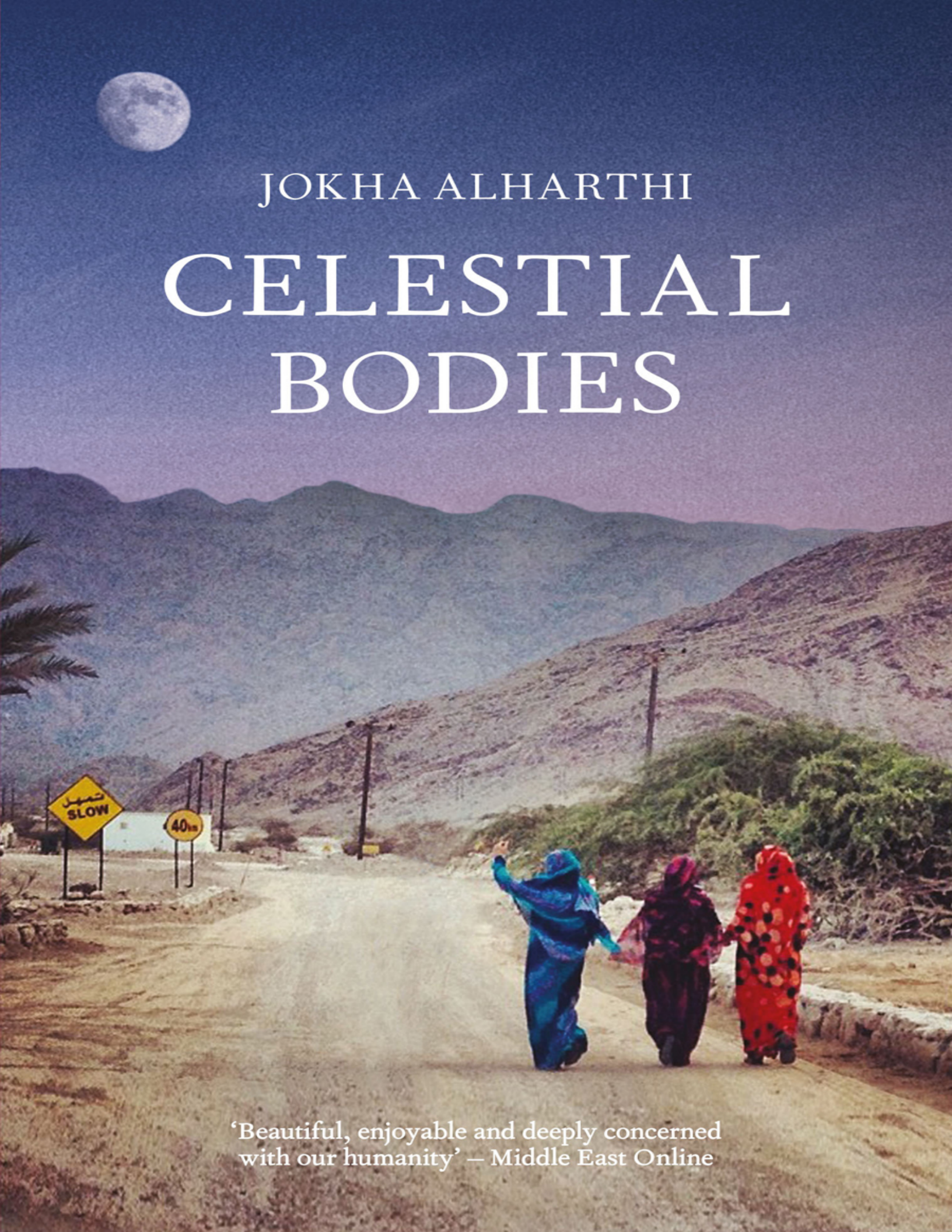
JOKHA ALHARTHI

CELESTIAL BODIES



'Beautiful, enjoyable and deeply concerned with our humanity' – Middle East Online

Jokha Alharthi is the author of ten works, including three collections of short fiction, two children's books, and three novels in Arabic. Fluent in English, she completed a PhD in Classical Arabic Poetry in Edinburgh, and teaches at Sultan Qaboos University in Muscat. *Celestial Bodies* was shortlisted for the Sahikh Zayed Award for Young Writers and her 2016 novel *Narinjah* won the Sultan Qaboos Award for culture, art and literature. Her short stories have been published in English, German, Italian, Korean and Serbian.

Marilyn Booth holds the Khalid bin Abdallah Al Saud Chair for the Study of the Contemporary Arab World, Oriental Institute and Magdalen College, Oxford University. In addition to her academic publications, she has translated many works of fiction from the Arabic, most recently *The Penguin's Song* and *No Road to Paradise*, both by Lebanese novelist Hassan Daoud.

CELESTIAL BODIES

Sayyidat al-qamar

JOKHA ALHARTHI

translated
by
MARILYN BOOTH

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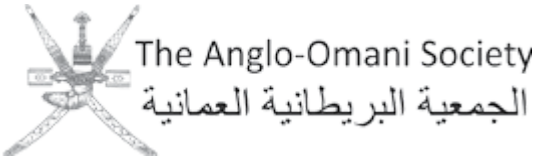

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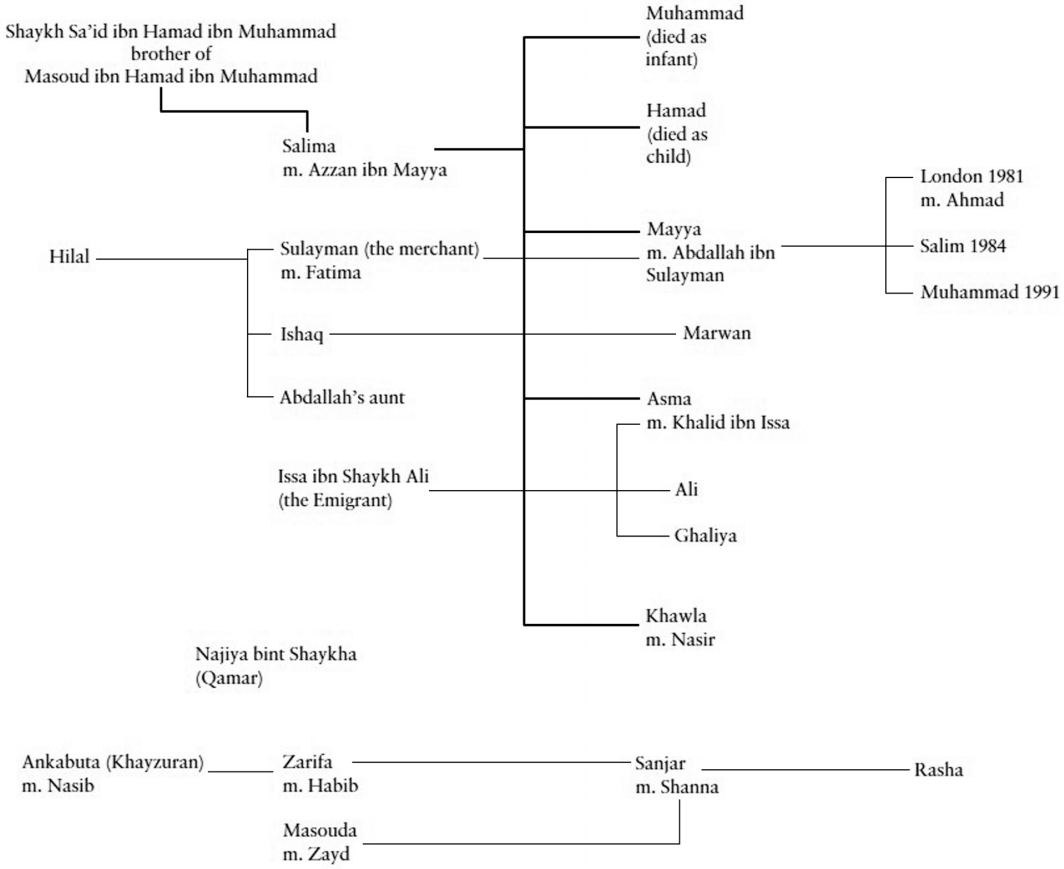
To my mother


Shaykh Sa'id ibn Hamad ibn Muhammad
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infant)
Hamad
(died as
child)
Mayya
m. Abdallah ibn
Sulayman
London 1981
m. Ahmad
Salim 1984
Muhammad 1991
Hilal
Sulayman (the merchant)
m. Fatima
Ishaq
Marwan
Abdallah's aunt
Asma
m. Khalid ibn Issa
Issa ibn Shaykh Ali
(the Emigrant)
Ali
Ghaliya
Khawla
m. Nasir
Najiya bint Shaykha
(Qamar)
Ankabuta (Khayzuran)
m. Nasib
Zarifa
m. Habib
Sanjar
m. Shanna
Rasha
Masouda
m. Zayd

Translator's Introduction

Celestial Bodies is Omani novelist and academic Jokha Alharthi's acclaimed second novel, first published as *Sayyidat al-qamar* (literal translation: 'Ladies of the Moon'). The book traces an Omani family over three generations, shaped by the rapid social changes and consequent shifts in outlook that Oman's populace have experienced across the twentieth century and in particular since Oman's emergence as an oil-rich nation in the 1960s. One of a wave of historical novels that constitutes a major subgenre of fiction in the Arab world, this work is narrated against a carefully evoked historical canvas. As the critic Munir 'Utaybah remarked, 'A complete world of social relations, practices and customary usages is collapsing, sending the novel's characters to the very edge, the border between two worlds, one of them a suffocating, rigid yet now fragile world and the other one mysterious, ambiguous, full of tensions and anxiety, of uneasy surveillance and fear of what will come . . . It is a precarious edge between one era and another, the border between the world of masters and that of slaves, between the worlds of human beings and of supernatural *jinn*, between living reality and nightmare, between genuine love and imagined love, between the society's idea of a person and a person's sense of self.'*

At the heart of *Celestial Bodies* is an upper-class Omani family whose members are expected to maintain traditional ways with only a tentative embrace of minimally modified social behaviour. But, trying to control the effects of social change, the family cannot repress an unspoken history of unacceptable liaisons and of master-slave relations. The impact of a strong patriarchal system on both women and subordinate men is unsparing but it shapes different generations, and individuals, distinctly as it leads to both suffering and confrontation. We find a patriarch whose love for a Bedouin woman tears apart his marital relationship. His wife, adhering to the

strictures of patriarchy, seeks her own kind of authority through denial of her granddaughter's challenge to inherited values through an unacceptable linkage to a man of lower social status. The older woman herself has had a difficult childhood in her uncle's home.

Three daughters exemplify diverse reactions to the society's notion of ideal womanhood in a time of rapid socioeconomic transition. The eldest, Mayya, prefers not to challenge her family and acquiesces in marriage to the son of a rich merchant. The second daughter, Asma, seeks an education; she marries an artist but one who is a relative and therefore acceptable. The youngest, Khawla, insists on waiting for her cousin who had told her repeatedly during their childhood that she would be his partner. Yet his emigration to Canada stymies her hopes. The younger generation, following a worldwide trend, move from the family village to Muscat, the capital, and their lives are equally turbulent.

The novel's structure is intricate and engaging. Alternate chapters are narrated by an omniscient narrator and one character, Abdallah, the husband of Mayya. Abdallah's father had been no ordinary merchant; his wealth was derived from a slave trade that had continued despite its legal suppression. Abdallah's life is overshadowed by the mysterious death of his mother; raised by his father's slave, Zarifa – the maternal figure in his life – Abdallah seeks emotional contentment with Mayya, but his love for her is not reciprocated. Through this tracing of intimate family relationships, Alharthi tells a gripping story while offering an allegory of Oman's coming-of-age, and indeed of the difficult transitions of societies faced with new opportunities and pressures. The novel has been praised by critics across the Arab world for its fineness of portraiture, its historical depth and subtlety, and its innovative literary structure.

Marilyn Booth
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* Munir ‘Utayba, ‘*Sayyidat al-qamar*: Fitnat al-haki wa-alam al-tadhakkur’ (*Sayyidat al-qamar*: the allure of storytelling, the pain of remembering), in his *Fi l-sird al-tatbiqi: Qira’at ‘arabiyya wa-‘alamiyya* (On narration and critical practice: Readings in Arabic and world literature) (Cairo: al-Hay’a al-‘amma li-qusur al-thaqafa, 2015).

Mayya

Mayya, forever immersed in her Singer sewing machine, seemed lost to the outside world. Then Mayya lost herself to love: a silent passion, but it sent tremors surging through her slight form, night after night, cresting in waves of tears and sighs. These were moments when she truly believed she would not survive the awful force of her longing to see him.

Her body prostrate, ready for the dawn prayers, she made a whispered oath. By the greatness of God – I want nothing, O Lord, just to see him. I solemnly promise you, Lord, I don't even want him to look my way . . . I just want to see him. That's all I want.

Her mother hadn't given the matter of love any particular thought, since it never would have occurred to her that pale Mayya, so silent and still, would think about anything in this mundane world beyond her threads and the selvages of her fabrics, or that she would hear anything other than the clatter of her sewing machine. Mayya seemed to hardly shift position throughout the day, or even halfway into the night, her form perched quietly on the narrow, straight-backed wood chair in front of the black sewing machine with the image of a butterfly on its side. She barely even lifted her head, unless she needed to look as she groped for her scissors or fished another spool of thread out of the plastic sewing basket which always sat in her small wood utility chest. But Mayya heard everything in the world there was to hear. She noticed the brilliant hues life could have, however motionless her body might be. Her mother was grateful that Mayya's appetite was so meagre (even if, now and then, she felt vestiges of guilt). She hoped fervently, though she would never have put her hope into words, that one of these days someone would come along who respected Mayya's talents as a seamstress as much as he might appreciate her abstemious ways.

The someone she envisioned would give Mayya a fine wedding procession after which he would take her home with all due ceremony and regard.

That someone arrived.

As usual Mayya was seated on that narrow chair, bent over the sewing machine at the far end of the long sitting room that opened onto the compound's private courtyard. Her mother walked over to her, beaming. She pressed her hand gently into her daughter's shoulder.

Mayya, my dear! The son of Merchant Sulayman has asked for your hand.

Spasms shot through Mayya's body. Her mother's hand suddenly felt unbearably heavy on her shoulder and her throat went dry. She couldn't stop imagining her sewing thread winding itself around her neck like a hangman's noose.

Her mother smiled. I thought you were too old by now to put on such a girlish show! You needn't act so bashful, Mayya.

And that was that. The subject was closed and no one raised it again. Mayya's mother busied herself assembling the wedding clothes, concocting just the right blends of incense, having all the large seat-cushions reupholstered, and getting word out to the entire family. Mayya's sisters kept their views to themselves and her father left the matter in her mother's hands. After all, these were her girls and marriage was women's business.

Without letting it be known, Mayya stopped praying. Instead she would whisper, Lord, I made a sacred oath in Your name, her voice wavering between submissive and plaintive. I swore to You that I wanted nothing . . . nothing at all . . . Only, I said, I wanted to see him. I promised You I wouldn't do anything wrong, I wouldn't say a word about what I felt deep down. I made a vow and I made it to You. So why did You send this boy, this son of Merchant Sulayman, to our house? Are You punishing me for the love I feel? But I never let him know I loved him. I didn't breathe a word of it to my sisters . . . Why, why did You send Mr Sulayman's son to our house?

Mayya, you mean you would really leave us? Khawla asked teasingly. Mayya didn't answer.

Are you sure you're ready for it? Asma asked, chuckling. Just keep in mind the Bedouin woman's advice to her daughter, those words to the bride we found in that old book stuffed away in the storeroom, you know, on the cupboard shelves where all those ancient books were put. The *Mustatraf*.

It wasn't in the *Mustatraf*, said Mayya.

This annoyed her sister. What do you know about books, anyway? Asma snapped. It was too there. In *al-Mustatraf fi kull fann mustazraf*, the book bound in red leather, the one on the second shelf. *The Novel Parts in the Elegant Lively Arts* – you know the book. The Bedouin woman tells the bride to use plenty of water for washing, and pile lots of kohl onto her eyelids, and to always pay attention to what there is to eat and drink.

Yes, said Mayya, her face as serious as ever and her voice low. And that I should laugh whenever he laughs, and if there are any tears rolling down his cheeks, there had better be some tears rolling down mine. I must be content with whatever makes him happy and—

What's wrong with you, Mayya? Khawla broke in. The nomad woman didn't say all that. She just meant you'd feel happy as long as he's happy and sad when he is sad.

So who feels any sadness when I am sad? Mayya wondered. Her voice was barely audible now, yet the word *sadness* rang out, discordant, to settle uneasily over the sisters.

When Mayya saw Ali bin Khallaf he had just returned empty-handed from years of study in London. It didn't matter to Mayya that he had no diploma: the sight of him electrified her. He was so tall that the fast-moving clouds seemed to graze his head, and so very thin that Mayya's first thought was that she must prop him up with her own body against the wind as it carried those clouds swiftly away. He was the picture of nobility, she thought. He looked so . . . so saintly. He could not possibly be an ordinary human being who would drop off to sleep after a long day, whose body

gave off sweat. Someone, for instance, who could be easily riled and shout angry words at others.

I promise you, Lord, I only want a tiny glimpse of him, only one more time. This is my solemn oath. And she did see him, at the time of the date harvest. He was leaning against a palm tree. In the heat, he had jerked his head forward to shake off his kummah, and now the delicately embroidered headgear sat at his feet. The sight of him brought tears. She only got as far as the top of the narrow cement-lined canal before she broke into sobs, her tears flowing like the irrigation water that ran over the falaj as it cut a path between the palm trees.

Mayya fixed all her thoughts on her beloved's spirit. She mustered every atom in her being and sent the lot marching into his. Then she held her breath. Her heart all but stopped beating under the fierceness of her concentration. Mayya bent her will to the task, orienting her being toward his, facing it, determined to follow wherever it might go. She sent her spirit into the ether, detaching herself completely from the world. Her body convulsed and she could barely keep herself from collapsing as she telegraphed her whole self to him, transmitting it with every gram of energy she could find. Then she waited for a signal, some response from him, any sign at all that would tell her the message had gotten through, somewhere deep inside.

No sign arrived. There was no response.

I swear to you, Lord, I just want to see him, up close. I need to see at least that he's real, that there's sweat on his forehead. Only once more. With his hand pressed against the tree trunk, his mouth working the pit out of a date. I promise you, God, I will not tell anyone about this sea inside of me when the silt rises to choke me. I swear, Lord, I don't want any attention from him – who am I, after all? A girl who doesn't know anything except how to sew. I don't know about books like Asma does and I'm not pretty like Khawla. I swear, Lord, I will wait a whole month, I can stand it and I'll be patient but then please will You let me see him? I promise I won't drop anything I owe to You, not the prayers that are our duty nor the extra ones

we sometimes do. I won't have any dreams that might anger You. I swear it, Lord, I do not want to even touch the skin of his hand or the hair on his head. I swear I won't give any of this a thought, not even about wiping the sweat off his forehead when he is standing there, underneath the palm tree . . .

Mayya cried and cried, and when Merchant Sulayman's son appeared suddenly at their house she abandoned her prayers.

After the wedding, she returned to praying. It had all happened because of her oath, she told herself. This was her recompense. Allah knew that she was not truthful in every word she swore. He was punishing her for her sin.

When, a few months later, she became pregnant, all she could hope was that the birth would be as easy as her mother's childbirths had been. She remembered her mother talking about Mayya's own birth. I was chasing after a chicken in the courtyard because my uncle had shown up unexpectedly in time for the midday meal. Suddenly my body was exploding. It hurt so much I collapsed, right there in the courtyard, and then I couldn't move. Your father went and got the midwife. Her time has come, Sabeekah said the moment she saw me. She helped me inside – I couldn't do anything on my own – and closed the door, and made me stand up. Stand on my own feet. And then she made me stretch both arms high enough to reach that pole fixed into the wall, and I did my best to hold on. But my legs started giving out. Then Sabeekah shouted – may God be forgiving to that woman! – Ya ayb ish-shoom! Shame on you! Will Shaykh Masoud's daughter give birth lying down because she's too weak to stand tall and straight? For shame, girl!

So I stood straight, clinging to the pole, until you slipped out of me, ya Mayya, right into my sirwal. There was room enough for you in those baggy trousers! You almost died, though. If Sabeekah hadn't prised my hands from the pole, and then if she hadn't dragged you out! You would've died with that cord wrapped round your neck. Ayy wAllahi, I wasn't even checked by a doctor, never – no creature ever saw my body, no, not me! These days you all go to the hospitals in Maskad, where those Indian

women and those daughters of the Christians see every inch of you. Ayy wAllahi Mayya, I had you, and all your brothers and sisters, standing as tall as a grand mare. God be good to you, Sabeekah. There I was holding tight to the pole with both hands, and she was shouting at me, Ya waylik! If I hear even one little screech you'll be sorry! Every woman brings babies out of her body, and what a scandal you are then, if you so much as whimper! A scandal, and you the daughter of the Shaykh! I didn't say one word, I didn't complain. Anyway all I could've said was, My Lord my Lord my Lord! And to think that these days, women have their babies lying flat on their backs, and the men can hear their screams from the other end of the hospital. There's no longer any shame in the world, ayy wAllahi!

When her belly was so enormously round that she could not sleep, Mayya said to Merchant Sulayman's son, Listen here. I am not going to have this baby in this place with those midwives crowding around me. I want you to take me to Maskad—

He interrupted her. I've told you a thousand times, the name of the city is Muscat, not Maskad.

She went on as if she hadn't heard him. I want to have the baby in the Saada Hospital.

You'd have my child slide out right into the hands of the Christians?

She didn't answer. When her ninth month came, her husband took her to the home of his uncle in the old Muscat neighbourhood of Wadi Aday. In what the missionaries called their Felicity Hospital – the Saada – she had her baby, a scrawny infant. A girl.

Mayya opened her eyes to see her daughter cradled in her mother's arms. She dropped off to sleep and when she opened her eyes again, the girl was sucking at her breast. When Merchant Sulayman's son came to see the newborn, Mayya told him she'd named the baby girl London.

She's exhausted, of course, he thought. She must have no idea what she's saying. The next day Mayya, the baby girl, and her mother left the hospital for his uncle's home. The baby's name was London, she told his relatives. The wife of her husband's uncle made fresh chicken broth, baked her the

special wafer-thin bread known to be good for new mothers, and made her drink fenugreek with honey to strengthen her body. She helped Mayya to wash her hands and then sat down next to her bed.

Mayya, my dear girl . . .

Yes?

The woman patted her gently. Are you still set on giving the baby such an odd name? Does anyone name their daughter *London*? This is the name of a place, my dear, a place that is very far away, in the land of the Christians. We are all very, very surprised! But never mind, we know you are weak and fragile right now, you've just had the baby, of course you're not yourself and you need more time. Do think again about a good name for the girl. Call her after your mother. Call her Salima.

Mayya's mother was in the room, and she wasn't pleased. Laysh ya hibbat ayni! My dear woman, why would you want to name her for me when I'm still alive and now I'm blessed with a grandchild? I suppose you're ready and waiting for me to die? That's why you'd like the little girl to inherit my name? As God's compensation. Oh dear me!

Hastily, the uncle's wife tried to repair her error. God forbid I would ever think that! she babbled. Lots of folks name their children after their parents, when their mother and father are still strong and healthy. May no evil touch you, Salima! So then. Let's see . . . well, name her Maryam, or Zaynab, or Safiya. Any name but this *London*.

Defiantly Mayya held the baby up in front of her. What's wrong with London? There's a woman in Jaalaan Town whose name is London.

The uncle's wife was running out of patience. You know very well that's not really her name! It's just a nickname, something people call her because her skin is so pale. And this girl, well, really now . . .

Mayya lowered the baby to her lap. She may not have light skin like the merchant's family does, but she's still the daughter of this family. And her name is London.

Salima took things into her own hands. It was time for her daughter and granddaughter to return to the family home in al-Awafi. After all, a mother

must recover in her family's embrace. Every new mother knew the importance of the forty days following childbirth. Mayya would spend it in her mother's home, under her mother's watchful care.

Listen, son, Salima said to her daughter's husband. Abdallah, listen – about your wife, here. She's had her first child and it's a girl. Girls are a blessing. A girl helps her mother and raises her younger brothers and sisters. What we need for this new mother are forty live chickens and a big jar of good pure mountain honey. Plus a pot of samna, the best country butter churned straight from a cow. When London is a week old I'll shave her head and you will make an offering – as much silver as the little one's hair weighs. It'll be enough to buy a sheep, you'll have it slaughtered and you'll give out the meat to the poor.

Salima pronounced every letter in the name London slowly and distinctly. Abdallah's face changed expression but he nodded. He took his small new family and his mother-in-law back to al-Awafi, their hometown.