

Minaret Chapter 1

Bism Allahi, Ar-rahman, Ar-raheem

I've come down in the world. I've slid to a place where the ceiling is low and there isn't much room to move. Most of the time I'm used to it. Most of the time I'm good. I accept my sentence and do not brood or look back. But sometimes a shift makes me remember. Routine is ruffled and new start makes me suddenly conscious of what I've become, standing in a street covered with autumn leaves. The trees in the park across the road are scrubbed silver and brass. I look up and see the minaret of Regent's Park mosque visible above the trees. I have never seen it so early in the morning in this vulnerable light. London is at its most beautiful in autumn. In summer it is seedy and swollen, in winter it is overwhelmed by Christmas lights and in spring, the season of birth, there is always disappointment. Now it is at its best, now it is poised like a mature woman whose beauty is no longer fresh but surprisingly potent.

My breath comes out like smoke. I wait to ring the bell of a flat; the number is written down in my notebook. She said eight. I cough and worry that I will cough in front of my new employer, implant in her anxiety that I will pass germs on to her child. But she might not be the anxious type. I don't know her yet. The only time I saw her was last week when she came to the mosque searching for a servant. She had an aura of haste and grooming about her. Her silk scarf was rolled casually around her head and neck and, when it slipped and showed her hair she didn't bother to tug it back on again. A certain type of Arab woman — rich student, late twenties, making the most of the West . . . But I still did not know her. She was not herself when she spoke to me. Few people are themselves in mosques. They are subdued, taken over by a fragile, neglected part of themselves.

I hope she hasn't forgotten me. I hope she hasn't changed her mind and put the little girl in a nursery or found someone else. And I hope that her mother, who has until now been the baby-sitter, has not extended her stay in Britain and made me unnecessary. St John's Wood High Street is busy. Men in suits and young women wearing the latest fashions get into new cars and drive off to good jobs. This is a posh area. Pink hues and the expanse that money blesses people with. The past tugs but it is not possessions that I miss. I do not want a new coat but wish I could dry-clean my old one more often. Wish that not so many doors have closed in my face; the doors of taxis and education, beauty salons, travel agents to take me on hajj. . .

When someone picks up the entry-phone, I say, my voice edgy with hope, '*Salaamu alleikum*, it's me, Najwa . . .' She is expecting me, *alhamdullilah*. The sound of the buzzer is almost thrilling. I push the door open and enter to find everything in wood; the past preserved and cared for in good taste. This is a beautiful building, dignified and solid. Old, cautious money polished by generation after generation with love and care. Not like my father's money, sequestered by a government, squandered by Omar. I was silly too with my share, I did nothing useful with it. There's a mirror in the lobby. It shows a woman in a white headscarf and beige, shapeless coat. Eyes too bright and lashes too long, but still I look homely and reliable, the right age. A young

nanny might be careless, and older nanny complains about her back. I am the right age.

The elevator is the old-fashioned type so that I have to yank the door. It clatters in the elegant quiet of the building. I reach to press the button for a second floor but find that the first button says one to three, the second three to four, and the third four to six. I try to work it out, stare at it but I am still confused. I decide to climb the stairs instead. A door slams above me; quick footsteps descend the stairs. When he comes within sight I see a youth who is tall and gangly with the start of a beard and curly hair. I stop him and ask about the elevator.

‘It’s the flat numbers, not the numbers of the floors.’ He speaks English as if it is his mother’s tongue but the accent is not local. It is difficult guessing people’s origins in London. If he were Sudanese, he would be considered light-skinned but I have no proof that he is.

‘Right, thanks.’ I smile but he does not smile back.

Instead he repeats, ‘You just have to press the number of the flat you want.’ His eyes are liquid brown; they shine not with intelligence, not at all like Anwar’s, but with intuition. Perhaps he is sensitive but not particularly bright, not quick and sharp like young people nowadays.

I thank him again and he ducks his head a little, shrugs his shoulders to adjust the strap of his bag. I have heard the saying that you can smell Paradise on the young. When he backs away and walks out of the building, everything goes back to normal again.

I ascend and open the door of the elevator to an elegant, vacuumed carpet, take hopeful steps towards the flat. I will take the little girl to the square across the road. I will take her to the mosque, time it so that I can pray with everyone else and afterwards feed the ducks in Regent’s Park. It is very likely that the flat will have satellite TV and I will be able to watch Egyptian film on ART and the news on al-Jezira. Last week I heard a talk and these were the lines that stayed with me, that touched me the most. <>The mercy of Allah is an ocean. Our sins are a limp of clay clenched between the beak of a pigeon. The pigeon is perched on the branch of a tree at the edge of that ocean. It only has to open its beak. Part One

Khartoum, 1984-5

‘Omar, are you awake?’ I shook his arm that lay across his face, covering his eyes.

‘Hmm.’

‘Get up.’ His room was wonderfully cool because he had the best air conditioner in the house.

‘I can’t move.’ He put his arm down and blinked at me. I moved my head back, wrinkling my nose at his bad breath.

‘If you don’t get up, I’m going to take the car.’

‘Seriously, I can’t . . . can’t move.’

‘Well, I’m going without you.’ I walked to the far end of his room, past his cupboard and the poster of Michael Jackson. I switched the air conditioner off. It died down with an echo and heat surrounded the room, waiting to pounce into it.

‘Why are you doing this to me?’

I laughed and said with glee, ‘Now you’ll be forced to get up.’

Downstairs I drank tea with Baba. He always looked so nice in the morning, fresh from the shower and smelling of aftershave.

‘Where’s your brother?’ he grumbled.

‘Probably on his way down,’ I said.

‘Where’s your mother?’

‘It’s Wednesday. She goes to Keep Fit.’ It always amazed me how Baba deliberately forgot my mother’s schedule, how his eyes behind his glasses looked cautious and vague when he spoke of her. He had married above himself, to better himself. His life story was how he moved from a humble background to become manager of the President’s office via marriage into an old wealthy family. I didn’t like him to tell it, it confused me. I was too much like my mother.

‘Spoilt,’ he now mumbled into his tea, ‘the three of you are spoilt.’

‘I’ll tell Mama you said this about her!’

He made a face. ‘She’s too soft on your brother. It’s not good for him. When I was his age, I was working day and night; I had aspirations . . .’

‘Oh Baba, I’m sorry.’ I hugged him and kissed his cheek. ‘Lovely perfume.’

He smiled, ‘Paco Rabanne.’

I laughed. He cared about his clothes and looks more than any father I knew. ‘Well, time to be off,’ he said and the ritual of his departure began. The houseboy appeared from the kitchen and carried his briefcase to the car. Musa, the driver, leapt out of nowhere and opened the car door for him.

I watched them drive off and there was only the Toyota Corolla left in the driveway. It used to be Mama’s car but last month it became mine and Omar’s. Mama had a new car now and Omar stopped using his motorcycle.

I looked at the garden and the road beyond. There were no bicycles on the road. I had an admirer who kept riding his bicycle past the front of our house. Sometimes he came past three or four

times a day. He had hopeful eyes and I despised him. But, like now, when the road was empty, I felt disappointed.

‘Omar!’ I called from downstairs. We were going to be late for our lecture. At the beginning of term, our very first in the university, we used to go well ahead of the time. Six weeks into the term, we discovered that the sophisticated thing was to appear at the last minute. All the lecturers turned up ten minutes past the hour, and swept grandly into halls full of expectant students.

I could not hear any sound from above so I ran upstairs. No, the bathroom was empty. I opened Omar’s bedroom and the room was, as I had expected, an oven. Yet there he was fast asleep, sprawled snoring. He had kicked the covers off and was drenched in sweat and listlessness.

‘That’s it. I’m going to drive, I have nothing to do with you.’

He stirred a little. ‘What?’

I sounded angry but I was also afraid. Afraid of his sleepiness that did not stem from any illness; afraid of his lethargy that I could not talk to anyone about.

‘Where are the keys?’

‘Ha?’

‘Where are the car keys?’ I yanked open his cupboard.

‘No, in the pocket of my jeans . . . behind the door.’

I pulled out the keys; coins fell to the floor, a box of Benson & Hedges.

‘See what will happen when Baba hears about this.’

‘Put the air conditioner back on.’

‘No.’

‘Please Nana.’

His use of my nickname softened me a little. The empathy of twins gripped me and for a moment I was the one who was hot and unbearably sleepy. I switched on the air conditioner and marched out of the room.

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I rolled up the window of the car so that dust wouldn’t come in and the hot wind wouldn’t mess up my hair. I wished I could feel like an emancipated young student, driving her own car with confidence. Was I not the emancipated young woman driving her own car to university? In Khartoum only a minority of women drove cars and in university less than thirty per cent of

students were girls — that should make me feel good about myself. But I preferred it when Omar was with me, when Omar was driving. I missed him.

I drove slowly and was careful to indicate and careful not to knock down anyone on a bicycle. At the Gamhouriya Street traffic light a little girl knocked on my window, begging with tilted head and unfocused eyes. Because I was alone I gave her a note. If Omar had been with me, I would have given her a coin — he hated beggars. She clutched the five pound note with slow disbelief and ran back to the pavement. When the light changed to green, I drove on. From the rear-view mirror, I could see her engulfed by other children and a few desperate adults. Dust and the start of a fight.

My hands were sweaty when I knocked on the door of lecture room 101. I was fifteen minutes late. I could hear Dr Basheer inside delivering another chapter on Accounting, my least favourite subject, but my father wanted Omar to study Business and, after years in a girls' school, I wanted to be with Omar. I knocked again louder and gathered courage to turn the knob. It was locked. So Dr Basheer had been true to his announcement that no latecomers would be allowed in his lectures. I turned and walked to the cafeteria.

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My favourite cafeteria was at the back of the university. It overlooked the Blue Nile but the water couldn't be seen because of the dense trees. The morning shade and the smell of mango trees began to soothe me. I sat at a table and pretended to read my notes. They meant nothing and filled me with emptiness. I could foresee the hours I would have to spend memorizing what I couldn't understand. When I looked up I noticed that Anwar Al-sir was sitting at the next table. He was in his last year and known for the straight As he got. Today he was alone with his cigarette and glass of tea. In the campus where most were scruffy, he always wore clean shirts, was clean-shaven and his hair was cut short even though longer hairstyles were in fashion. Omar had his hair just like Michael Jackson on the album cover of *Off the Wall*.

Anwar Al-sir was a member of the Democratic Front, the students' branch of the Communist Party. He probably hated me because I had heard him speaking in a *nadwa* with wit and scorn of the bourgeoisie. Land-owning families, capitalists, the aristocracy; they were to blame, he said, for the mess our country was in. I talked to Omar about this but Omar said I was being too personal. Omar did not have time for the likes of Anwar; he had his own set of friends. They lent each other videos of *Top of the Pops* and they all intended to go to Britain one day. Omar believed we had been better off under the British and it was a shame that they left. I made sure that he didn't write these ideas in any of his History or Economics essays. He would surely fail because all the books and lecturers said that colonialism was the cause of our underdevelopment.

It would have been childish to move from where I was sitting. But I felt uncomfortable sitting facing Anwar. He smiled at me and this took me aback. He kept looking at me. I felt that my blouse was too tight and my face too hot. I must have exhaled because he said, 'It's hot, isn't it?'

And you're used to air conditioners.' There was a teasing in his voice.

I laughed. When I spoke, my voice sounded strange to my ears, as if it were not me. 'But I prefer the heat to the cold.'

'Why?' He threw the butt of his cigarette on the ground and, with his feet, covered it with sand. His movements were gentle.

'It's more natural, isn't it?' There were two tables between us and I wondered which one of us would make the first move, which one of us would get up and move over to the other table.

'It depends,' he said. 'Someone in Russia might regard cold as natural.'

'We're not Russians.'

He laughed in a nice way and fell silent. His silence disappointed me and I thought of different ways to receive the conversation again. I scrambled different sentences in my head, fast, 'I heard you have a brother studying in Moscow', 'The air conditioner in my car broke down', 'You know, Dr Basheer wouldn't let me in'. I discarded them all as foolish and unbecoming. The silence grew until I could hear my heart above the sound of the birds. I got up and left the cafeteria without a glance towards him or a goodbye. It was nearly ten o'clock and time for Macroeconomics. The lecturer passed the attendance sheet. I wrote my name, then changed pens, made my hand-writing more upright and wrote Omar's name.

I walked out of the Macro lecture to find him waiting for me.

'Give me the car keys.'

'Here. Don't forget we have history at twelve. Show you face, please.' He frowned and hurried off. I worried about him. It was there, nagging at me. When I was young my mother said, 'Look after Omar, you're the girl, you're the quiet, sensible one. Look after Omar.' And year in, year out, I covered for Omar. I sensed his weakness and looked out for Omar.