

## LOVE AT GROUND ZERO

A novel

Charles Deemer

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Originally published in 2003 by Sextant Books

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*People who are sensible about love are incapable of it.*  
Douglas Yates

*No love like first love.*  
English Proverb

*We never forget those who make us blush.*  
Jean-François De La Harpe

*First love is dangerous only when it is also the last.*  
Branislav Nusic

### 1

Before the New York sun had climbed to noon, by which time television stations around the world were repeating, like a film loop in a pornographic peep show, images of unthinkable catastrophe;

before TV anchors found their gravest tones of voice with which to christen the shocking events “a day of infamy,” no less historic and horrific than December 7<sup>th</sup> or November 22<sup>nd</sup>, days etched permanently into memory by all who experienced them; before America’s violent baptism under the clear blue sky of a late summer morning; it was, after all, just an ordinary day beginning in an ordinary way.

Commuters by the tens of thousands streamed into the city by train and subway, by bus and car, by bicycle and on foot, rushing forward in a relentless march to another work day, with computers to boot, phone calls to make, meetings to attend, deals to close, new deals to initiate. Deals were lurking everywhere (“the business of America is business”) in this city that considered itself the financial center of the world and therefore the center of western civilization, New York, stretching awake with no suspicion of how much political innocence could be lost so quickly, oblivious to its vulnerability, oblivious to the march of history. September 11, 2001, was just another day as a great city scurried to life, a day like yesterday and presumably a day like tomorrow. Not an American hurrying to work could have guessed what was about to happen.

Wes, moving along in the flow of this commercial throng, felt apart from it. He was a student, after all, not an employee –and a creative writing student at that, which made him an observer more than a participant. He seldom ventured this far south of the NYU campus but this morning was a special occasion. Mike, his older brother, was in town, and Wes wanted to spend as much time as possible with him. Mike lived in San Francisco, where he worked for Jacobs & Smith, a lawyer like their father.

Despite their different career paths, indeed their different interests, Wes and Mike were close. Wes had missed his older brother since the last visit over Christmas, a brief appearance at the family dinner with the latest girlfriend, an attachment that gave the brothers precious little time alone together, which was why Wes especially valued the opportunity to be together today. Mike had taken care of business, the purpose of the trip, sooner than expected, giving them most of his last day together. Wes had no Tuesday classes at the university.

Mike’s college roommate, Jimmy, worked on the 88th floor of the South Tower of the World Trade Center, another lawyer, but it turned out the timing was bad for a visit, so Mike and Jimmy decided to meet briefly before work. This was why the brothers had come to the towers this early in the morning.

“How long will you be?” Wes asked as they walked across a plaza toward the South Tower.

“Jimmy has a meeting at nine. I’ll meet you in the coffee shop.”

“How’s he like working for a big corporation?”

“Jimmy likes making money.”

“So do you, big brother.”

Mike smiled, letting the family renegade have the last word. He admired his little brother more than he’d ever told him. Mike fully expected Wes to write a hit movie or a best-selling novel and become the wealthiest member of the family.

They did not look like brothers. Mike, at six-two, retained the athletic build that had won him accolades in high school, though he hadn’t played organized football since then. His hair was dark and curly, after their mother. Wes took after their father, blond and stocky, though not yet fat, and short enough to wish he were taller.

At the entrance into the building, a balding man, surely a tourist, was bending precariously back, trying to shoot up the overwhelming reach of the tower, barely keeping his balance. Tens of thousands

of tourists visited the twin towers of the World Trade Center daily – on normal days, that is, which this one was not destined to be.

Wes and Mike exchanged smiles as they passed the tourist. They entered the building, showed photo IDs to the security guard and moved on.

This was only the second time Wes had been in the building. As the first time, the experience of entering the lobby was overwhelming, and he gawked under the enormous presence of glass and steel, commerce as cathedral. Around him men and women rushed by with more mundane interests, getting to work, turning on computers, beginning the tasks of the day, but Wes hesitated as Mike walked on, taking it all in.

When he realized that Mike was moving away from him, heading toward the elevators, Wes called, “Look for me near the coffee stand!”

## 2

America was still capable of surprising her. Waiting for an elevator, Hayaam marveled at the American capacity to ignore miracles. What else was the extraordinary building in which she stood with Areeba, waiting for an elevator, this 110-story tower of the World Trade Center, but a miracle of engineering? The first time she saw it, two years ago when everything in America was still new to her, her eyes had been wide with marvel, much as Areeba was looking around now, but this had been on a Saturday when the tower and its twin across the way were filled inside and out with tourists like herself. Today was a Tuesday, a workday, and what impressed Hayaam most was not the miracle of engineering but how easily it was ignored by those who worked here, whether American or not (and clearly the tower was host to businesses from all around the world because already she had seen many races and national styles of dress in the building, including those from her homeland, Indonesia.). Hayaam, wearing traditional Muslim clothing or hijab, the long flowing dress purple, the head scarf orange, felt no one staring at her in such an international environment, the way students sometimes stared at her when she walked across campus at NYU.

Areeba also wore hijab, which was gray and drab in contrast to Hayaam’s bright presence. Neither woman wore makeup.

Areeba couldn’t keep her eyes still, taking in the wonder of the building.

“Quite a place, isn’t it?” Mike said. He smiled first at Areeba, then at Hayaam.

A bell rang, and the elevator door opened. Hayaam and Areeba waited their turn and entered. There was room for the man who had spoken to enter behind them.

Hayaam punched the button for the fifth floor, which was where the Employment Agency was located. She’d been studying to become an American citizen, though she’d told neither her brother nor written her father about this, and she was seeking a part-time job to reinforce her growing independence. Her father, she realized, might stop supporting her once he learned of her intentions.

As the elevator began to rise, Hayaam noticed the after-shave of the man standing in front of her, the man who had spoken to them. She found the aroma pleasant. She assumed the man was an American by the forwardness of his question, and she also guessed that he was there on business, like themselves, rather than an employee somewhere in the building because he was not wearing a tie.

The elevator made its first stop at the third floor, and a few people got off. At the fifth floor Hayaam said, “Excuse me,” and the man with the after-shave shuffled to the side so they could move past him.

Before the elevator door closed behind them, the man who had spoken spoke again.

“Have a nice day,” Mike said with a smile.

As they walked on, Areeba grinned, the reaction of an embarrassed schoolgirl, as if the man had been flirting with them, which was probably true. Hayaam smiled back.

Of course, you already know it would not turn out to be a nice day at all. But Hayaam didn't know. Wes didn't know.

### 3

Wes bought coffee at a stand, got a newspaper from a vending machine, and sat down at a table in an indoor courtyard off the lobby, figuring Mike could find him easily enough. He started reading the paper.

Suddenly there was a noise unlike anything Wes had heard before, not quite an explosion, not quite a crash, but clearly something of magnitude, strong enough to jar the foundation of the building as if some great force were sliding the floor out from under him. And then, just as suddenly, stillness, at least in the building's foundation. But the air was heavy with menace, like a distant, humid echo of catastrophe.

Already people were racing to the windows and running outside to see what had happened. Wes watched the commotion with a forced calm, staying at the table.

Across the way a man yelled, “The north tower's on fire!”

The news drew even more people to the windows and exits. Wes stood up, leaving the paper on the table but taking his coffee. He headed for the nearest exit, which faced north, trying not to join the growing panic. He mistrusted panic because it depended on first impressions.

Outside Wes couldn't quite believe what he was seeing, the north tower in flames several dozen stories up, spitting out great billows of dark smoke. Even harder to believe was what he could decipher from an anxious crowd of observers, many of whom were talking and yelling at once, as if trying to articulate their own disbelief. Apparently an airplane, a jetliner, had crashed into the north tower, an accident of colossal proportions.

High in the south tower above him, Mike would have quite a view of the situation. Wes decided to join him.

He made his way back inside, weaving through the crowd still coming out of the building. In the chaos, the security guard had abandoned his checkpoint, and Wes was able to enter without flashing identification. He found the building directory.

Mike had told him the name of the law firm where Jimmy worked. Wes scanned the directory, looking for a name that rang a bell.

On a loud speaker, a man was telling everyone not to panic, that the problem was in the north tower, not here, and that everyone should return to work. Few paid attention and a great flow of people continued to move outside.

Jacobs & Smith! That was the firm. The 88<sup>th</sup> floor. Wes headed for the elevators.

The first to arrive was packed with people coming down to get out of the building, still ignoring the advice to go back to work. When the last woman stepped out, Wes entered the elevator. Only several others joined him.

There were no stops until the sixth floor. The door opened. Just as a woman was about to step in, a horrendous explosion rocked the elevator, knocking Wes and everyone else off their feet, the woman

landing on top of him. He quickly maneuvered free and struggled to his feet, then helped the woman to hers. Someone yelled that they must get off the elevator, but Wes was a step ahead of the advice, wandering into the hallway. What the hell had happened?

The hallways were filled with stunned employees, everyone in shock, moving en masse toward the stairs, and Wes stepped along with the flow. Where had the explosion come from? Certainly from above, somewhere high in the building, somewhere closer to where Mike was.

Wes could hear screams coming from throughout the building. As he moved with the crowd to the stairwell of the fifth floor, one scream in particular caught his attention, a woman with a British accent, calling desperately for help from somewhere close. Wes moved into the hallway and found her only a few doorways down, a young woman in a gray robe, the style of dress worn by Arabs, who was kneeling over another Arab woman, whose robe was purple and orange.

“Someone help me!” the young woman cried.

Wes raced down the hallway.

“She can’t walk,” Areeba told him. “She twisted her ankle.”

Wes reached down to the young woman on the floor.

“Take my hand.”

Hayaam grasped the hand, and Wes pulled her to her feet. Hayaam grimaced in pain.

“I don’t think I can walk,” she told him, also with a British accent.

“Okay, here we go,” said Wes.

He lifted her up into his arms.

“You okay?”

Hayaam said, “Yes.”

“This way.”

Wes carried her back to the stairwell, where he joined the crowd that continued downstairs. Areeba took his arm and followed.

Something had changed. The air was now filled with dust and a pungent odor, strong and unpleasant, reminding Wes of the smell of burning oil. If his hands had been free, he would have held a handkerchief over his nose and mouth, but he was carrying the young woman in his arms, who was surprisingly light.

They continued downstairs with the flow, everyone staying calm, as if this collective routine was enough to put a temporary halt to fear and anxiety. But when they reached the ground floor, spilling out into the lobby, the crowd exploded into its panicked parts, with individuals suddenly racing for the exits and crying out in unintelligible anguish, the crowd becoming a mob.

Wes carried the young woman outside and moved far enough from the building so the crowd scattered a safe distance around them. He set her carefully on her feet.

“I have to go back inside,” he said. “Will you be okay?”

“Yes,” said Hayaam. “Thank you so much.”

“No problem.”

Hayaam recognized the same after-shave on the man as the earlier man was wearing, the one who had spoken to them. She offered her hand, the American gesture of gratitude.

“I am Hayaam. This is my cousin, Areeba.”

He took her hand.

“I’m Wes.”

There was a silence. When Wes realized he was still holding her hand, he released it.

“I have to go. I’m looking for someone.”

“Thank you for saving me.”

This had not occurred to him, and Wes had no time to reflect on the matter. His plan was to return inside the building and somehow find Mike, but when he looked up, as if expecting to find his brother staring down at him from some window high in the tower, Wes saw a horror of flames and dark smoke, and he realized that whatever catastrophe had happened in the north tower had occurred in the southern twin as well, creating a chaotic evacuation of the building which made it impossible to return inside. Wes had no choice but to leave Mike to his fate and to look out for himself and join the escaping frenzy of frightened people running randomly across the plaza, racing to go anywhere but here, racing to get as far from the towers, this center of western civilization, as possible.

#### 4

Wes ended up watching the continuing nightmare on television. For blocks he trotted along with an anonymous mob, heading north in the direction of NYU, occasionally glancing back to see the twin towers engulfed in flames and smoke, the sight as confusing and surrealistic as it was frightening, because accidents this extraordinary did not happen in pairs, which meant that clearly New York had been attacked – but by whom and for what reason? The innocent are always shocked to learn that they have enemies.

Finally Wes stopped running and bent forward to catch his breath. Straightening up, he saw the neon sign of a bar and decided a drink was exactly what he needed.

Everyone along the bar was staring up at a television set. Many were talking at once and again, as he had outside the tower after the first explosion, Wes pieced together a semblance of coherence from the snippets of what he overheard. The Pentagon also had been attacked, America apparently coming under attack in many places at once. There was an unconfirmed story of a fourth plane, perhaps on route to the White House, which apparently had crashed in a field short of its target. This was like Pearl Harbor, more than one angry patron announced to no one and everyone. Staring up at the television’s replay after replay of the jetliner crashing into the south tower, Wes felt numb. Suicide bombers had come to America.

After a beer, Wes found a pay phone near the restroom and called home. His mother answered, and as soon as she recognized his voice she started crying, sounding so relieved that he stammered when assuring her that although Mike wasn’t with him, surely he was all right, which Wes believed less strongly than he could bear to admit, even to himself. He felt certain that Mike was located considerably higher than the plane’s point of contact, and under such circumstances it probably was safer to be higher than lower. All the same, it might be some time before anyone could get up to rescue people on the higher floors.

Soon enough Mike’s survival became a moot point. Shortly after ten the south tower collapsed on live television, imploding upon itself with devastation beyond comprehension, a slow crumbling descent that looked almost to be in slow motion, kicking up a cloud of thick dust and debris as horrific as a nuclear explosion, yet also obscenely sensual in the slow rise and pulsation of its contours. Somewhere in the great growing heap of rubble was his brother, and Wes understood that no one could survive the tragedy on the screen, and the higher your fall, the more certain your death. He felt sick in his stomach.

By the time the north tower collapsed, Wes was running again, north again, to get away from the threatening advance of smoke and dust that approached from the direction of the collapsed towers.

Dust would hang in the air for days, as if one needed reminding of what had happened. Wes finally hailed down a cab and returned home, to the family house in Glen Cove on Long Island, expense be damned, even though Wes was living at home to save money so he could devote his time to the graduate creative writing program without taking a part-time job.

As soon as Wes entered the house, Evelyn, his mother, ran forward to embrace him, almost knocking him down. Where was Mike? Wes didn't even have to answer the question. She saw the truth in his expression, and her response was immediate. I know you will tell me it's a cliché if I write that she collapsed in grief, but this is exactly what she did.

## 5

No one found the body or parts of the body or any formal evidence of Mike's death, but everyone in the family knew and accepted what had happened, and so Mike was given a memorial service and a burial, dedicating a tombstone over an empty grave.

Walter and Evelyn hosted a reception after the funeral, which was attended by over a hundred people, extended family and friends, but Wes found so many people less comforting than distracting, a diversion from facing his grief head-on in order to deal with it. The well-meaning condolences from uncles and aunts and cousins, from long family friends and recent neighbors – *I'm so sorry, we share your loss, you're in our prayers* – the rhetoric of grief was repetitive and numbing. Finally Wes retreated in search of silence and found himself entering Mike's old room, which had not been lived in for almost a decade.

But the room looked like it had been lived in yesterday, his mother having kept the room immaculate. Stepping into it was like stepping back into high school with the school pennant on the wall and several photographs of Mike, the high school jock, winding up for a pitch, shooting a free throw, poised to zing a pass. Wes sat on the edge of the bed and wept.

As he got up to go, thinking he would give the reception another shot, if only for his parents' sake, he found Roger standing in the doorway. They had been good friends in high school but had drifted apart since then, although both were attending NYU. They still liked to shoot baskets together in the gym now and again.

"You okay?" Roger asked.

"Well as can be expected."

"Want to get out of here? Go for a ride or something?"

"I'll be okay."

"I could use some air."

That's all it took. Wes followed Roger out the back door, and they walked out the long driveway to the sidewalk and began strolling through the neighborhood.

"You have any Arab friends?" Wes said after a long silence.

"That's an interesting question. You mean, do I think they're spies? Yeah, I'd be worried about that. Why? Do you have any?"

"No, I was just wondering."

There was another silence.

Wes said, "When it happened in the first tower, I tried to take the elevator up to find Mike. I thought he must have a hell of a view up there. Then the plane crashed into our tower, and everything went crazy, we all had to use the stairs to get out of there. On the way down I heard a woman cry for

help, and I checked it out. There were two Arab women, and one of them had sprained her ankle. I carried her out.”

Wes stopped. Roger said nothing, and they continued walking.

Finally Roger said, “And ... ?”

“And what?”

“Is there a point to this story?”

“Not really. I was just wondering how she must be feeling now.”

Roger looked at him strangely.

“What’s wrong?” Wes asked.

“Thousands of people get killed. Your brother. Why are you bringing up a fucking A-rab with a sprained ankle?”

The hatred and anger in Roger’s tone couldn’t be missed. Wes had no energy for an argument and shrugged the question off, finally saying he’d better get back to the reception to please his parents, but as soon as they rejoined the gathering, Wes again slipped away, this time to his room, where he closed the door behind him.

## 6

Not every family gave a missing loved one a funeral. Not every family buried its missing and presumed dead. Testimonies to the human capacity for hope against all odds sprang up throughout the city in makeshift bulletin boards on building walls and kiosks on utility poles, in window displays and sidewalk memorials, and New York was awash in photographs of persons missing since the attack. None of these photographs was of Mike, of course, who had been put to rest. Evelyn still prayed for a miracle but did so secretly, not wanting her more logical husband or son to believe she had lost her mind.

Even stronger than hope was the capacity of New Yorkers for survival. The best defense against those who want to destroy our way of life, they were told by their mayor and their president, was to live life normally, steadfastly, doggedly refusing to let grief and fear destroy the freedoms Americans held most dear. Of course, there must be more security precautions now. But as much as possible, life must continue on as normally as possible. Americans gamely tried to follow their President’s advice.

Classes at NYU, which had begun the day after Labor Day, started up again. Wes had a meeting with his advisor. He was in the second year of his M.F.A. program in Fiction, and this year most of his energy would be devoted to writing his thesis, a novel. Two days prior to the attack he had given his advisor an outline of his proposed project, an historical novel based on the life of the great French playwright Moliere, a story Wes was calling *The Comedian In Spite Of Himself*. There had been a rumor during Moliere’s lifetime that he had married his own daughter, and the novel would focus on the psychological consequences of this in Moliere’s life and work.



The meeting with the advisor was brief, the professor's only comment being "Most ambitious," and Wes walked away with his thesis proposal approved.

Walking across campus after the meeting, he saw a woman in traditional Arab dress ahead of him. Could it be her? Wes trotted up beside the woman but when she turned to face him, he saw that it was not Hayaam.

"What do you want?" the woman said, her voice shaking with fear in the new America.

"I'm sorry. I thought you were someone else."

Then the next day he did see her.

Wes was working in his carrel in the library. Hayaam hobbled in on crutches. Today her hijab was a red robe with a white headscarf. As she passed the window of his carrel, he smiled but she didn't notice him.

Wes put down his pen and stood up. He left the carrel and followed Hayaam into the book stacks.

He found her trying to fetch a book that was on a shelf too high for her. Quickly he came to her rescue.

"Let me."

He brought down the book and handed it to her.

"Thank you."

And then she recognized him. She lit up.

"Hello! I was wondering if I might ever run into you."

"How's the ankle?"

"I'm supposed to let it rest. Not so easy when you are a student. And are you also a student?"

"I'm studying for my M.F.A. in writing."

Wes noticed the title of the book he had fetched for her, *The Puritan Way*.

Seeing his expression, Hayaam said, "I'm majoring in Comparative Religion."

Wes cleared his throat.

"Listen, if you're not busy, I was about to grab a cup of coffee."

"Tea would be nice."

Wes fetched his book bag from the carrel, and they left the library together. There was an awkward silence as they walked slowly across campus. Wes let Hayaam determine their pace toward the Student Union.

The coffee shop was on the ground floor. Wes told Hayaam to get a table, asked her what kind of tea she wanted, and got in line to order their beverages.

An hour later he couldn't believe how easily he had opened up to her. In fact, he had monopolized the conversation. He told her about how disappointed his mother (but not his father) had been when he decided not to go to law school, choosing the graduate creative

writing program instead. He told her about how guilty he felt that Mike had died in the south tower when he himself had survived. Somehow knowing how irrational these feelings were didn't reduce their hold on him.

"You didn't kill anyone," said Hayaam. "Quite the opposite. You saved my life."

Wes looked puzzled.

"If you hadn't come along, I could have still been in there when the tower collapsed."

Wes never had thought of it this way. He certainly didn't feel like a hero.

"You are my life saver," she repeated. "Thank you."

Wes felt embarrassed and wanted to change the subject.

"Where are you from?"

"Indonesia." She read surprise in his expression. "You thought I was an Arab, didn't you?"

"I guess I did."

"There are more Muslims in Indonesia than in any other country."

"I didn't know that."

She talked about growing up in Jakarta but the more she talked, the more confused Wes became because nothing she was sharing fit his preconception of a Muslim woman. She was verbal and smart, with excellent English skills, and she showed no hesitation in expressing her opinion. Was this because he was an American? Would she talk so freely in the presence of a Muslim man? Although Wes had never studied Islam, he had grown up believing (learning by the osmosis of American culture) that Muslim women were weak and subordinate to their men. Yet there was no sign of such gender reticence in Hayaam.

Finally Hayaam said she had to go. Wes accompanied her outside, figuring to go back to his carrel.

## 7

A small crowd had gathered in front of the library. At first Wes thought nothing of it but as they approached, it was clear that some kind of commotion was going on.

"Abdul!" Hayaam suddenly cried out. She made an effort to move faster on her crutches.

"What is it?" Wes asked.

Then Wes understood what the trouble was: half-a-dozen guys, jocks and fraternity types by their varsity jackets, had surrounded a foreign student, whom Wes assumed was Abdul, someone known to Hayaam, and the American students were clearly harassing him.

"Foreign fuck," said one.

"A-rab asshole," said another.

Abdul looked frightened as he turned quickly around, looking for an opening in the circle surrounding him.

"Let him go!" Hayaam shouted.

She stopped, put her weight on her good leg and raised one crutch high over her head in a gesture of threat.

The jocks thought this was very funny.

"Hey, sweetie pie. What do you plan to do with that?"

Another said, "Why you got that scarf covering your hair? I bet you got pretty hair."

This one stepped forward as if to see for himself, and Hayaam swung the crutch to keep him away.

"Oh, my!" said the intruder, stepping back.

Wes came forward.

"Hey, fellas, what's going on?"

"You tell us."

With the jocks distracted, Abdul slipped out of their circle and hurried beside Hayaam.

"Hayaam, this is not your fight," he said.

A jock said, "Who said anything about a fight? We just want you to go the fuck home where you belong."

"I am student here," said Abdul, "so today this is my home. Hayaam, let's go."

Wes, staying behind, wondered if Abdul was her boyfriend.

"Something we can help you with?" a jock asked with menace, as if one confrontation was as good as another in the new America.

"No. I was just leaving."

He caught up with Hayaam.

Abdul asked Hayaam, "Who is this?"

"He's the one I told you about." To Wes she added, "This is my brother, Abdul-Hakeem."

Her brother! Wes couldn't help but smile.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Wes."

He offered his hand. Abdul hesitated before shaking it briefly.

"I give you gratitude for helping my sister," Abdul said.

"I'm sorry for what happened back there."

"Your countrymen decided I am a terrorist."

Wes didn't know what to say.

"Hayaam, we must go."

"Thank you for the tea," she told Wes.

"Maybe we can do it again sometime."

She gave him a sweet smile. Abdul clutched her arm, a gesture repeating that they must go. She balanced her crutches and took the first swing of her leg to start forward.

Abdul glared at Wes as if he were about to say something unpleasant. Then he, too, turned and left.

Wes watched them go. Her brother didn't like him. But it could have been worse, much worse. He could have been her boyfriend.

8

Evelyn would cry without warning. Over laundry, in the supermarket, on the phone. Tonight it happened at dinner.

"I'm sorry," she sobbed, getting up from the table.

Wes couldn't bear to look at her for fear he'd start crying himself.

"Evelyn, it's okay," said Walter.

"Stop saying everything is okay!"

Evelyn hurried away into the kitchen.

Walter let out a sigh of exasperation.

"I meant crying is okay."

Wes nodded.

They continued eating in silence for a moment.

"Dad ... do you know any Muslims?"

"We used to have a lawyer in the firm who was Muslim. Why?"

"If he was still in the firm, would you suspect him of being a terrorist?"

"Of course not. Why do you ask?"

"There was a scuffle at school today. Some jock types hassling a foreign student from Indonesia."

"We're going to see a lot of that, I fear. Stupidity and patriotism make a volatile mix."

Wes encountered evidence of the truth of his father's observation the very next afternoon. He was shooting baskets in the gym at school with Roger.

"I ran into Hayaam," Wes said.

Roger gave him a puzzled look, then made a long jump shot. Three points.

"The girl I carried out of the tower before it collapsed. She's a student here."

"Don't tell me you've gotten interested in an Arab girl."

"She's from Indonesia. We had coffee."

Wes shot from outside the key and missed. Roger scrambled after the rebound.

"No big deal," said Wes.

"Then why are you talking about her?"

Roger threw a hard pass to Wes, which he fumbled. When he recovered the ball, Wes shot again and this time got only net.

"Do me a favor," said Roger after grabbing the rebound. "If you get involved with this Arab girl, keep it to yourself."

## 9

Several days passed before Wes ran into Hayaam again. He was working in his carrel, which had a window overlooking campus as well as those looking into the library. He was having a hard time getting started on the novel about Moliere despite his outline. In the new America, the life of a 17<sup>th</sup> century Frenchman, however famous, seemed irrelevant. The year-long excitement that Wes had carried for the story, eager to get to his thesis-writing year so he could explore the incredible notion that Moliere might have married his own daughter, was gone. Why should he or anyone else care about Moliere when America was under attack?

Looking out the window, he saw Hayaam hobbling across campus on her crutches. He left the carrel immediately.

Outside he caught up with her and, out of breath, said, "Hey."  
"Hello."

He decided she had the sweetest smile in the universe.

"You have a class now?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And afterwards?"

"I have a long break. Three hours."

"Time for tea?"

"That would be very nice."

They arranged to meet after her class in the coffee shop in the Student Union. She was late but Wes didn't give up on her. He would have waited for as long as it took. It never occurred to him that she might not appear.

"I think you're angry with me," Hayaam said after Wes had accepted her apology for being late. She'd stayed after class to talk with her professor.

"No way."

"You look upset."

In fact, he was upset -- but not about Hayaam. Under the social façade of returning to normal existence, this being the official national defense against those who would destroy American freedoms, everyone in New York, indeed everyone in America, was breathing behind a veil of anxiety. In the new America, a brooding stress and uncertainty were becoming a way of life, hanging in the air like storm clouds. If the enemy, these terrorists, could bring down the twin towers so easily, what else could they do?

"What is it?" Hayaam asked.

"I still can't believe what happened."

"I know."

Hayaam's smile was different now, less sweet and more maternal.

Wes said, "Do you want to take a walk? Get off campus? I guess it's hard for you ..."

"No. As long as you don't mind walking slowly."

"Nowhere to go to and no time to be there."

Love happens in the present tense. The cynics among you will scoff at this. But it doesn't matter what cynics think. All that matters is what Wes and Hayaam now began to feel in one another's company.

They left campus - and everything changed. The tragedy of the recent past and the stressful uncertainty of the future were forgotten. Suddenly only the present moment mattered. Wes and Hayaam became totally focused on one another, totally in sync, attentive and caring, bonded by mutual interest and curiosity and for the moment devoted exclusively to getting to know one another. It was as if the universe had been compressed into the small space occupied by their adjacent bodies as they strolled slowly along, going nowhere in particular, needing only to be together.

Oh, give them a break, for God's sake! Suspend your disbelief long enough for them to explore this moment. Magic is at work. Just because you failed at love doesn't mean that they must.

Wes tells Hayaam about the pressure he felt in high school to follow in the footsteps of his grandfather, his father, and his older brother to become a lawyer. In high school, he had considered his future undergraduate studies as predestined, a sequence of courses (it hardly mattered what they were) leading to law school. Yet he'd already felt his calling, identified the passion of his life, and this was to become a writer. Of course, it was unlikely he could make a living at it. Growing up among so many lawyers had given him a solid foundation in the economic realities of life, and so he prepared, first in his heart of hearts and finally in the selection of his college courses, to become a writing teacher. When he finally found the courage to share this decision with his parents, his father congratulated him and his mother wept.

Hayaam tells Wes about growing up in Jakarta. She had an easier life than most children in her country, her father a successful businessman, and until she entered her teens she could have been called spoiled, or at least sheltered, with all the poverty and political uncertainties in her country filtered from her day-to-day experience. Then her mother died. Hayaam was sixteen, and the beautiful bubble of her daily existence burst before her eyes.

She became a rebellious teenager, she tells Wes, laughing when she sees how strange the notion strikes him. Yes, teenagers in other cultures rebel! For the first time she looked carefully at her city and her country, and what she saw was poverty and unhappiness and political turmoil. She tells Wes that she then became a political activist, working for more freedom and opportunity for Indonesians,

particularly women. When her father sent her to the United States to go to college, she believes it was first to get rid of her, only second to provide her with a good education.

They share their stories in snippets, trading vignettes of biography as they walk across campus or sit on the grass or linger at sidewalk cafes in nearby neighborhoods.

They are at a table at what has become their favorite café when Hayaam says, "I take my exam next week."

"You have midterms already?"

"Not at the university. For my citizenship."

Wes waits for more.

"I didn't tell you before."

"Let me make sure I understand. You've been studying to become an American citizen?"

She smiles and nods.

"Hayaam, I think that's great. So you plan to stay in America?"

"I have not decided. I will be a citizen of both countries. First, I have to tell my father. He is visiting us next month."

"Will he approve?"

"He would not want me to live here, I think."

Wes starts to say something but stops himself. He looks away.

"What is that look?" Hayaam asks.

"What look?"

"Like you don't believe I'm strong willed."

"I've seen you strong willed."

"You think I must do everything my father says. Even though I am an adult. You think this because I am a woman. Especially because I am a Muslim woman."

"No, I was just reacting to what you said."

"What do you think I said?"

"You had to get permission from your father—"

"No, I did not say this. I said I haven't told him yet that I will become an American citizen. But this is my choice. He has nothing to say about it."

Wes is silent because he fears that whatever he says will escalate the conversation even deeper into what is beginning to feel like an argument.

"There is that look again," Hayaam says.

"I have no idea what look you mean."

"That I am a Muslim woman."

"Well, you are!"

"And what does this mean to you?"

"I don't know. I thought ..."

"What?"

"You know, Muslim women are different."

"How is that?"

"They're more submissive than in the west."

Hayaam manages to smile and glare at him simultaneously.

Wes says, "Like how you dress, for instance."

"What about it?"

"It's very modest. I'm not criticizing it, I'm just pointing something out. Muslim women are different than American women."

"Of course we are! We are more liberated."

Wes can't help but laugh, which he immediately understands is the worst thing he could've done. Hayaam shifts her energy into a higher gear.

"Why does this amuse you? I dress like this because I refuse to be looked at as a sex object. I refuse to be a part of the sexism that is the basis of gender relations in the west. If a man wants a relationship with me, he must start by engaging my mind. There are no physical distractions. This is why I wear hijab, and this is why it is liberating."

She stops. Wes realizes that she is going to stare at him until he responds.

Finally he says, "I never thought about it that way."

"Maybe it's time you do."

## 10

Wes couldn't get Hayaam's words out of his mind. The more he thought about them, the more he flirted with the possibility that her point of view made sense. Twisting his mind around gender relations in this way, he found an explanation for something that always had bothered him.

There often was a great distance between what young American women he knew espoused in theory and how they behaved in practice, and in no area was this discrepancy more visible than in fashion. The ardent feminist who insisted she was not a sex object could enter a party wearing the most skimpy tease of attire, strutting flirtatiously through the night as if politics were in no way personal, a radical feminist by day, a vamp by night. Of course, this same young woman would say, if cornered on the contradiction, that there was no contradiction at all, the sex in this equation was unilateral, coming from the dirty mind of the patriarchal observer, the culturally brainwashed eyes of the male held hostage by sex, and she, the passionate feminist, was merely expressing herself by her dress, or lack of dress, and not meaning to be sexual at all.

How different was the Muslim approach to fashion! That men were sexually tempted by women was assumed to be true, which meant that women should dress in a way that held off this natural biological energy. Men were animals by nature, and therefore both sexes should



behave accordingly. At least this was the sense Wes began to make of Hayaam's haunting words.

"That is the biggest crock I've ever heard in my life," Roger said when Wes shared the notion one afternoon. They again were shooting baskets in the gym.

"If you think about it, there's a logic to it. Put yourself in the shoes of a woman."

"Listen to you. You're thinking with your cock, white man."

*That's the point, isn't it?* Wes thought. But he realized there was no point in pursuing the matter with Roger. They shot the rest of their baskets in silence.

When they were dressing at their lockers after a shower, Roger said, "Have you nailed her yet?"

"We're just friends."

"Bullshit. You can't talk about anyone else."

"Okay, I find her different. But we're just friends."

"Do I detect a certain sadness in your tone?"

"She's a Muslim."

"Exactly. You nail her, and they stone her in the street, right? Then her brother tracks you down and cuts off your dick."

## 11

Could it be true? *You nail her, and they stone her in the street. Then her brother tracks you down and cuts off your dick.*

Knowing virtually nothing about Islam, Wes decided to learn something.

At the campus bookstore, he found a book shelved in the Religions area called *Islam: A Concise Introduction*. On his way to the cash register, he stopped to browse at a table full of books on sale. There was a paperback copy of *The Rubiyat of Omar Khayam*, which Wes bought as well because he remembered from high school a poem about a loaf of bread, a jug of wine, and thou.

His curiosity about Islam was challenged by the turgid prose of the book. He admitted that he actually wasn't interested in Islam so much as in Hayaam, in knowing how being a Muslim had made her different from other women he had known, American women, and how Hayaam was different from a more mainstream or traditional Muslim. Soon enough he read something that disturbed him, and he wondered if this had disturbed Hayaam as well. If so, he had been acting like an ignorant fool.

He soon had an opportunity to ask her. He'd taken the habit of watching for her from his carrel window, and one afternoon she passed below without her crutches. He stopped what he was doing,

which was precious little (he still hadn't started chapter one), and raced outside to catch up with her.

"When did you get off crutches?"

The answer was obvious since he'd seen her with them yesterday.

"This is my first day. If I am careful, I am safe."

They walked a moment in silence as Wes prepared to say what was on his mind.

"I owe you an apology."

"I don't understand."

"I've been acting from ignorance. I mean, I know we've never really been completely alone together since we spend our time together in public places, but I didn't realize it was against your religion to date. Not that we're actually dating. But we are, you know, sort of seeing each other regularly, which could be construed to be dating. I didn't mean any disrespect by it."

"You think I am forbidden to be alone with you?"

"I've been reading about Islam. It says you don't date or spend time alone with the opposite sex."

"I see. Then this is like my hijab, another example of my repression. You must feel so sorry for me."

"I'm not trying to make you angry. I'm trying to apologize."

"You are making me angry! Let me tell you something. I am a feminist. Yes, a Muslim feminist! Whatever book you are reading, I think you are getting bad information."

There was something in the energy of her stepping away from him that told Wes not to follow, she wanted to be alone now. But he was not sure what had just happened. He couldn't let it rest.

He found her in the library and sat down across the table from her. He leaned forward and spoke in low tones, surprising her by changing the subject.

"How's the studying for citizenship coming?"

Hayaam decided not to stay mad at him. After all, he was an American, and Americans knew almost nothing about Islam. At least he was trying to understand.

"Good," she said.

"I'd be glad to help. Quiz you, whatever you need."

"You would do this?"

"I'd like to."

"Even if we must be alone to do this?"

"I deserve that. Yes, even if we are alone."

"Then yes, you can help me."

"Great."

"When?"

"Soon. Let me get back to you."

His mind was racing with possibilities. One was inviting her to his house, where they could study undisturbed in the privacy of his bedroom. Besides, he'd like her to meet his parents.

At dinner that night Wes waited until Evelyn had cleared the table before telling his father about Hayaam's visit. He'd mentioned her to him before.

"I'm still seeing the Muslim woman I told you about. She's actually studying to become an American citizen. I thought I'd help her study."

"Is that a question?"

"I was wondering if it would be okay to bring her here. I mean, the way mom feels and everything."

"Of course you can bring her here."

"Thanks, Dad."

In his room, Wes decided to invite Hayaam to come over Saturday afternoon to study. If he'd had her phone number, he would have called now to ask. He wondered if Hayaam would consider it forward of him to ask for her phone number. The book said that Muslims didn't date and yet she had reprimanded him for even suggesting such a notion. No doubt there were as many varieties of Islam as of Christianity, and Hayaam practiced on the liberal end of the spectrum. If she was not afraid to be alone with him, she probably was not afraid to come to his home, to study without a chaperone in his bedroom.

## 12

Wes' advisor was Professor Adams, a stout, balding Blake scholar near retirement. With still no progress on the novel (not even an opening paragraph written down), Wes stopped by his office to confess to what appeared to be writer's block.

"Moliere seems so irrelevant to everything going on today," Wes said.

"Aha."

There was a long silence.

Professor Adams said, "But you were so excited by the possibility that he'd married his own daughter. There are obvious dramatic possibilities there."

Wes shrugged, as if to say, *So what?*

After another silence, the professor asked, "What do you think about history?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"How were you going to imagine how Moliere felt, a man who lived what, three plus hundred years ago? How were you going to get into his head?"

After a silence, Wes said, "I was going to imagine myself in the same situation, I guess."

"Exactly. You were going to make the leap that there is a common human condition than transcends time and culture. Am I right?"

"I guess so."

"Which means that all things that happen, no matter when they happen, can be made relevant to the human condition. In fact, this is your very job as a writer, isn't it? To show us why Moliere, and the turmoil he went through, matters to us today. What it can tell us about ourselves. Or do I misunderstand your intentions?"

Wes nodded without speaking.

"Remember, Moliere lived in very turbulent times himself," said the professor. "A history novel is always a contemporary novel."

"I see what you mean."

Professor Adams grinned, which seemed to make him stouter than he was.

Wes said, "I just needed someone to talk to, I guess."

"Of course. Glad to help."

That night at home Wes wrote the first three pages of his novel. He wasn't sure if they were any good but at least it was a start.

### 13

On Saturday Wes met Hayaam in front of the library on campus. When she'd accepted his invitation for a study session and he'd started giving her directions to his family's home on Long Island, he could tell right away that she wasn't used to taking the train. He told her he'd meet her on campus so they could travel together, taking the subway to Penn Station and the train to Glen Cove, the Nassau county village where Wes had grown up and his parents lived still.

It was, it turned out, Hayaam's first train ride in New York. For Wes this made the routine commute an adventure, and by the time they disembarked and walked to his car in the parking lot at the Glen Cove station, they both were in good spirits, looking like a young couple in love, which was how they were beginning to feel, though neither was prepared to admit this to the other. In public they were guarded and restrained, trying to behave like casual friends. Only when they knew they were alone did their guards come down as they moved into the temporary, present-tense realm of lovers.

Wes opened the passenger door of his Toyota for her. Before climbing in, Hayaam said, "If you have a car, why don't you drive to New York?"

"Spoken like someone who has never driven in New York."

The family home was close to town, a large two-story colonial on a sprawling corner lot. Wes parked the Toyota beside his father's Mercedes in front of the garage and hurried around the front of the car to open the door for Hayaam. To his surprise, she was getting out of the car herself before he had a chance to be chivalrous.

"I'm so nervous," Hayaam said. All the same, Wes had never seen a more beautiful smile.

"Trust me, my parents are great. A friend of mine is a friend of theirs."

Which was exactly what Walter soon suggested, standing in the doorway with a wide grin as they came up the steps.

"Saw you coming," he said.

"Dad, this is Hayaam."

"I thought it must be. It's very nice to meet you, Hayaam. A friend of Wes' is a friend of ours."

"It is a pleasure to meet you."

"Well, come in."

Wes gestured for Hayaam to enter first, and both father and son waited for her to pass. Walter winked at Wes.

"Is mom around?" Wes saw that she was nowhere to be found.

Walter said, "I think she went on an errand."

Wes could tell his father was lying. Earlier, in fact, as Walter and Evelyn watched the Toyota approach, standing back from the dining room curtains so as not to be seen, Evelyn abruptly had said, "I'm not ready for this," and bolted for the stairway.

Now it was Wes' turn to move for the stairway, saying, "I'm helping Hayaam study for her citizenship test."

"I believe you mentioned that," Walter said.

Wes led the way upstairs. At the top of the stairs, he noticed that the door to his parents' bedroom was closed. He imagined his mother hiding in there, determined not to meet Hayaam because of what had happened to Michael. Wes remembered how his grandmother, Evelyn's mother, had refused to ride in a VW all her life because the car was made by Germans. Xenophobia ran in his mother's side of the family.

Wes waited for Hayaam to enter the bedroom first. And then they are alone.

For a moment, stepping inside, Wes thinks of shutting the door for privacy but at the same time he doesn't want to give the wrong impression. He leaves it open.

An open door does not relieve the nervousness he feels about being alone with Hayaam in his bedroom. She seems to be taking her time taking the room in, as if trying to extrapolate insights about him from the NYU banner and the NY Yankees poster, from the long desk he made himself from plywood and bricks, which supports a computer on one end and stacks of books on the other.

"You can sit at the desk," Wes says.

Hayaam sits down and opens her backpack. She takes out a folder and hands Wes a booklet.

"These are sample test questions," she says.

But she is not quite ready to start.

"You like baseball?"

"Especially the Yankees."

"I tried to watch a game on television. I don't understand it."

"Maybe we can go to a game sometime."

"You would have to explain it to me."

"I can do that."

She smiles. By then Wes is so nervous he looks away.

"Shall we start?" she asks, rescuing him.

It doesn't take long before he realizes that she knows more about American history than he does. There are one hundred sample questions, arranged in sections, and her answers to each come quickly and confidently.

Reaching the Famous Quotations section, Wes says, "Give me liberty or give me death!"

"Patrick Henry."

"These are the times that try men's souls."

"Thomas Paine. I have one that's not in the book. No taxation without representation."

She stares at him, waiting.

"I know that one," he says.

But he's not sure.

He guesses, "Samuel Adams."

"Very close. Samuel Adams was his law clerk."

"Really?"

Wes has no idea who it might be.

"John Adams," he says, a wild guess.

"John Adams called him the First Patriot."

He rattles off a few more names, which exhausts his limited knowledge of the American revolution.

Hayaam says, "James Otis."

"James Otis. I'm not sure I ever heard of him."

"I know. He's not in the book of questions. I read about him in a book from the library. Do you know what he meant by no taxation without representation?"

"Since the colonies couldn't vote, they shouldn't be taxed."

"What did James Otis want to do about it?"

"To become independent. The colonies went to war over it."

"This is not what he meant. He wanted the colonies to be represented in English Parliament. He didn't want independence or war. When war came, he went crazy. They had to carry him out of Boston in a straightjacket. The citizenship book doesn't tell you

this. In Indonesia, the government only tells you what they want you to know. Is it the same in America?"

Wes isn't sure what to say. He is amazed, listening to her, not only by her knowledge but by the confidence with which she relates it. At the same time, her British accent adds an irony to her tone, as if the losers had to tell the winners what had really happened.

Wes says, "At least you could get the whole story in the library."

Hayaam says, "This is true. I think the history of your country is fascinating."

They continue through the booklet, and Hayaam doesn't miss a question. As far as Wes is concerned, she couldn't be more ready to take the citizenship test.

When they are done, he asks her if she would like to go out for ice cream or a snack. Glen Cove has a great bakery and a great café. Hayaam says she'd better be getting back because her brother would be expecting her. They leave his bedroom and reenter the world.

Wes insisted on driving her home, rather than seeing her off on the train. He could drop her off at her door and avoid the hassle of parking in the city.

On the drive into the city, they conversed little, not so much from nervousness now as from contentment, quietly happy in the silence of one another's company. Their eyes met often, and they almost always smiled then, as if astonished at how comfortable they felt together. Although the present tense magic of being alone in his room was gone, they still shared the embrace of intimacy.

Hayaam shared an apartment with her brother in Greenwich Village within walking distance of campus. She directed him to her apartment building, and Wes stopped in the street, double-parking. This time he hurried around the car before she could get out. He opened the door for her, then offered his hand to help her out.

Wes noticed Abdul looking at them from a front window. When Hayaam saw her brother, she said, "He didn't want me to come. He's afraid we're dating."

She seemed to be waiting for Wes to say something.

Finally she asked, "Are we dating?"

"I don't know. I mean, then it's allowed?"

"If I choose to, yes. Remember, I am a feminist."

"I keep forgetting."

"Are we dating?"

"Well ... what do you think?"

"Please answer the question."

Wes saw that Abdul was still staring at them from the window.

Wes said, "Yes, we're dating. I mean, I would like to think that we are."

"Good. I like dating you."

She flashed him the sweet smile, which melted him as always, and then she waved to Abdul. She ran up the few stairs to the building's entrance.

A car beeped its horn for Wes to move on. He hurried behind the wheel, looked quickly to see Hayaam disappear inside, and drove off.

## 14

As soon as Hayaam entered the apartment, she faced Abdul, who had positioned himself to intercept her. He looked angry at the world.

"Did you manage to get any studying done?"

"That's all we did. He asked questions from the book, and I answered them."

"Seeing him will not lead to anything good. You must know this."

"This is my decision, not yours."

"And Papa's decision?"

"Papa is not here."

"He will be soon enough."

Abdul said this is a way that made Hayaam believe he was keeping something from her. She stopped feeling defensive, her focus turning to her father. What had Abdul learned?

Abdul relished the power he had at this moment. He didn't give his sister the satisfaction of saying more.

"Abdul, what is it?"

He smiled, his signal of victory.

"A letter came today. His papers have been approved."

"How soon will he leave?"

"Only a matter of weeks now."

In her excitement, she embraced her brother. Abdul broke away, not comfortable with this gesture of overt affection for every happy moment of a day. The gesture was too American.

"Papa will not approve of what you are doing," he told her.

Hayaam was quickly defensive again.

"Papa knows me better than you do."

With this, she retreated into her room, closing the door behind her. It had been a year since her father's last visit, and she had changed so much since then. She still hadn't told him, or Abdul, that she was becoming an American citizen. Papa, she thought, would understand her reasons more than her brother would. Her father might not approve but he would respect her decision, she believed, and once she explained that this meant she was a citizen of two countries, not giving up an allegiance to Indonesia at all, her father would better understand what she had done.

However, her father would not understand nor approve of her desire to live in America. This would be the last news she would



tell him, and she would wait until he'd gone back home before sharing it in a letter.

## 15

Wes found his mother in the back yard at twilight, cutting flowers. He watched her from the den, and when she came into the house with a bouquet for the dinner table, he was waiting for her.

"Mom, are you okay?"

"Do I look that bad carrying flowers?"

"You know what I mean."

Yes, she did know, but Evelyn was in no mood to discuss the situation. She continued on into the kitchen. For a moment she was thankful that Wes had not followed her but he appeared after all, just as she started trimming the stems of the flowers.

"She's studying to become an American citizen," Wes said.

"Who is?"

"Why can't you accept her?"

She set down the scissors and looked at him. How could she even begin to explain how she felt?

"I just wish you could get interested in an American girl."

"I told you, she's studying to—"

"She's a Muslim. You know nothing about her. For all you know, she may be..."

"What? A terrorist? Don't be ridiculous."

"Muslims are different. Look what they did."

"I can't believe you're saying this."

"What would your brother think?"

"Mike wasn't a bigot."

"So I'm a bigot now?"

She picked up the scissors and went back to work, wishing against hope that he would just leave her alone.

"You're supposed to be a Unitarian," Wes said. "You're supposed to be tolerant."

"I'm a Baptist."

"What?"

"I'm a Baptist. We go to the Unitarian church because it's the only one I could get your father to go to. I was born a Baptist, and I'll always be a Baptist."

Evelyn moved to the sink and filled a vase with water. She began to arrange the flowers.

Wes lingered a moment, then walked out. As he passed by the living room on his way to the stairway, Walter looked up from the newspaper and said, "Everything all right, son?"

"Everything's great."

Wes took the stairs up two at a time.

## 16

Now that they were officially dating, Wes and Hayaam ventured farther from campus, talking long walks in the city, enjoying free time together in Central Park, strolling through Chinatown and Little Italy, going to the Guggenheim and the American Museum of Natural History. Wes felt like a tourist guide, showing Hayaam's the highlights of New York, and he enjoyed doing it.

On a Saturday afternoon, as they sit together on a blanket in Central Park, Wes brings out the volume of *The Rubiyat* and reads to her. He'd been rehearsing this moment for days, carefully selecting the verse he'd begin with, reading aloud in his room in hopes that familiarity would make it less likely that he'd stumble over words in his nervousness.

But despite all his practice, his voice wavers as he reads to her:

"Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough,  
A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse - and Thou  
Beside me singing in the Wilderness -  
And Wilderness is Paradise enow."

Wes feels himself blushing, his face hot, and he has to look away for fear of appearing more stupid than he already feels.

Hayaam takes the book from him. She flips through the pages, stopping when she finds what she's looking for. When she reads, her voice is soft but confident with its British accent:

"Ah, fill the Cup! - what boots it to repeat  
How Time is slipping underneath our Feet:  
Unborn tomorrow, and dead yesterday,  
Why fret about them if Today be sweet!"

If only a moment ago he couldn't look her in the eye, now he can't look away. Wes experiences a connection with Hayaam that makes him dizzy and speechless. He wouldn't know how to begin to describe it, other than to say that he had fallen in love with her.

Hayaam speaks first.

"I'd better go home."

"You're sure?"

Immediately he regrets asking. Of course she must leave, lest they make love on the spot. There is enough sexual energy between them to destroy all inhibitions, should they respond to it. Both are hesitant and frightened by the possibility.

Hayaam says, "Yes."

She shifts her position, getting ready to rise, and Wes bounds to his feet to offer his hand. He lifts her to her feet. They almost fall into one another's arms.

"Will you come to church with me on Sunday?" he asks.

For a moment the question seems to puzzle her.

"If you like," she says.

"I would like it very much."

"Then I will."

## 17

Wes didn't tell his parents about the invitation. Habitually they all went to church together, but Wes had agreed to pick Hayaam up. She'd insisted that he meet her at the edge of campus rather than at her apartment. Wes left the house with the curt announcement to his father that he'd meet them at church.

As soon as Wes was out the door, Evelyn came into the living room and said, "Is Wesley ready?"

"He said he'll meet us there."

"He's going to church alone?"

But as soon as she said this, Evelyn suspected the truth. He was bringing the girl to church.

This knowledge ruined for her what normally was a pleasant scenic drive from Glen Cove to Muttontown, where the small Unitarian Universalist fellowship met in a converted farmhouse. Evelyn was torn between telling Walter to turn around and return home, knowing full well it wouldn't take much of an excuse for him to do just this, and convincing herself that she was wrong, Wesley was not with them because he had other plans, with the Muslim woman no doubt, but certainly there was no reason why this woman, this Muslim, would want to come to a church that wasn't of her faith. To a Unitarian church to boot, which in Evelyn's opinion didn't seem to belong to any faith, at least none that struck her as actually being religious.

Hayaam's mind also was racing with thoughts as Wes drove through the woods of northern Nassau County. When she had accepted the invitation to church, she'd expected to be taken somewhere in town. She remembered passing several churches in Glen Cove on her first visit. But Wes didn't stop in his home village at all, continuing north along the highway. Finally he turned off onto a smaller road, and they drove through woods for a while until he turned again onto a long driveway that led to the farmhouse that was the church.

"We're here," said Wes, stating the obvious. A dozen cars were in the small parking lot. He maneuvered the Toyota beside his father's Mercedes and rushed out to open Hayaam's door for her.

Stepping out, Hayaam said, "I didn't think American men opened doors for women any more."

"I confess it's a first for me."

"Because I'm from Indonesia?"

"No. Because I want to make a good impression."

"It's really about good manners, isn't it?"

"Yes, I think it is."

He was bold enough to take her hand, and when he did, she smiled. They started toward the front entrance.

Walter had insisted on saving two seats, even though Evelyn was now almost sure Wes was not coming. When she noticed that people seated in front of her were craning their necks to stare back at the entrance into what had been the large dining room, converted now into a space more resembling a business meeting hall than a sanctuary, she shifted in her seat and was faced with the shocking sight of Wesley, who walked toward her holding the hand of the Muslim woman. Walter saw them, too, and quickly stood.

Evelyn assumed the worst immediately: Wesley had fallen in love with this woman.

"Hayaam, good to see you again," said Walter.

Wes said, "Mom, this is Hayaam." And to Hayaam, "My mother."

"Pleased to meet you," said Hayaam.

Evelyn managed to smile but couldn't bring a single word to voice.

The Muttontown Unitarian Universalist Fellowship had been formed because enough people living in upper Nassau County on Long Island had become tired of driving into New York to meet with those of kindred spiritual beliefs. It was already formed by the time Walter and Evelyn moved from the city to Glen Cove, and for a while Evelyn went alone to a nearby Baptist Church, just as she had done in the city. As they began to make friends, several of their best ones turned out to be Unitarians. Almost on a whim one Sunday morning, getting ready for church, Evelyn asked Walter if he'd like to go to the Unitarian church. She had read in the Glen Cove Record-Pilot that the fellowship, which had been meeting in private homes for years, had purchased and converted a farmhouse in Muttontown into a sanctuary. Services - or were they called meetings? - were held each Sunday morning at 10:30 a.m., late enough so Walter could still watch Sunday Morning on television. To Evelyn's surprise, Walter agreed, and they ended up signing a book to become official members of the fellowship less than a year later. That was two decades ago, and the size of the congregation had held steady between 30 and 50 ever since.

Today no more than two dozen had come to listen to the Reverend Dr. Sally Downs speak on, "Does Evil Exist?" Of course it existed, Evelyn thought. What was September 11<sup>th</sup> if not a manifestation of evil? This was what she couldn't understand about Unitarians, they

always tried to make simple questions complicated. But at least she and Walter did something together each Sunday morning, usually taking a drive afterwards and having lunch at some roadhouse they'd never been to before, and she was willing to put up with Unitarians in order to preserve the pleasures of their Sunday routine.

Wes couldn't focus on the sermon. He was aware that he'd upset his mother by bringing Hayaam. More than anything else, he wanted Hayaam to be comfortable now, and he made an effort to smile whenever their eyes met so she'd know how happy he was to have her there with him. She was wearing her usual hijab, today's robe as orange as a flame with a dark brown head veil. She looked beautiful, and the Unitarians around her all beamed when they looked at her, as if her presence provided the visible truth of their creed of universal tolerance.

Hayaam found the sermon both interesting and puzzling. As a comparative religion major, she was naturally interested in the question of evil, and the woman giving the sermon had done her homework on the subject. What puzzled Hayaam was that this lecture - and this appeared to be a lecture, not a sermon - was occurring in a church, or what was presented to be a church. Yet there was not a single reference to God or Jesus Christ through the entire morning. Once, after the lecture ended, the woman mentioned the Great Spirit before inviting the congregation to pray, but this was as close as the Unitarians got to what Hayaam expected to be Christian, or even religious, behavior. She had come out of curiosity to learn how Unitarians, practiced their religion but found the entire experience more confusing than enlightening.

Afterwards, as the small congregation stood in line to greet their pastor on their way out, Unitarians beamed again at Hayaam, and she began to feel self-conscious. Wes grasped her hand tightly and tried in his smile to encourage patience, that soon enough all of this would be over.

Wes and Hayaam were in line just ahead of Walter and Evelyn. No one spoke until it was their turn to greet the Rev. Dr. Sally Downs.

"Rev. Downs," Wes said, "this is my friend, Hayaam."

The Rev. Dr. Sally Downs showed off her excellent teeth with a broad smile.

"Thank you so much for coming!"

"She's studying to become an American citizen," said Wes.

"Well, this is an honor. I hope we see you again."

"Thank you," Hayaam said.

As Wes led Hayaam away, he heard the pastor behind him greet his parents, "Thank you for bringing Hayaam." If the Rev. Dr. Sally Downs only knew how little good Unitarian tolerance inhabited the Harding household!

Outside Wes didn't really want to wait for his parents but he wanted less to face the possible wrath that might greet him later if he rushed off with Hayaam now. So they waited, and congregants came one after the other to meet Hayaam, perhaps the first Muslim any of them had met before, or the first since September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Finally Walter bounded forward like a lawyer after a victory verdict.

"I assume you'll join us for lunch," he said.

Wes read from his mother's expression that this was a unilateral invitation. Before he could invent an excuse, Hayaam said, "I'm sorry. I must get home."

Walter looked as disappointed as Evelyn looked relieved.

"Some other time then," he said.

In the Toyota, driving slowly in order to keep Hayaam's company as long as possible, Wes learned that Hayaam didn't have to get home at all.

"I said what you call a white lie," she said. "Is that the expression? I have the afternoon free."

Wes shot her an inquisitive look.

Hayaam said, "Your mother doesn't like me."

"Of course she does."

Immediately he regretted the clear transparency of the remark.

"My mother is ... she was raised a Baptist. They aren't very liberal-minded about religious matters. But she's come a long way, believe me. I didn't even know she was a Baptist myself until recently."

"If she is a Baptist, why is she going to a Unitarian church?"

"Because my father wants to."

Hayaam smiled.

"What?" Wes said.

"I was just thinking ... American women are so repressed."

Later, walking through a small park along the shore in lower Long Island, Wes asked if she had liked the service.

"I was surprised. It is not what I expected."

"In what way?"

"I heard nothing about God or Jesus Christ. Even in the prayer, it was the Great Spirit who was prayed to. I thought only your American Indians prayed to the Great Spirit."

"Most Unitarians are refugees from other religions. God and Christ sometimes bring bad memories of how they were brought up."

"This is a strange foundation for a religion."

"It's not official doctrine. But I think it's true."

"Would you like to come to a mosque?"

The question surprised him, although it made perfect sense for Hayaam to return the favor.

"I would, yes."

"When?"

"Whenever would be appropriate."

"I don't know what this means. How would it be appropriate?"

"Hayaam, I will come whenever you invite me."

"Next Friday at noon. This is our large community worship. You actually can't participate but it would be appropriate for you to be there as an observer if you like."

Her grin revealed that she was making fun of him.

"Just tell me where to go," he said.

"There are several possibilities. Let me tell you next week."

## 18

Wes had not been reading the library book on Islam from cover-to-cover. When he'd first taken it home, he immediately searched the index for information on women, the hijab, sexual attitudes, and dating practices. The term "hijab" was especially confusing because sometimes its meaning was abstract and sometimes concrete. Thus the author wrote in one place, "Hijab is the long dress and veil worn by many Muslim women," but in another, "women wear the abaya (robe or dress that covers arms and legs) and hijab (scarf covering the head)," and in still another, "Hijab is an Arabic word meaning 'the covering' and refers to the Islamic dress code of women." So hijab could describe the practice of dressing modestly, collectively the robe and scarf that expressed this modesty, or just the headscarf. The bottom line was, a Muslim woman dressed so only her face and hands remained uncovered.

Returning home on Sunday, Wes picked up the book again and looked in the index to see if there was anything about the rituals of worship in a mosque.

He was astounded by what he found. The rituals of Islamic worship were so numerous and complex that he'd be stressed to the point of canceling if he were expected to participate in them. Before worship Muslims removed their shoes and performed a detailed and ritualistic washing ceremony: washing the hands to the wrists three times, rinsing out the mouth with the right hand three times, sniffing and blowing water from the nostrils three times, washing the face three times, washing each arm to the elbow three times, wiping the head with the fingers once, cleaning the inside of the ears with the index fingers and the back of the ears with the thumbs, both once, wiping the back of the neck once, and finally washing the feet up to the ankles three times.

Wes was exhausted just reading about it - and this was only the preparation for worship, which had a ritualistic order no less complicated. He was relieved not to have to participate but also

fascinated by what he'd read and curious to see such a complex procedure of worship in action. The Catholics had nothing on the Muslims for embracing rituals.

At school Hayaam told him to go to a mosque located only a few blocks east of Central Park. She normally attended a smaller mosque closer to her apartment in Greenwich Village, she explained, but this one was larger and more likely would have other guests beside himself. Guests sat apart from the worshippers, and he might not feel as conspicuous if he had company. She also told him to go right on in without her. Someone would direct him to where the guests sat. She would be worshipping in the separate women's section upstairs, so she couldn't visit with him until after prayers. Then she'd find him outside the mosque, and they could spend some time together.

Next Hayaam said something that he hadn't thought about.

"Of course, some people will think you're an F.B.I. agent."

"What?"

"Paranoia works both ways. Americans see a Muslim and think, a terrorist! Muslims see an American in a mosque and think, Why is he here? He must be spying for the F.B.I."

This was life in the new America.

## 19

Wes located the mosque early on Friday, arriving thirty minutes before worship began. The building occupied a corner of the block, a round building of brick and sandstone, red and brown, with a dome overhead near which a tall thin tower rose. He walked past the mosque several times, nervous enough to realize that the visit would be stressful after all, even if he couldn't participate. People would stare at him, knowing he didn't belong there. A few probably would conclude he was a spy for the F.B.I. As ridiculous as the notion was, it scared him a little. What if someone confronted him about being there? He wished Hayaam were around to accompany him inside. But, of course, she couldn't do this. The sexes worshipped separately. What was so liberal or progressive about this? What did the feminism to which Hayaam claimed allegiance have to say about it?

He walked around the block, then a second and a third time. As he approached the mosque again he heard a loud-recorded voice, sounding like some kind of chant, and he saw that people were beginning to enter the mosque, and Wes stopped half a block away to watch them. They arrived in larger numbers than he expected, of all ages, the woman always wearing a veil, though otherwise there was more variety in their dress than he expected. He watched, trying to get the nerve to follow them inside.



Hayaam appeared with her friend, Areeba, and they entered. This was the boot in the butt Wes needed. He strode briskly to the entrance, which was marked by a large, ornate open door, and he followed people inside.

Everyone ahead of him was taking off their shoes and slipping them into a cubbyhole in a large open case. Wes did the same. Cloth slippers of various sizes were available, and Wes slipped on a pair. As he looked around, wondering what to do next, a man with a thick black beard smiled at him and said, "Are you visiting us today?" When Wes nodded, the man gently took his arm and said to follow this way.

The man led Wes to a side wall of a large open room where two young men already sat silently on small rugs. Wes nodded and joined them, kneeling down on his knees on his own small rug.

In the large room men were arranged in long lines, all facing the same direction. Wes noticed a balcony, and this was where the women were waiting, also sitting or kneeling in long lines.

The sound of chanting had been coming over loudspeakers since Wes had entered. He couldn't tell if anyone was paying attention to it or not. He glanced a look at his two companions, guests like himself, and wondered what had brought them here. He wondered if they were F.B.I. agents.

Suddenly the men in the room rose to their feet. Glancing to the balcony, Wes saw that the women had done the same. But his two companions remained seated on their small rugs, so he didn't move. Apparently the worship service had begun.

Afterwards Wes was amazed at how quickly the experience passed by. The ritual itself was full of repetitions, a sequence of kneeling and bowing forward to touch the head to the floor, which was covered by a green carpet, then rising to one's feet to speak, then kneeling and bowing again, in an order and rhythm that gave the entire ritual the appearance of a dance. It must take a Muslim child years to learn how to worship without error, from the details of preparation to the complicated sequence of the religious dance.

Then everyone was leaving. No one was lingering to socialize. Wes followed the crowd outside, keeping to himself.

Outside the mosque, Wes looked around for Hayaam. For the first time he noticed two New York City policeman standing on the sidewalk nearby, and he wondered if they were there for a special reason or from routine in the climate of the new America.

Wes saw Hayaam and Areeba walking down the sidewalk. They must have exited before he had, and he worried why Hayaam hadn't waited outside near the door for him. Had he done something to embarrass her, even though all he'd done was to remain on his small rug to watch? Then she saw him and waved. He hurried to join them.

By the time he arrived, Areeba already had continued on alone.

Wes wanted to clear the air right away.

"Did I do something wrong?"

"I don't understand this question. Do you feel like you did something wrong?"

"You seemed to be walking away."

"There are many traditional Muslims here. They would be offended if we socialized too conspicuously."

"I understand. Shall we walk?"

They walked away from the mosque in an awkward silence.

"What did you think?" Hayaam finally asked.

"Do you know the expression blown away? I was blown away. It must take a Muslim child years to learn the right order for doing everything. It looks so complicated."

"It is not so difficult when you learn as a child. It's no harder than learning a language."

Of course not, Wes thought. It was exactly like learning a language. In a sense, religious worship, when expressed in such detail of ritual, was a language.

After they were a few blocks away from the mosque, they turned back and made a large semicircle into Central Park. As they strolled slowly in the direction of the Village to the southwest, Hayaam takes his hand.

Hayaam can tell that the gesture surprises him.

"You don't want to hold hands?"

"Of course I do. I wasn't sure if it was allowed."

"I'll pretend you didn't say that."

He walks her all the way to her neighborhood in Greenwich Village. He is not used to walking as far as she is, and he can feel the sweat on his back and the first hints of what will be tomorrow's soreness in his legs. Hayaam, it appears, walks everywhere. If Wes can't take the subway, he is used to hailing a cab.

Hayaam stops a block from her apartment and says, "I'll say goodbye here."

"So your brother won't see us?"

"He's more traditional than I am. He doesn't approve of dating."

"I don't ever want to get you in trouble, Hayaam."

"I don't need help to get into trouble!"

She laughs, giving him no choice but to grin along with her. He feels like kissing her but isn't sure how to start, isn't sure if this is too far an extension beyond holding hands in the strange world of proper Islamic behavior. He has no time to fret about it, however, because she quickly says she'll be studying in the library tomorrow if he happens to be on campus, and before he can reply she is skipping down the sidewalk, the long walk from Central Park not affecting her stamina at all, looking very much like a young woman in love.

## 20

That evening at dinner, Wes said, "I'd like to invite Hayaam for dinner."

Evelyn froze, then set down her fork. Both Wes and Walter watched her.

In a moment Walter broke the tension by turning to his son.

"Wes, it may be too early for that."

"Why?" Evelyn asked in a tone of reprimand. "He's obviously determined to keep seeing her. What will make the situation better if he doesn't ask her until next week or next month?"

"What I meant is, maybe you'll be able to accept her more graciously later."

"Graciously? Is that what I'm supposed to do?"

She stood.

"Those people killed my son. How can I be gracious about it?"

"Mother, you make it sound like she's a terrorist. She's becoming an American citizen."

"How wonderful for her."

Evelyn stepped toward the kitchen, making an effort to walk deliberately, no emotional storming off but a slow, calculated departure.

The men watched her go.

Walter said, "Wes, I don't think this is a good time right now."

## 21

The same evening, in the Village, Hayaam was studying in her room when her brother appeared in the open doorway. He waited until she noticed him.

"Tell me it isn't true."

Hayaam immediately knew what he meant.

"You want me to lie?"

"Why did you do it?"

"He is curious about Islam. He showed me his church. I wanted to show him mine."

"You went to his church?"

"They call it a church. It was more like a meeting."

"You know what father would say about this. He arrives next week."

The revelation pushed Hayaam between joy and apprehension. On the one hand, she loved her father and was eager to see him after almost a year; on the other, he was traditional and would not approve of her dating, especially dating an American, a non-Muslim.

"He will tell you not to see this man," Abdul went on. "You know he will."

Yes, she knew, though she did not admit it to her brother.

"When does he arrive?"

"His plane comes in Wednesday night."

Hayaam had a hard time falling to sleep that night for all her worrying about her father. She wanted to tell him about Wes before Abdul did because she, and only she, could explain the full context of what she was doing. In the darkness her mind raced with the words that she would tell her father. *Father, this is not how you think. This is not courtship. I know I can never marry this man, there are too many differences between us, our worlds are too far apart, and yet I enjoy his company here in America more than the company of anyone else I've met, more even than the company of Areeba, and so I see no harm in seeing him, in spending time with him, especially since we both know the limits and the boundaries of our relationship. We are friends, father, that is all. I know you think it is impossible to be just friends with a man but this is America, where many things are possible that are not possible elsewhere, in other traditions. We are friends, just friends, good friends. Father, you must trust me.*

It was a good speech, she decided, but the fact didn't help her fall to sleep. Repeating the words, and variations of them, in her mind, she soon was doubting them, and herself, and her feelings about Wes - she began struggling with the admission that she cared for him more deeply and more recklessly than the careful and guarded explanation to her father implied. And it was in this struggle that she finally fell to sleep because now sleep was an escape.

## 22

"You still seeing the Arab lady?" Roger said.

They were shooting baskets in the gym. Wes, getting set for a shot, broke his concentration and dribbled the ball.

"She's from Indonesia."

"I take it that's a yes."

Wes ignored him this time. He set up and shot, missed.

He rushed to the basket to get his own rebound.

"Why?" Roger asked as Wes dribbled back to the key. "I just don't get it."

"What's there to get?"

"Why an Arab, of all people?"

"She's Indonesian. Look, I'm just trying to feel like my life is normal again. What's wrong with that?"

"Life will never be normal again."

Wes shot. This time the ball bounced in off the backboard.

Roger dropped the subject. They shot baskets some more, then showered and went their separate ways to classes.

Later Wes met Hayaam in the Student Union. As usual, they got coffee and tea and sat at a table.

Hayaam did most of the talking. She was excited because her citizenship examination had been scheduled. It was only two weeks away. She was confident that she would pass.

Watching her, Wes noticed a strand of dark hair that had fallen from the band of her veil, and he realized he had never seen her hair before. How extraordinary! Was her hair short, long? He had no idea. He found himself wanting to reach out and touch the strand of hair where it fell from behind the veil. The thought became an obsession.

He realized he hadn't been listening to her when she said, not for the first time, "Wes? Where are you?"

"I'm sorry."

"Is something the matter?"

Wes couldn't stop thinking about her hair and was bad company for the rest of the afternoon.

## 23

A few days later an extraordinary thing happened.

They are in Central Park. Wes has brought along a Frisbee, and Hayaam has never thrown a Frisbee before. At first Wes just demonstrates how to throw it, letting her emulate him, but she is twisting her wrist when she throws, which she continues to do even after he points it out. He moves behind her and reaches around her, meaning to guide her hand and wrist and arm in the proper movement of throwing. Suddenly he freezes. He can feel how tense she has become and knows why. From behind, he practically is embracing her. They have never been this physically close before.

"Show me," Hayaam says.

Wes guides her arm, saying, "Wrist relaxed and release," repeating the motion again, "Wrist relaxed and release."

He lets her keep the Frisbee and moves a distance away. He tells her to toss it to him.

"That's better," he says.

Now she begins to get the hang of it, and in no time they are throwing the Frisbee back and forth across the grass. Hayaam tells him to move farther back, then in a while tells him again. She is throwing better and longer all the time.

They are about twenty yards apart when Hayaam's veil comes off from the exertion of a throw. Seeing her hair, Wes loses

concentration and drops the Frisbee. When he retrieves it and looks back, Hayaam has removed the veil entirely. She stands before him, twenty yards away, with dark hair falling past her shoulders.

Carrying the Frisbee, Wes slowly walks toward her. Hayaam walks toward him. When they meet, they stop, standing close. Hayaam's face is wet with perspiration. Without makeup, she has the face of a woman emerging from a shower.

Wes says, "You have beautiful hair."

"I know."

"I don't know why you cover it up."

"Because it's my decision who gets to see it."

"I'm glad I got to."

"So am I."

Perhaps you are too cynical to remember a moment like this: Wes can feel his heart pounding in his chest.

"Can I touch it?" he asks.

"If you like."

Wes reaches out and gently touches her hair, letting his fingers rest lightly against the side of her head, just above an ear. Her hair is damp. Hayaam closes her eyes.

"I want to kiss you," he says.

Without opening her eyes, Hayaam turns her head, offering him her cheek. He leans forward and gently kisses it.

No, he did not grab her breast. They did not suddenly collapse in a passionate embrace to make love on the grass. This is not a popular romance novel. This is not *The Bridges of Madison County*. This is not a Hollywood movie. This is the story of Wes and Hayaam.

Hayaam opens her eyes and looks at him.

"I have never kissed a man before," she says.

As she bends forward toward him, Wes expects a kiss on the lips but at the last moment she swerves and her lips touch his cheek. Her kiss is as soft as the landing of an insect.

Neither knows what to say. Hayaam breaks the silence.

"I'd better get home."

"I'll walk you."

They hold hands, as they often do now. They are silent, as if the new physical contact between them, however slight, has opened a dimension of communication beyond language, and their contentment in being together needs no explanation, no interpretation, no words to define it. They are learning to communicate through the pores of their skin.

You may have forgotten how this can happen. Trust me, it is happening to them. They are still too young to be cynical about such things.

They continue silently along, hand in hand, like two halves of the same person, leaving the park and rejoining the world.

Outside her apartment building, Wes finally spoke.

"I want to kiss you again."

"I know. But not now, not here."

"I know."

"I'll see you tomorrow."

"You certainly will."

They didn't even embrace. They exchanged smiles and moved apart, Hayaam into the building and Wes down the sidewalk.

Wes felt high, elated. He felt strangely powerful. He decided to return to campus to his carrel. Hayaam was like a muse, infusing him with creative energy, and he wanted to work on his novel.

A few blocks away Wes was stopped by the appearance of Abdul beside him. Abdul was out of breath.

"You must stop seeing my sister."

"I don't want to do that."

"You must, for her own good."

"Hayaam doesn't want to stop seeing me either."

"Our father arrives in this country next week. He is very traditional. You will only cause family trouble."

"I get the impression Hayaam does exactly what she wants to do. If she wants to see me, she will."

"You are right. This is why I am asking you to do the honorable thing. Stop seeing her. Prevent our family from this trouble."

"I'm sorry, I can't."

Wes started away but Abdul grabbed his arm and drew him back.

"Why do you do this? You think she will marry you? Even as radical as she is, she will only marry a Muslim. She will not sleep with a man before marriage. What is in this for you?"

"I love her."

Abdul laughed, not because anything was funny but because the notion was so ridiculous.

"What do Americans know about love? All you know about is sex."

"I don't see any point in this conversation."

But when Wes started off again, Abdul jumped forward to block his way.

"I have asked you to do the honorable thing, to honor our family. If you betray this request, then you will pay the consequences."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Stop seeing her."

There was hate in the final look Abdul gave him before leaving. Wes watched him hurry off, half expecting him to return with another warning.

Before reaching campus, Wes changed his mind. The muse had left him. He had no energy to write. He hailed a taxi for the ride to Penn Station, where he caught a train home.

## 24

Wes was studying in his room when Walter appeared in the doorway. It was almost ten o'clock at night.

"Hayaam is here to see you," Walter said. "She insisted on waiting on the porch."

As soon as Wes came outside, Hayaam practically leapt into his arms. They held one another for a long moment. This was the most physically aggressive thing she had ever done but it worried him. Something must be wrong.

Hayaam pulled away.

"How did you get here?" Wes said.

"I took the train alone. I'm very proud of myself."

"What's the matter?"

She wanted to walk. Along the way she told him that her brother had confronted her, demanding she stop seeing him, and also had told her about confronting Wes.

"I'm so sorry he talked to you that way."

They stopped walking, standing close on the sidewalk. Wes released her hand.

"Hayaam, I don't want to cause any problems for you. But I also want to keep seeing you."

"I want to keep seeing you, too."

"Abdul said your father won't approve."

"He's been angry with me before."

"I feel like I'm between a rock and a hard place."

"What is this?"

"A saying. I don't know what to do."

"Father will always love me. Even when he gets mad at what I do."

"I think maybe you have to lead the way here. I don't want to force you to make your father angry."

"You think you can force me to do something?"

Her smile caused Wes to smile.

"Of course not. A slip of the tongue."

"Kiss me."

Wes bent forward and kissed her on the cheek.

"Not there," Hayaam said.

She closed her eyes and puckered up. Wes almost laughed aloud, she looked so silly. But she was waiting, so he gave her a gentle kiss on the lips.

Hayaam opened her eyes.

"Again," she said.

They kiss a second time. His lips press against hers more strongly now, more confidently, and she begins to kiss back.



Suddenly Hayaam throws her arms around him, and they begin to kiss with growing passion.

Can you remember such wonderful abandon?

They start walking again, but they can't walk for ten yards without stopping to kiss. Wes caresses her head veil as they kiss, wanting to slip it down so he can feel her hair, but he fears the gesture will be too forward. Their slow progress through the neighborhood, walking and kissing, circles back until they find themselves where they started, standing in front of the Harding home.

"It's late," Hayaam says. "I still have studying to do."

"I'll drive you home."

"No. Just to the station."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. I like riding the train by myself."

He drove her to the Glen Cove station and parked. As he reached for the door handle, she stopped him.

"No matter what happens, I will never forget tonight."

"Neither will I," said Wes.

But he was thinking, *What can happen?*

Hayaam said, "Now I understand something."

"What's that?"

"Why a woman would want to."

"To kiss?"

"That, too. But I was thinking of the other."

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Why a woman would want to sleep with a man before she was married."

She kissed him quickly on the cheek, a peck as comfortable as one coming from a wife.

"Don't come in with me," Hayaam said. "I am a very independent woman. I can ride the trains by myself!"

He watched her race into the station. Just before entering, she turned and waved an arm vigorously over her head, and even from a distance, under the lights outside the building, Wes recognized the happy radiance in her smile.

He waved back, though he doubted she could see him. After she disappeared, he started the engine. For a long time he stayed in the parking lot, unable to put the car in gear. It was as if leaving now would be to drive away from more than he wanted to put behind him, as if something of what they had been together tonight had stayed behind, begging not to be abandoned.

"Mr. Harding, I was just thinking about you. How goes the writer's block?"

"It's gone."

"Good, good. So my advice helped."

"Absolutely."

And Hayaam, his muse, was helping, too, Wes thought.

"When do I get to see some pages?"

"When do you want to see them?"

"You have the first fifty yet?"

"Close."

"Terrific. Finish them, polish them up, and let me have a look. Say in a week or two?"

"I can do that."

"Excellent! Ciao."

The stout professor waddled on down the hallway.

"You've never shown me your writing," Hayaam said later after he'd told her about running into his advisor. As often, they were at a table in the Student Union coffee shop.

"That's true."

"I'd like to read something."

"I don't like to share work-in-progress. I mean, I have to show my professor. But that's different."

"I understand. Then you've never published anything?"

"I've published some short stories."

"How exciting! I want to read every one of them."

He promised to bring her copies but as soon as he made the promise, he worried about what she might think about them. He didn't want anything coming between them, especially not his writing.

## 26

Hayaam and Abdul stood in the crowded terminal, looking for their father among the passengers coming in through the gate.

Abdul saw him first and shouted, "Papa! Papa!"

It took Hayaam a moment to find him.

"Papa!" she cried.

Jamal, their father, picked them out in the crowd. He smiled and waved. Suddenly two men wearing dark suits stepped in front of him.

Hayaam grabbed Abdul's arm.

"What is it?" her brother asked rhetorically. "What are they doing?"

The two men in suits had positioned themselves on each side of their father and were leading him quickly to a side door.

"Papa!" Abdul called.

He started maneuvering through the crowd toward the men who were leading their father away. Hayaam stayed close behind, stepping quickly into the spaces in the crowd that Abdul cleared with increasing aggression, trying desperately to reach their father before he disappeared through the side door.

But they were too late. By the time Abdul reached the door, it was shut and locked. He pounded on it, yelling, "Papa! Papa!"

A young man in a white shirt and tie rushed up to them.

"What's the problem here?" He was looking at Hayaam.

Abdul whipped around from the door, his eyes blazing with anger.

"Some men took my father in there! I demand to know what is going on."

"Come with me," the young man said.

"I demand--!"

"Abdul!" Hayaam interrupted. She waited for her brother to look at her. "Let's go with him and find out what this is about. Please."

The young man led them down a hallway and through another door, into an office. He told them to sit down and disappeared through still another door.

"This is an outrage," Abdul said.

Hayaam nodded.

After a moment a different man appeared, wearing a dark suit like the men who had led their father away. Hayaam and Abdul quickly rose to their feet.

"Your father is being detained for questioning," the man said.

"Questioning for what?" Abdul wanted to know.

"That's all I know right now. You are free to go."

"Who are you anyway?"

The man took out his wallet and opened it, flashing some kind of badge at Abdul.

"Sorry," he said. "F.B.I. Special Agent O'Connor."

He quickly put the wallet away.

"Why is the F.B.I. interested in my father?"

Hayaam touched her brother's arm.

"Abdul, let's do as he says and go."

"Good idea," said the man. "Unless you want to be detained yourself."

"We can't help father if we get arrested," Hayaam said.

Abdul glared at the man.

"This is an insult, and someone is going to pay for it."

In the taxi, Abdul raved on all the way back to Greenwich Village, repeating what an outrage and insult it was to arrest their father, how something like this just showed how racist America was after the attack on the twin towers, arresting a man just because he looked Arabic, continuing on so loudly and repetitively that Hayaam worried that the taxi driver, a black man with an English accent,

was going to pull over and tell them to get out with all their anti-patriotic sentiment in the new America.

Hayaam didn't know what to think. She loved America and was less than a week away from taking her citizenship exam. But she well knew how differently some people had been looking at her since September 11<sup>th</sup>. She tried to assess the situation from the point of view of the F.B.I., charged with protecting national security after such a large failure in doing this very thing. She could understand how they might go overboard in their suspicions of entering foreigners, especially those coming from Middle Eastern countries. She could understand how they might want to question any foreigner entering the country. But then she remembered that other foreigners had come in through the gate before her father had entered, and none of them had been arrested. Why her father then? It was all as confusing as it is upsetting.

Abdul was on the phone as soon as they returned to their apartment, calling friends to share the terrible news. Hayaam thought he was assuming the worst too soon. Maybe their father would be released as soon as the F.B.I. questioned him, released as soon as later tonight. Then they would all sit around the table and laugh at the outrageous mistake. Imagine thinking that Jamal, a man so traditional and conservative in his ways, could be so bold as to become a terrorist! Yes, they would have a fine laugh about such a ridiculous suspicion. Hayaam wished Abdul would get off the phone so the line would be free to ring with the good news, but by the time he hung up she already was in bed and asleep.

## 27

For several days Wes couldn't find Hayaam on campus. When he phoned her, no one answered. He tried calling at different times through the day, using a pay phone on campus, but there still was no answer. At home he called her from his room. This time Abdul answered.

"May I speak to Hayaam, please?"

"Who is this?"

Wes hesitated, then said, "It's Wes."

"I told you to stop seeing her."

Abdul hung up on him.

The next day Wes saw Areeba walking ahead of him on campus. He ran to join her.

"Hi. Have you seen Hayaam?"

Areeba glanced around nervously, as if in fear that someone might be watching them.

"What's the matter?" Wes asked.

Areeba started to speak but stopped.

"What's going on? I'm worried about her. Tell me ... please."

Areeba spoke softly, hurriedly.

"Her father was arrested. They think he's a terrorist."

Areeba wouldn't elaborate, and Wes let her scoot along on her way. Once she glanced back furtively, as if wishing he already had disappeared.

Wes wasn't sure what to do. In his carrel he couldn't concentrate on his writing. He finally gave up, skipped his last class of the day, and left campus.

He took a subway to the financial district, where his father had an office. When the secretary looked up and recognized him, she broke into a broad smile. It had been many months since he'd visited his father at work.

"Wesley! How nice to see you."

"Is Dad busy?"

"Go right in. I'll buzz him you're coming."

Wes walked down a long hallway to his father's office. The door was open, so he stepped inside. Walter was already on his feet, waiting for him.

"This is a pleasant surprise."

"Hayaam's father's been arrested. Apparently the F.B.I. think he's a terrorist."

"Was this at the airport?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"It was in the paper. So he's Hayaam's father?"

"If it's the same guy. How many foreigners are they arresting these days?"

"It's a dangerous new world," Walter said. "I take it you believe he's innocent."

"He must be. I can't picture Hayaam having a terrorist for a father."

"Then there's an ulterior motive that brought you here."

"Dad, he's going to need a lawyer."

Walter nodded and said, "Let's get some coffee."

They chose a coffee shop down the street. Although there was an outside patio in the shadows of the towering skyscrapers, Walter led the way inside to a private corner table in back.

When they were settled in, Walter said, "I don't mean to pry, son, but how well do you really know this girl?"

"Well enough to believe that she doesn't come from a family of terrorists. Dad, I like her a lot. I want to help her."

"I can understand that."

"Her father's going to need a lawyer. A good lawyer. You've always been a champion of the underdog."

"And in today's climate, you can't get more unpopular than being a suspected terrorist."

His father stopped, and Wes patiently waited for his decision.

Finally Walter said, "I'll speak to him. That's all I can promise you."

Wes reached across the table and squeezed his father's arm.

"Thanks, Dad."

He tried calling Hayaam again to share the good news. No one answered. He continued to phone several more times through the day, and when Abdul finally answered, he hung up on Wes as before.

Instead of catching the train in time to get home for dinner, Wes walked to Hayaam's apartment. Standing outside the building, trying to get up the courage to go inside and find her, confronting her brother if necessary, he saw her in a front window on the ground floor. He moved closer, hoping she'd glance out and see him. Apparently she was in her bedroom, which faced the street. He moved to the window and tapped on it.

Hayaam jumped. When she saw him, she looked shocked, then happy. She rushed forward and opened the window.

"What are you doing here?"

"I heard about your father. I have to talk to you."

"Wait for me at the corner."

Hayaam joined him five minutes later. They fell into one another's arms as if no act could be more natural. Lost in the moment, Wes kissed Hayaam on the lips.

"I'm sorry," he said, breaking the embrace.

"Don't apologize."

"I heard about your father. I feel so bad for you."

"I think they will let him go soon. They have no reason to keep him."

"Hayaam, my dad's a lawyer, one of the best in the city. He's going to talk to your father. Maybe he'll represent him."

"Your father would be his lawyer?"

"He has to talk to him first."

"Why does he care?"

"He cares because I care."

Hayaam looked as if she might cry. She settled back into his arms. We'll keep them in one another's embrace for a while. They aren't bothering anyone.

## 28

The next morning a guard led Walter to a visiting area for prisoners in the Federal Building. Walter waited almost fifteen minutes before another guard led Jamal in. The graying man was

shackled at the wrists and feet, wearing white slippers and orange prison garb.

The guard shoved Jamal into a chair across the table from Walter, then stepped back to observe from the back of the area. No other visitations were in progress.

"I'm Walter Harding. I'm a lawyer."

"Are you a Muslim?"

"No."

"Why would I want a Christian lawyer?"

"Actually I'm not a Christian. I'm a Unitarian."

"What is this, a Unitarian?"

"We don't have much time. I'm here at the request of my son. He's a friend of your daughter."

"Hayaam knows your son?"

"Yes. Do you know why you've been arrested?"

"They say I am a terrorist. This is a lie!"

"That's a good place to start."

While Walter met with Jamal, Wes and Hayaam waited in a restaurant near the Federal Building. Wes, who had missed breakfast at home, poked at a plate of scrambled eggs, but Hayaam was too nervous to eat. She sipped tea, trying not to think about her father.

"Dad's a great lawyer," Wes told her, not for the first time. "He'll do what's best, believe me."

"Everything is so different now. The way people look at me, wondering if I'm a terrorist."

"That's not true."

"I see how they look at me."

"Only a few maybe. You saw how welcome you were at church."

"I still don't understand why you call this a church if there is no mention of God."

"We define God as spirit."

"God is more than spirit."

Wes didn't want to argue with her. He continued eating silently.

Hayaam said, "I think my father will be very upset by this. Even when he is released. He won't understand their point of view, how everyone is so scared now. He will take it personally. He will see it as an insult to his character."

"You can understand how a mistake like this can happen, can't you?"

Hayaam thought a moment before replying.

"I would understand it better if they had let father go last night."

Walter joined them shortly after the waitress had taken away what was left of Wes' breakfast.

Standing by the booth, he said, "I'm going to represent him until he can find a Muslim lawyer. This will give me a chance to make a motion for bail right away."

"How is he?" Hayaam said.

"Under the circumstances, better than I actually expected."

Wes wanted to know if bail would be a problem.

"Could be," said Walter. "We'll find out soon enough."

Walter couldn't linger and hurried back to the office.

Graciously, he picked up their check on the way out.

Coming out of the restaurant, Wes suggested to Hayaam that they skip classes, take a walk in the park and maybe catch a movie. They had a lot on their minds and deserved a little distraction.

"I don't like to skip classes," said Hayaam.

Wes skipped class anyway and spent most of the afternoon in his carrel, trying to get his creative juices flowing. He spent most of the time staring out the window.

## 29

The next day Abdul stood outside with two friends, Omar and Imad, across from the campus library. Abdul held a pair of binoculars, which he raised intermittently to look at the front entrance.

"There he is," Abdul said when Wes finally came outside. He raised the binoculars, then passed them to Omar.

"Get a good look so you'll recognize him," Abdul said.

"You want us to do it now?" Imad said.

"No. I'll give my sister one more chance. I want you to follow him, find out where he goes. Stick to him like glue."

Abdul laughed.

"Isn't this a wonderful expression? Stick to him like glue!"

Omar and Imad followed Wes across campus, where he met Hayaam coming out of a classroom building. Wes and Hayaam embraced before strolling off, holding hands. Omar and Imad followed them off campus, keeping far enough behind not to be noticed.

"Will you come to church with me Sunday?" Wes asked as they walked along in the direction of the Village.

"Are you trying to convert me?"

"I just want you to see that you have friends there."

Hayaam stopped and pulled away her hand. Omar and Imad stopped, watching the couple carefully.

Hayaam said, "Suddenly everything is so complicated."

"It doesn't have to be. Does it?"

"What is our future?"

The question stabbed him like the prick of a pin.

"Haven't you thought about this?" Hayaam said.



"Of course I have. But I prefer thinking about now, the present tense. I know I want to spend as much of it with you as I can."

"I know the feeling."

"Maybe that's enough for now."

"I don't know. I've never felt this way before. Everything is starting to feel so complicated."

"Don't let it."

Wes leaned forward to kiss her but Hayaam stepped back.

"I'm sorry. I think I need to be alone now. It's not you. It's me."

"You're worried about your father."

"Yes."

"Will I see you tomorrow?"

"Of course. Don't think I'm angry with you."

"I don't."

She surprised him by giving him a quick peck on the cheek.

Wes said, "Sure you don't want me to walk you home?"

"I'll see you tomorrow."

Wes waited a moment, watching her go. Behind him Omar and Ibid also waited. When Wes started walking again, they followed behind.

Wes walked to a corner bar called Rhonda's and entered.

"What do we do?" Imad said as they reached the corner.

"We go in," said Omar.

Wes was sitting at the end of the bar as they came inside. There were two empty stools down the way, which they took. Both looked around nervously.

"Holy shit." The remark came from an unshaven man sitting alone at a table. "Since when is this a watering hole for fucking A-rabs?"

The bartender said, "Hold your tongue, Charlie."

He stopped in front of Omar and Imad.

"I gotta serve you, but you might want to think about it. Charlie's got a bad temper."

Imad stared at Omar, waiting for a response.

Wes said, "You guys look familiar. You go to NYU? I think I've seen you on campus."

"Yes," Omar said.

"Can I buy you a beer?"

Imad stood up and said, "We don't want to cause trouble."

"Get them two beers," Wes told the bartender.

Now Omar stood.

"No, please. You are very kind, but we should go."

They hurried out the door.

The bartender came over to Wes.

"Well, aren't you something?"

"Fucking A-rab lover," said the unshaven man at the table.

Wes gulped down his beer. He slid off the barstool.

"You got something to say to me?" the bartender wanted to know.  
 "No, sir. I don't."

Outside Wes didn't notice Omar and Imad hiding in a doorway down the street. A cab approached, and Wes ran out into the street to grab it but it was occupied. What the hell, he'd take the subway.

Omar and Imad followed him as far as Penn. Station, where they watched him disappear into a train.

### 30

Wes fretted about which story to share with Hayaam. He'd published three ("only" three, as he put it to himself), all in literary magazines. His favorite, called "Teddy At the Pool," was a tour de force, a retelling of J.D. Salinger's story "Teddy" with a different ending. The usual interpretation of Salinger's story was that Teddy, the boy genius, committed suicide by diving into an empty swimming pool. Wes had never accepted this ending. For starters, he believed the internal evidence in the story put water in the pool. In his ending, Teddy pushes his little sister into a full swimming pool, and the story is about how Teddy has emotions after all.

This was all too esoteric to share with Hayaam, who likely didn't know who Salinger was anyway. Wes ended up selecting the only extra copy of *Prism International* he had, which contained his story "The Sentence." This was loosely based on something that had happened to his Uncle Don and Aunt Hilda. After his stroke, Don pretended to have aphasia with his wife, refusing to speak at all, but she later learned that he regularly gabbed away with the pretty nurses. It was a story of marital and family dysfunction, a popular theme for a young American writer.

Wes brought the literary magazine to school to give to Hayaam. He thought of signing it but couldn't decide what to say. Maybe an autograph was too pretentious, as if he were a famous writer or something.

They met in the coffee shop as usual, and immediately Wes sensed that something was wrong. Hayaam couldn't keep still, fidgeting constantly while they made small talk.

Out of nowhere, she said, "I have no doubt that I'll pass."

Wes was taken aback for a moment - then remembered what day it was. She took her citizenship exam today. He felt like an idiot for forgetting. He'd been too wrapped up in choosing the short story to give her.

Wes said, "Of course you will."

Across the room, Abdul sat with Omar and Imad, watching them.

Wes reached across the table and took her hand. He squeezed it.

Hayaam pulled her hand away.

"I don't want to be late," she said.

"You're sure you don't want me to go with you?"

"This is something I have to do myself."

They stood up together. Wes moved around the table to embrace her. Her mind was elsewhere, and she did not return his embrace.

"Good luck!" Wes said as she started away. "I know you'll do great!"

Hayaam mumbled, "Of course I will," but too softly for Wes to hear.

Across the room Abdul got to his feet.

"Wait here," he told his friends.

Abdul caught up with his sister outside the Student Union.

"You still are seeing him," he said.

"Are you spying on me?"

"I'm a terrorist," Abdul said mockingly. "That's what terrorists do, they spy on people."

Hayaam kept on walking.

"You will break father's heart when he learns this."

Hayaam stopped and glared at her brother.

"His father is helping us. He's the best lawyer in New York."

"We don't need his help."

"Of course we do. He's very important. He knows people."

"I'm asking you one more time, stop seeing him."

"I will not stop seeing him."

She started off again.

Abdul called, "Don't say I didn't warn you."

Again she stopped.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"How can you break father's heart? Especially now, with what he is going through. You have no future with this man."

Hayaam didn't reply. She hurried quickly away, and Abdul didn't stop her.

Back in the coffee shop, Abdul sat down at the table with Omar and Imad. For a moment everyone was silent, watching Wes across the room.

Abdul broke the silence.

"Do it tonight," he said.

### 31

Taking a break from studying, Wes wandered into the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator door but the cola that was there yesterday was gone.

"Are we out of pop?" he yelled, to no one in particular.

As he returned to his room, Evelyn appeared.

"Are we out of cola?"

"Looks like."

She already held out money for him.

"Would you mind? And pick up some half-and-half?"

"No problem."

It was a pleasant night. There was a convenience market down the hill on the highway, less than a mile away, and Wes decided to walk. He didn't pay any attention to the car parked across the street.

In the car Omar and Imad made eye contact. Omar nodded, and they got out of the car.

As Wes continued down the hill to the highway, Omar and Imad kept half a block between them. Wes reached the market and entered.

"What do we do?" Imad said.

"Let me think a minute."

In the store Wes bought a six-pack of Dr. Pepper and a pint of half-and-half. At the counter he added a Tootsie Roll, picking it out from a box near the cash register.

He was halfway up the hill when Omar and Imad jumped him. They came out from behind a hedge, attacking him so quickly that Wes was on the ground and being kicked before he comprehended what was happening. He tried to fend off their kicks but they outnumbered him, it was all he could do to protect his face.

Suddenly a car approached. The driver, seeing what was happening, started beeping his horn.

Omar and Imad looked up. The man pulled the car to the curb.

Imad took a quick step down the hill but Omar grabbed him. They started running up the hill, toward their car.

The man was just getting out of the car as they rushed past. He let them go and hurried to Wes, who was struggling to sit up.

"Are you all right?" the man asked.

It was the same question his father asked him in the hospital.

Wes tried to make a joke.

"You should see the other guy."

Evelyn bit her fist, her expression filled with horror. Walter managed to smile but it was clear that neither parent was in the mood for humor. Their seriousness made Wes feel worse than he already felt.

They stayed longer than he wanted. Finally he yawned, though he was not sleepy, and his father took the bait and said they'd best let him get his rest. His mother nodded. She hadn't spoken since saying "My God" when she first saw him.

As soon as Evelyn was out the door, Wes said, "Dad? Can I talk to you a sec?"

Walter said something to his wife, then walked back to the bed.

"Has Hayaam called?"

"Not that I know of. Maybe you'd better ask your mother."

"I don't think she'd tell me."

"You may be right."

"Her brother warned me to stop seeing her. Obviously I didn't."

Walter paused for more before saying, "You think he's behind this?"

"I don't know. Would you call Hayaam for me? I tried but her brother answered. He hung up on me. I'd like to see her."

"I was going to call and bring her up to date anyway."

"You have news?"

"It's not looking good for her father."

"Tell her I want to see her."

"I will."

"Thanks, Dad."

Waiting for the elevator, Evelyn said, "See where it all leads? Will you stop now?"

"Pardon me?"

"Representing that man. Wes seeing that girl. Look what comes of it."

"I won't dignify that with a response."

"I lost my son, Walter. I can't help how I feel."

"You can't wrap everyone in the same blanket just because they're from the Middle East."

"The city will never be the same again. The country. I don't see how you can represent one of them."

"I'm a lawyer. Even if he were guilty—"

"I know the speech. I just don't believe it anymore. I can't help how I feel."

A bell rang, and the elevator door opened. The elevator was empty. Evelyn entered first.

They didn't speak to one another for the rest of the day.

## 32

Looking for Wes, Hayaam spotted Areeba in the coffee shop. She reached her table grinning, and as soon as Areeba saw her she started grinning, too.

"I passed!"

Hayaam didn't stay long because it was Wes she wanted to tell the good news. But she couldn't find him anywhere, not in the library or in his carrel. She didn't learn what had happened until evening when Wes' father called. The news was bad all the way around, her father not likely to get bail and Wes beaten up and in the hospital.

After hanging up, Hayaam stormed into her brother's room. Abdul was reading.

"How could you!"

"How could I what?"

His cocky smile convinced her that he had been behind the attack on Wes.

"You have no right to interfere in my life this way!"

Hayaam stormed out, as if quick movement was the only release she could find, and she was halfway down the hallway when she heard, "You have no right to destroy our family!"

It took her over an hour by bus to get to the hospital. Mr. Harding had given her the room number on the phone, which was a blessing since she felt overwhelmed and lost in the enormity of the building. So many people were sick in America. She located the elevator.

On the seventh floor, she wandered aimlessly down several hallways before a nurse inquired if she needed help. As the nurse gave directions, Hayaam looked confused enough that the nurse stopped and said, "Come with me"

The nurse escorted her to the door, which was cracked open. Hayaam slowly entered and quickly stopped. She was shocked by his appearance, his face and arms badly bruised, his chest wrapped in bandages. He appeared to be sleeping. As Hayaam watched him from across the room, struggling to hold back tears, Wes opened his eyes and saw her.

"Hey," he said. "Thanks for coming."

Hayaam stood still, unable to speak for fear her emotions would get away from her.

"I look worse than I feel," Wes said. "You should see the other guy?"

"Who is the other guy?"

"There were two of them actually."

"Indonesians?"

Wes didn't reply.

"They were, weren't they. This is my fault."

"No. Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm so sorry."

"It wasn't anybody's fault. Please sit down. You make me nervous. Like you might leave all of a sudden. I don't want you to leave."

She sat down in the chair beside the bed. Wes slid one hand to her edge of the mattress, and she reached out and held it. Touching made them feel connected.

"How did you do on your exam?" Wes asks.

"I don't want to talk about my exam."

"You didn't pass?"

"I passed."

"That's wonderful!"

Wes grimaces, as if so much excitement is painful.

"It seems so small a thing now."

"No, it's wonderful. So what's the next step?"

"I take my oath as a citizen."

"I'd like to be there."

He squeezes her hand. Hayaam has to look away.

"What's the matter?"

She turns back to him.

"You have to ask what's the matter? My brother put them up to this. What kind of future do we have?"

"Hayaam, listen to me. I just have to be more careful. I don't want to stop seeing you."

She looks away again. Her eyes glisten with tears.

"Do you want to stop seeing me?" Wes asks.

Hayaam shakes her head, no. He squeezes her hand again.

On the bed stand is the copy of the literary magazine with his story. Wes reaches for it.

"For you. I have a story in it."

She takes the magazine.

"Thank you. I'll read it tonight."

"No hurry."

She is on the verge of tears. Wes doesn't know what to say. He suddenly feels very tired. He closes his eyes.

As Wes naps, Hayaam sits in the chair beside the bed, holding his hand, watching him sleep.

Shortly after he wakes up, his friend Roger visited. Hayaam shook his hand and told Wes that she'd be back tomorrow. It was easier to leave with other company for him there.

She caught the bus to campus but gave up studying in the library, unable to concentrate, and walked home. She encountered Abdul in the living room.

"I found a lawyer for father," he said.

"He has a lawyer."

"A Muslim. He's Pakistani."

"Wes' father is a very good lawyer. He also is representing him for no charge."

"So will he. He's a Muslim, he knows what we are going through."

Hayaam stared at her brother.

"Who are these men you got to beat him up?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Could she be wrong? She didn't think so, despite a momentary doubt.

Abdul said, "You visited him at the hospital, didn't you?"

"Of course. He's my friend."

"The longer you see him, the worse everything will turn out."

Hayaam didn't respond.

"You are not as stupid as you act," said Abdul. "You know what you're doing has no future. You know how much it will hurt father when he finds out."

"And you will tell him, won't you?"

"See? Even you are ashamed for father to know this."

"I will tell father myself."

And now sooner than she had planned.

### 33

Wes was released from the hospital the next day. He walked with a limp and looked like he'd been lucky to survive a car wreck but nothing was broken, except perhaps his spirits. He was having second thoughts about the wisdom of seeing Hayaam, at least so often and so blatantly. Selfishly, he wanted to keep seeing her but he realized that if they continued dating, she might become the victim of violent harassment instead of himself. They needed to sit down and discuss their future. At the very least, they had to be more careful.

Evelyn picked up Wes at the hospital. She didn't seem particularly glad to see him, and Wes knew what was bothering her.

"It's nothing serious, Mom," he told her on the drive home.

"What?"

"Between Hayaam and me. Relax about it."

"Relax about it?"

She let out an are-you-crazy laugh.

"It's nothing serious, really."

Which was a lie, of course. Wes spent most of the day trying to get the nerve to phone Hayaam. Of course, if her brother answered, that would just make things worse. It would be safer to track her down at school.

He'd meant to catch the train in time to meet her on campus after her last class but had made the mistake of stretching out on the bed. By the time he awoke, it was too late.

As it happened, Hayaam had phoned the hospital and learned Wes had been released. She wondered if he were well enough to come to campus. She didn't feel comfortable visiting him at home; she sensed his mother didn't approve of her.

Hayaam was sitting with Areeba in the coffee shop, a part of her hoping that Wes would walk in, when Areeba said, "I worry about you."

Hayaam shook her head.

"Not you, too," she said.

"We are so different from people here. I have to tell you, I'm thinking of returning home."

"Not before you graduate."



"Yes. I can finish my degree in Jakarta."

"But an American degree is so prestigious. If you took such a degree home, you could do anything."

"I've never been comfortable here. Now, of course, it is so much worse."

"Your parents wrote you, didn't they? They asked you to come home."

"Yes, and they are right. It is not safe here. You of all people should know that."

Hayaam glanced around the room, which was filled with students. Everyone was ignoring them.

"They get used to us," she said.

"Not everyone. The people who beat up your friend - don't you think there are Americans who would do the same to you?"

"I've not met these Americans. Tomorrow I will be an American myself. I take my oath."

"Have you told your father?"

"They won't even let me visit him."

"See there?"

"This is a temporary problem."

"It will get worse. Anyone who looks Arabic will be considered a terrorist."

"I don't think so."

"Hayaam, you are so naïve."

Was she? The possibility worried her. She tried to imagine what it would be like to be an American, to watch in horror as your greatest city is attacked, the Pentagon is attacked - of course, you would do things differently after that, anyone unknown to you would be a suspect. She tried to retain her belief that her father would be released, even though they'd held him far too long already.

All her worries were swept away as soon as she entered the apartment to see Jamal, her father, grinning at her. She ran into his arms.

### 34

Wes learned at dinner that Hayaam's father had been released. Walter had gone to the jail to visit him but he wasn't there.

"All charges have been dropped," Walter said.

Evelyn shook her head, ever the skeptic, and silently continued her dinner.

"Your reputation probably scared them, Dad," Wes said.

"I won't flatter myself. As a matter of fact, he was being represented by someone else. A Pakistani."

The news made Wes want to talk to Hayaam even more. What were they going to do? He finally phoned and for once Hayaam answered.

"Hello?"

"Hi. It's me."

"How are you?"

"I'm home."

"I'm so glad. How do you feel?"

"I want to see you."

There was a silence.

Wes said, "We at least need to sit down and talk about what we should do now."

"I agree. I'll see you at school tomorrow, okay?"

"Great."

"I take my oath in the morning."

"Wow. I didn't realize it would be so soon."

"When I see you, I'll be an American."

"I can't wait."

"Tomorrow, then. I'm glad you're feeling better."

"I feel great now."

"I read your story."

There was a silence.

Hayaam said, "It's very sad. But I liked it."

Another silence.

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Hayaam."

Later, in bed, Wes wondered if becoming an American would make Hayaam behave more like an American, in particular to dress like an American. Weren't there modern Muslim women who wore dresses instead of the hijab? In this way, she would be able to blend in and look less conspicuous, less foreign, less threatening. They would be able to walk down the street together as inconspicuously as any couple in America.

He is wrong, of course. In the new America, even as in the old, there are those who would disapprove of Wes and Hayaam being together as a couple.

### 35

Hayaam left the apartment early, even though the oath-taking ceremony in the Federal Building didn't begin until nine. She didn't want to risk the possibility of her brother, or even her father, trying to stop her. When she finally told her father what she'd done, it would be after the fact. She suspected, however, that Abdul would tell him first. Yet even Abdul didn't know how quickly she would become an American citizen - in a matter of hours now!

She found a coffee shop near the Federal Building. She had almost two hours to kill but she'd brought a book from school. She never was lacking for school assignments to read.

As Hayaam studied, waiting to take her oath of allegiance and become an American citizen, a very different future was being planned for her. The experience of being arrested had not settled well with her father. In the morning, even as Hayaam studied across town, Jamal told his son what was on his mind, speaking in their native tongue.

"Abdul, how have you been treated here?"

"How do you mean?"

"In this country where they arrest an innocent man. Do you feel like a free man here?"

"I have learned to look over my shoulder. Especially now."

"That's what I mean. I could not sleep last night. I kept waiting for a knock on the door, the police have changed their mind, they haul me away into the night, and I'm never heard from again."

"Father, what is it?"

"I'm going home. I should never have come."

"Then I will come with you."

"This is what I prayed for you to say. And Hayaam must come, too, of course."

Abdul was silent.

"She is such an adventurous girl," said Jamal. "Does she like it here?"

"She feels the same hostility, I am sure. But, of course, you are right - she is adventurous."

"Will you tell her we are going home?"

"Of course. When?"

"As soon as possible. Is there a problem?"

"No. I will tell her today."

But later Abdul couldn't find her on campus.

Nor could Wes. In the morning, working in his carrel but making no progress, in a sudden moment of frustration he'd ripped up the top sheet of the yellow pad on which he'd been writing. He left the carrel to look for Hayaam.

He couldn't find her in the coffee shop, though he did find Abdul sitting alone in a corner table. Wes went to class.

Later he found Areeba in the coffee shop.

"Have you seen Hayaam?"

"She didn't come to class after taking her oath this morning."

"Maybe she felt like celebrating."

But wouldn't she have wanted to celebrate with him?

"Her father's home," said Areeba.

"I heard. Great news."

But something in her manner told him she was hiding something.

"What is it?"

Areeba looked away.

"Areeba, tell me."

She looked him straight in the eye.

"Abdul says they are returning to Indonesia."

Wes waited for more.

Finally he said, "When?"

"Right away, I think."

He used a pay phone in the Student Union but no one answered. He dialed again, just to make sure, but got the same result.

Wes didn't know what to do. He left campus and started walking. He refused to believe that Hayaam was returning to Indonesia, certainly not right away, at the beginning of the school year. Areeba must have gotten it wrong.

He kept walking and ended up at Ground Zero, or at least as close to it as he could get. The scene was no less shocking than before, maybe even more so, with its great expanse of rubble and the courageous activity of the workers and volunteers who were hauling it away. It was far past the time when live bodies might be discovered. Now all effort was focused on cleaning up the mess of a war zone.

Wes kept watching the workers. It seemed to him that it would take months, years, to clean up the mountain of rubble. What a thankless task. What a dark depressing image of the new America.

### 36

When Hayaam came out of the Federal Building, carrying a small American flag, Abdul was waiting for her.

"Areeba told me you would be here. We're going home."

"This is my home now."

Abdul let out a long breath of frustration.

"Home to Jakarta. Father is making reservations for all of us."

"I'm an American now. Why are you doing this?"

"You have to ask? They treated him like a terrorist. They treat us no better, only you are too blind to see it. Father wants nothing to do with a country like this. I agree with him. He expects you to come home."

"But I'm in school!"

"We both can finish school in Jakarta."

"No, I won't do it!"

She tried to rush past him but Abdul grabbed her arm.

"If you think you are not going, you have to tell father this yourself. You will break his heart."

Before going home, she raced through campus, looking for Wes. She couldn't find him anywhere. On her second visit to the coffee shop she saw Areeba across the way but just the sight of her made Hayaam realize how upset she was, how fragile now, and she feared telling her friend would reduce her to tears when she needed to be strong, strong to face her father and tell him what she wanted to do with her life. As she walked home to face him, her heart was pounding.

Jamal was sitting in the living room, reading. He looked up from his book when he heard her enter.

"Hayaam, you look more like your mother every day."

Hayaam couldn't find the words to begin.

"But you look so serious," Jamal said.

"I became an American citizen today."

"I don't understand."

"I wrote you about it. About my dream."

"That was last year. I thought it was a passing fancy."

"I took the oath of allegiance today."

"What is this? What does this mean?"

"I have the rights of an American citizen."

"But you are born in Jakarta. You already have a country."

"I am a citizen of both countries now."

"And you want to live in America? Is this what you are trying to say?"

"I want to finish my schooling here."

"How can you feel anything but disgust with such a country?"

"I am so sorry for what they did to you. But it was a mistake. They let you go."

"It is the greatest humiliation of my life."

"Father, I understand how you must feel. The Americans, after what happened, they are not always thinking clearly before they act."

"I cannot stay here."

"I understand."

"I want us all to go home."

"I have two homes now. I want to finish school here."

"And then?"

"I always planned to return to Jakarta after I graduate."

"But you don't have two homes. I don't understand how this is possible."

"Father, I want to finish school."

"What would your mother say?"

Hayaam looked away, unable to meet his stare.

"Look at me. Tell me you will break up our family like this."

She stared back at him.

"I am not breaking up our family. You know how much I want to graduate from American university. You know how long this has been my dream."

Jamal sighed and looked down at his book.

"You are not safe here alone," he said without looking up.

"I can move into a dormitory. I will be perfectly safe."

He sighed again.

After a moment, Hayaam gave up and walked slowly to her room. Passing Abdul's room, she saw him studying at his desk, looking up from his work when he heard her.

She couldn't concentrate to study. She wanted to talk to Wes. She dialed his number but no one answered, and she didn't leave a message.

Hayaam stretched out on the bed. Stress was a strong sedative. She fell asleep quickly and didn't stir until her room was dark with evening shadows. She went to the desk, flipped on the light, and began to study.

Soon she heard something, a sound against a windowpane. She stared at the window. The sound came again. Hayaam stood up and walked to the window.

### 37

Waiting for his train at Penn Station, Wes felt a terrible foreboding, as if to suggest that if he left now, if he caught the train and went home, he might never see Hayaam again. He had to stay in the city until he learned what was going on. Did she become an American citizen this morning and, if so, why the sudden news that she was leaving the country? Was she in trouble with her father? He simply had to find Hayaam and talk to her.

He decided to go straight to her apartment. He had no idea what he would do when he got there. He took the long walk briskly, letting exhaustion distract him and calm him down.

When he arrived outside her building, he saw her through the front window, sitting at her desk, studying. He looked around for a pebble, not something easy to find in a neighborhood without rubble, and found several in the gutter, road debris kicked away by traffic.

Wes chose the smallest and tossed in under-handed at the window. A bull's-eye. He waited, then tossed another.

Hayaam looked toward him. Could she see him? She rose from the desk and approached the window.

Wes stepped quickly forward to meet her. When she saw him, she started, then lifted the window open.

"What are you doing here?"

"Areeba told me you're leaving."

"Wait a minute."

She stepped back into the room, leaving the window open. When she returned she was carrying a light jacket. She handed it to Wes, who stepped back as Hayaam climbed out the window.

Without a word, they embrace. Wes closes his eyes, holding her tight. Hayaam closes her eyes and breathes deeply. It feels wonderful to be in his arms.

Hayaam is the first to speak.

"Where can we go?"

"What do you want to do?"

"Get away from here."

Wes takes her hand, and they start walking. She carries the jacket in her other hand. No one speaks for several blocks.

"Is it true?" Wes finally asks.

"Father wants us all to go back to Jakarta immediately because of what happened to him. I told him I want to stay here and finish school. But it is very hard to say no to your father. You understand what I mean? Even if I go, I will come back. I want to live in America."

"Then you really are leaving?"

"I don't know. I can't think straight."

"If you go, I'll wait for you."

Hayaam smiles but there is sadness in it, as if she's reproaching a child about something he doesn't understand.

"Please don't say this," she says.

"I mean it."

"We don't know what the future brings."

"Hayaam, I love you."

He finally said it. Hearing it, he feels relieved, even a little angry with himself for not saying it sooner.

As if from habit, they are heading from Hayaam's apartment in the direction of campus

"In my country," Hayaam says, "a bride is expected to be a virgin. I never questioned this before."

The remark makes him too nervous to respond.

"This is something that only happens once, with only one man. You understand what I am saying?"

"I'm not sure."

"I want this man to be you."

Wes' breath quickens.

"That's the sweetest thing anyone ever said to me."

"Tonight," Hayaam says.

Wes swallows. This is the last thing he expected her to say.

"We are leaving very soon," she goes on. "We may not have another chance."

"But your classes..."

"When father makes up his mind, there is no waiting. I cannot say no to him, not after what happened. So we must do this tonight. Unless you don't want me."

"Of course I want you."

"Then you are in charge. I have no such experience."

"I don't have all that much myself."

"You don't know what to do?"

"I know what to do."

They are at the edge of campus by now, but no longer holding hands. To an observer they would have looked awkward, like strangers having a difficult time beginning a conversation.

Wes says, "This way," and takes her hand again.

### 38

They leave campus, to where Wes knows there are hotels. He tries not to think about what is happening, lest he lose nerve or question his motives, and maybe hers as well. He tries to take charge, as she requested, and take care of business.

He stops at the first hotel they come to and says, "Let me do all the talking." He leads the way inside.

He feels conspicuous, as if everyone in sight - the desk clerk, an old woman in the lobby, a couple waiting at the elevator - knows what they are up to. To his surprise, checking in goes smoothly, although an eternity seems to pass before the small machine approves of his credit card. No one asks why they have no luggage. No one asks if they are really married, as he'd told the clerk ("A room for my wife and I, please"), why neither of them are wearing a wedding band. When they enter an empty elevator and the door closes behind them, they embrace again and kiss deeply and long until the door opens on the seventh floor.

Try to imagine their anxiety as they move down the hallway to room 714. Hayaam, after all, is a virgin. She feels apprehension despite her feelings for him, which she, too, is beginning to call love. How much will it hurt to lose her virginity? This is not a coherent question, more a tight feeling in the gut, apprehension, stress. At the same time, she has no second thoughts, this is the man with whom she wants to do this singular and unrepeatable act.

Wes is nervous for similar reasons. He has never slept with a virgin before. In fact, he only has slept with one other woman before in his life, this in the back seat of a stranger's car in the gymnasium parking lot at high school, and he was intoxicated enough to be unclear about most of the experience. Above all else, he feels strangely honored, fully aware of how special this moment is, how special he is to Hayaam for her to want to share this moment with



him. Of course, he wants everything to go smoothly, a responsibility that scares the hell out of him. But he doesn't want her to know how nervous he is, how scared and apprehensive, so he tries to act cool, as if there's nothing to worry about, he has everything under control.

Wes unlocks the door and stands aside so Hayaam can enter first. The thought of carrying her across the threshold occurs to him, but only fleetingly, a moment's whim.

Hayaam stands at the end of the bed. Wes joins her, and together they look down at the huge, King-sized mattress.

"I don't think I've ever seen a bed so large," Hayaam says. She giggles nervously.

"They have room service. Are you hungry?"

"A little, yes."

"Do you drink champagne?"

"Not normally. Do you want to?"

"I think we should get a bottle."

"You can afford to?"

"Everything goes on the credit card."

"I keep forgetting."

"There must be a menu here."

He finds it on the table next to the television set.

They both order hamburgers and fries. And a bottle of champagne. Waiting for the food to arrive, Wes sits on the edge of the bed, and Hayaam sits in the stuffed chair across the room. No one knows what to say.

"I've never taken a girl to a hotel before," Wes announces, breaking a long silence.

"Then I'm glad to be the first."

"Actually, I ..."

It would so too silly to go on.

"Actually what?"

"I'm not very experienced."

"You don't sleep around? This is the right expression?"

"No, I don't."

"I thought all Americans did this."

"Only in movies."

"Of course, that's how we know about Americans. Until I came here, of course."

"And what do you know now?"

"Are you trying to change the subject?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Are you as nervous as I am?"

"Probably. I shouldn't say that. I'm supposed to be in charge."

"This doesn't feel very romantic, does it?"

"I know."

Hayaam is silent.

Wes says, "We'll eat. Then maybe we should take a walk. The city can be so beautiful at night."

"I think that's a good idea."

### 39

Champagne goes to Hayaam's head. She is no more experienced in the drinking arts than in the sexual arts. After they finish their hamburgers and fries, she kicks off her shoes and dances around the room.

"I like this feeling!" she keeps saying, with more lilting music in her tone of voice than Wes has heard before. He isn't quite sure how to respond to this new side of her, the intoxicated extrovert.

"Be careful," he says, "champagne will sneak up on you."

"It didn't sneak. It was very direct!"

She leaps like a ballerina and almost loses her balance. She giggles some more.

"When I was a little girl, I wanted to be a ballerina. But I was too fat."

"I can't imagine you fat."

"I'm still fat."

"That's ridiculous."

He can't imagine that she thinks of herself as fat. She is thin, small breasted - if anything, a tad under-weight.

Hayaam says, "I feel ... what is the word? Topsy?"

"Topsy, right."

"I feel tipsy! How long will it last? I like the feeling."

"Probably until you go to bed."

He regrets saying the B-word, *bed*. It echoes in his ears like a great obstacle.

"Maybe we should get more champagne," says Hayaam.

"Maybe we should take a walk."

"Yes! What a good idea. Where are my shoes?"

Somehow one shoe has ended up under the bed. When she's finally ready to go, Wes waits at the door, holding it open for her. For some reason she gets another giggling fit passing him, which continues as he leads her down the hallway to the elevator that will return them to the world.

Outside Hayaam settled down, as if the night air worked to sober her some. They started down the sidewalk, and Hayaam took his hand, smiling up at him. Wes resisted the urge to kiss her right then and there. They were no longer alone. The city engulfed them.

They slowly sauntered along, holding hands, quiet, sometimes turning at a corner and sometimes not, randomly moving through the

New York night. Wes was glad to be out of the hotel room, away from the stress of having to make love to a virgin, even if this woman was Hayaam. He wished he'd ordered more champagne so he could match her giddiness. Maybe he'd get another bottle after they returned.

They continued walking until they turned a corner to see lights and activity ahead, and Wes realized they were approaching Ground Zero.

Wes stopped. .

"What is it?" Hayaam asked.

"Maybe we should go back."

"No. Not yet."

It was her turn to lead, and they continued toward the chain-link fence that marked the physical limits of their curiosity. Lights illuminated a scene of busy effort as workers and machines continued the huge task cleaning up the rubble of the tower buildings. The scene of devastation was hard to comprehend, even though it stretched out unmistakably in front of them.

At the fence, they watched silently. The lights made the area as bright as day.

Hayaam said, "My father said he was never so humiliated. This is why he must return home."

"I'm so sorry that happened. At least they let him go."

"They had to. He was innocent."

There was a silence.

"You understand why I have to go back, don't you?"

"Yes."

But Wes had said this only for her benefit. He thought she should finish school in America.

As if reading his mind, Hayaam said, "I will get my degree in Jakarta. Then in two years I will come to America for graduate school."

"In Comparative Religion?"

"Maybe not. Maybe I will become a translator for the United Nations."

"Sounds good." But the response was automatic, he already was feeling how much he would miss her.

"People from many nations died here. Not just Americans. People from Indonesia, too."

"True."

"Some Americans forget this. They think they are the only ones who suffer."

"A minority, though."

Hayaam nodded. They watched the workmen beyond the fence for a moment, busy under the bright lights, apparently undaunted by the overwhelming task before them.

Wes said, "Shall we head back?"

"Yes. I haven't forgotten."

"That's not what I meant."

"But it's what I meant."

Walking back, each was aware that soon they would be making love - but since neither knew how to talk about this, they remained silent as they made their long, slow way back to the hotel.

## 40

Hayaam insists on getting ready for bed first. She goes into the bathroom, closing the door behind her, and Wes sits at the foot of the bed, channel surfing with the remote. After a while he hears the shower go on. He notes to take a shower himself.

After the shower goes off, Wes waits for her to make an appearance. Nothing on television interests him, so he finally turns it off. He sits on the bed, waiting.

"Hayaam?" he calls. "Everything okay?"

"I'm ready to come out," she calls back. "Will you hide your eyes?"

He has a better idea.

"I'm going to the pop machine. A Pepsi okay?"

"Diet!"

"I'll be right back."

He is back in five minutes. Hayaam is in bed with the sheet pulled over her. She won't meet his eyes.

He puts both Pepsi's on the small table at what apparently is now defined as his side of the bed.

"Here's the pop. I won't be long."

But he was gone long enough. When he returned, wearing only his shorts, he saw that her eyes were closed. He started to speak but quickly changed his mind. Something in her breathing told him she was passed out. He tossed his clothes onto an empty chair. He approached the bed.

He carefully turned down the bedspread. Hayaam was on her side, facing him, her eyes still closed. She was wearing panties and a bra. Her skin was beautiful, inviting him to touch it, but he resisted. He slipped into bed beside her, careful to move the mattress as little as possible.

She was breathing heavily, not quite snoring. He shifted his position. Hayaam gave no response of having felt this.

Wes watched her for a moment. Then he turned off the light.

## 41

Wes awoke early in the morning with an erection. He'd been dreaming, though the erotic inspiration for his desire was lost to him now. Slowly he became aware that Hayaam was beside him, a new kind of inspiration. Her breathing, soft now, hung in the hotel bedroom like a summons. It would be so easy, Wes thought, still not fully awake, to roll over and make love to her, and the thought itself almost pushed him over the edge. He slipped out of bed and hurried into the bathroom, where in less than sixty seconds his right hand relieved the pent-up energy of his morning fantasy.

He showered and dressed. When he came back into the room, Hayaam was still asleep, or at least appeared to be. Wes went downstairs and bought a newspaper.

She was in the shower when he returned, her second shower in less than twelve hours. By the time she came out, dressed and looking like she was ready for school, he was reading the sports section for the second time. If she was hungover, she didn't look it.

"Good morning," he said. "How do you feel?"

"Terrible. Why do people drink if this is how they feel? I must look terrible."

"You look fine. We'll get you an aspirin at the restaurant."

Wes was ravished and ordered a full breakfast but Hayaam settled for cereal and fruit. Even at that, she only picked at it.

"This morning..." Hayaam began.

"Yes?"

She spoke softly, looking down at her cereal.

"There wasn't any blood."

"I know."

"Then we didn't...?"

"No."

"Why didn't you...?"

"If it happened, I wanted you to remember it."

Hayaam looked him in the eye.

"Thank you."

Leaving the restaurant to enter the hotel lobby, Wes said, "I might as well check out."

"Not yet. I want to show you something."

"What?"

"It's a secret."

She took his hand and led him toward the elevator.

Whatever was going on, Hayaam was being very mysterious about it. Wes let her have her fun, not having a clue what she was up to. In the hallway at their door she said, "Let me in. Then you wait here for five minutes. Then you can come in."

Wes thought about it a little too long.

"This is very important to me," she said. "Will you do it?"

"Sure."

Hayaam seemed to be blushing as he unlocked the door. She darted inside and slammed the door behind her.

Wes looked at his watch. Five minutes. But before it was time he heard her call from inside the room, "Come in!"

He didn't know what to expect. Certainly not what he saw as soon as he entered the room. He is blown away.

Hayaam stands beside the bed, stark naked.

"Please close the door," she says.

Wes quickly complies.

Coming back, he finds her still there, still naked.

"No man has ever seen me naked before. You are the first."

Words escape him. He can only stare.

"Do you think I am beautiful?"

"More than I can find words to say."

"Good. Now you can go, so I can dress. I'll meet you in the lobby."

He didn't seduce her like Brad Pitt would have. He didn't insist on staying. He didn't go downstairs and pout. Waiting in the lobby, as improbable and as laughable as this may seem, he thought he had just participated in something like a miracle.

## 42

The moment had lasted only a minute but their bond became stronger because of it. Each knew this though they didn't speak of it. They didn't have to talk about it. Some things are too clear, too essential, to need to discuss. The things that matter most aren't seen on Oprah.

They came out of the hotel.

Hayaam asked, "What time is it?"

Wes looked at his watch.

"Almost nine."

"I'd better get home. I still have to pack."

"What do you mean?"

"We may be leaving soon. Even tonight."

"Tonight!"

"I don't feel like walking. Can we get a cab?"

"You didn't tell me you were leaving tonight."

"I'm sure not we are. But it would be just like him. I'll call you when I found out."

Wes couldn't believe what he was hearing. So many mixed emotions and thoughts raced through him that he became immobile.

"Would you get a cab?" Hayaam asked again.

"Sure. Of course."

In the cab, Wes said, "I'm coming to the airport to see you off. Whenever it is."

Hayaam considered this.

"You don't want me to?"

"Of course you can."

"Will it upset your father?"

He already assumed it would upset her brother.

"I would like you to meet him."

"He knows about me?"

"No, not yet."

They held hands in silence until the cab pulled to the curb in front of Hayaam's apartment building.

Wes said, "Let me know the minute you find out."

"I will. This has been good. I have a very special night to remember."

"Me, too."

They kissed, a long deep farewell.

### 43

Abdul was standing near the door when Hayaam entered the apartment.

"You spent the night with him," he said, glaring at her.

"What if I did?"

Without warning he slapped her. Her mouth dropped open in shock as Abdul grabbed her arm and pulled her into the living room. Her father was standing, as if waiting for her.

"She spent the night with her American boyfriend," Abdul said.

"Is this true?" Jamal asked.

When Hayaam didn't quickly respond, Abdul slapped her again. Her father did not object.

"Is it true?" he repeated.

"Yes!"

Jamal came forward until he stood right in front of her. Abdul still clutched her arm, holding her close. Then her father spat in her face.

"Cut her hair," he said.

### 44

Wes couldn't keep still. He paid the cab fare and started walking away, briskly at first in case Hayaam's brother were watching from a window. He ended up on campus as if from habit, then wondered what he was doing there. He was in no mood to write or sit in a

classroom. He wandered into the coffee shop, where he bought a cup of black coffee to go. On his way out he saw Areeba sitting at a table across the way. She saw him as well and immediately got up and rushed off the other direction.

Hayaam was leaving as soon as tonight. It was hard to accept. Everything was changing so swiftly that he was lost in a maelstrom of confused emotions.

His father was talking to his secretary when Wes approached the desk. He had come as if on automatic pilot, reaching an unconscious destination after a long period of walking, as if only exhaustion could shut off his mind.

"Wes. What are you doing here?"

"I need to talk to you, Dad."

For a moment, behind the closed door of his father's upscale office, with a view of the city that no longer included the striking presence of the twin towers, Wes came close to letting go, to breaking down, but he caught himself before slipping and got a grip. What was he doing there in the first place?

"What is it, son?"

"She's leaving."

"What?"

The words had come so softly Wes wasn't sure if he'd spoken them or merely thought them.

"Hayaam is going back to Jakarta. Her father pulled her out of school."

Saying it didn't help. In fact, it made his discomfort worse because now his father was trying to comfort him, which made Wes feel awkward and unmanly. He fled the office, telling his father they'd talk more at home.

He bought a ticket to a movie but had not been sitting in the flow of the screen for thirty minutes before he bolted up and escaped.

Wes almost never felt like getting drunk but he did now. At the same time, he was determined to see her off at the airport. He would do nothing to jeopardize this obligation, should her departure be this very night.

He tried to convince himself that the situation wasn't as dire as he felt. Hayaam had said she'd return for graduate school. She was a junior, so could be back in two years. In the meantime, they would correspond, they would continue to grow closer. He would wait for her, and she would wait for him. This didn't have to be a bad thing.

*This didn't have to be a bad thing.* It was the thought that got him through the rest of the day.



Hayaam had become hysterical, and Areeba was summoned to calm her down and help her pack. Jamal had been able to book a flight to leave the country this very night.

Areeba gasped when she saw her cousin. Hayaam's hair was as short as a boy's, an effect exaggerated by its uneven length with patches of near-baldness adjacent to ragged bits of protruding hair. Her head looked like a forest after a raging wildfire.

Hayaam was on the floor in a corner of her bedroom, both arms grasping her knees. Her eyes were red and swollen. She'd barely kept her composure long enough to leave a message for Wes before collapsing on the floor in tears.

Abdul, having let Areeba into the room, stood in the doorway, watching.

"Can we be alone?" Areeba said.

Abdul thought a moment before leaving.

"Hayaam, what happened?"

Hayaam didn't have the energy to relate more than an outline of the horror that had happened to her. Her own father had held her in the bathroom while Abdul chopped off her hair with a pair of scissors. This was punishment for shaming the family by having sex before she married, and with a non-Muslim no less. Hayaam explained that although she and Wes had spent the night together, they had not had sex.

Spending the night with Wes was enough to shock Areeba. All she could say was, "Oh, Hayaam."

Hayaam didn't want sympathy. She wanted a favor.

"I wrote a letter," she said. "You must deliver it for me."

She got up and went to her desk. The letter was in an unmarked envelope.

"Will you do this?"

Areeba would have preferred to have no part of it but she couldn't say no to her cousin, not in the condition she was in.

She said that, yes, she would give him the letter the next time he saw him on campus.

Areeba helped Hayaam pack two suitcases of clothes, the only thing she would be taking on the plane. Abdul had arranged for the rest of their belongings to be shipped home later.

In her mind, Hayaam began to believe she would be able to get through this after all. She would finish college in Jakarta. If she was accepted to graduate school in America, no one, not even her father, could stop her from coming. After all, she was an American citizen now.

Later her father had shocking news. Areeba had gone home, and they were waiting for the cab to pick them up for the ride to the

airport. Earlier Abdul had brought in a black hijab for Hayaam to wear, black for mourning and shame.

"I've arranged for your marriage," Jamal said.

Hayaam thought she must be hearing things. This could not possibly be true.

"Malik has kindly consented to take you as his bride."

Malik was one of her father's business partners, a man in his fifties.

"I will not do this," she said.

"Of course you will. You have shamed the family enough. You have shamed the memory of your mother enough. Malik is a good man. He is a good friend. He doesn't have to do this."

Hayaam knew, more than ever, that she could not return to Indonesia, she could not live her life this way, not any more. She felt like she was being held hostage. She felt like she was being kidnapped. She would kill herself before she married this man.

#### 46

The cab got caught in traffic. Ahead were blinking police lights and an ambulance.

"Sorry, folks," said the cabbie. "Nothing I can do."

In the back seat, Jamal exhaled in exasperation. Abdul nodded in agreement with his father. Hayaam, wearing the black hijab, prayed that they would miss the plane.

Walter gave Wes the message the moment he came in the door. Hayaam had been very upset when she'd called, he said. Wes phoned a cab immediately.

He was waiting outside when Evelyn joined him, carrying a small bouquet of six yellow roses, the joy of her garden.

"She might like these," she said.

Wes embraced his mother, who held out the bouquet to keep it from getting crushed.

Soon Wes, like Hayaam, sat in a cab heading for the airport. He clutched the bouquet with both hands.

#### 47

"Hurry!"

Abdul, clutching his sister's hand, led the way to the gate. Jamal struggled to keep up.

Across the terminal, Wes entered and looked around for a directory of out-going flights.

When their boarding gate was in view ahead, Hayaam tugged on Abdul's hand and said, "I have to use the bathroom."

The restrooms were just ahead.

Jamal caught up, out of breath.

"She wants to use the bathroom," said Abdul.

"You check us in. I'll wait for her."

Jamal escorted Hayaam to the door of the women's restroom.

"Hurry," he said.

Inside Hayaam headed straight for a stall. She closed the door, flipped down the toilet seat and sat down, thinking.

The plan had come to her on the cab ride. The more she thought about it, the more she was convinced it would work. At the very least it would keep her off the airplane. This certainly was the first step if she wanted to remain in America. After that, even if she ended up doing time in jail, it would be worth it. And once she explained everything, they might not even put her in jail. They had released her father in the end. American justice sometimes was slow but it worked. America was the land of the free.

Hayaam came out of the stall and hurried to the paper towel dispenser. Ignoring the other women in the room, she pulled out a handful of towels, which she took back into the stall.

She set down the towels on the top of the basin behind the toilet. She fetched a full roll of toilet paper. Carefully she wrapped the roll in the paper towels.

## 48

Wes trotted along, following the signs to the gate. It had taken him a long time to get through security, the guards even going through his small bouquet of roses, flower by flower. He was afraid he had missed Hayaam's departure.

As he approached the gate, he saw a commotion ahead. Some people were scattering, and others were frozen in their tracks.

When he saw her, his chest tightened. Hayaam was holding something wrapped in paper towels above her head, screaming, "I have a bomb! I have a bomb!"

Jamal had known something was wrong as soon as she'd come out of the restroom. Even before she'd started yelling, he'd seen it in her demeanor. Her eyes had the glaze of a mad woman. Once he understood what she was doing, he fled in the direction of the gate.

Abdul rushed up, saying, "What is going on?"

"She says she has a bomb."

"That's ridiculous."

"This is her way of staying."

"Father, let her go. We have to board while we can."

Jamal looked across the way, where people were both in panic and curious, some running away from Hayaam and others staring at her with dark fascination.

"Yes, we must board," he said.

Wes tried to work his way through the crowd to get closer to her. Hayaam was still screaming that she had a bomb. She looked crazed in her black hijab.

"Hayaam!"

She didn't hear him.

"Keep away! I have a bomb!"

A gunshot rang out, coming from behind Wes, so loud that his ear started ringing. Hayaam grasped her stomach and fell, and the guard who had fired the gun rushed past Wes to his victim.

Wes knew immediately that she was dead. In fact, she wasn't. Hayaam was rushed to the hospital, where she died three hours later. By that time, the jetliner with her father and brother on board finally had been cleared and had taken off to escape the new America.

#### 49

The weekend passed before Areeba saw Wes in the coffee shop and gave him Hayaam's letter.

*Dear Wesley,*

*I am writing this on the day I am leaving. I will give it to Areeba to deliver to you. I need to explain so you will understand what has happened to me.*

*I cannot go back. My father has changed. He has arranged a marriage for me, which of course I cannot go through with. I would kill myself first.*

*I have to choose between my family and my life. I choose my life.*

*I am not getting on that plane. I'm not sure how I'm going to keep off but I will create a scene if I have to, making them think I am crazy and dangerous. I am not getting on that plane.*

*I am telling you this in case you see me acting crazy if you come. You will know that I am - how do you say it? - crazy like a fox. I will do whatever I have to do.*

*Maybe what I do will land me in jail. This is fine because the jail will be in America. I am an American now. I am free to live my life as I choose.*

*I want to tell you something else. I am sorry I drank too much champagne. Do you understand what I am saying? I am sorry that the first man was not you. Maybe one day it will be you if this is not too much to hope for. I try not to think too far into the future.*

*If I am in jail when you read this, will you come and visit me? Maybe your father can help me. I did what I did only so I can stay in America.*

*I love you, Wesley. I think about you all the time. I hope you think about me, too. I will never forget you.*

*Love always,*

*Hayaam*

## 50

Wes fell into a deep depression. He had tried to see Hayaam's body before it was flown to Indonesia. He wanted to pay his respects. But he was not family and not even his father could pull the legal strings that would have permitted this final gesture.

He stopped going to school, instead spending the day alone in his room, sleeping as much as he could because when he was asleep he wasn't miserable. His mother told him so often that he would feel better if he lost himself in his studies that one day he took her advice and returned to campus. He stayed long enough to officially withdraw from the university.

He flew to San Francisco. He wanted to live somewhere he had never been before. He chose San Francisco because Mike had lived there.

He managed to get a writing job on an alternative weekly newspaper. He found a studio apartment he could afford on his meager salary.

Now and again he would see a Muslim woman in the city. When her hijab was bright and cheerful, he was reminded immediately of Hayaam. He had never met a woman like her before. He assumed he never would again.

He did and he didn't. He fell in love with a woman who taught art at the same high school where he'd been hired to teach English. Of course, he was expected to go back to school to get his permanent teaching credential to replace the provisional one on which he'd been employed. This was in San Francisco, which he now called home.

He met Heather after a short period of dating women casually, which began almost a year after Hayaam's death. Now and again he slept with someone. But no woman made him feel the way he had felt when he was with Hayaam.

Heather was tall and slender and dark. She reminded him a little of Hayaam physically, a resemblance which he never shared with her. In fact, they'd been married six months, with a child on the way, before he mentioned Hayaam to Heather at all.

They were having coffee at a sidewalk Starbucks when a Muslim woman walked by wearing a purple and orange hijab. As soon as Wes saw her, which was just as he was taking a sip of coffee, he gagged, the hot liquid entering his windpipe, and he started to cough violently.

"All you all right?"

It took him a moment to recover.

"Do you know that woman?"

"What?"

"You looked like you just saw a ghost. I thought you knew the woman."

"Oh, her."

"Yes, her."

"Right. I mean, she reminded me of someone."

He didn't tell his wife everything, or even most of it. He didn't explain how Hayaam had let him see her naked in the hotel room, which in memory seemed like the most romantic and intimate encounter he had ever experienced. He did not tell her how she had died or about the letter she had written him.

"You never told me you were a hero," Heather said. He'd just recited the story of how he had met Hayaam in the hallway of the south tower on September 11th.

"Hardly that."

"Sounds to me like you saved her life."

This was the last time Wes talked to his wife about Hayaam. Sooner than he expected, he stopped dreaming about her. More and more when he thought of Hayaam he seemed to be remembering things that had happened to a completely different person from the man he was today, a high school English teacher, with a wife and child, a grandchild whom his parents loved to spoil. This person in the past, this memory of his former self, had been capable of happiness. Today Wes concluded that happiness was beyond his reach. Contentment, yes. He was content. But happy? Happiness was something that happened in movies. Happiness was something that when claimed by other people was immediately suspect. What dark secrets were they hiding? What self-delusions were they embracing? These people lacked the courage to face life head-on with all its pain and treachery and unfairness. Happiness, like romantic love, was an illusion.

By the time Heather was pregnant with their second child, Hayaam would not have recognized the man to whom she had offered her virginity. Wes often was distant and moody. He brooded a lot. He was impassionate.

One Saturday afternoon he was working at the dining room table when Heather came in from a trip to the market.

"I can use some help unpacking the car!" she yelled from the kitchen.

When he ignored her, she came into the dining room. Wes immediately tore off the sheet of yellow paper from the pad on which he had been writing and wadded it into a ball.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing."

In fact, he had been trying to make a new start on his novel about Moliere. He'd been thinking about it a lot lately. He would continue thinking about it in the future, although with decreasing frequency. This would prove to be his last attempt to write anything down.

He stood up and said, "I'll get the groceries."

Some months later Wes was walking to the faculty parking lot after school when ahead he saw one of his favorite students, a bright girl named Mary, in an intimate embrace with a young man wearing a varsity jacket. They groped at one another, standing under a tree just off the walkway, only a few feet from where he would pass. Wes stopped walking.

Their mouths were locked together, and Mary had one leg wrapped around the boy's thighs. They were in their own world, bodies bound in the obsessive oblivion of first love. Wes stared at them not with longing but with sadness, as if they stood on the edge of a great precipice from which he was helpless to rescue them.

Their passion outlasted his patience. I'm sure you'll understand completely when I tell you that Wes took a circuitous path to the parking lot in order to avoid them.

At home he found Hayaam's letter. He held it for a long time without reading it. Finally he ripped it up, crushed the pieces into a tiny ball and flushed it down the toilet.

Although he still thought about her from time to time, and more than once regretted destroying the letter, Wes never mentioned Hayaam to anyone again.

END

### About the author

Charles Deemer is a playwright, screenwriter, playwright, novelist, filmmaker and teacher. He teaches screenwriting at Portland State University. He is the editor of *Oregon Literary Review* and the artistic director of Small Screen Video.

*(I hope you enjoyed **Love at Ground Zero**. You can follow my activities at my blog at <http://cdeemer2007.blogspot.com>. See you online. Charles Deemer)*