The Open Door

Latifa al-Zayyat

Translated by
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To my teacher, Rashad Rushdi

Chapter One

FEBRUARY 21, 1946. SEVEN O'CLOCK in the evening: the tranquil sky bore a pleasant coolness, and there was a clean purity to the air as if the heavens had poured down rain and washed the earth. Yet Cairo was not its normal, brightly lit self; its main streets were not choked with the usual crowds streaming through the cinema houses, shops, and cafes, or congregating at bus and tramway stops. The cinema houses were on strike, and so were other businesses, and no buses or trams were running. Police cars and vans slunk along streets packed with rifle-bearing soldiers. The few civilians in sight walked slowly in the streets or stood at intersections, knots of two, three, or four engaged in conversation. One could hear all sorts of dialects and levels of education in their speech, but every exchange turned upon the same subject, that morning's events in Ismailiya Square.

"That clash was no coincidence, no sir! They meant to provoke people. A demonstration of forty thousand folks, a big show of protest against the English, that's what people came out for—and what happens? Those English bring out five armored cars to plow into it!"

"Don't forget we Egyptians are brave—a country of tough guys. The tank crushed the lad and right away the students raised his shirt high to show everyone; there was blood all over it. Then the crowd just went mad. They attacked the English tanks and pulled 'em apart, and then they started throwing their bodies

right on the guns—why, you'd have thought they were made of sugar for all the people swarming around them."

"Now, personally, I consider this demonstration a new stage in our national struggle. First: this was a direct clash with the English. Second: the army refused to break up the demonstration. Not only that—our army vehicles were moving through the city plastered with nationalist slogans!"

"Then there's the way the workers joined the students. And everybody—all the Egyptian people."

"I'm telling you, this is a nation of toughies—even the women came out of their houses. There were women all over the place in Bab al-Sha'riya."

"Let's get to the point—and that's the weapons. The bullets were coming thick and fast from the army posts. The people were unarmed. If only they had had guns!"

"Fine, but did you see all of those bricks, raining down on the English? Brother, I couldn't believe it! Where'd folks come up with so many bricks?"

"Yes, and how about when they set fire to those barricades the English were trying to hide themselves behind?"

"Those boys were ripping off their gallabiyas, soaking them in gas, and setting fire to them. They were totally in flames, might eat up a guy's whole body, but what did they care? They would just crawl along, bullets pouring down like rain, paying no attention, no sir, went on moving, right to the attack . . . ."

"This wasn't simply an anti-English thing today. No, people were attacking the English *and* the king, and agents of imperialism in general. And I say this is a new stage of national consciousness, that's my own personal view of the situation."

"Well, me—even if I live to be a hundred I won't ever forget that scene in Sulayman Pasha Street. No, sir."

"Badges, badges of blood! The blood of those who died, those who were wounded, all for Egypt's sake. Twenty-three dead, and 122 injured."

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For those talking excitedly on the street the battle had ended. Final gains and losses had been tallied. But the battle had not yet ended, nor had any sums been figured, for the family of Muhammad Effendi Sulayman, civil servant in the Ministry of Finance and resident of No.3 Ya'qub Street in the neighborhood of Sayyida Zaynab.

In the apartment's large entrance hall, which served the family as an everyday living room, sat Sulayman Effendi himself. Ensconced in a cushioned wooden armchair facing the front door, he was repeating verses from the Qur'an in an undertone, stopping from time to time to listen hard whenever footsteps sounded on the stairs. As they came closer he would train his gray eyes on the door, his face set severely. But invariably the footsteps continued on, right past the door, up the stairs to the floors above. At that, his shoulders would slump and his sallow complexion would go even paler, giving more prominence to the patches of reddened skin on his face. Eventually he would resume his murmured repetition of verses from the Holy Book.

In the formal sitting room that adjoined the front hall, Sulayman Effendi's wife stood at the window. She was not a tall woman, but her full figure and light skin were attractive. At the moment the upper half of that compact body hung so far out of the window that she seemed almost to dangle. All her fiber was telescoped into her small, hazel eyes, flitting right and left, staring into the distance as if they could almost of their own accord pierce the dimness of the evening street.

In front of the round table that graced the center of the sitting room stood eleven-year-old Layla, a robust girl with skin darker than her mother's. She was fiddling with a wooden cigarette box, her motions mechanical, her bright eyes gazing into the distance, at nothing in particular. With a final, sharp tap to the lid of the cigarette box, she marched into the living room, passing her seated father as she headed straight for the front door. She reached for the sliding bolt. Her father's lips trembled, his face going even whiter as he raised eyes so faded they might

have been gazing from a corpse rather than from Sulayman Effendi. He stared at his daughter.

"Where're you going?" he asked in low, edgy tones.

"To look for Mahmud." At her words and the hint of defiance in her voice, his dreary eyes flashed. He closed them. "Get back inside." He reinforced his words with a fling of his hand, as if sensing the weary incapacity his broken voice conveyed.

Layla went over to him. Pausing by his chair, she searched for words that would not come. She put out her hand, meaning to lay it gently on his shoulder, but halfway there it hung motionless in mid-air and then dropped heavily to her side. Tears curtaining her eyes, she scurried to her mother in the next room and seized her arm.

"Mama . . . Mama!"

At her touch and her whisper the figure at the window gave a little jump, as if grazed by an electric current, and whirled round, a startled fear contouring her face.

"What is it?"

"Don't be afraid, Mama. Don't worry, I know Mahmud is fine. He'll come now, he must, he'll come. This morning . . . " But her tears choked off the rest of her sentence.

Her father fidgeted in his chair. That morning—just that morning—he had urged his son, "Don't go out, Mahmud." Already at the front door, the lad had paused.

"Nothing to worry about, Papa. It's to be a peaceful demonstration."

"So the demonstration can't go on without you?"

Mahmud had laughed. "Sure, Papa—but look, if everyone said that, then it really wouldn't go on."

"You're still a child. When you start at the university, then you can do what you like."

"I'm not so little. I'm in my fourth year of high school, and I am exactly seventeen years old."

Now, hours later, Mahmud's father bit his lower lip until it stung. If only he had given the boy a good thrashing and then

had locked him in—if he had just thrown him into a room and taken the key from the lock—then at least he would know his son's whereabouts. But if he were to inform the police at this point, no doubt they would arrest him, and if they arrested him . . . . It was Sidqi. Sidqi Pasha, who buried people alive. But what could he do? The boy might be hurt, wounded. He might be . . . . "Spite the Devil," he muttered to himself.

The clock on the wall above him began to sound the hour. Hardly breathing, Mahmud's mother listened and counted: seven chimes. She faltered for a moment, hung back, then rushed into the front room and planted herself before her husband, fixing him with frightened eyes that swung sharply from side to side.

"The boy is gone! He's gone for good! Gone!" She struck one palm against the other in a gesture of futility, seemingly unaware of the noise she was creating. Her normally soft, slightly limp features abruptly acquired an unfamiliar hardness. "If you won't go out—" The words died on her lips as her flustered husband struggled to his feet. On the stairs the sound of footsteps grew louder, the footfalls of more than one person, heavy and slow, steps that dragged. Layla ran to the door, her father close behind, and burst onto the landing with a shout.

"Mahmud!"

Still inside, her mother reeled and would have fallen had her fingertips not clutched the edge of the chair just in time. But when Mahmud came in, leaning on Isam's shoulder, she collapsed onto the floor in a faint.

The next morning Layla asked to see her brother before leaving for school. Her mother, eyes red and swollen, gave her a peculiar look as if she held a secret she was unwilling to share. Mahmud was still sleeping, she told her daughter in a whisper. Layla was uneasy, wondering what her mother's expression and manner of speaking meant.

"What's happened, Mama?"

As her mother leaned over, her swollen eyes took on a hard glint, the resistant fear of one who senses that she is the target of a well-aimed pistol. She spoke in the same whispered tone. "A bullet. A bullet went into his thigh."

"I already know that, Mama."

Her father broke in, lather covering his face. "Really, now—you like to make everything sound so terrible. I told you the doctor said it was a simple wound, no more than a scratch."

His wife waved his words away and began to count the day's household chores on her fingers, that strange, secretive look still masking her eyes. Layla gave her shoulders a dismissive shake and stood by the front door to await her cousin Gamila, her mother's sister's daughter who lived on the seventh floor. The moment she spied Gamila's hand through the door's glass panel, reaching across to ring the doorbell, Layla flung the door open. She closed it behind her slowly and very, very carefully.

It was not until they were on their way down the stairs that Gamila spoke. "What's wrong, Layla?"

"Nothing."

"No, I don't believe you. On the Prophet's honor, is there really nothing wrong?"

They came out into the street and turned in the direction of their school. "Yesterday was quite a day!" said Layla.

"Why? Did something happen?"

"Isam didn't say anything?" Layla struck her palm against her chest to dramatize her words.

"Say anything about what?" Gamila asked uncomfortably.

Layla rolled her eyes as she whispered. "About what happened to Mahmud, my brother Mahmud."

Gamila stopped, her discomfort and anxiety getting the better of her. "What? What's wrong with Mahmud?"

Layla's eyes hardened and froze as if she had just espied a gun barrel trained at her skull. She leaned close to Gamila, her words coming out in a measured, loud whisper.

"A bullet . . . a bullet in his thigh."

Gamila's schoolbag fell from her hand. Layla gave her a stare and walked on. Gamila ran to catch up, her breath coming in short gasps. "A bullet! Where on earth did this bullet come from, anyway?"

Layla's head jerked upward. "The English got him. They hit him because he is a nationalist. Because he is a hero."

"They hit him? Where?"

"Gamila, you never know what's going on! In the demonstration, of course, the one yesterday in Ismailiya Square."

"And what did the doctor say? Mightn't it be just a scratch?"

They were in front of the school. Layla did mean to tell her cousin what the doctor had said and what her father had echoed so firmly, but she saw the look of alarm in Gamila's eyes and noticed the awed respect, too. She couldn't help herself as they went inside. "What can he say? It was a bullet, after all."

A bullet. Mahmud a nationalist. A demonstration. The news caught fire through the school, and Layla found herself—a mere first-year student at the secondary school—the center of attention and admiration. It went on all day long. Older girls swarmed around her and teachers stopped her in the corridors to ask questions. The intensity of their interest intoxicated her, and she let her imagination go. His name? Mahmud Sulayman. His age? Seventeen. Layla, why didn't he go to the hospital? How could he go to the hospital, they would have arrested him there! So what did he do, then? Well, after he'd been wounded he just went on pelting the English back, the blood was absolutely pouring out but he didn't stop, his friend kept repeating "enough, stop" but it was no use. His buddy stayed right behind him all the way home, yes, dragged him home to the Astra Building, and they brought in a doctor, a relative, so that no one would find out, and he stayed in hiding as long as it was light, because if he had gone out in broad daylight wounded like that—well what a disaster it could have been!

By the end of the school day Mahmud had become a legend throughout the school building. It was he who had set fire to the

jeeps, and to the barricades behind which the English were hiding. It was he . . . and then it was he . . . Layla was sorry to see the school day end.

At the school entrance Inayat stopped her, tugging at her black leather belt to tighten it further around her small waist as the ringlets jostled each other across her forehead. Layla blushed. There was not a girl in her class who did not long for Inayat's attention. Moving the tip of her high-heeled shoe around in the sand, Inayat said, "Your brother Mahmud—what does he look like, Layla?"

A look of bewilderment crossed Layla's face.

"I mean, is he dark, light? Tall, short?"

"He's not dark and he's not light, he isn't tall, but he isn't short, either."

Inayat laughed and tilted her head pertly so that it almost met her shoulder. "Lovely!" Layla blushed harder but she managed to raise her eyes to the other girl provokingly, with a grin. "*Zayy al-qamar*, he's as gorgeous as a full moon." She could prove the truth of her words, she realized. She took off the pendant that hung on a chain around her neck and showed Inayat Mahmud's portrait in the little cameo. Inayat studied the tiny photograph carefully, and pursed her lips and said grudgingly, "Not bad. Pretty good-looking, in fact."

Layla took back the necklace and hung it around her neck, staring at the ground. Then she raised her head sharply. "I'll tell Mahmud that—I'll say, 'Inayat says you're good-looking.'"

"So how would Mahmud know who I am, anyway?"

"All the students at Khedive Ismail know you, in fact they say you're the reigning beauty queen of the Saniya School."

Inayat laughed agreeably and pinched Layla's cheek. "Careful, Layla—watch out I don't get mad at you."

Layla stamped her foot on the ground. "I'll say it. I will. I'll tell him."

She took off running in the direction of home. The moment she arrived, she burst into Mahmud's room, calling his name.

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But she stopped, suddenly aware of tension in the air. Mahmud was lying on his side, facing the wall, his eyes wide and unmoving as if he had not budged since yesterday. Isam, her aunt's son, sat on the edge of the bed rubbing his chin, and her mother stood next to him, a glass of lemonade in her hand.

"Come on, son. Sit up and wet your lips."

There was no sign that Mahmud had heard a word. His mother stepped over to a nearby table and set down the lemonade. She bent over the bed and reached out to feel his forehead.

"What's wrong, my boy? Tell me—I want to know that you're all right. What's the matter—where does it hurt? What are you feeling?"

Mahmud's face clouded and he spoke without turning to them. "Nothing."

"What do you mean, nothing?" His mother turned to Isam. "How do you like this state of affairs, Isam? From the minute he got home he's been like this, he won't say a word, just lies here moping in this black mood of his."

Suddenly Mahmud rolled over on the bed and sat up. He faced his mother. "Why all this fuss?" His voice was abnormally loud, the words seeming to force themselves with difficulty from his throat. "Why? I told you, it's a scratch. Child's play, just child's play." Repeating the phrase, his voice faded and he fell back onto the bed, his energy spent. His mother looked hard at him for a moment. His face had no color and his eyes were a glassy green, with the pale stare of feverishness. Drops of sweat stood out on his forehead. His mother opened her mouth to speak then pressed her lips together tightly and turned to leave the room. As she reached the door, Mahmud's faint voice came. "Mama . . . "

She stepped back into the room, but did not come all the way over to his bed. Mahmud sat up and beckoned her nearer. He leaned over to her as if he had a secret to tell. "You know—you know when you slaughter a hen and the blood runs out"—his voice was a whisper—"and the hen goes on moving, just for a

moment, and then falls down, boom, and that's it?" His eyes grew dark and his face went gloomy. He brought his fist down hard on the bedside table as he spoke in a voice that managed to be both a whisper and a wail.

"People died, lots of people—and that's exactly how they died."

"You'll feel better if you nap awhile longer, Mahmud," said his mother, stretching out her hands to his shoulders, trying to help him to lie back. He pushed one hand away slowly, his eyes searching out Isam's gaze. "Why? Why, Isam?"

Isam shrugged lightly and said calmly, "Why what?"

Mahmud gave his head a vigorous shake as if trying to come out of a nightmare. He slumped back against the headboard. "Nothing." His mother left the room. Layla took her place next to the bedside table and stood there looking anxiously at Mahmud in the silence.

"You mean, you don't want to talk about it!" exclaimed Isam.

"What's the point? If I told you about it, you wouldn't understand anyway. You're a guy who is all reason, all sense and balance. A guy who doesn't react to things, who never weakens."

"Quit it, you! Enough nonsense, on your papa's good name!"

Mahmud smiled thinly and a hint of color crept into his face. "Look, Isam, do you know what I feel like? I feel as if someone hit me hard, really gave me a beating. And I couldn't hit back. I couldn't even yell anything."

Layla's lips trembled and her face showed a wave of convulsions as if in response to a stabbing internal pain.

"One day soon," said Isam, "when the weapons are in our hands, they won't be able . . . "

Wailing "Mahmud!" and pouncing on her brother, Layla interrupted. She shook him by the shoulders. "Mahmud! Mahmud, you're the one who hit the English; it wasn't them who struck you. You, it was *you*, Mahmud." Her brother was silent, and so she twisted to face Isam, her hands still clamped firmly on Mahmud's stooped shoulders.

"Isam," she wheedled, "it was Mahmud, Mahmud who hit the English. Wasn't it, Isam?"

"Could there be any doubt?" responded Isam with a reassuring smile.

But Layla was not mollified. She turned back to Mahmud. "You, Mahmud, you. You." The wail was more subdued now. Try as he might, Mahmud could not avoid the blend of hope and flat despair in those eyes that confronted him squarely. She buried her face in his shoulder and he stared into the distance. "Yes, Layla. It was us—we struck the English."

Still sheltered on his shoulder, Layla began to laugh, laugh after laugh interspersed with sobbing. She raised her head, a smile on her face and tears glinting in her eyes. "I knew it, I just knew it. And besides, that's what I told them at school."

"What exactly did you tell them?" asked Mahmud.

"Everything, and the teachers were really delighted to hear what you did, they think you're wonderful, and—" Mahmud put his hand over her mouth. Layla pushed it away, her laughter now a teasing voice. "Even Inayat, she says you're handsome!" At that, Mahmud tried to conceal his smile.

"Inayat! Inayat who?" asked Isam. Her arms still around her brother, Layla turned to him. "You mean you don't know who Inayat is? She's the beauty queen of the Saniya School!"

"Oh, her! You son of a gun!" exclaimed Isam. "Inayat! She's a knockout."

Mahmud could not stop laughing. Satisfied that she had accomplished her mission, Layla sprang off the bed and hurried toward the door, but Mahmud stopped her.

"Layla."

"Yes?"

"First of all, you're a liar."

"Liar! What d'you mean, liar?"

"I mean . . . well . . . how would Inayat know, anyway? How could she have possibly seen me, to be able to say I'm a handsome hunk or an ugly ogre?"

Isam peered from brother to sister, a sly grin curving his lips. Pointing to the cameo hanging on her chest, Layla said, "She saw this picture of you."

Now a glint of inquisitive attention snared Mahmud's eyes. "Show me—which picture is it?" She took off the necklace and laid it in his open hands. He studied his own likeness with interest. Isam's grin widened, and he struck Mahmud on the thigh. "Mahmud—"

Mahmud turned to him, his left hand clutching the cameo. "What, Isam?"

"So what do you have to say now about that beating you got?" Mahmud kicked Isam and let the necklace drop to the floor. His sister knelt hastily to retrieve it; as her head bobbed up, level with Mahmud's, she paused in mid-movement, her eyes flashing as if an extraordinary thought had just popped into her head. "Me, too! When I get bigger I'll show those Englishmen! I'll carry a gun, I really will, and I'll shoot them all. When I grow up."

"Could there be any doubt?" laughed Isam, as Layla rose to her full height quickly and wheeled around to go out, with the measured bounce of the demonstrators, waving her right hand up and down, intoning, "Weapons, weapons, we want weapons. Weapons, wea–" She stopped dead, her arm dropped to her side and the words stalled on her lips. Her father was entering the room.

In a few days' time life regained its normal course. Preoccupied with daily demands, people acted as if the events of that day had been erased from their memories. Mahmud returned to school, and Layla no longer heard questions about him or the demonstration. At first she felt resentful, but gradually her own concerns took over.

One morning she woke up early as usual so that she could collar the newspaper before her father and brother were even up. Perched on the armchair in the front room, facing the apartment's

front door, she waited, her eyes shifting between the threshold and the clock until the newspaper appeared under the door. She had finished reading it and the clock said half past six, but still no one else in the family had emerged. She got to her feet, stretched contentedly, and tossed the paper onto the chair. But halfway to the door to her room she retraced her steps. She refolded the paper and ran her fingers along the crease, biting her lower lip, vexed at what she had to do out of fear of her father's scathing remarks. She hurried to her room, struggled into her school pinafore, and searched frantically for stockings and shoes, under the bed, beneath the wardrobe. She tugged a comb through her short black hair as she poked her feet into her shoes, grabbed one book from the table, retrieved another from beneath her pillow, threw them into her leather book bag, then scampered toward the dining room as if someone were in close pursuit. Careening into Mahmud did not stop her, but she did slow down when she saw her father standing before the basin, shaving. She worked her mouth into a polite smile.

"Good morning, Papa."

Her father muttered something unintelligible as he tilted his head back to shave his neck. She disappeared into the dining room and immediately demanded food in a loud voice. Her mother glared at her. "The *ful*-beans for breakfast haven't arrived yet." But her mother's cold look did nothing to dampen her enthusiasm.

"Anything's fine!"

"Why are you in such a rush? It's not even quite seven and the first bell isn't until eight thirty."

"But that errand."

"Ten minutes."

"I just want to eat, okay?" She yanked a chair away from the table, sat down, and rolled a bit of cheese in half of a bread round. She spread a thin layer of jam on top and gnawed industriously at her sandwich, swallowing it in lumps so that she could be off for school, off to slam her school bag on the grass and join

her classmates. Then the bell would ring and after a prolonged search for her bag she would head for arithmetic class.

She settled into her seat, rested her arm on the desktop, and propped her chin on it, her eyes glued to the teacher's hand as it moved across the blackboard. She must understand every word, she must, and every sum. She must. Miss Nawal said she had gotten better at arithmetic but she absolutely had to do even better—and better. Best in the class, so that Miss Nawal would show some fondness for her. Miss Nawal had to like her, she simply must.

This was the only *must* in eleven-year-old Layla's life. She must triumph, she must win over this slender teacher who pulled back her hair and wore it massed behind her head, who preferred mannish clothing, who could focus her small round eyes so intensely on you that it was as if she was going inside your head and ferreting out your thoughts; this teacher whose delicate lips would disappear whenever she tried to hold back a smile. Layla had begun the school year with a careful, polite smile always on her own lips. She sat primly through arithmetic class, her arms folded, ignoring the whispers of Adila, her deskmate. And even when Adila swung her legs to kick Layla under the desk, Layla restrained herself, only biting her lower lip. All of that, and she might as well not even have been in the room for all that Miss Nawal cared! When class was over, Layla waited until the last pupil had laid her workbook on the teacher's table, and only then she placed hers on the pile, straightening the whole stack, and starting to pick it up so that she could carry it to the teachers' room behind Miss Nawal. But Miss Nawal pressed her lips together and took the workbooks from her after thanking her. This peculiar teacher who refused to let a pupil carry her workbooks for her baffled Layla, but she did not give up. She knew a strategy that always worked. You could give the teacher an enchanting rose, and then when you went into the teachers' room with whatever excuse you drummed up, you'd find the teacher

there, the flower before her in a glass, and immediately you would know that some sort of bond had formed between the two of you. Hadn't the teacher kept the flower, after all? And preserved it carefully? Your rose, in front of her, in the glass. But Miss Nawal did not do what she was supposed to do. She did not preserve the flower in a glass. In fact, she did not even take the rose from the classroom. Nafisa took it—snub-nosed, kinky-haired Nafisa. At first it had all gone according to plan, but then things had gone awry. Walking into the classroom before the start of class, Layla had given the rose to the teacher. Miss Nawal had inhaled its scent and then had laid it carefully on top of her attendance book before turning to write the day's arithmetic problems on the blackboard. But before she had finished writing out the first one, she turned abruptly to face the class.

"Whoever is first to solve this problem gets the rose." So Nafisa got it as Layla looked on, her face stricken. She would snub Miss Nawal, she decided. And she did, until something transpired at home that caused her to revoke her decision. Her mother had asked her to bring her the alarm clock so that she could wind it. As Layla rushed over to her mother, the clock slipped out of her hand and the glass over its face broke. It shattered into pieces, just as the green vase with the handpainted white roses had shattered, just as the doll that said "mama" and had eyes that opened and shut had broken—just like everything in the house, in fact. Everything her fingers picked up. Her mother let out a scream, and went on screaming, as if something really horrid had happened, like a fire breaking out in the building. She bore down on Layla, face red with anger, and slapped both of her palms hard. Wiping the sweat from her forehead, she wailed, "What am I going to do with you? But what can I do with such rotten luck? God made you a real problem-child—may He take you and give us some peace!"

Her father, appearing in the doorway to his room, brought the matter to a close in his unruffled way, his voice firm but empty of anger. "I told you before that this one's no ordinary

girl. She's a *fitiwwa*, a real bull in a china shop." He turned, went back into his room, and shut the door behind him.

Layla stood before the oval mirror in her room. She stuck out her tongue, then ran it round her lips. Girl! Girl . . . *girl* . . . "A nice girl," the Headmistress had said in the courtyard, pinching her on the cheek. The headmistress was fond of her, and so was Miss Zaynab, and Miss Zahiya, and Miss Ratiba, all of the teachers, in fact. All except . . . . Layla sucked her tongue in and clamped her mouth shut. All except Miss Nawal. Because they had to like her. They had to—everyone in the school had to like her. Miss Nawal had to like her. She had to. Layla closed her eyes and turned her back to the mirror. She could see Nafisa in her mind's eye, holding a red rose to her snub nose. Suddenly she hurried to her book bag and took out her arithmetic workbook, her fat exercise book, and a pencil. She had an idea. She sprawled across the floor and opened the workbook to its first page.

Thus began a fierce attempt to conquer those numbers. Stark, bold numbers, skipping along before her eyes, figures coming together or splitting apart, adding, subtracting without any obvious logic, multiplying, dividing, suddenly confronting her with an answer that stared her wickedly in the face. Use your brain, Miss Nawal had said. But in arithmetic her brain refused to budge. In Arabic composition her mind worked just fine; one word brought another, and one sentence yielded the next, and her hand flew to keep up with her mind: a flitting bird, streaking through the sky far above the flock, diving to its nest with anxious love for its tiny baby birdies, encircling them with its wings to keep them warm. Or: here she was, a little child lost and wandering among unfamiliar people who stared at her but didn't see the tears in her eyes. Or she was Madame Curie, or she was a hero smashing the prison bars to save the folk from the colonizers. She was all of them, and others, too, if she wished. Or at the very least she could feel herself identifying and sympathizing with all of them. But in arithmetic, where

was she? With a grocer, selling sugar and buying oil. With a faucet, dripping X number of times per minute. With a basin, filling slowly to the brim with all of those uncountable drops. She was with numbers that danced before your eyes without any beauty or sense. But, sense or nonsense, she absolutely had to understand every word and every letter.

She began to get the better of the numbers. She grasped one strand from here, and wound in another from there; she twisted them together and held them delightedly in her fist. She began to make progress. Miss Nawal encouraged her at every step, until ahead of her remained only Nafisa. That girl could still solve the problems quicker than she could, and the grades in her workbook remained higher than the marks in Layla's. Layla put all her energy into this mission: trying to outdo Nafisa.

Nafisa was standing up to respond to a question from Miss Nawal. She got to her feet unhurriedly, spoke carefully, and answered precisely what was asked of her, no more and no less. Layla wondered if it was possible to surpass Nafisa, who was so very strong in arithmetic. All through elementary school she had done better than Layla, always staying several levels ahead. Now, could Layla possibly pass her in first-year secondary school arithmetic, when it was so difficult? And she was so weak—weak at arithmetic, weak in everything.

Without warning, Miss Nawal directed a question at Layla, who stammered an answer. She sat down again and tried to focus all of her attention on the arithmetic problems. Silence came over the class, as Miss Nawal walked up and down the rows, reading the solutions from above the pupils' heads. When she stopped at Layla's desk, Layla bent her head lower, the pencil motionless in her hand as if she were thinking hard. Miss Nawal read, pressed her lips together, and bent over Layla.

"You're doing well indeed, my dear."

Layla's eyes met Miss Nawal's. She felt a lump stuck in her throat and swallowed the saliva in her mouth with difficulty. Miss

Nawal put out her hand and ruffled Layla's hair, as if she were combing it from the nape to the crown, and then walked on.

Layla reached her hands up to pat her hair into place, but they hung in midair and she felt her eyes tear over as she realized that, yes, she could outdo Nafisa, and ten more as good as Nafisa, as long as Miss Nawal stood by her.

School was over for the day. Layla stood under the sycamore tree in the schoolyard. Gamila sat facing her on a wooden bench, and settled next to her on the grass was Sanaa. In the middle stood Adila, doing an imitation of their English teacher. Sucking in her cheeks and holding her body rigid, her arms stiffly to her sides, Adila marched, raising one leg and then the other in exaggerated regimental fashion. Her voice came out hollow as if she were a wooden doll. Gamila was laughing so hard that she had to cover her face with her hands. Sanaa doubled over, supporting her shaking middle with one hand. Layla's cheeks puffed up into little balls and her eyes narrowed to slits; the howls spun from her mouth in waves that came faster and faster until one swept over the next and she could hardly breathe. She turned her back on her schoolmates, leaning against the sycamore trunk, trying to regain her breath. She took out her handkerchief to dry her tears. Her hand stopped in midair, her eyes still streaming, as she suddenly became aware that Adila had not completed her sentence and the laughter had stopped abruptly. What had happened? She whirled round to face her classmates. Sanaa had lowered her eyes to the ground and was yanking out clumps of grass, barely getting one fistful out before fiercely seizing another, as if she had been assigned the task. Gamila seemed to be staring at a distant horizon.

"What is that bit of red on your pinafore, Layla?" came Adila's voice. Layla's head whipped around and she pulled the back of the pinafore forward anxiously. "Ink, must be ink. What else could it be?"

Gamila shook her head slowly, her eyes resting somberly on her cousin. At her mournful look, a sense of dread seemed to fill Layla's body. She didn't know where the sensation came from, and uncomfortably she started forward, meaning to throw her arms around Gamila. But she stopped dead when she caught sight of Adila's mocking, superior gaze.

"Congratulations, Madame Layla," said Adila with a smile of scorn. "You've grown up now."

Gamila gently drew Layla away. In the school bathroom she cut away the red spot with a razor. When Layla's mother saw the pinafore she exclaimed, "My dear! Why didn't you wash the spot out instead of cutting your pinafore?" But this time she did not treat Layla roughly at all.

Layla shifted her body warily in her bed, stretching slowly as if she were made of fragile glass that might shatter at a touch. She lay on her back, her eyes staring into the darkness. How strange this all was! She had only sensed the curious heaviness in her body when she had seen that look in Gamila's eyes. And it was the same expression she'd caught in her mother's gaze. What had happened, of course, had happened long before Adila's discovery of it, maybe even while she had sat in class that morning, but still, she had not felt the slightest bit sick or tired this morning. To the contrary, she'd felt light in mind and body, she had been ready to run and laugh and bury her face in the blooms of the garden. She'd felt strong, and smart, and as if she could get ahead of Nafisa in arithmetic. But now, Layla realized suddenly, her eyes still wide open in the darkened room, it all seemed totally insignificant. Everything did—Miss Nawal, Nafisa, arithmetic. It seemed as if all of those events had happened to her a long time ago. She closed her eyes and tried to summon the image of Miss Nawal bending over her desk. She concentrated so hard on that image that she felt sweat breaking out on her forehead. Yet the picture remained faint, fleeting, out of focus; and it was quickly erased by the scene at the

sycamore tree, and Gamila, giving her a look that reflected a sorrowful, loving sympathy.

"But why, Gamila, why?" Layla found herself saying out loud. "I *want* to get older. Yes, I do." Her eyes open again, she stared into the blackness.

To grow older. To become like her mother. No! To become like . . . like the history supervisor who helped their teachers, the woman with the broad, pale forehead, who held her head so erect, with her long, carefully coiffed black hair, and her gait as measured and dignified as that of any queen.

Layla heard the front door open. The light on in the front hall seeped into her bedroom, and to the bed where she lay; and then it disappeared as her father headed for his room, which shared a wall with hers. When she had arrived home from school that afternoon, he had already gone out. At the table her mother told her that he had been invited to dine out.

Now her father would learn of it. He would certainly find out, for her mother would tell him. What would he say, she wondered? He would be happy, of course, and he would show it, as he had when Mahmud's chin had first sprouted a beard.

On that day, she recalled, her father had stopped Mahmud and had drawn him over to the window where the light was stronger. He had stared at his son, and the look in his eyes had made Layla wonder whether he still had his feet on the ground! He seemed to be soaring somewhere above, Mahmud in tow. His face had reddened; he had laughed and laughed, for no reason at all.

The laughs died away . . . the stillness grew to encompass everything, and Layla's eyes stared into the darkness, as if in wait. Now she could hear her mother's voice, lowered; she stiffened as she made out her own name, and heard it come up again and again in the conversation. Then silence hung thickly over the room once again, an absolute stillness, a massed darkness.

A sobbing wail sliced through the silence and Layla jumped out of bed as if stung. But immediately she recognized her

father's tones in that wail. She stood transfixed in the middle of the room. She heard pleading invocations to God cut into the sobbing—"Lord, give me strength! She's just a helpless girl. Oh God!"—interrupted from time to time by her mother's voice, calm and low.

"That's enough, *ya sidi!* The girl can hear us."

"Protect us, Lord, protect us! Shield us from harm." The voice grew fainter until, with a final choked sob, it was silent. Layla felt a desolate emptiness expand to fill her chest, and a tremor that began on her lips moved to her hands and legs. Sweat trickled from the nape of her neck all the way down her back. Moving about in the darkness, groping for the door, she struck against something and wanted to scream, to call out to her mother. "Don't be afraid, dear," her mother had said that afternoon; now, the scream faded on her lips. Her legs felt heavy; she dragged herself back to the bed and lay down on her back. "Don't be afraid, dear, don't worry. You've grown up." And Layla tugged at the coverlet, yanking it over her body, over her face, pulling it up to the very top of her head.

On that remarkable evening Layla had not been able to fathom why Gamila had given her that melancholy gaze, or why her father had wept. It was only with the passage of years that she came to understand—and then she understood very well, indeed. She grew to the realization that to reach womanhood was to enter a prison where the confines of one's life were clearly and decisively fixed. At its door stood her father, her brother, and her mother. Prison life, she discovered, is painful for both the warden and the woman he imprisons. The warden cannot sleep at night, fearful that the prisoner will fly, anxious lest that prisoner escape the confines. Those prison limits are marked by trenches, deeply dredged by ordinary folk, by all of them; by people who heed the limits and have made themselves sentries. Yet the prisoner feels in her bones that she is strong, that she has powers within her, ones she has never before sensed; she knows

the abrupt and shocking strength of a body developing, growing. She finds herself held by powers that sweep all before them, that impel her toward freedom. She sees forces in her body that those border trenches work to enclose and contain; and she knows powers in her mind that the confines themselves work to impound. For they are insensible limits that neither hear, nor see, nor perceive. Layla's father had outlined those confines as the family sat around the table, eating lunch. His voice showed no uncertainty or hesitation.

"Layla, you must realize that you have grown up. From now on you are absolutely not to go out by yourself. No visits. Straight home from school."

Turning his eyes on Mahmud, he added, "I don't want to see any novels or girlie magazines around here. Understand?"

Mahmud dropped his head and twisted his lower lip. His father's voice grew less harsh. "If there's something you want to read, you can read it outside the house. Don't try to bring it here and hide it. I don't want anything poisoning the girl's mind." His eyes met Mahmud's, a man-to-man gaze, and son gave father a knowing smile.

"And, Mahmud, I don't see any reason why your friends need to visit you at home. Aren't the cafe and the club enough, pal?"

Mahmud's smile broadened. "Yes, Papa, they are. But what about Isam? He studies with me."

Her mother's eyes traveled upward from her plate, clouded with worry. "Isam—now really, is he a stranger? He's your cousin, my sister's son! Layla's not going to cover herself up in front of her cousin."

Their father wiped his mouth with his napkin. "Isam, well, never mind that. Isam is one of us."

Layla said nothing. No one expected any words from her. Now it was her mother's turn—her mother's turn to play a never-ending role. And she performed it so assiduously that now, whenever Layla heard steps, she would automatically throw a glance behind her, in expectation of her mother's harsh words of blame

for whatever it was she had most recently done, whatever error she had supposedly committed or problem she had caused. The worst of it was that she never knew what it might turn out to be. Something "improper," something "inappropriate," something that did not befit the daughter of respectable folk. A sudden laugh, straight from the heart, was "improper." Why? Too loud. Any statement that Layla thought frank and sincere was labeled "out of bounds." Out of what bounds? The bounds of polite conduct. "There's something, dear, called the fundamentals—the rules, the right way to behave."

And then there was the matter of sitting. "Goodness, Layla! Either you sprawl across the chair like a know-it-all or you swing one leg across the other—what will people say? I can already hear them grumbling—'She wasn't brought up right.'"

"People, people. I'm sick of people. I don't want to see anyone."

"Stop it! People must see you, of course. Otherwise, they'd say, 'Why's she hidden away? Is her arm crippled, or what? Or is she lame?'"

If she refrained from going into the living room to greet guests, her mother accused her of being "a recluse—you don't like anyone." But if, on the other hand, she did go in to greet them, her mother scolded her for not conversing animatedly. Yet if she spoke up, her mother said she was interfering in adults' business. If she stayed, sitting in silent politeness, her mother waved her out of the room! But whenever she tried to make a hasty retreat, her mother would say, "Why were you in such a rush?"

"Mama, I don't know what to do! You've completely confused me now. Everything I do turns out to be wrong, wrong, wrong!"

"Whoever lives by the fundamentals can't possibly go wrong."

"So what are these fundamentals?"

"The fundamentals are when one . . . " And so her mother would set new limits, add new restrictions. They were like water

dripping rhythmically onto a sleeping person, the regularity of them stealing the sleep from her eyes, drop by drop, hour after hour, day by day, year after year.

And year after year, Layla grew.

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