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GIRLS OF RIYADH



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FINANCIAL TIMES

RAJAA ALSANEA

Girls of Riyadh
by
Rajaa Alsanea

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I

To: seerehwenfadha7et@yahoogroups.com

From: 'seerehwenfadha7et'

Date: February 13, 2004

Subject: I Shall Write of my Friends

Ladies and Gentlemen: You are invited to join me in one of the most explosive scandals and noisiest, wildest all-night parties around. Your personal tour guide – and that's *moi* – will reveal to you a new world, a world closer to you than you might imagine. We all live in this world but do not really experience it, seeing only what we can tolerate and ignoring the rest.

To all of you out there

Who are over the age of eighteen, and in some countries that'll mean twenty-one, though among us Saudis it means over six (and no, I don't mean sixteen) for guys and after menarche for girls.

To everyone out there

Who has got enough inner courage to read the naked truth laid out on the World Wide Web and the resolve to accept that truth, with of course the essential patience to stay with me through this insane adventure.

To all who have

Grown weary of the 'Me Tarzan You Jane' brand of romance novels and have got beyond a black and white, good and evil view of the world.

To anyone who believes

That $1 + 1$ may not necessarily be equal to two, as well as all

of you out there who have lost hope that Captain Majed* will score those two goals to reach a draw in the last second of the episode. To the enraged and the outraged, the heated and the hostile, the rebellious and the bilious, and to all of you who just know that every weekend for the rest of your lives will be a total loss – not to mention the rest of the week. It's for you; it's to you that I write my e-mails. May they be the matches that set your thoughts on fire, the lighter that fuels a blaze of change.

Tonight's the night. The heroes of my story are people among you, from you and within you, for from the desert we all come and to the desert we shall all return. Just as it is with our desert plants, you'll find the sweet and the thorny here, the virtuous and the wicked. Some of my heroes are sweet and others are thorny, while a few are a bit of both at the same time. So keep the secrets you will be told or, as we say, 'Shield what you may encounter!' And since I have quite boldly started writing this e-mail without consulting my girlfriends, and because every one of them lives huddled in the shadow of a man, or a wall, or a man who is a wall,† or simply stays put in the darkness, I've decided to change all the names of the people I will write about and make a few alterations to the facts, but in a way that will not compromise the honesty of the tale nor take the sting out of the truth. To be frank, I don't give a damn about the repercussions of this project of mine. As Kazantzakis put it, 'I expect nothing. I fear no one. I am free.' Yet a way of life has stood its ground in the face of all you'll read here; and I have to admit that I don't consider it an achievement to destroy it by means of a bunch of e-mails.

* A very popular cartoon for the 1990s generation of Saudi Arabian children. Translated from Japanese, it's a story of a boy trying to achieve his dream of becoming a football star.

† There is an Arabic proverb that says: 'Better the shadow of a man than the shadow of a wall.'

*I shall write of my girlfriends,
for in each one's tale
I see my story and self prevail,
a tragedy my own life speaks.
I shall write of my girlfriends,
of inmates' lives sucked dry by jail,
and magazine pages that consume women's time,
and of the doors that fail to open.
Of desires slain in their cradles I'll write,
of the vast great cell,
black walls of travail,
of thousands, thousands of martyrs, all female,
buried stripped of their names
in the graveyard of traditions.
My female friends,
dolls swathed in gauze in a museum they lock;
coins in History's mint, never given, never spent;
fish swarming and choking in every basin and tank,
while in crystal vessels, dying butterflies flock.
Without fear
I shall write of my friends,
of the chains twisted bloody around the ankles of beauties,
of delirium and nausea, and the nighttime that entreaty
rends,
and desires buried in pillows, in silence.*

Right you are, Nizar, baby! Your tongue be praised, God bless you and may you rest in peace. Truth be told, though you are a man, you are indeed 'the woman's poet' and if anyone doesn't like my saying so they can go drink from the sea and forever hold their peace.

My hair is now fluffed and teased, and I've painted my lips a shameless crimson red. Beside me rests a bowl of crisps

splashed with chili and lime. I'm ready to disclose the first scandal!

The wedding planner called out to Sadeem, who was hiding behind the curtain with her friend Gamrah. In her singsong Lebanese Arabic, Madame Sawsan informed Sadeem that the wedding music tape was still stuck in the machine and that efforts were being made to fix it.

'Please, tell Gamrah to calm down! It's nothing to worry about, no one is going to leave. It's only one a.m.! And anyway, all the *cool* brides these days start things on the late side to add a bit of suspense. Some never walk down the aisle before two or three a.m.!'

Gamrah, though, was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. She could hear the voices of her mother and her sister Hessah shrieking at the events manager from the other end of the ballroom, and the whole evening was threatening to turn out to be a sensational humiliation. Sadeem stayed at the bride's side, wiping beads of sweat from her friend's forehead before they could collide with the tears that were held back only by the quantity of kohl weighing down her eyelids.

The voice of the famous Saudi singer Muhammad Abdu finally blasted from the amplifiers, filling the enormous hall and prompting Madame Sawsan to give Sadeem the nod. Sadeem poked Gamrah.

'*Yalla*,* let's go.'

With a swift movement Gamrah wiped her hands along her body after reciting some verses of the Holy Qur'an to protect her from envious eyes, and raised the neckline of her dress to keep it from drooping over her small breasts. She began her descent of the marble staircase, going even more

* *Yalla* can mean 'c'mon' or 'hurry up' or 'let's go'.

slowly than at the rehearsal with her girlfriends, adding a sixth second to the five she was supposed to count between each stair. She murmured the name of God before every step, praying that Sadeem wouldn't stumble on her train causing it to tear, or that she wouldn't trip over the floor-length hem of her dress and fall flat on her face like in a comedy show. It was so unlike the rehearsal, where she didn't have a thousand women watching her every move and assessing every smile; where there was no annoying photographer blinding her every few seconds. With the blazing lights and all those dreadful peering eyes fixed on her, the small family wedding she'd always disdained suddenly began to seem like a heavenly dream.

Behind her, Sadeem followed her progress with utter concentration, ducking to avoid appearing in any of the photos. One never knows who might be looking at the photos from the bride's or groom's side, and like any decent girl, Sadeem wouldn't want strange men to see her in an exposing evening dress and full makeup. She adjusted the veil on Gamrah's head and gave a tiny jiggle to the train after each step Gamrah took as her radar picked up fragments of conversation at nearby tables.

'Who's *she*?'

'*Ma shaa Allah*,* God willing, no envy touch her, she's so pretty!'

'The bride's sister?'

'They say she's an old friend.'

'She seems a good girl – since we arrived I've seen her running around taking care of all sorts of things – it looks like she's carrying the whole wedding on her shoulders.'

'She's a good deal prettier than the bride. Can you believe

* *Ma shaa Allah* is an Islamic phrase that one says in order not to jinx someone's luck.

it, I heard that Prophet Mohammed used to send up prayers for the unlovely ones!’

‘God’s blessings and peace be upon him. *E wallah*,* must be true, because I swear, the ugly ones seem to be in demand these days. Not us, what bad luck.’

‘Is her blood pure? Her skin is so fair.’

‘Her father’s mother was Syrian.’

‘Her name is Sadeem Al-Horaimli. Her mother’s family is married into ours. If your son is serious, I can get you the details about her.’

Sadeem had already been told that three ladies had asked about her since the wedding started. Now she heard numbers four and five with her own ears. Every time one of Gamrah’s sisters came over to tell her that so-and-so had been asking questions, she murmured demurely, ‘May good health knock on her door.’

It seemed to Sadeem as if Gamrah’s marriage might indeed be ‘the first pearl to roll off the necklace’, as Auntie Um Nuwayyir put it. Perhaps now the rest of the girls would be just as lucky. That is, if they followed the plan Auntie had concocted.

The strategy of *yaaalla yaaalla*, which means ‘get going, but just *baaarely*’, is the most foolproof path to a quick marriage proposal in our conservative society. The idea is to be energetic and constrained at the same time. ‘And after that you can be as foolish as you want,’ according to Um Nuwayyir’s counsel. At weddings, receptions and social gatherings where ladies meet, especially the *old* ladies looking to make a match (or ‘capital funds and mothers-with-sons’, as we girls like to call them), you must follow this strategy to the letter: ‘You *barely* walk, you *barely* talk, you *barely* smile, you *barely* dance, be

* *E Wallah* means swearing in God’s name that something is true.

mature and wise, you always think before you act, you measure your words carefully before you speak and you do not behave like a child.’ There is no end to Um Nuwayyir’s instructions.

The bride took her place on the magnificently decorated platform. Her mother and the mother of the groom mounted the stairs to congratulate her on the happy marriage she had embarked on and to have their photos taken with the bride before the men came in from where they were celebrating in an adjoining room.

At this traditional Najdi wedding, where most people spoke in the dialect of the country’s interior, Lamees’s sophisticated west coast Hijazi accent stood out as she whispered to her friend Michelle.

‘Hey! Check her out. The pharaohs are back!’ The influence of Lamees’s Egyptian grandmother was always readily apparent in Lamees’s sharp tongue and manner.

She and Michelle studied the heavy makeup that coated the face of their friend Gamrah, especially her eyes, which had turned the colour of blood from all the kohl seeping into them.

Michelle’s real name is Mashael, but everyone, including her family, calls her Michelle. She answered Lamees in English.

‘Where the hell did she get that dress?’

‘Poor Gammoorah,* I wish she had gone to the dressmaker who made Sadeem’s dress instead of this mess she came up with herself! Just look at Sadeem’s gorgeous dress, though – anyone would think it’s by Elie Saab.’

‘Oh, whatever. Like there’s even one lady in this provincial crowd who would know the difference! Do you think anyone has any clue my dress is by Badgley Mishka? By God, her makeup is painful! Her skin is too dark for such a chalky

* A rephrasing of her name to make an affectionate nickname.

foundation. They've made her practically blue – and look at the contrast between her face and her neck. Ewww . . . so vulgar!

'Eleven o'clock! Eleven o'clock!'

'It's one-thirty.'

'No, you idiot, I mean, turn to your left like the hands of a clock when it's eleven – you will never get it, will you – you'll never pass Gossip 101! Anyway, check out that girl – she's got "talent", all right!'

'Which "talent" – front bumper or back?'

'Are you cross-eyed? Back, of course.'

'Too much. They ought to take a chunk off her and give Gamrah a dose on the front, like that collagen stuff everyone is using.'

'The most "talented" of all of us is Sadeem – look at how feminine she looks with those curves. I wish I had a back bumper like hers.'

'I think she really needs to ditch a few pounds and work out like you do. *Alhamdu lillah*, thank God, I never gain weight no matter how much I eat, so I'm not worried.'

'What luck for you, I swear. I live in a state of permanent starvation to keep my body looking like this.'

The bride noticed her friends sitting at the table nearby, smiling and waving their arms at her while they tried to cover up the question that lurked in their eyes: '*Why isn't it me up there?*' Gamrah was ecstatic, almost intoxicated with this precious moment. She had always seen herself as the least favoured of any of them, but now here she was, the first of all to get married.

Waves of guests started coming up to the dais to congratulate the bride, now that the photography session was over. Sadeem, Michelle and Lamees all stepped up and hugged Gamrah while whispering something into her ear: 'Gamrah,

wow! *Mashaa Allah*, God's will be done! So-o-o gorgeous! The whole evening I've been praying to God to take good care of you.' 'Congratulations, sweetie! You look great – that gown is stunning on you!' 'My God, girl, you're spectacular. A vision! Best-looking bride I've ever seen.'

Gamrah's smile grew broader as she listened to her friends' praise and noted the envy half hidden in their eyes. The three of them posed for photographs with the happy bride. Sadeem and Lamees started dancing around her while the eyes of all those older women who devote themselves to arranging marriages were glued to all of their bodies. Lamees was proud to show off her distinctive height and her gym-toned body, and she made sure to dance slightly apart from Sadeem, who had expressly warned her beforehand against dancing next to her so that people wouldn't compare their bodies. Sadeem was always longing to have her curves liposuctioned so that she could be as slim as Lamees and Michelle.

Suddenly the men came shooting through the doors like arrows, the fastest arrow of all being the groom, Rashid Al-Tanbal, who headed straight for his bride on the dais. The women retreated en masse, desperately searching for whatever they or their friends had that would conceal their hair and faces – not to mention any other revealing body parts – from the eyes of those men on the march.

When the groom and his companions were just steps away, Lamees yanked up the corner of the tablecloth to cover her cleavage. Her twin sister Tamadur used a shawl that matched her dress to cover her hair and open back, while Sadeem whipped on her black embroidered *abaya** and silk veil, enveloping her body and the lower half of her face. Michelle, though, remained Michelle: she stayed exactly as she was and

* An *abaya* is a long, loose black robe worn on top of clothes whenever a woman is outdoors.

eyed the men one by one, paying no attention to the mutterings and truly sharp stares that she drew from some of the women.

Rashid ploughed towards the stage along with Gamrah's father, her uncle and her four brothers. Each man tried to download as many female faces as he could onto his mental hard drive, while the ladies, for their part, were staring at Gamrah's uncle, in his forties, who bore an unmistakable resemblance to the handsome poet Prince Khalid Al-Faisal.

When Rashid reached his bride, Gamrah, he flipped the veil back from her face as his mother had rehearsed with him, then took his place by her side, giving way for the rest of her male relatives to pass on their good wishes to her. He settled himself next to her and then the other men crowded around them to congratulate the couple on their blessed, auspicious and fortunate marriage.

The voices of the bride's friends floated upward in the ballroom's hot air. '*A thousand blessings and peace be upon you, beloved of Allaaaaah, Mohammed!*' the bride's friends chanted, and the piercing sound of women's trills filled the room. The men, except for the groom, soon left the place, heading home as their part in the females' celebration was over and their own celebration – which was only a big dinner – had finished before the females' party even started. The couple, followed closely by every female relative, headed towards the food tables to cut the cake.

It was then that Gamrah's friends started chanting at the top of their voices. 'We want a kiss! We want a kiss!' Rashid's mother smiled and Gamrah's mother blushed red. As for Rashid, he sent the girls a scathing stare that sliced them into silence. Gamrah cursed her friends under her breath for embarrassing her in front of him, and cursed him even more for embarrassing her in front of her friends by refusing to kiss her!

Sadeem's eyes welled with tears as she watched her childhood friend, her Gamrah, leave the ballroom with her new husband to go to the hotel where they would spend the night before heading off for a honeymoon in Italy. Immediately after the honeymoon they would leave Riyadh for the United States, where Rashid was to begin studying for a PhD.

Among the group of four girls, Gamrah Al-Qusmanji was closest to Sadeem, as they had been classmates since primary school. Mashaal Al-Abdulrahman – or Michelle, as we knew her – didn't join them until the second year at middle school, after she returned with her parents and little Meshaal – or Misho, as everyone called her younger brother – from America. Her father had gone to college there, at Stanford University, where he met their mother. After college he stayed in America for a few years to work and start his family. Only a year after Michelle came back to her home country to live, she transferred to a school where all the classes were taught in English. She simply didn't have the command of Arabic that she needed in order to attend Sadeem and Gamrah's school. At her new school, she got to know Lamees Jeddawi, who became her closest friend. Lamees had grown up in the capital city of Riyadh, but, as her last name implied, her family was originally from Jeddah – a port city with a long tradition of bringing together people from many places and therefore the most liberal city in the kingdom. Gamrah's family was originally from Qasim, a city known for its ultraconservative and strict character. Only Michelle was not from a well-known family tribe linked to a certain region.

In college, Sadeem studied business management, while Lamees went to medical school.* Michelle decided on computer science. Gamrah, the only one among them who wasn't

* Unlike in the West, medical school started right after high school and lasted for seven years.

so keen on her studies in high school, needed to use pull from several family friends to get accepted to college to study history, one of the easy fields to get into in college. But she got engaged a few weeks after the term started, and she decided to withdraw in order to devote herself full-time to planning the wedding. Since she would be moving to America right after the wedding anyway so that her husband could finish graduate school there, it seemed like an especially good decision.

In her room at the Hotel Giorgione in Venice, Gamrah sat on the edge of the bed. She rubbed her thighs, legs and feet with a whitening lotion of glycerine and lemon that her mother made for her. Her mother's Golden Rule was spinning in her mind. *Don't be easy*. Refusal – it's the secret to activating a man's passion. After all, her older sister Naflah didn't give herself to her husband until the fourth night, and her sister Hessah was more or less the same. But she was setting a new record: it had been seven nights and her husband hadn't touched her. Rashid hadn't touched her even though she had been quite ready to ditch her mother's theories after the first night, when she took off her wedding dress and put on her ivory-coloured nightgown (which she'd put on quite a few times before the wedding, in front of the mirror in her room, provoking the admiration of her mother, who had murmured God's name over and over to ward off envy as she gave her daughter a few suggestive winks). Her mother's delighted approval had filled Gamrah with confidence and pride, even though she knew that the expression on her mama's face was a bit overdone.

But on her wedding night she came out of the bathroom to find him . . . asleep. And although she almost could have sworn that he was faking it, a theory her mother dismissed in

their last telephone conversation as ‘Satan’s evil whisperings’, she agreed to devote all of her energy to ‘leading him on’, especially since her mother had recently announced to her on the phone that the policy of withholding had decidedly backfired in this case.

Since Gamrah’s marriage to Rashid, her mother had got bolder about discussing ‘the business of men and women’. In fact, before her marriage contract was signed, her mother hadn’t talked about such matters at all. Afterwards, though, Gamrah got immersion training in the art of seduction from the same woman who had ripped pages out of the romance novels Gamrah used to borrow from her friends at school, and who wouldn’t even let Gamrah go over to her friends’ houses, with the exception of Sadeem’s, after Gamrah’s mother had got to know Sadeem’s aunt Badriyyah quite well through several social circles among other ladies of the neighbourhood.

Gamrah’s mother was a firm believer in the theory that, if left unattended, ‘woman is to man as butter is to sun’. But her strong convictions that girls should be utterly naive and guys should be experienced melted away in an instant the moment the girl had that marriage contract. As for Gamrah, she started listening to her mother’s anecdotes and treatises on ‘the enterprise of marriage’ with the heightened enjoyment and sense of pride of a young man whose father offers him a cigarette to smoke in front of him for the first time.

2

To: seerehwenfadha7et@yahoogroups.com

From: 'seerehwenfadha7et'

Date: February 20, 2004

Subject: The Girls Rally Round Gamrah's Big Day, in Their Own Way

First, I have a little message for the following gentlemen: Hassan, Ahmad, Fahad and Mohammed, who made my day with their earnest serious e-mail inquiries.

The answer is: Uh-uh! Forget it, guys . . . no, we cannot 'get to know each other'.

Now that I have applied my signature bright red lipstick, I will pick up the story where I left off last week.

After Gamrah's wedding her friends lined up the petite keepsake clay jars engraved with the names of the bridal couple alongside the other souvenirs they had collected from other friends' weddings. Every last one of Gamrah's girlfriends was secretly hoping that the keepsake from her own wedding would be the next one to be added.

Well before the wedding, their little clique – the *shillah* – had made special preparations for its own intimate pre-celebration celebration. The idea was to put on something like the bachelorette party that, in the West, friends of the bride throw for her before the nuptials. The girls weren't interested in doing a DJ party, because these days, that was becoming as common

as sand. Besides, a DJ party meant that it would have to be a positively massive dance party that might even have involved hiring a professional local *taggaga*, a female singer, the kind that once upon a time just had a drum backup but now might have a whole band. They would need to send out invitations to every one of their girlfriends and female relatives and everyone that anyone knew, while pretending to keep the bride in the dark the whole time. And, of course, the little *shillah* of friends hosting the party would be burdened with all of the expenses, which would mount up to nothing less than several thousand riyals.

But Gamrah's friends wanted to do something new. They wanted to come up with something so bold and so much fun that others after them would imitate it, and then it would become a trend, and everyone would know who had invented it.

Gamrah arrived bright red in the face – and scarlet all over her body – because she had just come from a scrubbing at the Moroccan *hammam* as well as having the hair plucked from all over her face with a thread and from her body with sticky sugar-paste *halawa*. They were all to meet at Michelle's house. The hostess greeted them wearing baggy trousers with lots of pockets and an oversized jacket – gear that artfully concealed any sign of femininity – plus a bandanna that hid her hair. To top it all off, she had on a pair of coloured sunglasses that gave her the appearance of an adolescent boy who has escaped parental surveillance. Lamees wore a masculine-style flowing white *thobe* with a *shimagh* draped over her head and kept in place with a snugly fitting black *eqal*.^{*} With her height and athletic body she really did look like a guy, and a handsome

^{*} Saudi men's garments; a *thobe* is a long white loose dress, while a *shimagh* is a red and white triangular-shaped cloth worn on the head topped by an *eqal* to hold it in place. An *eqal* is a thick round, ropelike sash. Nowadays the *shimaghs* and *thobes* are designed by such famous names as Gucci, Christian Dior, Givenchy and Valentino.

one, too. The rest of them were wearing embroidered *abayas*. But these *abayas* weren't the loose teepees that you see women wearing on the street. These were fitted at the waist and hips and they were very attractive! With the *abayas*, the girls wore black silk *lithaams* that covered everything from the bridge of their noses to the bottom of their throats, which of course only emphasized the beauty of their kohl-lined eyes, their tinted contact lenses and their outlandish glasses all the more.

Michelle had an international driver's licence. She took charge: she drove the BMW X5 SUV with its dark-tinted windows. She had managed to rent it through one of the car showrooms by putting the rental in the name of her family's male Ethiopian driver. Lamees took her place next to Michelle while Sadeem and Gamrah climbed into the backseats. The CD player was on full blast. The girls sang along and swayed their *abaya*-clad shoulders as if they were dancing on the seats.

Their first stop was the famous café in Tahliya Street. But when Michelle parked the vehicle, the SUV's darkened windows gave them away in an instant: since tinted car windows are only used when women who need to be concealed are inside, all the guys in the vicinity, with their keen hunter eyes and their ready instincts, knew right off that the X5 had to be a priceless catch.* They jumped in their cars and surrounded the jeep on both sides. After the girls got the drinks they wanted from the drive-through, the entire parade started to move towards the big shopping mall in Al-Olayya Street, which was the girls' second stop. Meanwhile, the girls were taking down as many phone numbers as they could. They did not have to work very hard, because these numbers

* An expensive car with completely tinted windows can belong to a man who does not want his wife and daughters exposed to the eyes of young men looking for fun. Nowadays, tinting is prohibited by Saudi law for security reasons.

were generously showered upon them by the guys. The girls could memorize those with catchy sequences and repeated digits as the guys stuck out their heads through their cars' windows while driving and kept repeating them for the girls to write down. The girls also copied from placards the guys had hung on the windows of their cars so that girls in neighbouring cars could see the numbers clearly. The truly bold knights among them held out personal business cards, passing them through the windows to be snatched up by the girls, who were every bit as brave as the aspiring Romeos.

At the mall entrance the girls got out. Behind them appeared a rush of young men, but they all came to a stop uncertainly in front of the security guard. It was his job to keep all unmarried men from entering the mall after the call to the *Isha* prayer that ushered in nightfall. The weaklings fell back, but one lone fellow summoned his courage and approached Michelle. With her lovely face and delicate features, which she was quite simply incapable of concealing in her eccentric attire, Michelle had stood out from the start as a girl who was possibly bold enough to be looking for adventure. The guy asked Michelle if she would allow him to go in with them as a member of the family, and he offered her a thousand riyals (which is about £135) for the privilege. Michelle was astonished at his nerve. But she accepted the deal without much delay, and she and her friends surged forward beside him as if he were one of their group.

Once inside the mall the young women split up into two groups, one made up of Sadeem and Gamrah, the other of Lamees, Michelle and the handsome young man.

His name was Faisal. Laughing, Lamees remarked that no guys these days had the old Najdi Bedouin names, like Obaid or Duyahhim. They all pretended they had one of those cool names like Faisal or Saud or Salman just to impress girls. The

good-looking guy laughed along with them, swearing that it was his real name, and invited the two girls to dinner at an elegant restaurant outside the mall. Michelle turned down the invitation. Before leaving them, in fulfilment of the agreement, he gave her two five-hundred-riyal notes after writing his mobile number on one of them and his full name on the other: Faisal Al-Batran.

Women in the mall had an annoying way of following Gamrah, Sadeem and the rest of the girls with their eyes. It didn't matter that their face veils were in place: the girls could feel the sharp and threatening challenge of the women's inspections. They felt uncomfortably that any one of those women might as well be saying to them, *I've worked out who you are, but you don't know who I am.*

That's the way things are here in the shops and the malls: guys stare at women for their own reasons, while women stare at each other just because they are *nosy!* And they have no excuse for it. A girl can't stroll about in the malls under the protection of God without being checked out thoroughly by everyone, especially her own kind, from her *abaya* to the covering over her hair to the way she walks and the bags she carries and in which direction she looks and in front of what merchandise she stops. Is it envy? The French playwright Sacha Guitry was so on the mark when he said, 'Women don't pretty themselves up for men: they do it to get back at other women.'

The girls made their way towards the elegant Italian restaurant they had picked out for dinner. After eating, they headed for a tiny shop that sold water pipes, or what we call the *sheesha* – otherwise known as the hookah or hubbly-bubbly. The girls bought enough *sheeshas* that they would not have to share, and each girl chose her favourite flavour of the water-pipe tobacco mixed with molasses and fragrant essences.

They spent the rest of the evening at Lamees's, inside a

small tent in the house's inner courtyard where her father and his friends retired to spend their evenings two or three times a week. The men would smoke the *sheesha* and hold conversations ranging from politics to their wives or from their wives to politics. As usual, though, the family had gone to Jeddah, their native city, for the summer holiday. Lamees and her twin sister, Tamadur, had stayed behind to attend Gamrah's wedding.

But the father's *sheesha* went with him wherever he travelled. Like many Hijazi men and women, he was addicted to it. So the girls set up the newly purchased *sheeshas* inside the tent and the maid got the coals going. The music blared and the girls danced and smoked and played cards. Even Gamrah tried smoking the *sheesha*, though it's considered inappropriate among Najdi females, after Sadeem convinced her that 'a girl doesn't get married every day'. She liked the grape-flavoured tobacco the best.

Lamees tightly fastened her spangle-edged, jingly scarf around her hips. As always, her dancing was exquisite: no one could possibly match her, especially as she shimmied to the strains of a recent version of Um Kulthum's song 'One Thousand and One Arabian Nights'. None of the other girls danced with her. For one thing, none of them could approach Lamees's perfection when she danced, but more importantly, they all loved to watch her. Now and then, they would come up with a funny name for a move she made. There was the 'blender' move, the 'juicer' move and the 'follow me' move. Lamees performed these sequences over and over to popular demand. As for the third reason why nobody joined her on the dance floor, Lamees, as they all knew well, would refuse to go on dancing unless she got a good dose of loud encouragement, whistles, clapping and cheers befitting her stature as Queen of the Dance Floor.

Lamees joined Michelle that night in consuming a bottle of expensive champagne. Michelle had filched it from her father's storage cellar, which held special drinks meant strictly for important occasions. After all, didn't Gamrah's wedding deserve a bottle of Dom Pérignon? Michelle knew a lot about brandy, vodka, wine and other such things. Her father had taught her how to pour him red wine with red meats and white wine with other dishes, but she didn't drink with him except on very special and rare occasions. Since drinking alcohol is forbidden in Saudi Arabia, as it's against Islamic law, Lamees had never before tasted any of these drinks, except once at Michelle's, and then she did not find the taste of whatever it was particularly pleasant. But, hey! After all, tonight the two of them were celebrating Gamrah's wedding! So she joined in with Michelle, since they wanted to make this evening special and unique in every way they could.

When the volume of the music soared, there wasn't a girl left in the tent who wasn't on her feet dancing. It was the famous Saudi singer Abdul Majeed Abdullah's song:

Girls of Riyadh, O girls of Riyadh,
O gems of the turbaned fathers of old!
Have mercy on that victim, have mercy
On that man who lies prone on the threshold.