

IN ARABIC, HER FATHER PUT QUESTIONS TO THE OLD MAN. Whether these were advice seeking, or advice giving, Safia could not be sure. She never came to understand what her grandfather wanted from any of them. At the age she was then—fourteen—she was unsure about what she should think or how she should feel when he was in the same room.

“And what are you to make of yourself when you’re older?” Safia’s grandfather asked her in Arabic, expecting his son to translate.

“I want to be a theatre actress.” Spotlights and dreams of long eyelashes filled every corner of her consciousness.

There was disapproval. Her father translated it dutifully, wearing a cowed smile. It was shameful, shameful, *haram*. There was a nervous shift, and the room felt hellish and hot, suddenly.

She stared at the sheer, free-floating white curtains moving in the August breeze, at a *keffiyah* he’d placed underneath a big short-wave radio on the kitchen table. Her grandfather was living in a seniors’ apartment complex in Toronto. He was in the habit of putting out an over-large quantity of waxy apples—Golden and Red Delicious, as she recalled—in a giant wicker bowl on the coffee table. His whole life, he smoked Rothmans. He kept carton upon carton in the smoke-faded apartment. His damaged heart was no deterrent.

“You should become doktoor, like your mother.”

His judgments kept Safia and her parents quiet. They cut the apples into quarters and ate them on little bread plates from Jerusalem.

She’d heard stories that he used to travel regularly from Jerusalem to Damascus, where he had a mistress. And that he’d been in the U.S. for a time, selling pencils on the streets of Chicago in the 1930s. The story about the mistress must have been true. Safia had seen a red, leather-bound Baedeker in the apartment once. Delicately, she had pulled it out of the bookcase when she’d been alone one day. The title page, flaking away at the edges, said “*Palestine and Syria Handbook for Travellers*, Edited by Karl Baedeker, with 20 Maps, 48 Plans, and a Panorama of Jerusalem. Third Edition, Leipsic: 1898.” There were detailed transportation routes between the cities, hotels described, rates explained, customs decoded, holidays noted. It must have been indispensable if he was on the

road a lot of the time. He must have used the maps, because the rest of the book was in English.

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ON THE FLIGHT TO THE FUNERAL IN TORONTO, Safia buried herself in a photocopy packet of readings for the course she was taking in twentieth-century continental philosophy. She glanced across the aisle at her mother, who continuously muttered a prayer while wearing a sort of frown and holding a small cloth-bound Koran. Her mother didn't speak Arabic, but she had all of the prayers memorized in that language.

Safia hoped to finish the week's readings on the weekend, during the flight and between visits with relatives. As an English student, she had to keep on top of the reading, the preparations for essays menacing almost everything she read. She was always keeping books and essays in her head, juggling her own ideas with the Greats, an ego struggle that never ended.

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SPEAKING TO HER COUSINS, BOTH OF THEM MALE, had elicited accusatory glances from the earnest young men in the prayer area. As though they were all in a spaghetti western and had set vigilant eyes on rivals galloping up on horses from afar. Possibly friends, but more likely enemies.

Safia sat on a chair against a wall in the mosque's basement, where the prayer area was covered with a flowered blue carpet. A man in the last row of worshippers—a transplant from Saudi, or maybe Syria—had been giving Safia an unmistakable look of disapproval. He beckoned to Safia's brother, who walked over and cocked his head to hear what the man had to say.

"Safia, your scarf's slipped off your head," her brother said after returning to Safia's side. "The guy over there also said you had to move to the other section." Her brother gestured to the other side of the room, where mothers wore tightly held-in-place sheets neatly folded over their upper bodies and heads, dutiful as nuns. They tended to children while the unwed younger women stared out wildly, their dark brown eyes lined with *kajal*, the eyes of lionesses on a savannah.

The man was wearing the look of the jovial, fabled Mulla Nasruddin, inimitable and vexatious, as he looked back at Safia. She gave him a dirty look and stuck out her tongue, though she wanted to hurl the heavy photocopy packet of philosophy readings at his head. Her scarf was slippery and gauzy, and she hadn't realized it had fallen to her shoulders. She kept his stare and pulled the scarf over her head, mocking a full *burka*. She moved one token bench seat over to the left, still

teetering on the invisible male-female dividing line. Who the hell was he to police her, throw the book at her like a *Sharia* lawgiver in a backwater village? His look accused her, saying: For shame, what is she doing here with that unconvincing head scarf, speaking to men? Why doesn't she go sit where she belongs?

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"ARE THEY WASHING HIM?" her mother asked her ex-sister-in-law, Karima, whose eyes were red from crying.

"Washing? Yes, I think so, still washing," Karima said.

The imam's voice, slow and deliberate, came over the PA system. The ends of his sentences were long: drawn-out notes with abrupt ends, like the drawing of a cursive letter and the final staccato of a diacritical mark. Safia associated the call with the image of the minaret on the Jerusalem Bakery calendar her father tacked on the kitchen wall year after year. Going into the bakery around the corner with her father had been a routine; no small talk, no pleasantries, just the pastries, please. The owner would count out the change carefully, and her father would mumble a *shuk-re*. That was it. He'd pick up their box full of *baLA wa* tied up with doubled white string, and they'd exit.

"Are you coming upstairs with us?" Karima asked Safia. She and Safia's mother were ready to join the praying women on the balcony.

"Oh, no," Safia began, over-politely, "I can't pr—" She was about to tell her that she couldn't pray, that she didn't know the first thing about it, when Karima interrupted and leaned in with a lowered voice, her eyes moving around the room.

"If you are unclean right now, you can't come up with us, really. But we won't be long." Safia would let them believe that was the reason she couldn't go up. Better unclean than ignorant. Karima—who had once taught at St. George's School in Jerusalem—wore a long cotton dress and a white head covering. Now she taught Arabic to children at the mosque on Friday evenings. Safia's mother had said that, when Karima had arrived in Canada in the late sixties, she had worn miniskirts every day.

Safia had forgotten that rule about periods, but was thankful for it now. Why say anything at all? Her mother liked to think that Safia and her brother knew what to do based on the few at-home lessons she'd given them. But she was dead wrong. They knew nothing, had not even read the Koran in translation.

She took the philosophy packet outside into the October sunshine. The mosque was a converted church. From the street, it looked like part of an abandoned miniature village set, with a yellow trace of the old crucifix where it had

been removed from the front elevation. It had majestic doors and intricate woodwork. The main hall, empty of pews and altar, was a space of understandings and expectations transformed.

She took off the scarf and read for twenty minutes or so on the front lawn, then covered up again to go back inside. When she resumed her seat, the air was still loud with the imam's voice spilling over the PA. He was giving a speech about superstition; his alarmed state made him sound like he was looking for the emergency exit on a burning plane.

"You know, Safia, you are growing up more every time I see you." Rafik sat down beside her, all smiles and ingratiation. He was a friend of her father and his brothers from their school days at St George's in Jerusalem. He always asked her if she was to become a doctor like her mother. His smile revealed multi-coloured teeth. They reminded her of a crime boss's teeth.

"Yes, that's true." Resigned, she flipped the philosophy papers face down on her lap. She was hardly in the mood to come out of her shell, but now she was cornered. *The clashing of worlds*, she thought, *has reached its crescendo here.*

"So tell me your news."

"Oh, not much news. I'm still studying at McGill. English."

"Is that right?"

A minute or more passed. Rafik hung fire and looked at the crowd of men holding court in little gatherings in the middle of the room.

"You know, Safia, your grandfather always considered your father his lucky son. He was taking a bus to see him on the day your father was born. The bus was going through the narrow streets we have back home, with everybody crossing and pushing all over the place." Rafik looked ahead, moving his hands around in the air to illustrate his story. As he carried on, Safia thought about how strange her uncles sounded in Arabic conversation. The sounds were as bewildering as the ruddy Jerusalem and yellowed Bethlehem of her father's photographs of a trip he had taken with her mother in 1965.

She looked at her parents. They were speaking to each other and, like Rafik, were staring ahead as if out of a window or at a television. As if what they were saying was incidental to the clearer resolution of the world contained by a television screen or a window casement.

"And the bus hit a curb stone and turned on its side. But! Your grandfather was spared because he was going to see your father, just born. Your father was the lucky son happily ever after!"

Rafik thrilled at the near misses of just about anything, she'd once realized: take-offs and landings at O'Hare, or smart bombs of the Gulf War that everyone argued were not.

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AT PINE GROVE CEMETERY, KARIMA SAT IN HER CAR with the ignition off.

"Oh, come on, I'm sure it doesn't matter, you can come out to the site," Safia's father said, leaning into the car window.

"No, we aren't supposed to go near the burial. I am staying right here. Go. It's okay," Karima said. She knew all the rules for women.

"Are you sure about that?"

"Yes, go."

The funeral procession had made its way through the long Toronto streets, crossing the city's avenues and boulevards and ancillary expressways lined with the big Loblaws stores, the rows of old-school strip malls. The six cars in the procession were strung together in multi-ethnic variety like sideliners at a parade. They had entered a suburb but Safia had not paid attention to the direction of their travels, having been focused on keeping the procession unbroken. The six cars stuck together, refusing to desert each other even when caught on opposite sides of a traffic light. Pine Grove was located in the land of donuts, gas stations, and big home appliances.

Safia avoided Karima's gaze and walked through the rows of headstones to her grandfather's burial site. Her cousin, Karima's son, had been instructed by the imam earlier. He opened the shroud to make sure their grandfather's head was at the right end—or at least she believed that was what he was checking. He took a handful of earth and put it carefully on their grandfather's cheek, then covered him again. Then he announced that someone was supposed to recite a prayer. They looked around a moment, as the wind moved through the trees. Nobody had a Koran. Safia's cousin ran back to his mother's car.

"She'll say it," he said when he returned. They waited many minutes for a signal that Karima was finished.

When everybody recited a *bismillah*, Safia skipped through it, remembering only a few words here and there. When she was young, the long musical phrases and imagined meanings took shape in her mind without effort, but she couldn't fish the prayer out of all that she'd committed to memory since: a river of sonnets, scraps of soliloquies, and first lines.

The coffin was lowered into the grave. The men took turns shovelling earth to fill the grave. After that they all stood back while the cemetery people levelled the loose earth.

Somebody had brought a large bouquet of flowers to place on Safia's grandmother's grave, but nobody could recall exactly where she rested. Finally, Karima got out of the car and found the plaque in the ground. Marking the resting place next to it was a very tall statue, a Virgin. Moss had started to fill in the spaces between the delicately sculpted folds in the fabric of the long gown, and the folds reminded Safia of the Nike of Samothrace of classical antiquity. She'd stared at it for a long time when it was presented in last semester's art history course. The Nike was headless, but the Virgin's head looked skyward with blank eyes, waiting for a sign.

The air was cold but still full of light. Safia returned to her grandfather's filled grave. She heard distant cars moving past the surrounding industrial parks, the soundtrack for anonymous headstones that were factual and encyclopedic as entries in a library card catalogue. Where were they, anyway? Nowhere near the apricot, terebinth, and hawthorn trees of Jerusalem. Ajax? Markham? She must remember to ask if she could keep the red, leather-bound Baedeker as a memento. *The Handbook for Travellers*. To get a better look at the plans, the foldout maps, the panorama. She would learn something. She would measure distances.