

Chasing Valentino

Darren

It wasn't until Alex started asking about polygamy that Reema got worried. He asked with a hesitant, desperately curious expression on his face: the slight arching of the left brow, the slightly audible intake of breath as he leaned forward. She'd known it would eventually come, but did not expect it at Marian's Café on Market Street on a Saturday that had started so beautifully.

"Isn't it true that Arabian men can marry four women? That Islam permits men to have harems . . . and seraglios?" She intuitively knew that he added that last word to polish off the question with an intellectual coat of wax. At least he had the grace to look modest.

"Well," Reema began, lowering her voice so that the other clientele in the café wouldn't hear, "Muslim men can technically marry four women, according to the Koran, but they don't really do that anymore. And harems are a thing of

the past." She suddenly wished she hadn't been available when he called that morning. How innocent he had sounded a mere four hours ago.

"But doesn't that affect you—or bother you—as a feminist?"

"There are a lot of historical reasons for it. It's not reducible to sexism." She hoped her tone sounded final. But his narrowed eyes told her the truth: He thought she was apologizing for her culture the way that you apologize to your party guests for the burned roast and a flopped soufflé.

Alex didn't speak, which suited her mood just fine. They paid the bill and strolled through the dusky Philadelphia streets, arm in arm. A show was just letting out of the Walnut Street Theatre, and she made a mental note to check their showbill for the upcoming week. She hadn't been to a show in ages.

She'd met him six weeks ago through Aliyah's brother Nabeel. Nabeel and Alex worked together at an antiques gallery on Market Street, and since she lived only one block from there, Nabeel invited her to meet them for lunch one day.

Over the meal, Nabeel had teased her. "Aliyah said to tell you she and the other girls are mad at you." Reema blushed: she hadn't seen Nabeel's sister, or Hanan and Nadia, in months. Everyone knew that Reema wasn't doing much over the summer in terms of "real" work. She was in the final two years of the PhD, progressing with her dissertation—a collection and study of eyewitness accounts of war. It had reached one hundred and four pages by the end of June, when Nabeel called her for lunch, June 16th, in fact. She remembered the date because she hadn't touched the dissertation, or any of the books stacked beside her desk, since then.

Now she spent all her time with Alex. Even when she wasn't with him, she found herself too high-strung to actually sit down and shape the draft. The words had simply lumped on the pages, unformed and incoherent, but she lacked the strength these days to chisel them into significance. Should she focus on just the stories of women, or of all war survivors? Should their stories be left "as is," or incorporated into the historical context? And what about tracking people down?

Her NGO connections did not seem to be panning out, no matter how many emails she composed and sent. The dissertation was spinning out of control, and her advisor would not be happy at next month's update meeting.

However, all thoughts of it disappeared when she was around Alex. At 6 feet 3 inches, he had to lean down to kiss her, and it seemed as if his arms could wrap around her twice. He had pale blue eyes, flecked with a deeper blue, and his black hair was long and curly, flapping behind his ears like raven's wings.

When she first saw him with Nabeel, he'd paused before saying "Hello," and she sensed the attraction. Like the "thunderbolt," Michael Corleone experiences in *The Godfather*, or the "seizing of the heart" her own grandfather used to say he felt upon meeting her grandmother. She could not suppress her smiles, and she felt goofy and sexy all at once.

"I can't believe Nabeel didn't introduce him to *me*. Bastard," Aliyah said.

Reema sat on the couch of her apartment with a bottle of glittery copper polish, her feet on the coffee table. She had called Aliyah after such a long time to talk about Alex, and it felt good to share secrets again, like they had when they were little. "Well, Nabeel has always thought of me as his sister too, you know," she teased.

"*Habibi!* Is that right?"

They giggled like schoolgirls again for a long time, enjoying their togetherness. The last time they had been close, acting like silly teenagers, was years ago, when Aliyah had moved out of her parents' house and needed help decorating—the result had been lilac walls, sofas with originally designed and stitched flowered slipcovers, and a kitchen table painted in a black and white checkerboard pattern. All their mothers had collectively frowned, worrying that Aliyah's show of independence would have a domino effect. On Reema, it had.

On her first date with Alex, they met at the Lebanese café on 9th Street, managed by an elderly, slim man, his sons, and their wives for as long as Reema could remember. Over hummus and lemon chicken kabobs, Reema told Alex how she'd been pulled into sociology. "I

want to study the culture created by war, and examine how victims cope in new worlds. My interest is really coming out of the fact that my parents are refugees of war and immigrants to the States—I have no doubt about that."

"I just sell antiques," he said as he walked her home later than night. "That's all I could find with an art history degree."

"You don't enjoy it?"

"I love antiques and old things, but the job basically sucks." Then he kissed her, right there at the front door of her building. Tenderly. Sweetly. She called Aliyah that night for the first time in months, and they stayed on the phone until 2 A.M.

She continued to see Alex, almost every night of the week, and they quickly fell into a routine: He walked over to her apartment after work, where they ate dinner (he insisted that she cook Middle Eastern food, so rolling grape leaves, not her thesis, occupied the daytime hours). After dinner, they watched one of the prime-time sitcoms, usually *Seinfeld* or *Frasier*, or the reruns of *Cheers* if they were so lucky. Then they'd take a walk for at least an hour, strolling through the marvellously organized grid of streets that defined Philadelphia. Numbers running north and south; names going east and west. One-way streets, no deviations. It was comforting for the same reason that arithmetic always appealed to her in school—there was only *one* answer, just waiting to be discovered.

She loved the way he spoke, the way that he compressed his lips after making a point. "I'm a film buff," he said once, a few weeks after the disturbing polygamy question. "I collect old movies. I think you'd like them," his mouth engulfing the final "m" and sealing it in.

"What's the oldest movie you own?" she asked.

"*The Sheik*, made in 1921." He grinned. "You'd love that one."

"What's it about?"

"It's a Rudolph Valentino classic." They approached City Hall, which squatted at the intersection of Market and Broad Streets—solid, square, its white stone carved with figures that formed a Pantheon-like facade. They passed through the Market Street entrance to the building's central courtyard, where the moon shone

down on the sundial etched on the floor. They sat on a small ledge, off to the side, holding hands.

"It's the movie that made his career," Alex continued. "A silent movie, where this desert sheik lusts after an English girl and kidnaps her. He keeps her in his tent and basically makes her his sex slave, although it's not as obvious as that. It turns out well," he reassured her. "They actually fall in love at the end."

"Fall in love? After he's kidnapped her?" She dismissed it as a cheesy romance fluff novel plot, but Alex brought the film to her apartment the next night. She had made *tabouleh*, another of Alex's favorites. It had consumed most of her afternoon, chopping the tomatoes, parsley, and onions into the seedling-size proportions required by the recipe. She served it with mint tea, for which Alex kissed her hand and declared that he was "in paradise with a houri."

"You're crazy," she said, laughing. "Let's watch the movie."

Chagrined, he asked, "A good Muslim man gets seventy hours in heaven, right?"

"I guess."

"So what does a good Muslim woman get? Like, what will *you* get in heaven?"

She answered wearily, "I get to be somebody's houri?"

He pushed the play button and fell onto the couch next to her. He kissed her deeply, and pushed his hand into her hair. When he pulled away, he gazed down at her, his voice ragged this time. "You're my houri."

She only pondered those words when she and Alex were well into the film. Valentino, wearing a turban and a white cloak, crept stealthily and lustfully toward the unsuspecting Agnes Ayres, who wept for her stolen freedom in a corner of his tent. "Watch his face when he sees her crying," whispered Alex.

Rudolph's face crumpled, dissolved from lust to guilt and shame. Reema glanced at Alex's face in the semidarkness: entranced, fixed on the scene, as if he were Valentino himself, suffering a sudden pang of conscience that he'd terrified this beautiful woman.

"How many times have you seen this film?"

"At least twenty times. I know every scene."

When it was over, he wanted her opinion. "You're an Arabian," he prefaced.

"Arab."

"Arab. Sorry. What's your take?"

What could she say to him? That she was somewhat offended by it? That it was full of stereotypes? She tried to express this tactfully, so as not to hurt his feelings.

"You must be kidding."

"Alex, it's horribly racist. Why is there not one decent Arab in the whole movie?"

"What about the Sheik himself—Valentino?"

"He turns out to be half Spanish and half English—not a coincidence, I'm sure."

"But he's raised in an Arab culture. He's an orphan and—"

"Oh, Alex—men who kidnap women or buy them at bride auctions? That's Arab culture? Come on."

"You know that's racist, don't you? They didn't understand Arab culture then."

"Of course I know that." He kissed her hand and said, "Let's forget it. We can agree to disagree."

She didn't see *how* he could agree to disagree, because you can't disagree about something that's incorrect. You could never say, for example, "I just don't believe in a heliocentric view of the universe, but we can agree to disagree." But she dropped it, because there's always a time period in a relationship, usually toward the beginning, when people accept anything, when nothing is enough to make into a big deal. She kept quiet even when they had dinner with his friends for the first time and he introduced her as Reema, his "beautiful harem girl" to elicit a laugh and break the ice. When he asked her to tell him stories of her childhood, about her parents and their idiosyncrasies, about her brother and how he'd met his wife during a two-week vacation to Palestine, and then said that he felt like Sultan Shahrayar of the *Thousand and One Nights*—which Reema supposed

made her like Scheherazade. She just kept reminding herself of how blue his eyes were.

Since she had been old enough to understand it, she'd been bothered by the fact that people told her that she looked "exotic" (which, until the age of fourteen, she'd confused with "erotic"). The clerk at the post office, the police officer who'd stopped her for running a red light, people at school, such as the classmate who'd insisted that the shape and darkness of her eyes made him imagine "what Cleopatra must have looked like." It was all very silly—but she tolerated it because it never seemed appropriate to be offended.

"We've all gone through stuff like that," Aliyah told her one day. "I hate it when white guys tell me I'm 'mysterious' or something like that. It's different once they get to know you."

"But Alex keeps saying that stuff. It gets worse and worse."

"That's weird," Aliyah agreed. "On the other hand, he's really nice . . . and handsome."

Reema knew that was one major consideration, despite her most logical attempts to argue with herself. But the truth was it felt good to be with someone like Alex, someone she thought would never be interested in her. Someone who wasn't scared of her culture, hesitant about leaping into something completely different.

And if Alex had false impressions of her, well then was she any better? She confessed to herself that it felt dangerous to be with Alex, too—her mother expected her to eventually marry an Arab man. But what if Alex was the one for her? She needed to break out of the box, to find out, to imagine different endings to the story her mother had scripted.

So she didn't say much about her feelings to him—in a way, she was grateful that he showed interest in her culture. There were times when she lacked interest in her Arab-ness, when she wanted it to disappear and just wake up blonde and green-eyed, with a live-in, stock-broker boyfriend who watched football on Sundays while she read *Time* magazine on the couch beside him.

That, of course, had been her parents' first rule. They didn't support her moving out in the first place ("It's not safe," her mother had

said), but they expressly clarified that they would be compelled to disown her if it turned out that she was "with a man" or causing people to label her "*bint al haram*."

But leaving had become necessary—not to live with a man, but to prevent the competition of cultures from fogging the path of her future. There were times when it had, when she'd hated her mother and father—their sad faces, their accents, the way they always spoke wistfully of home, as much as she felt awkward around co-workers who couldn't wait for Fridays but trudged in with Monday morning hangovers.

"Would your parents like me?" Alex asked her one night, as they took one of their nightly strolls. They headed toward South Street this time to do some window shopping and people-watching.

"I'm sure they would," Reema answered, squeezing his hand reassuringly.

"Even though I'm not an Arab?" he stared at her eagerly.

"Why do you say that?" she asked, not sure how to give him an answer. His eyes looked almost desperate.

"I mean, would they want you to be with me or with an Arab guy, like Nabeel?"

"Most parents want their children to marry within their culture—it's natural."

"So they wouldn't like me?"

"I'm not saying that."

"Yes, you are." He dropped her hand. "They probably wouldn't even like you being with me. I'm disgracing the family or some crap like that and then your brother would have to kill you to preserve everyone's honor."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," she snapped. "And have you told your parents about *me*?" she counterattacked. "What did they say?"

He stopped under a street lamp, and she could see an odd smile on his lips. "Actually, I mentioned you to my mother and—goddamn it if she didn't ask me what color you were." He peered at her. "Isn't that weird? The cage of his mouth swallowed the 'd.'"

"She asked you *what*?"

"I told her that I was dating you, and she asked me what your name was. I said, 'Reema,' and she asked what you were. You know, like what nationality. When I said that you were Arab, she asked what color you were."

Reema wondered how her face looked to Alex at that moment, illuminated by the lamplight. How did her skin look against the red wool of her coat, the white of her scarf? Did she resemble Agnes Ayres, gazing up at Valentino in his white turban, flashing a maniacal smile? Reema briefly considered clasping her hands together in a helpless gesture, and raising her eyes heavenward in a silent prayer for the preservation of her purity.

"And what did she do when you told her that I was—what? How did you say it?—a light brown? Dark olive? What? Was she relieved?"

He hesitated, then said, "I told her that you were the most beautiful woman in the world, and that she'd be as enchanted with you as I am."

And Reema was certain she never wanted to meet his mother.

They continued to walk, had their fill of people-watching, and headed back to Reema's apartment. She hoped that he would leave right away—her head was spinning and she needed to think—but from the way that he stroked her hair as she fiddled with the key, she knew that he planned to stay a while.

Starting to pull off her coat, she simultaneously headed for the kitchen to do the dishes, hoping that it would kill his notions, but he pulled her toward the couch instead.

"Sit down," he commanded gently. When she did, he lifted her legs onto the cushions and opened her coat so that it formed a red pillow around her. He pulled her arms free and pushed the red wool up against her breasts.

"You're tense," he declared.

"I'm not."

He began to rub her temples anyway, but the bun into which she'd pulled her hair obstructed that. He uncoiled the tightly-wound band and untwisted her hair, letting it fall around her face. She moved to brush a strand out of her eye, but he stayed her hand and

settled it on the back cushion. "Let me," he said, moving the strand away from her eye, but laying it along her cheek instead, curved slightly toward her mouth. Another strand pulled out and placed like Cleopatra's asp along her breast (she knew that's what he was imagining). A heavier section of her hair arranged so that it tumbled off the side of the couch in a black wave.

He lifted her left knee slightly, stood back and observed his work, and then lowered the angle that her leg had formed.

"You're perfect," he proclaimed, satisfied like Matisse, who must have occasionally sat back from his odalisque paintings once in a while and murmured, "*Goddamn*, that's good."

Grasping the back of the couch for leverage, Reema pulled herself upright and stood up, out of his portrait.

"Please leave."

"What's wrong?"

"I want you to leave now. Please." He stood at the door, looking confused. "Can I call you later? Then will you tell me what's wrong?"

"Maybe."

When the door closed behind him, she walked over to her window, which faced Chestnut Street below. She opened it and curled up on the wide sill. Switching on the small lamp next to the window, she waited for him to appear.

He did—hands stuffed in his pockets, head down as he walked down the street. Feeling guilty, she almost called him back. Just then, he turned around and stopped, startled, when he saw her gazing down at him from three stories up. He took his hands out of his pockets, letting them hang at his sides like pendulums, swinging ever so slightly back and forth at mid-thigh, his face upturned. She suddenly realized what sort of image she presented, framed as she was in the window, illuminated by the feeble light of the lamp. Hair down. Red coat hanging around her shoulders. She reached over, clicked off the lamp, and closed the curtains.

She fell right into bed, still wearing her coat, and woke up before dawn. Sliding on her most worn pair of jeans, she went to the univer-

sity campus. She lugged her backpack up Locust Walk, lined with gnarled trees and stately brick buildings, and sat under the statue of Ben Franklin on the quad until Van Pelt Library opened. Inside, she searched carefully for the right place before claiming a table in the reading room. Her laptop screen glared before her eyes for a long time, she tapped restlessly on the keys, her brain would not settle, but still she waited for the words to come.