Naseeba Alozaibi

Shams

The woman pulled back the cover.

“Take her, please. Please,” she begged.

He saw nothing. Darkness and rain and mud smeared the ground and the sky.

His eyes followed the weak light from his rusty lantern.

She thrust her arms up toward him. He looked at the wound-up sheet between her shaky hands, and his eyes bulged. A baby girl! He brought the lantern closer, so that her features appeared. Her face was ivory, as silvery as the moon; delicate, small, and beautiful. Her cries were muffled. She must be hungry or cold from being soaked through. Like her mother. Was this her mother? He was jolted to attention. He studied the woman’s face, remembering he hadn’t yet done so. When he’d heard the sounds of her distress, he’d been running back from one of the tenants’ fields. Heavy rains had turned the earth into a slippery clay. He’d heard the sound of her moans, and he’d thought she’d fallen, broken her leg. Or maybe she’d gotten lost and was frightened. He couldn’t think of a reason why a woman would be out alone, on a rainy night like this, lying out on a back road where there shouldn’t be people or carts until daybreak.

He’d rushed over to help. But she’d surprised him with her pleading. And the baby girl.

He moved the lamp toward her, and his light poured over her dewy face. Her wide eyes overflowed with tearful panic. She wasn’t from here; he was sure about that. He noted her shining face, her intricately woven clothing, the jewelry that hung around her neck and wrist. Everything pointed to a nobility and wealth that was foreign to this place.

“Take her away from here, please,” she urged again.

He lifted the baby. Took her firmly to his chest. He, too, was soaked through.

Then he looked back down at the lady in confusion. “Who are you? Are you lost? What’s your name? Where’s the rest of your family? Is there anyone with you?” He took her hand. He wanted to lift her up from the ground.

“There’s no time. Please take her and go. They’ll be here any moment.” “Who?”

“Take her from here. Please.” She pressed her hands against his legs. “Quickly. Please.”
He didn’t understand. He heard the sound of a horse galloping in the distance.

He looked toward the sound, which was coming from the far end of the road. “Quickly,” she cried.

A chill ran through his body. He looked down at the girl in his arms. “And you?” He was confused. Then he dashed toward the forest by the side of the road. Pushed his way in, deep. He heard the sounds of shouting and stopped, hiding behind the trunk of a large oak. He was panting, heart pounding. He turned off the lantern and then turned back toward the road, where he’d left the lady. He saw men and horses. In the rain and darkness, he couldn’t tell how many. Two. Three, maybe. The woman was still on the ground, and the sounds were jumbled up. Were they asking her about something? A baby girl! Maybe! He couldn’t make out what she was saying in response. One of the men lifted her, roughly, onto a horse. Another moved toward the forest, carrying a lantern. The circle of his light widened. The farmer’s heartbeat pounded loudly. He looked down at the baby girl in his arms, and her eyes looked up at him with a strange tenderness. Why did she stop crying? Since he’d hunched down behind the tree, she’d been silent. What if she cries again? The circle of light expanded.

The man holding the lamp was growing closer. Then there was the sound of steps approaching the tree. It was more than one pair of feet. The man felt his heart hacking through his chest.

“Nothing here.”

“I think she was telling the truth.” “I don’t know.”

“Those were the tears of a grieving mother.” “I don’t know.”

“A baby girl. On her own. In this wilderness. She would be crying for sure.”

“I think we should go back. We’ll report what we saw, and then they’ll make their decision.”

“Go back?”

“I don’t know where this road goes, or where the forest ends. I’m afraid that, if we keep going, we’ll end up someplace full of people, and then someone will notice us. And she won’t stop shouting and crying.”

“So we gag her. Keep her quiet, calm her down.” “We can’t be sure what will happen.”

“It’s your call.”

“I say we go back.”

“So we go back.”

Their footsteps retreated. The circle of light weakened. The area sank into darkness.

He heard the sound of horses galloping away. Then he turned to the baby girl.

Sleeping. “How could she fall asleep just like that? Right now? Under these circumstances?” He looked out in the direction in which the lady had been taken. It was an empty darkness, still rain-washed. He drove off the idea of going back out there; one of these men might suddenly surprise him. He looked into the dark heart of the forest. He had nothing with which to light his lantern, but he’d memorized the trees and roads well. He’d crossed them many times, whenever the men who owned the nearby fields hired him to till and water their lands. Carefully, he stood up from where he’d crouched behind the tree trunk. He pressed the sleeping baby firmly to his chest and ran.
A flock of pigeons lifted off, suddenly, spreading out through the orchard. A rooster crowed, and the chickens cackled. “Something’s changed,” the man said, closing the door to his small cottage. He lit a lantern and placed it on the small table that stood beside his tattered bedding. He sat down. And put the baby girl down beside him. She was still asleep, as though it had all been nothing.

“What now?” he asked, remembering everything that had happened. He opened the window, contemplating the colors of the dawn sky. “The rain’s stopped,” he reassured himself. “There’s only puddles and slicks of mud to show for it. And everything wet.” He pulled off his mud-splattered shoes and took down a towel. Then he wiped his head, his neck, patted his clothes, and lit the stove.

He pulled the scarf and swaddling clothes off the baby girl. The cloth had a singular pattern and was the work of a master weaver. He’d never seen such material at the city market. “Absolutely not from here.” He was even more certain.

The swaddling clothes had been wrapped around the child with care, which had saved her slight body from getting soaked through. He looked her up and down. Search her arms, her neck, her palms. But he found nothing that gave a clue to her identity, or the identity of her mother. Usually, people put jewelry or beads on their babies. Or they might draw the letters of the child’s name, or the name of the father, on a baby’s right palm or shoulder. At least that’s what he’d seen the city people do. But this woman wasn’t from the city. Or maybe they hadn’t had time to put on such things—after all, the child was very young. A week or ten days, no more. Maybe they hadn’t even named her yet.

“Who are you, I wonder?” As he stared at her, she opened her eyes. “As-salaam alaykum,” he said, joyfully. “How are you, little one?” She didn’t answer, but just went on looking at him. He laughed at the idea of waiting for a response. Carefully, he lifted her up. He gave her an affectionate look and said, “What’s your story? Hm? What is your story, I wonder?” She didn’t answer. Again, he laughed.

He opened the door to his cottage. The air outside smelled of mud and wet grass. He gazed out at the orchard. Something has changed, he thought again. He looked down at the baby girl in his arms. Her eyes caught his. He smiled. She yawned. He laughed. “Look,” he said, and pointed off in the distance. “It’s morning.” And then he was silent. The sounds of birdsong overlapped and grew louder. He fell into a contemplative state as the sliver of sun grew stronger. It emerged from the earth, shyly, and then it grew: slowly, slowly.

1.

The morning sun was set to embrace the final hill of the city at the edge of the green horizon, completing its daily ritual of rising. Then, suddenly, the hen squawked.

Urgently, she jogged. Her foot slipped, and she rolled like a ball of red feathers down the long staircase that led to the wide market square. She didn’t stop until she reached the end and struck the hard ground. Her feathers flew out in every direction. What happened? she wondered in surprise. She was far too clever to slip like some daft chicken. She thought about it as she watched a few of her feathers swim in circles on the surface of the pool of rainwater that had collected near her.

It’s rain, she remembered. Yesterday, it had fallen from dawn until dusk. She went on being confused as she ruffled her wet feathers. Then she took a deep breath and went back to trotting.
Briskly, she avoided the feet of people walking in every direction, the wheels of speeding wagons, the hollows left by animals that nearly trampled her, as she ran past a scattering of farm buildings on either side of the road.

She didn’t stop to pick up the breadcrumbs and leftovers from the ground, as she usually did when she passed by this spot every day, nor even to greet her companions placidly cooped up in warm places—the matter is extremely important and there’s no time to waste on idle chatter, she told herself as she trotted on. Her little head moved back and forth in time with her bouncing steps as, steadily, she advanced.

From afar, the orchards of apples, oranges, and palm fronds came into view.

She rejoiced. She imagined arms waving at her, urging her to pick up speed. She picked up speed.

“Buk. Buk. Buk. Buk,” she said, as she approached one of the groves. She was greeted by acacia trees, which were putting out their yellow spring leaves, at the orchard’s wooden fence. Her two small wings fluttered as she passed through the open gate.

She stood for a moment among the trunks of trees that were loaded down with red fruits. She moved her head sharply, right and left, and then turned to look at the orchard. She saw a few girls standing in front of the fruit trees, either raised up on small wooden boxes or else standing on the ground. Their slender hands reached up into the branches. They’d pick the fruits, and then toss them into large straw baskets that hung from their shoulders. She saw other girls walking toward laden carts, carrying a bucket of fresh fruit in each hand. As for the youngest girls, they picked small twigs and dried leaves off the ground, as well as fallen fruits that had been damaged by the earth’s dampness and worms. They would collect them in worn-out pails, so they could later be pressed and sold as animal fodder to nearby farms.

The girls paid no attention to the hen as she walked alone in the orchard. There were no other chickens and no animals, besides the horses that pulled the carts and an old dog that slept peacefully under the shade of a tree. The hen, too, seemed indifferent to the fuss going on around her. Everyone was busy with their work. She, too, was busy with her research.

It’s true that she’d only seen her a few times, yet she could tell her apart from all the other girls in the city, and, when she saw her soon, as she hoped, her little heartbeats would speed up until she grew short of breath, and her small pupils would expand until her eyes filled with black, and her short wings would beat powerfully until she rose from the ground in a way that was not appropriate for a level-headed hen such as herself. So it was that the village chickens had ridiculed her when they’d seen her, but she’d noted them doing the same, and, when faced with this, they’d been overcome by shame, grew quiet, and didn’t bother her again.

The hen’s neck stretched toward the biggest apple tree, which stood at the far end of the orchard. The cold light of the morning sun shone among its dense branches, pouring down onto the long brown ponytail that fell to her lower back.

The girl was standing in front of the apple tree, reaching her slender hands gently up to the fruits, clad in a brown cotton dress with a white apron tied around her waist like the rest of the farmgirls.

The hen’s heart throbbed, and her wings flapped along with it. As she ran toward the girl with a growing determination, it felt as if she were flying.

When the girl heard the clucking, she stopped picking fruit. She turned, warmly, toward the trotting chicken. She smiled. She stepped toward her, saying, “Welcome Farroukha, hen of our neighbor Mr. Noman. This is a surprise! It’s the first time I’ve seen you wandering around the apple orchards. Did you lose your way?”

That was Shams, a girl of twelve, the village girl who the hen had come searching for. She stood before the hen with her magical smile, the sun heating her cheeks so that they’d faintly
reddened.

Farroukha stopped. She stood looking at the girl, wondering in astonished, just as she had
the time she’d first met her, a year before, when Shams had pulled her out from under a heavy straw
basket that had fallen on her while she was fooling around in Mr. Noman’s pantry. She’d been stuck
there for nearly two hours. All of
her efforts to lift the basket, or even shift it, had been for naught. She’d jumped, she’d clucked, and
she’d pushed her small head against the walls of the basket, until it seemed she was hurting herself for
no reason. After all those wretched attempts to free herself, there was nothing to do but squawk. She
squawked a lot that day.
Whenever she’d tell the story to one of her fellow chickens, she’d remember the pain that had lodged
in her throat, from the intensity of that squawking—a pain that had stayed for a whole week. When
she’d stopped squawking, she’d cried, wishing she
were a dog or a cow. Or any larger animal that was more powerful, had a louder voice, and that people
missed more when it was gone. She was quiet, and then fell into more crying. Then, after a while, she
heard footsteps approaching the pantry. She squawked again. The steps grew closer and entered the
pantry. Then they approached the
upside-down basket. She squawked more. She felt her voice was about to wear out when the basket
suddenly rose, and the sunlight shone in her eyes. She saw the world, drowning in red, then orange,
then yellow, then white, and things cleared little by little, until she saw the shining face, the wide
honey-colored eyes, the delicate chin, and magical smile. Her fear, sadness, and anger evaporated. And
everything she’d felt while in the darkness of that basket was replaced by what she felt after it, and
what she felt at this moment: that she was falling in love.

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The hen leapt into the arms that were stretched out to her in welcome. She looked into
Shams’s eyes, yieldingly, and said, “I’ve come with important news, Shams! I couldn’t wait until
you went back to your grandfather’s cottage. I didn’t think a thing like this would wait. And, when
you know what it is, you’ll agree with me, and you’ll be proud of how well I’ve handled it.”

2.

Shams stepped back, carrying Farroukha beneath the large apple tree. Day came with its light
and heat, and they stepped into the cool of shadow. As she sat on the wooden box, she remembered
their previous conversations, and she thought, This talk will go on for a while. Nothing wrong with that,
she thought, because she felt Farroukha was like a person, and she loved her, and found, in her chatter,
a distinct pleasure, and as long as she’d come all the way to the apple orchard from her faraway
coop, which wasn’t her usual way, it must be important and worthwhile. Shams looked at the hen
with affection. “Go on, Farroukha,” she said, encouraging. “Tell me. I’m all ears.”
Farroukha hopped down out of Shams’s arms, gave her a serious look, and then said, “I woke up
early this morning. As you know, I’m an energetic hen, and I’m used to getting up early, and that’s
what I do every day, I wake up early before
everyone else, and that includes that rooster of Mr. Noman’s. I’d never say this to him, I’d never
publicly announce it, and I’d never brag about it, ever. I am a modest, well-mannered hen, and I know
my limits very well and don’t step past them. I also don’t...”

“You don’t want anyone to get jealous, or your relationships with the rest of the chickens and roosters might become difficult,” Shams cut in. She patted the hen’s head and went on, smiling, “You’re so kind and sensitive to the feelings of others, Farroukha. Now tell me why you came. You said it was important and couldn’t wait.”

That smile put the hen at ease once again, and she found she wanted to say many things. She took a deep breath, and then went on:

“When I woke up this morning, I had a strange feeling that I couldn’t understand. At first, I thought it had to do with yesterday’s rain, and how I had to stay locked up in the coop all day, in the darkness and the damp. But then I felt better when I saw it was morning, clear and shining, with the songbirds singing and the squirrels gossiping, and the wind perfumed by scent of jasmine blossom.

“It made me remember the beautiful spring holidays, when people throng to the scenic meadows, spreading out across the green grass and among the blossoms of delicious fruits, drinking water from the burbling springs, breathing fresh air. Then I thought, well, this was a morning like no morning before it, and someone shouldn’t just hide out in the coop or sit on their eggs, no matter how urgent such a matter is for a loyal hen such as myself, who is bound to do so. So I decided to go out. And so I said to myself, I said, Relax, Farroukha, if only for once in your life, for your head’s tired of thinking. Just let your legs take you where they want to go. Let them lead your soul, burdened with its worries, to where you’ll find salvation, so they can move your tired body to where it’s comfortable. Let them walk anywhere in the lands of God’s vast kingdom and give them the freedom of choice—not telling them what direction to walk or where to stop.

“First, they went to where Mr. Noman and his wife Sakina were putting out chicken feed after the dawn prayer. I ate up more than my fill, so that I wouldn’t get hungry if I stretched my legs and went for a walk, because during such an outing, the heart, the mind, the body, and the soul all come together, and it can drain the energy out of a little hen such as myself, and might be the end of me.”

Farroukha cleared her throat and went on: “After I finished eating my breakfast, I walked all around the barn. From there, I went to Mr. Noman’s orchards, with their apple, mango, apricots, and grapes, even though he doesn’t like to see me and the other chickens walking among their trunks and seedlings, but I did, but not of my own free will, you see, but because my legs decided and forced me to do it, and so I thanked God that Mr. Noman wasn’t there to see me. Otherwise, he would’ve definitely smacked me with a shovel, or taken me back to the coop and locked me in.

“And so I went on walking until I found that I’d gone pretty far and was near to the far fence. So I walked along it, looking through its wires and meditating on the carpet of green grass that extended out beyond it, until I found a small hole in the fence that I’d seen before, and I thought, at the time, that my master had forgotten to repair it, or maybe he’d gotten lazy when he realized it was too small for a hungry wolf to push his way through, so that he could pounce on the poultry while he was sleeping or busy with the farm.

“Since I’d vowed to myself that I wouldn’t resist being directed by my legs, I looked down at them to see what they meant to do, and they ran lightly and confidently through the small opening in the fence, crossing me over to the other side, so that, together with them, I finished a carefree dance, and my eyes grasped the blue sky of the village, and the green of its hills, and its fruit orchards that were like nothing else. And while I was walking among the tall grasses and the baby ferns and the colorful morning flowers, passing by the beautiful spring all around me, I heard the sound of a bird singing that I hadn’t heard in all of the village, and I’d memorized the songs of all the neighboring birds from the forests, and even those migratory birds that stopped for food and drink during their to-ing and fro-ing.

“This bird’s singing sounded more like a sad hymn, and it made me close my eyes and try to follow its source, until I struck the trunk of a great poinciana tree.
Then I opened my eyes and followed the sound that was coming from among its lavish branches, not bothering about the pain that had come from my head bumping its trunk. And then my eyes fell upon it! It was a graceful and handsome bulbul, whose yellow feathers gleamed with every movement or gesture, as if he were a bright star on a dark winter night, and on his chest was a bright blue mark, and two red feathers rose up from his head, increasing his majesty and splendor.

“He stood on the branch with the presence of a Sultan and his Majesty the King. The sight of him captivated the heart and melted it with his magic. I stayed where I was, listening to the intensity of his utterance with a mixture of wonder and humility. Until, suddenly, he stopped. Then, without giving me a moment to prepare, he turned to me. And I don’t know what came over me, but I bowed to him as people bow to kings and princes when their great processions pass through the city squares on Eid holidays. And it seems that I kept on bending over, without noticing what I was doing, and the first thing he said to me was, ‘What’s wrong with you, hen? Are you all right? Lift your head up, please.’

“And his voice was even sweeter than his singing! I looked at him. And he still sat on a branch in utter majesty. I tried to jump up and reach it, but I couldn’t. And when he saw my little wings fluttering in vain, he soared toward me, lighting on one of the short saplings. And before I burst in on him with a shower of questions that had been rushing like a waterfall inside my head ever since I’d seen him, he told me his story, and his words broke my heart.”

“What’s all this, Farroukha?”

None of the servants had been with Princess Kahramana when she had suddenly collapsed.

She’d been standing at the window in her room that overlooked the palace’s lush green gardens, which was where it was her custom to watch the sunrise each morning. Her beautiful face had suddenly paled, pink draining from her cheeks, and her body trembled like a lone, weak branch on a windy day.

It had been a nightmare to watch her from inside his golden cage, which hung near her window, when he’d felt in his bones that something terrible was about to happen, and he felt a force pulse through his small limbs, as if sending them an alert. He was the only one who cried out.

The bulbul cried out, and cried out, and cried out, not with the sweetness with which he sang every day, but like someone who was seeing a great catastrophe unfold before him, or someone who was waiting for such a thing to happen at any moment. Princess Kahramana took notice of the bulbul’s cries. She walked toward him with difficulty, her delicate hands clutching the marble wall until she reached him, bringing her face close to the cage and whispering, “Good morning to you, beautiful bulbul. As you can see, I’m not doing well today. It seems I won’t be able to leave this room. But don’t worry. I won’t keep you locked up here with me. It isn’t your fault, my poor dear.” Then she opened his cage.

The princess had grown used to doing this every morning. She’d open his cage, play with him a little, and then allow him to fly in the vast palace gardens, soar in the clear blue sky, and flit between the flowers and trees as he wished, and he would return before sunset. He would go back on his own, to his cage and the princess who he loved, and he never asked himself, all that year he lived in this comfortable palace, why he didn’t take this opportunity to flee, or to return to the land from which he’d come. But this time, the bulbul didn’t come out of his cage when the princess opened the door. He looked in shock at her wide eyes as they rolled up into her head, and then she fell to the floor of her room, in a faint.
None of the palace servants heard the princess’s sudden fall. Not even the guard assigned to her room, who sat behind her large wooden door, heard it and rushed to her rescue, informing the king and bringing the palace doctor. Nor was it yet time for her ladies-in-waiting to come in and see to the day’s affairs, and so they didn’t discover her wretched condition. The bulbul tried to wake her up.

He cried out again, lightly tapping at her soft hands, her delicate shoulders, and her slender head, and then he tugged at a lock of her chestnut hair, spilled out across the floor like a long and wavy scarf, with his beak. But this didn’t awaken the princess from her deep sleep or affect her in any way. She stayed there, lying on the ground, her eyes closed and her body still. After repeated attempts at cawing and pecking and pulling, the bulbul decided to fly. He flew to the window and out of the room.

He soared over the gardens and around the palace, until he spotted one of the palace’s servant girls walking between the almond trees and the blooms of the morning flowers. She picked some, putting them in a small straw basket hanging off one of her arms. The bulbul flew near, anxiously fluttering his small wings in her face. Yet the simple girl didn’t understand what the bulbul wanted, and as it was not the habit of the palace birds to attack the palace residents, flying excitedly near their faces, the servant girl thought perhaps a bee had stung the bird, causing him to panic. She shooed the bird away, and, when she didn’t manage to drive him off, she ran toward one of the palace gardeners and asked for his help.

The gardener, too, tried to drive off the bulbul. First, with his hand, and then with the pickaxe he was carrying, but without result.

“The bee’s made him lose his mind,” the servant girl said. “What bee do you mean?” the gardener asked as he struggled to shoo the bulbul off. “The one that stung him. The princess’s bulbul has lost his mind!”

The gardener threw his pickaxe to the ground and jumped, trying to grasp the bulbul with both hands. The bulbul lightly avoided the gardener’s palm, then raced toward the princess’s window. When he realized the gardener and servant girl were following him, he slipped back into the room and sat on the floor beside the sleeping princess. His heart beat hard as he heard the shouts of the farmer and the lady’s maid, warning him not to harm the princess and vowing to catch him. When their voices suddenly fell away, he realized they were about to inform the palace guards, and to ask that he be removed from the princess’s presence before he harmed her.

The bulbul had not yet finished this thought before he heard a knock at the door to Princess Kahramana’s room. The gardener, the servant girl, and the guard stood behind the door, bewildered, waiting for the princess’s permission to enter. When the received no response, the guard knocked a second time. Then he knocked more forcefully and, when she didn’t answer the third time, the servant girl said with alarm, “The naughty thing might have scared her. The princess is delicate and can’t bear surprises.” And, without hesitation or reflection, the servant pushed open the door.

Things happened quickly after that. After the palace attendants heard the servant’s cry of alarm coming from the room of Princess Kahramana, they realized something terrible had happened. They charged toward the door of the room, wanting to know what exactly that was. Three ladies-in-waiting came to carry the motionless body to the feather bed. They straightened out the princess, smoothing her hair, resting her right hand quietly over her left, then covering her waist with a red silk scarf embroidered with a hem of gold and silver. The three lady’s maids didn’t leave off until the princess looked more like a beautiful sleeping angel than a sick girl who couldn’t open her eyes or move her body, with no one knowing what had happened.

The three ladies-in-waiting didn’t take lightly what had happen to Princess Kahramana; it wracked every feature on their faces, and every one of their steps, all of it showed alarm and deep grief. However, the laws of the palace, which each of them knew by heart, obliged them to preserve the princess’s appearance of venerable dignity at all times, even in this miserable state, as was accorded by
her lofty position. The three ladies-in-waiting took two steps back from the princess’s bed with their eyes fixed on her, and then they stood with the rest, waiting on the arrival of the king and the palace doctor.

No one paid any heed to the bulbul, not even the maid or the farmer or the guard, and not those standing in a crowd near the room’s open door. They paid no attention when the bulbul flew right past them, toward his golden cage. Their eyes were on the sleeping princess, in suspense and in fear.

*Translated from the Arabic by M Lynx Qualey*