

The Empress

I'm writing in English because I can. My English is very good. My private instructor always tells me my English is very good. He tells me I'm very intellectual. He tells me: Samia, you're so bright. He wants to have sex with me definitely. All men who see me without my abaya do. Specially Westerner men. Their women are so definitely thin and surly. And they don't have hair like beautiful hair of Arab girls. That's definitely the explanation that they don't wear the veil. Nobody cares about their hair. Westerner men don't want to have sex with them. All men want to have sex with us. So we must cover our beauty or they will definitely want to rape us.

Westerner men are perverting. So I wanted to hence find out more about their psyche. All pornography web-sites are blocked in Dubai, but with proxy web address I can easily access everything I want. Everyone knows I am very intellectual. My horse riding coach in Switzerland said this. He said: Samia, you're so mature. So I look at all the pornography sites I want. My friend Ruqayya doesn't

understand. She thinks I'm perverting. She says it's a sin for Muslims to look at nakedness and sex. But I am definitely a good Muslim. I show that I fast in Ramadan and have been loving and engaged to my cousin Ahmed. We marry when he returns from pilot training in America definitely. Ruqayya is jealous. She's scared of sex. I'm not. That's why I visit cybersex peep shows and play adult computer games that are dangerous and banned. I want to understand manly minds. But some of these games are very difficult definitely. I use Ruqayya's credit card to pay foreign online gamers to finish the games in China for me. I get bored easily. I use an intellectual pseudonym The Alchemist. I love Paulo Coelho.

Ruqayya is my cousin on my mother's side and is my friend because she comes from a poorer tribe than my daddy's tribe. Daddy's Bin Khalaib tribe own land on Jumeriah beach. There was nothing there my father tells me until the finance boom and oil discovery. Only tents and camels. Then Westerner businessmen came and wanted to buy Bin Khalaib land for their villas and offices. But my grandfather was a genius definitely. He agreed to rent land and take a cut of Westerners' profit. The profit from oil and free trade zone business and labour men from poor places like India was great. Praise Be to Allah. My family are very rich. We own a hospital in Sweden. We own a racecourse in New Zealand. So Ruqayya hence became my friend when she was born. She travels with me, goes shopping with me, eats food I

like eating and will marry after me. If her tribe had more wealth I'd have to be her friend instead.

I'm keeping my journal in English because I can write in English very brilliantly. My English instructor says it will help with my command and fluency. But I will definitely not show him this. I will not show this to anyone. So I can write here what I want. But what do I want? I want to travel to America to study heart surgery or become an astronaut. I want to go to space. Daddy says I can become the first Arab woman space traveller after I'm married. Mummy says it's not good for a Muslim woman to travel to the Milky Way if she's single. She says Westerner men could get tempted and want to rape her in the spaceship. I said I will definitely wear black burqa on my spacesuit to protect Bin Khalaib honour. But Mummy is not convinced. Ruqayya is scared of going to America and the moon. She's so lame. I'm glad I don't have to be her friend.

What else do I want? I want an Italian chef. Our Pakistani chef can't make real pizza as good as Pizza Hut pizza. I asked Daddy to sack him. But Mummy wants to keep him because she says she can't trust Infidel chef to make us proper Halal food. She made Daddy deport our Indian chef when she thought he had put pork in a dish to insult us and make us go to Hell. When in Switzerland I ate pork. They call it jambon there. It tastes disgustingly. The Profit Mohammed (PBUH) was right to forbid Muslims from eating pigs. But I like smoking marijuana. And I like cocaine.

So what else do I want? I'd like cosmetic surgery. Lebanese girls and Persian girls can have any cosmetic surgery they want but not Emirati girls. Boys look at us funnily if we even smoke cigarettes in public. Why can't a girl in veil and cloak smoke? I like Lucky Strikes. But Ahmed doesn't like me smoking. So he hence always sends me email links about lung cancer and heart attacks. I email him back that he should focus on learning flying airplanes so he can come back to Dubai soon and we can get married and I can travel to the space. But he's very slow. Jealous Ruqayya once said Ahmed was not hurrying up because he likes staying in America and American women. Stupid Ruqayya. Daddy said I shouldn't have hit her. Not with my horsewhip definitely. Mummy didn't speak to me for a whole day.

Ruqayya doesn't have my sublime eyes. I have very long eyelashes. Mummy says I have eyelashes like a gazelle, eyes bright as the moon. I know she's right. I know all men are weakened when I look them in the eye. Specially Westerner men. But they don't like Ruqayya. My German piano instructor only wanted to flirtate with me. Ruqayya's nose is too big. She needs a cosmetic surgery too. But she can't have one until I've had one because she's my friend. But I definitely wish she wasn't my friend. She's boring. She's scared of doing excitement things. I'm sick of her.

Like yesterday. It was a really hot day. We were driven by Mummy's chauffeur to the Mall of Dubai. I wanted to see the new branch of Marks & Spencer. And Galleries

Lafayette. And Al Azeem Water Fountain. It was inaugurated last week as the world's tallest water fountain. We had brunch at home because it's Ramadan and all the restaurants at the Mall are closed during the day so that Westerner tourists hence know we are Muslims and don't offend us with their decadence and ignorance. Ruqayya said she wanted to fast for real but I told her she can't because she's my friend and she ate pizza for brunch with me. We then washed our mouths to cleanse the smell of food so that Infidels won't tell lies about Muslims.

We then went to the Mall of Dubai. Ruqayya wanted us to bring Serena, my new maid, to carry our shopping for us but I wanted to punish Ruqayya for telling me she didn't like pepperoni pizza earlier so I hence said I wanted Ruqayya to carry our shopping that day. She wasn't happy. She said it's not proper for Filipina (which is the female form of the word Filipino) servants to not carry their Emirati madame's bags. I called her lazy. And fat. I wore tight sexy Calvin Klein jeans and Armani singlet and Yves Saint Laurent high-heels and my longest black abaya with gemstones on the fringe to cover my body from lustful eyes of Westerner men. Ruayya wore a veil similar to me but I don't know why because men definitely don't find her lustable.

So we entered the Mall at the Galeries Lafayette entrance and I bought two pairs of shoes from Galeries Lafayette and told Ruqayya to get herself a pair of socks. This is the biggest Lafayette store in the world, even bigger

than the original store in Paris. I saw Dua Bin Barsha and her Indonesian maid there and she was wearing her new embroidered abaya. Show-off. Mummy says the Bin Barsha are illiterate camels who are tasteless and common and garish. Unlike us. My Daddy is a graduated from Oxford, one of the first Arab graduateds from Oxford. Dua's father is just lucky to have oil on his land. They're not even originally from Dubai. They're from Yemen definitely. Dua thinks she's prettier than me. She was wearing a new diamond encrusted Frey Wille watch. And her headscarf was studded with rubies. I smiled at her. We kissed and she asked me what I'd bought that day so far. I showed her my shoes, they'd costed more than 2,000 dirhams. Dua smiled and told her maid to come forward and exhibited what she had just bought. A new Gucci purse. And she made sure I saw the price tag, 4,385 dirhams.

I told Ruqayya that Dua was a Bitch definitely afterwards. Ruqayya is so stupid and simple. She was shocked to hear me say Bitch. She said: Samia, you're so controversial. Such a simple ordinary poor girl. I was very angry. I told Ruqayya that Dua was also a Slut, and a Cunt, of course in English. I bet Dua doesn't know authenticate English words like these. Ruqayya was so definitely embarrassed and said talking like that was sinful during the Holy Month of Ramadan. I told her to Shut Her Ugly Face in English but I'm sure she understood me. She shut up and followed me out the store.

I was thirsty. But we couldn't have a drink. Important

Muslim women should not be seen drinking in public during Ramadan. Women of other lower tribes will gossip and spread vicious rumours about Bin Khalaib women's piety. So I told Ruqayya to go to the supermarket and buy a bottle of strawberry milkshake for us to drink at the women's WC. She complained and I called her a Slapper. I heard that word on a BBC criminal show. So she hence looked sad and came back with a bottle of strawberry milkshake and followed me into the women's WC. I was really angry now. I was Pissed Off.

So it wasn't hence my fault what happened next. I really wanted to drink but the WC wasn't empty and there was this ugly Filipina cleaner there. I decided to fix my makeup until she left the WC but then I saw she was chewing. Chewing a gum. I was outraged. These ugly Asian Infidels come to our Muslim country and chew in public during Ramadan to insult us. They're here to live off our wealth but they don't respect our holy culture. So I yelled at the Bitch. She was terrified. I asked her what her name was. She said Grace. A Christian name. I asked her if she knew she was now in a Muslim country. She nodded. I told her I would tell my Daddy the Sheikh of Bin Khalaib tribe and we would have her punished and deported from the country definitely.

Stupid Ruqayya. She said: Samia, you're so cruel. I could've punched the Bitch. The Filipina cried and said she couldn't go back to her country because there was no work there and she had two children and her husband

was unemployed. I told her I Don't Give A Flyer's Fuck. I have heard that expression in an Australian comedy movie. Grace was really scared of me now. I thought of something excitement and fun, a little game. So I hence showed this Grace the bottle of strawberry milkshake and asked her if she wanted a drink. Her eyes were wet and red and bigger than any Asian's I'd ever seen. She wasn't sure but she nodded I think to please me. So I told her if she was thirsty she could drink out of one of toilets. Just for fun. It was hard for me not to laugh. I told Grace if she didn't drink urine I'd tell Daddy and she'd be deported back to her dirty poor Asian country.

She begged me and so I was hence happy and felt good. But boring Ruqayya had to spoil my fun by telling me: Samia, you're evil. So she left the WC and wasn't there for the best part of my fun. It was more pleasurable than buying even a diamond studded Frey Wille watch or having cosmetic surgery. Unlike other stupid girls I don't need to spend a lot of money to have fun. Watching the yellow Infidel shame herself like a dog was so much gratification.

The Emperor

I am quite aware of her predicament. Samia is simply bored. It is the ennui that comes with having everything one needs, the disease of affluence. The fact that some of us Arabs have traversed so swiftly from desert camps to luxury villas is an astonishing, albeit unsettling, reality. My own father spent the best part of his youth fishing in the Arabian Gulf and it was not until the arrival of British oil consortiums that he was in the position to benefit from developing our ancestral land. Up til that point in life he had been a most industrious and diligent character. This is precisely what is amiss among today's youth. My daughter Samia and her peers have no inkling of what it means to work, let alone derive satisfaction from earning an honest living from work. For her, our clan's wealth has been a blessing and a curse. She can have absolutely anything she wants, and yet she is consumed with belligerence, resentment and disenchantment.

Perhaps I should have returned to Dubai immediately after being informed of the shooting incident. I never was

in favour of girls practicing with guns on firing ranges, and I was sadly not at all surprised to hear that Samia had shot her cousin Ruqayya in the leg. My second wife Fatima was thankfully as quick as ever in addressing the unpleasant situation by buying Ruqayya a new pony. But who knows what could happen next. What if Samia does in fact murder someone, perchance one of our foreign servants? The police will no doubt get involved, and it may tarnish our clan's reputation.

When Samia was younger I took her with me to many great cities, including London, where I had lived for a time immediately after receiving my PhD from Oxford. I believed that she and I had formed some sort of special father-daughter bond, the sort of thing that most other Gulf Arab families would have scoffed at. Indeed, I did not want anything to do with backwardness and retrograde traditions. My own father had, of course, been a pioneer in this regard. He was adamant that I should go to the best university in the world to earn my stripes before returning home to manage our industries. An incredibly advanced figure for his time. I recall many of my cousins idling away at the French Riviera while I slaved over tomes of international trade law. My father was absolutely adamant that I should speak English, French and German as fluently as I spoke Arabic. He once told me that I needed to feel as comfortable wearing a business suit as I did a dishdash. To him the future of Dubai resided with accommodating and not obstructing the power of Western commerce.

That is why I am here now, in Amsterdam, to consider a proposal for developing the small archipelago attached to our land. I could have as easily requested the Dutch company to send their representatives to Dubai, or could have sent my own delegates instead of coming here in person; but not unlike my dear father I too enjoy hard work. My contentment depends on my knowing that the seeds of our fruits have been planted by my own hands. A personal touch is also of assistance in these times of economic downturn. Many European firms are reluctant to get involved with Gulf projects due to the Global Financial Crisis. But their seeing me in person – an articulate Arab businessman with immaculately shaved face in a sharp Armani suit – reassures them that they shall be paid on time should they be successful in winning the contract.

Besides which, I love Amsterdam. To say that this temperate city provides one with a blissful respite from Dubai's infernal summer heat would be an outlandish understatement. And of course I also enjoy being alone. In Dubai I have no choice but to play the part of a munificent patriarch with three wives and eight children. Our excursions to shopping malls and the like are at times as difficult to organise and execute as Napoleonic military campaigns. But here, as I wander through the cobblestoned alleys and walk along serene canals, I feel young and liberated. Best of all, I feel I am under no obligation to uphold the image of an important member of the Dubai community. I gladly discard my ghutra headscarf, and

wear a baseball cap, a T-shirt and jeans like an adolescent tourist. I must emphasise, however, that unlike most other single male tourists, I do not take much interest in the prostitutes exhibited in the windows. My companion in Amsterdam is a professional and sophisticated young lady from Ukraine, an ex-model and university graduate, called Karina. I no longer possess an appetite for common street workers. I suppose one could say I overdid all that during my youth in London.

And I suppose I must also admit to the potentially queer nature of what took place between Karina and me two nights ago. But first, I must be absolutely clear that there has never existed any sort of hostility or even mild derision between Karina and me. I have always treated her with utmost respect and have always remunerated her lavishly for her companionship. She in turn has never displayed any sign of unease at having an Arab as one of her patrons. Indeed, she has always made me feel welcome and appreciated. Last summer, for example, when I was in The Hague for a conference, she travelled to the city to meet me and called me from the airport to find out which hotel she was to be accommodated at and to also inform me that she had something special in store for me. I was truly delighted to learn about her waxed vulva and pierced clitoris immediately after a very dull conference on the theories of Leisure-oriented Tourism and Destination Management.

But what took place two nights ago was arguably questionable. I must emphasise that I have always been gentle with my women. I understand that being in possession of the sort of fortune that I have come to be in possession of, I could be cruel or at least uncouth. Karina has told me many stories about how terribly uncivilised Russian and Kazakh millionaires can be. But I have never been anything short of a true gentleman. And I had absolutely no intention or even subconscious predilection to deviate from enjoying my evenings in Amsterdam with Karina the way we normally do.

But two days ago, as the Dutch property development firm concluded their rather lacklustre presentation – proposing to construct a water park as the key feature of our archipelago – I felt a yearning to be alone to not only think over the firm’s proposal but to also enjoy a Heineken away from my hosts’ excessive, at times sycophantic, conviviality. Had it been necessary for the company’s CEO to greet me in poorly-articulated Arabic, *Asalm-o-Alaykum*? I despise ethnocentrism, but admire Dutch beer.

As I started on my second bottle in the hotel’s bar, however, my eyes caught the expeditious images racing across the TV screen on the far end of the spacious room. My heart sank even before my mind had processed the meaning of the pictures on the distant screen. I suddenly lost my thirst for alcohol and felt agitated.

I am not all that interested in politics. Commerce and entrepreneurship are my passions and ever since my father

commanded me not to get involved in the politics of the Arab-Israeli conflict back in the 1970s, I have been all but indifferent towards the various crises that have bedevilled our tumultuous region. But what I saw two days ago somehow ruptured my perceptions. I took a step towards the TV screen suspended from the rafters at the hotel bar in Amsterdam.

There was of course nothing at all new about the news of yet another Israeli attack on Palestine, but there was something about the pictures that moved before my eyes – the speed of their transmission, their colour and texture, or their macabre subject matter – that captivated and horrified me. Eviscerated buildings, pulverised vehicles and many shrouded corpses. Veiled women crying over grey infants. And so on.

But what affected me most was the image of the aftermath of an Israeli attack on a Palestinian police station. I had to take one more step towards the screen to ensure that what I saw was a picture of a real event. Seven Arab policemen, one of whom looked very familiar, in the black police uniforms provided by their Iranian sponsors, were lined on the ground outside a smouldering building. All the policemen, other than the one who resembled someone I knew, were dead. The familiar man, however, was wriggling while staring directly into the camera and, through the screen, into my eyes. He was utterly helpless, dismal and pathetic. Here was one of the fabled freedom fighters dedicated to ridding Palestine of the Zionist

scourge; and he had been effortlessly shot by the Israeli soldiers and hurled out onto the street like a stray dog. He was dying, and once his face had stopped twitching I recognised where I had seen those thick eyebrows and wrinkled forehead. My father. The wasted Hamas militant was the spitting image of my great father, the Sheikh of the Bin Khalaib.

I left the bar and returned to my room. I looked very closely at my own face in the mirror of the bathroom. Yes, I too looked liked those slaughtered animals on TV. Arabs. Butchered with unerring regularity by whoever happens to feel the urge to kill us. How utterly hapless those dead 'fighters' had looked. And had they even managed to fire one bullet at the oncoming Israeli paratroopers before being decimated? Had they even had the time to perceive their wretched deaths as anything resembling martyrdom prior to their methodical extermination?

I sat on my bed and turned on the TV. Upon seeing yet another image of dead Arabs I turned off the TV and let go of the remote control. I could not bring myself to take off my suit jacket before lying down on the bed. My hands felt paralysed. All I could think about was the face of the dying Palestinian, and the voice of the Dutch CEO telling me in his fizzy accent, *Asalm-o-Alaykum*. These opposing perceptions kept me in their thrall until I heard the buzzing of one of my cell-phones. I would have ignored the

call had it not chimed in the sweet ringtone of the theme song of the movie *Emmanuelle*.

I was of course in no mood to either see or in fact even converse with Karina, but I did answer the phone. She had just arrived at the Schiphol Airport from Paris. She asked me where I was staying. I remained silent mostly because I could not muster the voice to tell her that I did not want to see her. I suppose I was feeling either immensely depressed, intensely angry, or something along those lines. Either way I could not answer her question.

‘Are you OK, Abdullah?’

I finally mumbled, ‘No. I am . . . not OK.’

‘Tell me what to tell the taxi driver and I’ll be there to talk about it, OK?’

‘No. Karina. I cannot.’

She fell silent and breathed into the phone. It was a short while before I heard her voice again. Her tone was neither frustrated nor sultry, but deliberate and businesslike.

‘I came back just to see you, Abdullah.’

‘Never mind, Karina. Usual amount in your bank account tomorrow. You have my word.’

‘I’m not a concubine in your harem, Abdullah. You don’t want my services anymore?’

‘No, Karina. I need to be alone. Something has happened.’

There was another, longer pause. I must admit I was anticipating her to hang up and disappear from my life altogether, but I suppose I had underestimated her professional

pride, work ethic, and her degree in psychology. It is not for nothing that she is one of the most sought-after escorts in all of Europe.

‘Abdullah. Family life can be very tough sometimes, can’t it?’

‘Family life, Karina?’

‘OK. The Dutch builders. Their proposal must have been very disappointing.’

‘No Karina. I can see what you are intending to do here, but I am simply not in the mood. Not today.’

‘Did they insult you, Abdullah?’

‘No, no. Not them.’

‘Who then?’

‘No one. I am simply not feeling . . . that way.’

‘OK. It was something you heard then. Maybe something you saw on the news, Abdullah?’

I wanted to dissuade her from continuing the interrogation but I was once again too depressed or infuriated to speak. She interpreted my silence expertly and spoke in a softer voice.

‘Gaza?’

My heart began to palpitate and I moved the phone away from my face to obviate breathing into it. I did not want her to find out more about how I was feeling and what I needed.

‘Abdullah? It’s the war in Gaza, isn’t it?’

I didn’t respond. Her next statements were preceded by the longest pause in our conversation.

‘Abdullah. There’s something I haven’t told you about me. Do you know why I left Ukraine and came to the Netherlands?’

‘It wasn’t just for money and work, Abdullah. Listen. Most Ukrainians are very anti-Semitic. Did you know that most Ukrainians collaborated with Hitler?’

‘You are . . . a Jewess?!’

I exclaimed uncontrollably, and was taken aback by the excitement, the boyish enthusiasm, in my voice. I sat up in my bed and tried to not sound too ebullient.

‘You, Karina. You . . .’

‘You haven’t been to the Anne Frank House yet? I guess you wouldn’t have. That’s why I’m here, Abdullah. The Dutch have always protected us. From those who want to kill us.’

‘Karina. I . . . I am . . . at Grand Hotel Roissypolsky. Room 48.’

I admit that I have indulged in risqué sexual activities before, but nothing could have prepared me for what was unleashed by Karina that night. I am most disconcerted by what turns out to be my penchant for erotic asphyxiation and my zest for anal intercourse. I am most displeased to admit that at times I did not care if I was hurting Karina or not.

We hardly exchanged words until the next morning. I finished two cups of coffee before conjuring the courage to tell her that I would be depositing a rather large sum of money into her account. She glanced at me ambiguously

The Hermit

Stupid people. How could they find this humorous? Does he understand what I've been through? The summer of love. Idiot. They should get on with processing my application instead of coming around, asking moronic questions and making jokes about my date of birth. Does he have any idea how we were suffering in Iran in 1969 under the evil Shah when the hippies in the West were enjoying free love?

I shouldn't have let them into my apartment. The idiot case manager says I'm lucky to have been given accommodation while my application is being processed. Most other asylum seekers end up in detention centres. But I'd feel a lot luckier if these ignorant people would just let me be instead of coming here every few days to ask more questions. They know what I've been through. I've told them everything about the prison. About the guards. About the torture. Why do they keep bringing me forms to fill? Don't they have anything better to do?

They say I've been very lucky to be allowed to live

freely in Amsterdam without a refugee visa. But I hate this city. I hate everything about it. The first day I ventured out of my apartment I caught a train, but when I sat down an officer told me that I had to move to a different part of the carriage because I didn't have a First Class ticket. So I had to stand up in a very busy section while there were empty seats in the First Class section. Stupid, elitist people.

Then I had to line up for hours to get to see ugly paintings by some idiot who cut off his own ear and killed himself. Then I had to get a tram back to my apartment. I hate trams. So slow. I felt claustrophobic. And when I arrived I saw my neighbour, a young woman from Russia or Ukraine or somewhere, in a very short skirt and smudged makeup crying as she was fumbling with her keys to open her door. She must be a damn prostitute. I don't linger in the stairway anymore. I hate leaving my flat.

I hate answering the phone too. It's usually some idiot immigration officer interrogating me about my job back in Iran, about why I was in the Evin Prison, things I don't want to talk about to these people. I go out once a week to buy bread and eggs and cans of soup. I'm happy with the mattress they've given me. I don't want anything else. I just want them to leave me alone. Give me back my damn passport and let me forget about everything. So what if I was born in the same year as their Woodstock festival? How is that supposed to be funny? Was the idiot trying to

make friends with me? I don't need friends. I won't make friends here. I want to be left alone.

What the hell did she expect me to say to her? Thank her for giving me her tattered bedside lamp? How dare she come and just knock on my door and disturb me. Stupid prostitute. What the hell is she doing here, anyway? Her English is too good. Why won't she go back to her damn country and get a proper job?

I won't buy a light globe for the damn lamp. It's an ugly lamp. It's orange. I hate orange. I hate all colours. When I was in the prison I started missing the colours of flowers and the blue of the sky and the green of the fields outside the city. But then I got used to the grey of the concrete walls, the dull metallic texture of the doors and locks, and the blackness of the solitaries. It was all black and grey in there, not even black and white. So I lost my appetite for colourful things. I'm glad the walls of this room are also grey. And the floor is a dirty yellow carpet, very similar to the khaki of the guards' uniforms.

Remembering the prison doesn't bother me. The kicks and the pliers were a part of that life too. As were the rapes and the gallows. The idiot Dutch counsellors try to tell me that I must've been traumatised by all of that. And I go along with their condescending nonsense so that they might tick off the boxes on their forms and get the hell out of my room and let me be. Post-traumatic stress disorder. They've got a dumb scientific name for everything. Have

they coined a term for glib obnoxious Westerners who think they were born to save the souls of non-Westerners? Oh yes. They're called Christians.

I haven't really told them about Soheila yet. They know I have a wife back in Iran, but I didn't answer yes to the question in the fifth application form about wanting to be reunited with my family in the future. They were happy about that and didn't pester me about it. I told them that with what had happened to me, I could no longer see myself sharing my life with another person, being intimate with a woman in a sexual way. The social workers nodded gravely and told me that considering what had happened in the prison in Tehran, they fully understood why I wouldn't be trying to bring my wife and children over from Iran if I was granted refugee status.

But these people don't understand anything. They've lived happy comfortable lives in countries built on the wealth stolen from poor countries over hundreds of years. It's our oil that lets their awful artists paint stupid pictures and not starve to death. Do these idiots understand that it was because of their hunger for our damn oil that we had that Shah bastard, then we had the damn Revolution, and then we had the damn war with Iraq? All of that for the sake of these pampered Westerners. So that they could have their cheap oil and drive their cars and enjoy their Heineken and waffles. They've got more blood on their hands than the guards at Evin. But I won't tell them that. I don't want to have anything to do with them. I just want

them to give me the damn visa and leave me the hell alone.

I like staring at the murky ceiling at nights until I fall asleep. I hate reading and I don't need a bedside lamp. I like my room dark. But now they've given me a light globe for the worthless lamp with frayed orange lampshade that the Russian whore was going to throw away.

Two fat immigration officers and an interpreter were here to interview me about why I had been persecuted. The interpreter, an Iranian woman, told me that if I told them I had converted to Christianity, or that I intended to convert to Christianity, they'd process my application quicker. So I told them that. The immigration officers were delighted to hear that, and asked me if I had everything I needed and if my allowance was enough to live on. I told them yes and tried to herd them out of my apartment. One of them lingered on, looked around the flat and told me that I needed to make the place more liveable.

So the next day the annoying woman came back with a bag of things, including a light globe, an English Bible and a damn Van Gogh poster. I thanked her and told her that I was having a 'post-traumatic episode' and needed to be alone. She gave me a hug – which felt fucking offensive – and told me that there were detectives from AIVD, the Netherland's intelligence and security agency, who wanted to speak to me. I nodded and was happy that she left after that.

They came over this morning. Two Dutchmen, and one of them spoke fluent Farsi. He asked me if it was true that I had worked at the Isfahan branch of the Islamic Republic's Department of Infrastructure. He then asked if I had been to the nuclear power plant facilities in Natanz. Before I had the chance to answer he told me that any information about Iran's nuclear weapons program would help my asylum application. I agreed and said that I had been to the damn place. He lit up a cigarette and asked if I had everything I needed and if my allowance was enough to live on. He took out his wallet and wrote me a cheque for 2,000 euros. He told me to buy myself a computer. He asked if I'd be happy to be contacted by members of Mossad. Then they left me alone. Thank god for that.

Why not? I'll turn the damn light on. Look at those hideous sunflowers. Is that art? These Europeans don't know anything. But I'll play the part. I'll indulge their ignorance. I'll tell the overweight counsellor that I love the Van Gogh poster.

And I'll tell the intelligence agents what they want to hear. There. I've turned on the light. I'll tell them that Iran is developing nuclear weapons. I'll tell them the Islamic Republic plans to sell their nuclear bombs to Al Qaeda or something equally idiotic. I'm sure they'll love it. They'll give me EU citizenship for that. They'll call me a heroic dissident or something like that. Idiots.

Now that there's light in my room at night I won't

be falling asleep as easily. I'm lying back on the mattress and thinking. But I hate thinking. There's nothing to think about. I look at the garish orange lampshade. And it reminds me of something. How odd. It even has a pattern of faded yellow flowers on it. Yes, I've seen something very similar to this before. A woman's headscarf perhaps. Or maybe a shawl.

And I remember. It was the young blue-eyed woman the Revolutionary Guards picked up outside a North Tehran bookshop one time. She was a beauty. Blue eyes are very rare in Iran, and considered very striking. Now I know why I can't stand the sight of my Russian prostitute neighbour, the one who gave me this lamp. She has the same eyes as the girl detained by the Guards. It must have been in the early eighties. That's when I was still in the Evin Prison.

It's a good thing these Dutch do-gooders don't ask too many questions. Well, they do ask too many questions, but they don't ask the *right* questions. They've asked me all about the terrifying prison. About the torture techniques, about the political prisoners and so on. But they haven't really bothered to uncover in what capacity I was at the prison. Fools. I'm thankful for their idiocy.

The girl was initially chastised by the Guards for not covering her hair properly with her headscarf. She had had the gall to argue back, telling the Guards that her hejab had been adequate. So the Guards had hauled her into their Jeep and used her forthrightness as an excuse for

searching her bag. And in it they had found a pamphlet by a leftist intellectual affiliated with the banned People's Party. Now, at this point the Islamic authorities were mostly worried about the Islamist-Marxist insurgents, not the spineless socialists. But the Guards decided that the gutsy woman was a traitor, and they brought her to Evin.

I was either fifteen or sixteen at the time. I had been filled with hatred for affluent Tehranis since the day I was born in a rural hellhole in southern Iran, and when the Iraqis attacked and we were all made war refugees and moved to Tehran, I was more than happy to join the paramilitary Basij corps with thousands of other homeless, angry and uneducated peasant boys. Did I buy into the religious nonsense the mullahs preached every day about our war with the Great Satan and the Zionists and all that? I can't remember. What I remember is that I was full of hatred, a poor adolescent boy's hatred for wealthy, sexually attractive women.

Did I volunteer that day or did the Guards choose me? I can't remember. But I was certainly attracted to her. It had taken about half an hour for a Revolutionary Committee judge to decide that the surly young woman with the orange headscarf was a communist traitor, and that she was to be executed. She was about twenty years old, a university student, and her family were to be informed after she'd been disposed of. But the thing was, just before taking her to the execution ground, they did a physical examination and found out that she was a virgin. The Guards, being

moral and pious men, believed that killing a virgin was a sin and the untainted soul of a virgin could go to Heaven after execution. They didn't want the woman's socialist soul to go anywhere other than Hell after they'd hanged her. So they asked me to help them. Or perhaps I volunteered. Unlike the other prison guards, I was an unmarried man – an unmarried teenage boy, actually – and it wasn't sinful for me to have sex with a woman.

So I did what needed to be done. That was my first rape. The first time I had sex, actually. It was a tarnished room with the woman's pale naked body pressed on the floor under the boots of the Revolutionary Guards. Over the next ten years I worked diligently to ensure that traitorous women's souls did not accidentally ascend to Heaven. Then I was given a university scholarship, and a job as an engineer in the department of infrastructure. I got married and bought a villa in North Tehran. It had taken a while, but I had finally become an urban middle class person. I even lost my country-hick's accent over time.

Now I can become an EU citizen. A Westerner. I'll tell them all about the mullahs' weapons of mass destruction, human rights abuses and so on. The Dutch will fête me as a brave defector. I could even paint some ugly flowers like the man who ripped off his ear. They believe anything I tell them.

Wheel of Fortune

‘So, the soldiers raped you. Anything else?’

Nowa is bothered. It’s the clinical tone of the white woman’s question. But Nowa doesn’t show her discomfort. She’s in no position to expect anything, least of all sympathy.

‘They did it in front of my father. One of them held a machine gun to his head and made him watch it. My father killed himself the next day.’

‘Right. You have already mentioned your father’s suicide. And you are how old now?’

‘Twenty-two.’

‘I see. And the child?’

‘He’s six.’

The white woman sighs, puts down her pen. Nowa wants to blab more about her son, about how difficult it is to raise a child in the red light district. She could also gossip about her violent boyfriend who comes around to Nowa’s shanty once a week to bring some money and to have sex with her. But the white woman isn’t interested.

'Look . . . Nara.'

'It's Nowa.'

'Right. Nowa. Listen. We are one of the only shelters for the female victims of the civil war in all of Liberia. Our funds are very limited. Now, I can see that you have had some terrible experiences in the past, but there are women younger than you with worse experiences and . . .'

Nowa tells her that they took her with them. The government militias took Nowa to their camp in the jungle. They raped her over and over again. One time they made her eat the flesh of another Kpelle girl that they'd kidnapped. They had cut off the girl's breast. They were high on speed and told Nowa to eat.

The Danish woman screws her face, signals for Nowa to stop speaking. She takes a deep breath and writes a few words down. The form has Nowa's passport photo stapled to its right-hand corner. Nowa's heart palpitates. She manages to keep her mouth shut. She shouldn't upset the white woman. White people are generally very squeamish.

'Right. I have added that detail as well. You have witnessed war atrocities. That is all the information I need for now. Now, Nana . . . Nowa, let me be frank with you. I think what you have been subjected to was absolutely ghastly. And I am so pleased that terrible President Taylor has been found guilty by the tribunal in The Hague. But this sort of thing is unfortunately routine across this continent. You poor people. You have suffered so much. But our NGO is not adequately funded to help all victims of

the civil war. There are many younger women who are more needy than you.'

'I can tell you what else the militias did to me'. One time it was discovered that one of the girls had become pregnant. The militia men decided to play a new game. They were extremely drunk on palm wine. 'They took bets on the sex of the foetus and they shot the mother and they forced me to take a bayonet and cut out . . .'

'I do not wish to hear any more.'

Anna Heinesen glares.

'This continent, this dark, dark continent. Why have you people not accepted the message of our Saviour?'

Nowa is perplexed. An odd change of topic, but she answers the displeased interlocutor sincerely.

'But I am a Christian. A true Christian.'

'I wish that were true, Nora. But from your answers to my earlier questions it is obvious you are an animist.'

'A . . . what?'

'That means you have taken the basic concepts of our Faith and mixed them with all sorts of witchcraft and sorcery. You believe in God, but you think that He retired after Creation. You believe in *geniis* and ancestral spirits. Were you even baptised? I did not think so. Listen, Nora. All humans are born in Sin, and it is by God's Grace alone that we can be saved. *Sola Gratia*. Do you understand me?'

Yes. Yes. She does. Nowa wants to be saved.

Anna smiles kind-heartedly.

‘Perhaps you do, Nona, and I shall pray for your soul. But we have only one more space available at our shelter, and there are many young women who wish to be offered a place here. Our dormitories are very overcrowded at the moment. I will forward your application to the managers of Global Rescue. You will be notified of their decision in due course.’

Anna stands up. Nowa doesn’t want to leave the compound’s reception office yet, but she’s compelled by the white woman’s uncompromising body language. She also stands up.

‘How will I find out? I want to come and live here. Please. I beg you. I can’t feed my boy and pay rent. He’ll become a street criminal. I don’t earn much. We need a place to live in. Please. For God’s sake.’

‘If I were you, Nana, I’d pray to Him instead of taking His name in vain. Pray, Nana. God loves all His children.’

A skinny white woman and her bodyguard step out of a chauffeured SUV in the scorching sun amid the frenzy of Monrovia’s red light district. Nowa recognises the Global Rescue administrator. She tells Siakoh to mind their market stall – an upturned cardboard box displaying eight spiky pineapples – before pushing her way through the peddlers and taxis, towards the flushed foreigner.

‘Hello! I’m here! Are you looking for me?’

‘Have we met?’

Nowa flicks the dreadlocks off her face and smiles.

‘It’s me. Nowa. Or Nana. From Bong County. Remember?’

Anna Heinesen squints her eyes behind her bulky sunglasses.

‘Oh yes. You poor child. Look, I am not here for you. But perhaps you can help us find this other woman. This is her picture. Her name is Bindu. She’s 15. Do you know her?’

‘She’s not here! She’s left. Please take me instead. Look over there. That’s my son. Siakoh! Come over here and say hello to the lady. Bring the pineapples with you!’

‘That will not be necessary. Please. Martin.’

Anna signals to her bodyguard to push Nowa away. By the time Siakoh has crossed the bustling road with their box of pineapples, his young mother is crying desperately and being consoled by an older woman who sells plantains. The boy puts the box down on the pavement and wraps his arms around his mother’s quivering waist. He stains her jeans with the blood of fingers pricked by bristly pineapples.

Nowa, standing at the driveway of the Global Rescue compound. It’s been two months since her interview with Anna Heinesen; she’s been raped five times since – twice by her boyfriend, and three times by a pineapple farmer to whom she owes money. Siakoh has started to smoke marijuana. Nowa can climb the gate but she’s not confident about crossing the razor wire.

When the gate finally opens she stands in the way of the glistening SUV. She weathers the threats made by its driver.

‘Call the police. I don’t care. You have to take us in.’

The tinted passenger window is rolled down. Anna’s shiny head of hair emerges.

‘I have told you, Nana. We are full. You have to wait and take your turn like everybody else.’

‘I can’t wait anymore. I won’t let my son become a rapist like other men. We have to get off the streets. I won’t have him turn into one of them. I’ll kill him with my own hands. If you don’t accept us I’ll drown him. I’ll drown him myself.’

Anna retrieves her head into the vehicle to perhaps order her driver to call the police. A minute passes and the backdoor of the magnificent four-wheel drive opens. A white man, slightly younger than Anna but with a very similar face, steps out. He walks towards Nowa.

‘Hello there. My name is Hans. Hans Heinesen. I’m Anna’s brother. Anna has told me about you.’

‘Please Mister Hans. Let us move into the compound. Or I’ll kill myself. I’ll kill Siakoh too. I swear to God I will.’

The man takes off his yellow baseball cap. He dries his forehead with a napkin and steps closer to the enraged young mother.

‘There’ll be no need for that. You need to have a medical examination first. The health officer will be in tomorrow, but perhaps you can stay in our quarters

tonight. You can move into the dormitories the following day. Where is your son now?’

Nowa’s eyes well with tears. She kneels in front of the man, and he smirks.

‘No need for that now. We’ll pray tonight after super. All of us together. Go and get your son and your belongings now. God bless you.’

‘Contrition and Absolution. We do not believe in the existence of a purgatory. We believe that we can be saved from Sin in this life through Faith alone. Do you understand me, Nowa?’

‘I think so, Mister Hans.’

‘Unlike other Christians, we believe in the Doctrine of Justification. All Sin originates in Adam and Eve’s disobedience, and it is only through God’s Grace, which can be gained through Faith alone, that we may be saved.’

‘Yes, Mister Hans.’

Hans grins. He motions for Nowa to remain seated next to him behind the dining table in his apartment. Servants remove the bowls with leftover rice and fish bones. The hitherto unhelpful Anna Heinesen has taken quite a liking to Nowa’s boy Siakoh and is teaching him to count in Danish on the other side of the wide table.

Hans’s voice grows deeper.

‘You see, Nowa, many other Christians believe in the Church, or saints and so on, but we believe that it is

through Jesus Christ alone that we may be granted God's Grace. *Solus Christus.*'

'*Solus Christus*, Mister Hans.'

'Yes. Very good. Now, there are ways through which Faith can be strengthened in this life and Grace can be granted. They're called Means of Grace. The Sacrament of the Altar, for example. But most important of all, dear, especially for people like you who wish to convert, is Baptism. Washing away one's moral sickness and degeneration.'

Nowa listens attentively but lowers her eyebrows.

'I'm not morally sick, Mister Hans. The militias did those bad things to me. They abducted me and raped me. They're degenerate, not me.'

'Oh yes, but through their evil deeds they have infected your body with their evil, dear Nowa, and it is only through Baptism that you shall be cleansed of their deeds and the Devil. Wouldn't you like that?'

'It wasn't my fault, Mister Hans. I'm innocent.'

'None of us is innocent, my dear. We are born into Sin, but we are not destined for Damnation either. That is why we celebrate the liturgies in our public worship. That is why we have our Means of Grace. We are different from other Christians. Because we can be Saved, my dear. But a person who rejects Baptism, she . . . is indeed condemned to Eternal Damnation.'

Nowa drops her gaze.

She's been very lucky to be admitted into the Global

Rescue shelter. No more getting bashed and raped by thugs and criminals. Her son may now receive an education and maybe even go on to study at the University of Liberia one day. She breathes deeply. She looks back up into the white man's firm, rapacious eyes.

He nods and tilts his face towards his sister. Hans and Anna exchange a knowing, unconcealed glance. The white woman tells Siakoh to follow her to the compound's communal area to watch some television. The boy trots after the affable white woman out of Hans's apartment without a goodbye for his mother. The door is shut behind them.

'Baptism, dear Nowa.' Hans whispers.

He and the young African woman are alone in his apartment. Nowa urges her muscles to stop growing tense. It'll only make it more painful, more horrible than it needs to be.

'You need to be washed clean of wickedness. Tonight, dear Nowa. I have my own bathroom here, with hot water. My bathtub will be our Baptismal Font. You go and get ready now. Go on.'

before redirecting her gaze towards the window while eating her croissant. I wanted to ask her if she really is Jewish, but I did not want to seem vulgar and uncouth. I instead spoke about my daughter Samia and her problem with anger management.