

## **Women of the Moon**

Mayya who had lost herself over her black Butterfly Brand sewing machine had lost herself in the ardour of love.

A love mute, yet one that would shake her thin body every night in waves of weeping and sighs. There were many moments when she felt she would die from the sheer force of her desire to see him, and in her dawn prayer, she took an oath: “I swear by God Almighty, I don't ask for anything, only to see him . . . I swear by God Almighty, I don't want him to notice me, just to see him.” Her mother believed that pale, silent Mayya had no other thought in the world beyond her fabrics and her threads, and that the only thing her ears were tuned to was the sound of the sewing machine. But Mayya heard all the sounds in the world and saw all the colours as she sat chained to her wooden chair opposite the machine the whole day long and part of the night, hardly raising her head except to reach for the scissors or to bring out some more thread from the plastic basket she kept inside the chest. The mother felt guiltily thankful for how little she ate, and she hoped in secret that someone would come along who would appreciate her flair for sewing and her sparing appetite and take her for a wife; and he came.

She was sitting on her wooden chair behind the sewing machine at the end of the long corridor when her mother came to her with a jubilant face and placed

her hand on her shoulder: “Mayya—my daughter—the son of the merchant Sulayman has come asking for your hand.” Mayya's body convulsed, and her mother's hand became heavy as lead on her shoulder. Her throat dried up and she saw her sewing threads winding around her neck like a noose. The mother smiled: “I thought you were past the age of blushing like girls do.” And the matter was settled. Nobody opened it again after that point. Her mother busied herself preparing the wedding clothes, the incense mixes and the upholstery, and spreading the news among the relatives. Her sisters fell quiet and her father put everything in the hands of her mother, for they were her daughters after all and matters of marriage are matters for women.

Mayya secretly gave up praying; she said in a low voice: “My God, I swore to you I wasn't asking for anything, I just wanted to see him . . . I swore to you I would do nothing wrong and I would keep my feelings to myself. I swore to you by everything. So why did you send this son of Sulayman's to our house? To punish me for my love? But I let nothing show to him, I didn't even let anything show to my sisters. Why did you send Sulayman's son to our house? Why?”

Khoula said: “Are you leaving us, Mayya?” Mayya said nothing. Asma' said: “Are you ready?” And she laughed: “Do you remember the admonition a Bedouin woman gave to her bride-to-be daughter, which we found in the book *The Most Exquisite Elements* in the storeroom?” Mayya said: “It wasn't in the *The Most Exquisite Elements*.” Asma' flared up: “And what would you know about books? The admonition was in the book *The Most Exquisite Elements from Every Elegant Art*, the book with the red cover on the second shelf. The Bedouin woman admonished the bride to use water and kohl and give her attention to food and drink.” Mayya said darkly: “Yes, and to laugh if he laughs and cry if he cries and be pleased if he's pleased.” Khoula stepped in: “What's the matter with you, Mayya? The Bedouin

woman didn't say that. You mean, to rejoice at his joy and to grieve over his grief.” Mayya's voice grew fainter: “And who will grieve over my own grief?” The word “grief” had a strange ring and spread a jarring spirit among the sisters.

When Mayya saw Ali bin Khalaf, he had been in London studying for years and had come home without a degree. But Mayya was thunderstruck the very moment she laid eyes on him. He was so tall he touched against a swift cloud that was scudding across the sky, and so thin Mayya wished she could lend him support against the wind that drove the cloud into the distant horizon. He was noble. He was a saint. He was nothing like those ordinary people who sweat and sleep and curse. “I swear to you, God, I just want to see him one more time.” And she saw him, during the time of the date harvest, leaning against a date palm, with his skullcap off because of the intense heat. She saw him and wept, and she turned aside at the first waterwheel and burst into sobs.

Then she concentrated her mind on his spirit; she gathered together every living particle of her existence and focused it intently on his existence. She concentrated so hard she stopped breathing and her heart almost ceased to beat. She directed her spirit toward his with all the force available to her. The material world had disappeared around her as she sent it out; her body shook convulsively and came close to collapsing as she transmitted that tremendous amount of energy to him. And she waited for a sign from him, any sign that would let her know her message had been received, but no sign came.

“I swear to you, God, I only want to see him, with sweat on his brow once more, with his hand resting on the date palm, with the date between his teeth as he chews it. I swear to you my God, I won't tell anyone about the floodwaters swelling inside me. I swear to you my God, I don't want him to notice me. Who am I, to be worth anyone's notice? I'm just a girl who knows how to sew and that's all. I'm not

clever like Asma' and pretty like Khoula. I swear to you, God, I can wait a whole month, will you let me see him after a month is over? And I swear to you, God, I won't forget a single prayer, neither the obligatory nor the supererogatory ones, and I won't dream about things that make you angry. I swear to you God I don't want to touch his hand or his hair. I swear to you God I don't want to wipe the sweat from his brow under the date palm.” And she wept, she wept for a long time, and when Sulayman's son came to their house, she stopped praying, and then when the wedding was over she started back again. She told herself these were her just deserts; God had known she hadn't meant a single word she'd sworn, and had punished her for her sin.

When she became pregnant a month later, she wished the birth would turn out as easy as her mother's. She recollected her words: “I was chasing a chicken around the courtyard to slaughter it for lunch because my uncle had come by unexpectedly to visit, when suddenly I felt like I'd burst and I fell to the ground rolling from pain. Your father fetched the midwife Mariya, and the moment she laid eyes on me she said: 'It's time!' I leaned against her for support till we made it into the room and then she shut the door and made me stand on my feet and she lifted my hands so I could hold onto the stake that was fixed to the wall with all my strength. When my legs gave way beneath me, midwife Mariya cried out, God bless her: 'For shame, for shame, the daughter of the shaykh Mas'ud will give birth lying down, she couldn't stand up on her own two feet.' And I stood up pulling tight on the stake until you slid out into my pants, Mayya, and you'd have choked to death if the midwife Mariya hadn't loosed my hands and pulled you out. God be my witness, nothing was revealed and not a living soul saw me. The rest of you can go to the hospitals of Moskad if that's what you like and have the Indians and the Christians make a spectacle of you. God be my witness, Mayya, I gave birth to you and your

sisters standing up like a mare. God have mercy on your soul, midwife Mariya—I was holding on to the stake with both hands and she was yelling at me: 'Not a peep from you, you hear? Women give birth the world over. A single cry from you and you're disgraced. You're disgraced, you the shaykh's daughter . . . ' And the only word that escaped my lips was: 'Oh my God.' And nowadays they give birth lying down and the men can hear their screams from the other side of the hospital. No shame left in the world, by God . . . ”

When her belly had grown so round she could no longer sleep, Mayya said to the son of the merchant Sulayman: “Listen to me, I'm not going to give birth here among the midwives. I want you to take me to Moskad.” He interrupted her: “I've told you a thousand times, it's called 'Muscat'.” She continued as if she hadn't heard him: “I want to give birth at the hospital *al-Sa'ada*.” He said: “And have my child fall into the hands of Christians?” Mayya said nothing, and when she entered her nine month, her husband took her to his uncle's house at Wadi 'Adi in Muscat until she gave birth, in the Mission Hospital *al-Sa'ada*, to a diminutive girl.

Mayya opened her eyes and saw her daughter in her mother's hands. She fell asleep and when she opened her eyes again, the girl was feeding at her breast. And when the son of the merchant Sulayman came to see the child, Mayya told him she'd like to call her “London.” He thought she was worn out from the birth and was raving. On the next day she came back to his uncle's house with the girl and her mother, and informed his relatives that the baby's name was London. His aunt made her fresh chicken broth, baked her flatbread and gave her fenugreek tonic with honey to drink, then she helped her wash her hands and sat by her bedside. “Mayya, my girl.” Mayya said: “What is it?” The woman stroked her arms and said: “Are you still set on giving the child that strange name? What kind of person calls their child 'London'? That's the name of a town, my girl—a Christian town. All of us

are at a loss what to say, and I think you're now well enough to have another think about a name for the girl. Call her after your mother, Salema.” The mother was in the room, and got angry. “Why do you want to call her after me when I'm still alive and well, my dear – are you trying to hasten my death? So that the girl can take my place?” The aunt quickly corrected herself: “God forbid, that wasn't what I meant; many people name their kids after their parents while they're still brimming with health—far be such evils from you, Salema. Call her Miryem or Zaynab or Safiya—anything but London.” Mayya took her daughter between her hands and raised her in the air. “What's wrong with 'London'? There's a woman in Ja'lan called London.” The aunt said impatiently: “You know that's not her name. That's just a nickname people gave her because her skin's so white. And this girl—I mean—” Mayya brought the girl down to her lap. “She's not white like the family of the merchant's son, but she belongs to them, and her name is London.”

Salema decided the time had come for her daughter and granddaughter to return home to al-Awafi to complete the forty days of confinement at her mother's house and under her supervision. She said to her daughter's husband: “Listen up, Abdullah my boy. Your wife here has been given a daughter for her firstborn, and daughters are a blessing to the house; they help their mother out and they bring up their siblings. We want forty live chickens for her, a jar of real mountain honey, and a jar of local cow ghee, and when London is a week old, shave her head and give its weight in silver in alms, and slaughter a sheep for her and distribute the meat to the poor.” She pronounced the word “London” with distinct emphasis. Abdullah's face changed colour, but he nodded and took his small family and his mother-in-law back to al-Awafi.

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The plane was passing through thick clouds, and sleep eluded Abdullah even though it was a long journey to Frankfurt. At the time when women were giving birth at *al-Sa'ada* Hospital in Muscat, black Butterfly Brand sewing machines hadn't yet reached Oman. So how could Mayya have been sewing on this machine? Electricity as a whole had only reached a few parts of the country. There may have been a few more hospitals actually around at the time London was born; there were definitely other hospitals around—*al-Rahma* Hospital in Matrah at the very least, maybe also *al-Nahda* Hospital in Ruwi; so why was Mayya so set on giving birth in the mission hospital? I don't remember . . . I can't make the connection between all these events. Her mother said to me: “Have some livestock slaughtered for London, and fetch twenty chickens for your wife who's fresh from labour,” and she pronounced the word “twenty” with special emphasis even though she knew I'd bring thirty chickens and a sheep on top. My uncle's wife in the old house at Wadi Adi stood in the courtyard and railed at me at the top of her voice: “*London?* And you *agreed?* Don't you have a say in your daughter's name?” I don't know whether they tore the house down or whether they sold it. I only saw her once or twice after my uncle died. When London graduated from the Faculty of Medicine at the Sultan's University, she said: “I want a BMW”; and Mayya put the Butterfly Brand sewing machine in storage when we moved to the new house. Why did she give up sewing? When did she give it up? It was after she gave birth to Muhammad, the year I took over my father's business and we moved to Muscat. Mayya was over the

moon, she said she didn't want to spend her entire life under her mother's thumb, and when she gave birth to Muhammad she gave up sewing, fifteen years ago when they opened up the new road in the south and they had the factory built. London's friend Hanan was teaching at a primary school in Salala when she rang up in the middle of the night to tell us that a group of teenagers had broken into the teachers' dorms and had raped several of them, and had also raped Hanan. And Mayya threw a big feast for the new house in Muscat and invited all her friends. She spread out a long tablecloth and arranged all the dishes on it side by side. Salem was in primary school, and Muhammad looked just like any other baby. Mayya was in a joyful mood, and when night came she put on her dark blue sleeping gown. When they had gone to sleep, I said to her: "Do you love me, Mayya?" and she started. She didn't say a word, and then she laughed . . . she laughed in a shrill voice which got on my nerves. She said: "Where'd you come up with this soap-opera love-talk, man? Or has the satellite dish and the Egyptian films you've been watching made you dotty?" Muhammad stood on my knees and pulled hard on my beard. Mayya slapped him, and he cried and cried. I never mustered the nerve to shave off my beard even after my father died, and when they opened the new classes for the eradication of illiteracy Mayya got into sixth grade straight away because she could read and write and do some maths. I told her: "Mayya, Muhammad is still young. You can go to school when he's a little older." She said: "I want to learn English, man." That was before we got the satellite dish; even when I asked her whether she loved me, that time in her dark blue sleeping gown, satellite dishes hadn't arrived yet, and I hadn't been watching any Egyptian films. When my father lay on his deathbed in *al-Nahda* Hospital, I stretched out my hand toward his and he pushed it firmly aside. And as we walked down to the funeral my knees could not support my weight. That was when Muhammad was just one year old. And when I asked Mayya:

“Do you love me?” she gave a shrill laugh. All the walls in the new house came crashing down from her laughter and the children fled. But Mayya hadn't been watching soap operas either. Salem had gone wild on Mexican soap operas, then he got bored with them and got caught up in video games; every time we'd go to Dubai he'd buy two or three games. Mayya's mother said: “You guard my daughter Mayya like the apple of your eye, Abdullah my boy; don't you take her away from me to Moskad. There's no-one sews better than her, and she's not one for eating or talking too much.” I told him: “Father please, I want to go to Egypt or Iraq to study at university,” and he grabbed me from the neck and yelled: “As sure as this beard lives, you're not setting a foot out of Oman. You want to go to pot? And come back from Egypt and Iraq with your beard shaved off, smoking and drinking?” And I started work in his business straight after secondary school, but I didn't move to Muscat for good until after he'd passed away. London was beautiful and plump; Mayya would bathe her in the aqueduct every evening and she'd be laughing. I would buy her Heinz baby food and Milupa. She was the only child in al-Awafi who'd be eating these things. I'd bring them back from the grocery store and Mayya would take great pride in them. My father shouted at me: “Boy,” “Boy,” and I was a father of three, I was no boy. I approached him and once again he began taking off his dishdasha and his undershirt; the sparse white hairs on his chest gleamed in the feeble sunlight stealing through the heavy curtains. I approached the curtains and he raised his finger: “I'm warning you, I'm warning you,” and I left them. He cried out in a fit of senile delirium which would come upon him again and again during the two years before his death: “Boy—go tie up the slave Sanjar at the eastern post of the courtyard, boy, and anyone who gives him water or shade will have to reckon with me.” I squatted down beside him: “The government freed the slaves a long time ago, father, and Sanjar has left for Kuwait.” Every summer London says: “Dad,

let's go visit Kuwait”, and Mayya refuses. “Shall we jump out of the frying pan into the fire? I'm not going to Kuwait, by God.” And Sanjar's daughter got married to an Omani and came back to live in Muscat. She recognised me when she saw me at *al-Nahda* Hospital where she works as a nurse. She saw my father who was lying on his deathbed and her mouth turned. My father shouted with trembling black lips: “Tie up the slave Sanjar so that he never goes thieving after the onion sacks again.” And when I say nothing he waves his stick in my face: “Don't you hear, boy? I say go discipline him so that he never thieves again.” London loves playing in the water. When she was six, Mayya rebuked me for letting her play in the filthy rainwater for two hours and warned me she'd be left crippled for life. I went several days without sleeping, watching her small feet closely, but no harm came to her and she continued running like a gazelle. My father's lips had turned black, his eyebrows had sunk back and a spray of saliva was flying out of his mouth: “Boy, have you tied up the slave Sanjar, the thief, to the eastern post?” I took his hand into my own to kiss it and he pulled it away. “The government freed the slaves, father, and Sanjar – the government, father.” My father growled out as if he'd finally heard me: “What's the government got to do with it? Sanjar is *my* slave, he's not theirs to free. I bought his mother Zarifa for twenty silver piasters and I gave her food to eat at a time when a sack of rice cost a hundred silver piasters—yes, a hundred piasters—piaster on piaster—ah, dear Zarifa—sweet-tasting Zarifa—good, soft Zarifa—but she grew up—she got cocky and I married her off to Habeeb, and she gave birth to that thief. What's the government got to do with it? He's *my* slave—how can he go away without asking me? How, boy?” And when the trembling returns to him and sweat comes streaming down his neck and chest, I wipe it off with that blue towel that always hangs from a nail on the door. After his death, the towel vanished. When I entered his room rolling on the ground with inconsolable weeping, my whole body

was covered in sweat and the towel was not to be found. The butterfly sewing machine also vanished. I haven't gone into the storeroom but I know Mayya keeps it hidden somewhere inside. Mayya cooks a delicious *sambusa* which I never loved before she made it for me. And when we moved to the new house, she made a huge dish of *sambusa* along with the other dishes. I said to her: "Mayya, let the housemaid give you a hand with the cooking," and she said nothing, and a few months later she suddenly insisted on sending the housemaid home. And at night the air in the room was perfumed and her dark blue sleeping gown was diaphanous and I said to her: "Do you love me, Mayya?" and she said nothing. And then she laughed. She laughed. She laughed. I was the tallest boy in the class and Zarifa had fastened my dishdasha so tight around my neck I couldn't breathe. The teacher said: "How many have you got on you, boy?" I'd kept the pocket money I'd been given on the feast and I'd only bought a single coconut sweet so I said to him: "Half a riyal," and the teacher burst out laughing. I hate laughter, when people laugh they turn into monkeys, their bellies and necks shake and their rotting and yellow teeth show. "How old are you?" "Ten or twelve." And the teacher laughed again: "You don't know your own age? You're too old for first grade." But what was I to do, when the school had only opened after I was too old. The other students whose dishdashas weren't strapping their necks in tightly like mine shouted: "Abdullah's too tall, we don't want him sitting in front of us, sir." Mr Mamduh took my hand and whispered: "Have you got any Omani *halwa*?" And I shook my head. He said: "You bring in some sweets tomorrow." Zarifa cried out: "*Halwa*? That's what he said? Not pencils, not notebooks—he said *halwa*?" Habeeb had left her and Sanjar was running away from the house. She was spending her entire days cooking and looking after me. Mayya is always busy; in the beginning it was with sewing and the kids, then she got busy with the school and her friends, and finally she got busy with sleeping.

I would breathe in the smell of chicken broth on Zarifa as I slipped my head into her bosom to sleep. Mr Mamduh said: “Abdullah can spell his name so he'll be moving to third grade,” and this is how I ended up in third grade along with four other students who spelled out their names successfully on the blackboard or brought in *halwa* for Mr Mamduh.

The clouds parted and the clear sky suddenly appeared in the window of the small plane. Abdullah the son of the merchant Sulayman dozed off for a few moments before waking up mumbling: “Please don't hang me upside down in the well, I beg you, don't hang me upside down in the well.”