

Julie Brickman

AN EMPTY QUARTER

You never know what boundaries love will make you cross. In the morning, you sneak into the men's quarters, slip into Samir's room. You have not been here in fourteen years, since he entered manhood. You are shocked by the change, the dark grain of the woods, the sleek blacks of the sound and video equipment. You still think of him immersed in celestial blues from pale noon to deep midnight, the colors you selected for his childhood.

You inch the door closed, slide the bolt into place. Now you can take your time. You don't feel like an intruder when you search your daughters' rooms. Samir's drawers are in meticulous order, the articles squared into columns and rows. You rummage with light, cautious fingers, seeking something extraordinary or hidden. You pause in the drawer with his *iqals*, for you know headropes are precious, like jewelry, and think he might conceal something of meaning beside them. You find nothing.

You remove a *thaub* from the next drawer, inhale his lingering scent. You can still smell the baby in it, a freshness as shocking as your first mouthful of sweet water. If Paradise has a fragrance, it is that of a newborn son.

You pick through his closet, his jeans, suits, jackets, his ornate *bishts*. When he drapes one of those dark, embroidered silk cloaks over the whiteness of his *thaub*, he looks so handsome you wish he had to mask, to protect him from the gaze of licentious women, like the American, who look at his face without being married to him. You first glimpsed your husband on your wedding day, his face like a falcon on a hunt, every haughty plane angled towards the victories he knew were to come. You knew at that moment you could surrender to such a man and to no other.

You wonder if you should search the bed, forbidden now that your son has become a man. You miss watching him sleep, checking each breath. You used to smell each exhalation, as if it were a scent from eternity, and scoot away, intoxicated and breathless.

Insubstantial, almost ethereal, you stretch across the puff of the comforter. The bed, king-sized and high off the floor, reminds you of your nights with your husband Khalid. The weave of the comforter is a blend of silk and cotton, as soft as a new bride's skin. You elongate into an angel like you once did in the cool shadowed sand. Dark paisley shapes ripple beneath you. You remember waiting in anticipation for Khalid's footsteps, your whole body one quivering ear.

On your hands and knees, you glide to the pillows, unfurl the comforter. The sheets are satin, almost luminescent, a dark shade of amber. You burrow between them. They combine the slick and the soft, like a liar's face. You inch the hem of your dress to your knees, scissor your legs along their cool surfaces. A faint smell of musk and sweat exhales from the covers. Your son's profile hovers on the screen of your eyelids like a giant billboard of the shaykh. Your mind kaleidoscopes into pure color.

When the colors dim you know where to look, but you don't want to move. You want to sleep in this cocoon of intimacy with your son. You have not felt this lightness in your soul, since you first held him in your arms, still slick from the fluids of your own body, and as defenseless as an exposed heart. You must save him now, or try, whatever it takes. You budge one leg, as heavy as a sack of grain, and almost as limp. It is such effort, this love for your children. You will yourself to move, to search the cabinet in his bathroom you have

just pictured.

The towels are stacked by size on ascending shelves. Their lemon scent reminds you of the splash of cool sparkling water on your face. You have never gotten over the joy of sweet water pouring from faucets and shower heads, of washing and drinking whenever you please. Underneath the middle stack, you find the pamphlets you are looking for.

It is worse than you thought. The pamphlets are from political organizations, Arabian Jihad and another whose name you don't recognize, the Gulf Islamic League. You close the lid on the toilet, sit down, and read. The Jihad pamphlet cites Surahs from the *Qur'an*. "*Think not of those who are slain in God's way as dead. Nay, they live, finding their sustenance in the presence of their Lord*" (II,154). These look like religious documents, designed to attract people into serious Islamic study. You must have mistaken their intent.

But they quote this in the context of suicide martyrs, the kind Samir denounced as Israeli fabrications at dinner. Here they are called missionaries, the highest and purest of the faithful, embraced by Allah in Paradise for all time. Surely your Samir is too educated to fall for this nonsense. Surely, he knows that Paradise might be a fable, not a place. That if it isn't, he will reenact his heretical act forever. Is he this angry? To throw away his life? And for what? These donkey-blooded cretins, these false *Imams*, who slithered out of a refuse heap of the world's losers to swaddle young boys in false glory?

Yes, yes, Islam can keep the world from self-destructing.

Everyone you know believes that. But this is a perversion of belief, the vision of a brute or a whore. Love and power unite in a sacred state of mind. You have had glimpses, moments of such a state, where love is so vast, it embraces everyone, even infidels and westerners, even Jews, as your husband would admit, if pressed, though only to you and only in privacy. In such a state, your enemy is beautiful, his life worth more than your own, for a coveted death poisons the marrow of your being, weakens your link with God.

The brochure outlines the training of a religious warrior: elevated by his spiritual teacher for special attention and training; the envy of his peers. Alone with his mentor for hours, days, sometimes weeks, he chants and prays until he attains a transcendent state in which his thoughts dwell only On God and His Will. You cannot believe what you are reading. They take the most sacred holy state a man can attain, a moment of supreme purity when innocence and knowledge become one, and they twist and pervert it, teach people it serves God to kill, when it serves only the Devil, when it ensures their burning in Hell, if Hell is the end of your soul. You cannot allow your Samir to die, or live, in such a state.

In the final paragraph, the pamphlet extols the teaching of an exiled religious scholar, who says that death is the only time in life a real Muslim can be sure he has completely submitted to God's Will and is free of his own, for what being, without the help of God, chooses death? It outrages you that any Man thinks he knows when God's Will is pure. *It is not for any soul to believe save by the permission of Allah.*

You can't imagine why your son, who has everything, would throw his life away in such a headstrong, foolish way. You would take his place if you could. You cannot imagine dying without the thought of your Samir as you go.

Your veins are gutters for the anguish that seeps from your children.

You can't find the words to pray. What kind of God accepts the sacrifice of an eldest son? You don't recognize Samir's God and your God as the same. You have been reciting *Surahs* in your mind all morning, but they are monotonous, unmusical. You chant and sing, trying to find your innermost being, where God dwells. It is vacant, like the heart of a mother who has a plaque of commendation in place of a son, an empty quarter. God has never been an enigma to you, but a presence strong inside you, who says His words to guide you in a loud, clear voice, bass and resonant, stronger than the song of the muezzin, and not at all like your own inner voice which tinkles in tones higher and sweeter than when you speak. Like baklavah nubbled with pistachios, this is the voice you will have when you die.

You kneel, prostrate, try to pray on the austere little mat angled towards Makkah near the *Qur'an* table in the corner of the room. *Why my son?* you cry, you who have always accepted God's word without question. Take me instead. A desolation darker than the shroud of a burqah blackens the vision of life you carry inside you, blots it out. You hear nothing, neither the deep voice of God, nor the tinkle of your own. Only silence, a heavy blank sound, not even viscous. Silence, and its color is black. Is this what it's like to be secular? To have no company inside?

Like cold lightning, a new and terrible chill travels through you. You understand those sad Palestinian mothers you have seen on Al Jazirah who celebrate their sons' deaths. They believe killing will restore the voice of God to their minds, justice to their lands, futures to the children of their children. In a fight to keep the darkness of *al-Gharb*, where the sun vanishes into night, from closing over their hearts, they offer their sons. Bereft, they have come to see God as a Great Housekeeper, sweeping away rubble and devastation and loss. God will clear the horror around them, reinstate love and nourishment and order. Islam will prevail once again against the chaos of *jahiliyah*.

You snuff out these useless thoughts. You herd them into a tiny corner of your mind where you allow yourself pride in the *karamah* of a son who would rather face death than bend to the will of unbelievers who would desecrate truth. You too want modernity without decadence; you agree that the West, in its greed, has suppressed Arab progress, but the Islamists use methods as corrupt as the ones they oppose. They are extremists and extremists always lose. You must rescue your son from their web. You must help him find a position of moderation and reason.

You pick up the booklet from the study table where you flung it when you started to pray. *"Warfare is ordained for you, though it is hateful unto you; but it may happen that ye hate a thing which is good for you, and it may happen that ye love a thing which is bad for you. Allah knoweth, ye know not."* (II, 216)

Samir would go far to protect you-perhaps you encouraged a sense of omnipotence that prevented him from understanding the relationship between personal limits and *hudud boundaries* that are sacred-but how far? *How far would he go?*

Unlike you and Khalid, Samir hadn't seen the poverty of your country before the discovery of oil, hadn't lived in a frond hut with no running water and not enough to eat, or watched small children die from treatable flus or infections. He didn't understand that your distaste for the British had little to do with their infidel religion and everything to do with the hospitals and schools they didn't build while they filled their tankers with oil and their coffers with revenues that your people never saw. Your generation, who made the transition from privation to comfort, never saw modernity as antithetical to Islam, but his generation equates Islam with the struggles of the Prophet, Allah's blessings upon him, and rejects all

that is progressive as corrupt. It has drawn them backwards towards the extremism you read in this pamphlet.

Its authors talk about atrocities directed against Muslims all over the world, which raise no outcry from so-called free governments or peoples. For this reason, they claim that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations is nothing but fraudulent, hypocritical propaganda, never intended to apply to Muslims, only to Christians and Jews. America and its heathen allies have only one goal: to destroy all Muslims and obtain control of their wealth and oil. And so: "We must rain bullets and bombs against the atheists and sinners who plot to make us part of their infidel empire. We must spill their blood and bleed them of their wealth. *'Those who believe do battle for the cause of Allah; and those who disbelieve do battle for the cause of idols. So fight the minions of the devil. Lo! the devil's strategy is ever weak.'*" (IV, 76)

You used to think Samir was gifted--a child of destiny--connected in his blood and bones to the reality of others, his eyes open inside the womb, as your grandmother would have said. You watched over him more closely than your others, worried that the cruelty of life could warp or crush him, but as his sensitivity folded into curiosity, he probed the *Qur'an* for dictums about justice and charity, read the work of clerics and scholars. You knew he was yearning for something, but you believed the way of scholarship was safe.

Then came the trip with his father back to New York, where you had lived in the early years of your marriage, and the endless questions it raised in his inquisitive mind. Why do they have so much--he called it life, but you knew he meant happiness, enthusiasm, *fun*--though you had seen it as a profound and inexplicable tie between people, a connectedness as deep as the *ummah* just because they shared a terrain of pavement or grass, as if common places like parks and streets and libraries and schools could be their own as much as a house or a dress. Everything around them *belonged* to them and they belonged everywhere they walked or drove or ate or shopped.

Why do they each act as if they are important even when they are poor? Samir went on, reflective not angry, not yet. Was it because they were white? It wasn't limited to whites. Christian? But some were Muslims, Jews, even atheists. Rich? But we were rich. Maybe it was because they had a say in their government, a vote? Was it the franchise? Or the way boys his age, younger, played on the streets: ball games, bike games, games of tag, marbles, cards, checkers, chess; laughing, shouting, teasing; always making noise and always in motion? One even called out to him, hey man you wanna play ball?

For you, it had been the benches. In front of public buildings or lining the paths that crisscrossed little concrete parks they called squares were benches where anyone could sit. On benches, the rich and the poor, the white and the brown, the men and the women, *ghurabah* who were not kin, sat beside each other and chatted, without fear, about the weather or their children. You used to roam everywhere and sit on the benches, raise your eyes and drink in life. A confidence you came to think of as community, an enviable sense of being somebody in a great place, pervaded life even on the crowded jostling disorderly obscene streets of New York.

Yet Samir has come to hate the exuberance of America. Heavy limbed and weary, you slump onto his bed, as though you had just given birth in the sand, like your mother and grandmother did beside their great tents. Your head weighted with shame, you force yourself to focus on the text in front of you, cruder than the sewage that once coursed to the sea.

The arguments are frighteningly similar to the widespread beliefs of your friends. They talk about hundreds of thousand Iraqi children want011ly killed by sanctions that deprived them of food and medicine. How in the Occupied Territories, blood and guts of women and children run down the streets, a sight you see nightly on Al Jazirah. Chechnya, Bosnia, Herzegovina, Kashmir, Somalia, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Myanmar, the Philippines: all the wars in the world are aimed at Muslims by governments armed with American weapons and supported by funds from their infidel allies. "It is obvious," they conclude, "that the Christians are in league with the Zionist devils to pursue a Holy War, continued from the Crusades, whose goal is the eradication of the Muslim religion and the confiscation of all our Holy Lands.

"How should ye not fight for the cause of Allah and of the feeble among men and of the women and the children who are crying: Our Lord! Bring us forth from out this town of which the people are oppressors! Oh, give us from Thy presence some protecting friend! Oh, give us from Thy presence some defender!" (IV, 75)

Footsteps thump like heartbeats and you immobilize yourself on the edge of the bed, slow your breathing to gain calm. You should not have stayed so long in the male quarters; activity increases as the day moves towards siesta. For such a transgression, you could be confined to the house and you cannot afford this when your son needs aid. The nearly inaudible sound of flipflops against carpet ambles past the doorway and down the corridor. *Bong, bong, Bong, bong.* It is your younger son, Abbas, who favors his left leg. If you get caught, any plan is finished. You must wait now until he leaves.

You and Khalid lived in New York long before the West was an opportunity for anyone but the shaykhs and the brigands, before oil wealth had filtered down to the people. When you returned, your stories about America raised such jealousy or incredulity in your friends, you stopped telling them. But like an unsettled feud, an untold story influences everything. The American years became the core identity of your family, hijacked the imaginations of your most gifted children, your unpredictable Samir, your daring and beautiful Ayshah.

Ayshah is the only one too young to remember the experience that made you outsiders in your own culture. Her exclusion from the family's--shameful? Do you feel ashamed of those years?--past has become an obsession. The spell of America enchants her. She reads fervently about New York, raids forbidden Internet sites to download music and movies, flaunts her intention to elope with an airline pilot or an officer stationed in the Gulf, acquire citizenship any way she can. Bold and flagrantly ambitious, she is just like her father. But her father had no opportunities if he did not leave the country. Things have changed since then.

This morning Ayshah was lurching around the house with something momentous on her mind, when you were trying to figure out a surreptitious way into Samir's room. You skulked around in an effort to avoid her, knowing you would be cruel if she cornered you, but, as if vision were a product of the heart, a cataract of moisture filmed over your eyes. You almost bumped into her in the corridor.

"You have to let me invite Emma out," she blurted. Her voice pleaded solo in the empty air.

"By myself."

Emma. The American. Not a good time to ask.

"To the Sultanah," she pressed. She quaked with tremors, which reminded you of dying, though you knew it was the surge of her hormones.

"Control yourself," you snapped, your own voice slapping you with its harshness. You would have to marry Ayshah off soon. Nothing else could protect her from her fascination with the West.

Her face beseeched you. She looked achingly beautiful.

"I doubt it," you replied. "But I'll give it more thought." Ayshah's hunger for freedom blinds her to the flawed situation of western women, the restless inner chaos generated by the unsettled spirits of partial liberation. Heavy makeup; dresses as small and tight as reptilian skins; perfumed and bejeweled, as if sex might occur anytime; eyes that rake over them in fantasy without intimacy: that is their freedom. Possibilities that seem without horizons in their adolescence dwindle to naught in maturity and old age. Exactly what you don't want for your Ayshah. At least Gulf women acquire authority as they age.

It is time to concede, you dislike western women. They are arrogant in their assumption that what they call freedom makes their lives more worthy than your own. From morning till night, western women enslave themselves to the serial fantasies of the men they encounter. They smile their whorey apologetic smiles and offer their flirty obsequious chatter to cater to every man's urges while simultaneously appeasing his rage at not getting what he wants. And if that isn't enough, they are surrounded--assaulted!--by a procession of magazine and television images that exalt and idealize the lowest, most degraded forms of male desires, until these free western women have no moment in their day when they can burrow inside themselves deeply enough to hear their own voices, much less that of God.

Every day you give thanks that you were born a Muslim woman, that you can go out in your protective raiments and just be yourself. A predictable set of fantasies are at the helm of your life, not the endless babble western women must sift and distinguish from their authentic interior thoughts every day. You cannot imagine how they ever feel stable inside.

Samir seemed preoccupied with instability last night at dinner, when he announced that the security system in the new office didn't seem safe enough for an agency that served western expatriates and tourists.

"You think we'll be a target?" Abbas, your quiet son, asked. "Remember Egypt?" Samir said. "The fifty-eight foreign tourists al-Gama'at killed at Luxor?"

"We've kept good control of those activities here," Khalid reminded them. "Except for that shooting in the Hyatt lobby."

"Even we will have problems until everything is in the hands of Arabs."

And there it was again. You would be happy to wring the neck of every person he met in England, starting with those ridiculous student radicals.

"We are always first to speak out on behalf of the Palestinians.

We give massive amounts of money to struggling Arab countries," Khalid said. "Not one of

those countries came to our aid before oil. We need science. We need trade. We need infrastructure. We can't have any of that without peace. Peace will last longer than oil."

"Peace!" Samir exploded. "Do you know what they do? They pretend they want peace, because they need our oil. They blow up their own countrymen and make it look like us. They want to discredit Arabs, blacken our faces, and make us look like monkeys who ruin their wonderful peace. The Americans draw cartoons of Yasir Arafat with words dribbling from both comers of his mouth and a beard that looks like cactus prickles." The ridicule of Arafat reminded him of how shunned he felt in England, how caricatured. "But that is how they are. The Israelis teach them. They send Mossad agents to work with the CID and the CIA, then set the whole thing up to look like it's Hamas. I think Hamas is a Zionist creation. I don't think there are any Arab suicide bombers. It's all Israelis masquerading as Arabs. You know all the Jews got out of the World Trade Center. It's an excuse to take our land and oil."

Khalid erupted with laughter, dismissive and paternal. He did not hear the incendiary mixture of spirituality and power that signaled the depth of the trouble your son was in or notice the angry sunset color his face. You think how the aggressive instinct in men disables their intuition, makes winning take precedence over understanding and interaction a contest between wills. They need a code of honor just to institute civility in a dialogue that is not geared toward understanding. Anything from an alluring woman to a secular idea can distract their thoughts away from God onto conquest. You will not get help from Khalid in a battle whose existence he does not see.

You heave yourself from your perch on the bed, pace around the room, rapping your knuckles against the furniture, wondering *what* kind of group is this Gulf Jihad, *what* you can do to help your Samir. You must revive your intimacy, whatever the cost. You pick up the brochure and see the passage you've been dreading.

"Brothers, take up weapons in the service of Allah! It is time for YOU to become part of the Great Jihad! In the name of Allah and His Prophet and Messenger, God's great and wondrous blessings upon him, true believers must crush the infidel coalition who is trying to destroy the Ummah that unites all Muslims. Seventy-two virgins await the arrival of every brave *shahid* in the gardens of Paradise, for the death of every warrior for Islam, whether on a bus or a battlefield, is a cause for celebration in our world and eternal reward in the next, an honorable and glorious sacrifice in the service of Allah!

"Let those fight in the way of Allah who sell the life of this world for the other. Whoso fighteth in the way of Allah, be he slain or be he victorious, on him We shall bestow a vast reward. (IV, 74)

"And fight them until persecution is no more, and religion is for Allah. (II, 193)

"Allahu Akbar!"

Their cold false faith releases an obstinacy in you, the first phase of an immutable determination that has impelled you to achieve every goal you ever thought vital. You slam the pamphlet against the black metal of the stereo. The *American-made* stereo, though its cabinet is Italian and the bookcases British.

Khalid can prevent Samir from renting his own apartment until the business has taken wing.

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This will give you time. You can surround Samir with people whose ideas challenge his, comrades, family. It would be wise to enlist others in this cause, but you can trust no one until you know more.

Samir will come to you if he is disturbed; he will come like the little boy who carried iniquities home like deaths. You must concentrate only on him, create warm maternal openings in which he is safe to talk. If you listen carefully to his statements, position yourself as a thoughtful confidant, not a rival against whom he must pit the strength of his beliefs, you can question what he thinks is *al-haqq*, insert small alternative truths into the weak spots of his vision.

You must gather the information you need, whatever boundaries you must cross. You must battle to supply his mind with alien and fearsome weapons: freedom, curiosity, a tolerance for private and divergent opinions. You must permit him--and yourself--the intelligence of doubt. The future of your son is at stake. The future of your world.