

from *The Sun Flower* · Sahar Khalifeh

NIGHTMARE or reality? She touched the walls of the room and the wooden bench beneath her. Everything seemed like a dream. The voices in Hebrew outside the room, the tread of feet, the ringing of the telephones, the smell of tobacco, the smell of western coffee, the smell of detergent, and Khadra's motionless shadow in front of the window. She saw all this dizzily, not grasping reality.

She got up from the wooden bench and fell down. In her foggy memory swayed narrow streets and faces and moving hands and gazing eyes, then her children. Azeez and Sumaia and Rashad and Jamal. And the children's supper! Her head struck the wall, making a cracking sound. She was pushed up and down by an earthquake. The window spun, Khadra spun, the ceiling wavered, the ground swayed. She pressed her churning stomach, holding back the urge to vomit.

She heard a heavy pounding at the door and the noise of the doorhandle being wrenched violently. Khadra was kicking at the door and shouting: *Iftakh hadelet. Iftakh hadelet memzerim. Ani rotsa lalekha. Iftakh, iftakh.*<sup>1</sup>

The door opened. A short soldier with a beard and mustache stood there. He shouted, shaking his fist in Khadra's face, "*Sheiket,*"<sup>2</sup> *Ma sheiket? Ani rotsa . . .* He stretched out his hand and pushed her away from the door. She backed away, rushing back to the door before he could close it. *Ani rotsa lalekha, ani rotsa . . .* She pulled the door with all her might, the soldier being dragged with it. He raised his hand and slapped her face. Facing him, she pulled him towards her and kicked him between the thighs. He fell to the ground. She stood above him for a few seconds, looking at Saadia with bulging eyes and tangled hair.

"Come."

Saadia looked at her without reacting. The other shouted wildly, "Come on!"

Saadia's heart palpitated. Glimmers of consciousness moved through her head. What was this crazy woman doing? Did she want to break out? What about the soldiers? What about the fences? And all of Israel? Saadia's head fell against the wall, the ground beginning to sway again. The soldier stretched out and caught Khadra's leg. Her heavy body fell on him. Quickly, Khadra opened her mouth and planted her teeth in his nose. He screamed, suffocating. She held his head between her strong hands and thumped it on the ground. His head cracked. He was silent. She stood up and faced Saadia, arm extended.

"Come on, you ass. Come on!"

Saadia looked at her vacantly and asked slowly, "Run away?"

"Ya, run away. What else, dance?"

Khadra grabbed her and pulled her arm. Saadia's body swayed helplessly and she fell. The noise of feet and boots crossed the corridor. Khadra turned wildly and shouted, "You've made us lose time, you ass. Shit on you, you fool!"

She left Saadia and flew to the door. She was greeted by khaki bodies with strong

arms. The fight began. Khadra's shouts, the soldiers' abuses, Khadra falling to the ground. She seized one leg, receiving a kick in the belly. She held the door tight, shouting and screaming all the dirty words she knew. Two of them caught her and pulled her into a corner and a third began beating her. She screamed, *Mezirim, mezirim, ani rotsa lalekha, ani rotsa . . .*

They turned round after they had finished. One of them came towards Saadia, eyes flashing, and grabbed her hair. She shrieked, "For God's sake!"

He shook her head and thundered, "What God? What God? There is no God."

Slaps and blows. She swayed and fell to the ground. The soldiers left.

In a daze, she felt her head. What was all this? The worst dream she had ever had. But this headache was real. The burning in her cheek was real. And the soldiers. The image of her children leapt into her mind—waiting and wailing on the stairs, they would ask about her, and people would ask too. Um Tahseen, her neighbor, would spread the news. She would say one thing and another. Shhada, whom she left in front of the cafe, would go back to Nablus and ask about her. He would say, "Saadia got on the bus and didn't come back." Lost, Saadia, as if the burden of your children was not enough.

She remembered little Azeez and missed the warm touch of his body. The poor child, he would have to sleep without his mother. Would he sleep? She imagined his small body on her breast, embracing the image with streaming tears and a broken heart. She remembered the beating, she imagined her children seeing what had happened to her. She was shocked and humiliated. Why did they beat her? She didn't do anything to deserve a beating. She didn't make them angry. She didn't strike at them, why did they beat her?

She had no one in the world to help her. She had no allies. She wailed, her body swaying as she wept. She heard Khadra's voice ordering fiercely, "When are you going to shut up, you sissy? Stop it!"

Raising her head, Saadia saw the woman sitting in the corner like a wild animal in a cage. Blood on her chest, forehead swollen, dress torn. Tears hardened in her eyes out of fear and she became numb again. Khadra began talking.

"They beat me, the bastards. *Tphu*. By God's great name, if I catch one of them I'll castrate him. They were smart with me, the pimps. I'll show them. By God, I'll blast their God away. They imprisoned us, they beat us, they seized us for a bus. So what? It's only a bus! And they, they took everything and no one was accountable."

She touched the swelling on her forehead and began pressing it with her palm. "Hey, they've beaten me, God! A good beating that went to my head. So what? I've had as many like it as the hairs on my head. The father beats, the husband beats, the Jews beat. If I have to be beaten, by God, to be beaten by the Jews is better. At least one feels respectable. Tomorrow I'll get out and say, 'They arrested me.' Heh! Sons of bitches, they were smart with me! I'm alone, they were three. If the one with the beard had been alone, I would have killed him, I would have cut off his thing."

Saadia was thunderstruck. This was the first time she had ever heard such talk. What

kind of a person was this? She had never in her life seen a human as bestial! A human being? No. A human being feels afraid, feels shame, thinks of the consequences, but this woman didn't feel afraid or ashamed or care about anything!

Khadra muttered as she fixed her dress, "A dirty life should not be mourned. From the beginning of our days, beatings, humiliation, bitterness and shit. You, woman, what's your name? I forget your name, by God's name."

Saadia did not reply. She continued staring dumbfounded at the woman's horrible appearance. Khadra shouted, "Hey you, woman, what's your name? Are you deaf?"

She began talking to herself, trying to clean the blood off her dress. "This woman is a certified ass. I never saw a dumber creature. I know this type, I know its sissiness. If someone waves a hand in front of her face, she cries and calls for Mama. Man! A real sample."

She looked at Saadia in disgust and continued, "Maybe you think that Shhada will defend and protect you. Heh, not Shhada or anyone else. You are completely naive. Listen, I tried fifty, not one. They're all dirty, they're all crooks. Everyone satisfies his desires and turns his back, not even so much as a goodbye or a so long. Everyone cares for no one but himself. As long as he's interested and needs you, he sticks to your neck like a leech. When you need him, look out! You'll search, but never find him."

The question leapt from Saadia's throat, "What about your children?"

Khadra stooped to clean the blood again, using the hem of her dress as a rag. "My children? God protect you."

"Dead?"

"How do I know if they're dead or alive? With their father, God take them and their father. Their father's in Jordan, and they're with him. I haven't seen them in ten years. In '67, we emigrated to the East Bank. We saw days we hadn't seen since '48. Oh, God is merciless, aggressive—He doesn't like us, we're doomed. He always defeats us. I don't know what we've done to You, God."

She lifted her head and cursed, shaking her fist. "What is it we've done to You up there? What have we done? You know you . . . you, what's your name? Tell me your name."

Saadia answered meekly, "Saadia. But people call me Um Hamada."

Khadra raised her hand to her head in a salute. "Bless you, mine is Khadra. People used to call me Um Khaleel."

She meditated for a while, then tears welled up in her eyes. She sobbed, "God damn me and my lot. Damn this world, damn it! Even our children don't want to know us, God! As if children with a mother like me would like to know such a mother . . . This is our fate."

She wiped her tears and was lost in abstraction. Then she asked, "You have a husband, Saadia?"

Saadia's head swayed and she moaned at the memory of her dead husband.

"I had a man, and there's not another like him on the face of the earth."

She began crying again and swaying. Looking at her, Khadra began to feel sorry.

This woman was poor, she didn't know anything about life. She was really naive and didn't know how to defend herself. All she had done when the soldier grabbed her hair was scream, "For God's sake." What God, which God? She couldn't forget the look of terror in her eyes, how scared to death she was when offered the chance to escape from prison. Run away? Ya, run away, of course, run away. You lost the chance, you ass, and you don't understand anything about this life. She really was an ass.

Khadra was the stronger and more experienced. This bitchy life which could not be lived except by bitches was too much for Saadia. She said gently, "Come here, Saadia, sit beside me. Come on, you poor thing, you have no one in the world but me." Saadia was horrified.

"No one except you? Death is better."

She wailed bitterly, "To whom did you leave me, my good husband, to whom did you leave me?"

Khadra consoled her, "Ya, *Sheikha*, don't worry, it was only a beating. Is beating so new? Ya, *Sheikha*, take it easy, take it easy. Listen, Saadia, listen. By your father's life, listen. I say, LISTEN!"

Saadia fell silent. Khadra looked at her like an expert teacher. "That's better," she said. "Be quiet and keep your mind in your head. Tears are useless, wailing is useless. Nothing will help. Saadia, my dear, we are not young, life is not easy. We have had as many beatings as the hairs on our heads. The first time I had a terrible beating was over my mother's body. We had left our country on foot. We were walking, and the blood was streaming down between my mother's legs. She had a baby; it died on the road. We went over the mountains and valleys, we ate wild plants and slept under the open skies. Mother fell to the ground, closed her eyes and went to her Creator. I screamed and screamed, "*Yamma, Yamma*. Shooting and bullets and the shouting of my father and my own screams . . . I didn't leave my mother until I was given a beating like the one you saw. You don't know, Saadia, you don't know, you are still naive. You have not seen what I have gone through. Suffering over, suffering under—we die and still suffering hangs onto our parts. From one camp to another, from one street to another, from one man to another. It's all suffering. We run from suffering, and where we take refuge, we find more suffering. What should we do? This is our fate. Tell me Saadia, did you emigrate from your country?"

Saadia shook her head, and said, blowing her nose, "I'm from Nablus, from the slums of Nablus."

"God! Nablus is full to the brim. Your situation is better than mine, yet you seem to have suffered."

Saadia swayed and moaned. She remembered Kuwait and its sandstorms. She remembered the room like an oven, how she escaped from it while her husband stayed on with the other workers. The dark, narrow slum that never, ever had light or sun, the place where she was born. The feast days when she would put on used dresses given her mother by those she served and washed clothes for. How scared she was to pass through those grand streets, afraid she might be followed by one of those high class

daughters shouting at her, "Saadia, you beggar, you're wearing my dress!" This had happened once and Saadia wept herself dry.

She said, "And we too have suffered. Those who see Nablus from the outside say, this is the city of grace. Those who know the truth know otherwise. But now, for me, it is all right." Looking out the window, she saw the blue color fading, darkness about to fall. She beat her breast and cried, "Oh, it's night! How black your fate is, Saadia!" She hit her head and wept and wailed. Um Tahsseen and Um Saber and all in the quarter, and the children waiting for her on the stairs, Azeez crying, his face running with tears and mucus. Oh, your fate is black, Saadia.

"What's the matter, Saadia? I thought you were going to be sane."

"The children, Khadra, the children!"

She remembered Azeez, his fat cheeks, his dimples when he laughed, his white teeth and how they became like crystal when she tickled him and he laughed. She kissed his warm neck and he laughed. She cried with a dead heart.

"And then, Saadia? It's only a beating. You're to blame. You didn't take revenge. If you had beaten them like they did you, you would have calmed down."

"Ya, *Sheikha*, please. The agony of our children is greater than anything else. The children's torture is more painful than any other. The children now are sitting on the stairs waiting and asking, 'Where is our mother?' Azeez is only five years old. Oh, Khadra, don't you care for your children? Yours are grown up, but mine are still only little. Azeez is still a kitten. I miss them, Khadra, I miss them." Tears welled up in Khadra's eyes again. "Who shall we miss?" she said. "God bless them, wherever they are. At least, Saadia, you have somebody who cares for you. But for me, have mercy. I have no one except an old man, and instead of helping, he increases my burdens. I ran away from the first, God tear him to pieces—he used to beat me like hell. I ran away. I thought I would relax, but it was no use. I told you we run away from suffering, but where we think we shall find refuge, we find only more suffering. I married another and thought he would support me and keep me from having to serve in people's houses, from stealing and prostitution. He turned out to be ill. Instead of him feeding me, I feed him. The poor man, his heart is sick. He has attacks in which he faces death. I feed him and take care of him and buy him medicine. He is warm-hearted and his tongue is sweet. He calls me Khadra the Princess. From him, I've heard words I've never heard before. You know, Saadia, no one can bear what's in a broken heart except broken people. My husband is as old as my father, but he is kind. My father was kind too until my mother died. After that, he became a wild beast. He began to beat us and even beat himself. Whenever one of us said, 'Father, I'm hungry,' he would begin beating us all like hell. In our country, when my mother was alive, God bless her soul, the world was real. Sun and air and oranges and so much grace. My father was a peasant. He had a small piece of land that sufficed through good days and bad. But the country disappeared, the land disappeared, and we went from one tent to another, from one house to another. I worked as a servant in this house and that, until they arranged my marriage. My father took my dowry and bought a cart. The poor

man, the municipality banned carts and my father walked around like a beggar. Then he went to Kuwait, where he died.

“And I remained with a man no better than your shoe. He used to beat me all the time. He had a first wife and sons older than me. His wife used to complain, ‘Khadra did this,’ and then he would throw me down and beat me, ‘Khadra did that,’ beat me. I tell you, Saadia, since the day of our creation, our luck has been black and God has condemned us. I ran away from him. I thought I would find a better fate, but my second bit of luck turned out to be worse. I lost my children, I lost myself and became what you see. One day with this man, another with that. One day here, another there.”

“But Khadra,” Saadia said sadly, “couldn’t you find anything better? What about your children, God bless and straighten you. How did the heart of a mother come to this?”

“Ya, *Sheikha*, you don’t know what beating does. When you are beaten the first time, you keep silent. The second time, you keep silent. The third time, you say, God! A new light comes into your eyes. You roll up your sleeves and sharpen your teeth and begin biting left and right. I’ll tell you this story, Saadia. When I was first married, I used to take my beatings by shouting and calling out, ‘Father!’ My father would come, and instead of defending me, help in the beating. Then he would sit down and cry like a woman and say, ‘Learn how to be patient, Khadra. It’s better to suffer and let it fester in your heart than to have people gossip.’ This is what he would say before he went off to Kuwait. One day my husband began to beat me, as usual. I said to myself, ‘What will follow?’ I found myself that day holding onto his beard until he collapsed. I’ll tell you a secret, Saadia. In the last resort, kick the man between the thighs—he’ll fall like a sack. The man who pretends to be a camel turns out to be a slug, heh heh! I learned that the beating you do not return is more painful. When the one who beats you realizes that you can face him, he begins to fear you and be on his guard. If you take revenge and beat him, his beating will not hurt you. It hurts, but not as much as when you suffer quietly. By God, that is life.”

“Why did you run away from your husband, then, if he was afraid of you? Why didn’t you stay with him and your children?”

“Because,” Khadra replied angrily, “afterwards, when he wanted to beat me, he used to bring his sons with him. Each of his sons was as big as a mule. They were many, I was only one. Almost like what happened with the soldiers. They were three, I was one. What could I do? And you, if you were not such a coward, you would have helped me. But you were weak-hearted and inexperienced. What have we done to them to deserve all this? They stick us in prison, why? Because we took the bus for one hour? So what! It’s only a bus! They took everything and no one calls them thieves or robbers or dirty!”

“They beat you because you tried to run away!” Saadia said, amazed. “If you hadn’t tried to run away, they wouldn’t have beaten you.” Recalling that she had been beaten because of Khadra, Saadia grew angry. She wanted to shout in the woman’s face, but she was afraid, knowing that Khadra had no respect for anyone. Suppressing her anger, she said quietly, “They beat me because of you.”

Khadra scrutinized her and thought, 'What an ass!' Aloud, she said, "They beat you for no reason."

"If you hadn't tried to run away, they wouldn't have beaten you or me."

Both women fell silent. They were heading in different directions and it was useless to try to see each other's point of view. Khadra stood up and fixed the scarf on her head. She took a piece of gum from a stash between her breasts and began chewing. She paced around the room, got bored, and sat down again in her old place. She looked at the melancholy figure of her companion and felt pity. She took out another piece of gum, saying, "Want a chew?"

Saadia shook her head and continued staring unseeingly at the woman. Instead, she saw her children. Azeez. Um Saber, Um Tahseen. The rest of the quarter.

"Hungry?" Khadra asked.

Saadia shook her head. Khadra felt her belly and said angrily, "They've beaten us, imprisoned us, and now they're going to starve us!" She felt her belly again and chewed faster. She stopped, spat the gum out, and shouted, "*Tphu*, damn the best of them! I'm hungry."

Saadia was astonished. How could this woman be hungry when she was in this situation? She stared while the other continued feeling her belly. Saadia's anger built up, then turned into giggling and laughter. Khadra looked at her forgivingly, "Laugh. Go ahead and laugh—it's better hearing you laughing than crying."

Khadra's tongue loosened. "Damn their God! If they'd only give each of us a banana! You like bananas, Saadia?"

"My children love them. The first thing I do when I get any money, I buy them bananas, many bananas. God bless them. They eat them in a wink. Azeez eats five bananas and says, 'Mama, more!'"

Khadra, a childlike smile on her face, said, "When I was a kid, by God's will, I used to steal from a banana salesman who set up shop on the edge of the camp. I used to steal a banana and run away. He was a poor, old, goodhearted man. He used to cry out after me, 'Shame on you, daughter. Tomorrow you'll get older and be a thief.' God bless his soul, he was a poor, goodhearted man. But the *zalabia* <sup>s</sup> salesman was a bastard. I stole from him twice or three times. The last time he caught me by the neck and put his fingers down my throat until I vomited everything up. Ever since then, I've hated *zalabia*, hated even its smell. But if they bring *zalabia* now, I'll eat it. Do you like *zalabia*?"

"I like it," Saadia nodded with a shameful smile.

Her stomach began churning. She wished Khadra would stop reminding her of food and hunger. She tried to avoid the thought of food by saying, "Stealing is a sin, Khadra. I would prefer to die than to steal."

Drawing herself up in a huff, Khadra said, "Stealing a sin? No, it is not. Which is better—to die of hunger or to steal? Maybe you think that prostitution is a sin too. Which is better—to be a prostitute or to let the old man die? When he has an attack, I wish I could steal all of Nablus and buy the medicine he needs. He never calls me

anything but Khadra the Princess. Did anybody ever call me Khadra the Princess before? It's true that he's sick and helpless and poor, but his tongue is sweet and his heart is warm. Wouldn't it be a sin to let him die? And then I'd have to remain alone in this world without a sweet word or a warm heart. Believe me, Saadia, a sweet word makes one forget suffering and pain."

Saadia felt obliged to defend the honest life. "But stealing is a sin. There are thousands of ways—"

"Ya, *Sheikha*," Khadra waved her hand, "forget about all that honesty and stupidity. We have nothing to lose. As if rich people are honest! You are still naive, Saadia. You've seen high class people and their tricks!"

Saadia remembered and winked in agreement, but in spite of everything, she had always worked hard and led an honest life. "There are thousands of ways," she said, "but one must be patient to be rewarded for honesty."

Fiercely, Khadra answered, "But when patience runs out, what do we do? We have to roll up our sleeves, sharpen our teeth and bite. If the soldier with the beard comes back, I'll devour him in front of your eyes. But his beard might stick in my throat."

They laughed together.

Khadra remembered food again. "You like *kabab*?" she asked.

"Ya, *Sheikha*. Let's not talk about it."

Khadra's mouth was watering and she felt her belly. "I love *kabab*, I love pistachio nuts and I love cake."

Saadia laughed. "What don't you love, Khadra? There's nothing you don't love, not even *zalabia*!"

"By God, it's true, Saadia. Everything is delicious and whets my appetite. From childhood, I've always loved food. When I pass in front of the *kabab* shop, my soul quivers. When I pass the nut shop, my soul quivers. Who is food for, then? Isn't it for people? Or are there some people who are human beings and others who are not? I'll tell you something, Saadia, there are no secrets left between us. I used to work for some people who had rice and sugar in burlap sacks. One day, I said to myself, so what if I take some of this and some of that and sell it and buy *kabab* and pistachio nuts and everything I want? It's a once-in-a-lifetime chance. What does anyone need in this world but a good meal? So, everyday, I used to take some of this and some of that. When the amount was big, I took it to a grocery in a distant street and sold it. Then I bought *kabab* and nuts and cakes. I didn't leave out anything that was in my mind. I bought everything. I sat behind the house and began enjoying my party. The neighbors saw me and told my masters. I was kicked out of my job."

"You deserved it," Saadia said.

"Deserved it?" Khadra shouted. "Why? What had I done? What did my masters lose except a little rice and a little sugar? I didn't steal their house, I didn't steal their car, I didn't steal their bus. They treated me the same way the pimps here did. I stole some rice and some sugar, and they beat me and humiliated me and, if they could do it, they would have imprisoned me. They beat us and humiliate us and imprison us."



Those people would have done as much for some sugar, and these do it for a bus. One is worse than the other. If we are going to be beaten, by God, beating by the Jews is better. At least one feels respectable.”

She stopped for a while and thought.

Then she continued, “You still believe that stealing is a sin, Saadia? I say it is not. All people steal and sin. Poor, helpless people like us who get caught lose face over a small theft. The rich and strong steal the whole world and don’t feel a thing—no scandal, nothing. If I hadn’t stolen the rice and sugar, how would I have ever tasted *kabab*?”

“Must it be *kabab*?”

“Yes, it should be *kabab*. Who is *kabab* for? Why should some people eat *kabab* and the rest have to eat shit? Tell me, why?”

“It is our lot, Khadra, our portion—a human being should accept his fate.”

“Shit on our lot and our portion! What maniac divided up the portions?”

“God divided them, Khadra, don’t be blasphemous.”

“No, it wasn’t God, and if it was, God was wrong. Why should only we know God and not the others? You stupid thing, didn’t you hear the soldier tell you there is no God? He kept beating you and you kept screaming, ‘For God’s sake!’ ”

Remembering the beating and how she screamed helplessly ‘For God’s sake,’ Saadia felt humiliated and shook her head bitterly. Oh, good husband, if you were still alive, would Saadia have to go through these dark days!

“Don’t say God,” Khadra continued. “People commit their crimes and say, ‘God.’ Stupid people like you scream and say, ‘For God’s sake.’ Leave God to his business and leave us to ours. God doesn’t care for you or me. If he tried to care for everybody, he couldn’t get his work done.”

After a few minutes, she snorted, “And now, what’s going to happen to us? When will these bastards let us go? We are bored, we are tired, we’re at the end of our tether. A beating is easier to take than imprisonment. How do I know what my poor man will do? If he knew I was in prison, he would lose his mind. He loves me, Saadia, he loves me. He always calls me Khadra the Princess, Khadra the Good, the Patient, the Best of All. His words drop onto my heart like sugar. I feel I could take my blood and give it to him. You know, Saadia, a sweet word makes the whole world sweet. When there’s someone who loves you, the bitterness of life is bearable. Did your husband love you, Saadia?”

Saadia’s head nodded, and she wailed, “He did, he did!”

“Was he kind to you?”

“What shall I tell you, Khadra? What shall I say?”

Both heads dropped. Tears came back to Khadra’s eyes as she thought, If he knew I was in prison, he would have a fit and die. I’ll have no one in the world who loves me or cares for me. I’ll be left alone with no one.

Saadia cried, her heart desperate. Oh, husband, oh, my good husband! But her husband’s image faded away and she was left alone with a bunch of children. Through

her tears, she said, “Khadra, you have no children, but I do. He left me to suffer for him, for the children and for myself. He was such a man, there’s no man on earth like him. They killed him, Khadra. They killed him in his youth.”

Khadra shook her head and wiped her eyes. “Not the first, not the last,” she said sorrowfully. “Life is all suffering. If we had remained in our country, none of this would have happened. The world has sold us and no one cares to pay the ransom. Even my father sold me to buy a cart. And I sell myself to buy medicine for that poor man. One should not feel sorry to die. Killing, humiliation, prostitution and shit. The whole world is like this.”

Saadia’s mind turned, and she thought, is the whole world like this? Is it true that people are obliged to steal and sin to make a living? She shook her head stubbornly. No, life is black and white, and a human being has to choose.

Khadra stood up, went to the door and began kicking and beating on it. No one answered. She yelled impatiently, “God, we are fed up, we are tired, we are at the end of our tether. All this, for a bus? For just a bus? If we were going to be locked up anyway, I wish we had stolen more than a bus.”

In despair, she sat on the floor and needled Saadia, trying to anger her, “So stealing is a sin, Saadia?”

But Saadia was getting bored. “It’s a sin.”

“Stealing the bus was a sin, Saadia?”

“It was a sin.”

“And they stole everything. They stole your husband. They took everything. We stole nothing but a bus for one hour. Stealing is a sin, Saadia?”

“A sin, a sin!” Saadia said irritably.

Khadra muttered, “She is an ass, a proper ass, a licensed ass.”

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Translated by the author, Mary Jane White, and Peter Nazareth.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Hebrew: “Open the door. Open the door, bastards. I want to go out. Open up, open up.”
- 2 Hebrew: “Silence.”
- 3 Arabic: “Mother of Hamada,” Hamada being her first-born son.
- 4 Arabic: “Good woman.”
- 5 Arabic: a kind of oriental pastry, fried, flat dough glazed with sugar, very cheap.