Acacia Horizon

Sadiq rested his forehead against the goat's silky flank. He listened to the rhythmic click of the pump, he watched Ibrahim and Mustafa plant the sorghum, he thought about the girl. He'd been painting the gate into the courtyard the first time he saw her. She was walking into town, taking the long way around to avoid the roadworks. She wore the pale blue uniform and cloud-white *tarha* of the girls' higher secondary school. Her two skinny friends had dropped their voices, shy at the sight of a man, but she had paid him no heed.

He poured the warm milk into glass bottles, rinsed the aluminium bucket in the irrigation ditch, filled the goat's water trough. He arched his back against the morning's bending. The horizon was a flat line between desert and sky, broken only by wide-topped acacias. He thought of his cousin – eleven months since Yusuf had journeyed into the Sahara, to Libya and the Mediterranean and Europe.

He had always envied Yusuf his sociable, adventurous father. Six years ago, while his own father remained wedded to the dull monotony of sorghum, Uncle Ali had planted his fallow fields with cashews. Sadiq remembered a fierce argument: "Don't be a fool," his father had thundered. "Cashews may be profitable, but they’re thirsty." After two bumper harvests Ali had turned all his land over to cashews – and then then there were three years of drought. Yusuf had tried to find work to support the family, to pay for his brothers' and sisters' education, but there were too many able-bodied men in the queue before him.

His latest email was from Milan. The emails were for sharing with his parents and the wider family. In text messages Sadiq read the true story: the long wait in Libya; how he had learned to tell the bad traffickers from the less bad: his terror of the sea; the slow journey up the length of Italy; the bone-freezing cold; the daily humiliations. But it was better, Yusuf wrote, than living without hope, an added burden on his ageing parents. Better to find scraps of work and send home what he could.

He took the food his mother had prepared from inside the shed. "Time for breakfast," he called out across the field. The three men rested in the shade of the shed, drinking milk and eating flat bread and *fūl* beans. The goats chewed on the morning's crop of weeds.

Sadiq found a reason to be outside the house most afternoons. His mother had been asking him for weeks to whitewash the wall, and there was plastering to be done, and another coat of paint for the gate. Every school day the three girls walked by in their sky-blue uniforms and gauzy veils. When she spoke her voice was unhurried – she put him in mind of an egret,

bright against the leafy greens of the riverbank. Still when she was still, graceful in motion. The other two talked and giggled all the time. He gathered they were studying for their final exams.

When the roadworks were close to finished he decided to talk to Mahmoud. Mahmoud's tea-shop was five gates down from Sadiq's house. He would have seen them too. Mahmoud knew everyone.

"*Salaam alaikum*," he called.

"*Wa alaikum salaam*," Mahmoud replied. "Not your usual time for tea – but come, sit."

He took a chair close to the tiny kitchen. "How are your family, Mahmoud? All well?"

"All well. And yours? How is your granny?"

"She is well, *Alhamdullilah*. Old age is her only complaint."

Mahmoud handed him a glass of cardamom tea. He sipped the scented warmth, looked around to make sure no one was within earshot.

"Tell me, Mahmoud, the three girls who pass every day, the one in the middle, the quiet one, who is she?"

Mahmoud smiled. "Ishraga Eltayeb. Her parents are teachers in the girls' lower school. Smart people, my friend. Maybe too smart for the likes of us?"

"Maybe." Sadiq shrugged. "I can ask." He saw the egret in his mind's eye. "All they can do is say no."

Mahmoud busied himself grinding coffee for the evening rush.

"Well then." Sadiq got to his feet.

"I have news."

"Oh?"

Mahmoud blushed. "You remember Khadija al Ahmed?"

"The girl that Yusuf liked?"

"Yes." Mahmoud squirmed with happiness and embarrassment. "I waited almost a year."

"Yusuf is far away," Sadiq said. "Tell me."

"Our families have agreed to the bridewealth. Everything is settled."

"My friend!" Sadiq embraced him. "*Mabruk!* You will be an old married man soon. *Mabruk! Mabruk!*"

His mind was on fire. *Ishraga*. She was the first girl he had ever truly seen. From the way his friend spoke, he could tell that other men didn't see her – to Mahmoud she was a girl like any

other. He wouldn't tell his cousin about Mahmoud and Khadija, it would only add to his misery. In one email he'd told them that in Italy people got married with no bridewealth to protect the woman. Uncle Ali had been shocked speechless. *Ishraga.* He repeated her name under his breath. *Ishraga. Ishraga.* He pushed on the gate, got a palm of sticky blue paint as a reward for his preoccupation. His mother sat under the *limūn* tree weaving a basket.

"*Salaam alaikum,* Sadiq."

"Wa alaikum salaam. Will I bring you water, Ummi?"

"Yes please, with a slice of *limūn*."

He placed the glass jug on the blue metal table by her side. "Where is everyone?"

"Osman is playing in a soccer match at school, and your father and Ali drove into the market in Ali's car. Granny is asleep – she sleeps more and more, don't you think? Miriam was here with the baby. She left a few minutes ago."

"Good. There's something I want to ask you."

"Yes?" She picked up a blue-stained reed to add to the pattern.

He steadied his breath. "There is a girl."

She smiled.

"Mahmoud says they are educated people."

"Who is she?"

"I should have stayed in school longer but Abba needed me and I wanted to –"

"What is her name, Sadiq?"

"Ishraga Eltayeb."

She nodded. "I visit with her mother. They are fine people. Ishraga has a radiant heart – and I know she is not betrothed."

His breath caught in his throat. "I would like you to ask the question, Ummi. She is – I think we might be happy."

She looked at him for a long moment. "I will speak to your father, and then to her mother, and to Ishraga. If everyone agrees, then the men will meet. You will have to be patient." She glanced at her watch. "It is time to cook. Bring me charcoal for the stove?"

He kissed her cheek, "Thank you, Ummi."

She called after him as he crossed the courtyard. "And Sadiq?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you for whitewashing the wall."

He was weighing grain and pouring it into hessian sacks in his father's shop in the market

when he saw her. She stood with her friends at a stall across the street. They were examining shoes and sandals, haggling with the stall owner. She wore a *tobe* of deep pink with wide blue flowers, the folds hiding the curves of her body. His heart hammered against the cage of his ribs when she turned to face him. She blushed fiercely but held his gaze. He saw dark eyes and long eyelashes, soft lips and honeyed skin. He glimpsed a small gold earring beneath her *tarha*. Then she turned back to her friends.

He shook his head in wonder. She had noticed him, all those days he'd spent painting the gate and plastering the wall. She had seen him and liked him and asked about him. Yes!

His mother smiled as he bounced into the courtyard. "*Ahilan*, Sadiq. Your father wants to talk to you."

"Did he say why?"

She smiled. "Go."

His father was indoors, studying the newspaper under a bright reading-lamp. Even with his new glasses he struggled to read the small print.

"*Salaam alaikum*, ya Abba," Sadiq said. "Can I bring you a glass of water?"

"Sadiq – sit, sit. You'll have a cup of coffee?"

He took a tiny cup from the glass-fronted cupboard, wiped the dust away with the sleeve of his *jelabiyah*, poured the coffee, added sugar.

"So," his father said. "This girl. You like her, yes?"

"I do, Abba."

His father drank his coffee and grinned. Sadiq stared at him.

"You've come to an agreement? Already?"

"We have." He put down the cup and clasped his hands. "All they want, apart from the usual – the cost of the wedding, the necessities you'll need to set up your household, the gold necklaces and bracelets and so on – is a share of each year's sorghum harvest made into her name. Four percent."

"*Ya Allah*! No more money?"

"Her father says sorgum is better than money these days. More certain." He scowled at the newspaper. "He may be right at that. Have you read this? What those scoundrels are up to? Everything that was steady is shaking."

"And did you agree, Abba? Did you say yes?"

"I said yes, son. But you will have to wait more than two years. She has already applied to the teacher training college."

"I will wait. But can I meet her, now that everything is agreed?"

"That is women's business. You talk to your mother about that."

He kissed his father's bald patch. "Thank you, Abba."

"Yes, yes," his father huffed, burying himself in the newspaper. "You could get me that glass of water now."

The seedlings were knee-high and thriving. He walked the field boundaries, checking the scrub-acacia fence for gaps. He remembered laying the fence during a school holiday when he was a boy and the thorn his mother had to prise out of his thumb. We will have children. He stopped at the thought. Ishraga and I, we will have children.

"Look," Mustafa called out. "Sadiq is dreaming again."

Ibrahim laughed. "You'll see her this afternoon. Only one year and nine months to wait, Sadiq."

He blushed and smiled. As he adjusted the irrigation pump, he heard the noontime *adhan* from the mosque. The three men rolled out their mats and prayed together. By the time they were finished the morning's small breeze had gathered force. They looked to the north-west. The sharp edge of the horizon had become a ruffled blur.

"*Habūb*," Mustafa said.

"That's us done for the day," Sadiq said. "Ibrahim, will you tie the goats inside the shed? Mustafa, make sure they have enough water to drink. I'll take care of the pump."

The wind was gaining power by the second. "It's a big one," Mustafa said. "I'll give them extra water."

An endless wall of billowing sand raced toward the town. The wind whipped at Sadiq's *jelabiyah* as he struggled to open the gate into the courtyard. "You should stay with us until it passes," he said. "You won't make it back to your own houses in time."

His mother echoed the invitation: "*Ahilan* ya Mustafa, ya Ibrahim, stay and welcome." She turned to Sadiq. "Osman is still in school. Granny and your father are in the bedroom. You bring in the water jars and the stove, I'll get the food and the lamps."

The air was dense with sand and grit. With the ends of their turbans wrapped around their mouths the three men carried the heavy clay jars from the open courtyard into the curtained innermost room. Sadiq's father sat in the corner with a damp muslin cloth held to his mouth.

His grandmother sat up in bed, startled. "Who are these men? Get them out, I don't want them here."

"It's only Mustafa and Ibrahim," his mother said. "They are here because of the *habūb*, granny. It will be over soon. Go back to sleep."

Sand and wind and grit scratched and rasped at the screens on the windows. It probed between the curtains like a living thing, worming its way into every crevice, into their eyes and ears and lungs. Sadiq's father coughed and hacked, desperate to clear his chest. He sat close to the radio, trying to hear the news against the roaring of the wind.

"They are saying it could last for three days," he said. "That's nonsense. No *habūb* has ever lasted for three days."

It died down on the morning of the fourth day. The howling dark had hypnotised them; the silence after the wind was like waking into a dream.

"*Alhamdullilah*." Sadiq's throat felt raw. He got to his feet. "I'm going to check on the goats."

"Never mind the goats," his father said. "The goats are dead. It's the sorghum I want to see."

The wind had scoured away the blue paint from the gate. The sky was a dirty yellow, the streets blanketed with sand, drifts gathered at the base of every wall and tree. They walked slowly, Sadiq with his mother, Ibraham and Mustafa supporting his coughing father. They met Osman on the way, full of stories about sleeping in his classroom with nothing to eat but dry biscuits.

"You can tell me later," his mother said. "I want you to run to Mustafa's house now, and to Ibrahim's. Say they are with us. Say that we are going to look at the fields."

But the fields were gone. They could see the neat grid of the thorn fence buried beneath the sand. The young plants were smothered and broken. There was no sound from the goat-shed.

"What do we do, Abba?"

"It is finished, Sadiq." His father was crying. He reached for his wife's hand. "The desert has swallowed our fields. We are poor men now."

He stared into the horizon, toward Libya, the Mediterranean, cold Europe. They would use the bridewealth to pay for his journey. He would find work of some kind, he would send home whatever he could. After many years his mother would find him a wife. But she would not be Ishraga.