa.

The lifeguard couldn't take his eyes off you,' she said.

`Very funny.' I stole a quick look at him. He was wearing a yellow polo shirt over swimming trunks. He was Eritrean.

I took my comb out of my bag and started to tug at my hair. I did not have nice, smooth hair like Mama's.

`Aren't you going to have a shower and shampoo it?'

`No.' After what she had told my about the lifeguard I felt too shy to go and stand under the showers which were just next to him.

`He'll get a good view of you then,' she giggled.

`Exactly.' I felt uncomfortable for no reason. Mama didn't object to me swimming as long as I didn't wear a bikini but, ever since I started university, I had begun to feel awkward, even in my black full-piece.

`My dad booked my ticket today,' Randa said.

`No!'

`Yes. I'm leaving next Saturday. Monday the term will start.'

I counted the days. Ten more days.

`We'll have a goodbye party for you,' I said.

`That will be nice.'

I tried to imagine where she was going. She was not going to London. She was going to Wales. I said, `fly cousin Samir is there too, at Atlantic College. You know, he said they have to do mountain climbing and outdoors stuff like that. It's part of the syllabus. He can tell you all about it. He's here now for the Christmas holidays.'

I pushed my chair back from under the umbrella so that the sun could dry my hair. Chlorine-streaked hair. I had to go home, wash it and set it fast because I had an evening class.

I wore my denim skirt that evening. It was my favourite, tight and longish, with a slit at the back. It had two side pockets and a zipper in front just like trousers. I wore my red short-sleeved blouse with the little blue flowers on the collar. My hair turned out nice that day, wavy and not crinkling up into curls. I cared that day about how I looked, more than usual. As if by looking good I would annoy Anwar or show him that I didn't care.

He wasn't there when I got to the university at five. I was late for my lecture because Omar had gone out with Samir and I had made the mistake of waiting for him. A breeze blew around the trees as I took a short cut across the lawn. The boy from the canteen was spreading out a big palm-fibre mat on the grass. He unrolled it and was shifting it around, getting the angle just right.

The Economics class was good that evening - Rostow's Take-off, which I understood and it made perfect sense to me. Our country was going to take off one day like an aeroplane, we just needed to keep jogging, to accelerate our development and then we'd move, slowly at first but then much quicker, from our backwardness, faster and faster until lift-off, take-off. We would become great, become normal like all the other rich Western countries; we would catch up with them. I was understanding all of this crystal clear, writing in my notebook, wishing Omar was with me, knowing that he would have loved Rostow. But then the professor pushed his glasses up his nose and said, `And now the Marxist criticism of Rostow's explanation for underdevelopment.' So it wasn't true after all.

We were not going to take off. Around me the students began to shuffle their feet and fidget, murmur that it was time to pray. The professor ignored them. `History shows that not all developed nations have followed Rostow's model ...' The murmurs increased and two brave boys just walked out, some girls started to giggle. The professor gave in and said, `We'll have a ten-minute break.'

A rush for the door. `Because he's a communist, he's not bothered about the prayers,' smiled the girl next to me, the pretty one with the dimples. She passed me in a hurry to go out, calling out to her friends, her high-heeled slippers slapping her heels. She wore a blue tobe today and looked even more cute. All the girls wore white tubes in the mornings and coloured ones in the evening. I liked watching the change in them, from the plain white in the morning to blue and pink flowers, patterns in bold colours.

I was one of the last to leave the class. Outside, I found Anwar chatting warmly with the professor as if they were old friends. I walked past them to the garden outside and sat on the steps of the porch watching those who were praying. Not everyone prayed. Girls like me who didn't wear tobes or hijab weren't praying and you could tell which bons were members of the Front, because they weren't praying. The others lined up on the palm-fibre mat but it was too small to take everyone. The ones who came late made do with the grass. Our Maths lecturer, who belonged to the Muslim Brothers, spread his white handkerchief on the grass. He stood, his shoulder brushing against the gardener's. The student who was leading recited the Qur'an in an effortless, buoyant style. I gazed at all the tobes of the girls, the spread of colours, stirred by the occasional gust of wind. And when they bowed down there was the fall of polyester on the grass.

`Why are you ignoring me?' Anwar's voice next me. I felt as if he was interrupting me - from what, I didn't know. I didn't reply. I got up and walked away in the direction of the lecture room. I couldn't see the students praying anymore and I felt a stab of envy for them. It was sudden and irrational. What was there to envy?

Anwar followed me. We were alone in front of the lecture room. He held my arm, above my elbow. `Don't play with me.'

`I am the one who is angry.' I tugged my arm away but he still held on.

`Is it what I said that day at the talk?'

`Yes it is what you said that day at the talk.'

He let go of my arm. `it has nothing to do with you

`It's my name. It's my father.'

`You're taking it personally. Broaden your mind.'

`I don't want to broaden my mind.'

`Do you know what people are saying about him?'

`I don't want to know.'

`They call him Mr Ten Per Cent. Do you know why?'

`Stop it.'

`You can't bury your head in the sand. You have to know what he's doing. He's taking advantage of his post in the government. He takes commissions on every deal the government makes with a foreign company.'

Anwar said the word `commissions' in English. It sounded to my ear formal and blameless. `So!' I said, sarcastic.

He lowered his voice, but it was sharper. `He's embezzling money. This life you're living - your new car, your new house. Your family's getting richer by the day ... Can't you see, it's corrupt?'

My anger was like a Curtain between us. 'How dare you say these lies about my father! My father is me. My family is me.

'Try and understand this. My feelings for you and my politics are separate. It's had enough I'm laughed at for going with you.'

'Then leave me alone. ,Just leave me alone and no one will laugh at you.'

He blew impatiently, turned and went. I walked into the lecture room and, instead of emptiness, found a girl wearing hijab sitting filing her nails. She looked smug and carefree, filing her nails. She had probably heard all the conversation between me and Anwar. What was she doing here anyway instead of going out to pray? She probably had her period. I sat down in my seat and, to prove to myself that I wasn't upset, I took my pen and started to make an invitation list for Randa's goodbye party.

Six

Pizza, Pepsi, chips and tomato ketchup. Cupcakes and ta'miyah. Samosas and chocolate eclairs from the GB. Sandwiches made of tuna, egg, sausage, white cheese mashed with tomato, white cheese with olives. Vanilla ice cream in small paper cups. I passed them round in the dark and ended up dropping plastic spoons in the flowerpots. Grey-dark on the porch, mauve shadows on the cars. We were all beautiful in the moonlight.

`Sorry guys, the generator just isn't working ...'

`I couldn't get the bloody thing to work.'

`Why are they cutting off the electricity in the middle of winter? What's wrong with these people.'

`Watch it, their father is the government.'

`Don't you have batteries for the tape recorder?'

`Batteries. Omar find batteries. Go.'

`I'll go buy some.'

`No ... no.'

`She's gone to Nairobi for the wedding.'

`Five minutes in the car ...'

`You have the most perfect white teeth, did anyone ever tell you that? I can see them in this dark!'

`You're embarrassing the guy.'

`This is my going away party. This?'

'Randa!'

`I'm glad I'm leaving you . . . if this is the best you can do.'

`Look at that girl!'

Day after tomorrow, no power cuts. Civilization.'

`Have a sandwich! That looks like egg ... I can't tell. Smell it ... This one is sausage for sure ...'

At might come back ...'

`What wrong with your generator anyway? Why couldn't you get it to work?'

`Let's go ...'

No one is going anywhere. Don't you dare move. Savor ... You'll just spoil the party.'

`If we just had the music ...'

`What's he doing? No, you can't go. Please don't go.'

`Samir, you can't leave us.'

The car light shone on Samir, on his Afro and new moustache. He sat on the passenger seat, one leg still outside, the door open. He looked down at the car radio, turned knobs and then there was the sudden blare of the tape recorder with Heatwave's 'Boogie Nights.'

He started to dance towards us. Randa laughed out loud.

`Samir you're a genius!' I shouted above the music.

`Put the engine on, man. Put the engine on . . . your battery will die out.'

I didn't feel well after they left. I sat on the porch while the servants cleared up. It was still dark because the lights hadn't come on yet, but by then my eyes had adjusted to the darkness and I could see the neighbouring houses and the swing in the garden. The party had been a flop. And now Omar and most of the others had gone off somewhere else. Randa had gone home to pack. She thanked me and said the party was great, but she didn't mean it. I could tell she didn't mean it. It was the power failure that spoilt everything. One minute we were indoors dancing with the music loud and the atmosphere just right. Next minute it was the dark silence of outdoors, the intimidating sky. The lights never did come on and the generator was useless. They would talk about this, say we were so rich and yet too stingy to have a generator that worked properly. I knew they would say this because I would have said it if I were in their place.

I thought about Anwar and how separate he was from the party. He did not know Randa or my cousin Samir. Now when I met him in university, he said hello and I said hello, that's all. Sometimes he looked at me as if he was going to say more, but he didn't. He seemed busy these days with a lot of Front activities. I still thought of the things he had told me, tried to make sense of them; why I felt frightened when he said, `The situation in the country can't last,' or when he said, `This system is bound to fall.' He had told me that his youngest sister was blind and if they had the money she would be able to go to Germany and get an operation. Every year we went to Europe, every summer we stayed in our flat in London or in hotels in Paris and Rome and did all our shopping. If one summer we stayed at home, Anwar could take the money we had saved and send his little sister to have an operation. When I was young, before secondary school, I used to get into serious trouble with Mama and Baba over things like that. I gave all my Eid money to a girl in my class. I gave my gold earring to the Ethiopian maid. The maid was fired and the girl got into trouble at school with the headmistress. There are rules, Mama always said, you just can't give charity based on whims - you will he despised, you will he thought a fool.

I learnt these rules. Only give away clothes you have worn. Give fairly. Give appropriately. Give what is expected. You can offend people by giving them too much. You can confuse people. You can embarrass people by giving them expensive gifts they will feel obliged to reciprocate. Never give one person something and ignore their colleague, their sister/brother. Think. Think before you give. Is it expected of you?

I stayed up until Omar came home. One of his friends dropped him at the gate and he walked slowly up the drive, stumbled up the steps to the porch, once nearly falling. He didn't see me until I spoke out. On one side of our porch was a bench built in the wall. He lay down on it, staring up at the sky, his hand dangling to the ground. The smell came from him again, sweet and smoky, distinguishable from beer.

'You're in big trouble,' I said to him. He didn't even turn to look at me. 'I saw a packet full of powder in your drawer.'

'Did you take it?' He sounded calm but more alert.

No, but I'm going to tell Baba about it.'

Its nothing, Najwa.' His words were spaced out. 'It's only bungo. It's not addictive - a bit stronger than a cigarette, that's all.'

You think Baba is going to be happy his son is smoking hashish?,

'Will he be happy his daughter is going out with a communist?'

`It's finished between me and Anwar.'

`You just had a fight, you'll make up.' He shifted sideways, looked at me in the dark. `And when you do, do you know what Baba will do to him? Send him some thugs to beat him up. Make sure when he graduates, no one gives him a decent job.'

I breathed out. `You're talking rubbish - that stuff has messed up your head. Baba wouldn't do that.'

He laughed. `He'd do anything to protect his precious daughter.' He turned again on his back and we were quiet. He started to breathe steadily as if he was beginning to fall asleep.

You better go inside before they come back.'

He grunted.

`Here, take the torch.' I put it in his hand.

While he was heading inside, I saw the headlights of Baba's car coming towards the house. The car horn sounded and our night watchman got up to open the gate. There was the sound of the wheels on the gravel, then Mama's voice as she got out of the car. `How long have these lights been out?'

I went over to Baba and hugged him like I was afraid of something and he was going to make the fear go away. He smelled of grilled meat and supposedly banned whisky. I moved away from him. Mama looked tired, her shoulders stooped. Even in the moonlight I could see the mascara smudged around her eyes. We climbed up the steps of the porch. They didn't ask about the party and continued the conversation they'd been having in the car.

`He'll weather it out,' Baba said, `he's faced opposition before.'

I hope so,' she said. `Whatever hurts him will hurt us.'

I opened the door of the house. The lights came on and hurt my eyes.