



# Slow Stately Dance in Triple Time

Anne Sanow

Looping the loop, 1946. It was nothing like diving over the chalk cliffs from Folkestone to Dover, where sun dappled the ocean below and sent up a glare that could stun a man into going the wrong direction. He'd managed to be in the thick of it mostly on bright days, only once or twice chasing Messerschmitts in the fog which he'd been told would never let up. As a matter of fact that was simply not true: like other places one is told about. Of the Arabian desert, others like him had certainly come before, but of the words written about it Gus was ignorant. Driving the plane into the sharpest, sheerest blue sky he'd seen since a boy, he saw below what he had not been able to fully imagine when standing in its midst.

There was a name for every ridge, every dune. As Gus caught an updraft, preparing to whip over and down, he could hear Basim shouting from the passenger seat in front of him. The machine was old, a light-model biplane. If there had once been a gun rig there was no longer any trace of it. Falling into the downdraft the two men saw the sands gleaming like waves: it rippled and broke, and Gus could figure, without having to hear Basim's explanations, the patterns made by the shifting winds. It was a map.

Gus took the nose higher for one last flip. Then they looked down at sky, up at land, and after the horizons righted themselves again their goggles continued to defy gravity, remaining on their foreheads. Gus dropped the plane into a lazy spiral, the world from five thousand feet becoming closer and real again, slowly then faster then slower still.

Back on the ground, taxiing short in the tugging sand, the colors and lines of the landscape and the objects there were distinct. There were tents, jeeps, camels, men. That morning Gus had at first failed to discern the plane itself, sitting parked, which like everything else seemed to blend into an endless beige. Now he was blinded as if by a rainbow. When Basim climbed out of his seat and asked him if he'd understood, Gus was startled by the bronze hue of his friend's face. Then he said that he hadn't been able to hear much, through the wind. "But you understand," Basim said, clasping him by the shoulders and looking at him carefully. Well yes, Gus said, he did.

Basim bin Fadil al-Aban was the son of long traditions and he knew that no man like Gus, no parched-plain roaming Texan boy, would ever read the desert as well as he could himself. And his own skills—though valid—were something he seemed determined to shuck off. This lack of seriousness drove his father to a state of suspended grief. What good was it for Basim to have this *bedu* knowledge in his blood, if he squandered it on airplanes and automobiles and sporting with hawks? Why these things? It was talent wasted without care.

In Naples Gus had learned these particulars from Basim. They talked about fathers as a way of introduction. Gus had been released from service, he said, and was not inclined to return home. He and his new friend took in the cities of North Africa and the Mediterranean, and for a time the fascination of shoddy cafes and winding alleys was enough. (Remember, his war had been from the air. What he understood

was the bird's-eye view: a shoulder of coastline, a grid of city or town shot over.) Grounded now, he had already wandered; with Basim it was no longer desultory. "It's not Texas," Gus said. In return for Basim's stories about the desert he described the dry terrain and ranchlands forty miles south of Abilene. He'd been relieved to get away from that flat, stretched place where the dirt smelled sour and his people let the landscape win. His tales soon ran out; he couldn't compete. Basim wound digressions into his narratives, taking up afternoons while they sat drinking coffee at tables on the streets next to other young men of various background and nationality.

Talk of battles was winding down. There was only so much repetition to be wrung from them. Gus and Basim reached a high pitch in their restlessness, a state that surpassed even that of the others strewn among the conjoining continents in that first year after the war. They were surprised at how quickly people were getting on. There was a drifting back, and then a tightening. *What did you do. Who are you. What do you want.* So the looks began to assess them more and more. Where two months earlier they had slipped through with little notice—Basim, after all, might be Indian, with his excellent lilting English—it was clear that despair on a grand scale did not exhaust suspicion.

They continued south.

In Cairo, the effects of unsettling were vibrant. Here were skins of all colors, and different uniforms—many pilfered or inauthentic. The two young men could breathe. Basim knew the city well, having attended its university. They could certainly have gone to the Auberge; Basim had afforded it during his student days and talked of the dancing and the stages and crystal-lit waterfalls and pools. Instead he directed them to a neighborhood where the doorways were low and heavy curtains fell across the archways. He lifted one of these and Gus looked down into a cellar room with a dozen or so small tables crowded together, where men watched a dancer thrash her hips to a drumbeat and cymbals. The lanterns hooked to the wall gave off a sickly light and the girl's eyes glittered like a lizard's. So this is how it's supposed to be, Gus must have thought, and he was depressed. Turning back to the door, he saw that Basim had dropped the curtain and disappeared.

The next day Basim suddenly pitched his coffee out of its cup onto the stone floor of the establishment where they were sitting. "This is swill," he said, loud enough for the barman to hear. "Tastes like goat piss." Gus understood that this unusually rude display meant that it was time they moved on.

From the port at the Red Sea, Basim hired three men to drive them as far as the good roads went, out to the Nejd plateau. From there they would find the family. Two weeks, or a little more—the trip would have taken that long, then. Sleeping in tents when the sun was high, making their way from village to well to date palm grove at night. It was new to Gus, so they did not hurry and stayed in places where Basim's father was known: Fadil bin Saleh al-Aban's son could expect hospitality. Much later, it was suggested that this journey could have been the beginning of something else. At the time it was expected

only that Basim was coming home. The two young men paraded themselves into camp in midsummer, each behind the wheel of a jeep; the arrival was viewed with indulgence, to be absorbed seamlessly into the life there that would go on as it had.

Aini. Nawar. Huma. Ghusun. Thurayya. *My five beautiful sisters*, Basim said, although this was not strictly the truth. He was proud that they tramped from the dim space of the family *mahram*, pushing the brightly colored curtains aside to come out of the tent and stand in a line. None could hide their smiles. Thurayya and Ghusun, twelve and thirteen that summer, jumped at Basim and giggled wildly with their heads pushed into his chest.

"You see they are not afraid—but take a good look at them now, before my older brother comes," Basim said to Gus. The two girls fought to get at the pockets of his field jacket. "Almost still children," Basim said.

Gus stood his place in the blowing sand; they had seen no women since leaving the sea. Everyone at the port had been rushing to gather and embark—who knew where to, and he hadn't cared. Now the three eldest sisters pulled into themselves, holding veils across their faces so that only their eyes and the bridges of three similar broad noses were visible. (They had not seen their brother in some years; he must have known that.) The black coverings hid Aini's full plain cheeks, Nawar's jutting incisors, and Huma's graceless jaw, but it was still possible to see the caution that rode their features down like gravity. Yet Basim disengaged himself from the quick dark ones to touch the other three in turn gently, resting his hand on each to kiss them once, twice, each side before holding them off at arm's length. His expression was kind.

The postcards in Basim's pocket were a present for the younger girls. Thurayya was smaller but grabbed faster than her sister Ghusun; she darted away, hair flying, and looked back at Gus once before slipping into the tent.

It must have been more than a year since the family had moved anywhere, Basim explained to Gus. His eyes traveled over the smooth sand, detecting a shallow groove leading away from the encampment where regular footsteps had tamped down the layers. And he claimed to be able to gauge a duration from the degree to which the poles of the tents had settled. His own childhood summers had been spent high in the mountains, in a village carved into the slopes; autumns, when the air was cooler again, they journeyed back near the farm in time to see the date palms hanging with fruit and ready to harvest. He took Gus to the top of the rocky escarpments. The cliffs sheltered the camp from high winds, and green scrubby plants burst from the rocks in a profusion that carried all the way down to the nestled valley of the farm, some two miles away. So much had changed. The edges of the groves touched a village now, and a single road made its way along the plateau, snake-like, until it met the larger road that went all the way to the city.

They had arrived from the other direction. Looking behind him, Gus felt the press of vast nothingness, though he knew he'd come through it to get where he was. The camp below appeared to him in miniature. The escarpments were not very high; nevertheless the arrangement of tents looked like dolls' houses made of cards, the jeeps were small as toys, and the animals no larger than insects. There were no lines or tracks anymore to evidence the journey they had made. It was as if everything had been dropped from the sky, or sprouted from underneath the sand. Yet there was movement: each thing that stirred made a puff or shadow before settling again. The back flap of the tent flicked out, then down, and then was held out again by an unseen hand.

*Hah!* the two youngest girls said to each other back in the tent, where they fingered the postcards taken from Basim's clothes. Ghusun and Thurayya held each one up to the thin beam of sunlight peeking

through the slit where they had untied a hank of goat's wool. The corner was otherwise held fast in darkness by patterned rugs knotted firmly together to poles. They were practiced at needing only this weak bit of light. *Hah hah.* Here, this is Constantinople in the rain; see how the cobbles of the street glimmer with wet. Here's the Parthenon, where Basim sat one day and wrote out a letter they cherished for its intent, though they could read only a handful of the words. This is Cairo. There is the university, they exclaimed, where their brother was until he decided his duty was with the North African troops of the Allies. But now he had come home.

Their mother called from the front room but the girls waited. If they were very quiet, they knew she would think they were out with the lambs—the young animals were theirs still to watch, although one of their father's men came to herd them back to the farm every day. Or she might think they were with their aunts. Thurayya and Ghusun did not want to go to their aunts' tent. They resented their dour moods. The two older women transferred the energy of their personal dissatisfactions and quarrels to the girls, making them sort rice or crank the wheel of the sewing machine while they mended their sons' thobes. The girls did not like their cousins, seven of them, all boys.

Ghusun pulled at the tangles in her hair. Thurayya looked intently again at the postcards: Athens. Tangiers. Rome. These were the words she knew; before Basim went away, he had shown her a book with a map of the world, pointing to where he would go.

It was late in the day and the girls peered out of the tent to watch Basim and their father standing together at the base of the ochre escarpments. The visitor was nowhere to be seen. Their brother had not changed out of his khaki fatigues and to the girls he looked like a visitor too. He spoke animatedly while Fadil bin Saleh al-Aban stood in his long white thobe, holding the sheath of his slaughtering knife. Their fine sharp heads nodded together. Thurayya and Ghusun had inherited the same definitions: high brows and slim, precise noses and lips. Their other siblings had been dealt the coarser features of Fadil's first wife. Now their brother Omar arrived. The girls covered their mouths and laughed at the sight of his fat backside swishing under his dress; his wives had the same pronounced bottom and waddle. The greeting between the brothers was a brief formality of two kisses, and then the three men made quick work of the killing.

They were not squeamish girls. First they saw a lamb, pierced fast in the throat so that it scarcely had time to cry. One of Omar's sons held a pail to catch the blood while Basim slaughtered a fat young goat. The girls were excited to see what came last: a camel calf, one of the softest things from that year's herd. Basim bowed to his father and led the animal to him. Omar, intent now on supervising the remaining butchery of the goat as well as the lamb, did not look up as Basim and Fadil worked together, the older man pulling the reins to the ground while the younger swiftly tied all four legs together with rope. Fadil punctured the camel's heart, then drew the knife through its neck.

It was to be a big feast, Thurayya and Ghusun decided. They wondered if the visitor would eat these offerings. And where was he now? Their mother called again, her voice coming closer to the dividing curtain, and the girls pulled the tent flap back in before she could catch them looking.

Gus watched Basim's mother hang copper lanterns and silver coin chains in the large front room of the family tent. From a hundred feet away, the ornaments winked in the sun in flashes that seemed to Gus like some kind of desert Morse code.

The front flap of the tent was open to the air. Basim's mother lifted an incense burner, which looked like an ornate spinning top, to a hook in the peak of the ceiling. One of the older sisters—Gus could not tell which—came in to change the front dividing curtain to a sheer panel of embroidered gold. Behind it was another in a deep plummy

shade, obscuring the family quarters. In his own tent, the standard Army issue of dun-colored cloth and tarps, Gus unpacked his belongings and arranged cot, folding desk, boots, canteen. He felt effete and ridiculous, like an explorer awaiting the arrival of a cushioned rattan lounge. His movements were routine but awkward. He was a skewed mirror image of the smooth domesticity playing out across the stretch of sand that separated the dwellings.

He should have known that it would be different. His plans remained unformed; flying had gotten him from the despair of a drying-up Texas farm to England and then farther, where he had lingered alone, until Basim. How easy it had been to drift. There were few questions asked, and any asked were glossed over; an American could work as well as anyone else, with so much to fix and rebuild, everywhere. He left town after town pocked with savage destruction—and gradually, he had allowed some grand idea of reparation to fill in the blank grooves of his mind.

“A man without a place,” Basim said to him often, in his jovial open manner. It was the big question for young men, a philosophy. Gus had vaulted from one understanding of the world to another. Texas had become impossible and thank god for the war; thank god. Men became different when they were only with other men.

Now Basim offered a recast of their many discussions on this matter. He stretched his arms up and leaned on the front poles of Gus’s tent. “So,” he said, smiling broadly, “your new place, for now.” The fabric of his shirt was stained with sweat and blood from the slaughter and pulled taut against the outline of his ribcage. His scent—the pungency of their three weeks’ journey together—hit Gus full-on. He closed his eyes. When he blinked them open, Basim’s mother stood at the tent flap next to her son with a tray of dates and flatbread. Basim shouted his approval of this and kissed and hugged her. He hastened to describe to Gus the superior provenance of the dates, his father’s plentiful groves and allotments, the delicious bread recipe unsurpassed by any woman in their tribe. His voice was no longer languid, and his mother’s gaze moved from her son’s laughing face to the tightened features of the boy he had brought home.

His name means “smiling,” his beloved second son’s. The first of course was Omar, and if his naming seems unimaginative it should not be thought so; where many parents chose it from the custom of designating *first son*, it should be known that there was a debt of honor as well, to the memory of the man who had been instrumental in my father’s security and wealth. But Omar from the start was hard to love. Was it his shameful puniness, his complaining cries that even his mother could not claim as robust? He did not improve as he grew and later he simply invoked his birthright. It was clear that he would work to earn nothing. Long years followed, where three dull obedient daughters came and father wearied of packing and moving this family with the seasons. He wearied still more when his wife died in the time of the long drought. Guilty over not loving her, he took as his next wife her sister, widowed and presumed barren. Basim, they say, was born in a year when the well in the northern oasis was nearly dry and the camels’ humps were sagging with malnourishment. Yet he thrived, and laughed when bounced or tickled, and a swinging pouch was fashioned in which Basim rode on his father’s back into the desert. And somehow this general good nature was carried on with the next two girls. If Basim was the favorite, we did not suffer for it and had more regard from our father than did our elders. Our smiling brother. Even now it is difficult to think of him as *was*, somebody gone, someone I once understood so well.

Omar, watching in the firelight, watching his father, seeing how he kneels down close, leg to leg when he speaks in Basim’s ear. Basim with his arm tossed over his friend’s shoulder, making everyone

laugh, the neighboring men who had come calling out their names, names of things they pointed to, making Gus repeat after them. Now Basim turning the game to instruct again, in that language where the words sounded slurry and unfinished. The visitor bestowed with a checkered ghotra and band for his head, wrapping it on expertly—too expertly—for roars of approval. The night was wearing on and the platters of meat and rice had been passed in to the women, the sisters and mothers, virgin and married, waiting behind the curtains stretching, dozing, nursing, the things they did there out of view.

Sitting cross-legged between the two curtains, the two youngest sisters, in that small dim space, skin prickled all over. *Airplane*, they whispered to each other, *Ab-ih-lene. Abilene*. Fadil bin Saleh al-Aban roasted coffee beans for his guests, jumped up to clap four times, gestured for Basim to lead a sword dance while the beans were pounded and boiled. The smell of cumin wafted through the tent and the girls tapped their fingers on their thighs in time with the drumbeats. Thurayya, draped in a rough cotton gown the color of pomegranates, eyes missing nothing, catching the dark look from Omar as her slight movements caused the curtain to stir, and holding that look, then going past him, to the restored authority of father and best-loved son.

Well, Nida. She never came while the visitor was there; of course she would not. The agreement between Fadil bin Saleh al-Aban and Nida’s father was long-standing, as those arrangements were. And Fadil’s position afforded him the luxury of bargaining well: he had what he needed, money earned from service to the House of Saud, control over a large swathe of land, and the betrothals of his children could raise the standing of other families. Years earlier there had been the necessity of bridges between lesser or volatile tribesmen. Omar’s two wives were no great beauties but—it was said—how cannily accurate the unions had turned out to be! Less hidden laughter attached to the fate of the first three daughters, poor things. A husband, a child dead; well, a father like that need hardly pair them again, if he could keep them. Nida’s father knew what he possessed: a flock of young females striking in looks and serene of temperament, with Nida the loveliest of all. This next bridge with Basim would have life the others had not.

But who carried the higher value now—a son with experience in the world, or the daughter grown into beauty so legendary that in the desert, our world, the legend seemed to fill it? These matters required decorum. The negotiations of pride would be sorted through by the fathers.

The timing was not right. This was sensed by everyone.

And there was Aini. That summer she had taken her place again with her sisters, and the woman who was not her mother, in the home she remembered from an earlier time. She was the first daughter. She moved with care: an old metal bin on her shoulder, a brush switched across the rug to scatter sand. Ordering, making tidy. There was little for her to do. Even Nawar and Huma had not suffered such a disgrace as she. Her husband was still living, but he had banished her—she brought death, he said, their children one by one and others in his village as well, though he was kept whole and alive to bear witness. It was said he was mad, to claim he knew what was willed. But still people wondered. Had Basim not come home, they might not have forgotten.

No, Nida was never there. She never did come, and Basim did not speak of her, and as the days went by time remained suspended like a bundle that should be let down but was not. Our brother was home. But behind his smiles it was as if he were examining objects from another life, and his face said that he would never go to her.

Gus did not write letters to anyone. He woke early from instinct; as a boy he’d always liked to see the sun rise. Later this habit served him well, and he had no trouble shaking off sleep to get into the fields of the farm and then again in England, where he woke refreshed to the

dawn after night bombing raids and mere hours of rest. Here in the desert he opened his eyes to discover the sun burning up the horizon as the moon fell down over his shoulder. Gus sat and watched with his folding desk on his lap. He felt that he should be writing it down, but for whom? The paper in the box had hardly been depleted since he’d left Texas—fingering it, Gus could not recall how many years had gone by since he’d written a word to his family but he did know that the paper had come in handy for rolling cigarettes.

One thing he discovered too was that there was often not much need of talking. Most days he followed along with Basim as his friend toured the lands with his father. Fadil bin Saleh al-Aban had much to show his son: the improved irrigation was making the farm and date groves lush and the animals fat. He joked that this settling was what came with old age. Some of the Arabic registered with Gus—he was recording it absently, he realized—but outside of the boisterous evening gatherings, little was expected from him. He was growing into the terrain. During these expeditions with Basim and his father one of them would occasionally say something to him, all smiles, and he would respond, punctuating the conversation with a pitch that echoed in a different key. The three men rode quietly on horseback and Fadil sometimes drew close to his son, looking out across the plateau as he spoke. Gus waited behind them.

Yes, he should have known it would be different here.

The summer’s heat reached its apex. Then it dropped off one day, bringing up a wind that blew in remnants of plant life along with a whipping tail of red sand. The women in the camp rushed about tying down the knots of the tents, frantically beating back the sand that was forced through with the sharp gusts. Spouts rose up from the ground and spat grains in circles. It made a mess of things, but the cool was worth the nuisance. To the youngest girls it was a game. “*Shamal, shamal!*” they cried, laughing, as they ran around outside the tent. Thurayya twirled, letting the wind make a balloon of her dress.

“No, *habib*,” Basim told her. “It will not be a big storm.” He explained to Gus that the weather was performing its customary tease for this time of year: it would soon be hot again, but not quite so much. The winds were a signal that the season was preparing a change.

When the winds settled again a new energy remained in the camp. Now there was anticipation. Each day Basim and his father assessed the date palms, testing for ripeness. It was a matter for precise calculation. Fadil was proud that his son remembered: Basim split each fruit carefully, touching his tongue to seed, running a finger over the shining skin.

There were other changes, things that the family had not seen before. One morning Basim and Gus rode away early in one of the jeeps, driving it up the steep road into the escarpments and onto the ridge, taking the fork to the large paved road to Riyadh. The city was only a half-day’s drive. Most in the camp and the village had never been there. Thurayya and Ghusun climbed the rocky path to wave at their brother as he sped away; he had told them he would come back with a surprise.

When the sisters saw his jeep returning they jumped up in excitement. They ran across the sand to meet him and then they stopped: their brother was alone.

And then they heard it, first a buzzing, then a roar, and everyone in the camp came running now, exclaiming in alarm and then wonder as the loudness increased overhead and an arm of shadow seemed to eclipse the sun. They looked up and the thing rushed over them, gliding down and down and down. As it went past Thurayya knew at once that it was no bird, and she saw a man sitting inside it, and he waved, and her brother returned the gesture and came over to pick her up on his shoulder so that she could see the final swoop as the thing slid smoothly from sky to earth some distance away. It came to a stop and sand billowed around it in a cloud.

“That is an *airplane*,” Basim said to Thurayya, and she remembered the word. Clapping and cheering now with her brother, while her older sisters shook their heads and returned to the safety of the tent, she loved this new thing that she saw.

Athens. Tangiers. Constantinople in the rain. We had known these things in our hearts, and now we could fashion them: Basim told us stories, and he helped us to trace the words on the cards with our fingers, and then with a pen on the visitor’s clean sheets of paper, which we held up to the light when they were covered with our markings and seemed to tell two tales, one on each side. We folded the papers around each picture to keep the new stories together. Our brother showed us books he had tied up with a strap: most were senseless to us, the words unknowable in stark tiny print. One was smaller than the others, with fewer pages. It showed the letters one by one, curling, and we wondered at how a hand had drawn them there so that they did not smear when we touched them.

Every evening, while the visitor stayed on, Basim gathered the men from the camps and the village. They laughed and talked together and we watched from behind the curtain. Each night brought something else new. One time it was a wooden box that opened up to display a horn. The visitor fixed a flat disc to the top of the box and Basim showed how to turn a handle on the side, and when this happened the horn made strange scratching sounds and piped out a song that screeched and bounced. The same song was repeated when the handle was turned again. This time we learned from the visitor *Virginia*, and *reel*—it was a dance, he said, for men and women, but here, in the desert, we watched the men together, making lines that formed and broke and came together again.

Now when our aunts called for us we refused to hear them. Aini could go, and we scuttled away. When our cousins came too close from their tent we ignored them; when Omar glared at our books we turned our backs, knowing he dared to say nothing. There was Basim, in sun or in firelight. The visitor was always close by. Perhaps we should have known that there would come a point soon when all that we saw must be taken away again, but we did not, and we continued to watch and grow bold.

The other things they saw: that a jeep taken up the low bowl of a dune could skim without sinking, then seem to almost plummet as it was whirled back around. If it tipped too far, bars overhead made it roll and you were not hurt so long as you were buckled in and held onto your seat. The sand was soft. Once at dusk, in the lull between first evening prayer and the meal, Basim drove while Ghusun and Thurayya scrambled around in the back seat, chattering and pointing at the roadside tea shacks they had seen before only from the distance of their seasonal caravan.

“Careful,” Gus said to them from the front, when a bump knocked Ghusun back into her seat. It was the only thing he said to them. The girls quieted to watch a man coaxing a camel into the back of a truck-bed. Two black-clad women were sitting there already, one on each tire rise. The camel settled between them and the man hopped into the driver’s seat, gunned the engine and tore off in a cloud of sand.

And they saw that a small plane could make loops in the sky. The sisters climbed the escarpments and shielded their eyes against the hot sun, looking straight ahead for miles and miles north, as Basim had told them to. Aini and Huma and Nawar stood still and seemed to be thinking of nothing. After a short while they called to their younger sisters to leave. Thurayya and Ghusun refused: they wanted to stay and watch the distant toy-like machine, jerking around in the sky as if on strings. Nawar hesitated, hovering for a moment as if attached by a string herself to the retreating backs of the two eldest who were picking their way back down the slope. *Yellah*, she said softly, you must hurry before Omar comes.

Dusty and happily tired, dresses torn from where sharp rocks and brush had snagged them, the two girls wandered back late together. Hand in hand, they came from the path to find Omar waiting for them by the camel hitch. “Lazy, disobedient things!” he shouted. “Little animals. I know where you’ve been.” He raised a hand to strike them.

“Yes—you do it,” Thurayya said, crossing her arms over her chest. He hit her and she stood where she was. Ghusun stepped out of reach but Thurayya stared at her brother levelly, the mark from his hand on her cheek. She lifted her chin, then spat on the ground. “That is what I think,” she said. “Don’t touch me again. I’ll tell father.” She pulled Ghusun by the wrist and back along the path to camp. The umber rays of the sunset reddened Omar’s face even more than it already was, and Thurayya gloated over her shoulder at the sight as she stalked away.

At the camp that night Omar sat alone in shadow. Between the curtains Thurayya simmered with a new rush of feeling, her face bare and thrust forward still, as if the print from his hand were indelible.

Later that night when so many stars pierced the black, the girls were discovered rolled in a blanket and sleeping outside the back flap of the men’s *majlis*. Yanked awake by Omar, they did not know where to look as the three men of their family paced off and shouted. They had not only been watching, but dancing—for proof Omar gestured at the tracks their feet had left in the damp sand, in the pattern of the square dance the visitor had been demonstrating to the men inside. It had been weeks of this, Omar said, and now it was enough. The elder sisters were already source for ridicule but should these youngest become so too? They were being corrupted, the family embarrassed. “My brother must do *his* duty now,” he said. Fadil bin Saleh al-Aban, though loving the other better, at last agreed with his first son.

Basim’s face—that smiling brother—was like a stone, unreadable though it may want to weep from within.

Thurayya, kicking idly at her sleeping sister’s feet, rolling over onto her stomach to inch up to the corner of the tent. Hearing voices float and waver, grow urgent. The bindings untied from the pole with her sure fingers now, knowing that she needed to hurry, hurry. Looking out through the crack and there were the two figures standing together by the visitor’s tent, arms clasped and there they held, close, outlined by the light of the lantern from within. They broke apart and the glow went out.

Then she was breathing quietly but hard, fast awake and keen. Tying back the knots to make blackness again and raising herself to a squat with her outlines blending into air. Without waking Ghusun, Thurayya reached her hands up to the little bag hanging from a loop over them and not needing to see, removed the picture postcards and the small cloth-bound alphabet book and the other scrawled-upon papers they had been accumulating like candy treats. Silently digging in the corner where the pole went deep into sand, under the mats, for what seemed like hours until the things could be stowed there and the surface brushed over without a trace. After unwanted sleep Ghusun shaking her hard, leading her outside where the earth stretched away and the visitor’s tent was gone, stakes pulled, and the tracks from their brother’s jeep left a faint and fading scar.

If it was then that the general knowledge began to spread, like anything dark, it was as this: in one way like an understanding anywhere, in any time. Sometimes it was discussed with troubled headshakes and somber tones by the men resting under the date palms. And by the women, the sisters banding tighter in resolution, muting their sadness whenever their mother appeared. She refused any mention of disaster. The three eldest, squeezing mounds of filtered camel’s milk into gluey bricks to dry in the sun, were caught by her one morning and struck dumb by the fierce expression on her face. “*Khalas*,” she told them, shaming their tongues into submission. From then on Aini

and Huma and Nawar telegraphed their thoughts on the matter to one another with their eyes. But Ghusun and Thurayya found more time to walk farther from the camp than they had before. They became expert at tending the young wheat stalks on the farm, nurturing the thyme and rosemary growing between the rows with hands more sensitive than their father’s workers. They brought the goats to calve and Thurayya, who had always been so impatient, spent hours supervising the weakest of them. That his youngest daughters were exhibiting industriousness of any kind was a welcome relief to Fadil bin Saleh al-Aban; to forget the disappearance of his son he redoubled his old chieftain’s habits, riding away regularly to enforce his benign control over Omar’s growing concerns and those of his closest neighbors, and exhausted by these efforts he failed to notice, upon his returns to the home camp, that the knowledge had seeped and hardened into deep divisions within his family.

The burnished autumn season had begun, the air heavy with the sweet smell of ripened dates. Fadil’s men took them down from the palms in fat bushels. They loaded them into the remaining jeep to take them to the city markets. Fadil now increasingly allowed for Omar’s demands. *Ayawah*, he would say. Yes, you do it, you do as you like. The youngest sisters were directed to remain at the camp. Under this silent and tense supervision, they did not dare to show any more interest in what lay beyond the confines of their settlement.

The visitor’s tent, folded down to vanish in the night. Thurayya had missed that moment, even if what she did see, her brother and his friend together, made her know it would happen. For as long as she could believe it she thought he would return. When the jeep was driven back from the markets in the evenings she watched from her corner of the tent; it seemed to her piloted by ghosts. The plane stood waiting, sheltered by the rise of the escarpments. Then one day she watched the men harness it to a team of camels and pull it away.

So now she had all of the questions, the things she did not understand and wanted to know, and there was nobody but Ghusun, who became docile and eager to please. *La*, she said, shaking her head, if Thurayya noticed that Omar was gone and implored her to steal away. The three elder pampered her and wound her in new veils. They brushed the tangles from her hair, hennaed her wrists; they scrubbed her face clean. They displayed Ghusun to her father when he came home tired, and this daughter seemed to him a relief. Thirteen was not too young for her to be married. Ghusun bound up her breasts with a long cloth, winding and unwinding until she needed no light to do it, releasing herself only to sleep; her sleep was now to Thurayya impenetrable and secret. Though the nights now came in the two stages for that time of year, the soft balm of dusk followed by a sharper cool and deeper sky, Thurayya kept her corner of the tent warmed with the heat of her fury.

And as if in silent unison with her sister, her own body raced to betray her. In her anger she bound herself too, hiding what might otherwise begin to swell, and she willed herself to contract from the inside and felt triumph when she remained dry. Ghusun’s bloodflow seemed saturation enough for them both.

“He is young, Thurayya, at least he is that.” Ghusun said this on the morning before the wedding. The girls stood together by the pen that had been constructed for the viewing of the dowry animals. It was empty now. Braided tassels around the posts flew up with the breeze. Tomorrow the pen would be full, camels and goats and sheep altogether, prancing skittishly in their confinement.

“Yes,” Thurayya said finally. The word came slowly from her tongue.

Ghusun walked away, leaving Thurayya alone in the slanting light. The sun moved over her as she stood there. She remained for some time until a cloud gnarled together above; she wondered if there would be rain. There was not, though she continued to watch the sky. When she returned to the tent it was empty. Ghusun’s bundles

were wrapped up in rugs and placed in a careful row against one curtain. Thurayya watched these too, staring hard as shadow slid its way around her while she sat. Then she must have fallen into sleep, or at least that is how she remembered it, for she knew that one moment she had been watching and gathering the fading light, as if to hold the last of that day, and then it was dark and Ghusun appeared there suddenly and she did not seem real. She held a lantern in her hand and walked slowly to the corner of the tent, looking around her as if finding a place in her mind to record every crevice she had known there and every thing she had shared with her sister, or ever fought over or contested in their girls’ life. That choice space by the vent they had fashioned, there: she had conceded it to the younger, who was stronger willed than she. Ghusun moved forward with the lantern and stood on the roll of her bedding. She curved her lips into a smile her sister had not seen before. Thurayya took the lantern and gazed now, transfixed, at the sight of Ghusun made clean and perfumed, bathed, covered only in a robe of golden cotton that was sheer enough to show the form of her body beneath. Her sister seemed to shimmer there, as if she were preparing to disappear. Then her lines became clear again. Before Thurayya’s eyes her shape adapted rapidly and she saw it all: not only her wedding night, but her children and her happiness and her unhappiness, too, everything etched around her, all the coming years. *I am ready*, Ghusun said.

And that next day at the wedding, Ghusun was transformed again. It is really true, Thurayya thought; she is leaving. In the tent

her sister sat now with her new husband and was viewed by all. She was in bridal finery, draped ear to ear with veils and coins. Her eyes, rimmed in kohl, peered out and only once—with one look—were they the eyes Thurayya could say she knew. The guests paid respects and their father accepted congratulations, together with Omar, for a match well-made. There was feasting and laughter and the noise went on into the night. They were celebrating a daughter’s leaving and through it they were forgetting another’s. The sounds of the drums were joyous and that joy was what was there on the faces, hiding truths. The night would erase. Thurayya’s anger remained her own. And after that night the knowledge now unspoken—as if Omar had ever been the only son—would stay buried in the set lines of Fadil bin Saleh al-Aban’s face and behind the darkened corner of the *mahram*, where sometimes a mother sat looking intently into the distance as if hearing a far-off signal. And the furious youngest, she imagined this:

Over the night the sand stretching out like a sea. Blue light illuminating small dervishes. The eddies and whirls puffed and settled gently, but someone looking with eyes intent and clear would have noted not a speck, not a reach of brush or rock or other life disturbing the surface that poured towards them steadily in the dark. The far dune’s edge peaked and shining like a sword in the sky. A sharp cool scent from this edge that was the lie that covered its power: wait, it sang; stay, rest. The swelling and lifting, what must have drowned them in their tent at night, two men alone and heedless of consequences.