

She Wore Red Trainers



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1

She was still looking at me, I could feel it.

You know how it feels when someone is staring at the back of your neck; it's as if they're sending off radio waves or something. Of course, she was expecting me to turn around and look at her again. I caught the look she gave me, just before I sat down by the window on the bus. I knew what it meant.

I took out my phone and started to play a game, hunching my shoulders to show that I was *not interested*.

Shoot those angry birds, Ali, I said to myself. Try not to think of the number of times this has happened this week.

A year earlier, when I had started praying regularly and learning more about Islam, paying attention to halal and haram at last, Dad had reminded me of the Islamic guidelines on girls, now that I was finally ready to hear them: no second look, limited interaction, definitely no dating and, of course, no physical contact of any kind before marriage.

There's no point pretending it wasn't hard.

Some days, I thought I would literally go crazy, I was so tense and wound up. And all the girls in their summer dresses didn't help things, trust me. Plus I was still thinking about my ex-girlfriend, Amy.

1

‘Fast, son,’ was Dad’s advice. ‘Work out, play basketball or something. It will give you an outlet.’

‘To be honest, Dad, it’s not that easy...’

‘Oh, I know it’s hard, son, we’ve all been there. But you can do it – you just need to practice a little self-control. And don’t allow yourself to get into any sticky situations, keep your distance.’

So, getting girls’ numbers was definitely out. Don’t get me wrong: back in the day, I wouldn’t have hesitated. Even when I was in a relationship, I was a mega flirt, I had to admit it, and I’d have had that girl’s number so fast, she wouldn’t even have had time to notice the tattoo on my right forearm. She would probably still have been checking out my blonde tipped curls, the stud in my ear, my light eyes.

Girls always loved my light eyes.

2 But despite the attention I used to get from girls, I think the way Mum raised me made it difficult to be the player I could have been. Too much guilt, for a start. And I was committed to Amy, in my own way. But, all the same, I did like a bit of cat and mouse.

But that was last year, practically a lifetime ago. Before I realised how short this life is, how something you think belongs to you can be snatched away at a moment’s notice.

Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji’un. To Allah we belong and to Him we shall return.

I couldn’t wait to get off that bus.

When I got home, to our house which still ached with Mum’s

absence, I found Dad in the light filled kitchen, his laptop open on the marble tabletop, a cup of cold tea beside it. He was on the phone. He was always on the phone these days. I felt irritation at his extreme attachment to his smartphone and computer. They were his crutches, I felt, his way of avoiding a reality that no longer included his wife of 20 years.

‘No, Kareem, I really don’t think so. I mean, I appreciate the gesture but I couldn’t, I just couldn’t...’

My ears pricked up. It sounded like Dad was talking to his old friend, Kareem Stevens, someone we hadn’t seen in forever. What was he offering him? And why was Dad turning it down?

Dad turned then and saw me standing there, watching him, and he nodded at me, gesturing for me to wait for his call to finish. Then he turned away from me and went out on to the balcony, the phone jammed against his ear. I went to the fridge and opened it to find the shelves bare aside from a half-finished bottle of milk and a carton of orange juice. Time to do the shopping again. The fridge had never looked this bare when Mum was around. I felt a twist of nostalgia as I thought of the boxes of cream cakes, the covered trays of cubed mango and watermelon, the bowls of spicy tuna salad and leftovers that tasted better than the day they had first been served. Mum hated an empty fridge.

I took the lonely carton of juice out and poured myself half a glass.

Through the open French doors, I could hear snatches of Dad’s conversation as he paced up and down the overgrown path through Mum’s herb garden.

‘But South London, Kareem? I don’t know whether I’m up to parenting my boys in the inner city... ‘

What was he on about?

There was a pause, then I heard Dad sigh. 'OK, Kareem, OK. I'll give it a try. It's not like we have any other options at the moment, anyway.' It hurt me to hear the defeat in my father's voice. But then his voice lifted again, strong: '*Jazakallah khayran*, my brother, I really appreciate it.' I could practically hear him pulling himself up by his bootstraps, straightening his shoulders. Dad never was one for self-pity.

When he came back into the kitchen, I looked into his face and braced myself for unpleasant news.

'Well, son,' Dad said in a fake, cheerful voice. 'How's it going?'

I raised an eyebrow and looked at him, warily. Whatever it was, it was making him extremely nervous.

4 'Sit down, Ali.' He gestured towards the stool by the counter. 'I've got to talk to you about something.'

I waited to hear the momentous news.

'We'll be spending the summer in London, *inshallah*...'

'London? Brilliant!' My face lit up as I imagined spending the summer in London, as we had done before, shopping on Oxford Street and visiting Tower Bridge, riding on the London Eye. But my face fell when Dad shook his head. And that was when he told me: his business was in trouble, serious trouble, and we needed to do something drastic to keep the house. So that was why we were moving to London for the summer, to rent out our place to another family visiting from abroad.

'I need you to understand, it won't be a holiday, son. I'll be working all the hours God sends so I will need you boys to be responsible and to look after yourselves, pretty much.' Then he smiled hopefully. 'The good news is that we've got somewhere to stay for a few months... just until we get back

on our feet and business picks up again and we can come home...’ I saw the look in his eyes: he wanted me to believe him, to trust him to make everything all right, like he had always done. To be a superhero once more.

You see, when we were little, Dad used to tell us that he was a superhero with secret super powers. Of course, we were always begging him to show us his powers, and he always said that he could never show them to us, but that we would know them when the time came. I’ll never forget the day I realised that the powers he had been talking about weren’t about being able to fly at warp speed or turn into a ball of fire; his powers were much more subtle than that. But the effect was the same: just like Superman, he made us feel safe, like there was nothing that could touch us, that he was always there to shield us from the baddies, from the harsher side of life.

Until Mum died, that is. Because then our superhero lost his powers and fell to earth, broken. And there was no one around to shield us anymore.

When I think about it, maybe that was what led us to find Allah again: the realisation that there is only One superpower on this earth, only One who can protect us. *La haula wa la quwwatta illa-billah*. There is no power or might except with Allah.

But that afternoon, in the kitchen of my beautiful family home in Hertfordshire, I let my dad be my hero again. I wanted him to believe in himself again, to see a stronger version of himself reflected in my eyes. ‘OK, Dad, that’s great. *Alhamdulillah*. Where will we be staying?’

‘Your Uncle Kareem’s leaving his place for a year to live and work in the Gulf. He said we can stay there. It sounds nice: three bedrooms, garden, close to the mosque... There’s

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only one problem...'

'What's that, Dad?'

'The house is on a housing estate.'

My jaw dropped. 'You mean it's a council flat?' Whatever I had been expecting, it wasn't that! An image of our beautiful house here in Hertfordshire flashed through my mind and it was as if a knife had twisted in my heart. A council flat? Oh, how the mighty had fallen.

Dad must have seen the look of horror on my face. 'No, Ali, it's not a council flat. It's a house and Uncle Kareem owns it. And it's not a real estate; it's in a compound with a gate so you don't have to worry, it is really secure.' I must have visibly relaxed because he smiled then. 'And the best thing about it,' he continued, 'is that all our neighbours will be Muslims. That'll make a change, won't it?'

6 I smiled weakly, trying to process what he was telling me. A new journey was about to begin.

2

I woke up to the sound of Mum crying. It wasn't loud or anything, but over the years, my ears had grown used to detecting the sound of her sobbing through the thin wall that divided our two rooms. So that was how I knew that my brother Malik's dad, my mother's fourth husband, had left the night before, after their row.

I felt my insides contract, just a little. Must have been anxiety. Or the thought that I would actually get a peaceful night's sleep again, a night where my body wasn't on high alert. Abu Malik leaving may have pushed Mum to tears, but it brought me relief.

Some stepfathers are more toxic than others. Let me leave it at that.

'Here we go again,' I thought as I pushed my little sister's sleeping body off my arm and towards the wall. I swung my legs over the side of the bed, the mattress creaking beneath me. 'I wonder how long it will last this time.' It wasn't the first time one of their arguments had ended in a walkout.

I knocked on Mum's door, knowing she wouldn't want me in there, wouldn't want me to see her crying. 'Mum,' I called softly. 'Would you like a cup of tea?'

I didn't wait to hear her muffled response. I didn't need

7

to. I knew she needed a cup of tea. Soon, she would need me to give her her pills, too. Just to take the edge off the pain.

As I made my way down the stairs, stepping over piles of clothes, both clean and dirty, toys and books, I found myself growing irritated by the damp spots on the wall of the bathroom and the dust that had gathered in the corners. What with me spending so much time studying for my A levels, I could see that things had slipped around the house. I would need to whip everyone back into shape.

I put the kettle on and padded towards the back of the house, towards Zayd's room. I knocked and waited briefly before sticking my head in. As usual, he was all tied up in his duvet, just the top of his head and his hairy feet sticking out, like an overgrown hot dog. I stepped in, narrowly avoiding the crusty glass and plate by the side of the bed.

8

'Zee,' I called out, giving him a nudge with my foot. He mumbled and groaned in reply. 'Abu Malik's gone, yeah. Just thought you should know.'

Zayd didn't come out of his duvet sandwich. 'Yeah, I know. I saw him last night, innit.'

'Did you say anything to him?'

'What's to say, Ams? It's the second *talaq*, innit, their second divorce. One more chance.'

I kissed my teeth and walked out of the door, disgusted. 'Men,' I thought to myself as I banged Mum's favourite teacup on the chipped enamel counter. 'They're all the same.'

So, that morning, it was up to me to get my little brothers and sister – Abdullah, Malik and Taymeeyah – ready for madrasah at the mosque.

'Taymeeyah, give me that hair grease... we're going to have to take your hair out soon, those plaits are looking kinda



tired.'

As Taymeeyah ran upstairs to find the hair grease in the bomb site of our room, I rolled Malik's sleeves up. His eczema was getting bad again. I grabbed the pot of aqueous cream from the counter and began to rub it into the rough, reddened skin on the inside of his elbows. 'You haven't been using that soap with the bubbles, have you, Malik?'

He just nodded, his finger in his mouth.

I sighed and shook my head. 'You know you can't, babe. Not until your skin gets better. And no more milk, OK? You have to drink the soya, you know that...'

Malik made a face. 'But I hate it, Ammie,' he whined. 'It's yucky!'

Taymeeyah had reappeared. 'It's true, Ams,' she said. 'It is yucky.'

I poked her in the belly. 'And how would you know, 9 young lady?'

She grinned at me, a guilty look in her eye.

'You drank the last bottle, didn't you? Admit it, Tay.'

She nodded sheepishly and I gave her a look.

'That's not right, is it, Tay? Malik's milk is expensive, y'know. And he can't drink the regular stuff. Promise me you won't touch the soya milk again.'

Taymeeyah nodded. 'I promise.'

'Muslim's word is bond, remember?'

'Yeah, I remember, Ammie.'

I felt a tugging on my nightshirt and turned to see Abdullah looking up at me.

'Where's Uncle?' he asked, using his podgy fingers to sign out the words.

I faltered. What should I tell him? What *could* I tell him?

That his brother's dad had just walked out on his kid in the middle of the night? That I had no idea where he was or when and if he would be back, either to see us, to drop some money for Mum, or to stay? No, I couldn't say that, so I gave him a quick hug and flashed him a smile.

'I'm not sure, babe,' I signed back, 'but if we don't hurry, you'll be late for madrasah. Come on, you guys, hurry up!' And I made a big show of getting the value pack of cornflakes down from the shelf and filling up their little bowls.

As I watched them eat, I felt the knot in my stomach tighten. They would all be depending on me again – me and Zayd.

10 OK, so now of course the question was, where was the human hot dog in all of this? Well, Zayd, my older brother, and I had a strict division of labour in the house: he did the weekday school run and I took the weekend mornings.

'What with work and *masjid* during the week, it's the only chance I get to sleep in, Ams,' was his reasoning. 'Now that you've finished school, you'll get to join all the other sisters, living the easy life at home, while we brothers sweat it out at work every day. *Subhanallah*, you sisters have got it easy, man!'

I had given him my most superior look. 'You must be mistaking me for someone else, brother dear. Last time I checked, it wasn't you waking up at 2 a.m. to take Malik to the toilet – or cleaning the mattress when one of the kids has had an accident! And anyway, who said I'll be sitting at home? Uni is only a couple of months away, remember? And then there's the fat job afterwards, inshallah. You do know that I'll be working after I graduate, don't you? No signing on or benefits for me. And no waiting for some useless man to

take care of me.'

Zayd groaned. 'What's with all this women's lib stuff? Is that what they taught you in that school of yours? A woman's place...'

I put up my hand and started shouting over him. 'OK, OK, Zee, give it a rest! Let's just agree to disagree, yeah? Because, if you think I'm going to be one of those deadbeat sisters on the dole, popping kids out every year, you've got another thing coming.'

I could have slapped that look of pity off his face. 'You have much to learn, young grasshopper,' he said, smiling. 'For now, though, you can do the kids on Saturday mornings while I sleep in, all right?'

'Yeah, yeah,' I growled. 'I guess that's fair enough.'

Zayd knew just how to wind me up. Most girls who had been brought up in a strict, conservative Muslim family like mine, praying, wearing hijab since the age of seven, with a stay-at-home mum who never finished school herself, would have had no problem with my brother's jibes. What he was teasing me about was the reality for most of the girls I grew up with: finish as much school as you can (GCSEs, if possible) and then hurry up and get married. Getting married was the biggest milestone, the one piece of news a girl's parents would make sure they shared with the whole community. Once you're married, you're safe: you're off the streets, you're not a *fitnah*, you've got someone to take care of you. This was my background, these were the ideas I grew up hearing. But I was never like the other girls. You could say I was cut from a different cloth.

11

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I looked in on Mum just before I left with the kids. I wanted to remind her that I was planning to go to the park to do some sketching after I had dropped the kids. I knew that she probably wouldn't remember and would start worrying if I didn't come straight back after the *masjid*.

The curtains were drawn and the room felt hot and stuffy. Mum was curled up in bed still, her hair spread over the pillow, a frown line between her eyebrows. I stroked her hair, tucking it behind her ear, and kissed her cheek. Her skin felt hot and damp.

'I'm sorry, Mum,' I whispered. 'I'm sorry.'

12 As we left the house and walked down the close to catch the bus on the main road, I looked up at Mum's window. The left side of the curtain was sagging badly, right where the broken glass had been sealed with masking tape, months before. Abu Malik was meant to have had the glass replaced but, obviously, he'd never got round to it.

O Allah, I prayed silently. Take me away from all of this. But look after them all when I'm gone.

3

The drive into London took forever, mainly due to an accident on the motorway. We drove down with Dad on Thursday afternoon to make sure that the house was ready for the movers who were due over the weekend.

I must admit, even though Dad took great pains to explain the difference between a housing estate and a housing association, I was expecting the worst: grim estates decked out with rusting swings and dog mess on the scratchy lawns.

13

But our route took us through the bustle of Brixton, up tree-lined roads, past a beautiful park with a country house perched on a hill, to the gates of our new home. Looking around as we drove up the driveway, I could feel my heart rate start to slow down and the dread I had been unconsciously holding onto, easing away. The houses were neat, well looked after. Good cars stood in the private driveways and the close was flanked on one side by sky-high oak trees.

‘You sure this is it, Dad?’ I asked, suddenly anxious to check that this was the right place, that I hadn’t got my hopes up for nothing. ‘It doesn’t look that bad...’

Dad smiled, ‘Uncle Kareem wouldn’t invite us to stay in a dump, Ali.’

Umar kissed his teeth and scrunched down further in his

seat, his eyes fixed on the phone he held in front of him.

'I can't wait to see what it looks like inside!' Jamal was jumping up and down with excitement.

Dad chuckled and tossed him the keys. 'Do the honours, son.'

And Jamal duly unlocked the door of our new home and let us in.

14 We went to pray the Friday prayers at the local mosque the next day and, as far as I was concerned, we stuck out like sore thumbs, even amongst other Muslims. We were obviously strangers, new to the community: we dressed differently, spoke differently, didn't know anyone. But one of the brothers made his way over to us like it was the most natural thing in the world.

'*As-salamu 'alaykum*. My name's Usamah.' As tall as Dad, maybe even taller, dressed in a brown linen *thobe* with a crisp white turban tied around his head, he greeted us with such a smile, such easy confidence, that Dad was caught off guard. '*Mashallah*, fine set of boys you've got here, sir,' he smiled, shaking us all by the hand, and giving Jamal a mock punch on the shoulder. 'Y'all new to the *masjid*?'

'Yes, we are,' Dad answered him. 'It's our first time here as a family.' Then he frowned. 'Well, the boys' mother - my late wife - and I visited a friend here a few times when we were newly married. But we moved out of London and didn't come back here again...'

I stared at Dad. It wasn't like him to speak so candidly -

and to a stranger at that.

Usamah bowed his head slightly and said a brief prayer, then looked up at all of us. ‘May Allah make it easy for all of you,’ he said quietly. ‘Losing someone that close is never easy.’

I shifted on my feet then, feeling bare and exposed in the crowded prayer hall. How are you supposed to respond to a statement like that?

But Dad didn’t seem to be having any problems. He answered the brother’s questions about our family, where we were living, what we thought of the *khutbah* – totally unlike his usual reserved self.

Although I wasn’t at all comfortable with the upfront disclosure that was going on, I found myself warming to Usamah. He seemed laid-back but had a serious, focused look in his eyes; his manner was confident but humble, in that spiritual sort of way that you read about but seldom encounter. I decided to suspend judgement.

15

Somehow, we found ourselves talking about sports and, once he heard that I had been on the school rugby and basketball teams, he laughed. ‘No wonder you’re so pumped up, bro!’ And he invited me to play basketball with him and some other Muslim brothers the next morning.

‘I’ll introduce you to the brothers,’ he said, full of confidence. ‘It will make settling in easier.’

And then he was gone, off to greet the imam of the mosque and get himself some fried chicken from the food trailer parked outside the mosque.

‘Mashallah,’ said Dad, with a smile, ‘he seems like a nice brother...’

Umar scowled. ‘What’s with the wacky dress sense?’ he growled, then kissed his teeth and went to sit on the low wall

outside the mosque, his hood over his head, his hands stuck deep in his pockets.

He stayed there, detached, not responding to anyone's *salam* or attempts at conversation, until it was time to go.

'He'll come round,' Dad had said.

'Inshallah, Dad,' had been my response.

16 By the time I reached the basketball courts on the other side of the park, the brothers were already there, messing about with the ball, shooting hoops, showing off to no one in particular. When I came the first time with Usamah, things were a little awkward but everyone relaxed once they saw that I could play. Now, it felt like I'd been playing with them forever.

I tossed my bag onto the nearest bleacher and called out: 'Hey!' My feet were itching to feel the heat of the court, my hands eager for the ball's rough surface.

The other three – Usamah, Zayd and Mahmoud – all turned and returned the *salam*: 'As-salamu 'alaykum, bro.'

Usamah's face broke into a smile.

'About time, akh!' he laughed. 'We thought you had bailed out on us!' And he did a little jump and flipped the ball into the net with a flick of his wrist. 'Ready to get your behind *whupped*?'

I grinned back at him. 'I'm going for 50 hoops today,' I laughed, buoyed by the bravado that came from hanging with 'the brothers'. That was how they rolled. So that was how I was going to roll, too.

‘Nah, man,’ jeered Mahmoud, ‘never!’

‘Watch me!’

‘I’m watching, akh,’ called Usamah, ‘and I don’t see nothin’ but talk. Don’t aim too high, you might fall hard!’

‘That’s right, my man!’ called Mahmoud, getting ready to throw the ball to Zayd. But, just then, something caught his eye and he turned towards the bleachers.

Two girls sauntered across the bleachers and paused, posing, preening, looking out on to the court.

Mahmoud let out a low whistle from between his teeth and nudged me, a crooked smile on his face.

‘Hey,’ he said softly, ‘have a look at *that*. Now *that* is hotness...’

In spite of myself, I glanced over at the girls and caught a glimpse of skin, glossy hair and flashing eyes. *Fitnah*. Straight up.

‘Now, wouldn’t you like a taste of that?’ Mahmoud was still staring, a slow fire burning in his eyes. 17

‘No, not me,’ I mumbled, studying the ball in my hands. ‘I’m not into all that.’

Mahmoud looked at me, curious. ‘Hey, a man’s got needs, right?’

I swallowed hard. ‘Yeah, that’s right...’ I avoided Mahmoud’s gaze and looked up at the net. ‘But that’s why I fast ... and play ball.’ I needed to ease the tension, to stop all this talk about girls and needs, all the stuff that made life complicated and left you frustrated. I took a run up to the net and slam dunked the ball, sweet as anything.

‘That’s one!’

The game was on.

* * *

♂ ALI

Well, after that, *alhamdulillah*, my mind emptied, the intensity of the game sweeping all other thoughts aside. I didn't stop for a moment: running, reaching, twisting, springing, leaping, thrusting, driving the ball into the net again and again and again.

The others were like shadows on either side of me, a blur, merging with one another. But I was aware of everything else: the hard slap of my trainers on the ground, the grainy texture of the ball, slick with nervous sweat, the strain in my calf muscles, the tension in my forearms, the sweat soaking my scalp, trickling down my back.

I lost myself in that game and left the others floundering, panting, struggling to keep up, to slow my flow.

But none of them could match my focus.

Not today.

18

Then came the moment of truth: I held the ball in my hands, my fingers splayed, my palms burning. The others hovered around, breathless, their shoulders heaving. I got ready to shoot my fiftieth round. Victory was within reach.

Then – ‘Zayd!’

A clear voice rang out across the court, a girl's voice, cutting the air like a knife, a cool wave over the hot tarmac, and I felt the tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Stupidly, I turned to look. And the world stood still.

It *was* a girl, but not like any I had ever seen. Her black hijab and *abaya* were stark against the sun-drenched colours of the bleachers. A fresh breeze came and whipped her long hijab up and it swirled around her like a cloud, like a dream, like a spell.

She brought her hand up to move the fabric away from her face and, in that moment, I froze as if a bucket of ice had

been poured over me. My breath caught in my throat.

I noticed everything: the tiny hands, the pale fingernails, the cleft in her chin, its defiant tilt, the nose ring, the piercing eyes, the long eyelashes. I noticed it all in the space of about 3.5 seconds, the time it takes to have one look, and in that moment I smiled without meaning to, an involuntary smile, the kind you get when your heart leaps for no reason, when it skips a beat. Then I looked down. And I saw her trainers. Red Converse trainers, just like mine.

‘Woah...’

My breath came back to me and the world began to move again.

I didn’t realise I had dropped the ball until I caught sight of Mahmoud, on the other end of the court, jumping high to land the ball into the net. The ball banged against the backboard and spun around twice before dropping through the hoop and bouncing off the court. Mahmoud and Usamah cheered, exultant.

‘You almost had it, man,’ Mahmoud panted, his wild eyes dancing.

‘What did I tell you?’ laughed Usamah. ‘Too much talk! Now, watch and learn from the experts, boy!’ And he ran down the court and did his favourite move, sailing through the air, arms and legs outstretched, swinging from the net as the ball fell through it.

I laughed as I watched him, panting. My mind was on other things.

But when I looked back to the bleachers again, the girl was gone.

4

I wasn't supposed to be at the basketball courts. Zayd, my older brother, was playing with his guy friends and that generally meant that the court was off-limits.

'I don't want you coming around the brothers, sis,' he'd always say. I would roll my eyes every time. Not like there was anything there I hadn't seen before.

20 'Nah, it's just that I know how guys' minds work, OK? Trust me, it's better you stay away.'

Then he'd keep going on in that earnest way of his about the Islamic rules on modesty - *ghayrah* and hijab, niqab, lowering the gaze etc. I'd usually tuned him out by that point. I got it. He didn't want his friends eyeing up his sister. I could respect that.

But that day was different. After I dropped the kids at the mosque, Mum started ringing my phone, asking where Zayd was. Apparently, he had promised to take the kids to the park after madrasah while she went to her appointment at the doctor's, and she was still waiting to hear back from him. I shook my head. Zayd may have been the world's most dutiful son, but he had a terrible memory.

'That's what smart phones are for, dude,' I often teased him.



Anyway, that Saturday morning, I knew that he had his regular basketball practice so I decided to go over and tell him to call Mum before going off to do some sketching.

I recognised all the other players: I had seen most of them outside the *masjid* at one time or another.

I saw Usamah, the exchange student from the Bronx, studying fashion and design at Central Saint Martins, a cross between a 'loud 'n' proud' New Yorker and a twenty-first century Ibn Batutta. And he scored a very respectable eight in our totally naughty but hilarious Muslim hottie chart: the 'Mottie Scale'.

Then there was Mr Smooth, Mahmoud. I only knew him because we'd been at primary school together but I never gave him much more than a nod and quick *salam* in recognition of the fact that he had once pushed someone over for bullying me in the playground. Other than that, I stayed away. Some guys are just too dangerous. You can't let them get too close because they don't know how to be 'just friends'. Mahmoud and guys like him were officially excluded from the Mottie rankings. We girls know better than to play with fire.

21

But then I noticed that there was someone else on the court, someone I hadn't seen before. He was playing some serious ball, making everyone gasp and pant to catch up with him. He seemed to be aiming for some sort of record, slamming the ball into the net again and again. There was something about the way he moved - strong, graceful, rippling, like a cat - that made something flutter in my stomach.

What a gorgeous specimen, I thought. From a purely artistic point of view, of course.

For a split second, I imagined myself framing the contours of his arms the colour of caramel, the biceps flowing into the

sinewy forearm, the powerful hands with the perfect nails. Charcoal, for sure. That was the best way to capture the glow of his skin and play of shadow and light that highlighted the muscles.

But those thoughts only flashed through my mind for a second.

Astaghfirullah.

What was I doing there again? Then I remembered: I was here for Zayd. But he hadn't seen me yet, he was so intent on trying to block the guy with the ball. I would have to interrupt.

'Zayd!' I called out, my voice perfectly controlled to sound mature and businesslike: my 'brothers voice'.

22 All three of them turned towards me and, for a brief moment, the stranger's eyes met mine. They were the lightest eyes I had ever seen on a mixed-race boy, light and clear. Trusting. As soon as our eyes met, he smiled, almost before he could catch himself, and dropped the ball. It was as if his smile had eclipsed the sun; I wasn't aware of anything else, just shadows that made him shine even brighter. My heart flipped a couple of times and my mouth went dry.

Oh, wow.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mahmoud running up to grab the ball. But it was as if the stranger couldn't hear him – either that or he didn't care.

A moment later, he had lowered his gaze, the ball was out of his control and Zayd was running towards me, his face red, his hair plastered to his forehead.

'What are you doing here, Amirah?' he frowned, guiding me away from the court. I heard the ball slam into the net on the other side of the court. Seemed Mahmoud had interrupted Mr Light Eyes' flow.



‘Well, *as-salamu ‘alaykum* to you too, brother,’ I smiled, only mildly irritated by his over-the-top protectiveness.

He mumbled a greeting as he opened his sports bag.

‘Your mother has been trying to reach you,’ I said as he fumbled around for his phone. ‘Something about a doctor’s appointment?’

Zayd groaned. ‘Subhanallah, I completely forgot!’ he cried, slapping his forehead.

‘Well,’ I said. ‘You’d better get your backside over to number 6 Seville Close quick time before the Wrath of Mum descends on you.’

Zayd turned to his friends: ‘Yo, *ikhwan*, I’m out. Got to take care of some family stuff.’ He looked over at the sharp shooter and smiled. ‘Great play, Ali, mashallah...’

So, his name was Ali.

Another piece of information to add to the fact that he was quite possibly the most gorgeous guy I had ever laid eyes on. 23

But I had to stop that train of thought before it got out of hand because, for a start, the only reason a strictly practising Muslim girl like me would have anything remotely emotional to do with a boy is if she were ready to get married.

And I was *never* getting married, ever.

End of.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Na'ima B Robert, who has South African Zulu and Scottish roots, was born in England, grew up in Zimbabwe and converted to Islam in 1998 at the age of 21 after visiting Egypt as a student. She graduated from the University of London and is founding editor of the UK-based Muslim women's magazine, *Sisters*. She has published many picture books with Muslim themes and four young adult novels: *From Somalia*, *With Love*, *Boy vs Girl*, *Black Sheep* and *Far From Home*. She has also published a memoir, *From My Sisters' Lips*, and a series of children's non-fiction books under her family name, Thando McLaren. Na'ima B Robert is married with five children and divides her time between London and Egypt.

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