



# When Saira met Sarah

Edited by Anjum Malik  
and Sherry Ashworth



**Short Story Collection**  
by North-West Muslim and Jewish Writers



commonword

Crocus Books

When Saira Met Sarah: Short Stories

Short Stories by North West Muslim and Jewish Writers

When Saira Met Sarah: Short Stories

First published in 2014 by Crocus  
Crocus books are published by Commonword, 6 Mount Street,  
Manchester M2 5NS

Copyright © Commonword and the authors 2014

No part of this publication may be reproduced without written permission except in the case of brief extracts embodied in critical articles, reviews or lectures. For further information contact Commonword.

[admin@cultureword.org.uk](mailto:admin@cultureword.org.uk)  
[www.cultureword.org.uk](http://www.cultureword.org.uk)

Cover design by tyme design



## Contents

Preface

Introduction

The Dress - Eleanor Greene

It's Raining Men - Naveed Mir

Ways To Remember - Becky Prestwich

Peace - Naveed Mir

Conversation With My Mother - Eleanor Greene

The Shawl - Jacqueline Lewis

Disturbing The Peace - Mahila Neesa

Mrs Abrahams - Sherry Ashworth

Biographies

## **Preface**

Commonword is delighted to be able to publish *When Saira Met Sarah*, the culmination of 5 years work. When we set out to develop a project bringing Muslim and Jewish women together we did so without being entirely sure what to expect. The two communities often sit side by side in Manchester and the day to day interactions are rarely noticed, and even more rarely recorded. With *When Saira Met Sarah* we set out to acknowledge, foster and encourage these links with the hope that friendships and good writing would be two of the positive outcomes. As this publication demonstrates, participants embraced the challenges with energy and enthusiasm. The writing contained here is not all the writing that has been done, but serves as an example of *When Saira Met Sarah*'s many achievements, both literary and social.

We would like to extend our thanks to all the participants, to the key facilitators Anjum Malik and Sherry Ashworth, and to all those others who have supported the project in ways both big and small.

## INTRODUCTION

*Sherry Ashworth and Anjum Malik*

Words divide us, and words unite us. The rhetoric of politicians and sensationalist news reporting try to turn us into opposing tribes. But real writers know better. We know that sharing our stories show us how much we have in common.

Nowhere is this more true than among the Muslim and Jewish communities in Great Britain, and especially here in Manchester. Both traditions are derived from the same religious texts, both have sacred places in the Middle East, both cultures are family-orientated, and dare I say it, food orientated. Anjum and I certainly plead guilty to this, and it was over a shared meal that we began to plan *When Saira Met Sarah*.

We envisaged an anthology that would contain writing by both Jewish and Muslim women. We wanted to have a co-existence project contained in the pages of a book. We wondered if we could find some talented writers who could fill those pages.

With the help of *Commonword* we struck lucky, and are very proud to be able to introduce to you the writers in this book. Some are established, some are new. All are either of Muslim or Jewish heritage and of course all are women. Why just women? Because women are great communicators, and are in their element telling stories and sharing feelings. We believe they have something distinctive to offer when it comes to opening up the lives of our two communities.

Our stories range widely in tone and subject matter. There are questions of identity, of courage, of discovering that the other

is not so very different after all. There is humour, revolt and acceptance. But most of all there is the chance for readers to look into the Muslim and Jewish worlds, and to make up their own minds about the way we live. And to enjoy the stories we have produced.

Salaam, Shalom!

## THE DRESS

*by Eleanor Greene*

I'm standing in the changing room of a dressmaker's in Bury. OK, that's not strictly true. It's actually a wedding dressmaker and the dress I'm standing in is my own wedding dress. And I'm not actually in the changing room, which is, admittedly, larger than an ordinary dress shop changing room, but still, it's not large enough for my dress, which is so huge that it doesn't actually fit into the cubicle so I'm being sewn into it standing on a box in the centre of the shop facing a huge mirror. I feel like a doll in a music box.

My mother, Francine, is standing next to me, also on a box, and also wearing her dress for my wedding. Hers is a green chiffon number but the skirt needs lifting because it's three inches too long and the top half needs pinning because it's slightly too big for her. Of course it is, she's tiny and always has been a dress size smaller than me. This is something I'm never allowed to forget.

My dress is a pretty good copy of the original, which I'd first seen in the window of an overpriced dress shop on the Kings Road. It has a shot-silk silver strapless bodice with crystal-encrusted lace around the top and a slutty hook and eye system going on at the back. The skirt is a full-on major meringue of netting - layers upon layers of it, hitched up at the side with an enormous red rose. I'd only tried it on for a laugh, but once it was on I didn't want to take it off and had pranced around the shop in it posing and cavorting with myself: me saying hi to cousins whose names I don't remember; me doing the Hora; me being photographed unawares looking beautiful; me being tupp'd in it by Charlie (my soon-to-be) at the end of the evening. I love this dress. Though, to say that it's more appropriate for an 18th century costume drama than an actual wedding dress is not over-stating the case. In fact it's more akin to one of the prostitute's dresses in *Les Misérables*, which, in retrospect is probably why I chose it: I didn't feel like I



was getting married in it – I felt like I was going to a fancy-dress party where the theme was ‘wedding’ and it just so happened to be mine.

The only problem with the original dress - other than the obvious fact that it belied my unacknowledged aversion to getting married - was the price tag at £17,000. I had no idea that netting could be so expensive and there was no way I was about to pay that much even it was a superb dress, so, and I know this is naughty, I’d taken a few surreptitious photos and pinged them to my mother, who had missed the cry for help and, having a quirky sense of humour herself, had actually rather liked the look of it and gone and found Christine, an elegant woman of few words and who’d agreed to recreate the frock at a tenth of the cost. Christine had been pleased because she’d never done a Jewish wedding before, plus the dress seemed like it’d be a fun challenge to make.

I’ve been up and down a few times, travelling from London to Manchester and back again, and now we’re here for the final fitting. Christine can barely have been prepared for the double whammy of both me and my mother in her shop – me talking like a late bus, my weight plummeting as my fear grew (and consequently the dress getting smaller and smaller, the adjustments increasingly fiddly.) Also my mother, a whirlwind, lists unscrolling like orchestra scores inside her head, with her perfect nails painted blue or purple or sometimes yellow (today – blue.). Now it’s the two of us standing in the shop, in our dresses, on our boxes, in our pretend shoes, and me with a mock bunch of flowers which mum’s brought with ‘for effect’. We all agree (Christine included) that we look fabulous. Mum is clasping her knuckles together and has them tucked under her chin. She’s beaming, and possibly suppressing a joyful tear: her only daughter is getting married, finally.

Only, I’m suppressing different kinds of tears. Recently, unable to sleep, Charlie snoring on the off-beat, me staring into

the gloom, I've been trying to picture myself walking down the aisle, hearing the walking-in music, (some traditional kletzmer that Charlie chose) my dad grinning on my arm. It's a long walk to the chuppah and Charlie is there under it, beaming his smile-with-no-teeth, (even though I've suggested to him a million times that he looks better when he smiles naturally ie with teeth) and I'm finding the smile a bit irritating, even more so because we're getting married and I don't want to feel irritated with him on our wedding day, and about halfway down the aisle, mid inner-rant, the movie cuts to the bit where I'm under the chuppah and have to circle him 7 times. It's traditionally a romantic moment in the ceremony, laden with symbolic importance. I think I'm supposed to do it to signify the love that I'm going to wrap him up in, among other things, except that in the movie I begin to make the first circle but I get stuck. I take a step forward, and then a step to my right and I cannot go any further: the dress is so big and the chuppah is so small that between Charlie and my mother the dress has nowhere to go and it gets wedged between the two of them and no matter which way I turn bend or twist, like a badly chosen new sofa that won't fit through the front door, my dress won't fit through that gap between Charlie and my mother.

So then what happens is I simply cut the circling bit from the ceremony - I mean, I don't need to symbolically say that I'm going to encircle him with my love, do I, when I'm marrying the guy, because doesn't the very fact of me marrying him say it anyway? And then I think, ok, let's see what else we could cut? The prenuptial address from the Rabbi? (We've heard it all before and let's face it he barely knows us) The guests? (Honestly, I won't know half of them). Maybe we don't need the dinner bit afterwards either (I've never been to a kosher wedding when people don't secretly complain about the food, so why waste money on the moaning masses?), and come to think of it, I think, maybe we could just get married without any of the celebration bit at all and

spend the money on a house deposit instead? And I keep going like this, cutting bits out of the wedding, until all I'm left with is a mumbling rabbi, a smashed glass, and – of course – the dress, still resplendent in all its frothy glory even in its impoverished wedding circumstances. In fact, by the time I've finished editing the movie it's as if we've barely gotten married at all, and that's the point at which I'm finally able to go to sleep.

And then, when I wake up the morning I realize how silly I'm being. Obviously I should have chosen a different dress.

The thing is, it's not the dress that's the problem. It's me. But I haven't dared articulate that yet. How can I? The invites have gone out, the caterers are booked, the honeymoon is organized, everyone is Super Excited, and here I am, standing on a box in a dress shop in The Dress To End All Dresses! Basically, I'm on an express train to Married Life, destination 2.4 children, North Finchley, and the only way off is to jump which means unimaginable grief for everyone involved, not to mention the plenty of bruises and broken bones I'll inevitably suffer from the fall. Besides, what kind of crazy 35 year old fool jumps off a speeding marriage train and expects to survive let alone have any chance of ever getting onto it ever again?

I met Charlie through mutual friends three years ago. I'd been single for years and our friends - who were married – had thought we'd get on, not least because of our mutual love of the film Die Hard. On our first date it transpired that we actually liked the film for very different reasons – me because obviously Bruce Willis but also I do love the fact that while it's an action film it's also a really sweet buddy movie between Bruce and that black cop, and it's so clever because that buddy bit is smuggled in under the surface of the action stuff, almost so you don't notice it, and this is what marks it out as a film that's about something – about communication and ultimately love – and therefore not just a bog standard action movie. Charlie liked it because he “just

thought it was a good movie". I mean, 'just thought it was a good movie'? I should have seen he was totally wrong for me. But at the time I didn't think that, I thought, never mind, because he's hot, and I really hope he calls me again because it would be really nice to have a boyfriend. I know. I'm not proud of thinking that. But I was 32 and I'd been single for so long and I so desperately wanted marriage and babies and all the things my friends were having with all the accompanying trimmings, including Being Happy. And here was Charlie: handsome, clever, an accountant, a full head of hair, and he was keen! He was calling! And it was so nice. And he was so nice. And there was absolutely nothing wrong with him at all. It's just that, I realize now, I was going out with him for all the wrong reasons.

It wasn't just that I wanted a boyfriend. I also wanted to please my mother after all this time - years of disappointment and inappropriate boyfriends - too old, too young, too poor, and once, the wrong sex. Now here I was with a nice Jewish accountant who she thought was the bee's knees and it felt good to please my mother. So by the time 3 years had passed and I'd turned 34 and he asked me to marry him, OF COURSE I said 'Yes!'

But I hadn't banked on the sheer amount of stuff I'd have to deal with including everyone asking and wanting to know: Are you excited? How are you wearing your hair? Who are the caterers? Where are you doing it? What's the dress like? It's as if I'd suddenly entered a world that looked and felt exactly the same as the one I actually live in only in this new world the only thing anyone ever wanted to talk about was the wedding. I'm sure I used to talk about books and box sets and sometimes politics and the new Ottolenghi cook book but I'd been reduced to chignons and knickers. I lost all sense of my self. Worse still, the more people wanted to know how excited I was, the less I felt it and then I began to worry if I'd ever really felt it at all. But I wanted to feel it, and to be swept up in it, and so I thought, all I have to do is let myself get swept up and

the rest will follow. I'll get excited because I'll be 'being' excited. Like method acting – simple. So every time someone asked me a question like, 'Are you excited' I'd say 'Yes, I'm so very excited' and I'd show them *The Ring* and I'd talk about *The Hair* and discuss the pros and cons of which Caterers but beneath the surface I was questioning everything. There was a whole discussion going on inside my head, as if there were two inner Abi's listening to what was coming out of my mouth and commentating on it like they were a couple of gossipy old ladies eating scones in John Lewis. 'She says she's excited but do you believe her?/ Not at all, and she looks terrible - so thin!/ I know, she looks like a sparrow/ And why's she going on about her hair? She's never cared about her hair before?/ She's turned into a berk/ I know it's so boring. I wish she'd shut up...'. On and on, and I wished I'd shut up too but I couldn't shut the old lady Abi's up and I couldn't stop myself from acting out the charade. The train can't stop! The show must go on! So I'd squeal with delight and play the part, (including, on one occasion smiling conspiratorially with a religious auntie who thought I was still a virgin and wished me luck on the wedding night) because I didn't want to disappoint my fans. I was the star, and it was fun being the star, and all my family and friends wanted to be lit by my happy brightness. And I get that. I really do because that's how it should have been. It's just that I didn't want it. I wanted to be the star of a different show - one whose name I didn't know yet. But as I say. I couldn't articulate any of this, I didn't dare. So instead I simply stopped eating and believe me, that was hardly a choice because I love eating -- it's just that I had no appetite. I couldn't have swallowed anything even if I'd wanted to. I was in panic. But, amazingly, my head and my heart hadn't yet communicated with each other and as far as the conscious 'I' was concerned, I was getting married, and I was looking forward to it, even as, beneath the surface, my old lady Abis were practically choking on their scones.

So. Here we are in the shop, three weeks to go, me in my

dress and all my unacknowledged angst, and my mum in her green chiffon with Christine ferreting around her, pins on her wrist, nipping her in and I'm looking at mum's dress and thinking, hers is a far more sober affair than mine and I can't imagine she's thinking about dad tugging her in it. It's a formal dress for a formal occasion and I picture her standing under the chuppah waiting for me to arrive (tummy in, back straight), her greeting the cousins whose names I don't know, her dancing the hora with me after we've smashed the glass. Christine asks her to hold still while she pins the dress in and mum dutifully extends her graceful arms, her years as a dancer still a part of her DNA after all this time. I'm looking at my reflection in the large mirror with my boney shoulders and skinny arms – the only outward sign that there's anything wrong at all - and I'm desperately hoping she'll say something about it so that I can finally tell her how I'm feeling. But maybe she's deliberately choosing not to see, because she always comments on my weight, whether I'm thin or fat, how my stomach is looking, whether or not I should have that slice of cake or the extra roast potato. And it occurs to me that maybe she has her own reasons for wanting me to get married that aren't just about wearing a gorgeous dress and that she hasn't articulated to me.

In any case, it looks like the charade is going to continue for now because she seizes the moment to discuss the tablecloths. 'So Abi I'm thinking purple tablecloths. Not white. What d'you reckon?'

'Purple?'

'I know it sounds a bit whacky but I thought, white's a bit traditional, and since the room is white and we're going with a purple and pink lighting theme wouldn't it look a bit funkier and more like a party with coloured cloths? The caterers said they could get hold of some purple wine glasses too. Don't you think that'd be fun?'

‘Right. Purple? I can’t really see it mum but if you think so, then fine. Sounds great.’

‘And my dress will stand out brilliantly, don’t you think?’

‘Yeah. It’ll look amazing. Purple and green. So fun!’

I wonder if she thinks it’s weird that I’ve done literally nothing to prepare for this wedding – other than saying yes to Charlie in the first place. She found the venue (I agreed to it) she found the caterer (I agreed to it) she chose the menus (I agreed to them too) the wine (yes) the photographer (fine) the order of the day (whatever mum), the wording on the invites (yeah fine) and now, the tablecloths (I mean, purple? really?). Christine asks mum to turn a quarter to the right so that she can pin the bottom. Now mum is facing me and I’m still looking in the mirror, looking at her looking at me.

‘What do you think Abi? I look fantastic don’t I?’

I look at her reflection and I think, yeah, you’re 65 years old and you do look fantastic, and I love her so much for having the confidence to say it and I know that part of her confidence today is about her happiness that her only daughter is getting married, and this is something she’s wanted and craved since I was born. I want so much to please her, to be the daughter who’s sorted her life out, who falls in love with the guy, who, when the guy asks her to do him the honour of marrying him, she says ‘Yes please, let’s go!’ And I realize that maybe what mum wants is her chance to play out being the proud mum, who’s raised a daughter who’s good enough to be married, never mind her unruly hair and un-flat stomach and this bonkers dress: her daughter is getting married to a nice boy and that means that she and dad have done OK.

‘You look great mum. The dress is amazing. Have you lost weight?’

‘No darling. This is my figure. But yes. It’s a great dress, isn’t it? It’s from Betty Barclay.’

'Betty Barclay? I didn't realize they were still going?'

'Oh yes. Been going for years. Darling, have you bought the shoes for your dress yet?'

'Umm. Yes'

'Ooh. You didn't tell me.'

'I dunno mum. I just found some strappy ones in John Lewis. They'll do the job.'

'Right.'

'Yeah.'

Even in profile I can see the telling twitch in her left eye. The ending of that little interchange is unsatisfactory to both of us – 'Right' and 'Yeah'. Our conversations don't end this way unless there is something wrong. But I don't dare say anything. I let the silence stretch. But - she's Francine Michaels and she's my mother after all: she makes the first move.

'Darling you do look fantastically thin. You are eating sensibly aren't you?'

'Yes mum. Trying to. I mean. It's hard, with all the stress. You know?'

'Oh I know. The list keeps growing too! There's so much stuff to think about. We need to decide on the kippot, and whether to have them or not, and I don't know where we're going to get the chuppa poles from. I spoke to Charlie who wants to use his grandfather's tallit to go over it, which is fine, but we need to find out how big it is so that we can all definitely fit under it.'

'Right. Yes. I'll get that information from him.'

'Great. Thanks darling.'

A false start. We both fall silent again and my heart is jammering away. She knows. She must know. I've barely spoken – which is not like me and we both know she's filling the air with her conversation because that's what she does. We're so sensitive to each others conversational patterns that as much as I can't do the thought experiment of getting married, I can't bear the fake



conversation that's currently going on between us. On the phone it's been fine, but face-to-face? I think I'm going to burst with frustration. Christine asks her to turn another quarter so her back is now facing the mirror and I can't see her eyes. I think, it's got to be now or never.

'Mum?'

'Yes.'

'About the wedding.'

'Yes?'

I'm feeling...well. I'm feeling a bit nervous.'

'Well of course you are darling! It's completely normal. And don't worry about the tablecloths. I'm sorry I even asked you.'

'No mum it's not the tablecloths. I mean. Don't you think? You know, it's my wedding and I've not really done anything for it.'

'But that's why I'm here! To do it for you. You don't need to worry about anything.'

'But mum. I'm...You know. The food. The drink, the dancing, the band. I'm not. I'm just not that interested in any of it. Don't you think that's a bit weird?'

'Abi darling, what are you saying?'

'Mum. I'm thin because I'm not eating. Not because I'm dieting but because I can't actually eat. I feel sick all the time. I'm not sleeping. And I can't...'

Christine is still on the floor with pins in her mouth and I can only imagine what's she's thinking. I can't look at her. She's had to source the slutty hook and eyes from a rare supplier in Italy and she'd told us earlier that she'd had to practise sewing them in and making them sit perfectly in the silk – a fiddly business – for days. The netting is imported from Paris and it's the most complicated dress she's ever had to make. But now, shit. I'm starting to cry. I can feel it welling up. I plough on.

'...I can't imagine getting down the aisle. Every time I try

to picture it it's like the movie freezes. And. Also. I'm dreading the honeymoon.'

'You're dreading the honeymoon?'

'Yeah. But it's not just that. I. I just don't think...'

'Darling if you're dreading the honeymoon then go somewhere else.'

'No mum. It's not the place. It's him. I don't know if I can get married. I don't think I want to get married.'

It's such a massive relief to finally say the Words Of Truth that my nose starts bleeding. Mum can't see though because she's still got her back to me. I don't want this minor calamity to interrupt our conversation now that we're finally having it so I tilt my head back and cover my nose with my hand. Also, I really don't want to ruin the dress – oh god!

Of course, by now mum has turned around, 'You don't want to get married?!' but then she actually sees me and mid-sentence lets out a little scream. 'Oh bloody hell Abi you're having a nosebleed!' at which, Christine looks up and scurries off. I used to get nosebleeds as a child and had to have my nose cauterised to stop them, which was a successful operation so to see me now with blood streaming out of my nose and all over my hands must be quite a shock. There's so much blood and it's not stopping and it's now running down my face – still tilted backwards – and down my neck and into my hair. This dress fitting is turning into a bad horror movie. 'Don't get it on the bloody dress Abi!' and she puts a hand on my back and tilts me forwards so that I'm bending at a 90 degree angle (something you should never do with a nosebleed – because it encourages rather than impedes the blood flow.) Then she grabs the netting of the skirt tight around my legs so that the drips of blood can avoid it and go directly onto the floor. Christine meanwhile has gone off and grabbed a handful of toilet roll and now she's standing on the box that my mother's jumped off and is mopping my face up. The three of us are standing here. Me

with blood all over my face and holding toilet roll up my nose to staunch the flow and Christine stuffing it into my bodice to catch any recalcitrant drips. Mum is on her knees behind me, hugging the skirt to my legs and with her head burrowed in the French silk netting of the dress.

I can't see her face, and despite the fact that it's my legs she's hugging and not me, I still appreciate the physical contact. She's got me, and she's not going to let me fall.

'My love. Lots of girls go through this before they get married. It's completely normal to feel stressed and confused. And you know, it's a big decision, getting married. Of course you're having doubts.'

Doubts? Now that I've started I'm not going to be dissuaded. I have to make her hear me.

'Mum. Sometimes I think if I could just chop my head off or cut my stomach out I would feel better. And I convince myself I'm being rational. I don't think that's rational, is it, to want to chop my head off?

'Love. I've got some valium at home. We'll go to the doctors and get them to prescribe some beta-blockers which will slow down the heart rate and help you calm down. On the day we'll give you a slug of whisky if you're still feeling like this. Ok? Don't worry. It'll all be fine.'

Beta-blockers is what they give to old men who've had heart attacks. 'Mum. You're saying you want me to get married on valium, beta blockers and a slug of whisky? Isn't that what they give to girls who are being forced into arranged marriages in foreign countries to old men they don't know? I'll barely be there. I don't think I should be getting married like that. I don't think I should be getting married at all.'

At this point, Christine, who hasn't breathed during this whole exchange takes a large breath in now – though it sounds a bit more like a sob – and she slopes off to hide somewhere in

the back room. Thankfully the nosebleed has almost stopped, and mum releases my legs and we both sit down on the boxes, finally facing each other.

She looks at me now, testily, not unkind, but fear in her eyes, and she waits for me to look back at her. There are tears running down my cheeks. 'What are you saying here, Abi? Are you going to go through with it? Or not?'

I look at my mum. Her big green eyes. I know that whatever I tell her right now will be OK because she loves me and won't let me make the wrong decision. In that moment I trust her more than anyone in the world and I think of the green dress against the purple tablecloths and the photos of it that'll rest on the mantelpiece for ever more. The memories she'll have. The money she's spent so far. I think of the veil she's insisting on embroidering for me with the appliqué butterflies that she's been saving in a special box since I was 18. I think about the fact that all my mother has ever wanted for me is to get married. I think about wanting to be the little girl that makes mummy happy. I've been hoping for a love-wand to hit me on the head to allow me to love Charlie without any of the doubts that I've lived with about him since the first day we kissed. Why did I think that agreeing to marry him would clarify it at all? I realize now what a big mistake that was. But now that I've said it I can't unsay it. 'No. I can't do it. I can't.'

'Abi. There are three weeks to go. Everything is organised and paid for including the dress you are wearing. Are you sure of what you're saying?'

'I can't do it mum. I can't. I'm sorry. I just. I can't marry him.'

From nowhere, Christine arrives with two glasses of water and some more tissues. She's clearly been crying but she doesn't say a word. I'm still holding the stupid flowers. Christine almost bows her way out of the room like me and mum are royalty but doing a really bad, undignified job of it.

‘Abi. I think you’re in panic. You need to think about this carefully.’

At this point, I stop crying. I hold myself up, shoulders back, tummy in. ‘Mum. I’m telling you. I can’t do it. I can’t marry Charlie’.

And that’s it. Mum closes her eyes, takes a deep breath and lets it go. Then she looks at me and she says. ‘Well my girl. We’d better go and tell your father. And then you can tell Charlie. And then we’d better undo everything we’ve done.’

She stands up, unzips herself out of her dress and heads into the changing cubicle, leaving me staring at myself with a tissue stuck up my nose and in this beautiful dress that I’ll never get to wear. I look a state. I hope I’ve done the right thing. I’m terrified, devastated, and suddenly, really really hungry.

## IT'S RAINING MEN

*By Naveed Mir*

'It's raining men! Hallelujah - it's raining men!'

Frustrated, Laila threw a cushion at her radio. It fell onto the floor from her nightstand and switched off before The Weather Girls could belt out the next verse. It certainly had been raining men lately but unlike the song, Laila did not feel the urge to whoop for joy.

"They'll be here soon," called her mother from downstairs. "Are you dressed? Put on a bit of lippy as well."

Laila looked at the shalwar kameez her mother had lovingly ironed and placed onto her bed. She had wanted to wear her favourite cream one with the turquoise flowers embroidered on but her mother had insisted she wear one of the new ones Mumani Jaan had recently sent from Pakistan. Laila glanced at the calendar on her wall. She could hardly believe that it was already mid-July. Nearly every weekend since the beginning of June had been busy with suitors visiting Laila and her family in the hope that she would find someone who could be a potential marriage partner. But so far every meeting had been fruitless and each meeting had left her (and her mother) feeling more and more frustrated.

Laila undressed and pulled the maroon kameez over her head. The silver embroidery tickled the skin on her arms. It actually looked quite nice; she had always had the same taste as her Mumani when it came to clothes. She looked closely at her face in the mirror as she grabbed her make up bag and sighed. Thank goodness for miracle concealers, she thought, as she dabbed some dots under her eyes and smoothed them out with her finger. She lightly brushed on some mascara. Her eyes widened with each stroke of the brush; she looked more awake already. After applying a dab of lip gloss, she put away her make up bag. Done. She knew

her mum would frown when she saw her; she always wanted Laila to wear more make up when she was meeting someone.

Laila's parents had always been great about the whole marriage thing. While she was at university her mother had reminded her on more than one occasion that if she ever met anyone she must tell them. This didn't of course mean that she was to have a full blown relationship and start dating; it just meant that if she saw someone half decent she should tell her mother. Laila wasn't in to the whole dating scene anyway. The only relationship she wanted to have was with her future husband. The problem was finding one.

She glanced at the birthday cards which lined her window sill. Laila couldn't believe she was thirty three years old already and according to some people in her community 'this was too old for a girl to be unmarried.' But she was proud of the achievements of her life so far. She'd completed a degree in medicine and worked for six years before embarking on an incredible travelling adventure with her best friend. In her spare time she helped out at a local Scouts Group and had started teaching herself Arabic after attending a two week summer course last year. She had also helped to organise collections of items for the last two Aid Convoys to Syria. Her next venture was to actually go on one of these convoys. Her parents had not been too pleased about this one.

"Can't you just stay at home and help people here?" her mother had asked anxiously.

Laila had explained that very few female doctors put themselves forward for convoys and that she had heard that they were needed.

"Well, that's my point," her mother had said, "Why does my daughter have to be the one that wants to go to a war torn country?"

Laila always stayed quiet when her mother gave her one of her 'Convoy Talks.' The irony was that it was her parents who

had brought her up with the principles she now lived by; to serve and help others with the gifts you have been blessed with. But they still had a hard time when they sometimes saw her embarking on things they would never have dreamed of doing at her age.

“I don’t even know if I will be accepted yet, mum,” Laila found herself explaining again and again.

Her interview had taken place with one of the main organisers a few weeks ago and she was still waiting to hear from them. Initially she had naively thought that she would volunteer and be accepted, simple. But it didn’t work like that. The whole process was tough. You had to provide a detailed written statement about why you wanted to go, prove that you had helped with charitable work in the past and have an interview with one of the main organisers. The organiser had explained that this was so they could make sure people were going with the right intentions. Laila knew that her parents would never say no to her going, but her mother liked to remind her every now and again not to mention it to any of their visitors.

“It’s not the sort of thing people want their daughter-in-laws doing,” she had explained.

Laila knew that her mother was secretly hoping that she would meet the man of her dreams and forget all about it. Comments about her single status had never really bothered her and she was usually able to brush them off. Recently, however, Laila had started worrying. She would sometimes wake up in the middle of the night and unable to get back to sleep, would think about what the future held for her. Obviously she never told her parents about these feelings and would pretend that she was fine with staying single. Her mum was having none of it though. “Hye Allah, not get married, God forbid, Laila why do you say such things?”

A gust of wind blew through the open window and one of the cards fell onto the floor. Laila went to pick it up and smiled. It



was from an old family friend, Shazia. She bumped into her every now and again and was always met with the same question.

“Still not met anyone, aww - not to worry! I’m sure he’s out there.”

On one occasion she had even advised Laila that she might be ‘too fussy.’

“You know the older you get the fussier you become,” she had said.

Laila had bitten her tongue. Yes that was it, she was too fussy. She must remember to lower her expectations, what were they again...oh yes, she wanted someone normal! Shazia had sent her a Moonpig birthday card with a picture of her four children on the front, just to rub it in even further. She had tried to hide it from her mother but she had seen it.

“Look at them, beautiful MashaAllah,” she had said, “I can’t believe she’s the same age as you and has four children! Now, that IS an achievement!”

Her mother had not seen Shazia’s children recently. Laila had seen them, though. It was around Christmas time when she had popped into the Arndale Centre to buy some gifts for her colleagues. They had been pulling at the baubles on a tree in Debenhams while Shazia screamed at them like a banshee. Achievement was not a word she would use to describe them. Laila’s mum often reminded her how great it was that Shazia had met someone at University.

“You know,” she would tell Laila, “he just used to carry her books home for her from the library and she knew she wanted to marry him.”

“Lucky Shazia,” Laila would say and under her breath she would mutter something to the effect of ‘yeah right, carrying books from the library! It was a bit more than that, mother!’

Although the meetings with prospective husbands left her feeling somewhat annoyed, she couldn’t help but have a chuckle to herself

when she thought about them.

She smiled as she thought about The Religious One. Her mum had insisted that Mo, as he liked to be called, was respectful of his religion and prayed five times a day – this had been one of Laila’s conditions. The matchmaker had assured her of this. When Laila had eventually got round to talking to him he had confessed that he was not actually sure that he believed in God and preferred to call himself an agnostic. Laila had advised him that he should tell his mother this as she was informing the matchmakers in the community that her son was ‘a deeply religious boy.’ Her mum had seen her face after they had left and asked her what was wrong with Mo. Her reply of ‘he doesn’t believe in God’ did not receive a response.

Then there had been Poor Bloke. His mother had obviously taken a shine to Laila and was keen for her son to make a good impression. Every time Laila or her mother asked him a question, before he could answer his mother would speak for him. She reeled off his achievements in an attempt to impress Laila. Laila was impressed. But she would have been more impressed if he had been able to speak for himself. Even her mother had a giggle after that meeting.

If the boys were semi-normal the mothers sadly were not. What was it with Asian mothers? Too short, too tall, too educated, too dark, too independent, too old. These were some of the things that were said about her in the follow up conversations they had over the phone. After one of these conversations, Laila’s father had come up to her bedroom and given her a huge hug.

“You’re perfect,” he had whispered in her ear.

Later that evening he had words with her mother telling her to leave things be and that he was worried all this would have a negative effect on their daughter.

One of the best meetings had been The Meeting That Never Happened. Laila had been at the top of the stairs listening

to the conversation taking place at the door. The lady had the audacity to ask her mother, before she had even come inside, whether Laila was fair skinned! Her mother had been outraged and had shouted, "I'm not selling a car...asking me about the colour of her skin! This is my daughter we're talking about!" and she had slammed the door in the lady's face. Laila had laughed when she found out a few weeks later that that particular suitor had secretly married his black girlfriend!

Laila felt bad for her mother. Before every meeting her hopes would be raised that this could be the one. Her mother would spend the morning of the meeting preparing tasty delicacies that she could serve when the guests arrived. It always annoyed Laila how the ones that she did not like ate the most food!

She had made a decision last week after another failed meeting; today's meeting was to be the last one. She didn't think she could take any more of this week in and week out. Perhaps she was just not destined to get married. She had tried to sit down with her parents and explain this to them. Her father had been understanding and suggested that maybe she just needed a break from meeting people every week. Her mother on the other hand had not. Laila had stood her ground.

"Mum, it's not that I don't want to get married it's just that..." And then she had started crying. She didn't even know why. Perhaps it was all the stress of meeting after meeting and having her shortcomings pointed out by complete strangers. Or perhaps she was slowly beginning to accept that she might not ever get married and have a family of her own. Then her father had made the mistake of hugging her which had made her cry even more.

Laila's thoughts were interrupted when she heard a car door slam outside. They were here already and she had not finished getting ready. She quickly slipped on her shalwar.

"They're here," her mother called as she walked across the

hallway to answer the door. “Come downstairs in about twenty minutes – ok, beta?”

She heard her mother say Bismillah before she opened the door. Laila returned to her room. She wasn't sure how other people did these meetings or introductions or whatever people liked to call them but a precedent had been set since the first of these meetings in their house. Her mother would answer the door and invite the guests inside. Next her father would go into the living room and convey his salaam, he'd have a brief chat with the man but nothing formal. After about twenty minutes of sometimes very awkward conversation, her mother would go into the kitchen to make some tea. At this point Laila would come downstairs. They would all have some tea and a bite to eat together and then the mothers would continue chatting in another room leaving the children to talk. It was all a bit mundane and boring, especially if the two children had nothing in common, but it had to be done. Laila took a deep breath and made her way downstairs 'Bismillah,' she whispered.

\*\*\*\*\*

That evening Laila lay on her bed thinking about how the meeting had gone. She smiled to herself. It had gone surprisingly well. She had talked to Qasim for nearly two hours. The time had flown by and they realised they had a lot in common. Laila had felt comfortable around him. There had been something there. A spark perhaps? She didn't know how to describe it but there had definitely been something. She had been unable to stop the huge grin from spreading across her face when he had asked if she would like his phone number. Even her mother had given her arm a gentle squeeze as they bid their guests farewell. Despite all this Laila did not want to become too hopeful.

There was the follow-up conversation to get through ...  
Beep beep! Laila's phone alerted her of a new email. It was from the Aid Convoy.

"Bismillah, Bismillah," she whispered to herself, "God, if this is good for me, please let it happen!"

She couldn't quite believe it when she read that she had been accepted to go on the Convoy. The words read: 'we would be honoured if you were to accompany us.'

The email provided a list of names of other people that had also been accepted. Laila skimmed the list, eager to find out if any other females were going. She stopped suddenly, catching her breath.

Qasim Daar she read. No, it couldn't be. It couldn't be. Her phone beeped again. This time it was a text.

'See you on the Convoy' he said.

Laila beamed. She would allow herself to be hopeful.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Beta* = Son/daughter

*Bismillah* = 'In the name of God'

*Hye Allah* = Oh dear God!

*Jaan* = Term used for respect, meaning dear

*MashaAllah* = As God willed

*Mumani* = Auntie (wife of maternal uncle)

*Salaam* = Greetings of Peace

*Shalwar Kameez* = Traditional Pakistani clothing consisting of a long tunic and trousers

## WAYS TO REMEMBER

*by Becky Prestwich*

When I was a little girl and I couldn't sleep, it was my Father who would come to me. He'd run his fingers through my hair and murmur, "Shoshana, my Shoshana". I thought it was just a pet name, invented for a sleepless child. My name was Rosa. Even at the end, my Mum only ever called me Rosa. Growing up, whenever a kind stranger asked after my black curls, my dark brown eyes, my Mum would say there was Welsh blood – on my Father's side. I sometimes asked about my Welsh Granny – she'd died, was all they told me. There was us. Only us. That was family enough – just the three of us. It was only later, much later, that I found out about my mother's brothers and sisters, the Aunties and Uncles I would have had, had they not grown up to be corpses instead.

We had a quiet, gentle life. My Mum went to Church occasionally – to the Christening of a neighbour's baby or with a friend who had been roped into flower arranging. She read the Parish magazine and sent me in with tin cans for the harvest festival. She never mentioned G-d. At my first wedding, I noticed that Dad kept his eyes open and didn't kneel for the Lord's Prayer, but I didn't think anything of it. A Leftie intellectual – why would he feel the need to pray? It was at Mum's funeral that it began to unravel. In the crematorium, all of a sudden, my father got down on his knees and began to pray: Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei raba b'alma di v'ra khir'utei, v'yamlikh malkhutei b'hayeikhon u-v'yomeikhon u-v'hayeit d'khol beit yisrael, ba-agala u-vi-z'mon kariv v'imru amen. The women from Mum's knitting her circle, the man she'd been a P.A to for over thirty years looked at him in astonishment. And so did I. He may as well have been speaking in tongues. I put my arm on his shoulder and asked him to quiet but still he prayed: Y'hei sh'mei raba m'varakh l'alam u-l'almei

almaya. Nobody came back to the house with us. Just he and I sitting amongst plates piled high with egg mayonnaise sandwiches and M+S vegetable bites. It was then he told me.

My Mother and Father were holocaust survivors. They were born in a small city in Poland with a name I still can't pronounce. Oleszyce. I looked it up on a map. When the Germans came to Poland they were moved to a neighbouring town. To the Jewish Ghetto. My Mother and Father were teenagers. School friends. Not yet in love. In 1943, all the Jews in the Ghetto were rounded up. When they boarded the cattle train, they knew where they were going. People started to pull out the barbed wires and jump through the tiny windows. The SS sat on the roof of the train and shot, but people still jumped. My Mother was the oldest of eight children. Her father shouted at her to jump, "You oldest try", he shouted, "Maybe somebody will survive". Her parents – my Grandparents – stayed with the smaller children but my Mum jumped and ran, hiding amongst corpses in the snow. My Father was on that train too. They were two people who survived, when so many people died. The first thing my Mother did was take off her yellow star. She took it off and promised herself she would never, ever wear a star again.

When my Father told me, a part of me was angry. A part of me was sad. He told me about this brave, fearless young woman and I didn't recognise my tiny Mother, baking Victoria sponge in our kitchen. I felt like I had been robbed.

My Father changed after that. He insisted on moving to a Jewish Care Home. He wanted to be with his own, he said. Once, I visited and the two old women next to him were chattering in Yiddish. I didn't recognise it. "I didn't know there were any Germans living here," I said. "That's Yiddish," my Father told me, gently. I felt angry and embarrassed. One Friday afternoon, I came to visit and the Rabbi was sitting beside him. He was in tears. I could hear an accent I didn't recognise in his voice. I shouted at

her. "He's an old man, and you're confusing him", I told her, "this isn't who he is". When my Dad passed away he was cremated, like my Mum, but the Rabbi came to do the blessing. I couldn't look her in the eye.

Soon after Dad died, I met David. I'd been married before, in my early thirties, to a nice non-descript man who wasn't easily bored. We spent nine uneventful years together before slipping quietly into divorce. I don't know if it was Dad dying that made me sign up for the dating site. It just felt like the time was right. Professional woman, 63, likes reading, walking and afternoons in the pub would like to meet a man with similar interests.

David had nice eyes, a well-cut shirt and an interesting job. I liked him. For our first date, we met in a bar his daughter recommended. After that, we went to art galleries and restaurants. He suggested the fun-fair once. "I'm not eighteen anymore", I told him. "All right, then, how about a football match?" he said. He told me he was Spurs fan, for his sins, and promised to look after me if it got too rowdy. As we walked up from the Tube station, he draped his son's old football scarf around me. He held my hand and I felt a knot of excitement.

It was in the stands that the chanting started. I didn't know what they were saying at first, "Yid army, Yid army, Yid army". David pumped his fist in the air like a teenager at a rock concert. And then I recognised it. That word. I felt hot and short of breath. Like when you're a child and your friends are laughing and you know it's you that they're laughing at but you have no idea why. I felt like I couldn't breathe. I threw the scarf to the floor and pushed out. "Where are you going?" he asked me. "I'm Jewish", I shouted. It was the first time I had said those words out loud. The first time they had meant anything. My Mum had sworn that her children would never grow up to wear a star. And here I was, hot and angry with a man who didn't know me, shouting a word I knew was ugly. I ran down the stairs, leaving the chant behind me. I didn't



expect him to follow.

In the pub afterwards, David said, "You didn't tell me you were Jewish". I looked down. "I didn't think it mattered." "No," he said, "it's just - so am I". "And you don't mind - that word?" He shrugged, "I grew up Spurs. We're a Jewish club: that's us." I almost told him there and then - about my parents: the long walk in the snow, the years of Christmas trees and Harvest Festivals, my imaginary Welsh Granny. But suddenly, the pub was full: grown men shouting and rubbing each other's shaved heads. Two Orthodox Jews walked past, one looking like every cartoon of a Rabbi you have ever seen. The men with their shaved heads turned to them, "Yiddo, Yiddo," they shouted, smiling. The two men stopped in the doorway and grinned. "You only see lads like them on a Sunday but see? They love it," David said. And he was right. Those two men were smiling - but I saw something else as well. A man with dark hair and little round glasses, a different cartoon of a Jew, putting his hand on his young son's shoulder and saying, "We don't use that word". "Not all the Jews here can like it," I said. "I suppose not," David said, "I'm sorry, that you were offended." And then he smiled, that smile, "My Mum and Dad would have been well chuffed that I'd finally found a nice Jewish girl," he said. He put his hand in mine.

I looked up at the men wearing their Tzitut and their Spurs shirts - soaking up the chant - and at the father steering his son gently out and away from it. I thought about my Mum, promising her unborn children that they would never feel scared or ashamed and of my father on his knees, saying the words to a prayer he thought he'd long forgotten. "I think mine would have been as well," I said.

PEACE  
*by Naveed Mir*

Nabeela's heart pounded loudly in her chest. 'I shouldn't be here, I shouldn't be here...' She kept repeating these words to herself in her head, in the hope that if she said them enough times she would magically be transported back home. She looked around at the other people in her group. They all looked so focussed and most of their lips were moving in prayer. Some had tears streaming down their faces. Nabeela felt ashamed.

The last three weeks had been a blur for her. It had all started one Friday evening when she was out celebrating Chris's birthday. She had received a text from her brother Tariq. It didn't say much. Tariq was a man of few words. 'Hajj???' he had written. Nabeela had ignored the text thinking he had sent it to her by mistake and had carried on partying the night away. Now as she walked towards The Holy Mosque in Makkah she could not believe that three weeks ago she had been out clubbing and was now about to begin her pilgrimage. This was something most people around her had probably been longing for their whole lives. They looked eager and prepared, ready to embark on this incredible journey. Nabeela was not ready. Her legs began to feel heavy, sweat trickled down her forehead and her heart continued to pound in her chest. It wasn't as if this was her first time in a new place. She had travelled before, often by herself, but she had never experienced nervousness like this.

"Tariq..." She grabbed her brother's arm. He didn't notice. Nabeela looked up at his face. He was smiling and crying at the same time and she thought he had never looked more handsome.

"Ya Hujjaj...muzdahim." shouted a voice belonging to a policeman.

Nabeela had no idea what he had just said but was thankful that whatever it meant had made the crowd stop moving.

“It’s too busy,” said Tariq. “We’ll have to wait for a bit before we can go in. Dadee Jaan, sit down here and rest your legs.” Nabeela smiled at Tariq. She was grateful he was there with them. Without him translating Arabic for her she would have felt even more lost than she did. Although she had never told him, she thought her brother was amazing. At university he had developed more of an interest in his religion and had decided that after graduating he would study Arabic. Nabeela never thought he’d see it through but she was wrong. After graduating he had worked his socks off and saved enough money to go and study at an Institute in Egypt which specialised in teaching foreign students. Nabeela and her parents had visited him there and she remembered he had wept as he led them in prayer one time.

“Nothing compares to actually understanding the verses of the Quran without the need for a translation,” he had told Nabeela when she’d asked him later why he had cried.

Her parents were so proud of him and loved telling people that not only could he speak his mother tongue, Urdu and had graduated with a First in English Literature - he could also speak Arabic. Nabeela was proud of him too. Upon his return he had offered to teach her some basic Arabic numerous times but as with anything remotely religious she had made up an excuse not to do it. She had put it in her ‘things to do when I’m older’ box.

Nabeela looked over at her Dadee Jaan. She looked so frail; the rest would do her good. She took out a bottle of water from her bag and offered it to her. She took it gratefully and made some room for Nabeela to sit next to her. She sat down, breathed deeply and closed her eyes. It wasn’t that Nabeela hadn’t wanted to perform the pilgrimage, it was just that she hadn’t wanted to do it this year or perhaps for another say twenty years! She had a life plan which involved partying hard for another few years, getting a good job, travelling, marriage and kids and then of course she would perform Hajj when she was older. In any

case she had wanted to sort herself out first before she made this journey. But it had just happened and now here she was. When she had met people who were going to perform the pilgrimage she had always thought that they looked serene. They had amended their worldly affairs as one was supposed to and had spent some time focussing on God and their spirituality. Nabeela did pray now and again, usually before an exam. And she made sure that each year in Ramadhan she read a small portion of the Quran using an English translation but she wasn't where she wanted to be before she made this journey. She hadn't been ready. Actually, if she was completely honest she hadn't wanted to make those changes in her life right now.

When she thought about it now, she had never actually said 'yes' to the offer of going this year. It just happened and Nabeela had gone along with it. Her Dadee had wanted to perform Hajj for a number of years and finally this year Tariq, who had always wanted to perform Hajj young, had agreed to accompany her. The original Hajj group from their family had consisted of Pupo Asia. She had performed Hajj before and had agreed to accompany them so that she could help her mother with things like using the bathroom. Unfortunately, Pupo Asia had slipped and fallen over and badly twisted her ankle. Hajj for her was out of the question. There had been two days of panic in the family. There was no way that Tariq would be able to take care of Dadee by himself but not going meant that they would lose the substantial deposit they had already paid. The Hajj operator had finally agreed that someone could go in Pupo Asia's place. It had never even crossed Nabeela's mind that she would be considered. However, as she was out partying that Friday night, her family had had a meeting. Zara had recently learnt she was pregnant so she couldn't go. Sofia had her finals at university and was so busy revising she barely came up for air. Pupo Saima was taking care of her sick mother in law. So that left Nabeela.

Everybody knew that Nabeela was a bit of a party animal and surprisingly to Nabeela they just left her to it. About a week before they had left she had heard her parents talking and her dad had suggested that 'it might even do her some good.' On a normal day Nabeela would have stormed into their room, interrupted their conversation and demanded to know what exactly he meant by 'it might do her some good.' But since the decision had been made that she was to accompany her grandmother and brother on their Hajj trip, Nabeela had not felt the urge to be argumentative. Tariq had given her a few books which she had tried to read but she could not quite get her head around the rites they would be performing. She knew she had to walk around the Kabah seven times and drink the holy water Zamzam. Or was she meant to walk between the two hills Safa and Marwa first? What prayer was she meant to recite when she stoned the pillars representing the devil that had tried to tempt Prophet Abraham? The more she read the more confused she felt. She had even started having dreams that she had performed the rites incorrectly and would wake up in a panic, sweating. It hadn't been her choice to go but now that she was going she wanted to make sure she did everything properly. Nabeela had spoken to Tariq about her fears. He had told her not to worry and that it would all make sense once they were actually there.

Unlike Nabeela, Tariq had been preparing for this trip for some time and knew the Hajj rites inside out. When she would often sneak home in the early hours of the morning, she would find that he was still awake reading the Quran and praying. He never said anything to her though; perhaps he felt she would find God in her own time as he had. Before leaving he had made an effort to visit all the family and his friends to ask them to forgive him if he had wronged them in any way. Nabeela had wanted to tell her friends she was going, although she was a little worried what their reaction might be. But when she expressed her fears to

Tariq, he had encouraged her to tell them.. She decided she should speak to Chris first.

Nabeela's parents had known Chris's family since they had moved to England from Pakistan over forty years ago. They always spoke highly of his dad who had helped them when they had first arrived. Nabeela's dad always told her that you didn't get people like that anymore. Nabeela and Chris had had grown up on the same street and had attended the same primary school and high school. However, now that they were older her parents had expressed concerns about Nabeela's close friendship with Chris. Her mother had tried to ask her once whether they were having a relationship and then reminded her that this was not something good Muslim girls did. Much to her mother's annoyance, Nabeela had burst out laughing.

In recent months however their friendship had changed and Nabeela felt a little distant from him. He had started asking her more and more questions about her religion but not in an inquisitive way like he used to. Just a few weeks ago in front of a large group of people he told her she didn't know what she was missing by not having a drink and had even said, "Go on, just a sip." Nabeela had left early that night disappointed that a friend who had always respected her beliefs could attempt to embarrass her like this in front of everybody.

Another time when there was a debate in the news about a young girl who wanted to wear a headscarf to school he had told her he was glad she wasn't 'that sort of Muslim.' She had asked him what he meant by that comment but he had simply brushed it aside. Nicola, a friend he had made at work, had recently started accompanying them on their nights out. She was the sort of person who had an opinion about everything and insisted on everyone hearing about it. One night when they had been out Nabeela had caught Chris staring at her. From a distance Nicola had noticed also. She had caught Nabeela's eye and had pointed at Chris then at

her and winked. Nabeela had blushed, embarrassed that someone else had noticed what she had suspected for some time. Anyway she had been glad that Nicola wasn't there when she decided to tell Chris she was going to perform Hajj.

Chris managed a 'Wow' when she told him she was going. And then went quiet.

"What is it?" Nabeela had asked him.

"Nothing. I mean performing a pilgrimage is a huge deal. I thought you had to be really religious to go and you know be like a real Muslim. I mean, do you really even believe in all that?"

Nabeela didn't know what to say. If she was honest with herself there were times she didn't feel like a real Muslim. This was especially the case on a Friday night when everyone around her fell over themselves drunk and patted her on the back for always being the reliable designated driver. That awful feeling returned in the pit of her stomach. He was right in a way. She wasn't religious and religious people performed pilgrimages, right?

"Nabeela..." Chris had started to say, but at that moment Nicola had turned up.

"Oooh, you two look like you're having a deep and meaningful," she had said nudging Nabeela.

"Nabeela was just telling me that she's going to perform a pilgrimage, Hajj," Chris said.

"Really?!" Nicola exclaimed, "Is that where you bathe in the holy river?"

"No, that's Hinduism. I'm Muslim," Nabeela said, annoyed that someone she had been seeing socially for the past few months would not know this important detail about her.

"Muslim? Really? I thought Muslims were..." Chris kicked her under the table. "So when you get back and we go out, will you be wearing a burka?" laughed Nicola. "I bet you could hide loads of stuff under there, they're huge! As long as it's not a bomb!"

Nicola carried on laughing at her own jokes. Chris looked

uncomfortable. Nabeela caught his eye but he didn't say anything. She felt let down that he hadn't defended her. She left soon afterwards. That had not gone how she had planned.

When she had told her old friend Rehana from mosque her initial reaction had been one of surprise.

'You...Hajj...really?'

Then she had realised what she had said and told her how great it was and had asked her to pray for her while she was there. After that Nabeela had decided that she would not tell anyone she was going. She didn't want to feel worse than she already did. Perhaps she would just update her Facebook status when she was there.

'Nabeela Khan is at Kabah, Makkah.'

That would be one way of telling everyone she was performing Hajj.

Nabeela looked around. The crowds were growing. Every now and again she would be shoved a little as the people at the back of the crowd would push from behind, urging people to walk forward. At this point the same policeman would shout out something in Arabic at which the crowd would stop pushing. There were people of all nationalities and she heard so many different languages being spoken. She saw a large group of women dressed in white and wearing green scarves. It was almost like a uniform. The man standing at the front of the group held a huge flag, Malaysian Nabeela thought. Another group of women had the Nigerian flag taped on their backs. They moved in a long line holding onto one another from behind. The men of course were all dressed in two pieces of white cloth. There was no way of telling the rich from the poor; everybody looked the same. Every now and then someone would shout out, 'Labbaik Allah-huma labbaik' and the whole crowd would repeat after them 'Labbaik Allah-huma labbaik.' These were words everybody there could say. It didn't matter where they were from or what language they



spoke, they all recognised this call.

Nabeela fiddled with the scarf on her head. She kept forgetting she had it on and when she remembered would check that it hadn't slipped, not that this would be possible considering how many safety pins she had in it. She looked over at Tariq. His lips were still moving hurriedly in prayer and she wondered what he might be praying for. Nabeela wanted to say a prayer as well but didn't know what to say. She didn't want to read a prayer from the sheet of paper that the leader of their Hajj group had handed out to them while they waited for what seemed like endless hours at Jeddah airport. She wanted to speak to God but it had been so long since she had done so that she didn't know how to begin. She sighed. 'I shouldn't be here,' she thought again.

Someone shoved Nabeela from behind and some books in her rucksack dug into her back. There was no point saying anything, being shoved now and again was to be expected when you were on a pilgrimage with three million other people. She removed the rucksack from her back and took out the books that were in there. She had not brought many, most of them had been the ones that Tariq had given her. Nabeela put the books back in her bag one by one reading the titles 'Hajj – The Journey of a Lifetime,' 'A – Z of Hajj.' She went to put the next one in her bag and stopped. It had been the one her Mamu had given her. He had handed it to her at the airport. She hadn't really wanted to take it; the last thing she needed was another book she wasn't going to read and her rucksack was heavy enough as it was. But she had taken it enthusiastically and hugged her Mamu tightly. He had whispered a prayer in Arabic into her ear. Nabeela's Mamu had performed Hajj the previous year and everyone in the family had commented on how he had changed for the better since he had returned. The sign of an accepted Hajj they all said. She wondered what they would say about her when she came back. The book he had given her had a hard red cover and stood out from the rest of

the books she had bought with her. She searched for the title on the cover. It was in Arabic and she struggled to read the fancy font it was written in. She had learnt how to read Arabic at the mosque when she was younger but that was now forgotten. She opened the book, looking for a translation in the inside cover but all she could see was Arabic script! What's the point of that, she thought? I can hardly read it, let alone understand it. She felt annoyed at herself and at her Mamu. Why on earth would he give her a book he clearly knew she wouldn't be able to understand? She was about to put the book into her bag when she saw a post-it note poking out of one of the pages. She turned to the page and saw that her Mamu had translated and highlighted a few sentences. She read the first few.

'Above all, remember that God invited you to come here; you are His guest. You should feel honoured that He chose you from amongst His servants to make the journey this year.'

Nabeela read the sentences a few times until her eyes filled up with tears and the words on the page became blurry. She had been invited. She had been invited.

'Labbaik Allahuma Labbaik.' The crowd started moving. Tariq helped Dadee stand up and they all started walking slowly towards the mosque. Nabeela held the book tightly in her hand, her index finger still on the page with the translated sentences. As they got closer to the mosque Nabeela gasped as she finally saw it in all its grandeur. This was the mosque that housed the Kabah, the holiest site in Islam and she - Nabeela - had been chosen to see it. Her heart started pounding again. But this time it was not out of shame.

"Lower your gaze when you walk into the mosque," Tariq advised. "Don't look at the Kabah straight away. Remember, the first prayer you make when you see it is accepted."

They walked for a few more minutes, Tariq leading the way, their Dadee behind him and Nabeela behind her. They

stopped quite suddenly and she knew they must now be standing in front of the Kabah. Out of the corner of her eye she could see that Tariq already had his hands raised in prayer.

Nabeela looked up slowly. It took her breath away. She had seen it so many times in pictures on the calendar her parents had hung up in their kitchen but there was something indescribable about seeing the Kabah in real life. She could not take her eyes off this ancient cubed shaped building. All the doubts she had been having a few minutes ago had disappeared. She felt stillness in her heart. This was where she was meant to be. Her eyes filled with tears and for the first time since she had started this journey she knew exactly what to do.

Nabeela prostrated and as her forehead touched the ground she felt it.

Peace.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Dadee Jaan* = Grandmother

*Hajj* = Muslim Pilgrimage to Makkah

*Jaan* = Term used for respect meaning dear

*Kabah* = Cube shaped building Muslims believe was built by prophet Abraham and his son Prophet Ishmael

*Labbaik Allah- huma Labbaik* = Meaning 'We are here at your service, O Lord.' Pilgrims recite this prayer before starting their pilgrimage, asserting that they are about to perform the Pilgrimage for God.

*Mamu* = Maternal Uncle

*Pupo* = Paternal Auntie

*Ramadhan* = Muslim holy month of fasting

*Safa & Marwa* = Two hills close to the Kabah which Muslims are required to walk between as part of their pilgrimage.

*Zamzam* = Reference to the water which flows from an ancient well named zamzam adjacent to the Kabah.

## CONVERSATION WITH MY MOTHER

*by Eleanor Greene*

Hi Mum!

Where are you darling?

I'm in Paperchase. I'm getting the stuff for dad's party. Do you need poppers?

Streamers? Sparkly pipe cleaners?

What would the pipe cleaners be for?

I dunno, maybe you could ask the guests to make shapes out of them? Be a bit quirky I suppose.

Yes. Good idea. Thanks. And yes to the poppers and streamers too. So. What did you do this weekend?

I went to Bristol to see Zoe and Louise.

Oh right...

Yeah, we went for a long walk in the country there.

You went to Bristol. To go for a walk. With Zoe and Louise?

Yeah. It was lovely.

Who are Zoe and Louise?

You know. From Kibbutz, and then Louise lived with me in Manchester when she did her teacher training.

Oh yes, Louise. And Zoe?

Well Zoe's like, y'know, Zoe Louise and Stef. That gang?

Right. I didn't realize you were quite so friendly with them.

Well I am, and it was lovely. And now I'm back. Mum, do you want me to make biscuits or a cake for the party?

No, don't worry darling and anyway how would you carry them on the train from London? But it's lovely of you to offer. I'll save the icing of the cake for when you get here if you want to do something.

Perfect. I'd like that. Mum, what have you got dad for his

birthday?

Oh I don't know - some Ipod thing - you know what he's like with gadgets.

How funny! I got him some iTunes vouchers – perfect. And who's coming?

Oh, the usual crowd. Helen and Brian can't come which is probably good 'cause you know what they're like. Can we go back to the weekend in Bristol?

What?

You went for a walk.

What do you mean you know what they're like? I like Helen and Brian.

Oh you know what I mean. Helen and Brian. Brian and Helen. They're kosher and won't eat in the house. Anyway stop avoiding. I want to know. You went for a walk in Bristol in January in the rain with Zoe and Louise?

Yes.

But you don't even like walking?

Mum how can you say I don't like walking? I walk all the time!

Do you?

Yes! Mum. It's no big deal. I went for a walk. It was just a walk. We don't need to talk about it. Tell me what else you've been up to. What are you reading at the moment and also I didn't realize Helen and Brian were so kosher they wouldn't eat in your home?

Yes they've been like that for a while now. But we don't need to talk about me.

Hang on, mum - I'm just paying for the cards and stuff.

Oh right. And you got the poppers and the streamers?

Yep. Got them.

Danielle. Is there something you're not telling me?

Hang on a sec.

Come on, stop avoiding. What are you not telling me?  
And did you get the sparkly pipe cleaners after all?

Yep. Got the sparkly things. Like what?

Well, is there someone you're not telling me about?

Mum.

Well?

Well. There might be, but if I'm not telling you it means I  
don't want to tell you about them!

Well that's great. I'm so happy. Are you happy?

Yes mum.

Ok. Well that's great and I won't ask you about it. It's  
none of my business and I don't need to know.

Thanks, mum. Ok. Well it was good to talk to you.

Yes, and you too darling. But look I know it's not my  
business and you don't have to tell me any details or anything  
about it but I just want to ask one thing.

Ok mum.

Is it a woman?

No!!

Oh thank God. Is he married?

No, he's not married mum.

Is he really old?

No!

Well what is it then? Why don't you want to tell me  
about him?

Well. He's not Jewish.

Oh that. That doesn't matter!

It doesn't? Oh. Ok. That's good.

Oh I'm so happy. As long as you're happy. I think it's  
great.

Thanks mum. I am happy. He's brilliant.

Darling I'm so happy you're not afraid to have another  
relationship.

I know mum. It's good. It's going slowly but it's good.  
Oh great. Well I won't ask you any more about it - you  
just tell me when you're ready to talk about it.

Thanks mum. I will. I'm glad you know now.

I know.

Love you.

Love you too. Ok. Gotta go now mum. It's raining.

OK darling.

Ok, bye.

Danielle?

Yes.

Can I just ask one more thing?

Yes.

What's his name?

Mum?

What?

I thought you weren't going to ask any more questions?

Well now I know he exists I might as well know his  
name.

Demetri. His name's Demetri.

Demetri? And what does he do?

Mum!

Ok. Ok. But you can't just leave me hanging here!

Ok. He's an academic. And a musician. He's in a band,  
that's why I went to Bristol. To see him play.

A musician. He's in a band. And he's called Demetri.

Yes mum.

Right.

What?

Nothing. Nothing. Are you happy?

Yes, but. What mum?

Nothing! I'm not saying anything. You're going out with  
Demitri from the band. And we're not talking about it.

Mum he's an academic too. Shakespeare. He does Shakespeare stuff.

Lovely. That's lovely. And. He's in a band. I'm not saying another word.

Mum?

Bye darling.

Bye mum.



THE SHAWL  
*By Jacqueline Lewis*

Naomi slumped into the chair by her daughter's bed, letting out a soft sigh. Her eyelids flickered, she stretched out her toes, and snored, a guttural purr.

The ward was at its quietest. The children all slept, while their monitors flashed and oxygen masks hissed. Soft-shoed nurses kept watch on their charges but did their best not to disturb their sleep, except when essential. One young nurse pushed back her hijab, to absent-mindedly rub her ears, as she watched the screens at the central desk.

Opposite Naomi, Zaina surveyed the ward from the chair by her granddaughter's bed. Sleep eluded her, due to her worries about the child's health. She tried to remind herself of the surgeon's words, that the heart operation had gone very well, the dangerous period had passed, but what if.....? She gazed for the hundredth time at the tiny girl's sleeping form. She appeared perfect and precious but so fragile! The grandmother's neck and low back were aching. She shifted her weight onto her right hip once again and waited for the morning to come.

She watched the doctor, who she had heard called Adam, wander onto the ward. He seemed much too young to have such a responsible position. She also felt that he would benefit from a good shave and wearing smarter clothes. He looked as though he had slept in them, but perhaps that was the truth? She chided herself because surely all that mattered was his ability and dedication. Here he was, checking on the children in the middle of the night and he would be back again early in the morning. How could he do this? When did he ever sleep?

Zaina watched him greet the young nurse at the desk, while nibbling on a dry biscuit which he had swiped from a packet on her desk. She looked up at him with a smile.

“Can’t you sleep, doctor? You know we’ll call you if we’re worried!”

“No, it’s not a problem! I just wanted to check the post-op kids again.”

“Shall I come with you?” she said, stretching across the desk to reach for her clip board.

“No, it’s fine! I won’t be long. I’ll just grab another biscuit, to keep me going!”

Zaina fixed her eyes on him as he made his way efficiently up one side of the ward and down the other, examining a monitor here and a chart there but she knew he was predominantly assessing the sleeping children, counting their breathing rate to himself, looking for flared nostrils, or inward tugging of soft skin at the base of their necks. She had heard him explain that to a new nurse the other day. He lingered for several minutes at the side of the bed opposite to where she was sitting. The mother of the observed child instinctively wakened and sat wide-eyed at the edge of her chair. One of the nurses hurried over to assist him. However, Adam was already striding on to the next bed, leaving in his wake the young mother, who now needed whispered reassurance from the kindly nurse. Zaina felt for her.

Day dawned yellow, around the edges of the vertical blinds. Naomi woke to the sounds of the ward coming to life. Her neck felt so stiff from sleeping in the chair and she had the beginnings of a headache, encircling her head like a vice. She used her finger tips to massage the back of her neck. She turned her head and registered her daughter, Rebecca, reclining against her piled up pillows, still sleeping soundly.

The little girl had a drip running into the back of her left hand, which was loosely bandaged, and her oxygen mask was slightly askew. Naomi thought that she appeared to be breathing normally. Through long experience, she had become adept at recognising the signs of her daughter’s setbacks. Naomi gently

pulled the mask back into position and then sat back to survey the ward. She saw that the nurses were getting busy to complete their observations before handing over to the day staff. A young boy, a few beds down, was kicking his legs rhythmically, trying to escape the confines of his sheet and blanket. "Naughty boy!" she thought, "Perhaps he's a similar age to my Jonathan?"

Breakfast was wheeled in on a trolley by an auxiliary and served at a central table for those children who were close to being discharged and onto bedside tables for the remainder. Naomi smiled at the nurse who placed Rebecca's food gently by her. She wondered if she ought to go to the canteen for the muesli and fruit that would be on offer there, but she did not wish to leave her daughter's side. Not yet.

Zaina woke from her fitful sleep. She was hurting all over but trying, as always, to ignore the pain, which she would not allow to set her back. Absent-mindedly, she patted her granddaughter's shoulder. Tahmina was drowsy, having been transferred to the Post-op ward from the ICU only the previous evening. She sipped listlessly from a sports bottle of water, which crackled as she squeezed it. Zaina pulled her shawl tightly around her shoulders, slid her feet into her worn sandals and with a quiet groan hauled herself to her feet, reached for her wash bag and rolled-up towel and set off for the bathroom.

She returned to her place beside Tahmina and pulled a Tupperware box from her small bag. She preferred her own food to that which was on offer but accepted a cup of hot tea from a passing orderly, with gratitude. She looked at the lady opposite her and again wondered at her circumstances. She appeared to be young and was attractive, with large, dark rimmed eyes and close-cropped hair. She had an air of calm. Her skin was so dark that she must surely be from Africa, so how was it that she was here in Jerusalem? Could she be an asylum seeker?

Naomi smiled, briefly, in acknowledgement of Zaina's

appraising glance. She in turn reflected on the elderly Arab lady, who wore a vivid pink and grey paisley shawl around her shoulders, in sharp contrast to the dull brown house coat, which reached down to her sandalled feet. Her eyes were heavy from lack of sleep, but when she turned to look at the child, who must surely be the Arab lady's granddaughter, they brightened and her smile emphasised her many wrinkles. She wondered what the Arab lady might think of her. Did she resent or fear her? Did she question her right to be there?

Naomi now observed the nurses bustling around, straightening up the ward, in anticipation of the doctors' arrival. Adam and the plump Arab doctor, called Hassan, formed the advance party of the ward round. On the previous day, Hassan had introduced himself. He told her that he was from Ramallah. He had trained at the University of Tel Aviv on a scholarship and hoped to return home to find a wife and set up his own practice. He was living cheaply in the hospital accommodation, while saving his wages to fund his future plans. His mother regularly sent him delicious packages of food, such as home made baklava and helbeh, which he shared with the ward staff. Despite his best intentions, he always ended up with the lion's share, he had told Naomi, not without pride. Hassan wedged himself into the chair at the nursing station and surveyed the screens, his eyebrows creasing inwards in concentration.

Next Mr Zalman arrived, sharp-suited in navy pinstripe. Naomi thought him too formal for a children's ward; however she had heard that his operating skills justified his pomp and mild arrogance. Mrs Joseph (also a cardiac surgeon) was more casual and softly spoken. Naomi liked the look of her; however the nurses told her that she was the one they feared upsetting the most. She questioned them relentlessly about their charges; any omission of care or attention to detail would have her grunting in exasperation. Naomi had felt embarrassed when she had once

witnessed this. So unnecessary!

Behind the qualified doctors trailed a straggle of medical students. Each one tried to blend into the background, in the hope of not being picked upon to make an observation. A sort of dance resulted, where one stepped behind another. The consultants were naturally familiar with these tactics and those at the back were the first to be singled out. Naomi smiled to herself.

Finally the ward-round reached Rebecca's bed. Mrs Joseph assessed the patient and Hassan lowered himself onto the foot end of the bed. It creaked and rocked slightly. Rebecca giggled at the movement, and Naomi's heart lightened at the sound. But then a brief coughing fit followed. While the doctors were examining her daughter, Naomi resisted the temptation to raise her hand as if she were in school. She fidgeted, while waiting for an opportunity to ask the questions that were burdening her. At last, Mrs Joseph looked in her direction.

"Please doctor, can you tell me how it's gone? Was the operation a success? Is she going to be OK now?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't fully answer that yet! The surgery went well, but now we have to rely on the result of the heart scan. We can get it done today – you'll know the outcome by this evening."

So her wait was not yet over. It was unfair – the agony was unbearable. She had to do something – she had to move, to get out. Excusing herself to Rebecca, she left the ward to stand for a while in the corridor. Just a moment later, she was joined by the Arab lady. Naomi wondered how to start a conversation with her. She wanted the human contact.

"I don't understand these doctors," she began "They are so clever but they act as though we can't hear through screens. I don't like to eavesdrop! Yesterday Rebecca was crying- she said she'd heard that Zaheer has to have two more operations- she was very upset! It's just not on! She's going through enough right now.

She shouldn't be worrying about the other children! Is there no privacy?"

"Yes, yes- I agree completely!" replied the other lady. "It is why I came outside."

So the two ladies talked, propping their tired bodies up against the white-washed walls of the corridor. To an outsider they would have appeared an unusual pair: the tall black woman, with her slender limbs and long neck, and the shorter, elderly Arab lady, with her furrowed brownish-grey skin, shrewd eyes and a few strands of silvery hair visible below the line of her shawl.

"I think I overheard the nurse - you are Naomi? My name is Zaina. I am the grandmother of Tahmina."

"I'm glad to meet you - not here, of course!"

"Excuse me... but I haven't seen the child's mother. Is she... is there a problem?"

"My daughter is quite well and she doesn't live so far away but she finds this very difficult - you know - the hospital and Tahmina being so ill. She wants to come to the hospital. She wants to do this very much but she cannot cope - she feels she cannot breathe and sometimes even she vomits. She cries and tells me she is so sorry. I come here in her place. It's good for me to be able to do something. Please don't think badly of her!"

"I know just what it's like," Naomi interposed. "I'm just the same! Some days I feel so bad, I have to stay in bed. I feel like I've got a lead weight in the middle of my stomach! If my friends only knew! They call me brave but I'm full of fear!"

Zaina was warmed by Naomi's confession. She was curious about this dark-skinned woman.

"Please tell me... I hope I am not being impolite, but are you also Muslim? I have seen many black skinned people in the market, where I work. I've always wondered about them and where they've come from."

"I'm not Muslim! I'm a Falash Mura. I have come from

Ethiopia. My family were Jewish once but way back, we were made to convert to being Christian.”

“Fall-lash Moo-rah. Is that right? So you’re not Jewish!”

“Well done! But I am Jewish now. I’ll try to explain it.”

“Thank you! I’d like to know.”

“I was only 5 when we left Africa, so I don’t remember much about it. They say there was a famine.”

“Yes, I think I heard about the famine.” murmured Zaina.

“Life must have been very tough...and you were only a young child!”

“Then the Israelis sent planes for us – thousands of us came over. I’d never seen a plane before.”

“That sounds so frightening!”

“It was very bad for me, because my mother stayed behind. She was going to come with us but my granny was ill and weak and she wouldn’t leave her, so at the last minute she decided not to travel. I still miss her so much! I came with only my father and two brothers.”

“Your mother stayed in Africa! And she is still there?”

“Yes, my grandmother passed on, but my mother would not travel on her own. I also think that she was not ready to leave Africa. It’s in her soul.”

“She may have been frightened too. It’s a big wrench to leave the land you grew up in.”

“She lives in our old home and she says that life is a little easier than before and she is content.”

Zaina considered: “Perhaps she says she is content but I’m sure that she thinks of you all the time. I know that I would, if it was me!”

“Thank you! This is so sad for me! My life is here now and it is a safer place to bring up my children. Even with the possibility of war and bombs, it feels better to be here. Rebecca would never have received this treatment in Ethiopia. I don’t think that she’d have survived. But still I miss my mother and wish she was here.”

“So you have a husband to help you?”

“No. Amos left me when Rebecca became very sick. He said that I was only interested in Rebecca and Jonathan and that he could tell that I’d stopped loving him.”

“Oh! Was that true?”

“I don’t know! How could I fail to give the children all my attention? Rebecca has been ill since birth. She has what they call a complex cardiac disorder. Her blood vessels attach wrongly to the heart. She struggled to breathe when she was first born. It was the most terrifying thing! She spent her first days in the neonatal intensive care unit and has had several operations since that time.”

“She was a ‘blue baby’?”

“Yes.”

“And you had other children?”

“Jonathan was born, 4 years later. I was so petrified that he too might have heart problems, even though all the scans had been OK. I was relieved when he turned out to be fine but I think I might have spoilt him a bit. And then Amos was always working. He said that we needed the money. So, we didn’t see much of each other.”

“Your father...is he at home?”

“Yes, but he’s never been the same man since my mother stayed behind. He lost his humour and vitality. When we came to Israel, we all converted back to being Jewish – it was his greatest wish. Now his life is spent in the synagogue, praying and talking to the other men and he has some part time work as a caretaker at the local school. He prays for his granddaughter, of course.”

“And how is Rebecca getting on?”

I don’t know! That is the truth. The consultants say that this is the most important operation. It is her last chance. If it doesn’t work, she will need – she will need a heart transplant.”

Naomi’s face began to contort, as she tried to keep the tears from flowing. She pressed a crumpled tissue into her eyes and her



shoulders shook rhythmically.

“How awful for you! When will you know?”

“The scan – she has to have a scan later today – then we will find out whether it’s worked. If not, then she has to wait for a transplant.” Naomi’s voice dropped to a whisper, “She would have to wait for...for another child to die!” Naomi lost all composure and quietly wept.

Zaina stepped forward and enfolded her in her arms.

“No, no child! I’m sure it won’t come to this! She will be fine and you will be fine! Insh’Allah!...Hush!”

They stood like this for a few minutes. Naomi’s head was on Zaina’s shoulder and she took from her the comfort that her own mother would have given her. Afterwards, they ambled into the ward and each returned to their place by the hospital beds.

Soon after lunch, the visitors started to trickle in. There was a background buzz of chatter which gradually grew louder. Naomi’s son Jonathan was dropped off by a friend. Then Ahmed arrived, holding tightly onto his grandfather’s hand. He sidled up to his grandmother Zaina and clamped himself onto her waist. Her husband, dressed in a white kurta salwar suit and loose scuffed slippers, shuffled over to check on his grand-daughter and then took up his rightful place, in the chair beside her bed.

Zaina disengaged from Ahmed and went to sit beside her husband, on a plastic chair, taken from a stack beside the ward entrance. The two boys sat on their sisters’ beds, already bored, legs swinging. They’d been on the ward for barely five minutes. Jonathan pulled some football cards out of his pocket and laid them out on the bed beside him. Ahmed had a toy car with him and crouched on the floor with it. Each watched the other and then returned to their games. After a while, Ahmed wandered over to Jonathan and it was not long before they were playing together, waving the cards in the air in competition.

Jonathan called out, “I’m Ronaldo, the greatest footballer in the

world!" He preened himself, pulling up his shirt collar and puffing out his little chest. Ahmed replied,

"No I'm Messi, the very greatest footballer in the whole world!" He mimed a kick and then did a little victory dance on the spot, raising puny arms to an imaginary crowd.

Naomi was distracted otherwise she would have shushed them. Rebecca's intermittent cough was becoming more persistent. Naomi called over one of the nurses to check on her. Ruthie hurried over. Her dark hair was in dreadlocks, knotted like a ship's ropes. She wore pale blue scrubs and white plimsolls. Her only adornment was a tiny silver star of David. She was gentle and reassuring, as she examined Rebecca. However she advised that as a precaution she would call for one of the doctors. Naomi's stomach tightened in fear.

Hassan lumbered into the ward. Patches of sweat were visible on his pale shirt, both under his arms and down the centre of his back. With Ruthie in attendance and the screens pulled shut, he fanned his broad left hand over the child's back and tapped on his fingers with the middle finger of his right hand, with all the concentration of a concert percussionist. Then he fished out his stethoscope, from his bulging pocket and listened carefully.

"Good, good!" he said. "We've caught the infection early. Perhaps some antibiotics....? Nurse, are there any allergies?" Ruthie checked her notes and shook her head.

"Maybe we should delay the scan until tomorrow?" suggested Hassan.

"What is that? Please, no!" exclaimed Naomi "I don't think I can wait another night for her results."

"Well, I'll check on her later and we'll see."

Naomi could tell that Rebecca had a slight temperature. She slumped back against her pillows. "Mum, it's too hot! I don't feel good!" Naomi called Ruthie again, who brought a fan and a damp facecloth and then opened the nearest window a few inches.

The ward was invaded by Jerusalem street noises, the muffled sound of traffic, horns blaring, car doors banging shut and an occasional raised voice, or shouted greeting.

Zaina's husband had been watching the boys with amusement. He sat straight-backed, almost immobile, a smile occasionally flickering at his lips. Zaina had occasionally risen from her chair, in an attempt to calm them but each time, he had gently restrained her.

"Let them play," he said. "It does them good. They should remember each other!" He fished in his pocket for a small bag of sweets and handed it to the boys to share.

Now he felt that he had put up with enough. He unfolded himself from his chair with great effort. He then rolled up his prayer shawl. As he walked out of the ward, Ahmed shuffled, a foot or two behind him, mimicking his bandy-legged gait and giggling, before returning to the game.

Some time later, as promised, Hassan came back after his clinic and checked up on Rebecca. He nodded at Ruthie and a porter was summoned. Rebecca shuffled over onto the trolley and her oxygen mask was connected up with the cylinder above the wheels. She waved regally at her friends and mouthed "scan!" at Tahmina, who nodded back and gave her a 'thumbs up.' Naomi was left behind, hugging tightly onto Jonathan's waist, which he resisted by wriggling free and running back to play with Ahmed.

Naomi walked back into the corridor in a state of restlessness. There was nothing she could do. To her pleasure Zaina was there, speaking in hushed tones into the coin phone. Naomi gazed out of the window at the street. The people out there were bustling, intent on their own business. She supposed that by this time of day they might be returning home to make supper and then rest. She barely remembered how she had spent her days before Rebecca was born. So much free time..it was a wonder to her what she could have done with it!

Zaina put the phone receiver down in its cradle and smiled at Naomi.

“We meet again!”

Naomi gestured towards the phone. “Was it your daughter?”

“Bilquis says she will bring me clean clothes and a meal. We’ll meet at the main entrance but she still can’t come inside!” Zaina shook her head. She tried hard to but couldn’t really understand.

“What about Tahmina?”

“She’s had a good day, I think.”

“That’s good! Her operation...?”

“It was for a ‘hole in the heart’...between the upper chambers.”

“So she may not need long in hospital?”

“They say it might be a week, perhaps a few days more.”

“Still, it’s hard for a grandmother!”

“Yes, but so much harder for Bilquis,” Zaina added.

“Tell me...your scarf...it’s beautiful! Was it a special present?”

“My husband gave it to me when we first became engaged. It’s Kashmiri silk. He wrapped it around my shoulders and said that it would be my comfort and would keep me safe, when he had to be away from me. He was so romantic in those days – today, not so much!”

“Did you live in Jerusalem at that time?”

“Yes. I grew up in East Jerusalem. My father was also a market stall holder. He had friends who were Jewish and they came to our home to drink tea with him.”

“That is good..”

“Yes, he was a good man, a highly respected man. Now my two sons are in Dubai. They’ve gone because they could get good jobs and a secure future but I’m almost a stranger to their

children. We can speak on Skype but you can't hug a child through a computer screen!"

"So your family is also separated. I am sorry."

Just then, their conversation was interrupted by a loud alarm, sounding from the ward and the young doctors ran past. Zaina and Naomi turned together and followed.

Zaina clutched Naomi's arm tightly. "Please God it is not Tahmina! she cried"

Zaina balled her hand into a fist and pressed it to her mouth to stop herself from crying out. Naomi looked on, appalled and mouthed a silent prayer. Zaina's fears were justified. The curtains had been tugged together around Tahmina's bed and the doctors ran through. Naomi turned away and almost collided with the two boys. Ahmed's arms were at his sides and he blinked repeatedly. Jonathan sucked on his thumb, with eyes widened.

Naomi ushered them into the corridor, taking Ahmed gently by the hand.

"You shouldn't be here! Come out, come out!"

As they walked, Jonathan tugged at her tunic. She crouched down to his level.

"Have we poisoned her, Ima?"

"No, no, she is very ill. What do you mean?"

"When we gave her the sweet, she looked like she was being sick and she made a noise!"

"A sweet? Stay....stay here!" she shouted over her shoulder as she ran back inside. She clutched the shoulder of a nurse, who was returning behind the curtain.

"The boys gave her a sweet – could she be choking -could it be that?"

There was a change in the activity behind the screen. Naomi heard the words "Possible inhalation. Bend her forward. Now thump...and again!"

There was a splutter and a cry from Tahmina and relieved

laughter from behind the curtain, as the sweet was retrieved, where it had been coughed up onto her sheets. Zaina lifted her head in wonder then slumped into her husband's arms in a brief faint.

Zaina's husband helped her to sit down and the ward orderly fetched her a cup of tea, which she sipped but soon discarded. Gradually she regained her composure. She leaned over to hug Tahmina tightly. Just then, Rebecca returned to the ward, pushed in by a different porter. She was oblivious to the recent drama. She shuffled back on to her bed and reached for her electronic game. Jonathan rushed to her side and buried his head in her lap. In surprise, she stroked his hair. He looked up:

"Rebecca, you'll never guess what happened! Tahmina stopped breathing and..."

"Enough, Jonathan!" remonstrated Naomi, her impatience fuelled by anxiety. "Shouldn't you be going home soon? Where are they?"

She pulled him onto her knee, and looked over at Ahmed and his grandfather sitting together at one of the low dining tables. Ahmed had found some paper and crayons and was drawing, with his head bent low over the paper. His grandfather sat opposite him, content to watch, the two forming a single harmonious unit. Naomi found brief respite from her worries.

Visiting time was soon over and the boys left the ward. Ahmed held hands with his grandfather and Jonathan was picked up by the same family friend who had delivered him there. Peace returned. Supper came and went and the nurses did their rounds with tablets and after this, checking all the monitors and recordings with vigilance. The nurse who came to check on Rebecca was able to demonstrate to her mother that her temperature was starting to respond to the treatment and her breathing was slowing down. She was dozing a little but gripping her mobile phone in her free hand. The drip still ran into the other.

Mrs Joseph stepped into the ward, poker faced and Naomi stood up then sat down again, on her hands to stop them from fidgeting. Mrs Joseph was walking straight towards her and then standing beside the bed.

The moment had arrived. Naomi dreaded the news. She did not know if she had anything more in her.

“Please – do you have the results?”

“I do.”

Was Naomi imagining that smile on Mrs Joseph’s lips?

‘I am happy to say the news is good.’

“Good news. What good news?”

“There is no need for any further operations! The surgery was successful! There will still need to be follow-ups at clinic, of course.”

“Thank you, thank you. I can hardly believe it - can it be true?”

“Of course it’s true, Mum!” interjected Rebecca, leaning over to hug her mother, who was still looking perplexed and shell shocked.

Zaina hesitantly walked over and the two women held hands and smiled, while tears coursed down Naomi’s face.

The lights were dimmed and the nursing station illuminated. Naomi settled herself into her chair, the day’s stresses having tired her enough to allow her a good chance of sleeping. After brief consideration, Zaina returned to stand in front of her. She removed the shawl, shook it out and tenderly wrapped it around Naomi’s bare shoulders, managing not to disturb her sleep. Then she shuffled back to her chair and prepared for the night ahead.

## DISTURBING THE PEACE

*by Mahila Neesa*

I was born here, my mother told me; it was in the year 1920. Here I have lived all my life and my old bones are telling me that here is where they will lie themselves down and rest for all eternity. There is not much that I have not seen in this little town, from joyous births to deeply mourned deaths, and occasionally kindness so sincere and unaffected that seeing it would melt the heart of a glacier. I have seen my grandchildren and their children grow up. It seemed to me one minute they are sitting on my knee kissing me and calling me jiddo- grandfather, and in the next they are running into the arms of this ever changing world and embracing her with what seems almost like ardour. My memories are beginning to fail me of late and are no longer able to keep me company in the solitary evening hours. However one memory will stay with me until I take my remaining breaths. This memory I must pass to you before it is too late and it is lost in the void between life and death. I pass it to you to hold and cherish because it changed the lives of all of us who lived in this little town at the time, my town of Berat.

The town of Berat in Albania was a quiet one in early 1943. At least for most of the residents who enjoyed the typically clear days and the songs of the birds entertaining them. They adored their picturesque world with the river Osum flowing and gurgling, and the majestic Tomorr mountains reminding them that God had favoured them with their fair share of the beauty of nature. Most of the residents considered themselves as part of a close-knit community and were always ready to help a neighbour. They did not consider it an inconvenience that the houses were built so closely together that from a distance they looked as if they were almost on top of each other. As the saying went amongst the townsfolk in those days, 'you only need privacy for two things in life, and that's why curtains were invented'. The local church was



busy on Sundays as were the Mosque and Synagogue on Fridays and Saturdays.

But two families who were very familiar to me routinely disturbed the tranquillity with hasty swear words thrown over their shared garden hedge. To ward off the boredom the usual curses were sometimes changed from 'May you die the death of a donkey' to 'May your sheep be eaten by wolves'. Sometimes the occasional 'May you spend the rest of your days rolling around like a pig in the mud' were also pitched in. This enmity between the Abromov family and the Idrizi family was not one of religion or land. Legend in the town had it that the enmity stretched back centuries. It was said that a great ancestor of the Abromov family had routinely allowed his goat to wander into the vegetable patch of the Idrizi family and do her business there. As a result the great head of the Idrizi family at the time was struck down with a never before heard of stomach illness. It took the poor man three months to recover from the illness and that was only after a thorough investigation into the food he was eating. The situation was further exacerbated when Great Idrizi went on a revenge mission. Some say the appetite for revenge fuelled his energy and actually helped him recover from his stomach illness. He would get up long before the sun had shown its rays over the Tomorri Mountains and in the semi darkness that swathed the garden he would pick up the goat's excrement. He would sneak to the hedge and coax the goat by offering it a tasty carrot or two. Then he would present it with the second course, a bowl of vegetables from the suspicious and contaminated vegetable patch, complete with excrement which the unsuspecting goat ate with great relish. So when the poor goat became sick and suddenly died Great Abromov had no doubt that it was the fault of Great Idrizi and his suspicions were further confirmed when Great Idrizi held a celebration party.

The families had not spoken since the incident and over the years it became a matter of honour and pride for the generations

that came after. The incident in Berat was known locally as the calamity, as never before in the known history of Berat had two families developed such a profound hatred for one another. But what they considered to be a calamity was in fact a drop in the ocean in comparison to what was to come.

In the early 1943 the residents of Berat had heard that war was devastating Europe and many men had died. They had heard news delivered from the relatives of various families visiting over the Christmas period in late 1942, families who lived close to the borders of Greece or Bulgaria. However the residents of Berat were complacent; they believed the talk of war would not really lead to anything and they couldn't really see how they would be involved even if it did. They were more interested in events closer to home.

The heads of the two notorious families at this time were Isaac Abromov and Afrim Idrizi. Both were men of some importance in Berat namely due to their ancestry and the fact that they owned land around Berat. Their long suffering wives Ada and Rovena had to battle with their husbands' egos on a daily basis, as well as battling with each other. Not surprisingly they were exhausted by the end of each day. Isaac and Ada Abromov had one son and one daughter. It was this daughter, Aliza that was a constant thorn in Isaac's side. I would often hear him moaning about her behaving more like a boy than a girl. She refused to wear dresses or allow her hair to grow. Isaac thanked God that at least she had her mother's good looks with her big brown eyes and pale skin. Although she didn't share her mother's gentle temperament. I would often hear her throw a tantrum, I assumed because she had been asked to help her mother in the kitchen. Aliza was a child who enjoyed playing outdoors in the fresh air that floated down from the mountains.

Afrim and Rovena had one son who was the centre of their world, even more so as they had lost their first born child

when she was only two days old. The heaviness that had gripped their hearts on that day only lightened when their baby boy was born. He took after Afrim Idrizi in looks and personality; he was proud to the point of haughty even as a young boy. He had his father's blonde hair and dark green eyes and even as a child people commented on his height and how he would be tall and broad just like his father. Afrim and Rovená proudly named him Aleksander, defender of mankind.

If my memory serves me well, all three children were of similar ages and when they were younger they all attended the local school. In the mornings Aliza, her hair in two tight plaits forcibly tied by her mother, would set off with her brother for the short walk along the cobbled streets to the main square where Berat school stood, as would Aleksander. Now both families had ensured their children understood the concept of honour and had spoken to them about respecting that honour. In other words, if the children of the other family said anything negative you must respond in equal measure or worse. And that is why most mornings the children from both families could be heard swearing and cursing each other all the way to school. If they continued swearing and shouting when they got to school the teacher would admonish them and threaten punishment if they continued. Invariably there would be a fight between Aleksander and Aliza's older brother on the way back home from school. Aliza was known to join in on occasion, especially when she realised her brother was getting a particularly bad beating which meant Isaac would be cross at them for not winning. Aleksander's stature and the unusually large size of his fists meant that he usually won.

As the children grew older Isaac Abromov decided, after considering the low standard of his son's grades that there was no longer any point in him continuing his education, and he therefore put him to work in the family business. Aliza on the other hand was studious and academic, but she had to struggle

with her parents to continue her studies. In those days it was considered a bad omen for marriage if the bride to be was too educated. Aleksander, as he grew older became a source of concern to his parents as he discovered a passion for art and poetry which his father did not consider to be manly pastimes. The result of this was that Aleksander's father was continually trying to distract him from his art and instead trying to persuade him to join the local wrestling club or even the hunting parties that went in search of wild boar or brown bears. But Aleksander was not interested in any of those things.

One morning as he left for school it was an unusually cloudy day. Sure enough not long after, the heavens opened and the ensuing rain made people run for cover. As Aliza was running she slipped on a mud patch and screamed as she fell backwards. Aleksander, hearing the scream looked back just in time to see her falling. He thought it was one of the funniest things he had ever seen and his chuckle soon turned into full blown guffawing. Still laughing he ran over to help her but the sight of him laughing had made something in Eliza explode and a rush of anger went straight to her head. She accepted Aleksander's hand as he offered it to help her up. But instead of easing herself up she pulled with all her might so that Aleksander toppled over and landed in the mud patch next to her. This time it was Aliza's turn to laugh and it just so happened that old Mrs Brahim was looking out of her window cursing the rain. She happened to see them both sitting in the mud laughing like the pair of teenagers that they were. The news spread like wildfire - an Abromov and Idrizi were seen laughing together! It was the most controversial and scandalous thing to have happened in Berat for generations. What made it even more so was that both Aliza and Aleksander walked to school together on that well remembered day, talking and laughing as if they had been best of friends since the day they were born.

That evening, when Aliza and Aleksander arrived back to

their respective parents the Albanian swearwords shouted out by both sets of parents could be heard all the way to the town square. Both sets of parents were appalled and disgusted, to say the least. As for Aliza and Aleksander, they had both learnt a valuable lesson that day. And that was of the effects hatred can have on a person and their lives, and also on the lives of those around them. They realised at their young age, better than their elders ever did, of the poisonous effects of animosity. How it can get its malicious claws into the everyday aspects of your lives, and how it takes strength and courage to break free from it.

But hate was not going to let us, the people of Berat escape that easily as we found out when we awoke the next morning to find our country and our small haven of peace was under occupation by Nazis.

We, the people of Berat awoke to the noise of military vehicles and announcements being shouted in forceful voices: 'all residents must be in the town square within one hour. Anyone refusing to obey will be dealt with by the justice deemed correct by the Fuhrer'.

There was confusion as blurry eyed townsfolk awoke and looked questioningly at each other, 'What was happening?' Later, those of us who survived would tell each other of our reactions that dreadful morning. Idrizi told us he had jumped out of bed and went to hug his wife who was looking frightened and bewildered. Aleksander soon joined them, the sickening feeling in his stomach seemingly making a permanent home.

As we walked towards the town square signs of Nazi occupation were apparent. Posters and notices plastered on the walls, harsh, unforgiving orders of curfew times. But what we noticed and found most disturbing were the posters and orders being given about the Jews of Berat. The Nazis seemed to be directing the people they assumed to be Jewish into one area of the square. They had an officer who seemed to be registering the

details and anyone who wasn't a Jew was sent back to the other side of the square. Military trucks were everywhere, and the soldiers looked intimidating in their Nazi uniforms and black leather boots.

I saw Aleksander, Rovena and Afrim huddled together waiting to be called when Aleksander caught the eye of Aliza. She seemed to be mouthing something to him. He stared at her trying to make out what it was she was saying. It was then that he noticed Abromov also looking at him almost as if he was desperate for Aleksander to understand what they were trying to communicate to him. He wasn't sure if he had understood but he thought he had an idea and hoping he was right, he turned to his father and said; 'Abromov said "Besa". Idrizi looked over and it was as if he had seen his neighbour for the first time. An ordinary man who was desperate to protect his wife and children. Idrizi gave a slight nod and Abromov noticeably relaxed.

I knew Aleksander was bought up with the concept of Besa being an important part of his life, just as I had been. His father had always taught him that even if your enemy sought refuge with you, you were honour bound to provide them with food and shelter and look after them as if they were an honoured guest. I knew then that Aleksander felt he had to live up to the code of honour, to respect the memory of his father, grandfather and those before him. It didn't matter anymore that their families had been fighting with each other for generations. All the curses and swear words and hateful looks that each generation had thrown at each other were blown away from Aleksander's memory like leaves in an autumn breeze. This was more important. The words his father had said to him on numerous occasions when Aleksander was a child came to his mind's eye, words from The Holy Qur'an, 'to save one life is as if to save the whole of humanity'.

Aleksander snapped out of his reverie by the feel of something cold and hard pushing into his back. He looked round

to see a Nazi officer pushing the barrel of a gun into his back. Other officers were doing similar to the people around him and barking orders. Aleksander looked around into the faces of friends and neighbours - never before had he seen such fear. I could see sweat trickling down his temples. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, I felt that if I reached out and touched the air I would be able to touch the fear, touch the thickness of dread in the atmosphere around all of us.

We were made to stand in line in front of the officer who was taking everyone's details. I could see Aliza ahead of Aleksander in the queue. I knew Aleksander was taking a risk, perhaps one that would cost him his life. I saw him looking at his mother and father and I said a silent prayer for him, 'Please God save his life, for the sake of his parents, for the sake of Aliza'.

I saw Abromov being led to the officer at the table and as I looked on at Aleksander my legs began to feel weak and tremble. I saw him take a deep breath, silently mouthing 'Bismillah' as he stepped out of the line with both hands above his head. I caught myself hoping and praying that the soldiers would question him rather than shoot first.

'Please Sir' he shouted at the top of his voice in the little German that he had learnt over the years 'that man is my uncle. He lives with me and my parents. His name is Adnan Idrizi, he is Muslimaan, we are Muslimaan'. Aleksander felt the barrel of a gun hit the side of his head. He told us later that as he fell to the ground his last thought before darkness took over was 'Please God, let them be saved'.

I leave this story with you as now my health fails me and my love and desire for this world lessens with each breath that I take. Do what you will with the knowledge woven into the words of this tale. My hope is that you will learn from it as I have, that by helping others we not only lighten their burden but also our own too. I have seen what happens to people who are controlled by the

greed of their own desires for power, and I have also witnessed the magnificence of selfless love. May your burdens be always light and may your love be always be selfless.



## MRS ABRAHAMS

*by Sherry Ashworth*

The girl talking to me is young enough to be my great-granddaughter although G-d knows I wouldn't recognise if I saw her – do I have a great-daughter? I will have to think about that. I don't know who this girl is – a nurse? A dinner lady? She smiles as if she's frightened of me.

I smile back and remember that I have no teeth – that it should have come to this, oy! She is good-looking, this girl. I tell her, I was good-looking once. My hair, I tell her, you should have seen my hair. Down to my waist, it was.

I lift my hand and touch what's left, thin but soft like silk. 'I've come to do your feet,' the girl says. 'My name is Karen.'

I look down at my feet in slippers I do not recognise.

'They're not my slippers! She has taken my slippers! That woman next door – the new woman.'

The girl Karen does not seem shocked and removes the slippers. She lifts my left foot and places it on the footstool.

'I never asked for you to come and do my feet!' I tell her.

'But I have your name down,' she says.

Sometimes my memory plays me tricks. I am not as young as I used to be. I know I need to remember better. I will allow this girl to see to my feet and I will let her know who I really am – not just an old lady who has trouble remembering.

'He loved my hair,' I told Karen. 'He watched me brush it at the dressing table.'

'Are you talking about your husband, Mrs Abrahams?' she asked.

'Of course I am talking about my husband! Oh, it was all right in the olden days, in the beginning. All the flattery, all the promises. We rented a house round the corner to my mother, she

was always popping in. My friends also – I had friends in those days. And he, he – he was always the big shot. Full of ideas. A talker, a schmoozer. I chose him because I knew he was going places. What use is a man who sits on his tukkus all day?’

Karen stops for a moment and looks up at me. ‘What’s a tukkus?’

I chuckle to myself. ‘These days they call it your bum. Your backside.’

She bends her head quickly and I chuckle some more. But I now I have the taste for my story, I want to carry on with it. If I can tell it all, if I can get to the end it might come clear to me. There might be some relief.

‘So he changes firms, I’m telling you, and gets a new job. But when he says to me we have to move and up sticks and leave our home, I tell him, no. And he pleads, and says how much he needs me and won’t go without me. And his Boss will be furious, and maybe he’ll lose this job, this job with the big prospects. And believe me, I would never have gone with him, except for one thing.

One thing.

My friends, the ones that called round, the ones I shopped with, the ones whose weddings I attended, they had babies now. Me, it wasn’t happening. G-d knows we tried, I’ll give him that. But every month – nothing. And then I hear news of another baby on the way, and it cuts me like a knife. Everyone else but me! What have I done to deserve this? Why me?

I thought it would be easier to bear away from my friends. I thought maybe in a different place, a baby might come.

So after giving him hell, I let him see that I was slowly coming round. I was prepared to move. He was a different man, then. Happier than I’ve ever seen him with all the packing up and plans and discussions. I said, can I help you, but he made me see it was men’s business, between him and his Boss – the one who was

investing in him. And I am thinking, the woman's business – what is that? I am failing in my own business and he doesn't seem to care.'

I stop and look down at my feet. I do not know the feet of the woman that I am, but the girl is gentle. So I say to her, 'These feet have travelled many miles.'

She looks up, nods and smiles.

'I am old,' I tell her. But I do not feel old. I know I have lived a very long time, but I do not feel old.

'Mrs Abrahams,' she says, 'carry on with your story. It's interesting to hear you talk.'

Interesting! Is that all? But I feel inclined to go on.

'We moved and it was some journey, I can tell you. Travelling light? What did I know of travelling light? So we settled into our new place, and I had to learn new ways. At first I felt cut off because this was before all these new-fangled phones and texting and BookFace, and I needed him more than ever. He was always talking and meeting people and I was lonely. But I held my head up high.

It still wasn't happening, still no baby. I prayed but I didn't know who to pray to any more. But there was one thing I was sure about. It wasn't a woman I was praying to, because she would have understood and done something about it, she would have answered my prayers. Was I bitter? Yes, I was bitter. When I looked in the mirror, I couldn't smile. But still with the lovely hair already.

He wanted a baby too. He told me. He said more than anything now it was important to have someone to hand the business on to. To hand the business on to! Is that all you care about? My blood was boiling. What about me? I need a baby – you have your Boss you're always talking to and hatching up plans with. And do I ever get to meet him? He stopped me with a kiss – boy, was he a kisser! And the rest. But still, nothing.

One day in the market I stood by a woman arguing about some bananas. Her baby was in a sling and it gazed at me, and smiled. I thought I could love that baby. I thought, maybe it doesn't have to be our baby. Just a baby.

It grew, that idea, maybe because I didn't have anything else to think about. Do you have a baby?'

The girl called Karen looks up and smiles. 'I'm not married.'

'The one we chose, she wasn't married either. She was alone, away from home, and didn't have a lot of money. We promised her that if she gave us her baby, we would look after her as well. Money my husband wasn't lacking in. She took some convincing but we wore her down. Now when I look back I think I must have been mad to go to those lengths because this was before IVF, before turkey basters, and the only way to do this was for my husband to impregnate her. But the baby would be mine even if the pleasure was not. Yes, it was madness – I had tunnel vision. Baby, baby, baby.'

Aah! I pull my foot away. She hurt me - with the scissors she hurt me!

'Sorry, Mrs Abrahams, I'm so sorry!'

'Ach, what does it matter? Carry on, carry on.'

Because you have to make allowances.

'It was a boy,' I said to Karen. 'The baby. It was a boy. Dark-skinned like her.'

'Sorry, Mrs Abrahams for interrupting, but would you like some nail polish?'

'Pink nail polish. I would like pink.'

'Pink for a girl and blue for a boy. I'm telling you, the baby was a big, healthy boy. But she, the mother, she wouldn't be parted from him. She said she would prefer to do without the money and keep her boy. I should have seen this coming – what normal woman could give up a baby? I cried in my husband's arms that night, buried myself in his chest. I loved the baby too, I needed

him. She could have another one day, but not me. My time was up.

He was always cunning, always good at arguing. It was why he had done so well with his Boss. That time when there were going to be mass redundancies, and he talked his Boss out of it. He was a good man. And clever. He said, let her come and live with us, all of us together. I agreed because it wasn't her I cared about. I wanted the baby.'

She stopped and looked at me, the brush suspended, glittering candy pink.

'This is like something off Jeremy Kyle, Mrs Abrahams.'

'Who's he when he's at home?'

'Sorry – carry on.'

'Of course they all talked, all the neighbours, but I didn't care. There was a baby. I held him on my hip as I moved around the house. I showed him pictures and sang him rhymes. He laughed when I came into the room.

But the baby loved her best, and sometimes when I saw my husband look at them both, and smile, my gut twisted.

Until the day my husband came home, excited, and took me to one side. His Boss had said he knew of a place I could go, and maybe it would help, and I could have a baby of my own. I laughed, oh, I laughed. Boy, did I laugh. Men! They are like little children, always confusing what they want to happen, with the truth. The truth was, I was too old now. No procedure in the world would work for me. I laughed with contempt, I laughed with despair.

But he begged me to go – this Boss of his, you don't know how much he looked up to Him! He worshipped Him! He never treated me like that! His Boss says run, he runs. His Boss says, have this procedure, we have it.

I laughed again in disbelief when it was my time of the month, and there was no blood. The next thing, I could not bear

the smell of raw meat and there was a strange taste of metal in my mouth. I was tired all the time.

I was pregnant.

‘Would you believe it? At my age!’

‘How old were you Mrs Abrahams?’

‘Never you mind – a lady never tells her age.’

We both laughed then.

‘So let me skip the pregnancy and tell you about when the baby was born. Another boy – my boy. So perfect, so good-looking. I smiled from morning till night. I lavished him with everything. He grew up fast. He was strong and clever and loved his mother. He played with the other boy, too. Like brothers, they were.

Maybe, I thought, a little too much like brothers. My husband would come back from work and both boys would run to him, my son and the other boy. The other boy was bigger and got there first. My son waited to be lifted in his arms.

That wasn’t right, was it? My son was his proper son, not the other boy. Is it wrong to love your child too much? Can you ever love a child too much?

What I did, I did for my son’s sake. I spoke to my husband one night and said the time had come for the other woman and the other boy to leave us. That they need to find their fortunes in another land. That the other woman was taking liberties, that the other boy was picking fights with my son. That might have been true – who was I to know what went on when I wasn’t there?

My husband wasn’t so sure, but I wore him down. I threatened to leave myself. Then I would change my tune, and say how much better it would be for the other boy to have independence. Believe me, I tried every trick in the book.

The day came when they packed their bag and left. We gave them plenty of money – we did not want them to starve. And my husband even found them a place not very far from us.

Can you blame me?’

‘I think you did the right thing,’ Karen said, flicking the brush. ‘It’s hard for two women to share a house. Me and my sister fight all the time.’

‘Hmm. If it had ended there. You see, what I couldn’t let go of was the idea that my husband preferred his other family. She was younger than me, and the other boy was handsome. Not as handsome as my boy, mind, but handsome enough. And I began to wonder, where was my husband when he wasn’t with me? He said he was with that Boss of his, but was he? At least when he was with me I could keep an eye on him.’

‘Those feelings are natural.’

‘But then I did a terrible thing.’

‘What terrible thing?’

‘My husband had been with his Boss all day, or so he said. And told me his Boss was sending him on one of those team-building exercises, out in the mountains. Climbing, hiking, living rough. To toughen him up or something, I don’t know. And wanted him to take his son with him.

I said to him, take the other boy and leave mine.

He said, this is a good opportunity. If the boy does well, the Boss will see his potential.

I hesitated then.

He said, I think I’ll take them both.

I wasn’t so sure. I pleaded with him again not to take my boy, because my life would be over if anything happened to him. My husband promised me both boys would be safe, but I’m telling you, would you ever trust a man?

On the day it happened, my son left with my husband early in the morning. I saw them go with rucksacks on their backs. I knew that on their way they were calling for the other boy. As I watched them turn the corner I had a sudden thought I would never see my son again.

I tried to get on with my household tasks, but that bad thought would come, and I froze with terror. I should have never let my husband take him. Then I would tell myself not to be such a fool, and I carried on. And stopped again. In the end I could not bear the wait so I left the house and went to the market.

I knew as soon as I saw the huddle of women around the fish stall. Something had happened. One of the women turned and saw me. The conversation stopped. As I walked toward them my legs felt like lead.

‘There’s been an accident,’ someone said. ‘In the mountains. My husband saw your husband with the boy.’

‘Oh Mrs Abrahams! I’m so sorry!’ Karen said.

‘I fell where I was standing. They brought me water. I could not drink. I did not understand why I was still alive. And then there was shouting, and I heard the words, they’ve come back. The crowd around me parted and I saw them. My husband, and the boy who had not been harmed.

It was my son.

I crushed him in my arms and knew I would never let him go again. But before my husband could offer an explanation, someone broke through the women surrounding me. It was the other woman.

She cries, ‘Where is my son? What have you done with him?’

Her face – I will never forget her face. All the sorrow in the world written on it. Such horror, such loneliness. I understood because I had felt all that too. And then she looked at me. Her face asked me a question I could not answer.

The next thing I knew I was lying on my own bed with my son by my side. He told me I had collapsed.

‘Tell me,’ I asked him, ‘about the other boy and the other mother.’

He looked down. ‘They are safe,’ he said. ‘Dad’s Boss



changed his mind at the last minute. I went home with dad but my brother ran home to his mother only he fell on the way and hurt his leg. That's why he was he was late.'

I thought, when I was better, I would go and visit the other mother and say that I was sorry. I knew it was my fault – I had wanted to risk her son's life. But how could I say those words? How could I admit the thoughts that had been in my mind? So I waited. And then it was too late. She moved away and I never got the chance to talk to her. I have done a terrible thing. She will never learn to forgive me.'

'No, you-'

I'm listening to hear what Karen has to say when the nurse comes in.

'Hello Mrs Abrahams. How are we this morning? Ooh – I see we're having a pedicure! But I don't remember you booking yourself a pedicure. Karen? Are you sure you weren't supposed to be doing the other Mrs Abrahams?'

I'm not surprised to hear there's two of us. There are three Mrs Cohens and four Mrs Levys.

'No,' Karen said. 'The other Mrs Abrahams said she'd pay for me to do this Mrs Abrahams.'

'I'm confused now,' the nurse says. 'Which Mrs Abrahams are you?'

I told her, wondering who this other Mrs Abrahams could be.

'I'm the first Mrs Abrahams. I am Sarah.'

## Biographies

**Sherry Ashworth's** first novel, *A Matter of Fat*, was initially published by Commonword, and went on to become a best-seller. Sherry has gone on to write over twenty books - more comic novels, award-winning fiction for children and teenagers (including *Disconnected* and *Paralysed*), and with her husband, set up her own publishing company. On retiring from Manchester Metropolitan University where she was a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing, she became a Visiting Teaching Fellow and still works freelance, both in the UK and abroad. She is a member of Manchester Reform Synagogue, and enjoys being part of Manchester's varied Jewish community.

**Eleanor Greene** lives in London with her brother. She was educated at Bury Grammar School and went on to do a degree at Birmingham University in English and Philosophy. While there, she directed plays and edited a magazine and she is now Head of Drama at Wall to Wall, producing drama for all the major broadcasters. She recently tried her hand at short stories and non-fiction writing in her spare time and found that she loved it. This is her first published piece of work. Eleanor is also a keen knitter and patchwork quilter.

**Jackie Lewis** is a General Practitioner, with many Muslim patients. Her medical interests include Epilepsy and pain management. She is on the committee of the Manchester Muslim Jewish forum and she volunteers for the Salford Healthy Communities Collaborative. She has a son, Daniel, who is studying Mathematics and a daughter, Heather, who aims to study Medicine. She has not previously had any published work but she has written a children's story on the dangers of smoking and she has helped her uncle in

writing his autobiography. She is a supporter of the 'One Voice movement' for peace in the Middle East.

**Naveed Mir** lives in Bradford with her husband and young daughter. Born and raised in Luton, she graduated from the Brunel University with a degree in Law. She then pursued a career in teaching, working in a number of schools before the birth of her daughter. She is now a stay-at-home mum and enjoys reading, baking and volunteering for her local mosque. She also enjoys travelling and has visited many countries across Europe and the Middle East. She speaks three languages and her contribution to this anthology is her first published work.

**Maliha Neesa** lives in Didsbury, Manchester with her husband and three children. She works full time for a charity organisation. Maliha has a degree in English Language and Creative Writing. In her spare time she writes stories and poems and is presently working on her first novel. Her inspiration for her writing comes from the daily struggles that people face all over the world. Her personal favourite authors are Khalid Hosseini, Charles Dickens and Naguib Mahfouz. Her hobbies include reading and star gazing. Above all else Maliha enjoys spending time with her family.

**Becky Prestwich Hine** is a Manchester based playwright, whose plays have been produced at the White Bear Theatre Club, the Old Red Lion and Theatre 503. Her first Radio Play, CHOPPING ONIONS was broadcast on BBC Radio 4, starring Maureen Lipman. Becky also delivers arts projects for children and young people and is currently the Young People's Coordinator at the Royal Exchange Theatre. Becky is currently expecting her second child.







































