

CONTENTS

Code of the West	7
Shisha Love	19
Masculine Verbs	22
In The Event	35
Perfect Genes	43
Snake Eyes	51
Wingspan	63
New and Gently Used Hijab	72
If I'm Not Home	79
The Great Chicago Fire	94
Widow	99
Failed Treaties	113
American Dollars	119
Life Springs from the Dead Sea	124
Acknowledgments	

SHISHA LOVE

You used to smoke the shisha after a plate of your mother's stuffed cabbage, or at Souk on Taylor Street, together with your girlfriends. Now you smoke it when you're waiting for him to come home, after he's gone down on his Lithuanian girlfriend. She has a thin nose and blue eyes. You smell her on his breath—a scent strangely like papaya-flavored tobacco you smoked once.

His parents threatened to disown him if he married her, so he married you—a respectable arabiya who wears fashionable hijab and attends the Bridgeview Mosque fundraisers. You pretend you don't know about that woman and wait until he comes around and sees you can be just as sexy as her—and be his whore, too—though you've given birth twice in three years and your dimpled thighs and ass are not as firm as they used to be. Your stomach is no longer taut, your shriveled navel has lost its allure. Still, every night you loosen your long, wavy hair from a tight bun, letting it spill over your shoulders like the licorice juice your centenarian grandfather, Siddo Jaddallah, drinks once a day in the summertime.

In your eggplant and sage-hued kitchen, you prepare the shisha. You stand at the granite island and scoop the moist and fragrant black cherry tobacco from its round metal container. You store it in the back of the refrigerator so Musa doesn't get his plump hands on it when he's looking for his Jell-O Pudding cups. The coolness sharpens the flavor of the tobacco like menthol in a cigarette filter.

With a tablespoon, you delicately pack the tobacco into the small bowl. If you listen closely, you can hear it squish down into place, like footsteps in mud. You cut a square of aluminum foil to cover the tobacco bowl then pierce the surface with a toothpick. Tiny holes for ventilation emit shame and failure, opening up like pores in your olive skin, though everyone tells you men will be men.

He doesn't beat you, he doesn't gamble—Allah forbid.

What arrabi man is perfect?

He's a great father, Alhamdulillah.

He married you, after all. Count your blessings.

In the kitchen sink, you let the faucet run cold and fill up the glass water-base, shaped like an oversized perfume bottle—a stolen relic from the chambers of a concubine in a sultan's palace. The glass is the color of an emerald and embellished with gold laurels.

You attach the copper stem to the water-base then screw the tobacco bowl to the top of the stem, and connect the braided hose to its side. You wrap your fingers around the shaft, cradling the base in your other hand as you carry the shisha out to the balcony and carefully set it on the concrete floor. You sit on one of the wrought iron pub chairs—a pair with a matching table that you knew would be perfect for this space—to watch the cars whiz past on Wolf Road, and listen to the wailing horn of an evening commuter train as it deposits stragglers returning to the suburbs. You hear the crackling of their heels on gravel. They walk quickly to their cars, unlock the door, and speed out of the parking lot. The city skyline is a vague memory.

With tiny steel tongs, you lift two round charcoals from a red box called “Three Kings” with a picture of the Magi on camels, facing the horizon. You position the coals on the foil-covered tobacco bowl and ignite them with a butane mini-torch; sparks dance across their spheres.

As you wait for the coals to blaze into small setting suns, you head back inside and lean against the door where Musa and the baby sleep. Lena has finally suspended her two a.m. feedings—though you never really minded being pulled out of a half-empty bed. You slide the patio door shut behind you and settle on your chair, checking your cell phone for a text that he's on his way.

You look up as the night sky fills with stars. A breeze rushes across your cheeks and you take off your hijab because no one can really see your bare head from the street. You want to feel the coolness seep into your thick strands of your hair and caress your scalp. The charcoals flare up from the breeze like lava rocks then die down as hope tends to do.

You lift the hose and instinctively wipe the mouthpiece across your thigh even though you're the only who smokes from this it. If he were there, he'd ask for a disposable mouth tip despite other fluids you exchange, twice this month. He insists he doesn't want to catch a cold.

The first drag is supreme. It's like opening a valve and something more essential, more desperate than oxygen saturates your lungs. These spongy

oldest, slept perpendicular to him so that her feet sometimes touched Emad's when she stirred.

That woman in the car did not quite look like a whore to him—although Emad was not entirely sure what a whore might look like.

“If she were my sister, she'd be dead,” Hatim said, pointing an imaginary gun at the car with one squinted eye. He drew a bead then discharged, his hand jerking back as though a real bullet had ripped from a barrel.

“Who'd want to screw your sister?,” Emad joked.

Hatim was unsure whether to accept this as an insult or not. Tamer rubbed his ear and waited for his brother to respond.

“Kuss immak,” Hatim finally said. “Screw your mother.”

They all laughed this time and jumped to their feet and raced each other back to the camp.

* * *

The stench of sewage in the refugee camp was like rotten cabbage and it filled every pore and fiber of Emad's body. He closed the metal security door behind him when he entered his beit and the odor of the majarri still clung to him like a gauzy veil.

“Emad!” It was his sister Keeyan. She was home early from the medical clinic in Ramallah where she assisted nurses. She was the only one working since his father left them. “Wash up quickly! We need to talk.”

He rushed to the tiny washroom. His mother had wrapped an old dingy towel around the stem of the toilet to capture leaking water. The rim of the toilet bowl, which his mother vigorously scrubbed every morning, was stained brown. Emad flushed, hoping the chain would not come undone, and washed his hands.

He gazed at himself in the mirror, opening his mouth and examining his tonsils. There was a long crack in the glass that stopped abruptly below his right eye in the reflection. Several months ago, it had stretched to his right cheek, and a year ago it barely reached his jawline. He knew it would not be too long before the crack in the mirror split his entire face in two.

Emad put his ear to the bathroom door before pulling out the coins and setting them on the chipped sink. He knelt down and removed a piece of tile in the floor and lifted an old tin box for bandages, wrapped in cellophane. He and the boys had received enough money to pay an electric bill for their parents or to purchase shawarma sandwiches in town. He dropped the coins into the tin box and they rattled like heavy raindrops against the sheet metal

roof of his beit. He wrapped the box again in the crinkly cellophane and returned it to his hiding place.

At the square table flushed against one wall of the kitchen, his sister and mother were drinking tea with sage. A pot of mlookhiya and chicken simmered on the stove. The aroma of the leafy stew mingled with starchy rice.

Khamis wasn't home.

After she downed her glass and placed it in the sink, Keeyan pumped a small cloud of foamy hand sanitizer into her palm. It had a label containing words in Arabic, Hebrew and a language Emad didn't know. She brought bottles home from the clinic and insisted everyone apply the stuff as often as possible—except for Khamis, to whom she barely spoke. She inspected Emad's fingernails once a week before permitting him to go to bed.

Emad watched as Keeyan pressed her palms together and rubbed them in small circles before spreading the foam over the back of her hands, massaging her fingers and knuckles. Her body was shaped like plump fig, bottom-heavy with a narrow torso.

"Sayida Muna came into the clinic today," Keeyan said. She was Emad's science teacher at Ramallah School for Boys.

Keeyan hadn't taken off her hijab yet and it was wrapped tightly around her head as though it were second skin. Emad was used to seeing it frame her face than without it, and her complexion was light like his mother's. Emad was dark like his father from what he could tell in a few photographs of him that his mother had tucked away in a broken-down bureau in the room where he slept. His mother took one of Khamis's old school copybooks and wedged it under one side so it would not tilt. When he was younger, he would stand on his tiptoes and lean over the top drawer, examining the photographs without taking them out. He'd spread them above a layer of his mother's cotton underwear and prayer clothes. His face was round like his father's and they shared the same coal-black hair like a mist had permanently settled over it.

"She says she hasn't seen you for a week," Keeyan continued, her hands gripping her plump forearms on the table.

Emad's mother sat with one elbow propped on her palm, the other hand pressed against her cheek. "Where have you been, yamma?" his mother earnestly asked. Crow's feet were deeply stamped around her eyes and her lids drooped with resignation. She looked at Emad as though she were already

grieving another lost son.

There were only two chairs in the kitchen so he stood before the women, his face flushed with guilt and a tinge of anger when he thought of the other boys, believing they did not have to endure an interrogation concerning their whereabouts.

“Well? Where have you been?” Keeyan demanded. She placed a finger inside her hijab to scratch a spot above her ear and he wondered why she did not simply unfasten the fabric to free her head now that she was indoors.

He still did not answer. He knew Keeyan would give up after a few more tries. His eyes dropped to the corner of the kitchen floor where a cockroach was trying to squeeze into a crack in the wall. It tried several times before abandoning its plan and scuttled alongside the wall for a new route.

“Your education is important, ya Emad,” his sister declared. “I wish you could see that and make better choices.”

It sounded like she was repeating what Sayida Muna had told her. He imagined that conversation and the way she sounded different from the other female teachers like Sayida Amal or Sayida Nabiha. Sayida Muna was born in the United States, and she had an accent that Emad envied. It was an accent that instantly alerted people she was only a visitor—a temporary guest—with a passport stamped with an Israeli insignia because it was far more convenient to travel through Ben Gurion than wait hours to cross at the Allenby Bridge in Jordan.

When she spoke, she did not always roll her r’s and she sometimes forgot to conjugate a verb according to the masculine rule when she scolded a boy. He joined the rest of the class as it roared in laughter, yet he was secretly envious of such slips in language.

“You must return to school, yamma,” his mother said, gently pulling a tuft of hair near his forehead and drawing him closer to her. He could smell the fresh garlic in her fingertips that she had minced and added to the stew. “Tayib?”

Emad silently nodded.

“Alright then,” his mother said. “Let’s wait for Khamis just a little while more and then we’ll eat.” She hoisted herself from the table and lowered the flame under the pot on the stove. “Ya rubbi, give me strength.”

Outside the small barred window, the neighbor’s son was cursing members of his family for drinking the last bottle of cola.

* * *