

Washweesh

Baba called it *The Village with the Big Sound* because of the booming voice that called back when him and my uncles yelled at the top of their lungs down into the ravine from Teta's¹ balcony. Built into the side of a mountain, Teta's house hid in between the grape vines that snaked around it. Its chipping mudbrick sides were decorated with colorful rugs that swayed in the summer breeze. A large olive tree stood tall in the small courtyard in front of the house granting shade next to a fountain dotted with clay pots of various shapes and sizes. Not a single modern amenity in sight. It was here that Mama said I would stay until I "got better". Apparently, I needed sometime away from America and that meant getting on a plane and going back to Deir Al Qamar, the village in Lebanon where my father's family is from. And an upcoming cousin's wedding provided the perfect cover for no one to ask questions. Weddings also provided the opportunity for mothers and aunties to find matches for their children. As I was nearing twenty, my parents decided this might be for the best. Get me married so I can "calm down."

We arrived in a beat-up Honda Mama flagged down from the airport and, even though we were being kissed and hugged by relatives I had not seen since I was a kid and offered sweets meant to celebrate our safe arrival, I felt like I had just arrived at a prison. Mama's eyes met mine with the stern look she gets that meant you would get an earful later when I, for the third time, refused a baklava from my aunt. I had no stomach for it and the dry heat was already starting to sizzle my brain.

¹ Teta means Grandmother in Arabic.

“Hamdillah alla salameh,” one of my aunts said in greeting as she kissed my cheek and then my mother’s.

“Salam albek,” mama replied.

I slipped passed the extended arms and made my way to the outer rim of the mob before the inevitable nosey questioning started. I don’t think my mom would have told anyone the real reason why we came. It would mean embarrassing her and my father. You don’t talk about mental health and you certainly don’t talk about medication. That meant you aren’t praying enough. Panic disorder happens to ajnebi² not to us. I guess the ajnebi started to seep into me the second we moved to Connecticut.

I made my way down the small driveway towards the dirt road. Villagers mingled about the various stalls and the around the big fountain in the village center. I caught sight of a small child watching me from a window. The child smiled at me. I did not smile back.

“Hey big ears!” I heard a voice calling from behind me. I turned to see a rather tall and tanned girl about my age with half of her dark hair shaved. She was sitting on the stone fence next to the dirt road peeling an orange.

I ignored her and started wringing my hands. The heat in my chest building.

“Yaaa big ears! I said hey!” She called again.

If one thing never changes on this earth its Arabs insistence on calling people, whose names they don’t know, by their most prominent features. My brother was hawajeeb or “eyebrow” for most of his childhood. Hence the singular. Mine was Danye and getting asked if I get satellite television.

² Ajnebi – stranger or foreigner in Arabic. Usually used to mean non-Arab.

I began walking back towards Teta's driveway, my relatives had now moved up the driveway into the courtyard and felt a tug on my arm. I could feel the juices of the orange from her fingers on my skin, and it only added to the tension.

"Big ears I- "

"Don't call me that!" I snapped and tugged my arm free.

"Oh, hey oh," she put her hands up and took a step back, "I'm joking around with you. I'll stop, okay?"

I didn't know what to say back. I hate when this happens. Like the lava that was pouring into my chest bubbled and burst and scorched the other person. I didn't know what was worse, the shame I felt afterwards or the look the other person always gave me. Like I was a monster. This time was a bit different though. The girl with the shaved head just looked at me like she was reading something in my face.

"I just don't like being called that."

"Okay. What shall I call you then?"

"Yasmeen."

"Yasmeeeee," she said and held out the last syllable. Again, I had no idea how to react, so I just stood there.

She laughed a bit, popped another orange slice into her mouth, and wiped her hands on her cargo shorts. "I'm a bit much I know. I'm Alissar but I like being just Al."

"Just Al," I repeated and before I said anything else came the loud shout of my mother's voice.

“Yasmeen! Yallah come!” I turned back to look at my mother motioning with her hands at me. She looked like she was about to burst some lava herself.

Just Al gave me a half salute and turned back towards the stone fence. Humming the entire time.

When I reached my mom, she pulled me to the side of the house and lowered her voice.

“Did you take your dawa?” she whispered.

“Yes, I already told you on the plane that I took my first dose this morning.”

Mama closed her eyes and took a deep breath. A vein protruding on her forehead.

“Then why did you snap at Bint Om Idriss like that? She’s a family friend and well known. We’ve barely been here five minutes and you’re already causing problems?”

“I didn’t!”

My mom put her hands over my mouth.

“Shhh! Do you want the entire daiya to hear you?” She removed her hand from my mouth and rubbed her temple. “Yasmeen, we came here so you can get better. That’s not going to work if you brought all your estoobid behavior with you.”

“But I- “

“Khalas,” she cut me off, “I don’t want any habal here anymore. Not in front of your Baba’s family. And especially before Bint Khalil’s wedding.”

I sighed and nodded. There was no point in explaining anything to her. She would not listen anyways.

Two of my aunts were watching us closely. One of them leaned over slightly and whispered something.

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Later that evening, after dinner was eaten and eaten again, and dessert was served and then served again, I walked out the back door and onto the porch overlooking the ravine. I gripped the old metal railing and debated about yelling, "I hate it here!"

As I weighed the possible outcomes, and whether my mom would actually kill me if I did, I heard the door open. It was Al.

"Aye. They said you were back here", she walked over and leaned on the railing next to me.

"I'm sorry about earlie- "

Al lifted her hand to stop me. "It's okay I forgive easily."

I managed a smile and turned back to look out at the mountains. Silence filled the air between us, and I mulled over in my head what to say to break it. Al didn't seem to be bothered by it though as she had begun humming to herself again.

"Conversations take two parts", I recalled my therapist saying when I met with her for the last time before we left, "It's not always your fault if they die down."

But being out here in the heat, in a country I barely knew, with a person I just met, with the feeling that I bring shame to my family wherever I go made the silence absolutely deafening. I couldn't take it anymore and before I could think I blurted out, "Why is your hair shaved like that?"

Al grinned at me, "Give me your hand,"

"Why?"

"Just do it Yasmeen."

I lifted my hand, and she took it and guided it onto the right side of her head. She pressed my fingers gently onto her scalp and moved them slowly. I could feel a series of bumps in a line underneath her short hair.

“Are those stiches?”

“Yup,” she replied looking rather pleased with herself. “I lost a fight with an arz.”

“You,” I couldn’t help but laugh at that response, “You fought a tree?”

Al turned to lean back on the railing. The sleeves from the t-shirt she wore were torn off making it so her toned arms were visible. I could see the line of her tan near her collarbone.

“Right so get this,” she began, “My mom’s scarf gets blown up with the wind and gets caught in an arz down by Abu Bilal’s. Of course, my mom cannot get it, so I decided to climb up there and get it down for her. Obviously, this causes a commotion as people are like, “why is there a girl climbing a tree? Girls don’t climb trees yada yada yada whatever”, so anyways as I was about to climb back down one of the akhwat sharmouta³ branches breaks, and I fall. Wahyat Allah⁴, I saw my entire life flash before me. I scrapped my head on another branch on my tumble down and the doctor had to shave half my head to get it stitched up.” She turned her head from side to side. “Looks cool, doesn’t it?”

I blinked at her as I processed this information. “Y...yeah it does. You look like a Viking.”

Now it was her turn to blink at me. I guess they don’t force feed you European history everywhere.

“Like uhhh,” I struggled trying to think of the country’s name, “Al Nirwij⁵.”

³ Curse word translated literally as “Siblings of a Whore.”

⁴ I swear to God.

⁵ Norway in Arabic.

“Ha!” She laughed, “Okay but I was thinking more like Zenobia⁶.”

“Yeah, that’s better”, I replied and felt myself a little more at ease, “You can be Zenobia and I’ll be uhh...” I trailed off not knowing how to finish the sentence.

“Kahina⁷, my priestess,” Just Al replied.

“That works I guess.”

“Ugh let’s go back in time, beat up the Romans, and take back Tadmur⁸.”

Now it was my turn to laugh.

Just then Om Idriss popped her head through the screen door.

“Yallah Alissar, time to go. They’ve had a long trip. Let’s let them rest.”

Just Al stood up and, before she stepped through the door, turned back to look at me.

“Meet me by the river at midnight.”

“Why?”

“You’ll see.”

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I had become a professional at sneaking around my house at night. Many things had to stay hidden under the light of the moon. Books I wasn’t supposed to read, phone calls I wasn’t supposed to have with friends I wasn’t supposed to talk to, sweets I shouldn’t eat, even television I couldn’t watch if I were lucky enough to close the living room door without it squeaking. I often thought how the moon, *Al Amar*, knew everyone’s secrets. Maybe that’s why she always looked so sad.

⁶ Third-century queen of the Palmyrene Empire in Syria.

⁷ Priestess. Zenobia was known to have many in her court.

⁸ Tadmur is Palmyra in Arabic and was famously destroyed by Roman Emperor Aurelian in 273 AD.

It was easy enough to creep out of Teta's house. It was only three rooms anyways and mama had been snoring loudly from long before the night's stillness blanketed the village. The rest of my relatives were also fast asleep in various places around the inside and outside of the house. As I carefully lifted the door up on its hinges, to keep it from making a sound, I felt my heart stop as I heard a grunt behind me. It was just my uncle stirring on the sofa and after a moment he settled down again. As I made my way down the driveway towards the dirt road, I even caught a glimpse of some of my cousins asleep on the roof underneath the grapevines.

It took me a bit to realize that I had absolutely no idea where I was going or even where the river was. I tried looking around me but besides the palm trees and other mudbrick houses the street was empty.

"Psst!" came a loud whisper and I looked over to see Al emerging from behind the village's main fountain. Everything was quiet except the soft sound of the running water. A handful of watermelon and mangos were floating in it, having been left to cool overnight.

"I've been waiting for so long I didn't think you would come," she said and handed me an unpeeled orange. What is with her and oranges?

I declined and she placed it back in her cargo shorts pocket. "Come on let's go."

She took my hand and lead me down the dirt road and into a wooded area. There were old fences marking off large areas with signs that read DANGER indicating a possibility of land mines left from wars long past. STAY ON THE ROAD another one warned, and I gulped a bit as tension began to build in my chest. I freed my hand from Al's and began to subconsciously wring them.

Al noticed this and said, “Don’t worry. The road is completely safe. I walk here every day.” It wasn’t enough to help me fully settle down, but it helped.

It was a weird feeling having someone be understanding. That was usually left to my therapist. I could never open up to my mother about what was happening inside my brain. Al didn’t seem phased at all by my nervous ticks. Didn’t tell me to stop. Didn’t call me Booma⁹. She was making me feel ways that felt *foreign* and left me unable to process. I looked up at the moon as if to ask her to explain. Her full face looked understanding. Solemn even. But she, like many nights before, gave me nothing.

We continued a bit until the dirt road became narrower and starting winding in between the trees. Eventually it opened to a bank on a river basin. The basin was surrounded by cliffs with a waterfall on one side and thick palms trees on the other. It made the area look secluded. Like a private lagoon. The water was so blue that under the moonlight it looked like crystal. The area was quiet save for the night crickets serenading us.

Al beckoned to me to follow her around the side and up some stone stairs carved into the rock. It wrapped up and around and onto a wooden balcony that looked to be getting on in years.

“Look”, she pointed down to an area on the other side of the pool.

I followed her finger and saw a group of river otters milling about the weeds near the bank mud. Some of them were asleep and others grooming each other. It almost felt like we were intruding on their little town. I noticed the ones that were asleep were holding hands with each other.

⁹ Booma means owl. It also means someone who cries a lot as owl calls are thought to sound like someone crying.

“That’s so cute,” I said a little too loudly and some of the otters jerked a bit in our direction.

“Oh sorry,” I lowered my voice, “I didn’t know they held hands like that.”

“They do that so they don’t get separated,” Al said, “Otherwise they’ll float apart from each other and get washed away.”

We sat in silence and just watched the otters. It felt so peaceful in this place shrouded by night and guarded by the trees.

“I like to come here to just sit and think,” Al said and sat down on the side of the wooden balcony, letting her legs hang from between the beams. “It’s one of my favorite spots.”

I nodded and bit my lip a bit unsure of how to comment.

“What’s your first favorite spot?” the question popping into my head.

Al reached into her pocket to pull out the orange again, “In the fields,” she said and smiled proudly. Her smile looked so genuine, and I could feel my face starting to heat up.

“Am tastiheh meneh¹⁰?” Al teased and gently poked my blushing cheek.

I gulped a bit and brushed her off.

Silence fell between us again and Al started to hum to herself.

“I got expelled from my university,” I said quietly after a while, “That’s the main reason why we came here so I can “get better.” It wasn’t just for my cousin’s wedding.”

Al nodded and, when she didn’t say anything, I continued.

“I have this...thing. I’m just not...well sometimes I feel like I can’t breathe, or my hands start shaking and my chest starts pounding. I don’t know why. Sometimes I freak out when it

¹⁰ Are you getting embarrassed from me?

gets too bad like all my senses at once are going crazy and like I start just yelling and crying or I feel like I'm choking."

I had no idea why I was telling all of this to a complete stranger. But something about Al felt so familiar to me like I had known her for years. It was like I was starving for human contact. I just wanted someone to actually look at me and care.

Just Al's face was patient and she nodded as I talked. Again, it felt weird to have someone's full attention like this. Al gently brushed some of my hair back behind my ear. Her touch felt so soft despite her rough hands. The gesture made me blink a couple times as I struggled to keep my voice from breaking.

"Like this part of my brain, you know? This part of me I can't control. Like some...*demon* is in me, controlling me. I tried to tell them something was wrong. Mama and Baba didn't listen to any of my guidance counselors when I was still in school. They kept saying that this type of thing happens to Amreekans and not to us."

At that Al let out a "hmmm."

Live in America was not... good. I managed to make a lot of enemies in school and the town we lived in was so small there was no way you could stay away from certain people. And like," my voice broke, "there are some people who aren't satisfied with being cruel. They have to put in a tremendous amount of effort and time to being super cruel."

At that Al raised her eyebrows, "I've met people like that before, hell, there's people like that here."

I waited for her to elaborate and when she didn't, I continued.

"There was this American girl named Madison who, together with her friends, never left me alone in school. Every time I would walk into a room, run into them at Stop & Shop or the mall or anywhere, they'd start whispering to each other. Always making a huge show about it too like they wanted me to *know* they were talking about me. Sometimes they would loudly ask me a question afterwards. Usually it was a variation of, "why does your lunch always smell?" Another popular one was asking me if I knew anyone in Al Qaeda. It was like... like I am constantly being judged by everyone and I can't do anything about it. I had demons inside of me and demons watching me from the outside."

"One day I couldn't take it anymore. I was tired of her and her friends. Tired of this country. Tired of my own brain. I lost it. You know a pressure cooker? It's like all that build up couldn't take it anymore and I exploded. It was in the girl's dorms. She bumped into me with her shoulder on purpose and I... snapped. I launched myself at her and.... didn't stop. It took two dorm managers to pry me off of her. I was yelling and crying. Everyone was yelling and crying.... the terrorist finally snapped everyone said. "

Just Al spat, "Kis ommun kilon¹¹," she cursed.

"Anyways, so long story short, I got expelled, my parents finally let me start taking dawa and now I've been banished to here in the middle of nowhere."

"Ouch", Just Al teased, "We aren't that remote. I mean Abu Bilal's has a television now. With sports channels and everything." She did a chef's kiss. "It's very fancy now."

¹¹ Those motherfuckers

“Don’t you,” I stammered a bit debating if I wanted to ask this, “Don’t you hate how our parents don’t let us make our own decisions? Like you could be married, with your own house and children, and still, you have to answer to someone.”

“I know right!” Al said, “It’s only for the banat¹² too. You know they don’t treat the subyan¹³ like this. Like an auntie’s son could be gone for a few days and no one cares but the second her daughter wants to leave the house she’ll turn into a detective.”

I laughed a bit and, for the life of me I didn’t know why, I opened up about something that I had only ever whispered to the moon. “I just want to know why Allah made me like this you know. Like why? What did my parents do that was so horrible he punished them like this?”

“To that, habibti, I can relate. Big time.”

I mimicked Al by staying silent to let her finish.

“I used to pray like that. Why did Allah make me this way? More like a man and less like a girl. Like was he trying to make up for taking both my brother and father back so soon? Maybe Allah felt guilty, so he had me grow up like this to take their place.”

Her words were then joined by an owl hooting softly in the distance. It joined the crickets in their song.

Al threw the orange up a bit and caught it, “You know my family grows oranges? It belonged to my great grandfather, then my grandfather, and then my father. Now? It belongs to my uncle. I remember the day we got the news that both of my brother and father had died in the fighting in Beirut, the first thing I did was go out to the fields and pick oranges. Who was

¹² Girls

¹³ Boys

going to do that now that they were gone? It had to be me. It just...made sense to me at the time.”

Al tossed the orange into the water below and we sat there for a few moments watching it bob up and down.

“Do you still do that?” I asked, “Pick the oranges?”

Al nodded, “I mean my mom would love it if I got married and gave her grandchildren but, yes, I do. I can’t bring myself not too. Maybe I’m still waiting for them to come back. Like I’ll turn a corner, behind a tree, and see my dad there on a ladder throwing down oranges to my brother below.”

The way she said it made my eyes tear up once more and, again, I turned my face from her to hid it.

“You know that story in the Injeel¹⁴ where that woman reached out and touched Ibn Allah’s¹⁵ hem and she was healed?” I asked when I was sure my eyes were dry, “That’s what I think about the most. Touching the hem of his shirt and then my head clears.”

“Habibti, I would take his entire thobe not just the hem,” Al replied and we both laughed.

The laughter made the air feel lighter. As light as the palm leaves that swayed in the night’s breeze. I wanted to float up into the sky and just lay there awhile.

“We should get back,” Al said and stood up.

“Can we come back again tomorrow?”

¹⁴ Bible

¹⁵ Son of God

Just Al winked at me and descended the stairs.

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And so we did. The day was spent among my relatives, dodging whispers from aunties, trying my best to evade questions about marriage from nosey family members, and enduring my mother's glares. The night was at the river, sharing stories, secrets, jokes...all while the moon watched. Slowly I felt myself unwind in her aura. It was so healing and so soft. Al just *exuded* peace. The silence that sometimes fell between us no longer came with an awkwardness. Instead, it was still like water with no ripples. Calm.

Here's the thing about Arab culture is that, although the personal space is much smaller than other places, that closeness is only allowed to people of the same sex. That meant me and Al could hang out as much as we wanted and as close as we wanted, and no one batted an eye. One day while we walked over to the main fountain to fetch some mangos for my aunt, Al linked her arm in mine. I smiled big, the first in a long while, and felt my shoulders ease. I knew then and there that whatever could be burdening me, Al was strong enough to help me carry them if not lift them up with her large arms built from picking oranges and throw them down the ravine herself.

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The day came when we were to head into a nearby town to shop for outfits for my cousin's wedding. Weddings were giant affairs that typically lasted a whole week which meant we needed more than one outfit. One for the Hafli¹⁶ someone would have to celebrate the

¹⁶ party

arrival of the groom's family, another for the Laylat Al Ars¹⁷, one for the actual wedding and Zaffeh¹⁸, and then something casual for the Azeema¹⁹ the following morning.

I began to feel my head start to spin from all the different fabrics and prints. As my mom engaged in a heated debate with one of my aunts over whether she should pick something more traditional or go for something western, I slipped out into the street to get some fresh air.

The Souq was bustling with people, stalls selling everything you could possibly imagine, the smells of spices and street foods, and decorated with lights, lanterns, and colorful awnings. I began to feel the anxious feeling I frequently got in large crowds.

I took a few deep breathes as I walked over to an old woman sitting next to a cart filled with handmade trinkets. The bracelets caught my eye and I picked out two matching ones with a khamsa²⁰ on it. I recalled the sadness in Al's eyes when she opened to me about her family and felt like perhaps it would give her some peace. Funny how even though I am in need of some peace, I am gifting it to her instead.

As I pocketed the bracelets and turned to head back to my mom and aunts, I heard a voice speaking out over the crowds. I looked up to see an old Hakawati²¹, with a group of children sitting around him. He waved his wrinkled hand in the air and the keffiyeh²² on his head swayed with it.

¹⁷ The Night before the wedding there is usually a get together with just close family members from the bride's family.

¹⁸ Traditional wedding procession

¹⁹ The day following the wedding, the bride and groom's family will usually meet for lunch at the bride's family home.

²⁰ Pendant to ward of the Evil Eye

²¹ Storyteller

²² Arab kerchief

“Kan ya ma kan²³,” he began to a group of bright brown eyes watching him.

I paused to watch from a distance. I had heard about storytellers visiting Souqs before but had never seen one in person.

“In a valley not far from here there used to be a town that no longer exists. The people and buildings lost to time but the legacy of it lives on.”

He paused temporarily for dramatic effect before continuing.

“In the town lived a girl named Zahra who was the daughter of a poor orange farmer. Zahra was a humble girl and plain looking but her heart was so sweet that people called her the Ahsal²⁴ of the town. She had a beautiful voice and every spring she would go out into the orange fields and sing to the trees. Her voice made the trees so happy that they would bear the most delicious fruits. Back then those trees didn’t grow flowers before they bore fruit, instead it was Zahra’s voice that helped them grow.”

At that a little boy of maybe six or seven broke in. “How can they not have flowers on them? I see them every spring. I picked a white one for my mama once.”

“Do you want to tell the story then since you know everything?” The Hakawati teased not unkindly, and the boy fell silent, blushing slightly.

The Hakawati laughed and continued, “One day, when she came to the market, she caught the attention of the son of the Amir²⁵ of the land. His name was Ilyes and he was sought by many who would dream to have their daughters be married to him.”

²³ Once upon a time

²⁴ Honey

²⁵ Prince

Just then I sidestepped out of the way of a large man carrying an even larger basket of pita bread. He gave me an annoyed look as he passed, and I took a small step closer to where the old man was speaking trying to keep my mind on the story and not on the proximity of the people.

“Ilyes could not take his eyes off Zahra. He thought she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Now Ilyes, he fancied himself a bit of a Naswanji²⁶, he goes through women like water and the woman he sees are more decorated and more beautiful than even the moon. But something about Zahra moved his heart. He tried to reach her, but the crowd of the market was too much, and he lost sight of her! He began to ask around for the woman who looked as sweet as honey. Oh, how she enticed him! And soon everyone wanted to know who is the woman that made the son of the Amir so majnun²⁷. Even the Amir himself could not believe how enchanted his son had become. Finally, Ilyes tracked her down to the poor orange village in the valley. To not draw attention, Ilyes disguised himself as a villager and went out to the fields to speak with her. The woman who had stolen his heart was sitting and singing to the trees. Ilyes could not take it anymore and announced his presence. He took her hand in his and told her right then and there how he felt about her. They began to meet in secret. Every night in the orange fields Zahra would wait for Ilyes to come. One day, suddenly, Ilyes asked Zahra to marry him. Oh, how she was beside herself! Imagine a poor farmer's daughter to be wed to the Amir's son! But they knew that society would not allow them to be together, so they devised a plan. On the next full moon, they would meet in the orange fields and run away.”

²⁶ Womanizer

²⁷ Crazy

“Yasmeen! Ya Yasmeen!” came the voice of my mother calling me. I steeled myself to move in between and out of view in the now sizable crowd that had gathered around to listen. My mother could wait a few more minutes.

“Someplace where they can be just Zahra and Ilyes not the Amir's son and a poor village girl. But they did not know that a spy for the Amir was watching them that night and told their plan to the Amir. Outraged at the idea of his bloodline being tied to a peasant, the Amir sent his trusted assassin to kill Zahra before the two of them could run away.”

The small crowd around the Hakawati murmured a bit. Some looking over to their children with worried looks. One woman beckoned her son to her, and she covered his ears.

“On the night of the full moon, Ilyes made his way to the orange fields to meet with his future bride but instead he found the field filled with white blossoms growing from the trees. It was like nothing Ilyes had seen before! The scent of Zahra was on them, like honey and citrus. Ilyes fell to his knees and weep for he knew in his heart that he would never see Zahra again. Allah had seen what had transpired and these flowers were a gift to the young man. Now every year the trees grow simple white flowers. So plain and yet to mesmerizing.”

“But wait!” cried a young girl in the crowd, “What happened to Ilyes?”

The Hakawati waved the girl’s question with his wrinkled hand, “Perhaps Allah reunited him with his bride in heaven.”

The crowd began to disperse as people handed the Hakawati money for his story. Before I could reach into my purse for a coin, my arm was tugged into the opposite direction. My mother had found me and begun leading me back to the shop.

“You’re ignoring me ya hawawani?” my mother said sharply. I tugged my arm free, and her nails caught my skin a bit and begun to bleed.

The pain had triggered something like my skin had suddenly remembered. Visions of Madison and girl’s dormitory flooded into my brain and I burst into tears. Stupid! Stupid Yasmeen!

I wrapped my hand around the cut and began to blink rapidly to keep the tears from spilling. Very little was more humiliating than crying in public.

I resigned myself to go through the motions when we reentered the dress shop. I nodded, barely, to dress suggestions and gave half-hearted responses to my opinions of them.

I tried focusing my mind on Al. I pictured her rough face and the way her black hair shapes it on one side. Could Al be my Ilyes? Would the two of us end up like them? Alone with only God and the moon knowing what transpired?

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That night I was the first to arrive to our meeting spot by the river. Nature seemed to be more in motion than normal, and the air had something electric in it. I ran my fingers over the smooth khamsa pendant on the bracelet I held hoping Al did not run into any bad luck before I had a chance to give it to her.

Ten minutes passed and still no Al. I began to worry that someone had caught her until I heard a branch snap behind me.

Al came trudging along holding her side. Her lip cut and her left eye was starting to bruise.

“Al what happened?!” I gasped and went over to help her.

Al pushed my hand away and gave a weak laugh as she sat down on a rock near the water, "Heh nothing. Just a little quarrel is all."

"You're bleeding! That doesn't look like nothing!"

"Yeah? Then what's that then?" Al deflected and pointed to the bandage on my arm.

"That's not the same thing. What happened to *you*," I demanded.

Al sighed and slumped her shoulders a bit, "Fine, habibti, I'll tell you. But really it's nothing." When she saw me waiting, she continued, "Just some boys that think they're tough. Wanted to teach me a lesson, I guess. Joke's on them because I got in a good punch or two or three..." she trailed off.

"Al this isn't funny. Who are these boys that attacked you?" I pressed.

"They're nobody," Al deflected again and for the first time I could feel her getting a bit angry with me.

"But I- "

"What happened to your arm," Al interrupted.

"I...my mom grabbed me earlier and her nails scratched me."

Al just looked at me for a few seconds before getting up and started to make her way towards the dirt road.

"Where are you going?" I followed and stepped in front of her.

"To teach that bitch a lesson," Al huffed and attempted to sidestep around me.

I stood my ground and placed my hands on her shoulders, "You can't do that! Al, she's, my mother!"

The electric current in the air began seeping into my veins and I felt as if I could not breathe. This isn't happening. This can't be happening.

"Why not? She hurt you, Yasmeen, that's not what mothers are supposed to do."

"And boys aren't supposed to hit girls and yet you tell me it's nothing."

Al stopped walking and clenched and unclenched her fists, "That's not the same thing." I could feel the tension building from her.

"Why not?" I breathed. My chest felt so heavy.

Al was silent for a moment. She looked into my eyes and I could see something pass behind them. I could see gears turning behind the deep brown of her pupils.

"It's not the same because," Al hesitated, "because it's you. You're hurt and that shouldn't happen. Me? Heh, I can take a punch. Hell, I've been taking punches my whole life. But you? That I can't, won't, allow."

I began to wring my hands again and felt tears welling up. The electricity in my arms made me feel like I could barely contain it anymore.

"Al no please I'm begging you. What do you think will happen?!" I began to cry, "You can't do anything, please, it won't help. I promise you it won't help."

Al stood there watching me for a while. There was a type of sadness that formed around her that I couldn't quite put my finger on. Again, her eyes seemed to pass thoughts and whispers that might never make it to the surface. That only the moon would ever know about. Or so I thought because then she stepped forward, reached around my waist and pulled me into a kiss.

