



## Julie Brickman

from *An Empty Quarter*

## MESSAGE FROM AYSHA

*I was never so excited in my life as the day my father told me he was hiring an American woman to run his new business. Well, not run, but co-run. And she was to be on equal footing as a director with my brother, Samir! Samir was not happy, in fact he was furious. He flushed to a bruised purple and stayed that way throughout the evening.*

*My nervous system electrified like a hot wire fence, sending little zinging feelings crackling through me, until even my liver trembled, my kidney, my heart, though I tried to conceal my elation. I wish they would send me to school in England; I'd come back broadened. I am proud of my father. No one else in this fossilized country would dare do such a thing, except my father. He is so cool, don't you think? The first with new ideas, western technology, change. I wanted to throw my arms around him, but of course I didn't because I am seventeen and my father is a man.*

*Though I wish, sometimes, he would listen to me.*

*I've dreamt about you. Emma Solace. What a funny name. I looked it up in my English dictionary. "Solace: To console. To make cheerful. To amuse." I thought, she will make me laugh My mother claims I shouldn't laugh because something bad will happen, but you, Emma Solace, laugh in your picture, your mouth wide and open like you could swallow the world, your hair the color of moonlight on water, frothy like a whipped-up sea, and completely uncovered. The top button on your blouse undone so anyone can see the milky skin on your chest covered with freckles like specks of gold in the sand.*

*I sneaked your visa down to the tourist photo shop where I could get a copy of that picture. The very look of it declares independence; what I will have in my life. Idolatry is a sin, my mother would say, quoting our imam, because it distracts from devotion to God, but what she really fears is diluted respect for the family. Even my father, who is probably the most influential person in this country, not counting the royals, had to get special permission to put a statue in front of his new building, a Bedouin with a camel. So I figured the sin was small enough to be worth the risk. After all, you had the photo taken yourself. It wasn't as if I were stealing a piece of your soul. Not that I'd mind. I think you must have a soul of steel to come to Arabia all by yourself.*

*I take out the photo and stare at it every day. I have memorized every line on your face, even the tiny ones that look like sandpiper tracks by the sea. It is a lived-in kind of face, beautiful but homey, as if the person wearing it got weatherbeaten from being so real all the time. I try to learn from those eyes. To look into the secret parts of myself for vision is power and I need all the power I can get. When I gaze into your eyes, aqua like a sundrenched sea and set so far apart they can watch every direction, I feel an acceptance of things I can't say to anyone. I plunge further into myself, deeper into the murk of rage and desire. I hear myself shouting with anguish. No, I won't! I won't follow unjust laws of God or man! I won't obey my parents! I won't be forced to marry! I won't obey God or Mohammed his Prophet and Messenger (Blessed be his name). Emma Solace is from an atheist country; her eyes permit this terrible doubt, forbidden here, punishable under charges of apostasy, yet my father doubts, he doubts and together with curiosity it has enabled him to develop and progress, to become wealthy; he doubts but won't let me. But I will go to school and develop my mind, I will select a career and push it as far as I can. If I can't do what I want in this pathetic country I will emigrate to Where I Can.*

*And listen to me, listen. I won't have children. No Children.*

*I want my eyes to behold a thousand mountains, my ears to hear a thousand tongues, my mind to rove as far as strong minds can launch it, to the stars and to Europe and to the United States of America. I want to see London and San Francisco and Paris and to live in New York. In New York at Columbia University, where my father went, I will learn everything there is to know. I will wear slinky dresses and date men who hand me glasses of wine and tilt*

*through the air between us just to hear what I have to say. My skin will feel the wetness of snow and sheets of rain, my ears will hear the timpani of thunder and the melody of harps and flutes, my lips will be kissed. I will eat pork in restaurants and go out with Jews. I will get a doctorate in the history of infidel ideas and work at the United Nations or at a university.*

*The eyes in your photograph understand. They say, yes, Aysha bint Khalid bint Maryam al Rashid you can go to Europe and America. You are smarter than Samir or Abbas or your sister Nura, fleet of wit like your father. It hurts to neglect a brilliant mind It hurts to chain it forever to a common mind or to expose it to no more than gossip and the swish of silk dresses. You can get a doctorate in any subject you choose, those eyes of iron assert. You can marry whomever you want.*

*My thoughts are so vivid I think they have happened. If I hear an interesting story about a man I instantly dream about how he might brush my hand or my neck and I feel this liquid in my body that makes me want to rock myself. I recite verses of the Qur'an to remind myself about what happens to bad women, but I think badness is a barrier to keep men away from women's souls and my thoughts just get stronger. Like last night when my father said to tomato-faced Samir, "The cowboy had another great idea." The Cowboy. That salty admiration in my father's voice. The sizzle of Samir's envy. The choice of a man is the choice of how to live. Emma of the oasis eyes will be able to answer my questions about differences between men. I must know if this liquid feeling is love, if every man can set it off or only the right one. I must know if who I choose will matter or if all men will be uninterested in the depths of my being. I must know if a woman's life is better alone.*

*For months I have pondered what to offer so we can become friends (and now at last you are here!). My father must respect you immensely to hire you to manage a branch of his business. He claims you have romantic silly notions about the desert and the Bedu, but a surprising amount of real knowledge too. He says you are a Catholic Christian. I guess that means you believe in some kind of god (but surely not without thought? not absolutely?). Everyone here thinks that the reason there is so much robbing and killing in the big cities of the west is because they believe Man is more important than God.*

*I wonder how love grows if you don't believe in God.  
I wonder if doubt incapacitates love.  
God. Love. Ideas. There's so much I need to talk to you about.*

*My father refused to let me go to the airport when you arrived. I argued with him, but he had decided. "You are not to go. You will go to school. You can meet her later when she's not so exhausted. After she's had a chance to settle." "After you've decided if I should!" I accused. "It's because I'm a girl. You're taking Abbas and Samir." "They are out of school," he said. He was lying. He did not ask Nura and she is out of school. But Nura didn't care if she went to the airport or met Emma Solace the American at all. Nura only cares about music. It's like she's not even in the family.*

*"I'm going to go live where I can go to the Airport by myself," I muttered, though not loud enough for him to hear. My mother heard. "He is trying to do what is best for you," she insisted.*

*If I hear those words one more time, I am going to slap her. Why does she have to perfume everything he says? He's not right all the time. And she has her own ideas. I can see them in her eyes. Once, just once, I want to hear what she thinks, not what he does. You'd think he was Allah and she was his Prophet. I started making as if to prostrate in front of her and she yanked me upright by my shoulder. "Oh Mother, " I sniveled, "How could he leave me out?" She put her arms around me like I was a little girl again.*

*But she didn't take my side.*

*The minute she left, I whipped back to this e-mail to you. Here's what I can do. I can show you underground happening Arabia, the cafes where girls go, the music and video clubs, the secret gatherings where we discuss reform, everything you will never find in books or on your own. Dearest Emma, I have been writing to you for months. Meet me for coffee at the Sultana Cafe.*

*If you are hurt because my parents turned around about your staying with us, understand it is because of me. My father wants to make sure you are a fit companion for his precious daughter. Since you're not married, he's afraid that you may have turned into one of those flirty, sexy types or become discontented and bossy. He'll send you right back on the next plane if he doesn't approve of you. I'd absolutely die if that happened.*

*My mother worries your reputation will suffer if you live alone, but she completely panics-goes nutsie with prayer-over the thought that Samir will fall for you. She thinks he's obsessed with English women since he was at Oxford. As if marrying an upper class blonde with skinny lips would get back at all the men who snubbed him because he was Arab and brown. And you know what? I don't think it was the prejudice that offended him. I think it was the way sin is so cool there.*

*The day you came, I put on my favorite abaya and went to school. The abaya felt especially heavy and hot, like a gag over my whole body. I kept imagining what you would be wearing when you stepped into view. You would be dressed in pastels, as you were in your picture, strong colors that conjure images of rainbows and sunsets. The kind of colors that sparkle from crystals and sunlit water. The colors of nuance and doubt, of life lived at its most supple.*

*And I would be covered in black. The color of limousines and stars that disappear, of newsprint on the Khaleej Times and the ropes around my father's white ghutra. The color of oil and thirst-swollen tongues. Of shadows and midnight and the unknown. Of death and slavery and domination.*

*The color of Gulf women.*