Aunts

Aunt Gazala

In one of the "filial piety" assaults, with all it demands in terms of compliance and devotion—where submission morphs into "virtue"—I finally yielded to Mother; my mother, whose solidarity with others is seen as a "handicap". I cite one of her cousins, who regards such compassion as naïveté, far removed from goodness, insisting that "nothing good comes from others!"

Perhaps my hatred for this toxicity led me to take my mother's side and to sympathise with her actions, even when they provoke concern and weigh heavily upon me—so much so that I began to wonder whether I might as well share her handicap.

.....

I exclaimed with emphasis, voicing my fear while restraining my protest: "Aunt Gazala?! Aunt Gazala, Mum?!"

Gazala—a name feared not only by the students, and even the teachers, of our primary school in a quiet village south of Tripoli, but also by the majority of young men and women in town, and by the old men too. Exempt from this fear are Aunt Fujra and her husband, Uncle Salim el-Kannas (the sweeper), who belongs to the minority: those few men bold enough to provoke Aunt Gazala, defying her omnipresent authority—especially during the tea gatherings of summer afternoons, held at the entrance of Uncle Bin Jarid's shop.

“Yes, your Aunt Gazala! And why not?!” my mother continued angrily. “What’s wrong with your Aunt Gazala?! She’s a human being like the rest of us! Besides, what does a girl your age know about others?”

No sooner had I opened my mouth than someone raised their voice, remarking, “Dear God! Children these days! You never do what we ask of you. God have mercy on us”.

It was Aunt Ain, scolding me: “This woman, whom you shamelessly raise your voice at, bore you for nine months and nursed you for two years. She raised and protected you, and God alone knows what she endured—for your sake. Now you scream in her face. You might as well strike her! This woman is your mother. God has placed Heaven beneath her feet. Shame on you!”

I fought back tears, for—unfortunately—Aunt Ain, whom I fear most in the extended family, was the third among us, listening and frowning, staring at me like a hunting shotgun. None but we, the family children, understood the peril of Aunt Ain’s frown. I had learnt how she cast her victims into the prison of their own fears, and that crying, in her presence, was a blunt weapon—one that only worsened the punishment. So I came to myself and relinquished the tears, conceding, as always, defeat.

Surrendered, I said, “Fine. What should I do for Aunt Gazala?
“Well,” Mother said, lowering her voice and urging me to keep the matter secret—not to be shared with classmates, nor even with

teachers—"Your Aunt Gazala has finally been guided by the grace of God. She has decided to begin practising prayer."

I did not fully grasp what Aunt Gazala's praying had to do with me, nor why she would bewilder me and leave me at the mercy of Mother and Aunt Ain.

I found myself lowering my voice as well, consolidating a partnership sanctioned by Aunt Ain, and said, "But everybody prays—my dad prays, and you pray, and Grandpa prays, and Teacher Mabrouka prays." I did not miss the cherry on top: "And Aunt Ain prays!"

In truth, I could not recall ever seeing Aunt Ain pray. I had only mentioned her name in the hope of securing her blessing, placing her among those who please Allah and His Messenger. But she interrupted and reprimanded me:
"Why are you lying? When did you ever see me pray?! God knows I rarely pray. Is it acceptable to lie to Allah? How many times have I told you—and the other children—that Allah casts liars into hell?!"

I embraced the K.O. and remained still, as my mother gently tended to my bruises and cuts.
"Sweetie, your aunt has never prayed, and now Allah has guided her—she wishes to begin practising. But she doesn't know a single word of the Quran. Would you have her pray without reciting the Quran?! Teach her Al-Fatiha, a few short Surahs, and how to write her name. I swear I would've done it myself, had I the time—to earn the blessings of Allah."

This disarmed me. Perhaps next time I lie, I shouldn't be so rash. Perhaps I ought to master the art of lying. Or perhaps I should cease lying altogether—and that is no easy feat, when lying, despite exposing one to humiliation and shame, remains the only means of surviving the oppression of the powerful.
In short, how does one avoid lying in the presence of Aunt Ain?

Aunt Ain stood, veiled in her *Farashiya*. Appeased, she said, "If I had the time, I too would've learnt to read and write alongside her." She dropped the bombshell and kissed Mother goodbye. Then she turned to me: "Listen to your mum, good girl."

Good girl! I know well what those two words mean when Aunt Ain uses them. But her wish to learn from me frightened me and made me sick to my stomach—an ache I usually feel when I'm at the mercy of overpowering insolence.
Now all I needed was Aunt Gazala, creeping into my tumultuous inner self, governed by my father—the extremely pious sheikh and judge—and Aunt Ain, the family's KGB!
Then come the witches, descended from the fables of Grandma Salha, trailing me wherever I go. And here I am, surrendering to the will of Allah—Allah who, according to everyone, will cast me into hell for a small lie about Aunt Ain's "piety," a lie I thought might shield me from her fury.

As soon as Aunt Ain left, I breathed a sigh of relief, as they say. I gulped a large dose of oxygen, expelling carbon dioxide—produced

by her presence and the lingering shadows of Aunt Gazala. Yet I found myself overcome by a sense of injustice, to the point of tears.

In the second round between me and Mother, I began to stitch together a tale of reluctance, withholding the version that would unravel her plan—made possible only by my fear of speaking the truth.

I took my time recounting to her the many forms of punishment meted out by the teaching staff, which would, without doubt, be carried out by Teacher Mabrouka should I fall behind on my homework.

She interrupted me softly: "Be a good girl".

The words were gentle, almost soothing—yet beneath their calm surface, they pulsed with quiet coercion.

"God will help you, because you'll be teaching His word to a good woman—one who only longs to draw nearer to Him. And to do that, she needs the Quran to pray.

Just imagine your answer to Allah on the Day of Resurrection, when He asks, 'Why didn't you teach my *Ayahs* to your aunt Gazala'?

What will you say then?

I'm not asking you to teach her *Al-Baqara*. Just help her memorize *Al-Fatiha* and a few short *Surahs*, so she can pray.

You'll be rewarded—not with a single *Hasana*, but with sixty, and even more!

They'll carry you to Heaven—with your aunt Gazala by your side."

I exclaimed, dismissing her talk of Heaven and Aunt Gazala, “She doesn’t know Al-Fatiha”!?

To be honest, I hadn’t memorized much of the Quran myself. My mother knew. She also knew how hard I’d worked to commit *Al-Fatiha* and a handful of short *Surahs* to memory—*Al-Fil, Al-Kawthar, Al-Falaq, Al-Nas, and Al-Ikhlas*.

I had developed a deep aversion to memorization. When I stood in prayer behind my father, flanked by my mother and little sister, I performed the *Ruku* and *Sujud*, leaving the recitation of *Surahs* to my father.

As for *Fajr*, I would drift into a light sleep from the first *Sujud*, only to be poked awake by my sister as my father finished the prayer.

My mother said, “Yes. Even *Al-Fatiha*.”

I was carefully lining up the arrows of my escape from this burdensome task, one by one. Each had to be released with precision—like the Indians in Westerns.

If my first arrow, the threat of school punishment, failed to hit its mark, I had others—more effective ones. Next, I turned to my father’s authority: his firm decisions, respected by everyone, especially my mother.

He never approved of village women visiting our home. I even once heard him explicitly forbid such gatherings.

So, I let loose my second arrow, saying to my mother,

“Didn’t Dad forbid us from mingling with the local women? Let alone Aunt Gazala!”

Mother fell silent for a moment. Then, in a faint voice, she said,

“Fine. Allah will be the guide.”

I nearly clapped my hands in joy as blood rushed to my cheeks. My second arrow had flown gracefully into the target. It wasn't unusual for my father's shadow to sow confusion among the enemy.
I savoured the victory—but not without a trace of remorse.
I wondered what Teacher Mabrouka would have said about my shameful behaviour towards my mother.
.....

Teacher Mabrouka taught Theology to the primary classes, from first through to sixth grade.
In truth, there was no other subject I ever wished to see cancelled. Only this one—shocking, grim, exhausting, fearsome, confusing, and dull. It was taught by the Theology mistresses and overseen by Teacher Mabrouka herself.

Teacher Mabrouka was mononymous, yet many-sided as the village elders saw her. She was tough and devout, even as she walked about town without a male guardian, unashamed of being an old maid.
These traits were viewed as almost virtuous by our guardians.
But to us, they were far from clear. Our direct encounters with her left us confused, driven by fear.
She often behaved like a High Commissioner of some obscure, shadowy authority—one that seemed intent on placing us in only two directions: Heaven or Hell.
She was heavily armed with a curriculum issued by the Ministry of Education, through which she mapped out the details of both realms, engraving them into our consciousness and subconscious alike.

She would punish us ruthlessly—sometimes with pleasure—displaying various forms of discipline depending on the type and nature of the sin.
We would cower in our seats, eyes wide, cringing, holding back both tears and words. She offered no comfort.
Things became more complicated when she punished some of us with a thin olive branch, gifted by one of our classmate's mothers.
Then I would grow even more confused:
Who was punishing us—Allah, our classmate, or Teacher Mabrouka?

What could be forgivable about Teacher Mabrouka was her ability to pull us out of the doom and gloom and into something entirely different—a place filled with compassion and excitement.
Even if this transition was driven by her mood swings, it was enough to carry us from a detestable inferno to an oasis of love and delight.
It was where the Prophet Mohammad spread his love to children, treating them with kindness and playfulness, just as he did with his grandsons, Hasan and Husayn.
And so we, the children, would be granted a credit card—temporary, perhaps—sponsored by this merciful Prophet, who never gave up on children, always interceding to bring them into Heaven.
The excitement would reach its peak as we imagined, with fresh and vivid minds, a wondrous tour through the dazzling realms of Heaven:

“Up there, children, grown-ups won’t hit you—not your daddy, mummy, aunties or uncles. You shall never be thirsty or hungry. If one of you fancies a delightful fruit, you won’t need to cry or beg; it will fall effortlessly into your mouths.”

Grown-ups won’t hit us!

This would have been great news if Teacher Mabrouka had included teachers in her list of grown-ups who’d stop hitting us.

Nevertheless, we were overjoyed—even though this merry tour obliged us to toil, memorise *Ayahs*, and recite them.

It would thrust me, personally, into the hands of my father or Teacher Mabrouka, confused and repeating phrases I did not understand—all in the hope of pleasing, and gaining access to the plenitude of Heaven, to play in its myriad gardens.

Every morning, the bus would deliver Teacher Mabrouka from a place far beyond our village—a place we did not recognise, yet one that stirred our imagination. In every Theology class, which we had come to accept largely because of that bus, we found ourselves more and more motivated to track its stop each morning. Some of us would even give up our halva sandwiches to the older students, hoping they’d leave early and solve the mystery. But it was all in vain.

And then again, Teacher Mabrouka would guide us through her Heaven—with its golden palaces encrusted with ruby and sapphire,

its singing gardens, and rivers flowing with milk and honey (no, she said nothing of wine rivers!) Radiant angels with white wings soared above, flying over our wishes to realise them before we even asked. The only thing we were required to do to attain all this was to obey our elders, especially our teacher and our mothers.

We grew obsessed—certain, even—that Teacher Mabrouka knew every nook and cranny of Heaven. Each time she spoke of ruby and sapphire, our eyes would fix on the ring adorning her finger, undoubtedly believing it to be a heavenly gem. What truly assured us was the red coral necklace she wore. How exhilarating it was—how utterly wonderful—especially when we imagined that necklace and ring to be heavenly gifts, custom-made just for her.

Chance alone prevailed—though it was a chance in the presence of something far too frequent. The following day, to bring matters to a close—given how far-flung children had arrived too early at school, even before Aunt Fatima had opened the gate—Teacher Mabrouka was seen boarding the brand-new red bus. My classmates were left in incomparable awe. They swore they had seen angels seated inside. And I smiled. They went on to say they had seen hands waving at them, bright faces with blue and green eyes, and snow-white drapes upon their shoulders, surely their wings. With such certainty, who would have dared to question whether that gleaming red bus, which brought Teacher Mabrouka every morning, had been launched directly from Heaven?

As a result, most of us—third and fourth graders—began to question the fruits of our discovery, and soon became absolutely certain that the bus came directly from Heaven to our school. Teacher Mabrouka, set apart from her colleagues, was an expert in all things heavenly—a place equal to both the earth and the sea.
And whoever gained access as a child was transformed into a sparrow, chirping joyfully in its bushes.

Now sparrows were involved—sparrows that flew, singing, through the star-studded skies of Heaven. No one could interrupt their play, nor take away their wings. Who wouldn't wish to be one of them?

But is there a school in Heaven? Is it near, or far from the village? Will Teacher Mabrouka ever take us there? And if there really were a school in Heaven, why wouldn't we simply go there? We knew almost everything about Heaven, except for the one thing that should have brought us closer to it: where is this Heaven?

One day, I took it upon myself to put an end—vicariously—to the endless back-and-forth fact-checking of Heaven, especially after we had confirmed what the bus and its passengers looked like. That bus had become an object of desire. We would sneak onto its seats and enjoy our imagined flight to Heaven.

It was only a matter of time—delayed by obsession, and muddled by the fear that our parents might refer us directly to Faqih Mabrouk, the village's spiritual healer. He would make an example of us, caning us as part of his exorcism, and might even convince our parents to stop sending us to school altogether.

Instead, we'd be sent to a *zawiya*, run solely by him. And this is precisely what happened to Maryam—my classmate, top of the class in maths—who told her mother she was going to ride the shiny red bus that came every day with Teacher Mabrouka, and that she was going to book a flight to Heaven!

Such was my curiosity—always designed, as ever, to spoil the pleasures of mystery.

In the final minutes of the Theology lesson, as Teacher Mabrouka prepared to leave the classroom, I raised my hand.

"Teacher… teacher… teacher, please. Where is Heaven?!"

She was taken by surprise—as were the younger students, who turned to her, waiting for an answer. She stared at me for a moment, then, mildly irritated, said:

"Not yet, my good girl. You'll know when you grow up".

Then she turned to the class:

"When you grow up, you will know everything about everything."

Noticing our impatience and defeat, she skilfully passed the question back to us—like a seasoned footballer—her tone suddenly tender:

"Where is Heaven, kiiids?

Next class, you shall answer the question:

Where is Heaven, my smaaart kids?"

To me, when adults imitate children's speech, it disgusts and deeply irks me.

I was not satisfied with having the question deflected. Besides, Maryam's fate haunted me. One simply did not ask such difficult questions to the adults in my family. They would either criticise you, demand that you ask Allah for forgiveness, or send you to one of the many *zawiyas* scattered across town—a protest, of sorts, against the modern sciences taught in public schools. Or worse, they would give you an answer that answered nothing. Like the time I asked my father where Allah was. He took my hand, placed it on my chest, and said:
"Allah lives here."

In the "next class", most of the younger students chanted in infuriating unison:
"Heaven is beneath the feet of mothers."
"Bravo! Smart kids!" she exclaimed, clearly pleased.
She repeated it again, smiling:
"Heaven is beneath the feet of mothers."
Why?

"Because our mothers bore us for nine months and nursed us for two years, and they are… etc."
Personally, I was bitterly disappointed when Teacher Mabrouka revealed the way to Heaven. Disappointed? No—shocked. A terrible geographical shock.
Dear God!
Of all the skies, rivers, trees, parks, palaces, nymphs, sparrows, angels, and buses—you couldn't find a better place than beneath my mother's feet?

I would study my mother's feet—small and delicate—made even more beautiful and glamorous by *henna*. Then I'd shift my gaze to my father's feet: larger, stronger, more commanding. Only then would I compare the two pairs—for my father's feet, I reasoned, could buy me a larger space.
And when dealing with the consequences of my actions, I'd pay attention not to her facial expression, but to her feet.

Deep down, I don't think I ever accepted the answer. But did Teacher Mabrouka lie? The same question applied to Aunt Ain, the village sheikh, and the students' parents. Even if they had lied, my father certainly wouldn't, couldn't. I never asked him. Perhaps I feared they might antagonise him.

Today, the maxim revisits me, ingrained in my subconscious like a silent spell. It returns and places me once again in an uncomfortable position—re-examining my girlhood, three years after Teacher Mabrouka defined and delineated the geography of Heaven.
It is beneath my mother's feet—she who now begs me to bend to her will and teach Aunt Gazala a bit of Quran. And instead of undertaking such a noble task, I find myself throwing arrows at her, ecstatic at her defeat by me. Though I was heavy with guilt, feeling the accolade of all the wicked characters from children's stories and the fables of Grandma Fadila, I could hear a voice deep within whispering:
"Keep up your refusal to engage with Aunt Gazala, and do not believe the foolishness of Teacher Mabrouka."

In the evening, I was keen to sit at the table in the middle of the hall, shifting the energy of my studies out of the room my sister and I shared. I stacked all my textbooks and notebooks—I didn't even leave the drawing book behind. I kept pretending to be dedicated to my homework, waiting for my father to pass into the bedroom, counting on his refusal to host Aunt Gazala. I prepared my facial expression to look unhappy and wronged. I would complain to him about how abusive Teacher Mabrouka was—as were her colleagues: the Maths, Sciences, and Arabic teachers. I would tell him I couldn't even sleep. How could I? The Arabic teacher had demanded we write the Reading lesson a hundred times, as collective punishment. The Maths teacher made us recite the multiplication table daily, and woe betide those who failed to memorise the national anthem. And the Sciences teacher…

Suddenly, he turned to me, and with a touch of hostility, said:

"Be careful not to mispronounce when you teach Aunt Gazala the Quran!"

There was no escape. This was fate.

That night, I went to bed defeated. There she was—Lady Mother—monopolising Heaven beneath her feet, unforgivably betraying me, as she conspired with my father against me. There it was—my second arrow—breaking and failing me. I said to myself, "I have no choice but to tell my mother the truth about Aunt Gazala." She might understand and support me. Thus I might please my father, and Teacher Mabrouka, and all the Theology teachers in the country."

The next day, Mother brought it up again:
“An hour would do you no harm, doing something good. Your homework won’t be affected—and of course, I’ll help you!”

She added:
“I know how difficult and moody your Aunt Gazala is, but all this will come to an end once you become her teacher. She’ll treat you differently, and she’ll never forget the favour!”
“Mum, everybody’s scared of her—even the teachers. You haven’t heard what I’ve heard. I’m scared of witches, and Aunt Gazala is a wicked witch!”
“Your Aunt Gazala is a simple villager, and she wears her heart on her sleeve. She’s not a witch, as your Aunt Fujra says—may Allah show her the path! Use your head, my good girl. If your Aunt Gazala were truly a witch, Fujra and her husband would’ve been her first victims—she thinks of them as her arch enemies. And remember, you’ll be teaching her the Quran. With Quran, witchcraft cannot harm you—nor can anything else, for that matter. Besides, your witch phobia will disappear once you’ve grown up and realised that witches don’t exist outside Granny Salha’s fables.”

I have always loved Granny Salha’s tales, with her swift style and graceful phrases, as she flits from the palace of Aisha, the Sultan’s daughter, to the boudoir of Scheherazade, to the tale of Oum Bsisi and the Cunning Mouse, to the anecdotes of Juha. Her stories wouldn’t end without us demanding the tales of the High Noon Hag, and what followed—fables concerning djinns, ifrits, witches, and ghouls.

As soon as Grandmother finished her stories, we would go to bed stumbling in fear, where most of us would find the witches already tucked in, with their brooms and long nails, messy hair and blackened teeth. I myself would scream, and my father would come and place his hand on my forehead, reciting *ayahs*, until I felt safe and relaxed, watching them ride their broomsticks and escape through the windows!

"If I were you, I'd protect my home, my husband, and children. You're letting Gazala into your house, and she's a witch, casting her spells on whomever she meets. If your husband makes her cross, she'll turn him into a gecko. If you make her cross, she'll turn you into a frog. As for the kids, she'll turn them into beetles!"
Aunt Fujra, Uncle Salim el-Kannas's wife, whispered these words to Miss Nafisa, the Art teacher—and apparently, she whispered them to all the townswomen.

Eavesdropping is widely frowned upon; it is tantamount to lying, blabbing, and a whole set of prohibitions at home. You wouldn't find it difficult to understand that my mother's remarks, spoken to me about Aunt Fujra, were only hinting I'd made a mistake—eavesdropping on people. It is a mistake that would become a sin if it reached my father.
What might forgive this "lapse", however, was my anxiety to either tell my mother why I wouldn't honestly comply, or claim what I actually claimed under false pretences.
At any rate, as much as I hated this heavy task, my fear of this "witch" made me think of my family's fate, which now lay in my hands. It was incumbent on me to save them, lest they separate as

reptiles, frogs, and insects—if I became a stumbling block to Aunt Gazala's ambitions!

I gave up the fight as my quiver turned empty—no arrows left to throw at my mother. But my fear of Aunt Gazala, and what a relationship with her entailed, was diminishing; and regardless of her connection to others, the help I would give her should shield my family from her wicked ways.

My father would be safe from whatever she had in store for him—for, according to Aunt Fujra, Gazala might turn him into a slithering gecko, creeping through the crevices and across the roofs, chased by brooms and slippers, falling eventually with a severed tail.

And if I kept refusing to teach her, I might have a hand in the transformation of my poor mother into a frog (Mother and I share a disgust towards frogs and geckos). Then it would be my turn, and my sisters', and she would turn us into beetles and hornets to be stepped on—or to fall prey to the foul and infamous DDT.

I asked my mother, who ought to know best what lay beneath her feet, "Will I really go to Heaven because of Aunt Gazala? And if it is decided I shall get in, must I go in with Aunt Gazala!?"

"God willing, whoever does good for others shall go to Heaven—with or without Aunt Gazala," Mother said.

Why not? I thought, staring at my mother's feet. As long as Aunt Gazala's literacy, and teaching her a couple of *Surahs*, gets me into Heaven to enjoy its fruits. And I thought I ought to find the delicious mango, which is not available in Libya, as it is usually brought to us by my father's friends—the Egyptian sheikhs who work with the

government—as a gift they bring when returning from their summer holidays.

Later, when Aunt Gazala began frequenting the house, I started questioning my chances of going to Heaven by her side—assessing the risk of entering Paradise in her company, as one ought to be cautious about the nature of this confrontational character, her boldness and unpredictability, which might irk the guardians of Heaven's Gate as they organise the entry procedures.

There was also an additional weakness to our company, for according to Teacher Mabrouka, whoever avoided animal sacrifice during Eid al-Adha would be forced to walk the Path on the Day of Resurrection, while those who did sacrifice would enjoy crossing the Path riding their own lamb. And I don't think Aunt Gazala's economic conditions allowed her a sacrificial lamb. Therefore, we would be forced to cross the Path on foot.

And she would probably cut in line, barging her way to the front. Everyone knew Aunt Gazala had a little trouble with compliance. Besides, she wouldn't allow potential mistakes in the queue to go unnoticed.

And even if she passed these rigid entry requirements, she would face another problem (Faqihs had no classification or close reading of her case): smuggling drugs into Heaven! I personally do not think Aunt Gazala could part with her snuff tin. It is possible—likely, even—that her obstinacy would lead her to hold on to her tin, and this might result in her immediate transfer to Inferno by the monitors of Doomsday, having grown impatient with her outbursts and the havoc she'd wreak.

Then what fate awaits me as her companion?!

.....

Aunt Gazala is a widow in her mid-fifties—fearless and aggressive, with a foul mouth feared by almost everyone in the village: old and young, male and female. She speaks her mind with no regard for any authority but her own. This is no coincidence, but rather the fruit of personal experience, honed by the presence of working country women in that nice little town where my childhood—save for a few setbacks—had been, on the whole, happy.

However, above all, Aunt Gazala is the midwife who has tended to most of the village's newborns. And she knows the names of all her babies, reserving motherhood and authority over them. That is why, whenever one of the "little shits" angers her, she lashes out:

"Behave, you little shit! I swear, if I'd known you'd grow up to be an arsehole, I would've broken your neck the moment you came out of your mum—or I would've pushed you back to complete them nine months so you'd be well-done, you medium-rare git!"

She is omnipresent—shielded with wit, often caustic, and armed with a solid memory. She is the black box of the village, recording everything, big and small. And woe unto whomever keeps a secret from her. This would mean they had pushed her away and failed to pay respect to her ears—and this is unforgivable, as she is the village confidante.

And if someone confided in someone else, her extensive relations would bring the secret to her. Then Aunt Gazala would sanction the confider under "Ignored Voluntarily", and they would never be taken off the list until they'd learnt a very harsh lesson.

.....

One day, Faqih Mabrouk's third wife stood before the judge and the Sharia court, trembling and mumbling her way towards a divorce. She had been married for only three months, and she had to tell the judge why she would go through "the worst of Halal in the eyes of Allah!"

The wife, a fourteen-year-old child, turned crying to the courtroom, as a woman raised her voice and barged into the stand:

"Your Honour, please consider me a witness and let me tell you what this little girl wouldn't say—even if she stood here forever."

She then bent over, took off her slippers, and placed one upside down on the stand.

"This is what the girl faces, Your Honour. Now, Your Honour, please do tell—can this please Allah and His Messenger? Does it please you, or the state?

Your Honour, do you accept these acts—acts that even Satan, even Satan, Your Honour, is ashamed of?!"

The judge seemed taken aback—perhaps by the slippers flipped on the stand—but he also seemed to accept her audacity, having allowed her pleading. She turned to Faqih Mabrouk in reprimand:

"If you're truly a man, tell the judge the truth. Tell him why the little girl ran away from you. Tell him you're a demonic macho, a lady-killer. You think you're a stud, like one of them bulls." (Laughter in the courtroom)

“This girl is your granddaughter’s age, old man, and you want her to satisfy your whims. And when she says no, you beat her, lock her up, and starve her!”

She then turned to the courtroom again, pointing to a couple of women seated at the back:

“God be my witness. Your Honour, here are his other wives—testifying and filing for divorce from Mr Faqih Mabrouk, ending a miserable life!

And I ask you for a favour, Your Honour. This little girl is an orphan and has no custodian. I would like you to appoint one for her—and that custodian is myself. From now on, I’ll be her mum, dad, and family.”

The judge studied the slippers on the stand, while a consul whispered in his ear. He then ruled for a divorce for the “little girl”, reserving all her rights. The prosecution accepted the motion for divorce filed by Faqih Mabrouk’s two wives.

Now, who else would have dared—within that patriarchal rural community—to convince three wives of their just cause, and notify a Sharia courtroom and its firm judge of the suffering of women in general, and poor ones in particular, but Aunt Gazala?!

It took me forever to realise how influential Aunt Gazala truly was when it came to the business of women—whether it concerned their social or economic status. She was the one who guaranteed work for poor townswomen in the farmlands, and she was the one claiming their rights when landowners violated them. She was also the one

overseeing matchmaking, circumcision, and even divorce, when needed.

I also came to understand that flipping slippers and shoes in the courtroom signified that the husband had demanded perverse sexual acts—such as anal sex—which, as far as I know, is forbidden in Islam and is also a social taboo.

And what I also knew, in time, was that the judge who listened to Aunt Gazala's defence and took the side of the complaining wife—was my father.

.....

Had it not been for the invention and spread of radio, Aunt Gazala would have become the foremost news agency in the region—where news turns into a dazzling affair.

With her country colloquialism, she would retell the BBC news or *Sawt al-Arab* (Voice of the Arabs) with her own seasoning and flavouring—so it became hers.

As soon as she entered Uncle Bin Jarid's shop—the hub of social, moral, and economic affairs in the village—unveiled and dressed in casual traditional garments, neighbouring shopkeepers, a few retirees, and the Seega-playing "old folks" would gather around her, listening to the news and analysis in her own way.

She paid no attention to Bin Jarid, who would reach for the radio on the counter as soon as she entered, harassing and welcoming her joyfully:

"Gazala or *Huna London*!?"

And the audience would raise their voices:

“London? Spare us the English lies—Gazala is better than a thousand *Huna London*!”

At the corner, Uncle Salim sits facing the tea kettle, as usual, as it boils on the Primus stove. He serves a foamy shot to Aunt Gazala:

“One syrupy tea for Auntie Gazala!”

Aunt Gazala, sitting with a confidence “superior even to an MP”—to quote Uncle Salim el-Kannas—holds both the shot and her comments. She sets the glass aside and pulls the silver snuff tin from the folds of her *rida’*, takes a pinch of the wondrous snuff, lands it on both nostrils, and inhales so deeply that her head begins to shake, her body wobbling as though she were working a sieve.

This is followed by quick, consecutive sneezes. She wipes her nose with a tissue pinned to the tip of her *rida’*, and exhales:

“Ah, now I can see you!”

She begins sipping the saccharine red tea and applauds Uncle Salim, adding her special touch:

“Great handiwork on the tea, Sluma! If only you could stop those hands from hitting your wife, fool!”

She then launches into the special news, as Salim el-Kannas interrupts—standing by the door with his chin resting on the top of a large broom, nitpicking:

“When people sneeze, they say Alhamdulillah! (Praise be to Allah!)”

She lashes back without looking at him:

“This is a snuff sneeze. People don’t praise Allah for it.”

Uncle Salim el-Kannas, as mentioned, is a worthy opponent of Aunt Gazala when it comes to reporting the news. It is from this rivalry, I believe, that her careful morning reporting truly emanates.

She would memorise the news verbatim and retell it playfully—so much so that it reached the ears of Teacher Mabrouka, who would berate us whenever we failed to recite a *Surah*, saying:

“Gazala, who neither reads nor writes, memorises things better than you lot!”

Indeed, Aunt Gazala benefits from a sharp memory and wit, but she faces an agonising problem. It’s not the newly graduated male nurse, nor the visiting doctor from Egypt—who comes once a week—who made young women stop seeking her medical care, though they had long relied on her herbs for pregnancy and menopause.

What truly disturbs her is the presence of the nurse’s wife, an obstetrician. This could mean she is a certified midwife with a decent state salary.

But that isn’t the only thing bothering her. What certainly galls her is how pleased the townswomen are with the newcomer, who prescribes the *ricetta* to pregnant and postpartum women, allowing them to collect their medicine from the city *farmacia*.

The *ricetta* was, according to the women, prescribed by the midwife in *Italiano*—which Aunt Gazala deemed untrue. She insists that the nurse (the midwife’s husband) is the one prescribing the drugs for her patients.

This wouldn’t soften the blow for Aunt Gazala. She was unprepared for unexpected defeats—having remained undefeated until now.

.....

“Today, Aunt Gazala, is Lesson Two.”

Lesson One—having lasted more than a month—was dedicated solely to writing the alphabet, letter by letter, and pronunciation.

Lessons Two, Three, and Four were devoted to writing the first half of the Basmala: In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.

She protested affectionately:

“Oh no, dear, you’re coming on too strong. If it’s only a matter of In the Name of Allah, that’s easy—here I am saying it.

But don’t force me to write it down. Oh no, this one is hard and needs time…”

“What’s the rush? And what about those curved things—one time you say they come with three dots, next time they come with nothing!” (She refers to the letters sīn and šīn.)

“Pick a lane, kid!”

“As you wish, Aunt Gazala, we’ll put off the *Basmala* writing.

Now then, let’s see how we write your name! Your name consists of six letters: G, A, Z, A, L, A.

When we bring them together, we get a beautiful name, written like this… Gazaaaala.”

Once I began explaining the function of *Aleph*, especially how it follows other letters, I noticed how Aunt Gazala hated *nuqats* (dots), dismissing them as childish nonsense.

And so, she would copy her name without dots.

"Where are the dots, Aunt Gazala!?"

"As though the world would come to an end if I didn't write those dots. Besides, everybody knows my name. Just teach me the difficult letters. Let the dots wait—they're not going anywhere!"

"You have a beautiful name, Gazala. What's lovelier than a *gazala* (a gazelle)? So you must write it properly."

My mother's intervention, diplomatic and endearing, would soothe her and make her less resistant.

One time, I made a terrible mistake when I applied letters to names. Unawares, I wrote in large letters: (S) Salma, (S) Salem, (S) Salim.

Then I read: "Salma came. Salem came. Salim came!"

"Who is this Salim, and what have I got to do with him—whether he comes or not?! You couldn't find another name but this dreadful one?!"

In the early days, I wouldn't dare look into her face and study it. Sometimes she'd doze, and I'd let her nap, gazing at a sunny face with delicate features that bore no resemblance to the conscious intensity that followed.

Each time, I'd puzzle over whether to wake her or let her sleep; if I dared wake her, God knows what her reaction would be.

So I let her sleep.

And when she got up, she'd rebuke me:

"I'm here to learn or sleep! Focus, kid—and get me to focus as well!"

Then she'd call out to my mother:

"Hajji, could you please get me a shot of green tea!"

As it stood, something was wrong. She had learnt how to write her name—dots included—and memorised *Al-Fatihah*, *Al-Nas*, *Al-Falaq*, and *Al-Ikhlas*.

Granted, she'd incorporate colloquialism into *Ayahs*, as she did with *Al-Ikhlas*, changing "He begets not, nor was He begotten" to "He ain't birthed none, and he ain't been born to none!"

Which made Mother blame me for my "recklessness and lack of seriousness", as she took over the teaching of Quran, and I devoted my lessons to Reading and Writing.

Aunt Gazala's morale was boosted. My mother blessed her, and even my father wished her well and prayed she'd visit the holy Kaaba.

However, Aunt Gazala wasn't entirely satisfied. I noticed how distressed and dismissive she was during Reading and Writing lessons. I didn't dare ask what was wrong—I was waiting for her to pour her heart out.

Finally, she confronted me in front of my mother:

"Listen here—and your mum is listening," she said, turning to my mother,

“Hajji, tell your daughter: first, she must spare me these useless scribbles—those Fatḥah, Ḍammah, and Kasrah! I want her to teach me useful stuff. I need to know how to read and write prescriptions for pregnant and postpartum women, in Arabic and Italian.

If we’re talking Quran, thank Allah, I’ve now memorised a couple of *Surahs* to pray with. All I need is to know how to answer the angels—Kur bin Kur—when Lord Azrael collects his due and I lie in the grave!”

“In Italian!”

My Italian would sustain neither me nor Aunt Gazala.

Still, I understood why she was worried—and why she even felt prosecuted.

As for Kur bin Kur, and what should take place between her and them on the way to the grave, my hands were tied.

In truth, I didn’t even know who these gentlemen—Kur bin Kur—were.

“Don’t get cocky—and go easy on your aunt, love. We’ll all be six feet under, facing the two angels as they ask what we did and didn’t do.

What will you say, smartarse, when they ask you about my studies?!”

When the matter of the “two angels’ test” arose like a hanging sword over my head, I worked up the courage:

“Who are Kur bin Kur, Aunt Gazala?!”

Her eyes opened wide. She took out the snuff tin from her chest, took a long sniff, and looked down at me:

“Bloody hell! You don’t know who our lords *Kur* and *bin Kur* are?! Get up, come on! You—daughter of a Sheikh—and we’re to think you’re learning and teaching!”

What have I done to myself—and to Dad—I thought.

Nevertheless, I pretended:

“I know who they are, but I forgot their names!”

She was condemning my ignorance of *Kur* and *bin Kur* with delight—a pleasure drawn from a student topping the teacher:

“When you’re buried, our lords *Kur* and *bin Kur* will come and ask whether you’ve taught your Aunt Gazala how to prescribe the *ricetta*.

What will you tell them, lady know-at-all?

Will you tell them Aunt Gazala doesn’t know dotting?

Education, my foot!”

For the record, Aunt Gazala did not perform the hajj, and Hajji here is only honourific.

Still, she brought joy to our evenings—my mother’s and mine—except for the urgency of learning Italian, supposedly essential for writing prescriptions for whomever remained of her patients.

My mother would soothe her, as though assuring a child, and say that once she had mastered her Arabic, she would find someone to teach her the language of efranja—the Europeans.

I was no longer afraid of her, but waited for her to arrive, spreading joy with her feisty demeanour.

Yet to me, Aunt Gazala's greatest accomplishment was destroying the witches that had been haunting my sleep.

Later, I would learn from Mother two serious pieces of information concerning the two angels.

First, *Kur* and *bin Kur* are two strict blue angels who conduct the initial interview with the deceased—immediately after burial—when everyone departs and leaves you alone, suffering the difficult test before the decision to move you to the realm of spirits, either to Heaven or Hell.

Second, *Kur*, as named by Aunt Gazala, is *Munkar*, and *bin Kur* is *Nakir*, and the *Sunnah* dictates that whenever we mention them, we must say "peace be upon them."

Other than that, whenever I thought of my first night in the grave, I would remember Aunt Gazala.

I think I would burst out laughing once I saw the two angels. I think they would laugh with me, and I might spend my first night having a nice chat with them—talking about Aunt Gazala, where no student in history could be funnier, naughtier.

And I believe, with the mood brightened, the two angels would gift me a one-way ticket straight to Heaven.

I believe I would find Aunt Gazala there, surrounded by the audience of Uncle Bin Jarid's shop, enjoying her tales of the small village and the shop and what she'd done to Faqih Mabrouk.

She might retell a BBC radio news bulletin—*Huna London*—holding the silver tin with a pinch of the miraculous powder between her fingers, which would eventually land on her nostrils.

And as usual, she'd keep on sneezing until her body shook all over.

Uncle Salim el-Kannas would turn to her and say sincerely,

"Bless you, Gazala."

She would kindly reply,

"May God bless you too, Hajji Salim."

As soon as she noticed me coming from a Heaven Garden, she'd get up and say:

"Oh, this is the girl I told you about. This is the one who taught me a couple of *Surahs* so I could go to Heaven.

If it weren't for her, I'd be burning.

But this little fox didn't teach me how to prescribe a *ricetta* in Italian!"