

# Preface

My uncle Mehmet once told me how, when he was a boy, sleeping with his three siblings and parents in a one-room unit in Marrickville, he woke as a spirit—nudged out of his body by the foot of an angel—and that he took the hand of this angel, and was swept away across the land of the living and the dead. He was unafraid, a little Turk in a strange country; this was simply another translocation. He remembered an enormous shore, unending waters, how he did not sink into the sand; he recalled the black feet of the titanic angel, and how by the time he returned to his small body, curled up between his two younger brothers, his spirit feet had begun to blacken too. Mehmet Amca wagged his thick bushy eyebrows when he told me this, and said, See oğlum? My life should be a novel, isn't it? Call it Action, Romance, Mystery, Tragedy, Love, Everything. He died before the pandemic, alhumdulillah, before this story could be told, but I would like to hope that he is standing beside me now, his toes black and beautiful, his whole spirit shining like glorious night, and that he is about to lead me out.

Jamal Khaddaj Smith

**I**

# The Night of Power

# Soyam

He was beyond saving, and still he chose to pray. The choreography of faith was new to him; although witnessed a million times, as numerous as birds in the sky, this was the first time he'd tried to fly alone. Jamal raised his hands to his temple, as if laying on a crown. *God is greater.* Folded his arms, right hand over the left. *I seek refuge in Allah from the outcast devil.* He silently recited the Fatiha, knowing the Arabic sounds by rote, a music without meaning. He was praying in his aunty's bedroom, which everyone knew was off limits, and everyone used when they wanted privacy. The door opened and his baby cousin Amani poked her head in, goggling. Jamal put his eyes back to the ground, the red prayer mat under his feet, trying to focus. He wasn't meant to look up, but the door was still open, and he was starting to sweat. He had to get this right. It was Laylat al-Qadr, the Night of Power, on which the Archangel Jibril first revealed the Quran to the Prophet Muhammad with the word, 'Read!' On this night, the angels would descend to the earth, prayers would be heard, sins erased from their records. This one night in Ramadan was worth a thousand months, a lifetime, in

terms of its significance to God, and Jamal was counting on that. Needed it, in fact.

It had been a month of firsts for him, beginning in Liverpool Local Court with his mother as she and a man in a wig stripped him of his last name. He was no longer a Khan. Hala was dressed in a grey suit, her hair tied back into a shining black bun, exposing the hard bronze planes of her face, her sharp nose; she looked like a powerful businesswoman as she told the judge that his absent father had never been part of his life, and didn't deserve to have even four letters tying him to his son. At fifteen, Jamal didn't have a legal choice in the matter, but if he had, he would have agreed. All his life, he had been kept apart from his Lebanese family by this other name and now, finally, he would be a Smith like them. He could not keep his eyes off his mother. Her performance was awesome to witness: an outraged woman of means taking full claim of her child. She didn't even have a job, but you would never know it, looking at her. Nor had she raised him for the first seven years of his life, but he was hers at last.

He bowed to the earth and the air and there, under his face, was a giggling Amani. His lips twitched. Upright again. *God is greater.* His aunty hadn't approved of the name change. It was haram in her eyes, and in Islam, to brand a boy in his mother's image. A father's name, his lineage, was meant to rule. Hala cheerfully didn't give a fuck. She didn't pray, didn't wear hijab, and told her sister to shove it up her arse. He's mine, and I'll be damned if I give that prick anything he wants, she said. The Department of Child Services had located his father, and so he met the man for the first time as a result. Jamal hadn't said anything, hadn't been able to even look him in the

eye, he let Hala do the talking. As they left, his father grabbed him in a hug, and slipped a note into his hand with his phone number, telling him to call. He showed the note to his mother as soon as they got into the car, and it drove her into a fury; she called him at once to say he had no right to go behind her back like that, he had no right whatsoever, and she was going to prove it. Between that and what was brewing between him and Bilal, he had plenty to ask of the angels.

Jamal sank to his knees, brushing Amani aside, feeling benevolent and wise, having seen his aunties gracefully move curious babies out of the way like this many times, without breaking their prayer. As his head hit the mat, hands flat, elbows tucked in, an explosive fart popped out.

Amani! he shouted as she collapsed into more giggles, and he did too.

It was no use now. Sullied, he would have to do wudu again, washing his body and starting the prayer over. You're a menace, he said and chased her out of the room to her delighted shrieks, her chunky little legs wobbling fast as she could go, messy bob of curls bouncing. He went slow down the hallway to give her time to get away. Cracks split the white tiles throughout. It was bad luck to step on a dividing line, and this house was full of them. He skipped as many as he could, treading on the tips of his toes. In the lounge, two large brown couches lined the walls, and the box TV set blocked most of the light from the front windows. A large framed photo of the family hung above the couch: Mahmoud, big and bald, had his arm around Aunty Rania, who had her arms around baby Fatima. Ali, a tall teen, was smiling next to his dad and in front of them

stood both Sara, with her frizzled mass of curls, and Jihad, all wearing flower-print Hawaiian shirts. Jamal had been there on the day, wearing a matching shirt, but he was not in the photo.

The lounge flowed into an adjacent dining area, with an alcove next to the kitchen. Aunty Rania was praying there, a white dove facing the old grandfather clock, and behind her, her mother sat on a chair, eyes closed, a dusky hill of a woman. After a minute, his aunty stood, taking off the hooded half of her prayer garment, becoming flesh again: she was short and round, with pale skin and severe lips. She stepped out of the bottom half and folded up her prayer mat. The clock, a creaky wooden antique with a broken plastic bird under the hours, loomed over her. Iftar was still an age away.

Wulah, inta soyam? she said. He was fasting as usual, but he and his cousins would be asked this question at least three times before dark fell. In the Smith family, you were weak until proven strong and strength was impossible; you might trip up and swear, might cave to hunger or to thirst, might come down sick (which they all claimed, at least once), might erupt into violence (which they all did, all the time). It was better not to try at all than to break midway, but they tried anyway, alert to possible faults, even eager to find them, to be the righteous one pointing fingers, shouting, Iftarat! Iftarat! You ate, you broke! To break your fast was to be the split spoiling the family ceramic. Rather than admit they were all so flawed, they competed to deflect attention from their own faults by jumping on each other's.

This was why he hadn't told anyone he was attempting to pray seriously. He didn't want to be judged if he failed or stopped. It meant too much to everyone. Jamal stuck his tongue out at his

aunty, wagging the greyed-out slab as proof. A healthy pink would have condemned him, but the grey-white film showed his aunty he was telling the truth. Not a drop of moisture had passed his lips, not a crumb of food.

Good, she said, though her eyes were still narrow with suspicion. Behind her, Teyta finished her prayer and stood up with a heavy sigh. She was too old to prostrate herself, so for her, language sufficed. Amani had gone straight to her, bored with him now, and his grandmother beamed, her face lighting up bright as the sun, swooping to pick up the baby, crooning Arabic lullabies. Aunty Rania beckoned, and he followed her into the kitchen. Two large pots steamed on the stove and the oven filled the cramped space with heat, while Fatima, a smaller version of her mother, took up the remaining area, peeling a large stack of potatoes on the bench, hands stained with dirt. Seeing their preparations for the feast, Jamal's hunger doubled. In Ramadan, unlike any other time, the Smiths—the sons and daughters of Abu Ahmad—pooled their money, and there was always enough.

Rania wanted him to get extra groceries from the mall down the road, and she opened the fridge to show him the containers, the specific brands she wanted. He nodded in the right pauses, but he was distracted by the realisation that he was taller than her. Her eyes had to climb to his and, as though annoyed by the same thought, she flicked his nose hard.

Ow! Kholto!

Pay attention, you stupid boy! She stared at him hard.

I was, he said, pointing. Whose is that?

There was a long chocolate éclair on the top shelf of the fridge,

just beneath the bulb that lit the cold interior, and the strips of whipped cream had a halo he could almost taste.

Rania's nostrils flared. You know what, just get the yoghurt, forget the rest, I don't trust you. She shut the fridge door. It was covered in old photos and crumpled print-out sheets that had instructions like, 'Say this surah 99 times and you will have a guaranteed place in heaven.' He stood in front of it often, aiming to trick his way into jannah, but he would always lose the count midway, stumbling over the numbers.

Forget what? he said, and she chuckled, thinking he was joking. She fished a tiny purse out of her bosom to give him a rolled-up twenty. He might see Jihad and Moses at the mall, at least. They stayed out until the last rays of light were leaving the sky, when blue verged on black, trying to time it so they arrived only at the exact minute they could eat. To sit in front of what you could not have, when you had thought of nothing else all day, was agonising. It used to be the case that he would roam the streets with them, playing cricket or footy, but that was before he got hooked on reading books, on the strange and powerful absence that came with making a world inside himself, and now he went outside less and less.

Get yourself a treat while you're out, love, Fatima said in a broad nasal Aussie accent. Her cheeks bunched up as she snort-laughed.

Skittie wuleh! Aunty Rania whirled on her and Fatima flinched, arms up, her long braid of brown hair twitching back like a snake.

It was a joke! Oof.

Oof? Aunty Rania looked like she'd tasted dirt. *Oof?* I'll show you oof, wuleh.

But she lowered her hand and turned away, the threat enough.



Aunty Rania said *girl* like it was the dirtiest word in the world, the *leh* rising high like a lash. When Rania's back was turned, Fatima was unbowed. She mouthed 'Psychooo', made cuckoo eyes, and stifled a laugh, her eyes glinting with mischief, and Jamal grinned as he backed away. The closer it got to nightfall, the more tense it became. Soon more of the family would arrive and the house would resound with their voices along with the melody of the Quran crackling out of Jido's handheld black radio.

Outside, the sun hazed the hedges, the uneven street, the Subarus and Commodores. He could see his jido, who other old men called Abu Ahmad, crouched at the top of the yard like a spade in the mud. He was a short thin man with silver hair, thick square glasses, and big ears. He should have been funny looking, but there was a keenness to him, an edged reserve that instead made him fearsome. Jamal didn't want to go. He wanted to sit and read, to leave this place with its hungers behind him. Besides, it was cool inside, with the broken tiles and the rattling brown box on the window valiantly conditioning the air.

Before he could go any further, Rania's screech yanked him to a halt. Wulah, ta lehon ya ibn haram!

Far out, what now? He glanced behind him.

His teyta sat in front of the clock, hunched over a large metal bowl full of mincemeat, onion and spices that she was rolling into kibbeh. She anchored him right away, every part of her solid as the earth, her wrinkled skin, the kerchief tying her hair back, the rhythm of her hands. Behind her, standing at the kitchen entrance, Rania stood with her hands on her hips, a younger and angrier version of the old woman.

Didn't I tell you to take the garbage out? Oh, you wicked boy.

He trudged back and grabbed the garbage bag, fuming. It wasn't fair, damn it. He should have gone with Jihad and the others earlier. When would he learn? As he walked past his grandmother, she smiled and her face cracked in a thousand places where life had left its lines. Yullah, habibi. Words soft as sand, warm as the sun, washed away the resentment before it could get a hold. He stepped into the heat, putting his shoes on and wishing again that he had real choices.

Jido turned at the sound of the screen door opening, the tip of his cigarette flaring amber, smoke rising around his head. There was a small metal tray and raqweh beside him, as well as an Arab coffee cup from which he sipped. The old and sick weren't required to fast any more than children, although that didn't stop Teyta from trying. Jido didn't speak much to his children or his grandchildren. The former because he didn't want to, the latter because he couldn't: none of them were fluent in Arabic. Rumours bloomed in the wake of his silence—he'd been a baker, a sniper in a distant war, a restaurateur, an orphan who fled from Lebanon and left behind his Arab last name. He remade himself and nobody knew if he liked the outcome.

The same choice was spread out before him, Jamal realised. His grandfather had done it and survived, but at what cost? He didn't know much about the man except that he could swing between silence and screaming in a second, that he loved to garden and watch Hollywood action movies, and that whenever he saw him, he was meant to kiss his hand, just past his hairy knuckles, bowing over it and bringing the kissed skin to his forehead. Jido was a king in a kingless country, and that made him frightening and unpredictable.

Jamal hurried past, the acrid scent of smoke spiking his nostrils, and neither spoke. There was still over an hour to go before iftar, and when you were this hungry, an hour meant anywhere between sixty minutes and a lifetime.

No food, no water, no cursing, no violence, no sex, no masturbation—not even smoke could pass your lips from sunrise to sunset during Ramadan. It was a hard reset, learning how to go willingly from feast to famine, to redefine feast as *anything*, as Leb bread smeared with zaatar and oil, as a splash of mai in a mouth. Harder still to go back to glutton afterwards. Think of the kids in Africa who don't have a choice, Auntie Rania would say to them. She never said, Think of the kids in Lebanon. Think of your cousins. The family left *over there*. It was always Africa, or India, because it was easier to imagine darker strangers suffering. She herself didn't fast. She had too many pains, and cooked for half the day what everyone would eat when the adhan rang out from the radio; no one could begrudge her that, and if they did, they could eat somewhere else. Jihad always argued the first day was the hardest, while Moses said the last day, but for Jamal it was the whole middle stretch, when the body had adjusted to lack, when what was strange and difficult became normal, routine. After the first week, he stopped wanting so much, and the absence of that sheer animal desire was oddly frightening.

Jamal never told anyone that he wouldn't mind being one of those kids in other countries if it meant he could touch himself. What's an olive to an orgasm? A pit to pleasure? The choice was

obvious, the answer clear: he would die for this sensation. He was nine when he was introduced to it, in line outside the demountable classroom near the back field of Casula Public, pinned between a militant blue above and the mutant green of grass. Christian, a thin Anglo kid, was going down the line of boys, pretending to ignore the girls, even as he put on a show for them. He had three older brothers and he often spoke with their voice, their knowledge, to make himself seem older.

Jamal had retreated to the shady silver bench nearby, where he prayed for Mr Davis to hurry up. He was shy at the best of times, and Christian didn't speak to anyone without pitching it to be heard by the class. Jamal could hear him asking the boys, laughing as he went from one to the other—Have you ever—Have you tried yet—Do you?—until finally he stopped in front of the bench, grinning. Christian was not the smartest or the fastest in their year, not pretty or ugly, not gifted in any particular way, and maybe this was why he needed the most attention. His golden hair and freckly white skin were too bright to look at, and Jamal had to squint up at his weak chin.

Have you tried wanking yet?

What? Oh, yeah—yeah, totally.

His grey shorts were level with Jamal's eyes. The light behind him was blinding, a sea of blue and white. Jamal tried to focus on the bulb of pink kneecap, the pale expanse of skin. Twitched away to peek around the corner. Mr Davis was late again.

Christian's braces glinted. Oh yeah? What is it then?

Jamal flushed and squirmed in silence. Christian's laughter peeled out.

It's this! He grabbed his dick through his shorts, his eyes rolled up into his head as he started gyrating, and he moaned high-pitch moans.

Boys! Cut it out! Mr Davis's voice whipped Christian around, and he laughed carefree, crudeness discarded. No worries sir, it wasn't even me sir, I swear sir.

That night, Jamal had struggled to sleep. The blinds rustled with every puff of wind, letting in slivers of streetlight. He ached with a known and alien need. Listening for any change in the house, he pulled his underwear down, grabbed his softness, and closed his eyes. White light, lurid green. Christian in front of him, head tilted back, lips parted in false ecstasy. His metal mouth moaning. Jamal grew larger, jolted into hardness. He rubbed himself frantic, electricity shivering over and under his skin, and he was never the same.

It had been easier to fast when desire was yet a distant, unmet country. It didn't matter at first, he was young then—the angels on his shoulders would not record his sins until he was fourteen, and old enough to know better. He was old enough now and this was why he was thinking of prayer, and how to save himself. Already he dreaded to think of how busy he'd kept them, his angelic scribes. As he walked up the street, this thought preoccupied him: how could he protect himself from himself? He tried to soak up as much knowledge as he could, to follow the right rules, but there were no guarantees, and every day there was something new he had to do to be spared unimaginable torment, eternities of hellfire. It was haram to eat pork, to drink alcohol, to do drugs, to be with girls before marriage, to speak back to your mother, to disobey your

elders, to listen to music, to piss while standing up, to leave shoes on their side or up, their dirty soles facing God. Each year it grew and grew, this tree of sin, crowned by the ultimate taboo: that no boy should love another boy, no girl should love another girl.

Every cousin and aunt and uncle added new fruit to it, voices low and serious, yet secretly gleeful. One night while squished between Sara and Jihad on the floor (they had bunk beds, but they all preferred to be together), Sara told Jamal that he couldn't sleep on his back—doing so opened you up, it meant any shaitan could get inside you, could take possession of your body. He immediately rolled onto his side, eyes wide open, and she breathed easier, stretching her bony arms and legs to fill the space he vacated. He never slept on his back again. His days were filled with stories of what the djinn, the free-willed spirits of the invisible world, could do to him if he wasn't careful.

Sara, fingers stuck in her fried hair, told them all the next morning that she'd seen a djinn. It was dressed in Ali's brown skin, his tall, muscled body, and walked by the room that she shared with the others, his features a grim parody of a clown, lips stretched from ear to ear. She had screamed, but no sound came out. Sara sat on an armchair, knees drawn up to her sharp chin, dark circles around her eyes, and as she spoke, Aunty Rania started praying, clicking furiously through her green prayer beads.

I was awake! Sara said. It was real. Seriously, Ali, was it you?

Ali shook his shaved head. Wallahi it wasn't, what the fuck.

Stop talking about them, Rania said. You invite their attention.

They each had experiences like that, and despite Rania's warning, they told them over and over again. Jamal's first began as

a dream: he was in his teyta and jido's flat in Warwick Farm. Their lounge, with its flower-print couches, framed Quranic tapestries on the wall, and red Persian carpet, seemed carved out of another time. He was both present and not, could see everything and only the back of his head, as though he walked behind himself. He followed the figure into the hallway, to the first bedroom on the left, and as his double opened that door, he turned and smiled at Jamal. His eyes were molten black, and the look of malevolent joy on his face froze Jamal's blood.

He woke up. He was on the floor, enveloped by Jihad's and Sara's snores. He didn't see his doppelganger enter the room, he was simply there, his eyes windows of night, his hands around his throat. Jamal tried to scream and nothing came out, there was only a relentless wave of pain and fear. He told the others it stopped when he recited the Fatiha, and sometimes that was true. Other times, it went on, it seemed, until the djinn got bored. They had little proof of the divine without these episodes of devilry. In theory, one implied the existence of the other, but Jamal felt nothing except terror. No matter how hard he found fasting, Ramadan would always be his favourite time of the year for one simple reason: it was the only time the gates of hell were fastened shut and evil spirits denied entrance to the world. It was the only time he felt close to safe.

# Iftar

Jamal's thirst for knowledge did not stop at sin: he knew every street in the area, every alley, every wooden and metal fence, and every tag on them. He knew where the fruit trees stretched their bounty above borders and the branches that had initials carved into them. He knew which yards held dogs, their barks, their bites, how high they could leap. When the boys were bored they used to run past Melissa's yard down near the park, yelling and banging on the wooden pales to rouse her two vicious pit bulls. The athletic animals would leap and scabble upward, climbing a rope of snarls, always threatening to make it over. Once, Darren Hunter, a scrawny, scabby kid, matched each leap of the dun-coloured dogs, laughing and taunting them, until one jump brought him too close, canine jaws latched on with a growl, and blood arced into the air. He slumped to the ground with a squeal, his upper lip ripped clean off, a limp lick of flesh on the ground. It was stitched back on in the end, a darker band than it had once been, and they stopped teasing the dogs then. Darren's fucked-up black lip taught Jamal never to lose sight of fear's purpose.



He knew Mesake's house near the alley mouth as well as his aunty's, he knew the Hunters who lived opposite had the only Aussie flag in the hood, pressed up against their kitchen window, and that their dad Mick was a drug dealer. Mick looked like a chewed-up stick that had been dipped in a dozen paint cans. He ran a tattoo parlour out of their laundry and bikies were always coming and going.

Jamal turned up the alley, onto Kurrajong Road. He had barely managed a metre when a small red Corolla floored to a stop next to him, flinging gravel up in a wave. The driver's door swung open and Charmaine bounced out, tall and brown, flawless thighs showcased by ragged denim cut-offs, tits straining against her singlet. He had a second to gape at her before she slugged him straight in the mouth, and he staggered backwards, falling as much from surprise as force.

Give that to your fuck of a brother, she said, and spat. She jumped back in the car, speeding off. He stared, hand on his tender mouth. His hands were scraped raw from the fall, but he got up, and resumed walking. His legs jerked forward, out of rhythm, his pace picking up, as if the punch, the sudden violence, was repeating in his blood. He'd heard a rumour Moses hooked up with her, but hadn't believed it. All the boys wanted Charmaine and told stories of getting with her. The path blurred. He was almost running, so wrapped up in the injustice—he hadn't done anything wrong, it wasn't fair!—when he collided with Moses, Jihad, and Bilal on their way back from the mall.

Jemzy! Bilal's voice was warm and open.

Watch where you're going, bro! Jihad shoved Jamal back. He was a year older, and Jamal was already taller, which rankled.

Like his father Mahmoud before him, his cousin was balding early, his curls more sparse every year, and each bit of hair that fell took with it another inch of his patience, his easy smile.

Who hit you? Moses cut through the noise, and the other two stilled.

His dark hair was gelled back from his handsome face, his furrowed brow. Tall and fit and pale, he looked nothing like Jamal, who was shorter, slighter, darker. They had different fathers—one Lebanese, one Turkish, both absent. They shared that at least, along with their mother. Moses wasn't concerned for his brother's bruised jaw as much as he was for his own reputation; to fight someone in the area was to fight their whole family. No one wanted to fight Jihad because Ali was his brother, and no one wanted Ali's eyes on them, not even Mick. Knowing that made Jihad more reckless, the first to throw a punch. Moses, meanwhile, had few chances to prove himself. He was beloved, and his smile could charm even the devil.

Jamal stared at his brother spitefully. Your girlfriend happened, bro. He told them what she said and they laughed at him.

She's crazy! Phwoar! That's what you get with a glamour like that, boys, Filo girls don't muck around, ey. But that's what you want, wallahi. As they cracked up, she grew in their eyes and he diminished.

As if you got bashed by a girl, bro.

Jamal brushed past them, annoyed, ignoring their calls to come back, that iftar was soon. It took him a moment to realise that Bilal had followed him, splitting from the older two.

I told 'em it's too early to go in, he said, slinging an arm over

Jamal's shoulder. He was taller and wider than his cousins, a forward in the local footy team, whereas Moses played on the wing to best use his speed, and Jihad was the dummy half, small and determined. Bilal's hair was shaved around the sides, a ruffled black mullet growing out the back of his head like waves, and he stayed close, talking into Jamal's ear. Jamal tried to stay calm, but his heart had already begun to dance.

Before yesterday, he had thought himself alone, a unique devil, and if you asked, Bilal would be the last person he thought to name as belonging to this haram. He was like most boys in the area, loud and brash, his body an announcement, always ready to make a ruckus, to be the centre of attention, to make a fool of himself chasing girls. Nothing like Jamal, who could spend a day without saying a word, trying to avoid notice, to become a hush.

They'd been talking about Eid, the money they might get at the end of the month and the Adidas sneakers Jamal wanted, as they got off the bus at Prestons Public. The school spread out behind them, a huge gated enclosure, old demountable classrooms and long ghost gums at the fore. Jamal looked up at the broken pale stone of the moon, which was meant to confirm Laylat al-Qadr and Bilal rolled his eyes. Like you're gonna be the one who figures out which night it is! It could be any of the last ten days. He reached out and cupped Jamal's chin. You're too cute, bro.

Some dickhead honked their horn then, and Bilal's hand darted away so fast it might never have touched him. They crossed the road and went down the alley where they parted as usual, but in silence. Jamal went left to Aunty Rania's, and Bilal went right to his home around the way. He'd carried the warm flash of Bilal's hand

on his skin, the charge of it, for the rest of that night and woke up determined to pray.

Okay, but what would you do if you died right now, like, *right now*, bro?

Jamal chewed his bottom lip. Bilal was acting as if nothing had happened yesterday, and maybe nothing had. Maybe it was all in his head. Saying 'Fall to the ground' would only earn him a punch for being a smartarse, so he didn't say anything.

Bilal continued, urgency in his voice, Say you had to face the Punishment of the Grave? He shook his head. I'd be fucked, he said, laughing. This was a common topic in the Smith family. Before Judgement Day even came, before the eternity of hellfire that might await, there was the grave, the waiting in which the body was still sentient. In his ancient history class, when Jamal realised that the Romans and Egyptians he was learning about had been waiting in their graves all that time, a hole opened up inside him into which part of his spirit fled and never returned. He tried not to think about it. The hole had a gravity all its own, and always threatened to take more of him away. Kholto Emne told them that the Punishment of the Grave was even worse than hell. It was the first test the newly dead had to pass: two angels, Munkar and Nakir, the Denied and the Denier, would descend and ask three questions:

1. Who is your Lord?
2. What is your religion?
3. Who is your prophet?

Emne's grey eyes gleamed in the telling, not from fear, but pleasure. These angels are nothing like the khara you will hear about from Christians, okay? Remember that the Archangel Jibril

can fit the Earth on a single feather from his wing. Munkar's and Nakir's shoulders are miles long, in their eyes are the depths of space; one holds a hammer, the other a club spiked with nails, each instrument so large that all of mankind together couldn't shift them a single inch. They speak, and their tongues are flame. If you answer correctly that your Lord is Allah, your religion Islam, your prophet Muhammad sulAllahu alayhi wu salaam, then your grave will be graceful, peaceful and spacious, until the trumpets ring and the world ends. If you answer incorrectly, then the grave will be your first punishment, and you will feel every minute pass, every bite of the worms and insects, every bit of the dirt on your chest, in your mouth, under your eyes. And each day except for Friday, Munkar and Nakir will descend to beat you with their cosmic weapons, until or unless Allah orders them to stop.

Jamal's nights were sweat-drenched with visions of these beatings. Why would you be fucked? he said. He'd never heard Bilal admit he felt fear like this, too. As they crossed the road into the carpark at Casula Mall, everything was touched with the soft gold of the departing sun. Bilal shrugged, uncertainty flitting across his face.

Don't they know all your sins?

Jamal wasn't sure. There was nothing in the questions about sins. That was between you and Allah only, as far as he knew. What twisted and gnawed inside him was much more elemental: the angels would be speaking Arabic, the holy language of the Quran, and he only knew fragments, like yullah and habibi, like mai and haram, like immi and kholte. Hurry, darling, water, sin, mother, aunty. What could he say to them, the first divine servants

of Allah, the immortal angels, that would spare him? Would they listen to English, or would he falter under their imperious stare, trying to wring an ocean from the precious few drops he had collected of his mother's tongue? Whenever his grandparents asked questions in Arabic, staring with dark and expectant faces, Jamal felt sure he'd failed before he even began to speak, and so he often didn't answer at all, waiting helplessly for an adult to offer a translation.

Maybe, Jamal said. But don't forget about your hassanat. They know your good deeds too. As they came close to the Liquorland side entrance, Bilal slowed.

Go first, he said. The dogs were on us before.

When all the boys in the area—Lebs, Samoans, Tongans, even a couple of Anglos—slouched into the mall together, security guards would descend on them like flies to shit. They were forced to split up. Sorry lads, no gangs allowed, Security said, even though the guards looked like them, a thick Maori man and a sallow, sweaty Leb. People get scared, Insecurity said. Over time, they learned even three of the boys counted as a gang, a threat, a breakable unit. Two should have been fine, though.

Were youse doing anything?

Nah, bro, what do you mean? Bilal's voice was angry. We're soyam.

Yeah? Jamal spun around to face him. Show me then.

Bilal stopped, surprised, as they came face to face. This close, Jamal could see the stubble along his jaw. Not like the fluff on his cheeks, closer to real manliness. Bilal opened his mouth, showed him his tongue. His teeth were a mix of jagged and even whites, his

tongue was grey. He kept his mouth open for longer than needed, closed it slowly, blew a little kiss.

See?

Yeah, I can see that you need to brush your teeth. And then he ran into the mall, Bilal lunging after him, laughing. The tongue test was easily fooled. If they ever broke their fast, they would wipe their tongue on their shirts until it bleached, until it was so dry they wanted to retch. It was an old trick, one they all knew and applied to hide their shame. There was no proof you could trust, except the word—that was the measure of faith, and perhaps why they kept failing.

&

The moon's heft weighed on the sky as they walked home in the gathering dark. Bilal lumbered a few metres behind Jamal, because he was lazy or because he wanted to check out Jamal's arse. That thought sent tendrils of dread down his spine, and what was dread if not desire's other face, a question you didn't know how to answer?

Cars were piled up in Aunty Rania's yard and on the street. Her windows beamed a warm yellow, the babble of a hungry crowd washing onto the street. Moses, Sara, and Jihad were sitting at the table on the veranda with their cousins Saja and Doha, twins in matching blue tops. That meant Kholo Buktikh and his wife Wafat were here, too. They called him Uncle Watermelon because of his big oblong gut, or the way his sloppy red smile seemed to split his face in half, depending on their mood when asked.

Adhan, adhan already, bro! Jihad called out. Bilal practically ran inside, and they all laughed. There was still time. Jamal kicked off

his shoes, looking through the front windows. Jido was at the head of the table, Teyta next to him. Kholo Khadeer shrunk the space, big as a truck, his chest a V8 engine, his beard a long oil spill. His wife Emne darted between the kitchen and the table, her flowing mauve hijab making her seem like a butterfly or stage magician. Next to Khadeer, his older brother Buktikh looked small and harmless, his clean-shaven oval face grotesquely babyish. Ali took up the last spot, a slim brown blade of a man with dark bags under his eyes. A second fold-out table had been set up and a bunch of cousins Jamal couldn't remember the names of were seated there, one nestled in a black niqab. This was only a small part of the family—Kholo Ahmad and his children lived in Melbourne, and Kholto Nazeero lived in Bankstown, with her uppity Turkish husband who thought he was above them all.

Jamal had to tread around a half-dozen children in the lounge, their paper plates full, mouths covered in sauce. The kitchen was a hive of activity. He'd barely lifted the plastic bag with the tub of yoghurt before Fatima snatched it out of his hands. He slunk back to the couch, where his aunty Wafat was keeping an eye on the kids, rocking a baby in its hezezeh. Her face was heavily made up within her floral hijab, blush on her cheeks, red on her lips, eyes sparkling.

Wulah, b'dok aroose? Inta wu Saja?

He sighed. She would not stop asking him if he wanted to marry her daughter, Saja. It started out cute, because the two of them were close and loved spending time together, but Wafat had stopped laughing as they got older, her question laced with intent. He did not want to marry his cousin, not at fifteen, not ever, but he couldn't say that. Wafat and her husband were cousins, and she



seemed insistent on making a tradition of it. The adhan went out, the long call to prayer; there was an elongated pause, then loud clatter as collectively the Smith family broke. Now, it's now, now! Some shouted, as if the others didn't know. Wafat left to get her own food, but not before giving him a last lingering look.

Fatima clumped over to him, body dipping to the right with rhythmic thuds, her brown chain lock of hair bouncing to the beat. Her shorter leg hit the ground harder and louder when she was tired.

I put this for you, she said, nodding at the plate. It was filled with his favourite meal: fatteh jage and bulgur, a yoghurt-based chicken dish with brown wholegrains. There were hot chips and chicken nuggets on the coffee table, salad and fried kibbeh, and icy cans of Coke and Fanta. Baby Amani was busy lifting one red can to her mouth. She had the same grey eyes as her mother, Emne.

How come? he said, taking the plate gratefully.

Ash'had! she said. And you're welcome, gronk.

He raised his right forefinger and recited, Ash-hadu an la-ilaha illAllahu wa ashadu anna Muhammadan rasulAllah. There was no God but God and Muhammad was his messenger. He started eating and had to bite back a moan as creamy deliciousness, melted butter and paprika exploded in his mouth.

Okay, fine, Fatima said, tossing her hair back. I was the one who told Mum to tell you to get extra. We don't even need it. She hated peeling potatoes and was annoyed he didn't have to, just because he was a boy. She'd also hoped he would read between the lines and come back with sweets.

Read between the lines? he scoffed. You said it straight out!

And you still didn't get it, ya majnun.

Nuur. Even your mum got it, and nearly gave you an atleh.

Jamal ate until he felt pain, which was well before he finished the plate. He could never get used to this part, where a whole day spent fantasising about how much he would eat ended so unsatisfactorily. It wasn't that he was hungry still; it was hunger's ghost roving in his blood, powered by all those dreams. While the kids ate, the adults had their first coffees and smokes of the day. Above their table, smoke swirled in thick eddies. Jamal would never smoke, he couldn't even look at a lighter without feeling nauseous. Saja came in from the veranda, small and swathed in cloth, the blue of her jilbab flowing past her waist. She managed somehow to be in perfect control of its every swish, to not be swallowed in it, so you knew beneath it she was slim. She perched on the arm of the couch next to him, folding her dainty hands on her knees.

My mum go after you again? Saja had a button nose, unlike the rest of them, and so everyone reckoned her a great beauty, Jamal among them.

First thing, he said, and she laughed a bright, tinkling laugh.

Me too. She screwed up her face and parroted her mother's heavy migrant accent, 'B'dek areese, inti wu Jamal?' A million times at least. She's got issues, cuz.

Tell me about it. He leaned closer, whispered, Who's the ninja? indicating the niqabi.

Oh my god, cuz, don't. Saja laughed and slapped his arm. That's Emad's wife, Najwan, he met her at Lidcombe Maccas after he went on Hajj last year.

There was no chance of being overheard, but Jamal still looked around. Saw Emad in his dark grey thobe, his long brown beard

and skullcap, head to toe an immodest declaration of his faith and modesty. He had a cheeky smile and an easy soft manner.

Behind him, Kholo Khadeer came stomping out of the kitchen, the house shaking with each of his steps, roaring, Who ate my éclair? I've been looking forward to it all day! He looked so furious and so sad, this large éclair-less man, his beard a hungry bush. Silence encroached on the noise around them, a sudden embarrassment. The parts of his cheeks that weren't covered with hair went pink.

I dropped it off this morning and I told you—he pointed at Rania, who was tiny next to him—I told you to make sure no one touched it.

Jamal shook with the need to laugh, while Fatima hid her double chin in the couch, and Saja carefully looked away, biting her lips.

Aunty Rania tried to mollify him, but he shook her off, his big belly wobbling.

It's not about the éclair, ya. It's the principle!

That was too much, and Jamal snorted so hard he pushed Saja off the edge of the couch. Her yell covered his laughter. No one noticed, anyway. The moment of quiet had only been a moment. There was a constant flow of people in and around the house. Kids taken inside to be washed, or pulled apart from screaming fights, or put to bed; plates refilled, discarded; more food being brought in from the kitchen or packed away. His grandparents shifted to the lounge, Jido in his blue striped pyjamas, Teyta in her white linen pantaloons and loose green top. Jido fixed his eyes on the TV, although Jamal wasn't sure why. It wasn't like he could speak

English. On the news, muted and grainy footage of Western jets bombing a distant city.

Wein ummok? Teyta said to Jamal. *Where's your mother?*

Like he knew. She never fasted, and rarely came to these dinners except to pick up Moses and Jamal. His eyes drifted over to Aunty Rania and back again as he tried to find the Arabic to reply. Between them, an untravelled sky. His grandmother never stopped trying to reach him, though they shared only a handful of words. She often singled him out for the chore of massaging her feet, and he'd sit on the couch with her heavy legs on his lap, trying to press into her hard skin, her iron muscles, to show he knew what she was trying to say. Unlike the others, he ran towards her, not away, when she yelled, *Tah lehon! Come here.* Through her, Jamal knew love did not have to be spoken.

Without looking from the TV, Jido barked, *Lek, skittie wuleh!* The *leh* a lash. Teyta rocked back, false teeth clicking as her jaw snapped shut. Jamal wished he hadn't seen it, the pain and fury that flared and floundered in her eyes, how she opened and closed her mouth like a fish yanked out of its nature, then looked away, her hands twitching; how he knew that she, like him, was drowning and unable to escape. Jamal shoved another bite into his mouth, and then another. He knew better, and he didn't care. He ate until his stomach expanded, until the food was crammed right to the back of his throat, until he felt sick.

The living room emptied within the hour. Jido and Teyta went home, and the men decamped to the end of the driveway, where

they stood in a grim circle, smoking and talking. The women stayed in the lounge, some cleaning up, some eating, all talking and laughing. Jamal sat near them, as usual. He didn't want to join the men. They were out there pretending to be serious, the patriarchs, the providers, but he knew they'd been sent out of the house because they were useless, because they got in the way of the actual work, and because the women wanted to talk without being interrupted. He heard it all, the budgeting, the bargaining, the parenting tips, as well as the weirdness and rawness they saved for each other. At one point Najwan lifted her baby son right up to the eye-slit in her niqab and declared, Oh my god, I love him so fucking much! She shoved her face in his belly and he giggled. Like, it's not normal, wallah. I would suck his little doodle if he wanted, she said, and the women screamed with laughter. I don't care! I don't care what anyone says! I'd eat his snot. Anything, anything he wants. And they cackled, the younger ones, while Rania led the disapproving clucks of the older women, and the words sin and shame bubbled over them.

Jamal kept his face turned away, curled up around his book. As long as he was reading, he was invisible; he could see the men, hear the women, and be part of both worlds. Why would he ever give this up? Bilal poked his head in, around the screen door. Yullah, we're going to the mall, he said, and Jamal put his book down without a word to follow him out. Fatima hissed, Make sure you get me some Ferrero Rocher. And a Buffalo Bill!

They passed through the circle of their cousins and uncles like the wind, unremarked upon, unseen, not-yet men.

Where's Jihad and Moses?

Already gone, Bilal said.

The streets were dark and quiet and they glided along, as if the soft night was inviting, no, pushing them forward. The mall proper was closed, but Coles stayed open late. They crossed the road near the baseball field, going through the sloping grass towards the library, and the back of the mall. Bilal confessed to the great éclair heist, and they laughed themselves silly about it.

Did you see his eyes? Faaar out. If looks could kill, forget it, we'd be gone!

Haram but, Jamal said. I'll get some now so he doesn't have a heart attack. That set them both off again, their laughter bringing them closer together. Jamal brushed up against him, breathless, and Bilal's foot slipped, sending them both to the ground. They fumbled around, rolling, hands grasping for purchase, flashes of warmth. Jamal half on Bilal, half off. His eyes flicked from the green of the field to the lights blaring over it, settling on the dark glass of the library windows. Bilal followed his eyes.

Eidre b' this library, Bilal swore. What's it got that I don't?

Internet, Jamal said, knowing that *books* was an unacceptable response. Besides, he loved going online, where being a nerd was basically the default, and aside from his school friends on Myspace and Bebo, there were endless forums and chatrooms full of people who would talk to him.

Oh, so it's like that, Bilal said. Can you watch porn there or something?

No, but you can read it. Jamal smirked. And it looks like you're studying.

Bilal whistled. All this time we thought you were just a nerd,

you were being a horny cunt? He put his hands on Jamal's shoulders, on his neck, sliding them up to Jamal's face. Fingers on his jaw. Touching his lips. I've got a lot to learn.

Jamal shifted without thought, aligning his hips with Bilal's.

Tell me what you read, Bilal said. Voice heavy. Trees whispering above.

I—

Jamal couldn't bring himself to say the words. He'd never told anyone what he wanted, never said aloud what lived inside him, and even now, an urgency for touch wrestled with a fear of being known. Watching was different to reading and both were as different to doing as life was to death. He remembered when Anthony, the slim Viet boy with a cloud of black hair who lived down the road, had found one of his dad's porn videos in the garage and Jihad promptly arranged a viewing. Anthony arrived with Aiden and the Hunter brothers, Rick and Darren, in tow; he was always hanging with the Anglo kids. Aiden's family owned the only mansion in the area, an old estate on top of the hill with a blue slate rooftop. He looked well fed, his teeth were white and even, and he was the only boy in the area who rivalled Moses; naturally, they were best mates. Next to him, Mick's sons looked like dirty starving ghosts.

Aw fuck, it's Chinkie porn, Darren said as the video started, his black lip twisting. They saw a naked Asian woman crouch over the chest of an old fat man and take a long curling shit. The boys hooted because it was gross, but they didn't care because she was still naked and, later, Jamal couldn't tell what had him feeling so tight and hard, full of an inexpressible energy: her pert tits, her gaping, or the close-

ups of the fat man's cock. They watched intently, carefully spaced out around the lounge, kitchen, dining table and hallway, wherever they could contort themselves into seeing the screen, all of them jerking off and yelling, Don't look bro, don't look bro, don't be gay!

Jamal had been closest to the TV, so close to the glare of the light it was almost unbearable, in full view of them all, unable to look away from the screen, unable to touch himself. He sat still, the focus of all that desire.

Staring at Bilal now, and seeing a reflection of that want, unlocked something in him, but the words he had read would not come.

I'll show you, he said.

He moved down, feeling Bilal's muscles flex beneath him, lifting his shirt, kissing the heat and hair. Bismillah, he thought. It was muscle memory, this half-prayer. Entering a house? Bismillah. Reaching for a pot on the high shelf? Bismillah. A reflexive reaching for safety. In the Name of God ... His fingers trembled on the cold belt buckle.

Jamal undid Bilal, pulling the leather belt tight, flicking the metal pin, letting go. Each inhale roared in his ears and panic fluttered at the back of his throat.

I knew, Bilal whispered. I knew you wanted it.

He did, more than anything, and still he hesitated. He could hear Rania hissing in his ears, *Ta lehon ya ibn haram! Come here you sinful boy!* How many times had he heard it? A hundred times, a thousand, more: as a shout promising violence: laced in an affectionate chuckle: a rasp: a whisper almost to herself, an echo as he was lassoed to her from wherever he'd been, a soft song of



ibn haram, ibn haram. O you son of sin. His other name, his true lineage. He'd never thought of the words in English, tuned rather to the tone, the sound that could predict future pain, but they unveiled themselves to him as he pulled Bilal's zipper down. He hurt more than he knew how to express, he was hard in his pants, and he could not move.

Jamal resisted the faint pressure on his shoulders. He could feel Bilal's breath on his ear, and the tenderness in his voice, real Romeo shit, might have worked better if Jamal hadn't heard him try it on Lizzie, Tania, Charmaine and every other girl they'd come across. He thrilled to the idea that he was wanted enough to replace them, before his anxiety returned in a wave of static.

It's just us, Bilal said, and Jamal buckled.

Just us, he thought. No demons left in the world, no spirit to whisper wrongdoing, just this desire. From us. Jamal drew down the denim until he saw the insistent shape of a hard, thick cock pressed against black briefs. His tongue was dry again. He licked his lips and looked up. Bilal had never looked more serious: his usual dopey half-smile, the glint in his eyes replaced with intense focus.

Jamal leaned in and pressed his face softly against the clad warmth of a cock. He'd thought and dreamed about this often—not this boy, but the kneeling, the wanting, the taking, the tasting—and nothing compared to the reality. Bilal's thick muscled thighs. His hairy funk. The sourness of his sweaty underwear. Jamal soaked it in saliva, lapping at the thick twitching dick, like he was still afraid to have nothing between him and his desire, needing even this thin layer of protection. And then he couldn't take it anymore, he

released what was his, opening wide to suck on the brazen bald head. It was warm and hard and perfect in his mouth. He couldn't believe how it seemed to fill everything inside him.

He was a faggot, oh God he was a fag, and he fucking loved it.

Jamal and Bilal ran up the hill as fast as they could, sweets forgotten. Jamal was faster, but Bilal was fitter, and as one pushed ahead, the other would soon overtake. They never tried to match each other; their difference, the fluid distance, was as necessary to them as getting away from what they had done. Jamal's heart thudded in his throat, his jaw ached, his mouth tingled with a tang that burned a line into his stomach. He could die, he could die right now and he would do so happy—he had never been more alive. They crested the hill and crossed the overpass bridge, terrified and ecstatic, broken and whole. Jamal made it to the roundabout first. The road ahead led to Prestons, the turn down and around to Bilal's house. He slowed to a walk, heaving. His face was wet and dark patches stained his shirt. He didn't check to see if Bilal had followed him or gone his own way. He could guess.

There were only two cars in the yard when he got back to Rania's and one of them belonged to his mum. He took his shoes off on the veranda, his mind spinning. Through the screen door, he saw Hala on the couch, laughing. She'd brought hulew; three aluminium trays of Arabic desserts were laid out on the coffee table. When he opened the door, she turned to face it as he had once, and he was seven years old again.

He'd stood on these cracked white tiles as Hala, wearing Chanel

sunglasses, jeans and a white singlet, stalked into the house like she owned it.

Hi Kholto, he said to her, because every adult was an aunty or an uncle, and the woman he had thought of as immi—his mother—grimaced.

No, Rania had said from her seat. *I'm* Kholto. That's your mum, give her a hug.

And he faced two women, made strange by a sentence. They could not have been more different. One was tall, thin and brown, alluring and poised; the other was pale, soft, matronly, her auburn hair tied back in a bun, eyes pinched with worry. Love. Sticks and stones, he thought. He would never be afraid of sticks or stones again. He jerked a step towards glamour, the newcomer, and then another, for no reason except that he was expected to, until finally he was within her arms, resting his head on her hard collarbone. He sensed her deep discomfort. Whether at his reluctant hug, obvious ignorance as to her existence, or some other pain, he didn't know. It would be years before he thought to ask the question she might have feared, and years more before he could voice it: *where were you?*

He had stepped away then, unable to look at his not-mothers. Aunty Rania announced that Hala was there to take him home, but he heard what she meant: she's here to take you away from your home. In that moment, he understood why his cousins had been sent outside to play. He understood them, Sara and Ali, Jihad and Fatima, *as* cousins, and he realised it was only Moses—who he didn't see much, because he lived with Teyta and Jido—who had ever called him brother back. He heard at once all the buried instances of near revelation from every bout of bickering: he doesn't know, he

doesn't get it, shh you can't tell, you're not allowed, that's not your—, she's *our*—! He'd thought of them all as one, and why not? Family was who you lived with, who you woke next to, who you bathed, ate and fought with, and that afternoon, they were butchered into adjacent pieces of language.

Oh, there he is, Hala said brightly, reeling him back to the present. Look, I got your favourite. Her voice was unexpectedly girlish, high—she was in a rare good mood, and he was conscious of not wanting to ruin it, but still he wavered there on the threshold. He took one look at the Znoud, fat rolls of deep-fried pastry with a gooey cream centre, the thick lengths drenched in honey, and rushed inside, his gut a pit of wild snakes—he made it to the toilet in time to expel it all, every bit of white, every dash of sin.