

Alia

Khobar, Saudi Arabia

To be in love with a girl is in itself a crime. This is all the more true if she is a fellow student at your all-girls' high school in the Bayounieh neighbourhood in Khobar. These feelings are too sinful even to be inwardly acknowledged, let alone publicly expressed. Keeping them secret goes without saying. But what would happen, I wonder, were I to openly declare these feelings for my classmate Moodi? I was fully aware that there could be only one possible outcome. It was inevitable. Complete and utter doom.

Still, I longed to confess my secret love to Moodi. My feelings were at war with each other. They were relentless, threatening to suffocate me every minute of every day.

I love you, Moodi. I love you so much. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I feel a boundless longing to be with you. I woo her beautiful spectre, as if in a lucid dream.

Moodi comes from the well-to-do Qa'ad family. She's a pretty girl with rosy cheeks, whose clothes give off the scent of traditional Arabian incense mixed with French perfumes. Her delicate, pearly white teeth are always busy chewing gum, and its minty fragrance trails in the air behind her, reminding everyone of how flawless she is. She's neither too curvy nor too slender, but perfection. She's an angel fallen from the sky one

cool day when the flowers began to blossom, when everything took on a rose-coloured hue. Anyone who claims she's merely human is a liar! She has creamy skin with pinkish undertones, full, rosy, and perfectly drawn lips. Whenever her luscious coffee-brown hair bursts free from her hijab, it cascades down over her neck and shoulders like a silken waterfall. There is no doubt that she's different from all the other girls I've ever known here in Khobar. She's not even like those beautiful girls from Aden or Taiz who I had the chance to see up close last summer, when, for the first time, I set foot in the land of my ancestors in the far south of the Arabian peninsula. I'm nearly certain that with all of the beauty God granted her—her unique refinement, the glint in her eyes, and her teeth as shiny as pearls—thousands would flock to her and try to win her affections.

But that sweet and happy young woman, who always has a smile on her face and pays little attention to her studies, pays even less to my emotions. She's indifferent to the looks cast her way by petite, Yemeni me, described by our fellow classmates as having "tomato cheeks." Since I'm well-spoken and diligent, they call me a nerd. No one can best me in the finer arts of grammar and rhetoric. I keep to myself most of the time. A smile rarely crosses my face.

"You look sad and subdued all the time, like an orphan," one of them told me. "Everyone agrees you always seem worried about something." Another tugged at my heartstrings when she whispered in my ear with a sly smile, "Anyone who looks at you would swear you'd fallen in love. Do you have a crush on someone?" I instantly feared she might have noticed my attraction to Moodi, and that she would gossip about me behind my back.

In any case, I don't blame Moodi for her indifference. Who could blame her, really? All the girls at school vie for her attention. Her teachers are drawn to her and give her passing marks even if she doesn't show up for exams. The school's headmistress once said, "You're as sweet as honey, Moodi. Your mother must be Egyptian!"

At night, in the shelter of my bedroom, when the universe is still save for the sounds of distant cars—young men racing to show off their speed and, quite frankly, suicide skills—I nestle my head into my pillow. I lure my eyelids shut and will sleep to come. But it never does. A vision of Moodi occupies my every waking thought—her laughter, her gestures, the flash in her hazel eyes, the outline of her symmetrical face and round, soft cheeks, polished and rosy like two apples. Her small nose that flares a little at the bottom does nothing to distort her beauty, not at all like her sister Bayyan's nose, which juts out of her angular face. Bayyan is one year older than Moodi and is enrolled in the science track at our school.

But Moodi acts as if she doesn't know I exist. She never spends any time with me, though I wish she would. She never even asks how I'm doing the way she does with the other girls. Our classmate Watfa is her best friend. They both agree that high school is the furthest they'll take their education. "By the time you finish, you'll be old and grey, and by then it'll be hard to have children and raise them properly!" Moodi would proclaim, always trailed by Watfa's agreement: "Education does nothing for a woman's future, nothing at all!" They've convinced each other that their marital homes will be more worthy of their time and attention than pointlessly pursuing an education. Like a

broken record, Watfa repeats this whether or not it's appropriate. Men and marriage are the main topics of conversation for her and Moodi. This comes up once, twice, even three times a day, with no sign of abating. It's even the main course when we gather at teatime during the half-hour break between periods— "God will never be pleased with a woman who doesn't focus on her husband and home."

She doesn't let up: "Women weren't created to work and get tired. Our soft bodies aren't made for drudgery and toil. Women are made to raise children and care for their husbands."

She carefully examines our faces as she speaks, alert to who's on her side and who isn't. Her anger swells and her face brims with confidence as she swears by Almighty God that what she says is true; it's logical, correct, and indisputable. This is a righteous truth that cannot be invalidated, as undeniable as the light of the sun. Her argument culminates in one final proof, "That's why my father lives so happily with my mother. She's never once complained—not about him, not about her life."

Sometimes Watfa even cites Qur'anic verses and sayings of the Prophet she's heard her father repeat. "This is what Allah wants for us— *'And abide in your houses'*; and He also said that women must not wish to become like men—*'And do not wish for that by which Allah has made some of you exceed others'*."

Despite all this, and the fact that I've been growing increasingly certain that Moodi will never notice me or my feelings, I'm still inexplicably drawn to her. She affects me a great deal, though I know very well that at the end of the day—and at the end of the current school year, seven months from now—Moodi will go her way, and I'll go mine.

She's lodged herself deep within me, whether I like it or not. Every time I see her walk into the classroom, my heart skips a beat. It then proceeds to pound against my ribcage when her steps lead her in my direction. My chest tightens and my stomach flutters when I see her laughing and chatting with Watfa, cheerful as usual. I envy Watfa. Sometimes I even resent her and wish she would just disappear.

Though we've been classmates for two years, only recently has Moodi come to occupy my every thought and waking moment. I don't understand what's happening to me. All of a sudden, these complicated and conflicting feelings started growing inside me, and they fixated on her. Here I am now, unable to control either my feelings or the obsessions that follow.

The onset of these feelings for Moodi is not the only new fixture in my life. I've found myself becoming more and more drawn to the songs my father Abdel Rahman plays on repeat, especially those by Umm Kulthum, Abdel Halim Hafez, and Farid al-Atrash. Every Thursday, my father follows a special routine. He gets home from work at sunset, weary and exhausted. He takes a shower and sprays his clothes with his favourite cologne, a mixture of oud, sandalwood, and cardamom—or that's what he claims the secret

ingredients are. He then reclines on the sofa in his room, my mother Jawaher right by his side. She'll have already made the necessary preparations for this weekly ritual. She cooks dinner extra early on Thursdays, so as not to miss out on sharing the entire evening with him. Then the whole house is flooded with Umm Kulthum's voice. Her distinctive rhythms set the stage for the night. I cannot recall one Thursday in all the years we lived in Khobar that started with any voice but hers. *Al-Atlal, Enta 'Omri, Fat al-Ma'ad, al-Hobb Kollo, Lelat Hobb, Ya Msaharni, and Aghadan Alqak*—these songs were our companions throughout those years. My father says *Fat al-Ma'ad* is the most beautiful song he's ever heard, "the lyrics, music, and performance." He sings along after Umm Kulthum's lengthy crooning, "*What good is regret... what use is reproach?*" In a euphoric daze, he exclaims, "God bless you, Baligh Hamdi, you're a composer like no other! What a genius... genius doesn't even describe it..."

He then calms down and finishes his thought, "If only the lovely Umm Kulthum had not sung it in the year of the Naksa."

The muscles in his face tense up when he reaches the part of the song where she sings:

The curtains of oblivion fell long ago

If it's about past love and its harshness

I've forgotten it; I hope you forget it too.

He sways his head as he sings along, stopping only when he begins to lose his voice.

The ritual continues until the very end of the night. Before he climbs into bed and submits to slumber, he listens to one or two songs from Yemen, his homeland. He has a special affinity for Ayoob Tarish's *Wa Mfareq Bilad en-Noor*. "This song will be the main reason we return to Yemen," he often used to say, to me and to anyone else in the house.

You who left the country of light, the time has now come to reunite

Loyalty to the homeland is calling, the time to heed that call is now.

Do not stay away, enough distance, agony, and sorrow...

Yemen awaits you with open arms.

Stranger to the homeland, enough distance and travels

Loyalty is religion, grace your families with your presence.

Enough of letters, paper can be burned with fire,

And money brings no joy to those who are longing.

The songs of Abu Bakr Salem bring tears to his eyes and tug at his heartstrings, which were already heavy with yearning. They also nudge forward his plans to return to Yemen as soon as possible.

He would flip between two songs, each making him more homesick than the other.

If you fly, fly to the town of Aden

Passions run high, I am too far, I am too sad.

*I cannot take this distance,
Every day feels like a year,
It is the paradise of the world,
It holds all art dear.*

And:

*If you love your home, get up and dust yourself off.
For you, Mukalla, Sanaa, Aden.
Yemen is sweet, even sweeter are its people.*

I rarely focused on the lyrics of the songs my father played. I barely paid attention to any single phrase. I always thought it so strange that my father sighed whenever Umm Kulthum, known as Kawkab al-Sharq, reaches the end of a verse. I couldn't understand it. But this all changed with the tidal wave of emotion that swept over me and fixated my thoughts on Moodi. Now, I'm actually drawn to those sentences and expressions that seem to stem from my own mind, from the feelings simmering just below the surface. I focus intently, anxiously, on Umm Kulthum's words:

Am I going to meet you tomorrow? How terrified my heart is of tomorrow...

And:

*Oh, you who forgets me while you are on my mind,
Your spectre never leaves my sight,*

Comfort me and empathise with my situation

And relieve me of all my worries.

Far from you my life is torture.

Don't stray far from me.

And, every once in a while, my eyes swell with unwanted tears.

My mother has been attuned to these changes taking place within me. Back when I turned twelve and was still flat-chested, she grew more and more concerned. Later, she noticed my newfound interest in music just as she noticed my increased inclination toward quiet and calm. Not long ago, she was calling me silly and foolish. Now, I still haven't gotten my first period, and I'm late compared to other girls my age. This worries my mother, who claims time is running out because soon a suitor will come knocking, his family in tow, to ask for my hand in marriage.

No, it's fair to say that I hope the day my mother has been fretting about never comes. I'm in no condition, psychologically speaking, to picture a man sharing my bed and inching closer to me to "flirt with me, touch me, hold me, and enjoy my charms", as Watfa keeps repeating. Moodi always nods along in total agreement. But I cannot imagine a man breathing so close to me. The mere thought of it makes me sick.

But I do wonder, sometimes, why I don't have the same desires that Watfa and Moodi do. Why don't I care the slightest bit about men? Am I not a woman? I find it very odd that these feelings only come with puberty. When we were still in junior secondary

school, girls started talking about boys. Is it safe to assume that they all hit puberty so early on? But when I hear my mother factually narrate how these things happen, I stop worrying. She knows best, after all. “They’re just deceptive, early teenage feelings,” she says, confidently brushing off my worries. “A girl only knows how she truly feels once she hits puberty and gets her period.”

In my current state, I feel an extreme aversion to men. With every day that passes, I grow less and less interested in them, especially the ones with hair growing on their faces.

“My mother says that men without hair aren’t real men.”

“My mother says that the more hair a man has, the more of a man he is!”

I listen to these conversations in class and feel queasy. They make my stomach turn, and I feel I’m going to be sick. Mirvat, our Islamic Education teacher, hates men. She once told us, “I can’t stand talking about them.” She announced that a man has to be very clean and not let his beard grow out too much so that wispy beard hairs don’t fall out onto the ground—or, even worse, get mixed into the rice when you’re eating. “I don’t like beards at all,” she asserted. “They disgust me.” Sarcastically, she asked, “Did God create hair for us just to let it grow?”

Back when I was in kindergarten, and during my early years in primary school, I spent a lot of time with my female teachers. I never really had the urge to play with the other girls in my class. Instead, I spent most of my free time between periods in my female teachers' offices. Sometimes I would even prefer to just stand there, behind their office windows, watching them move around. A hint of a smile would dance on my face whenever one of them noticed me and ushered me back to enjoy playtime with my classmates. When I went home for the day, I would stay inside until the following morning, when I got on the school bus. My mother was always worried about me, constantly cautioning me against leaving the house. This made me less willing to go out and play with the neighbours' children, who I viewed as monsters.

All this changed when I turned nine. That's when I threw caution to the wind and forgot my fear of being outdoors, beyond the high walls that surrounded our house. I firmly implanted myself within the group of neighbourhood boys. I started talking to them, playing with them, acting just like them, all the while completely avoiding the many girls who lived in the area. My mother didn't comment at first, and she didn't object either, as long as I had no budding little bulges on my chest.

My father was surprised at my football skills, especially considering I was playing with boys. In his opinion, I was better than them, dribbling the ball and scoring goals with great precision. Jokingly, he once said that his dream—that my mother's firstborn child would be a son—may actually have affected my genetic makeup. Perhaps I should have

been a boy, as he had wished. He praised me, “The boys you play with can’t kick the ball as hard as you can. You’re the best player in the world. Better than Pele!”

When I turned thirteen, I was forbidden to play football with the boys. At the same time, I found myself involuntarily pulling away from my sisters Nuha, Suha, Anoud, and Shazza. I started to recoil from all the kinds of “girl talk” they shared. I preferred to spend time with my brothers Hamed, Assem, and the youngest, Mourad. I’d steal Hamed’s bicycle and ride on gravel, tiled, and dirt trails, and on the pavement, sometimes falling on the asphalt and scraping up my arms and legs. Barefoot, with dark blood dripping from my skinned knees, I’d race my brothers up dirt hills, covered in grime and dust, oblivious to how filthy my clothes would get.

I cared even less about how angry my mother would be when she saw me, about the screaming fit that would ensue. I’d follow them up the trunk of the massive walnut tree in the middle of our yard. Even when my climb ended in a painful fall and bruises all over my body, I never cared. My mother would scold, “You’re a girl, this is inappropriate!” And when she realised that her admonitions were going unnoticed, she would fly into a fit of rage and call me names. “Stupid,” “scatterbrained,” and other words she used went in one ear and straight out the other. And she didn’t stop when her anger dissipated. No, she then resorted to other weapons in her arsenal. She would sit me down next to her, bring her face close to mine, and then, very calmly, with a smile, give me some advice:

“You’re a girl, a lady, a delicate woman. Soon your womb will have fully developed and will be able to carry a man’s seed. You need to take better care of yourself. If God forbid

you were to break your hymen with your reckless behaviour, you'd never find a man who'd agree to marry you. You'll live your whole life without a husband, do you understand?"

But all her advice, everything she said, would float away on any passing breeze. She carried on, well-intentioned but naïve, "It's okay to play, but don't run around too fast, ride bikes, or open your legs so wide!" Again, I didn't listen. Looking to my father for support, she'd complain, "Your daughter is going to drive me crazy!" But none of it made a difference to me. I went on feeling that I was a different kind of girl. "I'm not like other girls, Mama," I would say. She would always shake her head, refusing to listen. Even Hamed backed me and confirmed, "This girl is more like a boy—ten boys even!"

When I turned fourteen, I started getting intense stomach cramps. They were irregular and kept coming and going every three or four days. This made my mother extremely happy. Joy returned to her otherwise morose countenance as she calmed my pain with analgesics, insisting that my cramps were the onset of period pains. "It appears you're one of those girls whose periods are very painful. You'll suffer, I can already tell," she would say gleefully, then murmur, "but the pain will subside after marriage. I was just like you."

But no blood flowed, and the cramps didn't go away. They accompanied me everywhere, like a shadow. I would sit in front of the mirror, feeling my face and the wiry hairs that had started to grow above my lip and under my jaw. "When you get older, you'll

have light hair growing on your face, kind of like a beard,” the Sudanese endocrinologist, Dr Abdel Ghaffar, had said. He’d started following my case when my mother began to feel there was cause for concern. But he couldn’t find a convincing explanation for my condition. Obviously anxious and confused, he started scratching his bald head and making a sort of (+) sign on his cheek. He mumbled to my mother as I sat there watching. “There’s nothing to worry about with your daughter Alia. This is normal. Her body is secreting an excess of male hormones, which is expected for her age group. This will all go away when she hits puberty.” I was fifteen at the time.

The doctor’s words confirmed what our General Sciences teacher had told us in class: all our confused teenaged feelings of love, passion, and attachment to each other were transient and would fade away, disappearing with time. She also gave us the following advice: “It’s possible for a girl to like another girl, or for a boy to like another boy, during your teen years. It’s easy for feelings to get mixed up between ordinary, natural love—like the love between siblings and friends—and that other, unnatural love, which is the forbidden kind. So, girls, you must remain on your guard and be aware of everything happening around you. Don’t hesitate to tell your mothers if anyone makes you feel unsafe.” Then, resorting to stronger language, she warned us, eyes bulging, “And don’t you ever, ever, go near boys. At this age, they’re nothing but rabid dogs that will ravage the flesh of anyone they come across. They’re like wildfire, consuming everything in their path.”

Even at an early age, I'd never been emotionally drawn to boys. I always felt a profound interest in girls, and, as I grew, so did this interest. Two years ago, I met an Egyptian girl at school. She was in the year below me. Nasma. She was as gentle and breezy as her name suggests. She had ivory skin, rosy cheeks, and slender fingers. I was completely taken by her. One morning, I mustered up the courage to talk to her for the first time, and she stole my heart with unnerving ease. There was magic in her smile and in the pink of her cheeks. But soon after, she left our school and Khobar entirely, to move to Jeddah. I was miserable for days. She haunted my dreams for a long time.

When my sister Anoud, who is three years younger than me, got her period, I began to despair. She was only thirteen! I grabbed my journal from the bookshelf and started to scribble in it furiously, cursing the state I was in and imploring God to save me. It was He, after all, who had decided to make me as I was. No one else.

It's not fair, I wrote. Why do Anoud and all my other sisters get to live their lives free of stress, while I have to deal with all this anxiety?! Why have I been sentenced to this torture?!

But I immediately felt guilty and tore out the page, afraid of God's retribution.

Sometimes, when I'm alone in my room, I picture myself talking to Moodi. I conjure up her face and tell her about everything I'm hiding deep inside, all the conflicted feelings I have for her. But even in this fictional world, she doesn't care. She won't even offer the solace of a curt smile.

I pull my notebook out of the drawer and write:

I don't know what's happening to me. I don't understand. I can't even explain it, let alone confide in anyone. Deep down, I wish I could be like all the other girls. I wish I had the same thoughts and desires as they do. But I don't. I can't. I always feel so detached from how they talk about their feelings. But why? It's probably those male hormones the Sudanese doctor told us about...

Starting a new paragraph, I write:

I wish I could think and feel the way that Watfa, Moodi, and my sisters do. All this confusion is torturing me! I feel so alone... I struggle to join conversations. I've gotten so used to talking to myself that my sisters call me crazy. But in reality, I have no control over this confusion, and the only solution I can think of is to wait for my period to come and puberty to hit... it's already so late...

I go on writing:

But despite all this anxiety tearing away at my insides, I'm a girl who fears God and believes in Him. I do strongly believe that soon He will pull me out of this daze. I pray to Him five times a day. Because I haven't yet had my period, I fast the whole month of Ramadan. I even perform all the extra, optional prayers. My sisters Nuha and Suha can't

always fast during the full month of Ramadan because sometimes they get their periods, which prevents them. But I'm different. I hope I get it soon so that I can be normal like them...

Then I delve deep into a sea of supplications, stopping only when the darkness is defeated:

O Allah, it is Your mercy that I hope for, so don't leave me in charge of my affairs even for the blinking of an eye. And rectify all of my affairs for me. There is no God but You.

O Allah, I appeal to You for the weakness in my strength, and my limited power, and the lack of support and the humiliation I am made to receive. You are the Most Compassionate and Merciful, the Lord of the weak.

Still, despite all this, I once again fall prey to these contradictory feelings that relentlessly attack me. Furiously, I underline the words I've written:

I don't feel like a girl. I don't feel like I belong to the world of girls. I can't stand their conversations, and I hate talking about men! I won't get married: I'll live my life like this, without a man and come what may. My father will be angry and I know my mother will roar on about it, but it's my life and I'll live it how I want to. If it were up to me, I'd choose to be a boy.

Sometimes, when I think about the strict laws and customs here, my eyes can't help but well up with tears. It's depressing to think my fate will be the same as Moodi's and Watfa's.

These irreconcilable feelings surface sometimes more than once a night. Occasionally, I manage to picture myself as a full-fledged girl, beautiful and natural with two swollen breasts, "a rose in a garden" to borrow my mother's words. But other times, I feel disgusted at the thought of being that sweet girl, adorned and perfumed with oud oil, lying in wait—at the end of the night—for her mate to appear and bite at her luscious flesh before he succumbs to slumber.

My father has always been oblivious to the details of what was happening to me. This was especially true after I stopped playing with the neighbourhood boys. He doesn't come home until late, and, when he does eventually arrive, he's always exhausted, too tired to speak. Even his breathing is laboured, and sometimes he grumbles about work. He's sick of his job. He complains that it's sapping his energy and health. During the workweek, from Saturday to Thursday, he never really speaks to us much. He doesn't give and take; he just sits quietly at the dinner table—if by coincidence he makes it home on time—and quickly finishes his meal before turning in, not to leave his bedroom until the following morning. He's only ever truly present on Thursday nights and Fridays. Otherwise, my father is more like a spectre that floats through the house. And although

Ramadan is the month when he pays more attention to us and is more inclined to offer us his company, nothing really changes. The arduous day-long fast brings him home shortly before the call to prayer, at which point he's mostly quiet. If he speaks, it is usually about the "brutes" he works with or his cruel bosses who "claim to be Muslims and perform Umrah and Hajj every year yet are harder on their fellow Muslim employees than they are on Zionists!" His barrage won't even stop there. He claims that the bosses "ignore the fact that it's the holy month, the month of mercy and compassion", and indeed that their cruelty "actually intensifies during Ramadan—they spend their time chit chatting in air-conditioned offices, not caring that the rest of us toiling in the heat are also hungry and thirsty."

I, for one, do not understand how this weary, grumbling man who curses and swears when he's tired is the sentimental romantic who listens to Umm Kulthum every Thursday night. But all that aside, I love my father very much. I've been attached to him ever since I was little. He treated me like a boy all throughout my childhood. Those were the best years of my life. He left me wanting for nothing: he would always buy me new clothes to wear for football, and at the beginning, he ignored my mother's pleas to stop me from playing with boys and riding bikes. Standing behind her, he'd give me a knowing smile, and his twinkling eyes would wink at me to "go on out and play." But he later took a step back and retreated into his work—my mother had finally gotten through to him. He left me in her hands and diverted his attention to Hamed, Assem, and Mourad. My mother kept insisting that it was shameful for a daughter to confide in her father about the things that bothered her, but I still wished he could be there for me more. I've always had a longing to talk to him in particular about what's going on with me beneath the surface.

I've wanted him to know about my feelings. Him, not my mother. There is something in me that makes me sure my father would be more understanding. He knows more about life than she does. He's the one who has struggled; he's the one who life has crushed; he's the one who has met with countless types of people, and he's the only one who is educated. He studied accounting and got his diploma, unlike my mother who didn't even finish elementary school. But my wish still has not come true; he has kept his distance.

It is with great pain that I listen to my classmates talk about the attention their fathers lavish on them. I cannot reconcile the way they depict their fathers with the way I see my own: these fathers take summer trips outside of Saudi Arabia with their daughters, buying them whatever they want, sometimes even surprising them with gifts—a watch, a bottle of French perfume, a gold bracelet, or perhaps some money. If they get sick, their fathers are the ones to rush them to hospital... But as my father has aged, his changed image has cemented itself further, and I now realise how diametrically opposed it is to the images my classmates draw of their own fathers. At home, we've gotten used to hearing him complain about work, and he has made it abundantly clear that he can't stand hearing us complain about school. He barely even gives my mother space to air her concerns. He is bossy most of the time, and moody, too; he could have a frown on his face and then just as quickly shed that skin, a smile emerging from underneath. Just like a chameleon. He claims his arduous job is the reason behind his mercurial moods:

“Isn't it enough that I work myself to the bone for you? My whole life is for you. All I'm asking is that you succeed at school.”

Like a broken record, this is all he ever says. And that's on the rare occasion that he does speak to us. He's said it so often we've memorised it word for word. Sometimes he'll switch up the actual words, but the gist is always the same: "You need to get the highest marks at school. I won't settle for you ranking any lower than first in your class." Not only because I'm in high school, but also because I'm the eldest of his children, he'll gesture at me with his index finger, saying, "You must have a high GPA. I want to see you among the top students in the Kingdom. I want to see your picture in the papers."

Then, subdued, he'll lower his voice a little and continue, "I've invested all my money, all my time, all my energy in your education. I only ask that you excel and go to top universities. I want you to become doctors and engineers, or to run companies. I've devoted my whole life to you. Don't let me down."

Or he'll say: "I don't want you to end up like me, living on the sympathy and satisfaction of others. I want you to be free. Your degrees will open doors for you anywhere in the world."

Then he looks me straight in the eye and holds my gaze. "I'm speaking to you especially, Alia," he says, his voice struggling to hold back emotion. "You in particular must excel and win a spot at university to then go work abroad. I don't want you working in Khobar. Not even in Riyadh or Yemen, or any country in the Gulf. I want you to travel outside the Arab world. There's no good to be found in these countries. We break our backs day and

night, wasting our youth, and they treat us no better than they do migrant workers. I want to visit you one day in the United States, Canada, or New Zealand.”

But my father knows how far-fetched that is. How am I supposed to accomplish what he wants? I’m just a Yemeni girl in Khobar, a Yemeni girl who isn’t eligible for any scholarship to study outside the Kingdom. Even getting into a Saudi university takes connections and bribery! And if my father’s connections fail to secure a Saudi government scholarship, then he—the self-described sincere and dedicated worker who toils relentlessly—doesn’t actually have enough money to afford university fees in Saudi Arabia, even if I do manage to get in. A few of his Saudi friends have suggested that he apply for citizenship, vowing to stand by him and help him through the process, but he has categorically refused to even consider giving up his Yemeni nationality—“no matter the temptation.” He’s repeated this time and time again, to us and to anyone who suggests it: he will not do it, he will not renounce his origins and forget who he was and where he came from. He claims that Taiz was the birthplace of all Arabs, the “origin of all mankind. Adam (PBUH) descended on Jabal Sabir.” Standing firmly against my mother’s insistence that he apply for citizenship and settle in Khobar, he always argued, “How can you ask me, someone with my direct ancestry, to beg for citizenship from my own descendants? My ancestors, princes in their tribes, never sought other nationalities even though everyone used to beg them to.”

“I will act no differently,” he would add. Then, his voice a little louder, he’d proclaim, “I am Yemeni, and only Yemeni. My people are the origin. I will not allow myself to be anything else.” Quoting a song about Yemen by Abu Bakr Salem, he might then recite:

You are civilisation, you are the lighthouse,

You are the origin, the detail,

Soul and art.

Tell me, who looks like you, who?

Afterwards, he always cursed the British, the occupiers who forced him to leave Aden, once they discovered he was part of the Workers’ Party. The Party opposed the occupation, and my father used to distribute flyers that helped to incite rebellion against the British. My mother believes that my father adamantly refuses to apply for citizenship because he is certain that the Ministry of Interior will reject his application, despite the influence his Saudi acquaintances might wield. These acquaintances, according to her, do not have any real influence to speak of.

“Daughters follow their husbands, Abu Hamed,” my mother says, objecting to my father’s encouragement to study and work outside of Saudi Arabia. “Only sons are supposed to travel and work abroad!”

But my father responds in a derisive tone, “Easy to say when you’re sitting comfortably at home all day. I’m the one who has to endure all the insults and humiliation.”

I've strayed too far from my point. What I mean to say is that I'm living in a state of violent confusion. I'm at a standstill, unable to find a solution, unable to extricate Moodi from my mind or my imagination. The few hours during which I can watch her from afar in the classroom are no longer enough of a remedy; they no longer sate the frenzied feelings I have for her. I'm consumed by my desire to spend time alone with her. Just her and me. I want to possess her; I want her to be mine and only mine. I want to hold her tight against my chest. This restless feeling courses through my veins, night and day, so fiercely that I swear if I were to find myself alone with her, I would kidnap her and hide her somewhere secret, unreachable. So all-consuming and merciless are these feelings that I've come to fear them. I'm terrified that they will overpower me and force me to expose what I'm trying so hard to hide. And if I cave in one day and act foolishly, I will have single-handedly destroyed myself. Fires will rage in our otherwise calm and quiet neighbourhood. The earth will shake under my feet. And my parents will have no choice but to sacrifice me to purge themselves of their shame. Either they'll bury me alive or they'll ship me off to Aden, where my uncles are, so I can be married off the very day of my arrival.

I have to mention, though, that these strange feelings have generated some sort of positivity in my life. They've motivated me to take better care of my appearance. I apply light kohl around my eyes even though I hate kohl. I've started perfuming myself just like Moodi does, using the few bottles my mother has on her vanity. I've also started looking

more closely at my reflection in the mirror, examining the contours of my face and the smoothness of my skin to ensure I'm beautiful and always look my best.

“You're the most beautiful girl at school, and what's more, you're the most hardworking and intelligent! Men will compete for your hand in marriage, you'll see. Just wait till you're done with your education. You're a rose in a garden.” My mother always says this with great confidence, and usually I respond with a smile, “Surely you're referring to my university education, and not school?”

She whips out her customary answer, “Had it not been for your father's stubbornness, you'd be married with kids by now!”

Despite how cruel that image feels, I burst into laughter.

In the room I share with my sisters, I've gotten used to staying up alone in bed while they drift off to sleep. My thoughts always wander first to Moodi, then to my ambiguous future. Somehow the spectre of Moodi makes its way back to me without any effort. Once it finally dissipates, I always vow—just as I vowed the previous night, and the night before that—to purge her from the recesses of my mind at dawn, to restrain myself from making my way any further down that bumpy, perilous road, scattered with jutting rocks, that leads to nothing but pain.

Moodi will leave anyway, I tell myself. She'll disappear into some man's arms, and my feelings will wilt and desiccate with her disappearance. "I'm going to marry my cousin who works at the Saudi embassy in Kuwait," she says, elated. "He's so impatient! I'm planning to travel there to live with him. My life hasn't even begun yet. It'll only start after high school!"

I have to forget about her. Today. Not tomorrow, not the day after. How I wish I were him, though... Lucky is the man who will get to gaze upon this beautiful princess, day and night.

I'll forget about Moodi and focus on my studies. I'll do everything in my power to graduate top of my secondary school class. Getting good marks will help me along my path to choosing either of the two majors I dream of—philosophy or geography.

But the firmness of my nocturnal decision meant nothing. I spotted Moodi at school, saw her sweet smile and the twinkle of her hazel eyes. She was standing nearby, but I kept my distance, having separated myself from the rest of the girls. She walked up to me of her own accord, and I couldn't help but admire her stature and the soft glow of her face. She asked me—no, she begged me—to tell her how I felt. "I know what you're thinking about," she said flirtatiously, coaxing me to reveal my secret and assuring me she'd take it to the grave. She jumped for joy and pranced around when I let it all out and revealed the depth of my attachment to her. Had her sister Bayyan not suddenly

appeared to yank me out of my perfect daydream, I would have danced around with her. I would have held her close and wept on her lap.

On our fifth visit to the Shahama Medical Centre in two years, Dr Abdel Ghaffar had no choice but to order an x-ray. Before that, he had actively postponed such a procedure, claiming it was “too early for such a step.” The nurse turned on the device, which passed over my body, and the doctor then examined the results against a back-lit white screen on the wall behind him. He grabbed the images and brought them closer to his face, raising them against the light of the neon ceiling lamps. After returning them to the screen once more, he stared a while longer, his brows furrowing as he squinted. He put his glasses on and repeated the whole scene from start to finish, but with glasses, as if he were on the verge of a breakthrough or trying to figure out something that kept eluding him. He ended all this by confirming to me and my anxiously expectant mother that everything inside my body was normal. There was nothing to worry about.

“How can this be normal, doctor? Have you ever heard of a girl who still hasn’t gotten her period at this age?” my mother asked him.

He examined the x-rays against the back-lit screen again. This time, he peered over the top of his eyeglasses, his neck strained, cheeks drooping, and lips pursed almost in

disgust. "The truth is, she's one of the very few patients whose period is so late," he muttered hesitantly, noticing the signs of worry on both our faces. He quickly smiled and started shifting his gaze between my face and my mother's as he more confidently asserted, "But medicine has progressed, and treatment is available now, Umm Alia. There is no problem that cannot be cured by medicine these days. There's no need for stress or fear."

My mother's face brightened up a bit, a hint of a smile almost breaking through. Still alert, she pleaded, "Help us, Doctor. May God grant you good health. Please help us, we will always be in your debt."

She urged him on, as my eyes darted back and forth between the two of them. I felt a tiny bit of hope and was hungry to hear more. But on some level, I also intuited that the doctor was only saying empty words to reassure us.

The treatment failed. It collided with my body's stubborn line of defence and ultimately lost the battle. I took those pills for six full months without interruption, as instructed. But the thing we were all waiting for never came. We went to see the doctor again at the beginning of the school year to tell him about this failure. We were surprised to see that he seemed to have been expecting it. He sat there, that hopeful smile plastered on his face once again, repeating the same words about the strides medicine had made: "There is no disease that doesn't have a cure."

He asked me to keep taking the hormones for another six months.

“But they haven’t helped,” I said, beyond certain that the treatment was bound to fail.

“Usually this is a year-long treatment. I prescribed it for only half the duration hoping that you wouldn’t need the full course.”

It failed once again, and my mother rushed back to see him, on the verge of exploding with rage. He tried to calm her down, the smile on his face bigger than ever. Purposely deepening his tone to sound fully confident, he asserted, “Then we shall try another hormone, a stronger one.”

He got up from his chair and left the office to check whether the hormone was available at the Centre’s pharmacy. He returned a few minutes later and, still smiling, looked my mother straight in the eye. “This hormone won’t disappoint you or your daughter.”

He nodded encouragingly, trying to urge us along after he was unexpectedly met with my complete silence and my mother’s cold response. He was vigorously trying to elicit some hope and reassurance, sensing that any remnants of these emotions had withered away.

“If we were to give this hormone to any camel, it would menstruate immediately.”

“But not all camels menstruate, doctor,” my mother retorted. Flustered, he flashed her an embarrassed smile, mumbling, “Well, I meant a female camel.”

My mother flashed her own smile in response, only hers was both sarcastic and angry. “And the hair on her face?” she grilled him, as certain as I was that my persistent condition was too complex for this doctor to handle. He didn’t seem to know what he was doing.

He muttered defeatedly, “She’ll lose it all.” The smile that both my mother and I despised was still bright on his face.

We kept quiet for a few moments as he continued to nod, trying to reassure us that he had indeed gotten it right this time. Then, with a very loud voice that was meant to dispel any hint of agitation, he ventured, “Trust me. This time, you won’t be disappointed. Allow me this opportunity, before...”

“Before what?” my mother interrupted harshly, “Could you be implying the possibility of failure, by any chance?”

He was caught off guard by the speed of her response and her snide tone. He pushed his chair back a bit and took off his glasses, setting them down on the desk. “Not at all, God willing, it won’t fail. This hormone hasn’t failed me yet. Just yesterday, it triggered the period of a girl nearly your daughter’s age,” he mumbled.

“And where does this girl live?”

“In Riyadh.”

I had to take that hormone for three weeks without interruption. I closely monitored the changes it effected in my body. My breasts swelled, quite rapidly this time, so much so that my classmates noticed and started to mock me playfully.

“You’ve gotten married and we’re the last to know, is that it?”

“Only married girls’ breasts grow that fast.”

Even Moodi asked me what my secret was. “I want what you’re having,” she said, openly admiring what she saw. “I want my breasts to be like yours.” My heart skipped a beat, and I responded with a smile. The neighbourhood boys I used to play with kept following me with their eyes, staring at me as I got on the school bus in the morning and as I got off it in the afternoon. They too were surprised by the changes in my body, incredulous that I was the same person who had bested them with my football skills. I’d hear their comments from afar: “Why don’t you play with us like you used to? You’re the best player in the neighbourhood,” one of them said, another adding, “I swear to God you’re the best player in the whole Kingdom!” A third moaned, “We don’t have a scorer on our team anymore! We really need a scorer!” And a fourth repeated once more, “I swear you’re better than Maradona. I’d testify to that.”

On the outside, I smiled at the compliments and the recognition of my skill. But on the inside, I was hurting. I had long wished that God had created me male. I would've been playing in the best clubs in the Kingdom by now, Ettifaq or al-Qadsiah, or why not even in one of the two leading clubs, al-Nasr or al-Hilal? And why couldn't I be the best player in the Kingdom? What do I lack? If I were a boy and a famous player, our family could get citizenship much more easily. Alas, this was not on the cards. So I never let those musings get the best of me. I was, after all, just a girl.

There were so many times I asked myself: Why aren't we given the chance to pick our gender before we're fully formed in the womb? But every time, I'd quickly return to my senses and ask God for forgiveness, fearing His wrath.

I need to be patient. My mother says it, my father says it, my sisters and the doctor say it. I even say it to myself. I will be patient about a lot of things. I will be patient about my strange condition that keeps raising more questions that cannot be answered, about these toxins otherwise known as hormones, about the periodic cramps I get. I will be patient, as I have no choice but to be patient and wait: to wait for the gloom that follows me everywhere to lift, to wait for my period to finally grace me with its arrival and emerge from the fortified walls of its castle. Then I will be a complete young woman, like all the others, with the same dreams and desires.

In the bathroom, I take off my clothes and feel my breasts, which have swelled and gotten rounder. Other parts of my body have also been affected by the hormones; my

hips are wider, my arms and thighs are smoother, and even my voice has lost a good deal of its huskiness and is now closer to that of a girl. Most importantly, I lost the hair that had been growing on my face, just as the doctor had predicted. Everything he said would happen did, except for the ultimate thing—the start of menstruation. My period continued to stand its ground and refused to comply with or submit to the hormones. Not even one lone red drop deigned to trickle down to offer me the transient illusion of hope. I wore out my private parts by wearing sanitary pads every day, at my mother's recommendation, "so that what happened to your sister Suha doesn't happen to you. She suddenly got blood stains on her clothes and blood even dripped onto the kitchen floor while she was helping me carry dishes out to the table." I kept wearing those pads till my body rejected them: my skin became irritated and itchy for days.

The Moodi I see in my nighttime dreams is different from the real Moodi, or even the one I daydream about. And on this night in particular, she was even more different than usual. She looked beautiful and utterly serene. She walked into my room suddenly, without knocking or asking permission. I only noticed she was there when she sat down on the small sofa opposite my bed and started leafing through a textbook. At first, she didn't say a word. She just looked at me with that bewitching gaze of hers and only broke the spell with a wink. She was radiating freshness and beauty, and the air was thick with the scents of oud and incense—and, of course, the characteristic smell of her minty gum that caressed every last one of my brain cells.

I thought, *The beautiful Moodi is in my room*. I almost couldn't believe it! I sat up straight and, just like that, we were facing each other. Flirtatiously, she said to me, "I came to study with you." She was like an angel that had just appeared before me, and she had deliberately worn a sheer white robe that left little to the imagination. This seduction paired with her divine magic made me both braver and more hesitant. As I inched toward her, our knees touched, and she shifted back a little, a smile dancing on her face. My heart had reached the limits of what it could feel: it could be no happier and beat no faster. I pulled the textbook from her grasp and set it on the stool by the bed. I took her palms in mine and kissed the pearly white surface of her hands. She closed her eyes, giving in to the drug-like bliss that was washing over her. I stood up, and she followed my lead, her eyes still closed. We were facing one another. A distance no longer than the length of a ruler separated my body from hers. I moved even closer. She did the same. At that moment a fire erupted in my body, and I shuddered with violent desire. I held her and my fire pierced her body. I felt a tremor course through her, and she shuddered in my arms. I trailed kisses along her neck as I moved toward her lips with an insatiable lust and hunger. I used to laugh at my father when I'd see him doing the same thing with my mother on one of those Thursday nights, wondering what the rush was for, so long as there was plenty of time. And now here I was, doing the same thing with Moodi! It seems that lust leaves lovers no room for patience. Trying to calm myself down, I slowly followed the scent trail the oud had left on her, starting from right under her earlobes, moving to the base of her throat. The scent only got stronger the further down I moved from her throat toward her chest, and the unbridled desire raging within me only

increased in urgency. I was just about to reach her breasts when my entire body shook and yanked me out of my dream; I was burning up with a real fever and a sharp, splitting headache. My body was drenched in a sea of sweat that had completely soaked my bed, and the sound of my breath was so loud and harsh in the darkness that I feared it would wake my sisters.

I looked at the alarm clock on the small stool beside me. It was 3:00 in the morning.

It wasn't the first time I'd had such a dream. But it was the first time I'd felt that fever, that headache, and those severe cramps in my lower abdomen.

Quickly, I got up and stumbled into the dark bathroom. I tried to catch my breath. I felt around between my legs. There was a warm, mucus-like fluid that had shot out from inside me. I had felt it ejaculate out from within me when my dream startled me back to reality. I switched on the lights and saw that the fluid was thick and white, and I wondered whether it was a sign that my period was about to come. Or maybe it was a sign of female lust, the one I'd heard my classmates talk about at school?

In any case, I did feel some happiness, despite the brutal cramps and headache. I thought they must all have been the side-effects of that "camel hormone."

In the morning, I told my mother what had happened. She didn't seem too impressed. Her face didn't light up as I'd expected—her reaction was limited to a curt smile and a

cold response. “Good. But we have to wait for the blood. Other kinds of discharge in girls are not as important.” Then, an hour later, the matter took on new levels of importance as she added, “Women have a lot of different types of fluids. I want you to tell me about everything you find.”

The dream recurred a few nights later. But this time, the object of my desire was Haifa, the Yemeni girl who was in the science track with Bayyan. Haifa was beautiful and arrogant. Other students used to say that she walked around with “her nose in the air” because of how rich her father was. Once, she pretended not to know me, which made me really angry, because I knew her mother was aware that my mother had a rich family in Taiz. Her mother had even visited our house more than once, and the last time was less than a year ago! But I’d never once thought about Haifa, not that I can recall... not to mention that she never even came to me in my regular dreams, let alone this type of dream. I don’t understand why she showed up. I don’t think we’ve even spoken more than once—only that time she walked over to me in the school courtyard and said, “I’ve underestimated you, bint Jawaher, you’re quiet but you’re a dark horse.”

She said it and just walked away. I didn’t understand what she meant at the time. I thought maybe she had the wrong person, or maybe she’d heard some gossip about me. It wasn’t so much her words that irritated me as her arrogance, that haughty look she shot me. But even though Haifa was spoiled, she excelled at school. Nothing ticked her off more than someone, anyone, getting better marks than her. She was clearly envious of all the other clever girls, regardless of whether she knew them or not. So I controlled my temper and didn’t respond to her remark. The end of the school year would come soon

enough, I told myself, and with it our report cards. She'd combust of her own accord when she saw my marks.

In the dream, I hugged her from behind and kissed her neck as she swayed in my arms. "You can take your revenge on me now," she said, pulling her wrist free from my grasp. I pulled her to me forcefully, and she moaned softly and provocatively as she fell against my chest. Her breasts grazed mine as she deliberately rubbed against me, igniting a blazing fire in my veins—a fire which, once again, violently shook me back to reality, the fluid seeping out from between my legs. I felt the same cramps and intense headache.

What is happening to me? Why doesn't the dream ever go past this point? Or do all such dreams end this way? And why Haifa, out of all the girls I see every day!? Where did she sprout from? I knew I had latent rage and frustration toward her—was this my subconscious taking its revenge? Or had my subconscious put her in the same category as the other beautiful, charming girls, stowing her safely away to be summoned at will?

Doubtless the hormone is changing something in my body. Ever since I started taking it, this desire for girls I've tried so hard to hide has increased exponentially. On more than one occasion I've found myself staring at the most attractive of them, only to conjure up their faces later before sleep takes me away. Then their spectres would appear in sheer, loose-fitting dresses, languidly approaching me, femininity and tenderness oozing from their pores, just waiting for me to take them.

What on earth is happening to me?

Once more, we made our way to the Shahama Medical Centre, as the medication—despite its potency—was unable to trigger my period. My mother's patience was wearing thin, and by then even my father had become party to the cycle of questions and anxiety. I finally underwent a laparoscopy, a procedure the doctor had long been hesitant to perform because he was worried it would break my hymen. It was not Dr Abdel Ghaffar, the endocrinologist, who performed the procedure, but some other Egyptian doctor whose name I don't remember. I saw him for the first time then, and never saw him again.

Dr Abdel Ghaffar asked us to wait two or three days for the results. I spent those days in a constant state of fear and anxiety. The situation weighed heavy on my heart, which kept beating so fast I feared it would explode. Leaving the operating theatre, I had a faint hope that the surgery would lead somewhere. But this hope was very quickly dashed when Dr Abdel Ghaffar was late to call and inform us of the results. I had a very bad feeling about this Abdel Ghaffar. Not once did I find comfort in his diagnosis or his words. He seemed to speak only to calm us down, never saying much else. For some reason, I felt that, had I been under another doctor's care, I'd be cured by now. He was less a doctor than a raven. All he brought was bad news.

The longer we waited for his call, the angrier I got. For the first three days, my anger steadily intensified. It then turned to rage during the next three days, as we waited for a call that never came. The phone finally rang on the evening of the ninth day. We had just

sat down to dinner. My father got up from his seat and picked up the phone after plopping himself down on the nearby sofa. He hung up mere moments later. The words he had said to the doctor were short and concise: “Yes... go ahead... yes... correct... Subhan Allah...” The only complete sentence he said during that call was a question: “What do you advise me to do, Doctor?”

After he hung up, he didn't budge, he just sat there quietly. He was staring into nothingness, the wheels of his mind churning, trying to figure out what to tell us, or rather what to say and what to hide. He remained silent for a long time. I was bursting with anticipation; the wait was agonisingly long. His strange silence made me break out in a sweat. Sweat filled my armpits, seeping out onto my clothes.

I was broken by this scene even before I found out what the doctor had said. I knew it would be bad news. I could read it on my father's face, which moments ago had been visibly happier. It was a Thursday night, after all. But his face had fallen suddenly, as if all the blood had been drained from it.

It did not bode well. I was sure of that. I couldn't wait a second longer, so I got up and stood in front of him, maybe half a metre from where he was sitting. I was about to ask for the news when he beat me to it, his voice morose and broken.

“He advised me to get you treated outside of Saudi Arabia.”

I trembled in alarm.

“Why? What exactly did the doctor say, Abu Hamed?” my mother asked, before I got the chance to react.

My father was quiet again. Although only seconds passed before he started talking, it felt much longer. My mother had also gotten up from the dinner table and was making her way toward us. My father realised how much tension his silence had produced, so he said very clearly, meaning for everyone to hear, “The doctor said that Alia can only get treated in Europe. He said London would be the best place for her to go. I am now thinking of what our next step should be.”

My heart dropped. I felt very confused, worried that what was wrong with me was very dangerous, bigger than any of us had expected. My mother sensed my agitation, so she pushed my father to tell us *exactly* what the doctor had said.

“We need more details, Abu Hamed,” she insisted.

He nodded and grumbled a bit, feeling cornered.

“There’s no cause for concern. All he said was that he’s never seen a case like hers before, and that he doesn’t know what exactly is wrong or how to treat her. He told me

that he's consulted fellow specialists in other hospitals in the Kingdom, but they weren't able to reach a diagnosis either. That's why he took so long to call us back."

He paused a little before turning and speaking directly to me: "But he said the sooner we get you treated, the better."

He sat back down at the dinner table, but he quickly realised that we had all lost our appetites. He continued to direct his words to me, trying to pull me out of a misery that everyone had sensed, even my youngest brother, Mourad. "Don't be afraid. He assured me that the treatment exists in London. 100%."

He looked deep into my eyes. It seemed he had intuited what was going on in my head. Reassuring me, he went on, "I will do the impossible to get you treated. Even if I have to sell everything I own."

None of this was helping to calm me or my mother down. We needed to hear the exact words the doctor had said. We both felt that my father was keeping something from us, so we packed ourselves up on Saturday morning and went to visit the damned doctor, unbeknownst to my father. But we didn't find him. In his office, we found instead a young female doctor we had never seen at the Centre before. She seemed to be new there. The moment she figured out who I was, she frowned, and her face turned surly. She pursed her lips and shook her head, visibly uncomfortable and angry to see me.

“But I need to know the details of what’s wrong with me so I can look for the right treatment,” I said, my temper rising. Her strange reaction had made me very angry, especially as it was the first time we’d ever met her.

“The doctor told your father everything you need to know.”

“But it’s my body. Not my father’s. The doctor was supposed to speak to me directly, so that I could understand precisely what he meant when he said treatment only exists in London. What treatment is this exactly?”

She frowned even more deeply. She furrowed her brows and clenched her teeth before she leapt out of her chair and stepped out of the office. Standing there, she looked me dead in the face and pointed her index finger at me accusingly, teeth pressed together, “You know exactly what the doctor meant, and let me assure you that what you’re looking for does not exist in our Muslim community that fears God and the punishment of Judgment Day. You’ll only find what you’re looking for in those other godforsaken countries. Go there. You’ll find what you need. The treatment for your disease.”

She stormed off down the hospital corridor, grumbling, “I seek forgiveness from God, the Most High, the Almighty. I seek forgiveness from Almighty God for every great sin. I seek refuge in the words of God from His anger and punishment, and from the evil of His servants.”

My heart beat wildly. I was gripped by a sudden fear. I felt my knees go weak, my feet rooted in place. I tried to lean on the chair for support, but I fell to the ground. The room was spinning and the ceiling had moved or tilted—or was I levitating? My mother and I stared at each other in shock, completely caught off guard by the convoluted, incomprehensible words we'd just heard. Not to mention the inexplicably cold way we'd been treated. What could her words mean? What was she accusing me of? Immediately, I thought of my feelings for Moodi. My feelings for other girls. And I understood that there was a connection between those feelings and the words she had spit at us.

I collected myself and regained my equilibrium, and I asked my mother to take me home.

“I'm not going anywhere until I understand what that arrogant woman meant.”

“We'll ask the doctor again later.”

My mother was absolutely intransigent as I tried to drag her out of the office by the wrist. I couldn't get out of there fast enough. I did not want to face that doctor again. My heart was beating faster than it ever had before. A cold fear washed over me. I was terrified that, if she came back and found us still there, she would share more details about my case or would rudely kick us out, asking the security guards to escort us outside.

“Come on, Mama, we’ll just come back later. We need to take the high road. This doctor is new, she probably doesn’t know much. We’re better off coming back later, when Dr Abdel Ghaffar is here.”

Somehow, I managed to hold back my tears, though they were threatening to spill out of my eyes at any second. I’d cry later, when I was alone. I’d rehash everything that terrible doctor said, and I’d cry over my rotten luck and cursed fate.

I came out of that experience with more questions. They constantly niggled at me as I searched, in vain, for answers. I kept hearing over and over those last words she’d said to me. I did end up crying. I cried hysterically. I stayed up all night going over what she’d said, trying to analyse the hidden meaning behind her words.

Let me assure you that what you’re looking for does not exist in our Muslim community that fears God and the punishment of Judgment Day. You will only find what you’re looking for in those other godforsaken countries.

Then I recalled her strange supplication. I didn’t understand its purpose. How could she consider me a devil before hearing about the torture I suffer every day? Why did she erupt like a wild animal when we are not the enemy? Why did she speak to us so crudely? What was stopping her from treating us like human beings and calmly explaining whatever she was insinuating? Am I not a patient in search of a diagnosis? Isn't it her job to explain the details of the treatment? Isn't it my right, to hear it clearly and frankly? The

right of any patient, no matter the disease? She must know that I had no part to play in who I am! I had no choice. Isn't in my power to change anything. This is how God wanted me, for a reason only He knows. Does she not realise that the God she sought refuge in from me is the very same God who created me this way?

I didn't sleep that night. I stayed up until morning. I prayed until dawn and begged God for forgiveness. My tears fell all through the night, and I couldn't shake the feeling that some dark injustice had befallen me. I was sure that Dr Abdel Ghaffar didn't have enough knowledge in his head to find the correct diagnosis for my case, if there was any knowledge in his head at all. I was sure that my doctor had found no other way out of his miserable failure than to cry London. And he'd kept claiming that he was the "first and foremost endocrinologist in the whole Kingdom of Saudi Arabia"!

The day after the doctor called, the way my father looked at me changed. His eyes were suddenly full of emotion.

"How do you feel?"

"Like a candle burning at both ends."

I was crushed, deeply frustrated. I felt it in my blood. The desperation was written on my face.

He asked me this more than three times that week. Every time, I gave him the same answer, and his response was always a variation on the same idea, with “London” as its foundation.

“Hang in there. Your outlook on life will change after you get treated in London, inshallah.”

“You’re wrong. As soon as you get to London, you’ll change your mind.”

“I’m certain that your real life will begin as soon as you arrive in London.”

There is something wrong with me that no one has yet been able to define. A conundrum that has yet to be solved. Still, imagining my life in London managed to bring me some sort of happiness. Trying to find some relief, I convince myself that there is something still hidden between the lines of everything unfolding, some sort of mystery. The screenplay seems to have been written for my eyes only, and because of it, I now have a new purpose in life, something to live for. This “London” I’ve heard so much about in such a short period has become my lifeline. I will be done with high school in less than five months, and then my father and I will fly to that mighty city everyone keeps talking

about. The city of fog, the city of dreams—there is a secret wisdom, and only my Creator knows its purpose.

I carried my teapot and a tape recorder and went up to the roof. It was a cold night in February, with a full moon, when I decided to change my view of things and convince myself that everything I was going through was intended to help me, do me good. Only good things awaited me. The air was fresh, and a cool breeze softly tickled my face. I turned on the tape recorder to Abdel Basit Abdel Samad reciting Surat al-Baqarah. I sat there, listening closely, waiting for the noble verse:

Perhaps you hate a thing and it is good for you; and perhaps you love a thing and it is bad for you. And Allah knows, while you know not.

I breathed in and thanked God profusely for everything. Then I returned to my room.

That night, I slept more deeply than I had in years.