

A HAY FESTIVAL PROJECT

# beirut 39

NEW WRITING FROM THE ARAB WORLD

FOREWORD BY TAHAR BEN JALLOUN

EDITED BY SAMUEL SHIMON

B L O O M S B U R Y

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EDITED BY SAMUEL SHIMON  
WITH A PREFACE BY HANAN AL-SHAYKH

B L O O M S B U R Y  
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These thirty-nine Arab writers are all under the age of forty. They have flung open the doors on Arabic culture, inviting the reader to transcend cultural boundaries and land in a region known as the 'Arab World'.

The reader touches, feels, hears, tastes and sees the Middle East and North Africa as really is: cosmopolitan cities, villages, towns, desolate mountains and deserts. And soon these complex places in a foreign culture become recognisable and familiar as they are revealed in poems, short stories and extracts from novels. We experience the aches and pains of imprisoned freedom like birds in a cage; stifling societies, sexual frustration, corrupt regimes, poverty and illiteracy. And mapping the soil in which the seeds of fanaticism flourish, good women are driven to madness by injustice and oppression. The subject of war, of course, is never far away: between East and West, civil war and the occupation of the West Bank. This writing offers a fresh, often ingenious perspective – world away from headlines and news stories. Finally, there is the bliss of love and passion, the wisdom of ancient culture, the piety of true believers, the sheer beauty of life on earth to experience, regardless of race and class.

*Hanan al-Shaykh*  
*London, January 2011*

The abundance of young entrants in the competition is especially noteworthy: more than 450 young authors from across the Arab world, and from the Arab Diaspora in Europe and America, submitted work.

The members of the committee, headed by Egyptian critic Gaber Asfour, and which includes the Lebanese novelist Alawiya Sobh, Omani poet Saif al-Rahbi and Lebanese poet and critic Abdo Wazen, pored over the multitude of work sent in by authors and publishers in order to make their selection. The committee worked by elimination: it first picked 100 names, then brought the list down to 60, then, after long discussions and much debate, to the 39 finalists. On more than one occasion, the debates stretched for hours at a time, since there were so many wonderful books that deserved to win. Arriving at the final selection was a difficult, demanding and meticulous process.

The 39 names that have been chosen were selected for the superior quality of the work, whether as novels, short stories or poems. They represent an ideal mixture of tradition and modernity, and display high literary and critical standards. These are the voices of young ingénues who have managed to form their personalities and impose their experiences and views, in addition to sharing an exemplary use of language, technique and vision.

The final choice of the 39 names does not detract from the worthiness of many other important contributors. Many entrants were eligible to be shortlisted in the competition, but the Hay Festival's commitment to the 39-name rule proved to be unlucky for some.

In conclusion, we would like to pay tribute to young Arab writing, which is emerging as an idiosyncratic and unique literary genre. Perhaps this generation of young writers will forge the future for Arabic literature.

The winners, followed by their country of origin and year of birth, are: Abdelaziz Errachidi (Morocco, 1978), Abdelkader Benali (Morocco/The Netherlands, 1975), Abdellah Taia (Morocco, 1973), Abderrahim Elkhassar (Morocco, 1975), Abderrazaq Boukebba (Algeria, 1977), Abdullah Thabit (Saudi Arabia, 1973), Adania Shibani (Palestine, 1974), Ahmad Saadawi (Iraq, 1973), Ahmad Yamani (Egypt, 1970), Al Hlehel (Palestine, 1974), Bassim al Ansar (Iraq, 1970), Dima Wannous (Syria, 1982), Faïza Guène (Algeria/France, 1985), Hala Kawtharani (Lebanon, 1977), Hamdy Gazzar (Egypt, 1970), Hussain al Abri (Oman, 1972), Hussein Jelaad (Jordan, 1970), Hyam Yared (Lebanon, 1975), Islam Samhan (Jordan, 1982), Joumana Haddad (Lebanon, 1970), Kamel Riahi (Tunisia, 1974), Mansour El Souwaim (Sudan, 1970), Mansoura Ez Eldin (Egypt, 1976), Mohammad Hassan Alwan (Saudi Arabia, 1979), Mohamad Salah al Azab (Egypt, 1981), Nagat Ali (Egypt, 1975), Najwa Binshatwa



(Lybia, 1975), Najwan Darwish (Palestine, 1978), Nazem El Sayed (Lebanon, 1975),  
Rabee Jaber (Lebanon, 1972), Randa Jarrar (Palestine/Egypt/USA, 1978), Rosa Yassin  
Hassan (Syria, 1974), Samar Yezbek (Syria, 1970), Samer Abou Hawwash (Palestine,  
1972), Wajdi al Ahdal (Yemen, 1973), Yahya Amqassim (Saudi Arabia, 1971), Yassin  
Adnan (Morocco, 1970), Youssef Rakha (Egypt, 1976) and Zaki Baydoun (Lebanon,  
1981).

‘Beirut39’ is a unique initiative that aims to identify and highlight contemporary literary movements among Arab youth, and to gather young faces and names and provide them with an opportunity to meet, exchange expertise and ideas, and work together in literary workshops.

Young Arab writers have transcended geography and local identity in their creative work, aligning themselves with – and inspired by – global literary currents and movements. It is obvious, for example, that many novelists from all over the Arab world, Mashriq and Maghreb, belong to the same literary current across regional barriers. Through their work, they communicate and bond with each other despite geographic distance, such that one can easily speak of the youthful realist novel, or neo-realist novel, or fantastic novel or post-modern novel that young writers from all the Arab countries have contributed to. The literature of young Arab writers has invaded the Arab literary market, making it difficult to speak of the young Lebanese novel, or the young Egyptian novel, or Syrian, or Saudi, etc. A youthful pan-Arab literary movement currently dominates, bringing together novelists from all the Arab countries, and aiming to break down regional boundaries. This definition also applies to poetry: there is no longer a youthful Lebanese poetry that is different from a youthful Egyptian poetry, or a Saudi, Iraqi or Palestinian one. Poets are collaborating to establish new styles and a new poetic language, in addition to their unique visions. The internet age has certainly helped them to overcome the obstacles posed by the difficulty of meeting and communicating with another person.

What brings together most young Arab writers is their tone of protest, and their rebellion against traditional literary culture. They have announced their disobedience against the ideological bent that exhausted Arabic literature during the 1960s and 1970s. They have also risen above the idea of commitment so prominent a few decades ago, which was imposed by a political-party and communal way of thinking. Instead, they strive towards individualism, focusing on the individual, the human being living and struggling and dreaming and aiming for absolute freedom. Many young writers have declared their disdain for what they describe as contrived, ‘proper’ language. Often, they aim to express their personal concerns as they see fit, freely and spontaneously. And it is important that they protest and reject and announce their frustration with language itself, this language that differs between writing and speech. They want to write as they speak, absolutely spontaneously, unbounded by the censorship imposed upon them firstly by the language itself, and then by religious or moral apparatuses.

These writers believe that the new era, the information age, the computer and internet age does not leave them with enough time to decipher the mysteries of grammar and

rhetoric. They seek the language of life. These writers are not afraid to make grammatical errors. Some purposefully don't finish their sentences, others are fond of slang and street talk and dialect.

This book contains selections from novels, short stories and poems by 39 young Arab writers, and presents the reader with a panoramic glimpse of Arab youth literature. It aims to engage the reader in a conversation, and to help illuminate this scene.

*Abdo Wazem*  
*Beirut, February 2011*

Once the judges had made their selection, I was able to contact the 39 authors who live in twenty cities in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as in Europe and the USA. As the reader may imagine, I blessed the internet and email frequently, because, despite the short time available, it meant that I could work closely with each author to select the pieces that would best represent their work. It was relief to know that they were happy with my choices.

A word or two about the arrangement of the book: after the Preface, Judges' Announcement and Introduction, the pieces are published in alphabetical order by author, and the translator is acknowledged at the end of each piece. I have only noted the language from which a piece has been translated when it is not Arabic. At the back of the book are Notes on the Text, as an aid to the reader who may be unfamiliar with various aspects of life in the Arab world, and Notes on the Authors and the Translators.

*Beirut39* is, of course, only a first step to discovering the extraordinary talents of Arab writers, and it is hoped that readers who enjoy the work in this book will explore further and so encourage the all-important work of translation.

*Samuel Shimo*  
*Bleibtrau Hotel, Berlin, February 2011*

## Abdelaziz Errachidi

Policemen, arriving from the nearby precinct and annoyed by the cold and insignificance of the place, recorded the details of an accident that night: an elegant white car without licence plate had hit a wooden electric pole. A snarl of wires from the pole lay beside it. No passengers were to be found at the site despite the fact that the car was new. The damage was minimal, and there didn't appear to be any victims.

The policeman ordered the onlookers from the town to leave. Leaving nothing unturned, the police recorded their observations: the number of miles on the car; how much it had sunk into the thin layer of mud; the estimated power of the impact that had caused a petrol leak, preventing them from continuing; the approximate time of the crash and other details no one but the obsessed would bother with. And despite the weight of their tired eyes, they didn't forget to question witnesses, although no one had actually seen the accident at the time.

Everything was there in front of them: the new car whose hefty tyres had woken them up in the dark of night. Yet there were no passengers. Where had they gone, leaving the car and their belongings behind? Leaving behind warm comfortable seats on an autumn night cold enough to make people shiver under their covers?

Opening up the boot, they found a seed bag, an axe and an odd-shaped hoe. There was also some food and ripped pieces of paper.

A long time had passed and not one person from the town could claim they knew what had happened. But there were those who would narrate the event endlessly, their faces expressing surprise and their eyes ablaze as they scrutinised the details with the mastery of someone with too much time on his hands. With each new telling, their passion was rekindled anew, proof that desert dwellers compose the music of lies. They mulled over it with profound conviction: Was it the fog that caused the accident? Was it the darkness or the booze? Or maybe it was speed? Finally they agreed – after all other possibilities had been exhausted – on the power of the impact, since they had sensed its tremble in their sleep, its echo resonating in their dreams.

The storytellers found the incident entertaining, a pastime to fill their empty, repetitive days. They had become virtuosos in their retellings. One would say, 'Some tourists from Europe came here, they were injured in the accident, but then went back home to their country. They will, no doubt, come back to pick up the car.' And someone would interrupt him, claiming confidently that 'Europeans don't pay attention to money and material goods; it's silly to think they'll come back.' He'd explain it this way: 'They're

thieves who came here at peak harvest time for dates. They didn't find the secret spot and they failed to get the people's consent, so they must have been cursed by trying to hide from the law.'

People went on and on talking and asking questions: Where did the strangers come from? What did they want and what was their story? Were they overwhelmed by the serenity of the area as they passed through? And was the accident the price they paid for their stupor? Why did they run away, leaving behind such an expensive car? What were they afraid of? Were they thieves? Who was their leader? Did they treat their own injuries or did someone help them get away? Or was the accident part of their plan, a ruse to divert attention? Maybe they wanted to hide something?

The townspeople speculated endlessly, spending their empty days chatting and arguing about it wherever they happened to be: in fields that had been parched for a long time taking the opportunity to tie their donkeys to small date palms and sit about, either squatting or stretched out while arguments heated up between them; or dangling their feet above the mud irrigation ditch, moving carelessly from one topic to another, from the lack of water, the effect of which was making them so crazy they would stare out into space absentmindedly, to temptations – like leaving this place, or women; or close to the mud-brick mosque, in front of the clashing tall cement minaret, where they would sit at the end of every prayer. At other times, at nightfall, some of them – the real night owls – would hurry to the lone grocer to carry on talking and arguing. They'd explain the accident according to their own reasoning, conflating details of it with their own anxieties, some of them garnering encouragement and interest the more they got into it, though this could be interpreted as having a dubious relationship with the strangers. In the kitchens, women spiced the pot with possibilities, their eyes huge with excitement, the timbre of their arguments ringing out as the wind carried their words away.

Explaining the accident had become a competitive game among the people. Then *al-mahjub*, 'the covered one', spoke. He had only recently arrived in the town from the desert and hadn't quite integrated into the rhythm of their lives. An outcast, he triggered the most extreme dismay in them. They themselves were surprised by how they could have overlooked the most likely possibility; but now that they were alerted to the danger they carefully hid their children, now that they were alerted to the danger. When the kids got wind of this, they trembled together and quickly began comparing their hands, reading their palms like fortune-tellers do. Some of the townspeople gloated that the strangers had failed in their efforts. The hash smokers, though, didn't buy into the man's story, and held fast to the one that the strangers had brought the stuff with them. They had got used to them taking a shortcut, walking from north to south and bringing what they needed to ease the journey, which they and their friends could get from most of those living in that well-to-do oasis. So they searched tirelessly for chunks of hash near the car and in the trunk, and some found a bit, the talk having given them confidence. Meanwhile others were only interested in the seed sack, the old, odd-shaped hoe and the

axe.

In the end, though, all this talk got the better of them and they gave in to temptation. They stripped the car, stealing the seat covers, the good wires for one thing or another and parts of the engine. They stole the hoe and the axe, and left the car exposed to isolation and cold. During their cozy gatherings at the top of the nearby mountain, they cursed the unfortunate circumstances that made them lose their love for *al-sibsi*, their long-stemmed kif-smoking pipe, the pleasures of burning hash and crumbling it into small pieces in their palms.

*Al-mahjub*, charmed by his own story, didn't stop. He was a gypsy from the desert who had settled in the decrepit old clay castle, which was on the verge of falling down after being abandoned by its inhabitants. They had settled outside on the welcoming expanse of land because without a war they no longer had need of the castle's protective walls, though other transgressions still flared up from time to time. With his thick white beard, resolute eyes and endless tales, he told his own story and explained the accident as he saw fit.

Was anyone interested in all this prattle? Certainly the powerful of the town, that is the 'judicious', were. They are those of land and of rank whose ancestors were the first to colonise the town and who bravely set off to fight in the wars of their time, some of them had taken on the Europeans during colonisation, while others made truces with them, more interested in their money and heirs. They made up the council of notables. They represented the norm, a tradition upheld in complete happiness or sadness. They knew all the thousands of stories, and what was circulated and what ought to be.

For the kids of the area, *al-mahjub* became a game; they would pelt him with stones and swear at him, and no one would stop them. He shaved heads in front of the mosque, split kindling for fires, repaired sandals, got paid, and chattered away . . . His certitude was effective: as far as he knew, there were four passengers in the car. He explained this by the warmth of the seats that cold autumn night and the four banana skins on the road that everyone else had failed to notice. For sure, the driver was the cause: the strangers were on their way, but the driver couldn't resist temptation. He asked them if they could stop so he could take a hit, but they didn't hear him, so he decided to make an adventure of it. He let the car drive them after making sure of a smooth path in the conniving emptiness of the southern road. He took out a small chunk of hash from his pocket and lit it. The hash and the light of the fuel wafted in front of him, creating images. Worlds and dreams clashed in front of his eyes. The car started to play with the wind.

They weren't thieves, and neither did they have rheumatism which the sands of the oasis cure. Nor were they treasure hunters, as was most popularly presumed. Could they be anything other than drought hiding in this oasis? They knew what they wanted. They were wise and composed, and took orders from an older man, assiduous and well-to-do and someone who didn't mince words.

Meanwhile, they had stopped off, according to *al-mahjub's* story, many times before

arriving at the town. They talked quietly among themselves, checking the maps which they could read very well, and knowing well, thanks to their nous, how hard it would be to get what they wanted. He thought that they were probably travelling by memory to the edge of another time, to an old summit for a saint's innumerable blessings, or to a festival, or a *zawiyya* – a saint's tomb – or to a popular marketplace where people scramble about, whispering among themselves about what they want. To where oaths to ancestors and sacrifices are made; to ancient books where one may learn to be a thief convincing even arms salesmen and leather vendors. They paid a lot to ensure victory. They spoke faintly, no doubt, like fortune-tellers and scared women, and burnt with desire to possess maps that would lead them to where they want to go. Patience nourished them as their longing burnt within. How sweet their toil – they made mockery of distance in the dark of night, in the heat or chill of the day, as they searched for those salvaged maps. Strangers, they were practised in talking to everyone with false intimacy, in such a way that they could misrepresent what they wanted and mislead the curious. Meanwhile they knew all too well the details of where and how they would take their next step.

He described everything about them, from the colour of their clothes to their preferred food. They loved money. They loved old pots and kettles, craving the vintage aroma of their pallor, its swag making hearts flutter. *Al-mahjub* said that the strangers, without doubt, made fun of the sleeping townspeople as they passed through, often pitying – the time with a light connivance – the simplicity of desert town buildings. Yet how they loved the gentle tranquillity of the night and the purity of the air. They came determined to win their battle. A desire for money brought them together, only braving the danger because they could be crushed by their armour: the hoe, the axe and seed which they would scatter, leading them to the site. The map was their only provision; they would solve the puzzles and carry home the prize. Time or place were of no consequence.

All those stories about the strangers that the Bedouin told started to have an effect on him. As if he was with them. As if it was his thing. People were well aware of the levity he brought to reciting those beautiful poems, embellishing them with ambiguity about women and friendships that radiated an aroma of fresh green grass and herbs, and of scorching heat that had been swallowed up by the sand. They knew he dipped deep into the sea of metaphor, almost to the brink of tears. He was a poet. They knew his stories about the desert, how he mixed seriousness with silliness, and so they weren't very interested. But rumours spread – and there's no smoke without fire – and no one could stop asking questions, even the head of the police force, who spent his time playing cards with the two other night officers of the oasis, drinking strong tea and waiting to leave one day. All the towns around the river were quiet, and the people who lived in them preferred to settle their problems among themselves. They were afraid of the government and didn't have any faith in it. But the story enticed him, and so, according to rumour, he dispatched a storyteller.



Suns set and others were extinguished. Days and nights passed. Between the beginning and the end time stretched, and the policemen never towed the car away. It remained lifeless, like a canvas for those who passed it to contemplate. It had become an everyday sight in the southern part of town, springing up out of the emptiness between the sand and the mountains. Then the children, distracting themselves from the monotony, had adopted it and turned it into a game. They would practise driving, some riding while others pushed, taking turns, but also fighting about whose turn it was each time.

Then the men, after realising how serious it was, started to hide their children as a precaution, because of all that was being said. They gathered in front of the mosque and legislated: there would be no going out after evening prayers. If someone did, then they would be accorded justice; that is, they must feed six members of the tribe in their houses according to ancestral law. A surveillance patrol would begin.

Of course, for children, every story takes on a life of its own. For them, the owners of the car were much more interested in children's blood. Blood was their means for discovering what they were looking for. And the elders' warnings and punishments were of no consequence. So the children continued to play, though they became a bit afraid of any stranger who appeared to be travelling, some of them trembling after sunset as they remembered the words of the barber. They would circle every visitor or stranger, but especially the musk and saffron sellers and those light-skinned passers-by who would complain about the staring and questions.

Every chance he had the man would talk about the strangers who came by car. He would be shaving heads, repairing sandals, all the while rhapsodising: what they drank, what they ate, what they did. No one would stop to ask him where they were hiding because they didn't want to stop the pleasant stream of stories. His status in the town grew, until he eventually became its spokesperson. People would laugh at his seasonal chatter, while others were jealous of the extent of his imagination.

And again, days led people who woke up to create another one. For some of these people the story nested in their minds; the more they told it, the bigger it got. For others time dragged them along and led them each day to some far-off corner. It is said that the groom took the mirror from the abandoned car and gave it to his bride as a present. The lamppost was repaired and electricity was restored, though with its usual repetitive interruptions. And time erased everything. Yet did *al-mahjub* stop his endless prattle? Of course not. Often, standing in front of the mosque and near the grocer, with a seriousness that diminished anyone who stood eye-to-eye with him, he reiterated that the strangers were treasure hunters and had come to dig nearby, and for a child's blood, the lines of his hand proving that he was the one: they would sacrifice him and spread seeds on the blood which would coagulate at the site of the treasure, which they would then dig up. He added that the driver, high on hash and the youngest of the strangers, caused the accident. Then he would say – to himself, this time – that life, days will soon reveal to the 'castrated' élite of the town, those who didn't recognise the value of men, what the

had been ignoring all along.

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*Translated by Alexa Fir*

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*The Trip to the Slaughterhouse*

Abdelkader Benali

Life would have been different if he hadn't gone to the slaughterhouse with his father. He would have gone on living with his parents and been married off to his cousin, who his sister later informed him – had once had a bowel resection, a fact that the girl's family hushed up out of fear that no one would marry a girl with a blemish.

His father had come to Europe in the 1960s. First Spain, then France, then Holland. He no longer remembered the exact year of his arrival. The main thing was that you'd made it, not when you got here. The names of the cities he'd lived in had likewise faded into oblivion. They lived *here* now, and not *there*, and by *there* he meant the Moroccan village by the sea where his ancestors had been born.

He had been conceived during one of his father's trips back home. His father recalled very little of those years. They had gone by in a flash, like a season without even a rainstorm to remember it by.

His father had no hobbies, except for repairing transistor radios. He didn't like music. He didn't like going out. He didn't like other people. He didn't like sleeping late. No alarm clocks ever went off in their house. His father woke him when it was time to get up. He'd stumble out of bed to find him tinkering with his radios. His father had learned how to fix them by taking them apart and putting them back together again until he could do it blindfold. Once he'd got the hang of it, he started repairing other people's radios for free. People would bring him one they'd given up on, giving the radio – and his father – one last chance. He'd throw himself wholeheartedly into the project, as if he was repairing some defect in himself.

He continued to fix radios for free until it occurred to him that he could buy up broken radios, repair them and resell them. So he started cruising flea markets, where he would hang around until closing time and then approach the vendors. They were usually so glad to get rid of their broken-down radios that they *gave* them to him. He was doing a brisk business, selling four or five a month, when digital radios hit the market. 'There's nothing left to repair,' he moaned. 'They don't have any replaceable parts.' After that he began fixing up radios that had been lying around for ages and would never be sold.

Once a month a strange excitement seemed to take hold of his father, and he'd pace around, hardly able to contain himself until he went out. Then he'd come home and collapse on the couch, exhausted. He never said where he'd been, but would be a mess, wound up, as if he'd been arguing the ins and outs of some complicated issue.

‘Take me with you,’ he said to his father one night at the dinner table. His father pretended he hadn’t heard him and went on chewing.

‘Take me with you,’ he said again, louder.

‘Take you where?’ his mother asked.

‘To wherever it is he goes.’ His father said nothing, just kept chewing, so he repeated his request, even louder: ‘Take me with you.’

‘What’s got into you?’ his father said, and whacked him with a spoon, right on the cheek. A perfect aim. He reared back, his cheek still stinging from the impact, but he didn’t give up.

‘Take me with you,’ he repeated. His father whacked him again, even harder this time and with greater precision: the spoon landed on the exact same spot. It hurt. Then his father used the spoon – his favourite eating utensil – to dig back into his dinner.

Rubbing his cheek, he yelled, ‘Take me with you!’ This time his father whacked him with a spoon full of food.

‘That was unnecessary,’ his mother remarked. ‘You splattered food all over the table. Couldn’t you have hit him somewhere else?’ The last blow had been aimed at the other cheek and had left a smear.

Having made his point, his father stood up. ‘I don’t have to sit here and listen to this.’

Why had he asked to go with his father? Because he was intrigued by his blissful smile? Because his father was nice to him for days afterwards until the magic of that mysterious visit had faded and he’d sunk back into his usual lethargy? Or because he sensed that by going with him he would learn something about himself?

‘Why won’t Father take me with him?’ he asked his mother.

‘Take you where?’

‘To wherever he goes once a month.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ His mother didn’t say this because she wanted to lie or pull the wool over her son’s eyes. She said it to make it clear that there were more important things in life than finding out what makes your father happy. What he hadn’t realised at the time was that, with their curt refusal to satisfy his curiosity, his parents had known what they were doing. They had slammed the door because they knew he wouldn’t have been able to deal with what went on behind that door. Even his sister, Soraya, who refused to help him when he asked, seemed to be in on the conspiracy, for that’s how he thought of it, as a conspiracy to deny him something he was entitled to.

‘Why don’t you tell them that I ought to be allowed to go? You’re older than I am, they’ll listen to you.’

‘Why should I? Maybe it’s none of your business.’ She knew where their father went, she just didn’t feel like telling him. ‘Anyway, you’re going about it the wrong way. You can’t force them to do something they don’t want to do.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because you’re you: their son. They can’t let their son boss them around. The rest of the world can push them around as much as it likes, but not their own son. They’d rather jump off a cliff.’

Their unequivocal ‘no’ filled him with a desire for revenge. Only much later did it dawn on him that every fibre of his being had been focused on revenge, and yet all of those pent-up feelings, no matter how powerful, would never have been strong enough to break that taboo.

‘Do you really think he won’t take me with him?’

‘Why do you assume that he doesn’t have a good reason? Why do you think that what *you* want is more important?’

‘How come he won’t tell me? How come nobody will?’

‘You’re smart. Figure it out for yourself.’

‘Shouldn’t I be allowed to see whatever it is that gives him so much pleasure? Mama’s in on the secret, and you’re in on it too, why can’t I be?’

Soraya got up suddenly from her chair and went into the kitchen to get something to drink. ‘What really bugs you,’ she said as she took a glass out of the rack, ‘is that everyone except you knows what’s going on. Even people outside the family, people he bumps into at the place where he goes, who ask him when he’s going to bring his son.’

What could he say? Soraya had hit the nail on the head as usual. She came back with a glass of apple juice.

‘OK,’ he said, ‘but then tell me why nobody will talk about it. It seems like the whole world is against me!’ He was so mad his ears had turned red.

She took a sip and sat down. ‘I don’t know why you haven’t been told. You might as well be, since nobody knows why it’s such a big secret.’

‘Then tell me! If it’s so bad that you’re not supposed to talk about it, I have a right to know.’

‘It isn’t all that big a deal,’ she said, lapsing into a reverie. She stared out the window brushing her hair. ‘If I were to tell you, it *would* turn into a big deal, and that’s a risk we can’t take. Does that sound logical?’

‘No.’

‘Good, it’s not supposed to.’

For a girl her age, she had extremely long hair. Actually, for a girl her age, everything about her was extreme. According to one of her teachers, who had dropped by to discuss her future, Soraya was extremely bright. ‘Arithmetic, maths, history, science, P.E. – your daughter excels at everything. You should send her to a good school.’

‘Do we want to do that?’ his father said after the teacher had left.

‘Do what?’ his wife asked.

‘Send her to a good school.’

‘Oh, I’d already forgotten the teacher’s advice. Are you really asking me for m

opinion, don't you already know what it is?'

'I think you'd like her to drop out of school and stay at home.'

'Nobody wants to marry a woman who's had too much education. Educated girls have loud mouths and opinions of their own. They put off getting married, and we can't have that.'

In eavesdropping on his parents' conversation, he noticed that his father, unlike his mother, was ambivalent about his daughter's future. He wanted what was best for her up to a certain point – but his mother wanted what was best for tradition. In their household Tradition was spelled with a capital 'T'. His mother, in particular, who had missed out on the wave of modernisation in Morocco, was a powerhouse of tradition. She was a strong woman, in both word and gesture. If she didn't like something, she said so. She was not one to lavish compliments on her children. She hated the country she lived in. You could tell by the way she spoke about the outside world, as if it was an intruder that had forced itself upon her. The outside world was an enemy of her tradition. She knew it, his sister knew it and he knew it.

Everyone always noticed Soraya's long hair. Even perfect strangers complimented her on it. She didn't have to put much effort into keeping it glossy and smooth, since she was at the age in which beauty clings to a young woman like the smell of booze to a drunk. She gave her hair a hundred brushstrokes every night, and that was that. The brush, a gift from her mother, had been a source of strife: the little girl had wanted to brush her own hair. Later, when, according to their mother, Soraya had developed 'a loud mouth and opinions of her own', she claimed that all her woes had begun with that brush. 'I wish I'd never given it to her.'

Their mother had taken her hair-brushing duties seriously. Her daughter meant everything to her. Sometimes, after coming home from visiting friends and listening to their alarming stories about their daughters, she would give Soraya a big hug. 'Thank goodness you're not like *them*,' she would shriek. 'They've been led astray. Girls aren't girls any more. They cut their hair short, walk in and out of the house as if it was a supermarket, speak a language their mothers don't understand and sip on straws. One of the girls,' she nearly choked on her words, 'has bleached her hair!'

He asked his sister if she was going to bleach her hair, but she said she wasn't sure.

'I'm not the trendy type. People who follow the latest trends suffer from low self-esteem, and the only way to raise your self-esteem is to follow the latest trends. It's a cruel trap everyone is bound to fall into sooner or later,' she said. At such moments he understood why his sister's grades were always better than his:

*Hers*  
Dutch: A  
Arithmetic: A  
Geography: A

*His*  
Dutch: B  
Arithmetic: C  
Geography: C

And so on down the line. He was lousy at everything. It was his father who noticed that his grades were much lower than his sister's. His mother shrugged. 'Boys are boys,' she said. 'They always have been and always will be.'

One time he was cuddled up to his mother while she was doing some mending when the subject of Soraya's outstanding achievements came up again.

'Her teacher's happy with her,' his father said.

'That doesn't mean anything,' the girl's mother replied.

'So what do you suggest?'

'Her schooling has to stop at some point. And college is out of the question.' At such times even his father, who occasionally agreed with his wife, felt compelled to speak up.

'Education is a good thing.'

'Not for girls. They bleach their hair. They stop speaking our language. They forget tradition. Do you call that "good"?''

'So what options does she have?'

'She can go to a domestic science school.' He didn't realise that his mother was speaking her mind so freely because she'd forgotten he was there. The combination of anxiety, jealousy and outright anger at her daughter, fuelled by her husband's recognition of his daughter's ambitions, had blinded her to his presence. Had she been aware of it, she might have softened her tone, feeling that it might be better for her son's mental health not to have witnessed her machinations, because even though she was convinced that tradition would rescue her daughter only when all other avenues had been blocked, she couldn't help feeling there was something a tad inhuman – not that she would have phrased it that way – about her methods. Nor would she have been able to determine, if she'd given the matter any thought, whether her desire to keep a tight rein on her daughter stemmed from a tendency to be overly protective or was the product of a twisted mind at the mercy of circumstances beyond its control. She acted purely out of instinct. Her instincts had now got the better of her, and that's why she'd forgotten he was there. Getting her husband to agree to her wicked plan was more important than keeping her son from overhearing it.

'We'll send her to a domestic science school, where she'll learn how to cook and clean and sew. There's one nearby. It's an all-girls' school, which is the way things should be. Don't worry, I'll make sure she finds a suitable husband. Leave her to me. Stop complimenting her. Stop praising her good grades. Help me, your wife, to focus her interests on what's going on here at home. We have to protect our daughter. She's the only one we've got.'

His mother's plan was so far-reaching and diabolical that he could hardly believe his ears. He sat up with a jerk so that she suddenly noticed him.

'What are you doing here? Go to bed, young man. Right this minute.' She gave him

push and laughed when she saw the expression on his face. ‘Fortunately, we don’t have the same problem with you,’ she said. Actually, it made him feel good to hear her say this.

His father had sent him to judo lessons so he could learn to defend himself. ‘It’ll toughen you up.’ He was crap at judo. When the class was over, the boys were always sent off to take a shower. They stared at him while he showered; then, when he was through, they hit him. He had no idea why. Maybe because he never hit them back. He was afraid that if he put up a fight they’d pound him even harder. He didn’t dare tell his father, for fear that he’d smack him for being such a weakling.

One day in the shower room, when he couldn’t stand it any more, he yelled, ‘Why are you hitting me?’

‘Because you’re a dumb Moroccan,’ said one of the boys. ‘And dumb Moroccans like you don’t have foreskins.’ They hit him because he didn’t have a minuscule piece of skin on his dick? It was the first time he realised that circumcision made such a difference. He was furious with his parents and his religion for circumcising him. ‘All these problems because of a little piece of skin!’ If he was in Morocco, nobody would have hit him, though they might have hit some guy who did have a foreskin. If war broke out between Muslims and non-Muslims, a quick look at someone’s dick would be enough to determine whether or not he should be killed. The idea made him shudder, the way he shuddered at spinach with mustard (his sister’s favourite dish), the colour orange and fingernails grating on a blackboard. It would have been better to send his sister to judo class: at least they couldn’t pick on her.

‘What’s wrong?’ his sister asked. He felt he could confide in her, even though it wasn’t easy to admit to being a human punchbag.

‘I always get beaten up after judo.’

‘Why?’

‘Because of a little nick in my skin.’

‘A little nick here and there – nobody’s perfect,’ she said with her usual shrewdness. Her words were oddly comforting. She seemed to know what she was talking about. He should listen to her: she was the only person he could confess such things to. ‘Who beat you up?’

Their father was in the other room, bent over a transistor radio. He worked in silence since that was the only way his fingers could do their meticulous work in harmony with his mind.

‘The guys in my judo class.’

‘It’s an ancient sport,’ his sister said. ‘Too bad it attracts so many morons.’

‘I’ve noticed,’ he said.

‘So where’s the nick?’

He pointed to his crotch.



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