

The Wages of Choice

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For Shannon B.—One of the bravest women I know

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THE CLOCK IN the generic waiting room emits a slight hum as the seconds tick by in slow progression. Hanifa's eyes dart from the clock to the waiting room's wood-paneled door. She nervously shifts her hands in her lap and then remembers that she is not supposed to be the mousy being so expected of her. So she adjusts her pose to that of an imitation of masculinity. She glances at the other patrons; one has already gone through "the change," legs crossed demurely at her side, but the ankles give away facts, which the woman would rather remain hidden. She sighs to herself thinking it is always in the ankles, and the hands. Unfortunately, there is no surgeon's blade that can fix those.

The door slowly slides open and another woman clasps the doctor's hands to say goodbye. Salaams are exchanged, after which the doctor calls her name. Suddenly her throat seems to close in upon itself. It feels like Mecca on an August day. Parched. She calls to the doctor that she is here and gets out of the chair. She wipes her sweaty palms on the jeans she has on and follows the doctor in the room.

"Have a seat, Ms. Alowadi," the doctor says politely. He is a balding man and portly. His trousers uncomfortably pull at his sides as he levers himself into the chair. But his eyes seem so kind. Blue eyes stare at Hanifa as they indicate the chair that she should take. They are limitless in depth, with the crinkles at the corners that show a lifetime of smiling, for desert eyes don't exist in San Francisco.

"My name is Dr. Franklin, and I will be your therapist during this process. As you know from the orientation, intensive therapy sessions are required in order to make the determination that you are mentally as well as physically ready for the surgery. During our sessions, I will ask you about how you came to this decision as well as how you will deal with the coming year. My goal is to assess your mental state and readiness. You are ready for this process, correct?"

"Yes, Dr. Franklin, that is correct," Hanifa replied. "May I ask, however, if our conversations will remain private? I am going through a custody battle with my husband, and I want to make certain that none of this will be leaked to the court."

"Of course, Ms. Alowadi, our sessions will be completely confidential. I thought you understood this when you signed the contract."

Oh, yes, please, thank you. I just wanted to be sure."

OK, Ms. Alowadi, why don't you start from the beginning? Tell me where your journey began and how you ended up here, in the city, and ultimately, at my door."

Hanifa licked her lips with what little moisture that could be found. She had never spoken to anyone, with the exception of Kate, about what she would speak of now. It was such a private thing, a barren landscape punctuated with oases of flowers scattered here and there on the horizon of her life. Could she finally find freedom in the telling? Freedom from the restrictions, from the iron *niqaab*, from the social expectations that had stifled her being, and repressed her soul? Flashes of her life lay themselves at her feet, and she remembered all ... Allah kareem ...

Breezes on the rooftop and the smell of *taamia* frying in the kitchen come unbidden to my senses as I think about the house I grew up in. Modest, that was our house. Just on the left side of the division between rich and poor, wealth and abject poverty. In it we existed somewhere in between.

Its sandblasted wasted walls were unassuming, unimposing, not a great house, such as many of our neighbors' houses. Rather, it was wedged between the great houses, as if to say, "Uff, don't notice me." Like most Arab houses, the dingy façade hid a beautiful building. The outer courtyard sang with herbal plants and a small fountain. Its cooling ability unsurpassed. Beside the weary homcomer, jasmine and night blooming flowers filled the courtyard with their graces. Everywhere, splashes of color peeked out amongst the dust to soothe and provide balm to my family. This courtyard, while stunning and an oasis of heaven, was nothing compared to the rooftop which cooled us at night.

The courtyard opened up to the small but tidy kitchen that my mother ruled. Every morning, *Omi* began her day by frying up taamia and bread while the Azhan sang in the background, summoning to worship, welcoming the sun. The kitchen, in all of its deliciousness, could only be the domain of my *Om*. Here she was queen, here she had dominion, and she ruled her dominion as loving dictator. She ladled out love and justice along with her soups. Ah, the smells of her kitchen—cardamom, garlic, chilies, basil—all arranged in the delicious bouquet of homecoming. My mother used spice as a surgeon's laser attacking the palate as opposed to flesh. Her family actually looked forward to fasting for Ramadan, as that was when she went out of her way to make the very best food. Under her tutelage, we actually gained weight during the thirty days of fasting required by our Islam. The aromas of her love would waft out of the kitchen, down the whitewashed and tiled walls to the rest of the house.

She was a small but severe woman. Years of waxing her brows to make them thin had left them with a mere suggestion of presence. Her eyes were quicksilver pools of emotion, and like the fish stuck in our small fountain, their emotions would dance to a music all of her own making, the clang of pots, the chink of dishes clicking together. Her ample bosom would suckle two daughters, forever a disappointment to our father. The swish of her hips would resound as she twirled this way and that around her domain. But her hair, oh her hair, it was a glory. In the house, she would find freedom for her locks. Dark cascades of moonlight, it traversed itself down her back to find dominance at her waist; I think, looking back on it now, that she probably dyed it, although my father never guessed, as never did I see so much as a single strand of gray.

When she went out, she opressed her hair under the prettiest hijabs she could find, as if somehow their majesty should provide a small reflection of the treasure it hid. Likewise, she hid the pearl of her body for only her husband and our family. It was her gift to him, along with the social convention of the day. When she went out, she wore the long *abeya* and niqaab required of women in the Kingdom of Saud. Black, always her abeyas were black. As I look back now, it seems a strange color choice, but I think it was popular because it hides the dirt so well. *Omi* would say that it is the color of modesty and respect. I think it allows women in this kingdom to blend together, to become faceless, nameless. Their modesty becomes armor against all unrequited intentions. But for all of her severity and the disappointment of our gender, she loved us. Although not open to large displays of affection, she showed her love in the small ways that only a mother can. It was in the small sweets she would bring home for us, and with a look that always said, don't mention this to your father. It was in the taking in of extra laundry so that she could also provide us with the finest of hijabs and hijabi pins. For my mother, love was not defined by hugs or kisses; rather, it was provided by food and small presents. One time, my sister, Doha, and I were caught sneaking out after dark. Mom beat us with her sandal, but then brought us sweets after we were done crying. In her kingdom, dichotomies were an everyday occurrence.

In the salon, my father would sit after a long day at the Ministry of Immigration, where he would serve hundreds of men every day. Imagine the floor of a stock exchange, with masculine hordes calling out orders all day. Now imagine this in a smoke-filled room with only a small window. My father lived this chaos from behind that small window, patiently and sometimes not so patiently, providing immigration stamps for those in the Kingdom of Saud. Men jostled and fought over a

prime position just to get to his window, pay the fee, and get the stamp. My father never knew a minute of quiet during the day. Rather, he was in the eye of the storm of shouting, calmly taking their money and severely stamping their documents. He was a quiet man who liked his surroundings quiet as well. I picture him now, surrounded by bookshelves that house the literary treasures he so enjoys. Feet up on the small coffee table, not looking at all at the old television, he has his aquiline nose stuck within the spine of a Shakespearean play, *Merchant of Venice* most likely. My father, the literary scholar, was stuck within the walls of the Ministry of Tourism. He would sit there, so quietly, until Omi called him for dinner. Somehow the aroma of *kofta* and salad mixed with the Othellian drama and he would be content.

I was always Daddy's girl. He would take me on *Jumma* down to the *masjid*, where he would perform *Salat* and *Dua* while leaving me in the care of the coffee seller beside the *masjid*. There I would wait his return, always looking for the short man, whose simple smile was my world. His eyes, so brown they were almost black, would light up when they saw me as he was coming from the interior. Somehow I would always spy his countenance even while surrounded by the hundreds of men spilling out of the mosque. Then my *aba* would take me to have fresh hibiscus juice from the cart seller nearby. I would wait impatiently while they would fill my plastic baggie full of juice, wind the tape around the opening, and put a straw in the middle. I would suck that luscious liquid until there was not one more drop in the bag, while *Ab* would smile his shy smile. Together, his large elegant hand in mine, we would walk home. Friday was my favorite day of the week.

Only once in a while did I see my *ab's* more *magnon* side. Ordinarily, he was so polite, such a good Muslim, but every once in a while, the crazy came out. I remember one time, my sister was accidently struck by a taxi in front of our house. Luckily, she wasn't injured but *Ab* became a wild falcon on the cab. He attacked that cab like it was the last desert snake on Earth. Over and over he kicked that car with his sandaled feet until there were large dents in the hood and bumper. He was frightening, this little stocky man. *Ab* could raise his voice so much so that the mountains of Mecca would resound with the power of his persuasion. He berated the man into paying us for our damages, while at the same time he nearly tore apart the cab. But that is *Ab*, polite unless you threaten his family or his Islam. Another time, a sheik accused him of not being devout. I thought he would come to blows with the foolish old man. *Ab* is the type of man who says little, but when he does speak, it is important and one should take heed. But for all his bluster, and his quietness, all three of the women in his house loved the old man.

My sister, Doha, and I are two years apart, with her being the elder. My father had prayed for boys. He got the two of us instead. My sister was, I think, before me, the largest disappointment of my father's life. He was so sure he would get a boy, he didn't even consider any female names. Much to his chagrin, he got a beautiful, delicate, and graceful female and me. My sister and I are polar opposites. She is graceful, while I am, well, not. I always admired her long willowy neck, the graceful fingers that end in the most beautiful nails. The way she tossed on a hijab and it was ALWAYS perfect. Even her ankles, so demure, so thin, were the picture of the feminine ideal. I, on the other hand, was a large ogre beside her. I was just a tad too tall, a bit too thick, a wee bit too boyish. I emulated her perfection, without ever fully achieving its acme. I remember gazing at her across the small bedroom we shared and hating her with clarity. As if by some means, my hateful looks could impose some of her grace upon my own brow. Her side of the room was always tidy and neat, while my side of the room had hijabs and clothes haphazardly scattered on every spot your eye could settle. I got my revenge, though, when she would step on my *hijabi* pins. But even in this, she shrieked beautifully. There was a time in my life I absolutely detested her.

But she is a mouse. She has no compunction, no drive, and no will to see anything around her that is different as beautiful. She is married now, and lives at the complete whim of her husband, a husband who barely notices she is there. Her beauty has faded into the background noise of the

lovely tapestries that adorn her home. I don't envy her anymore. I was so happy when they married her off. No more disappointed sighs at the state of our room or the shape of my side of the dresser. I had the entire room, done in disgusting pink, to myself. Oh, but I hated that color, as if even then, I knew the color pink, with all of its gender associations, was not for me. But now, I can love my sister. Even if it is like the love of the sun in the desert, dreaded but familiar. I wish her well, even if she refuses to ever speak to me again.

Shams—the desert sun. It is always the fifth family member in any Saudi house. It pervades everything like the small bits of dust brought in by the wind. Always, you try to avoid it, think of ways to be under the shade of a building, a tree, a screen. In the summer, it is the only thing you can focus on in the desert. But at night, on our rooftop terrace, it makes the heavy sun worth it. Always we were happy sitting on our rooftop pillows under the gazebo, with the heady fragrance of jasmine floating on the summer night wind. When we escaped the summer sun and fled to the rooftop at night, we felt the world was ours. Gone were the annoying honking of cab drivers, the hustle and bustle of the Ministry's immigration window, and the jealous impotence between my sister and me. Instead, there was love, there was a cool breeze, there was my mother's delicious cooking, and soft pillows to sit upon. There was family and there was home.

No longer do I see that short house in the middle of mansions. I can't ever taste or smell the spices coming from my mother's cooking. Instead I see illuminated reflections of my mother's hands, and facsimiles of the smells, the tastes that I call home. It disappears like a mirage in the summer sun.

"Ms. Alowadi?" the voice called, tearing me away from home, from comfort and heart's ease. I snapped back to attention to the paneled office of Dr. Franklin.

"Ms. Alowadi, why don't we start with your birth story? I assume, you've been told it. What do you think your parents thought when they had you?"

I began to spit out the words, their syllables caught in my throat, choking me. I imagine what my mother went through based on what she has told me. The paneling recedes again.

"Disappointment. That was what I was. A disappointment from the very moment of my birth. I think that is why my father and I bonded as we did. Perhaps he felt guilty for that initial letting of tears upon seeing my sex. I won't ever know."

"You don't speak to them anymore?"

"No, not since I was married off like some sort of shamed chattel."

"Talk to me about your early years. What was your life like growing up?"

"Growing up in Saud is a very different experience for a boy and a girl. Our society has very strict gender roles that are assigned to each of us, and we are expected to maintain these rules at all cost. What can I say about what I remember ... ?"

The sun, ever present in our lives, shone down upon my friend Hany and me as we lay in the *wadi*

making plans for the future. We were the closest of childhood friends. Hany was my cousin, my mother's sister's youngest son. Oh, but she was blessed with six strapping boys.

Abdullah, her oldest, was already married and had his own children. Abdullah was a cruel husband. His hooked nose carved a line of impatience with his wife above a slash of a mouth, their corners permanently turned down. "Tsk, tsk, tsk," he would say to us as we played together, his head wagging his disapproval of our antics. Abdullah was a strict Salafist and so he did not agree with Hany's and my friendship. Abdullah would split his time between the masjid, and I swear, beating his wife—the two loves of his life. Fatima would turn up to our house with bread, trying in vain to hide the bruises that Abdullah would inflict upon her body. She would come over to our house daily, toting two squalling children behind her. Around Abdullah the children were required to be as silent as poor Fatima. So, when they came over to the house, their cries were a release that could never happen at home. The whole family was afraid to speak louder than a whisper so that Abdullah would not take notice of them. Fatima would startle at loud noises, which would set the children off crying harder. At our house, Omi did her best to soothe Fatima, getting her small presents and sweets to ease her heart. Always Fatima would take these gifts with her head bowed, the weight of a bad marriage weighting down her soul. Between the bruises and the fear, she had aged well beyond her twenty-five years. Abdullah was not ashamed of what he did; he even boasted about it in the cafes, how "humbled" his wife was. When someone disagreed with him about his punishments, Uncle Abdullah would point to the section in the Qu'ran that stated it was permissible to hit his wife. I guess he neglected to read the part which stated that it wasn't the preferable option. But that was Uncle Abdullah, loud and uncompromising. Needless to say, he frightened me.

While Uncle Abdullah was severe, Uncle Mohammed was cheerful. Uncle Mohammed drove a taxi in the city. I loved Uncle Mohammed so much. When Ome had to go to the market, she always called Uncle to take her. He would arrive with his large taxi and we would pile into air-conditioned luxury. It's funny how the hooked nose of Abdullah was repeated in Uncle Mohammed, but the result was so different. Drives with Uncle Mohammed involved laughter, taking the long way so that he could tell us about this or that fare. Weaving in and out of traffic, he would excitedly point out a new building, a new market, a new spectacle.

Uncle Mohammed was unmarried, and not likely to be anytime soon. Personally, I think Uncle Mohammed liked boys, but you could never say that in Jeddah. He sure did love going to the café to play chess. I don't think I ever saw him in the company of a woman and it caused quite a scandal that he was in his midthirties and was still unmarried and childless. If you were to ask him about it, he would get a pained look, then wink at you and state that he just hadn't found the right one yet. Personally, I think Ome's sister rather liked the fact that Uncle Mohammed was still living at home. She certainly enjoyed the money he gifted to her.

Uncle Mohammed had the biggest appetite for a person I have ever seen. The man could eat! I once saw him down two pizzas in one sitting and then ask for dessert. Yet, for all that eating, I'm not sure where the food went, as he was so skinny. Although he never worked out, Uncle Mohammed was toned and fit. To this day I can't figure out how that was, what with spending all day driving the cab.

Then there were the treats. Every time I saw Uncle, he would fish a treat or two out of his pocket, and slyly slide it over the seat, or under the seat, so that Ome wouldn't see it. We made a game out of it. He would somehow nefariously slip it to us, and we had to be silent eating it. I could always tell when the manna was about to drop into our laps because Uncle would get a certain twinkle in his eyes as he dropped it. Quick as field mice, we would catch it and begin to slowly and torturously unwrap it and eat it. If Ome knew this was going on, she never let on. Truly rides with Uncle Mohammed were treasured above all else.

Uncles Khaled, Ahmed, and Sameer were off in the Gulf States. They worked abroad to send money home to their families. I never really got to know them as they were gone by the time I was born. This left Hany. My Hany. My closest childhood friend. With Hany, I could escape the social expectations of a girl and just be me—Hanifa.

Hany was a skinny kid, his knobby knees poking out from his breeches like hippopotami on the Nile. It was as if his body hadn't quite gotten used to its length yet, so awkward didn't even begin to describe his movements. He was running into things, full tilt, tripping over his overgrown feet. When we were seven, Hany and I were playing in the back neighbors' garden, climbing the wall to the next house, when suddenly, Hany lost his balance. When he fell, he chipped his tooth on a rock, leaving his craggy smile. But that smile would grace his countenance for many years to come, until he scraped up enough money to have it fixed. But somehow, the broken toothy grin went with his mop of hair, which took him forever to comb through, to make my perfect friend.

Every day during the summer, Hany would wait at the rock that bordered our property until I came out. Together, Hany and I would run from the house, until breathlessly, we had no choice but to stop, our chests heaving and blowing sweat. Then we would collapse in a fit of laughter.

Hany was the perfect partner in crime, and oh, but we were criminals. Frequently, we stole into Mr. Lotfy's garden and plucked apples from his trees. We would climb up the garden wall, and reach as far as our fingertips would go to pluck a luscious bit of fruit. When we were caught, we grabbed our booty and made for the town square, so that we could make our escape in the bustle of downtown. We filched coins off the café tables meant for tips so that we could buy sweets from the grocery store. Our system worked so well; we were never caught.

I would distract the waiter by going into some girly histrionics, why Hany sidled by the tables and slid the coins into his pocket. Then when the waiter felt he had appropriately responded to my tears, I would move away from him, hiccupping loudly the entire way out of the café. I would then, of course, meet up with Hany at our favorite grocery store. Sometimes we scored enough money for many types of candy. We would shove them in our pockets having so many it made it difficult to run. Then, we would sit under a tree at the masjid and divvy up the spoils of our thefts. Greedily, we would suck down lemon drops, and mints to our children's hearts' delight.

Aside from our more criminal enterprises, Hany and I were close confidants. When Hany's uncle beat him for speaking out of turn at a family gathering, Hany and I plotted our revenge. We gossiped about all the people in our neighborhood during the long summer months. Why old Ms. Doha was getting fat, why Mr. Basha was sleeping outside instead of inside with his wife, who was getting married, and who, had sadly, called it quits. As I look back on the ruin of my life, I realize that these were the happiest moments of my life. Too soon society would start to determine our courses, and intrude on the special bond that Hany and I shared.

I first realized the iron will that is religious expectations when I turned seven. Up till then, I enjoyed a freedom that is only known to boys and very young girls. At that time, I didn't think of myself as a boy or a girl. I was Hany's friend. Of course, I knew I was a girl, but I didn't *feel* like one. I only knew that instead of playing dress-up like my sister or playing princess in a woman's grown-up hijab, I enjoyed climbing trees. I loved the freedom of my body, legs pumping hard as Hany and I ran through the streets. I loved playing soccer and Mujahidin versus Templars with the other boys. This was fun, this was excitement. I could think of nothing more boring than playing at being a woman as my sister did. I didn't realize that I was different until Adham moved into our neighborhood.

Adham was a kid from the nice part of Jeddah. His family had fallen out of favor with the royals in the government. Adham's father worked very high up in the government, something having to do with finance, and when money went missing from the royal treasury, well, I'm sure you can understand how quickly Adham's father fell from grace. Nevermind that it was probably one of the rich spoiled brat of a prince, second removed, who may have taken the money, but the government had to save face. Adham's family was sacked, and then the money ran out. Up until that point, Adham's family had lived in a palatial estate just south of the capital. Cool breezes wafted jasmine scents, I'm sure, into Adham's bedroom every night, and a wet-nurse, surely wiped his backside for him in the *hamam*. Adham grew up with every advantage a kid from the kingdom could have, money, a name, and familial respect. But when a hand dipped into the treasury, his entire world was gone, and instead he came to our neighborhood a spoiled and entitled bully. He never let us forget where he came from even though where he ended up was the same.

He was a fat kid, Adham. His rotund cheeks slightly dimpled when he sneered, and his nose tilted upward as if to say even the air he breathed was better than the simple oxygen we imbibed. He soon rose to prominence in our neighborhood, probably owing to his newness, and he became the little lordling of our medina. Adham quickly became fast friends with Mohamed, the other neighborhood tough.

Adham and Mohamed were a matched set of polar physical opposites. Where Adham was round, Mohamed was lean; where Adham was loud, Mohamed would just as soon hit you as talk to you. Adham's face was a barren landscape of disappointed affection. His stoic visage held a lifetime of imagined or real ills compressed in a thin slit of a mouth. Where Adham was once wealthy, Mohamed came from one of the poorest families of the medina, and only recently moved up the social ladder to the lower middle class. His older brother married a westerner, and when that happened, his family was flush with wealth. This, however, didn't change his more provincial and backstreet attitude. His house was still dingy and poor, even though it was twice the size of the home his family once inhabited. They, of course, were the same people they were before, just with bigger walls. From this background, Mohamed was sprung among us. He stole, he cheated, he gambled, and even at a young age smoked cigarettes and hashish. More importantly, he terrorized Hany and me.

The day I first met Adham started like any other. There was nothing different, nothing magical, nothing that would announce the great change that I would experience. It was as mundane as any other summer day. At 4:30 the Azhan played and Omi got up to pray and make breakfast. The delicate smells of good flat bread drifted out into the dawn air, drifted across the courtyard to tickle my nose with its brown flavor. I could hear the sizzle of egg hitting the pan. I took a moment before I opened my eyes, mentally anticipating the adventures Hany and I would embark upon during the day. I think we would go by the juice seller and get some date juice before playing king of the heap with the boys.

I jumped out of bed, and dragged a home abeya on to go out to the kitchen. *Abu* was there, having his morning coffee and reading the newspaper.

"*Saban el khaier*," Om said as I sat down beside Abu.

"Morning ... ," I mumbled already grabbing a piece of bread and ladling honey onto it before stuffing it into my mouth. Abu looked up from his newspaper to ruffle my hair and give me a kind smile.

"And Daughter, what will you do today?" he asked.

"Allah knows," I yawned back to him. By this time, I was on to the cucumbers Ome had set out. I

grabbed another piece, dipped it into cheese, and then loudly munched on it, while my father tried to read the paper. Ome just eyed me and shook her head.

"I suppose Hany and I will be off on an adventure," I explained.

"And what adventures will those be?" Abu asked as he grabbed me and started to tickle my sides.
*

Amira Mohamed skillfully crafts a stark and vivid portrait of a desperate Middle Eastern Muslima on a quest of self discovery. As unrelenting as the Saudi sun, her inner struggles with taboo desires, exacerbated by the expectations of a strict Muslim culture, lead to the ultimate betrayal, a nightmare from which she emerges neither apologetic nor defeated.

The author deftly immerses the reader in the emotional and physical trauma endured by a prisoner of her own flesh in this current and controversial tale. Self actualization, in a culture that devalues womanhood, is hard enough, but the challenges faced by Hanifa, Mohamed's hapless protagonist, are multiplied by a secret of which even she is barely aware.

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