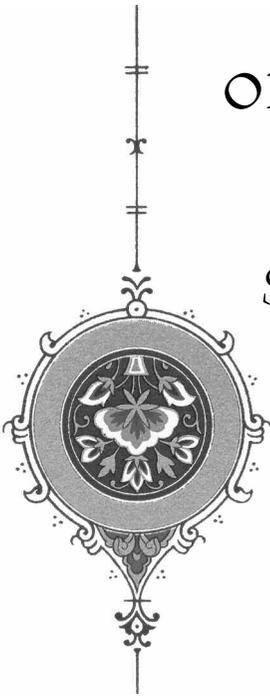


The  
Inheritance  
of Exile

*Stories from South Philly*



Susan Muaddi Darraj

*University of Notre Dame Press*

*Notre Dame, Indiana*

Copyright © 2007 by Susan Muaddi Darraj

Published by the University of Notre Dame Press  
Notre Dame, Indiana 46556  
www.undpress.nd.edu

All Rights Reserved

Manufactured in the United States of America

*Library of Congress Cataloging in-Publication Data*

Darraj, Susan Muaddi.

The inheritance of exile : stories from South Philly / Susan Muaddi Darraj.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-0-268-03503-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-268-03503-2 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Arab American women—Fiction. 2. Mothers and daughters—Fiction.

3. South Philadelphia (Philadelphia, Pa.)—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3604.A75154 2007

813'.6—dc22

2007002523

∞ *The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.*

# NADIA





## Back to the Surface

Nobody believed what I said about Siti, not even my mother. Maybe she didn't want to accept it, maybe it was too painful, like opening your eyes to the yellow glare of the midday sun, so she resisted.

"Nadia, your grandmother is dead," my mother said, soothing me back to sleep. She knelt on the floor, hovering over my bed, stroking my hair along my back the way she used to when, as a child of twelve, I cried for my father. A drunk driver had hit him that year, but it took him three months to die in the hospital. "They'll have to take me kicking and screaming," he'd promise, lying still in his hospital bed, in too much pain to even clasp my hand. But he left without a sound.

Now my mother smoothed my hair again in long, comforting strokes that ended in the middle of my back, before starting again at the top of my head, like a skier at the summit

of a steep slope. Except that now I was twenty-one and seeing visions of my grandmother.

“But I saw her,” I repeated stubbornly, my shoulders still shaking. I’d awakened, screaming, minutes earlier, prompting my mother to burst in from her adjoining bedroom.

“What did she say?” she asked, patiently. Nervously.

“Nothing,” I sighed. I knew she wouldn’t believe me or, worse, would try to argue with me, begging me to “be logical.” “Go back to bed—we’re both tired. I’m fine now.”

My father had never spoken to me again after he died, though I willed him to. Many nights that year, I’d lie attentively in bed, conjuring up his image in my mind. Not as he looked in the coffin—pale and pasty, the mortician’s makeup job masking his smooth olive skin—but as he looked when he played baseball with me or as he sang songs during road trips to entertain Mama and me. Since I was always in the backseat, I could only glimpse his mustache and lips in the rearview mirror, sometimes his white teeth when he smiled, pleased at how well he’d delivered a particular verse. So his half-face is what I frequently imagined, though it never spoke to me, only gazed at me sadly, apologetically, lips pressed together.

On the other hand, my grandmother arrived in my dreams the same night that she died—she flew in quietly and settled into the brightest corner of my mind. She wore her pale blue housedress, its large pockets weighed down with her large bundle of keys, her packet of cigarettes, chapstick, quarters for the washing machine, and the eyeglasses that she refused to wear. They were unusable anyway, having been badly scratched by the constant companionship of sharp-edged keys. Her face was rolled into a quiet smile that would often unravel into a sneaky grin, reminding me of the times she allowed me a clandestine reprieve from my punishments as soon as my mother left our apartment. Siti’s hands smelled salty, like the brine of the grape leaves she was eternally stuffing and rolling at the kitchen table while listening to her tapes of Om Kulthoum in concert. “That

woman had a voice, God bless her,” she would say, shaking her head in amazement, her fingers working quickly and steadily, stacking the completed grape leaves in piles before her, like an arsenal of snowballs on a winter afternoon.

The first night she appeared, she said, “I’m sorry that I didn’t wait for you.”

“Mama’s still upset,” I replied. We had to hurry to the hospital when the nurse called, but Siti had died before we reached her room. I could tell immediately upon entering the cold room that we were too late, from her closed eyes and the way her mouth drooped open. Mama looked as if she’d been betrayed.

“You have to help her, *habibti*,” Siti said, touching my lips with her fingers. I could taste the salt on her skin and see the green stains from the leaves on her cuticles, outlining her wide, square nails. I also recognized the added acidic taste of the lemon that she used to scrub out the stains. I liked when she called me *habibti*, “my love” in Arabic. I’m the only grandchild she said that to, maybe because I was the oldest and resembled her the most.

“OK, but come back,” I said. She grinned and left, and I didn’t cry two days later when we buried her, even though all my aunts beat their foreheads and wailed and my uncles sobbed into their hands like children. They had flown in from Jerusalem for the funeral, arguing that their mother should be buried back home. But Mama, exhausted from crying and lack of sleep, had hysterically insisted that Siti be buried here, in Philadelphia, because she’d come with Aunt Nadia to live with us when Baba died. “She wouldn’t want to leave us now.”

As we wearily watched them lower her coffin into the cold ground, Mama was amazed at my calmness. “It’s OK to cry,” she told me, holding me tightly. “We all miss her—it’s OK to cry.” I nodded, not knowing how to tell her that she had misunderstood.

I was named after my youngest aunt, Nadia, who was only eleven when my mother married my father. My father always liked the name

because, in Arabic, it meant “the dew on the flower’s petal,” and he loved that image. “Only the Arabs give their kids names that are pictures,” he would boast, half-seriously, half-jokingly. So I became “little Nadia” in the extended circle of the family. After Baba died, Nadia the Elder, who’d been in her twenties and the only one still unmarried, moved with Siti to the States to live with us.

At thirty, she had married a “non-Arab,” as he became known among the family, who also referred to him simply as “Nadia’s husband,” or more often, “*al-Amerikani*.” But his real name was Kevin and he was an Irish-American, tall and blond and handsome. When I say “tall,” I mean 6 feet 4 inches, not what Arabs refer to as tall, which could be anything from 5 feet 8 inches and above. He had a large, welcoming smile and bright blue eyes that he passed on to their son, Patrick. With those eyes, Patrick could charm anything out of any member of the family of dark-eyed Arab-Americans who adored him but were wary of his father.

Actually, Siti was the most suspicious and she spread her bad vibes to the rest of us. “He won’t understand our culture,” she’d insisted when she realized that Nadia and Kevin were becoming a serious couple, when they were seen together at every party and event, so conspicuous because of the contrast in their heights and looks.

“Mama,” Nadia would begin to argue and then trail off as if she were too exhausted to continue. She would come to the apartment, sip many cups of dark coffee with my mother, and talk for hours in the kitchen. Sometimes I would join them, but when the conversation became very serious, Mama beckoned for me to leave. Nadia the Elder would apologize with a wink to soothe my insulted feelings.

She married Kevin despite the frown that Siti wore throughout the entire church ceremony. I was actually thrilled for Nadia, but dared not act too exuberant in front of Siti. Things calmed down when Patrick was born two years later and he glittered our lives with his laughter. He was only four years old when Siti died. She told me in a dream weeks later how much she especially hated leaving him. “Promise to spoil him,” she entreated me and I agreed solemnly.

A few months after Siti died, when Patrick was five and newly in school and I was newly in love and Mama had finally stopped wearing black, I noticed that Nadia the Elder had stopped being happy. She rarely smiled anymore and became very protective of Patrick, clinging to him tightly. Often, she showered him with a frightening excess of kisses, so fiercely that a few times he grew uncomfortable, pulling away from her.

I returned home from work one night, having dealt with some hard-to-please clients at the agency. As I climbed the steps and unlocked the door, I thought about my date with George later that night—we were supposed to see a Japanese film at the Ritz Theater. The sound of Patrick's happy babbling surprised me as I swung open my front door.

My aunt sat at the kitchen table with my mother. They both looked anxious, strained, their thick, dark brows weaved together at the center of their foreheads. "Siham, you're just as old-fashioned as Mama," Nadia the Elder was saying. Then they both glanced up and saw me.

"What's up?" I asked, hesitating in the kitchen's entrance. My mother had a secret language with her sisters that I, as an only child, did not understand. The rules often had to be spelled out for me simply and clearly.

"Nothing," they both said, my signal to go upstairs and get ready for my evening out. The expression on their faces was clear enough, so I showered, dressed, and left, slipping Patrick a handful of candy as I made my stealthy exit.

When I came home later, I checked for Nadia's car on the street, but it was nowhere to be seen. "She's gone," I told George, who leaned in for a kiss, just as I glimpsed my mother watching from the second-story window, her face half-concealed by the lacy green curtain. I pushed George away and rolled my eyes upward toward the window. He followed my look in time to see my mother's silhouette vanish.

"She's crafty," he said with a smile. He had a lot of respect for my mother. When he'd been a student, new from Syria, she had invited

him over to our house for dinner, cooking his favorite dishes, like *warak dawali* and *magloubeh*. But he also knew she was paranoid about me.

“She’s not there now,” he added, kissing me anyway. My front door opened behind us but, absorbed in our kiss, we failed to notice until my mother spoke.

“Nadia, I need to speak to you inside,” she said loudly.

Springing back, George mumbled, “*Masel khair, Sitt Jundi*,” as he straightened the collar of his shirt.

“Good evening? George, it’s two o’clock in the morning,” she replied brusquely. “And I need to speak to my daughter.”

Squeezing his arm, I followed Mama inside and immediately began apologizing. For what, I wasn’t sure, but I felt from her expression that I ought to be sorry.

She waved her hand dismissively. “Nadia, you’re too old for that—I don’t care what you do. I really do need to talk to you.” She headed upstairs to her bedroom and opened the window to let in some fresh, clean air. “Your aunt is having serious problems.” She took a pillow and laid it on the sill, then leaned her elbows on it and stared up into the city’s night sky. I joined her, anticipating a long talk, which we frequently had, sitting just like this on nights when neither one of us could sleep. We’d started almost immediately after my father had died, huddled in the window like a couple of crones, shoulders hunched as if bracing ourselves for another punch. The streets were quiet, and even our neighbors downstairs seemed to have understood that they should be silent tonight. When I was a child, there was a flower shop below us, but the owner had died and her daughter had quickly sold it. After many permutations, including a Vietnamese grocery store and a short-lived espresso café, it was now a used CD and record shop, with customers coming in and playing and listening to music until late at night. The Polish and Vietnamese families who lived on either side of us were quiet tonight as well, perhaps lulled to sleep by the crisp air that made you want to burrow under layers of blankets.

“What’s wrong with her?” I asked, leaning far out to try to glimpse George walking back up the street. But the night was too black, too opaque to be pierced by the street lamp’s feeble light.

“She wants to divorce Kevin.”

That stunned me back to attention. I turned to look at her and noticed how much older she seemed. Her brown eyes were rimmed with red and her dark hair fell limply, lifelessly around her shoulders. She wore one of my grandmother’s old housedresses, one from Jerusalem with the red and blue embroidered panel on the bust. Days after Siti’s funeral, my aunts and mother had divided up her clothes and jewelry among themselves. My aunts vied for her bracelets and necklaces, her silver brooch and her colorful scarves. My mother hoarded, almost obsessively, all of her housedresses and even her old leather house slippers. Mama used to wear colorful clothing, fashionable stuff, but lately all she wore were those shabby dresses. The thread’s once-bright, vibrant colors were faded now, and I suddenly realized that my mother resembled Siti in the last year of her life.

“She says she doesn’t love him anymore—she just fell out of love. I can’t believe she’s doing this to him—and to her son.”

The fingers of my mother’s left hand clenched in a tight fist, then relaxed, clenched and released again. I knew she was furious because Nadia was treating marriage so casually, and especially since her marrying Kevin had originally sparked such a commotion in the family.

“It’s because she’s the youngest,” my mother continued. “Your grandparents spoiled her the way they never spoiled the rest of us—whatever she wanted, she got it. They never wanted to upset her.

“She was sick, too, when she was young. Always had chest colds and high fevers—she stayed in bed for a whole month one time because your grandfather didn’t have enough money to let her stay at the hospital. It was during the war and the beds were filled with people who were getting amputations and recovering from shrapnel and gunshot wounds. He was a doctor, so he treated her at home as

well as he could. Your Siti didn't sleep at all that month—she kept checking Nadia's temperature, boiling sage and chamomile with honey, making cold compresses for her head and warm ones for her belly. And she grew up that way, knowing that your grandmother and everyone would do what she wanted."

She was quiet for a few seconds and then both fists clenched and slammed down on the pillow, which muffled their impact.

"Damn her!"

She left, went to bed, but I stayed by the window, sorting out this new information.

I knew that my mother was hurting, but when her hurt spilled over into anger, it was my signal that she was thinking about my father. Unavoidable parallels between Nadia's marriage and her own stolen one were probably burrowing steadily into her mind. After a few minutes had passed quietly, I smoothed the two dents in the pillow with my palm, closed the window, and went to bed.

Nadia the Elder did not come to our house for six weeks, but my mother had tense phone conversations with her. She sat at the kitchen table, a full cup of coffee, long grown cold, before her, her mouth pressed close to the receiver, and she spoke in low, terse Arabic. Sometimes, I could hear her voice rise and once I heard her say, "If our mother was alive, she'd never let you do this!" That particular conversation ended shortly thereafter, but my mother stayed at the table, staring down at the pine wood surface, tracing invisible circles with her thumb.

I told George what was going on—said that I wanted to hang out at home more often in case my mother needed me. He smiled and held me for a long time, as if to send his strength to me that way, and he reminded me about the skiing trip that weekend. "I forgot—oh, George, I probably shouldn't."

"We promised Hanan and John we'd go with them. Besides, a couple days in the Poconos will help you forget these troubles."

I finally, reluctantly, said I would go. But the night before the trip, my grandmother visited me, wearing a stern, disturbed expression.

“Are you upset about Nadia?” I asked her. This was the first time she’d come to me since I’d heard the news.

She ignored me, ignored the question, and told me instead that I shouldn’t go on the trip with George. “You don’t know what could happen,” she said.

“Siti, George is a nice guy. Mama likes him—we might even get engaged soon.”

She didn’t reply, just shook her head and clicked her tongue.

I assured her that we were going with a group of friends, that we’d be safe, that she didn’t have to worry about *a-naas*. *A-naas* is a phrase that I had often heard her fret over: “What will *a-naas* say?” “What will *a-naas* think?” She always worked herself into a frenzy about the gossip circles created and perpetuated by *a-naas*, the small but organized network of Arab women and men in America who had the uncanny ability to transmit a single, juicy nugget of information about someone’s reputation across the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea to the corresponding family network back in the Middle East.

She left me that night, still agitated despite my reassurances. I told her, just before she faded, that my mother did not see a problem with the trip.

“She doesn’t think now,” she answered, “not clearly,” and was gone.

“Mama, are you OK with the trip I’m going on tonight?”

“The trip with George?” she asked, leaning all her strength into scrubbing the large pot in the sink. She had made *mansaff* last night for some friends, and they’d all ooh-ed and aah-ed appreciatively as she’d laid the flat dish on the table, the mound of fluffy rice atop a foundation of shredded pita bread, quilted with roasted almond

slivers and slabs of juicy lamb meat, all drenched in the milky *laban*. The guests had left late, so neither of us had done the dishes and now, the *laban*—everyone’s favorite part of the meal—had stuck to the side of the pot in flaky, cellulite-like ridges. My mother was on her second Brillo pad, pearls of sweat breaking through the defenses of her hairline.

“Yes, the one to the Poconos. We’re leaving early in the morning.”

“To the what?” She shut off the faucet and I realized how noisy the water had been—and how eerily quiet it was now. “Where is the trip?”

“To the Poconos. We’re going skiing with Hanan and John.”

“OK, *habibti*. That’s fine, as long as you and Hanan sleep in one room and you let George and the American boy stay in another room.” She resumed her scrubbing, water off, using a pool of water that had collected in the belly of the pot. “I told you that I like George.” She smiled at me, a sad, small smile. “I hope that you marry him someday—he’s a good man. He’d never leave you or . . . hurt you. Some men hurt the people they love without even knowing it, but not George. He’s different.”

“I know.” I sat at the kitchen table and started to dry the water glasses that she’d just washed.

“Every woman needs a man to be with, not for money or anything, but for friendship. For love.”

“Yes, I know.”

“And I hope that you would never leave him or hurt him, like your aunt is doing to Kevin.” She wiped her forehead with the red sleeve of her housedress. Her elbow knocked the blue stone that dangled from the shelf above the sink, dropping it into the suds in the sink. She picked it up carefully and replaced it. “Good men are rare, Nadia.”

“I think Siti is not convinced of that,” I hazarded after a few moments.

“What did you say?” She interrupted her scrubbing once again to stare at me.

“Siti. She told me last night, in my dream,” I continued. “She doesn’t want me to go.” I pushed the dishcloth deep into the mouth of

the glass, swiveling it around with my index and middle fingers, left then right, snatching up every drop of moisture. “I think she doesn’t trust him completely.”

Before I knew what was happening, before I could glimpse the metamorphosis of her expression, Mama snatched the glass out of my hand and smashed it against the blue and white tiles of the wall. Her black eyes were twin pools of fury, rippled with fear, I thought, as I sat stunned in my chair.

“Goddamnit, Nadial!” she shrieked. “Your grandmother is dead!”

I didn’t say a word as she stomped out of the kitchen, crushing the glass shards into powder underneath her wooden house sandals.

“Why do you keep torturing me like this, goddamnit!” she screamed from the hallway. After the door to her bedroom slammed shut, I swept up the glass, then finished scrubbing the pot.

I packed that night and then hung out in the kitchen, hoping Mama would come out of her room. Eventually, I gave up and slept for a few hours, and listened intently to any sounds from next door. I heard nothing. Early the next morning, she still hadn’t emerged, so I left for the trip without saying goodbye.

The last thing I remembered before we crashed was that George reached out for my hand, his other hand still on the wheel, and . . . yes, then Hanan and John screamed from the backseat. And then—or maybe it was before they screamed—the flash of headlights, of someone else’s headlights to my right, blinding me before it all went black.

*I sank to the bottom of a dark blue ocean, the floor littered with thousands of eyes and lips, staring, speaking, confusing me. Blue eyes, brown eyes. Lips that spoke in Arabic and English. One mouth in particular intrigued me—a pair of bright, green lips that opened wide, large enough for me to swim through. Tired and too sleepy to think, I drifted toward it, not moving really, just floating and letting it pull me in.*

*And then a warm grip on my ankle and I was being pulled away, too weary to turn back and see who this other force was, pulling me up*

*through miles and years of water, back to the surface. Only then, when the bright sky beckoned me to open my eyes and energized me, I saw Siti, cradling my head in her elbow and stroking my hair back, away from my eyes, from my cheeks and lips.*

*"Go back," she said. "Don't come here yet."*

*I opened my mouth to speak, but no sound pierced the still, quiet air. Mute and suddenly scared, I stared at her.*

*"Tell your aunt to be a mother. Tell her to be a loyal wife." She paused. "And say that Kevin is good."*

*I nodded, clutching my throat. Her words, her tone, the rhythm of her voice, resounded in my skull, sticking to it like the dried ridges of laban to the pot.*

*"And your mother must forgive your aunt. Help her to be happy." She called me *habibti* and stared into my face, as if assigning me to a mission, putting her trust in me. "Help her because I cannot."*

*She pressed my cheeks together between her warm palms and kissed my eyes, saying "Go back," then sank below the blue waters.*

When I awoke, I was lying in a white bed, surrounded by the anxious faces of George, my mother, my friends and their mothers, and Nadia the Elder, who sat in a corner, clutching Patrick in her lap. Hanan's mother stood clutching the crucifix around her neck, mumbling, "He's brought them back, He's brought them back." My mother said nothing, but she held my hand so tightly and kissed my forehead so fervently that I thought perhaps she understood or, at least now, she would be willing to listen.



## The New World

It was a small apartment, comprising the second and third stories of the row house; the first level was a flower shop, run by an Italian widow and her spinster daughter. On Siham's first day in the apartment, they had brought up a coconut custard pie, slightly browned on top. It had also been her first week in America, so they gave her a red rose as well. Mrs. Donato spoke with a heavy accent, which reassured Siham about her own. But Carla, the daughter with the bullish, round eyes and the penciled eyebrows, emitted negative vibes that Siham could not explain.

The floors of the apartment were what Nader called "hardwood"—dark, polished slats of wood, side by side like slumbering children. She'd never seen floors like this; her parents' home had marble floors in every room. In Jerusalem, all the homes, even those of the very poor, were made of stone, the most democratic of building supplies because

there was plenty of it. People only used wood to create heat and build furniture. Whenever Nader was at work, Siham liked to put on her socks and slide across her new “hardwood” floors like an ice skater. She hoped Philadelphia had a real ice rink, because she’d never seen one of those either, except on TV.

Nader worked all day, five days a week, with his friend Michel, who owned a food truck and catered to the businesspeople in the city. They stood at 16th and Market Streets, crammed together in a metal cart, one frying the steaks and the other bagging the soft pretzels, from 6 A.M. until late in the evening. Nader always came home, smelling like grease, his thick mustache limp with the steam that filled up their cart. She missed him terribly during the day and offered to work with them, like Michel’s wife had done before their daughter Hanan had been born. But Nader had said that his wife was a lady and he didn’t want her to get dirty. “What about Michel’s wife?” she asked, but Nader said that she had lived in a refugee camp and was used to the dirt. “Plus she’s a little loose in her head,” he added.

It was an unkind comment and it bothered Siham, because she liked Layla. Siham’s father had taught her to treat everyone kindly, often stitching the wounds of villagers without taking money and even without making them feel indebted (though her mother huffed in frustration when they themselves sometimes ran out of milk and eggs). Siham liked to think that she had inherited his open heart, and she told Nader many times not to speak that way. After all, like Siham, Layla was also struggling to learn English and to get used to living here. She had been pregnant with a son, and lost him, plus Hanan was a bold child, curious and daring.

But in every other way, Nader was perfect. Once a week, he stopped at the general store on 9th Street on his way home and bought her a present. Once it was a black, satin scarf, embroidered with blue leaves on silver vines. Then a tube of her favorite Revlon lipstick, a dark burgundy shimmer. It used to cost her thirty shekels, or ten dollars, in Jerusalem’s finest drug stores. Here, in America, it was only two dollars at Eckerd. The most amusing things he bought

her were Barbie dolls, the most American toy of all, with their long blonde plastic hair. The most thoughtful thing was a personal date book to keep her appointments, though for now those would be things like “Monday: Wash windows and dust ceiling fan” and “Thursday: Shine floors and do English exercises.” She practiced her English like a religion; Nader had bought her a primer and an Arab-English dictionary (yet another present) and she rehearsed her verbs for at least an hour every morning.

Anticipate.

Expect.

Wait. I wait. You wait. He/she/it waits.

One August morning, she sat on her green sofa, a used one they’d bought from a consignment store. She was embroidering a small coin purse for herself, using the black and red design of the Palestinian villages. Her English book lay open on the armrest and she read the sentences aloud, especially practicing the words with the letters “p” and “v,” which did not exist in the Arabic alphabet.

The phone rang, a not unwelcome disturbance. Siham slid across the floor to it, nearly colliding with the end table, eager to practice her English with another person. She hoped it would be one of those telephone survey people so she could get at least five minutes worth of their time.

“Is Nader home?” The voice was a woman’s, but deep and smooth, like the chords of an *oud*.

“No. May I please take your message?”

“Who is this?”

“I am his wife.”

“His wife!” Pause. “No, thanks. I’ll try calling later.”

Siham slid the phone back into its curved cradle. Not hearing the familiar “click,” she picked it up and replaced it firmly. Later that evening, Nader told her not to worry about it. “I don’t know who she is. If it’s important, she’ll call back.”

“But she used your first name. That means she knows you.”

“*Habibti*, in America, that’s what they do. These telephone people, they don’t use ‘Mr.’ and ‘Mrs.’ anymore. You’ll get used to these little cultural things. It’s how they get you not to hang up right away.” He laughed nervously, and she knew it wasn’t.

She looked up a new word in her dictionary that night, one that contained a “p,” and she practiced it a few times. Suspect. I suspect. You suspect. He/she/it suspects.

Siham enjoyed exploring their new neighborhood, taking long, early afternoon walks through South Philadelphia. The streets were perfectly arranged, organized, like a grid. Numbers ran north and south, names ran east and west. Or was it the other way around? She and Nader lived on 9th and Passyunk, in what they called the Italian Market, but Siham felt it was an island, lonely, despite the flow of people. Layla rarely visited because the crowds were too much for her to handle her young daughter. The positive aspect of it was that Siham found everything at the Italian Market, from tomatoes to fresh coffee beans to bath towels, sold by everyone from leathery Vietnamese women to Sicilian men with mustaches like Nader’s to young Irish women with green eyes and red curls scooped back into bandannas. Some of these Philadelphia people were immigrants like her, and others were the children of immigrants, having had an entire generation to adjust.

Sometimes, the Italian Market reminded her of the Old City quarter of Jerusalem, full of men yelling out the prices of vegetables and women peddling their crafts, their embroidered pillowcases and blouses. They even targeted tourists with photo frames and wall hangings that said in embroidered English, “God Bless Our Home” or “Home Is Where the Heart Is.” In Jerusalem, she could bargain with the peddlers. In fact, they were insulted if you did not engage them in some level of negotiations. But in the Italian Market, the price was set. She knew because she’d once tried to talk the fruit man down two dollars. “Hey lady, no bargaining! This is already a bargain, ahw-ight?” Even this talent was taken from her here, rendered

null. Nader claimed that her ability to bring prices down in the Khan al-Zeit bazaar was what had won his heart.

*She was examining the leather wallets at the stand next to the entrance to the Dome of the Rock when he approached. They each bought a wallet, although she paid eight shekels and he paid fourteen. As Siham walked away, Nader called after her, "How did you do that?"*

*She did not answer. So he asked, "Can you come shopping with me? I have a few more things to buy today and I could use your help."*

*Siham took one look at his pleated trousers, linen blazer and shiny, lace-up shoes and kept walking. Ignored him, who was so obviously, as she'd thought, one of these returning American Arab nouveau riche. He probably sold bananas on the city streets in America but made himself look rich when he returned home to visit the "Old Country." Sickening. Especially when the richest man in the "Old Country" only made about \$400 in American dollars a month. Her own father, a doctor, made a mere \$250.*

*She entered one of the coffee shops and sat at a small table in the corner, reading her newspaper and sipping the bitter Turkish qahwa from the small, enameled cup. The boy shot in the riots yesterday had died last night. There were expansions planned for six more settlements, four in the West Bank. The Boutique Shahrazad was announcing another sale on evening gowns.*

*"May I join you?"*

*She looked up and saw Linen Blazer bent slightly over her table, staring eagerly at her.*

*"No."*

*With a chuckle, he sat down anyway. He ordered coffee for himself with an imperious wave of his hand. The other men in the café stared at them curiously, stopping their conversations to see who was this Amerkani sitting with the eldest daughter of Doctor Abdallah al-Medani. Aware of their scrutiny, Siham stood up and left.*

What an ill-timed first meeting!, she thought to herself now. She'd dismissed him as a self-centered piece of fluff who had become lost among the casinos and dance clubs of America. Thank God he'd sought her out, asked people about her. He came to her

parents' house and entertained her family by bringing boxes of sweets, giving her little sister Nadia rides on his shoulders, and by singing—he had such a deep, wonderful voice. He had especially charmed her mother by complimenting her cooking, the spice in her *falafel*, and the texture of the *laban* in her *mansaff*. One month later, after he and his family had formally asked for her hand in marriage, Siham applied for a visa to the States. Nader had recently become a citizen himself, so she filed happily as “spouse of U.S. citizen.” They were going to wed. To marry. I marry. You marry. We marry.

She strolled toward Ellsworth Avenue and entered the lobby of the Lebanese Maronite church. Inside, Siham saw the two old Lebanese widows who volunteered to clean, polishing pews and vacuuming the dark, wine-colored carpets. Giving their free time to God, good hearts. They reminded her of her mother, who prowled around in her loose housedresses, attacking dust in every corner of their home. She and Nader had talked about eventually sponsoring her entire family to come to the States, because the economy was slipping faster than before and people couldn't even afford doctors. One of the widows kissed the image of the Virgin Mary as she dusted the base of the statue. Approaching the prayer stand in the foyer, Siham lit three candles, driving the slim, white tapers deep into the sand pile. One for her family, especially her mother, back home. One for Layla, to help her overcome her grief and to have another child soon. The third one for Nader, to keep him safe.

As she walked home, she thought how Nader would smile indulgently at her “voodoo,” as he called it. When they'd first moved into the apartment, she had immediately set about sprinkling chrism on each wall. Mrs. Donato had nodded approvingly when she heard about the incident. “A good, good girl. Fears God,” she'd said. But all Nader had wanted to do was make love in their new bed, though Siham had insisted on first driving a small nail in the wall so that she could hang a charm above their heads. It was a blue glass stone, with an eye painted on it, a charm that hung in every home in Jerusalem. “To ward off the Evil Eye,” she announced proudly, as Nader tugged at her arm, pulled her down.

She entered the flower shop and headed for the back stairs, the only way to get up to her own apartment. It would be this way until the landlord decided to make a separate entrance. But Siham didn't mind so much. "Hello, Mrs. Donato," she said to the black-haired, elderly woman sitting at the counter, arms folded across her chest and eyes closed.

"Hello, *bella*," she replied, her eyes snapping open.

"I did not mean to awake you, Mrs. Donato."

"No, no, *bella*. Iz OK." Mrs. Donato beckoned to her daughter, who was at the other end of the shop arranging flowers in a basket. "Wait, wait for Carla. There is a woman here before. Blondie woman."

"Blondie?"

"Wait for Carla. Wait, she tells you."

Carla approached them with two lilies in her hands, the long stems coiled like serpents. "Hi, Siham. How are you?"

"Fine, thank you very much."

"How is Nader?" she asked, a curious glitter in her brown eyes.

"Fine. Your mother, she said about a woman?"

"Yes, there was a woman here about an hour ago, looking for Nader. A tall, blonde woman. Red suit, linen, with black heels. Looked a little younger than me, maybe forty or forty-five years old."

"What does she say?" Siham interrupted Carla's flood of description. She liked Mrs. Donato, but Siham was wary of Carla, who was obviously very smart but who thrived on gossip, like her old aunts back home. A woman who never missed a single detail or a gesture or a look.

"She asked if Nader Jundi lived upstairs. I said yes, he does, with his wife." Carla casually snapped the heads off the lilies and Siham watched a lone, white petal float to the floor. "She asked how long you'd both been married. I said, 'I don't know,' but that you had moved in together a few months ago."

"Does she—did she leave a message?"

"No, she just left. Didn't even say thank you. Tossed her head and walked out."

“Thank you, Carla. I will see you later.” Siham headed upstairs, a sick feeling creeping into her belly.

“*Bella*, have some coffee with us,” Mrs. Donato called out behind her.

“No, thank you.” She scaled the steps three at a time. Before she shut the door firmly behind her, she heard Mrs. Donato yell at Carla for ruining the flowers.

Later that night, she questioned Nader about it, as soon as he walked into the apartment. Her father used to say, as he furrowed his shaggy brows, that his daughter had been aptly named. Siham meant “arrows” in Arabic. Straight to the target. No deviations.

Nader was visibly startled, his eyes widened like white discs. Especially when she told him of her feeling that it was the same woman who had phoned the day before. “It was probably an old friend, *habibti*, from work or something,” he said reassuringly, though he didn’t stop tapping his foot through the rest of dinner. Siham felt suddenly guilty for upsetting him. That night, their frantic lovemaking knocked the blue stone off the wall. It rolled along the headboard and, before she could grasp it, shattered into fragments on the hardwood floor.

Siham heard nothing about the blonde woman for the next month. Nader’s workdays grew longer, and he often came home with sagging shoulders but more bills in his wallet. “We’re getting a lot of business because of the nice weather. Everyone wants to come out and buy lunch and get out of their offices.” She could tell he was grateful for the work, because he sighed less heavily when he wrote checks for the bills at the beginning of the month. To pass the time, she began English classes at the community college. Her professor told her that she was one of the most advanced students in the class. She’d better be, she thought, after all her own self-tutoring.

By October the leaves on the occasional tree in South Philadelphia began to change colors. The trees in Jerusalem were mostly olive trees and they didn’t change colors, as she tried to explain to Carla, who didn’t seem to care. Their leaves just curled up like

shrimp and died, pulled away from the branches by the harsh wind that whipped through and wrapped around the hills. But here, the leaves retained their shape, became muscular in texture and turned red, orange and gold. One autumn afternoon she slipped two leaves, a yellow one and a red one, into an envelope and mailed them to her youngest sister, Nadia, who lived at home. She also described Halloween to her, how goblins, witches, and boys with bizarre black and white face paint, claiming to be rock stars, came to the flower shop and the other stores along the Market for candy.

In November she found a way to help Nader pay the bills. She invited Carla and Mrs. Donato up to the apartment for tea one evening after they closed the shop. They praised her embroidery skills. It was not a rare talent for Palestinian women—Siham had been taught by her grandmothers—but Carla and her mother, deeply impressed, made a proposal. Siham gave them a pair of sofa pillowcases that she had stashed away in a chest to put for sale in the shop. They sold the next day, and the Donatos took orders for three more sets. “You make ‘em, we’ll sell ‘em,” said Carla, handing her thirty dollars that evening. “I’ll just take a 10 percent cut. People snap them up when you say that they’re hand-made.” Siham requested only that they hide her work from Nader when he passed through the shop on his way up to the apartment after work. She wanted to save the money and surprise him with a gift.

The extra bedroom on the second level of the apartment became Siham’s embroidery and study room. The floor was covered with yards of cloth and dozens of spools of thread: tightly-wound ribbons of red, wrapped rivers of yellow, and coils of green. They were rainbows in her hand that she could unfurl at will. Her English books were stacked in a corner underneath the sole window in the room. A lonely stuffed chair sat in the middle of the room, next to a halogen lamp. Her only desk was her lap. This room would be a nursery one day. They had decided to start trying soon. She had already lined all the Barbie dolls Nader had bought her over the past year—the doctor, the nurse, the singer, the horse jockey—on a small shelf, hoping it would bring them a girl.

She was sitting one November afternoon in this room. As she embroidered an octagonal cross-stitch pattern on a black mesh background, she listened to a Miles Davis cassette tape. It was part of her effort to be infinitely more American, like watching the news and grilling hamburgers. She would conquer jazz music just as she had the others, and her English professor had loaned her his cassette of Davis's music. She heard Carla's familiar tap on her door downstairs and she ran down to get the mail. The bundle, which grew daily as she and Nader became more "established" (and thus more susceptible to circulars and junk mailings) sat on the top step, where Carla left it every day. There was one letter in particular, addressed only to Nader, in a woman's slanted, looped script. The "J" of their last name was decorated with a large loop at the top. The return address had no name, only the street name and zip code: 1012 Chestnut Street.

She took it upstairs to her embroidery room and placed it at the foot of her chair. She resumed her work, counting stitches on the black cloth as she drove the needle in and out, leaving tiny footprints of bright red thread. It would be a wall hanging for a woman from Queen's Village. Occasionally, she glanced at the letter, wanting to open it, but she was an American wife now and they were "cool" about these things. No suspicions. A marriage was a friendship in America, not a spy operation. Miles Davis played "My Funny Valentine" over and over, at the mercy of the rewind button, until 6 P.M.

"Here," she said, handing Nader the letter. She made no other acknowledgment, just left him alone with it and went into the kitchen to heat up yesterday's leftover spaghetti. Mrs. Donato's recipe, which Nader loved. He came in as she was setting the table. The letter was not in his hands; she made a mental note to check the wastebasket later. "Anything interesting?" she asked.

"No, just an old friend who wanted to say hello." His voice was steady and casual and he kissed her cheek with his usual lingering sweetness. He even lit a candle and placed it on the table between them as they ate. It was only his incessant foot-wiggling under the

table that confirmed Siham's suspicion. When she couldn't find the letter the next morning, either in the wastebasket or in his pants pocket, she decided to visit Chestnut Street.

It took her forty minutes of brisk walking, and she realized that she'd worn bad shoes for such exercise. She also noticed, as city blocks streamed slowly by her, that the sidewalks were strewn with much less litter than in the Italian Market. The bricks of each building front were cleaner, and each door frame had a fresh coat of paint. Windows opened to little plants on their sills. The storefronts became fancier, as did the names. Gone were places called "Mike's Deli" and "Geno's Steaks." Here, there were salons, cafés, and food markets that advertised themselves as "gourmet." The sidewalks were red brick, not tan cement blocks separated by tufts of grass trying to break through. The men on these streets wore dark suits, not blue work uniforms, and the women got thinner with each block.

She approached 1012 Chestnut Street, a three-story house that was attached to the other homes on the block. A "town house," as Nader called them, like their own "row home," although they looked the same to her. At first she had a difficult time understanding this concept of homes attached like the links on a chain, a house where even your walls weren't entirely your own. When Nader had shown her the front of their building for the first time, she'd been delighted.

A puzzled Nader had asked, "You really like it?"

"Of course!" she'd answered, pointing to Washington Avenue on her left and Federal Street on her right. "This whole building is yours—you must have been right about America! You really can do well here." He'd laughed for several minutes before explaining that only the top two floors of the single unit in front of them was theirs. "It'll be a few years before we own a big house, but it'll happen in time," he'd said.

But 1012 Chestnut was nothing like their tiny apartment above the flower shop. Its white front steps, edged by a beautifully-carved stone rail, descended elegantly to the sidewalk. The door, made of dark wood, featured a round, brass knocker in its center, like an eye.

Like the Evil Eye painted on her blue stones. She stared up at the windows, awed and suddenly sad. A glimpse of a blonde head looking out of the second-story window sent her walking back. She hummed “My Funny Valentine” all the way home to calm the frenzied beat of her heart, and spent the rest of the day studying her verbs.

*I hide. You hide. He/she/it hides.*

*I lie. We lie. They lie.*

*I cry. You cry. He/she/it cries.*

*I cry.*

Their one-year anniversary was December 3rd, three weeks before Christmas. Nader had carefully planned a surprise, which included an early dinner at a Lebanese restaurant on South Street (where Siham was impressed to see that most of the clientele were not Arabs but Americans) and a concert in Atlantic City. The headliner was one of Siham’s favorite Arab singers, who rarely performed in Palestine. Her sister Nadia would get a long letter about this.

As they drove to Atlantic City in their two-door Nissan, Nader explained that many Arab singers held concerts in the States. “When I was single, I would go to a concert, when I could afford it, with some Egyptian guys I worked with,” he said. “We always hoped that we’d be attending these affairs with wives on our arms one day. I imagined taking my dream girl out for a romantic dinner, how she looked, how she spoke. And then I saw her outsmarting a leather vendor in the bazaar in Jerusalem!” They laughed and he reached for her hand in the darkness. He kissed the tips of her fingers gently, then lingered on her palm. “I’m so happy.”

“Me, too.” She truly was. She was also relieved that she had not refused his proposal. It was a risk, to marry a man who had spent so much time in America, but a lot of girls in Palestine did it. To get out of the country, to try their lives and their luck across the ocean, they married. One-month, even one-week engagements were not unusual, but Siham had never imagined she’d do it. How could you know about a man’s past?, she used to argue. Unlike Jerusalem, where gos-

sip lines kept everyone updated on their neighbors, someone could hide an entire life, conceal so many secrets behind America's veil. Even though Nader's family was originally from Jerusalem and had been sufficiently "checked out" by the al-Medanis, how could she trust him immediately? She had always claimed that she would get to know her fiancé for a long time, at least three years, before they married. Well, she was simply doing the "getting to know" part after the wedding.

"We're so lucky to have each other, Nader," she said, turning to look at his face, highlighted in short intervals by the lights along the expressway.

He kept the wheel steady with his left hand and wove the fingers of his right hand through hers. "When we first met, you *hated* me. I know you did. I thought you'd never agree to marry me, but I had to try."

"So you charmed my family to death? Good strategy."

He took his hand away to switch lanes then surrendered it again. "I just wanted you to like me so badly. If that meant flowers for your mother and American whiskey for your father and uncles . . ."

"And candy and chocolates for my sister, and perfume for my aunts," she continued. "That's what really got me. One day, Nadia walked into my room with chocolate all over her mouth and told me I had to marry you—or else she would!"

"Really?"

"Yes." Siham smiled to herself. All she'd heard from her mother was that a man was coming to the house to meet her, with the intention of eventual marriage. *He was an Amerkani, she'd said to her confused and bewildered daughter, but his roots were Arab. Siham had immediately suspected the brazen Linen Blazer from the bazaar last week and, sure enough, he strode into their living room the next evening, his arms laden with gifts, hair freshly combed, the same linen blazer crisply ironed. He told jokes, did impressions of celebrities, and casually worked in a discussion of the importance of family. He engaged her directly in conversation and seemed thrilled that she could hold her own when it came to culture and politics.*

*After Nader left, her father called her into the kitchen and asked her opinion of this tall, dark, smooth-faced Arab from America. "You would have to live in America with him," her father had warned her. "In a city called Philadeelpheea." One month later, he walked her down the aisle of the Greek Orthodox church.*

Now, six months later, she was beside him, on the way to a concert at the seashore. She would make sure this marriage lasted forever. Lasted happily. She clutched his hand even tighter, twisting her fingers between his in the way that she'd seen Carla twist the necks of the lilies.

Carla came up to the apartment one Thursday morning, two weeks later. It was almost Christmas and Siham had all the windows open, trying to infuse the rooms with fresh, cold air before she began to decorate. She had two red stockings on which she planned to embroider their names. She'd considered writing in glitter, but glitter would eventually wear off. Thread would imprint itself forever. She and Nader had bought a tree last night and she had yards of silver garland that she couldn't wait to use.

"It's like a freezer up here," Carla grunted, rubbing her arms. "I brought you two more orders for pillowcases, both black cloth, and this." She handed her \$140. "From the last batch."

"Thank you, Carla." Siham rolled the wad of twenties and put them into the pocket of her cardigan. She purposefully didn't count them, knowing that Carla would pick up on it, her eyes flashing. She had such a temper, this one, so unlike her mother, whose smile was all gentle curves. A patient smile. She had probably learned to develop it over the years.

"Carla, I am making tea. Would you like a cup?" She could also be patient and kind. Why not? She was feeling good.

"Yes," Carla said, seeming startled, probably because Siham had never invited her to stay unless her mother was also there.

"Please sit." Siham indicated the large, green sofa in the living room and went to the kitchen. She poured two cups, set them on the

tray with the sugarbowl and came out to find Carla standing underneath the wedding picture on the wall.

"Your dress is beautiful," Carla said. "Very traditional, with that full skirt and the long train. Very . . . well, bridal."

Siham gazed up at the portrait. She and Nader stood before the white stone wall that formed the back of her parent's house in Jerusalem. The Dome of the Rock, with its golden cupola, was visible in the background. Her own face looked pale, washed out by the whiteness of her dress, but Nader's olive skin blazed like the sun. Black brows that could look fierce when he was tired or irritated, but always masculine. She only had to smooth them with her index finger to reveal their gentleness. They framed large, caramel eyes that were always soft, that had emanated only love for the last three days, when she told him that she was pregnant.

"You know, I almost got married," Carla said, stirring lemon into her tea and perching on the edge of the sofa. "I had a fiancé years ago. An Irish guy from Northeast Philly."

Siham noted the way that Carla's hair curled softly at her neck. How her hands were slender and her fingers long, how her cheekbones sat high up in her face. Yes, a man *could* have loved her once.

"He worked at a dry cleaning and tailoring shop with his parents. When we got married, his parents said they were gonna retire. They were old, you know. John was their youngest of eight kids. They wanted us to take over the store, because I knew how to sew and handle customers."

"What happened for him?" Siham asked, making a mental note to look up the word "retire" later.

"He cheated on me. Knocked up another girl from his neighborhood."

"Knocked up?" Siham imagined him rapping his white knuckles against the forehead of some poor girl.

"Pregnant. He got her pregnant." Carla drained the last of her tea. "I refused to marry him after that. But I never married anyone else. Obviously." She smirked, closing the softness that had been subtly creeping into her face. "My mother said I'm just stubborn, that

I didn't want to give anyone else a chance. But that's my decision, I said, right?"

"Yes, of course. I am sorry for this happening to you."

"I'm not." Carla stood to leave. "Just proves you can't really trust men." She arched a painted eyebrow meaningfully in the direction of the wedding portrait. "Thanks for the tea." Her dark eyes glittered and Siham felt nauseous.

Later that night, when Nader was snoring softly, Siham rummaged through her wooden storage chest until she found what she wanted. She crept downstairs to the living room and taped a small, blue bead, painted with the Eye, to the back of the portrait. She also put a small one in the nursery, next to the door, above the shelf where the Barbie army sat patiently in line, waiting for a child's hands to animate them. She would have to find another, a larger one, to replace the one above her bed. How could she have left that precious space unprotected for so long? She climbed back into the bed, shivering.

She had seen the Evil Eye itself today, sipping tea on her sofa.

It was not enough. The Eye worked its evil the very next day, assuming the shape, not of a black-haired, meddling spinster, but of a tall, slim blonde woman. Powder-blue suit, big shoulder pads, collarless jacket with a scalloped neck. Siham didn't understand why she focused on this detail, but she did. Maybe she'd known already, from the moment she heard Mrs. Donato's voice calling her down, she'd known it would be this woman with hard, rounded calves and pale brows. Sitting calmly in a chair in the flower shop, looking like Attorney Barbie.

"Hi," she said, standing up. She was tall, too, which made Siham feel even smaller. "Are you Nader's wife?"

"Yes. My name is Siham al-Jundi." Thank God she'd at least had the foresight to put on lipstick and pull a comb through her hair. She suddenly felt that it mattered. "Can I help you?"

"I need to get in touch with Nader, to collect some money he owes me. I've tried to reach him several times, but it seems like he's avoiding me and I can't wait any longer."

"Money? For what?"

"Well, that's really between Nader and myself," replied Attorney Barbie, her voice brusque and dismissive. "When do you expect him home?"

"Maybe in one hour." Siham was acutely aware of Carla's glittering, inquisitive eyes staring at them from behind the counter. She felt even more minuscule and tiny next to this living doll, this American dream.

"I will return then. Please tell him to expect me." She slung her purse over her shoulder and headed for the door.

"What shall I tell him your name is?" called Siham after her.

With a weary sigh, as if it hurt to speak, she said, "Just tell him that his first wife came by to see him."

Siham refused to allow Nader to bring Homewrecker Barbie upstairs to the apartment. "Talk with her down there," she said when Mrs. Donato's voice summoned him. Nader squeezed her hand apologetically and descended to the flower shop.

All the while that he was downstairs, she could only think furiously that he had brought the evil into their home. With his lies, his guilt. He had explained it, of course. He had even cried with her a little. After he'd graduated from the university, they were going to deport him, he said. He'd needed a green card. So he got married, like a business deal. She'd done him a favor, but he still owed her two thousand dollars that he didn't have.

But had they been lovers? No, he insisted, so adamantly that she believed him. "She wouldn't have an Arab in her bed. Just in her third-story room, for the promise of six thousand dollars," he said. The third story of the house on Chestnut Street, in case the INS checked up on them. He'd even paid her rent during those three

years, in addition to the money she wanted. Two months after their official divorce, he'd returned to the Old Country and spent the remaining two thousand dollars on his wedding. His "real and meaningful" wedding, not the sham one of almost four years ago.

Siham sat at the window in her embroidery room, looking down at the sidewalk below. She had \$850 in an envelope, tucked beneath layers of fabric and spools of thread in her craft box. She'd wanted to use it to buy a new crib, a changing table, and a rocking chair to put in this room. This room would soon be a nursery. If the baby was a girl, as she hoped, she had planned to buy the beautiful set of baby furniture she'd seen in the Sunday circular, an ashy wood with brass details on the drawer handles.

A blonde head appeared below and turned right heading down 9th Street, probably toward her beautiful and elegant home with its plants on the windowsill and clean, swept sidewalks. She was abandoning the numbered streets for one with an elegant and thoroughly American name: Chestnut. Only Americans named their streets after trees, instead of after presidents and wars and prophets. She probably wouldn't even walk; she'd hail a cab along the way or maybe get into her expensive car.

Nader would come upstairs now, probably with a rose Mrs. Donato would wisely press into his hands. He would be climbing the steps, hoping it would make her smile. And she would smile, as genuinely as she could stretch her lips, and say that she understood. That it would take a while to forget it, but that they had to think about the baby now. Then she would hand him the envelope with the money and ask him to never mention this again. She would not tell him about the nursery set, just quietly toss out the picture in the circular.

And she would write her mother, asking her to mail a few more blue stones. She had to be more careful from now on.