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Glass Enclave

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“Glass Enclave” is an excerpt from a novel-in-progress.

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SHE DREAMT THAT IT RAINED and she could not go out to meet him as planned. She could not walk through the hostile water, risk blurring the ink on the pages he had asked her to translate. And the anxiety that she was keeping him waiting pervaded the dream, gave it an urgency that was astringent to grief. She was afraid of rain, afraid of the fog and the snow which came to this country, afraid of the wind even. At such times she would stay indoors and wait, watching from her window all the people doing what she couldn't do. Children walking to school through the swirling leaves, the elderly smashing ice on the pavement with their walking sticks. They were superhuman, giants who would not let the elements stand in their way. Last year when the city had been dark with fog, she hid indoors four days, eating the last packet of pasta in the cupboard, drinking tea no longer with milk. On the fifth day when the fog lifted she went out famished, rummaging the shops for food, dizzy with the effort.

But Sammar's dream was wrong. It wasn't raining when she woke that morning, a grey October sky, Scottish grey with mist from the North Sea. And she did go out to meet Rae Isles as planned, clutching her blue folder with the translation of *Al-Nidaa's* manifesto.

The door to the Winter Gardens, an extended greenhouse in the city's main park, was covered with signs. Sorry, no prams or pushchairs allowed, sorry, no dogs allowed, opening hours 9.30 till dusk. In this country everything was labelled, everything had a name. She had got used to the explicitness, all the signs and polite

rules. It was 9.30 now and when they went inside there was only a gardener pushing a wheel-barrow along the wet cracked slabs that separated the plants. Tropical plants cramped in the damp warmth and orange fish in running water. Whistling birds flying indoors, the grey sky irrelevant above the glass ceiling.

Benches. White curved metal, each and every one bore a placard, In Loving Memory of this person or that. As if people must die so that others can sit in the Winter Gardens. People must die... Her invisible brand shifted, breathed its existence. It was hidden from Rae, like her hair and the skin on her arms, it could only be imagined. Four years ago this brand had crystallized. Grief had formed, taken shape, a diamond shape, its four angles stapled onto her forehead, each shoulder, the top of her stomach. She knew it was translucent, she knew that it held a mercurial liquid which flowed up and down slowly when she moved. The diamond shape of grief made sense to her, her forehead—that was where it hurt when she cried, that space behind her eyes, her shoulders—because they curled to carry her heart. And the angle at the top of her stomach—that was where the pain was.

So that she was somewhat prepared, now that the liquid in the diamond moved carefully like oil, she was not surprised, when Rae asked her about Tarig. ‘My aunt’s son’, she replied, ‘but it was not until I was seven that I met him. I was born here as you know and my parents and I did not go back home until I was seven’.

They were sitting on a bench in a room full of cacti. The cacti were like rows of aliens in shades of green, of different heights, standing still, listening. They were surrounded by sand for the room was meant to give the impression of a desert. The light was different too, airier, more yellow.

‘Not until I was seven’. These were her words, the word ‘until’ as if she still could not reconcile herself to those first seven years of life without him. In better times she used to re-invent the beginning of her life. Make believe that she was born at home, Africa’s largest land, in the Sisters’ Maternity Hospital, delivered by a nun dressed in white. She liked to imagine that Tarig was waiting for her outside the delivery room, holding his mother’s hand, impatient for her, a little fidgety. Perhaps she would have

been given a different name had she been born at home, a more common one. A name suggested by her aunt, for she was a woman who had an opinion on all things. Sammar was the only Sammar at school and at college, when talking about her people never needed to say her last name. Do you pronounce it like the season, summer?, Rae had asked the first time she met him. Yes, but it does not have the same meaning. And because he wanted to know more she said, it means conversations with friends, late at night. It is what the desert’s nomads liked to do, talk leisurely by the light of the moon, when it was no longer so hot and the day’s work was over.

Rae knew the Sahara, knew that most Arabic names had familiar meanings. He was a Middle East historian and a lecturer in Third World Politics. He had lately written a book called *The Illusion of an Islamic Threat*. When he appeared on TV or was quoted in a newspaper he was referred to as an Islamic expert, a label he disliked because, he told Sammar, there could be no such monolith. Sammar was the translator in Rae’s department. She worked on several projects at the same time, historical texts, newspaper articles in Arab newspapers, and now this political manifesto Rae had given her. *Al-Nidaa* were an extremist group in the south of Egypt. The document was handwritten, badly photocopied and filled with spelling mistakes. It was stained with tea and what she guessed to be beans mashed with oil. Last night she stayed up late transforming the Arabic rhetoric into English, imagining she could smell beans cooked in the way she had known long ago, with cumin and olive oil. All the time trying not to think too much about the meeting next day, not to make a big thing out of it.

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AMONG THE CACTI, Rae said ‘Tariq?’, stressing the *q*. She said, ‘Yes, it’s written with a *qaf* but we pronounce the *qaf* as a *g* back home’. He nodded, he knew the letters of the Arabic alphabet, he had lived in her part of the world. Rae looked like he could easily pass for a Turk or a Persian. He was dark enough. He had told her

once that in Morocco he could walk as if disguised, none suspected he was Scottish as long as he did not speak and let his pronunciation give him away. Here with others, he looked to her to be out of place, not only because of his looks but his manners. The same manners which made her able to talk to him, made the world vivid for the first time in years. The last time she had met him she had gone home ill; eyelids heavy as coins, hammers beating her head, the smallest ray of light agony to her eyes. When she stumbled into unconsciousness and woke up feeling radiant, light, she thought she must have had something like an epileptic fit.

'Tarig's mother, my aunt, is called Mahasen', she went on, wondering which part of the narrative to soften, to omit. How much of the truth could he take, without a look of surprise crossing his eyes. She had never said anything that surprised him before. And she wanted it always to be like that. In this country, when she spoke to people they seemed wary, on their guard as if any minute she would say something out of place, embarrassing. He was not like that. He seemed to understand, not in a modern, deliberately non-judgmental way but as if he was about to say, This has happened to me too.

When she boiled chicken, froth rose to the surface of the water and she removed it with a spoon. It was granulated dirt the colour of peanuts, scum from the chicken that was better not eaten. Inside Sammar there was froth like that, froth that could rise if she started to speak. Then he would see it and maybe go away, when what she wanted was for him to remove it so that she could be clear. It would be easy for him to make her clear, as easy as untying a ribbon.

Tell him, she told herself, tell him of Mahasen and Tarig and Hanan. Mother, son, daughter. Tell him how you shrugged off your own family and attached yourself to them, the three of them. Made a gift of yourself, a child to be moulded. Their house, where you imagined you would one day live, the empty square in front of it. When it rained, everything stood still and the square took the colour of the moon. Tarig's bike, Tarig's room, Tarig singing with imaginary microphones, imaginary guitars, imaginary drums. An obedient niece, letting Mahasen decide how you should dress, how

you should fix your hair. You were happy with that, content, waiting for the day you would take her only son away from her. Take care of Tarig, she whispered in your ear when you said goodbye. And you brought him back to her shrouded in the belly of an airplane.

'My aunt is a strong woman', Sammar said, 'a leader really. She is looking after my son now. I haven't seen them for four years.' She had given the child to Mahasen and it had not meant anything. Nothing, as if he had not been once a piece of her, with her wherever she walked. She was unable to mother the child. The part of her that did the mothering had disappeared. Froth, ugly froth. She had said to her child, I wish it was you instead. I hate you. I hate you. In that same death-carrying airplane he had wanted to play, toddle up and down the aisles, all smiles, his father's ease with strangers. He had wanted food, he was greedy for food. On her lap with the tray precarious before them, he had grabbed rolls of bread, smeared butter, poured the juice on her clothes. Full of life, they said of him, full of life. She pinched him hard when no one was looking. He kicked her back. In the bathroom she cleaned him while he wriggled, his hands reaching for the ash-tray, the button that called the hostess. Stop it, stop it. The child would not let her be, would not let her sink like she wanted to sink, bend double with pain. He demanded her totally.

'Tarig was a student here', she said. We came here after we got married. He was a medical student and we lived near Foresterhill. On the day the car accident happened and he was taken to hospital, some of the doctors on duty there knew him. They were very good to me. They called the Ethnic Minority...' She stopped. 'Worker or Coordinator', she wasn't sure what the woman's title was. Rae shrugged, it didn't matter. He wiped his face with the palm of his hand, down to his chin and up to press his fingers against his temples.

The Coordinator was an energetic woman with curly hair. In the stark, white moments of disbelief, she took the roaming, exploring child, saddled him on her hips and bought him Maltesers from the snack machine. This one is for you, Mama, he said when he came back, teeth stained with melted brown. He lifted the

sweet to her closed lips, made coaxing noises like the ones she made when she fed him. No, not now, it is for you, all for you. She could see the woman on the telephone, gesticulating with her hands. The child whined in anger, stamped his foot, pushed the chocolate against her lips. Against her will she bit into its hushed sweetness, honeycomb and tears. 'That woman was the one who called the mosque and someone from there came to do... to do the washing'.

A whole week passed before she got him under African soil. It had taken that long to arrange everything through the embassy in London; the quarantine, the flight. People helped her, took over. Strangers, women whom she kept calling by the wrong names, filled the flat, cooked for her and each other, watched the ever-wandering child so she could cry. They prayed, recited the Qur'an, spent the night on the couch and on the floor. They did not leave her alone, abandoned. She went between them dazed, thanking them, humbled by the awareness that they were stronger than her, more giving than her, though she was more educated, better dressed. Their clothes were drab, out of fashion while she covered her hair with Italian silk, her arms with tropical colours. She wanted to look as elegant as Benazir Bhutto, as mesmerizing as the Afghan princess she had once seen on TV wearing *hijab*, the daughter of an exiled leader of the *mujahideen*. Now the presence of these women kept her sane, held her up. She went between them thanking them, humbled by the awareness that they were not doing this for her or for Tarig, but only because they believed it was the right thing to do.

Their children ran about, her son among them, delighted with the company, excited by the gathering of people. Poor orphan, not yet two, he can't understand, the women said as he leapt past them with a toy car in each fist, trilling the names of his new friends. But it seemed to Sammar cruel and shocking that he would not stop, pause, that with the same undiminished zest he wanted to play and eat and be held so that he could sleep.

Tarig's clothes clung wet with hers in the washing machine between the spin and dry cycle.

When they dried she put them with his other things in a black

dustbin bag. Packing and giving things away. She filled black bag after black bag, an evacuation. Tearing letters, dropping magazines in the bin, a furious dismantling of the life they had lived, the home they made. Only Allah is eternal, only Allah is eternal. Photographs, books, towels, sheets. Strip and dump into a black bag. Temporary, this life is temporary, fleeting. Why is this lesson so hard to learn? Pens, boots, a torchlight, a comb. The index cards he used for studying. Could you please take these bags to the mosque, someone might need something or perhaps if there's a bus going to Bosnia... One woman's eyes glittered for the pair of shoes, Tarig's coat that was nearly new. My dear, this tape recorder so bulky for you to travel with? This little rug, you forgot that? Strip, give away, pack. We're going home, we're finished here, we're going to Africa's sand, to dissolve in Africa's sand.

How did she bring herself to phone Mahasen? To be the bearer of the worst news? And Mahasen's phone was not working. It had to be the neighbour's and Mahasen running, breathless, bra-less, a *tobe* flung over her nightdress, one roller perched at the top of her head like a purple crest. She was always like that at home, with this one purple roller in her hair. She even slept with it so that when she went out a fringe would peep becomingly from under her *tobe*.

I love your mother more than you, she had teased him, hugging her aunt, kissing her cheeks, putting her head on her shoulder. Go away Tarig, we want to talk, she would say laughing. We are going to gossip about you, Mahasen would say to him, in little pieces. The word for 'gossip' meant cutting too.

This was the Mahasen who now spat when mentioning Sammar's name. *Tfou*.

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'*Euphorbia Herimentiana*, *Cereus Peruvianus*, *Hoya Carnosa*'. Rae read out loud the names of the cacti. Names that Sammar could not pronounce. '*Cleistocactus Reae*, planted by Silvana Suarez, Miss World 1979. Really?' He made a face. It made Sammar smile. The second time to see him outside work and it

still felt strange. New and happy like seeing a baby walk for the first time.

The first time had been Saturday when she went to the public library with Yasmin. Yasmin was Rae's secretary. A glass door connected her office with Rae's so that when Sammar went to see him, she could see, while they talked, Yasmin furiously typing, her straight black hair hiding her face. Yasmin's parents were from Pakistan but she was born and had lived all her life in different parts of Britain. She had a habit of making general statements starting with 'we', where 'we' meant the whole of the Third World and its people. So she would say, We are not like them, or We have close family ties, not like them. There were two other department secretaries who worked in the same room as Yasmin; cheerful, coffee-scented ladies with greying hair and pleated skirts. When one of them once patted the curves of her stomach and moaned the fact that she could not stick long to any diet, Yasmin was quick to sneer, Our children are dying of hunger while the rich count their calories!

Yasmin's husband, Nazim, worked some of the time on the oil rigs off-shore. When he was away, she tended to meet Sammar on the week-ends. Yasmin had a car and Sammar liked driving around, listening to the radio, seeing parts of the city she had not seen before. She wished she could have a car and escape the weather.

That Saturday, they went to the library because Yasmin, now eight weeks pregnant, wanted to look at all the baby books. There were shelves of books about pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding. The library was warm, full of people, full of books. There were books on Cesarean birth, abortions, infertility, and miscarriage. Sammar had miscarried once, a year after her son was born. She remembered the night, fateful and climactic, coming after days of anxiety, days of awareness that this pregnancy was not going right, something was wrong. She remembered Tarig on his hands and knees mopping the bathroom floor, her womb that had fallen apart.

There was gratitude between them. Gratitude cushioned the quarrels, petty and deep. It levelled the dips in affection. Some-

times this gratitude came to her in trances and in dreams. Dreams with neither settings nor narratives, just the feeling, distilled.

'I can only take six books', Yasmin was saying, 'if you had a card I could borrow on yours. That's an idea. Let's get you a card'.

'No, some other time'. She did not like doing things impulsively, without warning. She looked at the queues which stretched out from the desk, the librarians running pens on the codes of books. They made her nervous. She tried to sound convincing. 'You'll never read more than six books in a month. Six is enough'.

But Yasmin insisted, giving her a lecture on how a library card was a right. 'You pay tax, don't you?', she said and told her how a Nigerian woman with three children lived in Aberdeen for seven years before finding out that she was entitled to Child Benefit. 'No one told her', Yasmin screeched in a whisper.

Twelve books on pregnancy made their way to the counter with proof that Sammar lived in the zone which this library served. Getting the card, Yasmin did all the talking. Sammar felt like a helpless immigrant who didn't know any English. She imagined the English words lifting away from her brain, evaporating, forming a light mist. It was one of the things that Mahasen had said to her the night of their quarrel, trembling with anger, fluent with righteousness. The night when Sammar had asked her permission to marry Ahmad Ali Yasseen. *An educated girl like you, you know English... you can support yourself and your son, you don't need marriage. What do you need it for? He started to talk to me about this and I silenced him. I shamed him, the old fool.* He's religious, Sammar had choked the words, he feels a duty towards widows... *He can take his religiousness and build a mosque but keep away from us. In the past, widows needed protection, life is different now.* She had wanted to say something in reply but the words stuck in her throat like dough.

'Rae's book', said Yasmin, just as they were leaving, 'did you see it? I'm sure it's here. Nobody reads these kind of things'. With their twelve books they went back to the History section and searched, finally finding *The Illusion of an Islamic Threat* upstairs, classified under Politics. On the back Sammar read in italics what others said about it, *Brings a new understanding to the*

turbulent situation in the Middle East. –Independent on Sunday. Isles sets out to prove that the threat of an Islamic take-over of the Middle-East is exaggerated.... His arguments are bold, his insights provocative. –The Scotsman.

They talked about him when they left the library, their voices carrying above the sound of the traffic and the cold wind. Sammar wanted to know about his ex-wives. The first, Yasmin said, was married now and living in Wales. She belonged to the distant past, Yasmin had never met her. The second, the mother of the daughter who was in boarding school in Edinburgh, worked for the World Health Organization in Geneva. They used to live in Cults, a big nice house. Then he moved to a flat in town.

Yasmin drove erratically, the books slid and parted in the back seat. In a tree-lined street, in a part of town that was unfamiliar to Sammar, she parked. 'This is where he lives', she said, 'I've come here often with Nazim. It's good that you're with me, I can give him these faxes that came for him yesterday after he went home. He's waiting to hear any moment now from the Anti-Terrorist program. They're going to take him as a consultant'.

'We can't do that, it's not right', said Sammar, 'give them to him on Monday...' But Yasmin was already unclasping her seat-belt, switching the heating off, pulling up the hand brake. 'We're together', she answered, 'it's not as if either of us is on her own'.

'He might not be in anyway', Sammar went on. Yasmin was out of the car, Sammar still tied up by her seat belt. It was getting dark, the clouds were plastered purple against the sky, the sun far away.

When Rae opened the door, fur brushed against Sammar's knees. It was a large black cat which made its way indoors with them. Sammar was wary of cats. When she was young stray cats had sneaked indoors and shocked her by jumping out of cupboards or from underneath the stairs. They were savage cats, their ribs visible against matted, dirty fur. Some had a black hole instead of an eye, some had stumpy legs, amputated tails. While she screamed, they ran back and forth in the room, desperately seeking an exit. It seemed to her that they clambered the walls, clawed the paint, cried furiously like she was crying, to get out of the trap

they had voluntarily entered and back to the outdoor life they knew.

Tarig had a story about stray cats, the ones that lived around the hospital. Their favourite meal, he said, comes every time a baby is born. They wait around the dustbins, one juicy placenta drops in and you should see how they fight for it! He liked to tease her with gory hospital stories. Laugh at the expression on her face.

Rae's cat was slow and well-fed. She walked, glossy and serene, around the room while he greeted Yasmin and Sammar and showed them in. 'What happened to your hair!', was the first thing Yasmin said. His hair was cut so short that it stood up from his head like spikes. He laughed and patted his head, saying, 'I guess the barber was over-zealous this time'. He looked different than he did at work. He was not wearing a tie and he had not shaved. It seemed to Sammar that the flat was not very large. The room they sat in was attached to the kitchen. Large bay windows overlooked the road and on the other side of the room, over the kitchen sink, was another window with yellow blinds. There were books lined under the window and the Week-end supplement spread out on the floor.

The cat climbed and sat on Sammar's knees. She did not know what to do, she had not looked at a cat closely like this before, not seen the yellow slits of its iris, the shine on its perfect black coat. She stroked it awkwardly and listened to Yasmin and Rae talking about the faxes, the weather outside, the headlines on the newspaper that Rae now picked up from the floor and folded away. 'I loathe all this fuss about the Royals', Yasmin was saying. 'Loathe' was another of the words that Yasmin often used. I loathe this shitty British weather.

Rae went to make tea. The cat left Sammar's lap and she began to look around at the rugs on the wall, the copper plant pots on the floor. There was a photograph of Rae's daughter on top of the shelf of books. She looked like she was around fourteen or fifteen and was riding a horse. She wore boots and a cap with straps along her chin. Sammar imagined the child's mother with that same long brown hair, courageous too, working for the

W.H.O., an important job, doing good, helping people.

She thought as she drank her tea that she was in a real home. She had not been in a real home for a long time. She lived in a room with nothing on the wall, nothing personal, no photographs, no books; just like a hospital room. She had given everything away, that week before taking Tarig home. She had stripped everything and given it away never imagining she would come back, never imagining the quarrel with Mahasen. And when she did come back she had neither the heart nor the means to buy things. Pay the rent for the room and that was all. One plate, one spoon, a tin opener, two saucepans, a kettle, a mug. She didn't care, didn't mind. Four years ill in a hospital she had made for herself. Ill, diseased with passivity, time in which she sat doing nothing. The whirlpool of grief sucking time. Hours flitting away like minutes. Days in which the only thing she could rouse herself to do was pray the five prayers. They were the only challenge, the last touch with normality, without them she would have fallen, lost awareness of the shift of day into night.

She tasted the tea Rae had made for her and listened to the only two people she really knew in this city. Yasmin, her face a little pinched in the early weeks of pregnancy, dark shadows under sleepy eyes. But that was natural, she would be big and healthy in a few months' time, round in maternity clothes. And Rae—it was strange to see people she only knew from work in their own homes. He didn't shave on week-ends.

One of the magazines that lay open on the floor had pictures of different world maps. It was an article on traditional maps and how they tended to show continents incorrectly in proportion to one another. Europe appeared larger than South America, North America larger than Africa, Greenland larger than China, when the opposite was true. In the latest, equal-area map, Africa was a massive elongated yellow, Britain a rosy insignificance. Somewhere in this vast yellow, near the blue that marked the flow of the Nile, was the life she had been exiled from.

She knelt and sat on her heels to look more closely. The familiar names of towns, in black type against the yellow, moved her. Kassala, Darfur, Sennar. Kadugli, Karima, Wau. Inside her

was their sheer dust and meagreness. Sunshine and poverty. Voices of those who endured because they asked so little of life. On the next page of the magazine there was an advertisement for educational materials. Schoolgirls in Somalia, smiling, arm in arm. Short-sleeved white shirts under a navy pinafore, white belts around their waists. She had dressed like that, been a face like that once. Hair carefully brushed, white socks and the white belt. She remembered walking with friends, her fingers hooked in their belts. Tugging. Hurry, the canteen will run out of Bezanous. The bottles had little bumps all around, curved pretty bumps. The Bezanous was pink and sweet, never cold enough. Smooth the sand under your foot, pat it flat, very flat. Hold the empty bottle, don't cheat and bend your knees, let it drop. If it stands, then what? Your wish will come true, or 'he' loves you too.

When she looked up, Rae was watching her, a look in his eyes like kindness. Encouraged she said, 'I used to wear a uniform like that in secondary school'.

'They made us wear shorts', he said, 'even in winter. It was awful, walking to school in the cold. I was glad when I got expelled'.

'You got expelled from school?', asked Yasmin. What terrible thing did you get up to?'

'I wrote an essay'. He was laughing so that Sammar did not know whether he was joking or not. 'I wrote an essay entitled *Islam is better than Christianity*'.

Yasmin started to laugh. 'Liar, I don't believe you, you're making this up'.

'No, it's true. This was in the '50s. They probably wanted to expel me anyway and this was the last straw'.

'Why did you write something like that?'

'I had an uncle who went with the army to Egypt in the Second World War. When he got there, he became interested in Sufism, converted to Islam, and left the army. You can imagine, he was considered a traitor, a defector. My grandmother told people that he was missing in action. She kept saying it until she believed it and everyone else in the family came to believe it too. Uncle David wrote to her, and to my mother too, explaining why he had

done what he did’.

Sammar closed the magazine. Rae sat back in his chair. He coughed and blew his nose in a large blue handkerchief. He looked as if this was a story he told often and liked to tell again. ‘I read this letter. It was, I think, the first time I came across the word ‘Islam’ and understood what it meant. Of course I was aware that my uncle had done something scandalous and I was curious. Also I had this essay that I had to write for school. I wish that I still had David’s letter now, or even the essay. Because’, and he paused, ‘I plagiarised whole paragraphs. The title though was mine. David never of course wrote that Islam was ‘better’ than Christianity. He didn’t use that word. Instead he said things like it was a step on, in the way that Christianity followed Judaism. He said that the Prophet Muhammad was the last in a line of Prophets that stretched from Adam, to Abraham through Moses and Jesus. They were all Muslims, Jesus was a Muslim, in a sense that he had surrendered to God. This did not go down very well in the letter nor in the essay’.

Rae was laughing again.

‘And so what happened to your uncle?’, Sammar asked, ‘Did he ever come back?’

‘He couldn’t come back, even if he had wanted to. He would have been arrested. Defection, treason, these are serious charges. He kept writing for some years to my mother. He changed his name, married an Egyptian woman and had children. I had Egyptian cousins, relatives in Africa. I was very excited by that. I thought it was very romantic. But my mother never answered his letters, or maybe sent him nasty letters, in return, so he stopped writing. I went looking for him in ’76 through to ’81 when I was in Cairo teaching at the AUC, but I couldn’t find him. I wouldn’t mind going over to look for him again’.

They were quiet when he finished speaking. Sammar felt that she and Yasmin had been in his flat for a long time. The afternoon in the library seemed distant, another day. The last drops of tea in her mug looked like honey. Then Yasmin started to talk of people’s intolerance and Sammar got up to wash the mugs in the kitchen. ‘It will only take a minute’, she said to Rae when he told

her to leave them, not to bother. But she took her time and looked around. A bottle of Safeways olive oil stood on the kitchen counter, an open packet of soluble aspirins, more photographs of the daughter, younger and smiling, were stuck to the door of the fridge. On the wall, there was a print of the Uleg-Beg Mosque in Samarkand, its exterior designed with the interlacing, intricate patterns of Islamic art. It was built in 1418, the caption read, and was both a *masjid* and a school which taught not only religious sciences but astronomy, mathematics and philosophy. Sammar rolled the blind up over the kitchen window and she could see in the dark a garden shed, lights in the other buildings, the auras of people’s lives. Warm water, lather that smelt of lemon, Rae’s voice.

‘...at times the courts here do show cultural sensitivity’, he was saying, ‘and each case sets a precedent for others to follow. In one case a High Court Judge awarded a divorced Asian woman damages, in thousands of pounds, against her husband. He had slandered her by suggesting she was not a virgin at the time of her marriage. The grounds for the case were that the insult was very serious in her community’.

‘Yes, we prize virginity’, Yasmin said, ‘and chastity. It’s hard to believe that a British judge and jury could understand that, let alone sympathize’.

‘People understand it but in the context of its own place, its own part of the world. Here though, it’s a different story. I would think that the consensus is, In Rome, do as the Romans do’.

‘Typical imperialist thinking’.

‘You’re right’, he said, ‘but these things take time to change. Not in our lifetime, I don’t think.’

‘In *your* lifetime’, said Yasmin. ‘We’re young aren’t we Sammar?’.

Sammar turned around. Her hands were wet with soap and she held them above the sink. ‘You’re younger than me’, she said to Yasmin.

‘I’m going to be thirty next week’, said Yasmin, ‘my birthday, and Nazim will be away as usual.’

‘He’s still off-shore?’ asked Rae.

'Off Shetland, freezing away, poor thing. But it is so peaceful without him'.

'You say things you don't mean, Yasmin', said Sammar. She turned off the taps and wiped the basin with the wash cloth. There were stains around the plug and in between the taps.

'Chekhov wrote', said Rae, 'that a woman pines when she is deprived of the company of a man and when deprived of the company of a woman, a man becomes stupid'.

'Rubbish', said Yasmin, 'I never pine.'

Sammar looked around for a towel to wipe her hands. The towel she found hanging on the back of a chair had a picture of a dolphin on it. The cat was nowhere in sight. It had gone outside and it was time for them to leave too. 'We should go, shouldn't we?', she said to Yasmin when she joined them, 'It's getting late'.

'I'm so tired I can't move', Yasmin said and Sammar had to hold both her hands and pull her up.

'What are you going to be like in a few months time?', she teased her and they were laughing when Rae opened the front door and walked with them down the steps.

Outside, Sammar stepped into a hallucination in which the world had swung around. Home had come here. Its dimly lit streets, its sky and the feel of home had come here and balanced just for her. She saw the sky cloudless with too many stars, imagined the night warm, warmer than indoors. She smelled dust and heard the barking of stray dogs among the street's rubble and pot-holes. A bicycle bell tinkled, frogs croaked, the muezzin coughed into the microphone and began the *azan* for the *Isha* prayer. But this was Scotland and the reality left her dulled, unsure of herself. This had happened before but not for so long, not so deeply. Sometimes the shadows in a dark room would remind her of the power cuts at home or she would mistake the gurgle of the central heating pipes for a distant *azan*. But she had never stepped into a vision before, home had never come here before. It took time to take in the perfect neatness of the buildings and the gleaming road. It took time for the heating in Yasmin's car to clear the mist of their breath on the window panes.

They drove through streets bright with lamplight, full of cars.

Young people strolled along the city's biggest road as if they did not feel the cold. Saturday night, another world.

'Rae is different', Sammar said. Her voice made it sound like a question.

'In what way?'

'He's sort of familiar, like people from back home'.

'He's an orientalist. It's an occupational hazard'.

Sammar did not like the word orientalist. Orientalists were bad people who distorted the image of the Arabs and Islam. Something from school history or literature, she could not remember. Maybe modern orientalists were different. Her eyesight was becoming blurred. She felt tired, deflated. The headlights of the cars were too bright, round savage circles crossed by swords.

'Do you think he could one day convert?' Mirages shimmered on the asphalt.

Yasmin snorted. 'That would be professional suicide'.

'Why?'

'Because no one will take him seriously after that. What would he be? Another ex-hippie gone off to join some weird cult. Worse than a weird cult, the religion of terrorists and fanatics. That's how it would be seen. He's got enough critics as it is, those who think he is too liberal, those who would even accuse him of being a traitor just by telling the truth about another culture'.

'A traitor to what?'

'To the West. You know, the idea that West is best'.

'But you can never tell about people', said Sammar, 'look at this uncle of his...'

'Are you hoping he would convert so you could marry him?'

'Don't be silly, I was just wondering'. She breathed in and out as if it was an effort. Her eyes ached, her nose ached. Washing the mugs was a mistake, senseless behaviour. 'I was just wondering because he knows so much about Islam...'

'This annoys him'.

'What annoys him?'

'That Muslims expect him to convert just because he knows so much about Islam'.

They had reached Sammar's place by then. She could hardly

open her eyes to put the key in the lock, light was a source of suffering. And a headache, pain greater than childbirth. Inside, she wanted to hit her head against something to dislodge what was inside. Sleep, which came so easily in this hospital room, in layers and hours, would not come now. The silence, the absence of pain would not come. *Ya Allah, Ya Arham El-Rahimeen*. When sleep finally came it was desperate unconsciousness. She woke up clear, weightless, full of calm. She thought she must have had something between a migraine and a fit.

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OTHERS WALKED in the Winter Gardens now. Mid-morning and families were calling out to each other, strolling among the flowers and green plants. A boy ran past Sammar and Rae, holding a red packet of crisps, the arms of his jacket tied round his waist. Her son would be the same age now as this boy. No longer curved like a baby, no longer learning how to talk. A school-boy. Mahasen had written to her and said, schools here are not what they used to be, you must come and take him back, it would be better for him. Her aunt's letter arrived when the city was covered in fog (even the postman still made his rounds unperturbed in the dark). A year later and Sammar was still paralysed, unresponsive to her son. Froth, ugly froth.

She could not forget what her aunt had said to her, that night when they quarrelled about Ahmad Ali Yaseen, old family friend. *Nine months have not yet passed, you want to get married again... and to whom? A semi-illiterate with two wives and children your age. I'll never give permission for something like this. From what sort of clay have you been made of? Explain to me. Explain what you think you're going to do...* Throughout her childhood, the man she had called 'Uncle' Ahmad had come to visit from the south. A roll of dust behind his Toyota van, crates of mangoes, straps of sugar cane. He laughed happiness. Sammar always remembered him as laughing, except the time he cried for Tarig, his stomach shaking underneath his white *jellabia* the same way it did when he laughed. Doctor. He called Tarig 'doctor' even

when Tarig was sixteen and waiting for his exam results.

Tarig, Rae had asked about Tarig. There was Ethiopian blood in his family, in the copper hint to his skin, the shape of his nose. Studying for exams, so many exams to become a doctor. Tarig doodling music on his notes. They came to Aberdeen for more exams. Part One, Part Two. Exams that never ended. Culture-shocked they were alone together for the first time. No Mahasen, no Hanan. No one in this new city but them. They had dreamt of this, talked of this. Yet like the elderly who remember the distant past more clearly than the events of the previous day, Sammar lived with a young Tarig inside her head.

'When he was fourteen', she said to Rae, 'Tarig broke his leg. He fell off a ladder while he was trying to hang up a poster in his room. The ladder fell too. It made a terrible bang which woke Mahasen from her afternoon nap. She came rushing into the room and beat him with her slipper for being careless and for waking her up. I was laughing at him, I couldn't help it. I covered my mouth knowing it was wrong to laugh when grown-ups were angry. But I couldn't stop myself. He looked so funny tangled up with the ladder, fending off Mahasen's slipper. It was a good thing she did not see me laughing or else she would have turned on me too'.

In the Winter Gardens, Sammar started to laugh. 'I always laugh', she said, 'when people fall down, I can't help myself. And Rae laughed and said, 'Not a very refined sense of humour'.

She said, 'No, not very', and went on. 'His father had to take him to Germany for an operation—the doctors had to put metal pins in his calf. The day they came back, the house was full of people and all the lights were on. From Germany, they brought with them boxes and boxes of lovely chocolates. Mahasen saved them for the important guests and everyone else got Mackintosh, a tin that was past its sell-by date. They sold them like that, imported at the Duty Free Shop, the chocolates ashy-grey, the toffees stuck to their wrapping.

'Tarig came back different, like he was suddenly older, even though he had been away only for a month. His leg was in plaster and he had crutches which Hanan and I took turns to hop with

around the house. I wrote my name in Arabic and in English on the white plaster’.

It had been easy to talk when they were young. Things changed when they outgrew sparklers and bikes. Or even, she sometimes thought, things changed from the time he broke his leg. If Hanan was with them they could talk, the three of them, about films they had seen or who Tarig had met in the petrol queue. But if Hanan left them alone, to make Tang or answer the telephone there would be an awkward silence between them. Silly talk, while they heard her stir the orange powder in the glasses, bang the ice tray in the kitchen sink. How are you? I’m fine, how are you? When his sister came back they would look guilty as if they had done something wrong.

Shyness pestered them for years. It was scratchy like wool. It made them want Hanan to be with them so they could talk and want her away from them so they could be alone. Tarig sent her notes at school with his best-friend’s sister, overriding Hanan, although she was in the same class. The treachery dazzled more than the words he wrote. Flimsy papers that weighed in her hand like rocks. She tore them and scattered the tiny pieces in different places, afraid that someone would find them. She liked to talk to him on the phone, it was safe on the phone. On the phone, they swapped recurrent nightmares and happy dreams. He said, I want to tell you something but I’m too shy.

She imagined that what she wanted from life was simple, nothing grand, just to continue and live in the same place, be another Mahasen when she grew up. Have babies, get fat, sit with one leg crossed over the other and complain to life-long friends about the horrific rise in prices, the hours Tarig had to spend at the clinic. But continuity, it seemed, was in itself ambitious. Tarig was plucked from this world without warning, without being ill, like a little facial hair is pulled out by tweezers.

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‘YOU MUST TELL ME about this’, she said to Rae, holding up her folder. ‘Are all the rumours about you true?’

‘What rumours?’

‘You and the terrorists or is it all top secret?’

He laughed and put his finger on the blue folder. ‘You tell me first what you thought of it’.

‘It’s sad’, she said.

‘Sad?’

‘There is something pathetic about the spelling mistakes, the stains on the paper, in spite of the bravado. There are truths but they are detached, not tied to reality...’

‘They are all like that’.

‘You get a sense of people overwhelmed’, she went on, ‘overwhelmed by thinking that nothing should be what it is now’.

‘They are shooting themselves in the foot. There is no recourse in the Sharia for what they’re doing, however much they try and justify themselves’.

‘When are you going to meet them?’

He shook his head. ‘I didn’t get the job, they took someone else, someone with more palatable views, no doubt’.

‘I am sorry about that’. She wished she had not joked about it before.

‘I am sorry too. A winter in Egypt seemed to me like a good idea’. He looked at the windows. Beyond the Winter Gardens, Sammar saw a world dim with inevitable rain, metallic blue, dull-green. Lawns empty of people, covered with dead leaves.

‘But really it would have been good for the department. We have to prove ourselves useful to Industry or the government to keep the funding coming in’.

She looked at the slabs on the ground, hexagonals by lines of pebbles. Tidy, rubbish free. Was it Tarig who always shaped designs in the dust with his feet? Or was it she? Shifted twigs, dented bottle tops, kicked around a pebble that stood out from among the rest because of its striking shape, its different colour. And to avoid Tarig’s eyes, she had pulled little oblong leaves from their stems, tied the stems in knot after knot. Rolled the petals of jasmines between her fingers till they became pulp.

‘I was thinking of you’, Rae said, ‘this is why I wanted you to translate this. They need a translator. I would be happy to recom-

mend you. It would be a short contract, no more than a month. Then maybe from Cairo you could go home to visit. How far is it from Cairo?’

‘Two and a half hours by plane’. She looked at him warily, there was now a distance between them, a new coolness. ‘You imagine that I can interview terrorists?’ Her voice sounded sarcastic, grudging.

‘The place will be swarming with security. You needn’t worry about that. Anyway, a lot of them would not have taken part in terrorist activities. And you’re translating not interviewing, someone else will be asking the questions. I think you’ll do fine.

‘These Anti-terrorist Programs’, he said, ‘I see them as part of a hype to cover up the real problems of unemployment and inefficient government. I’ve spoken to members of these extremist groups before and you will see that if you speak to them, they have no realistic policies, no clear idea of how to implement what they vaguely call ‘Islamic economics’, or an ‘Islamic’ state. They are protest movements, and they do have plenty to protest about. The mediocrity of the ruling party which has no mass support and which are in the main client states to the West. These groups appeal to people’s anger against cultural imperialism, against class divisions but do people really believe them to be a viable alternative? I don’t think so.

‘I’ll get off my soap-box now’, he said and laughed. His laugh turned into a cough. ‘I’m sorry I go on about this. Consider it though. I think it would be a good chance for you to go home, see your family’.

‘I’m afraid’.

But he did not understand. ‘It’s natural to be afraid of a new job’.

When she did not answer, he said, ‘There are other rooms in these gardens, do you want to see them?’

So they walked away from the cacti through greenery, among tropical plants with large leaves, pink flowers. Miniature waterfalls and streams where little girls teased the swimming fish. And all around them the sound of the birds and running water. Water rushing in the pipes that ran along the ceiling to keep the air

humid or was it already pouring with rain outside?

In the farthest corner, in a stagnant pond, near the toilets and the fire exit, a comical mechanised frog rose and fell. It broke the surface of the scum and rose, jaws wide open, to spit out the water he existed in. Down again it sank, heaved, only to obey and rise again. The boy with the jacket around his waist was there, kneeling by the side of the pond. He had a friend with him and they appeared to be greatly amused by the frog. The boy pulled a piece of gum out of his mouth, long and silvery, he made a loop of it and put the other end into his mouth. It dangled long, nearly touching the ground where he knelt. The actions that make mothers scold, Put that gum back in your mouth. Don’t play with it. She had said to Mahasen, I need a focus in my life and her aunt’s reply was, *Your son is your focus*. But she had left him behind, come here and her focus became the hospital room, watching from the window people doing what she couldn’t do. Four years convalescing. If she went home now, she would bring the child back with her, if he would agree to come. She would not escape from him again.

Glass corridors led on to other rooms where there were tree barks, plants for sale in flower pots, giant mushrooms shaped out of stone. Back in the desert room, their bench was empty, the light welcomed her. No electric frog, no foliage, just the coarse, sparse aridity that was familiar to her from long ago.

The sound of running water was the rain against the glass. It was like the rain of her dream, her first dream of the present, the first time this grey landscape had found a place in her sleeping mind. Four years and her soul had dived in sleep to the past, nothing in the present could touch it. ‘But if you go home’, Rae said, ‘you would find it hard to come back and I would not have a translator any more’. She learnt, then, the meaning of his kindness. That he knew she was heavy with other loyalties, full to the brim with distant places, voices in a language that was not his own.