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Opening Extract from...

Lyrics Alley

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Lyrics Alley

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I

Alhamdullilah, he was safe and the worst was over. Thank God, he was better today compared to yesterday – that was what everyone around her was saying, but Soraya was impatient. It was not enough that her beloved Uncle Mahmoud was recovering his appetite or talking to visitors about how the Korean War was likely to increase the price of cotton. Soraya wanted him as he was before, not weak and bedridden; she wanted him to be on his feet again, smiling and striding. Then they would slaughter sheep, or even a bull, to give thanks to his recovery, and beggars would crowd in through the gates of the saraya for their portion of cooked meat and bread. After that she would go back to school.

Soraya had been skipping school ever since the head of the family was taken ill; at a time like this she could not stay away. This evening, too, visitors were flowing in and out. Many of them had been before, and many would stay for supper. Today, Fatma and Nassir had come especially from Medani. It was Nassir's duty to be by his father's bedside; indeed, it was embarrassing that he had not come earlier. Soraya was delighted to see her older sister. They now sat on the steps of the garden, away from everyone else. Soon they would have to go and help prepare the supper trays for the men, but for now they could dawdle. The garden in front of them was shadowy and lush, and the warm air carried the repetitive croaking of frogs and the scents of jasmine and dust. Soraya glanced up and imagined that in the blur of stars and clouds there was the star she was named after; pretty, brilliant and poetic.

She turned to look at her sister, to gauge her mood. She wanted Fatma to be easy and generous when Nur came along. He would seek Soraya out as he always did, and tonight she

wanted Fatma to be lax as a chaperone, neither serious nor grown-up. Soraya could remember when Fatma was unmarried and the two of them went to Sisters' School every day with the driver, crossing the Umdurman Bridge, passing by the Palace, then turning right at the church. She remembered Fatma in her senior uniform, neat and vivacious, spluttering with laughter, screeching with her friends, her thin hair tightly held down with pins of different colours. She also remembered Fatma crying when she had to leave school, and how Sister Josephine had visited them at home to try and stop the wedding.

Fatma said, 'We shouldn't be here; we should be back there with my aunt frying the fish.' But she did not move to get up.

'You're a guest. No one will expect you to help.'

'Since when have I become a guest? In 1950 alone I came three times and each time I stayed over a month.' She had taken offence.

Soraya tried to sound apologetic. 'Everyone knows you must be tired after your journey from Medani. You can help out tomorrow.'

They were silent for a while, then Fatma said, 'Has anyone been talking about me? About me and Nassir?'

'What about?'

'About us taking so long to get here. We should have been here days ago.'

'Well, why weren't you? The day Uncle Mahmoud fainted and the doctor came and said it was a diabetic coma – that was last Tuesday!' Her voice carried the edge of accusation and her older sister folded her arms defensively.

'So I'm right, everyone has been talking about us.'

'Well, they were wondering.'

'You know what Nassir is like. He wakes up at noon and everything is an effort for him. He dithered and dithered: tomorrow we will travel to Umdurman, tomorrow we will leave. He couldn't decide. He had to do this first, he had to do that. Should we bring the children or leave them behind . . .' She lowered her voice. 'We

had no idea how long we would need to be here. We could be stuck here if Uncle Mahmoud gets worse, and then what? So he hesitated and the days passed.' She sighed and then said more sharply, 'If I had left him and came alone, which I could have done, it would have looked even worse!'

Soraya regretted this turn in the conversation. She did not want Fatma to be sullen and grumpy when Nur came. So now she said, 'At least you're here now. Stay as long as you can even when Uncle Mahmoud gets better – don't leave.'

Fatma smiled. It was a sad smile. Soraya felt lucky she was not marrying a lazy, useless man like Nassir. It was said that he was an alcoholic and that people cheated him, that they borrowed from him and never paid him back. It was sometimes hard to believe that he was the son of Uncle Mahmoud, and Nur's older brother.

Fatma said, 'At first I used to think that Nassir would change, but now I am just glad that we are away in Medani. If he were here, Uncle Mahmoud would be critical of him and make his life miserable. And Hajjah Waheeba has such a sharp tongue!'

'Well, maybe this is what he deserves.'

'But I don't want that for him! Maybe it's because he's my cousin that I feel soft towards him, but no matter how many faults he has, I don't want anyone to rebuke him, even his father and mother.'

It was as if Fatma had said something profound and strange, because they both went quiet. It occurred to Soraya that Fatma had fallen in love with her husband. The idea was startling and disgusting. She could remember Fatma weeping because she had to leave school. She had seen her sleepwalk, passive and cool, into this marriage, and now she had become so protective of Nassir.

Soraya stood up, straightened her tobe around her and strained to look at the direction of the gate to see if Nur was coming.

She said, 'I am the same age as you were when you left school and got married.'

'Don't worry, Soraya. When Sister Josephine came that day, Father promised her he would let you finish school.'

Would a promise given by the Abuzeid family to a headmistress be binding? But still, though she was a woman she was European, an Italian nun.

Soraya said, with a mischievous smile, 'But I did get a proposal of marriage.'

Fatma shrieked, 'And no one told me! I cannot believe it. It is as if Medani is at the end of the world, the way you people have forgotten me!'

This lively Fatma was the Fatma of long ago, the real young Fatma. Soraya laughed and put her arms around her sister.

'How can we forget you? How can *I* forget you? Don't you know how much I miss you?'

'You never visit me.' The reproach in her voice was sweet, without anger. She wanted reassurance, reassurance that marriage and distance had not changed anything between them.

Soraya understood this and her voice was loving, 'Because it's better for you to come here. You enjoy yourself, and there are more of us here.'

Every time Fatma was due to give birth, she came from Medani and stayed with their elder sister, Halima. In her first pregnancy, when her morning sickness was severe, she had stayed in Umdurman from her second month until forty days after giving birth.

'Anyway, anyway,' Fatma was impatient, 'tell me about this prospective bridegroom. He can't be from the family.'

Soraya smiled. 'You're right. His father is a friend of Uncle Mahmoud. His mother came and spoke to Halima. She said that her son is going away to study in London and then he wants to be an ambassador. When we get independence, he will be one of the first ambassadors of Sudan abroad. As if I want to travel!'

'You do, Soraya, you do.'

She did. Geography was a favourite subject. She gazed at maps and dreamt of the freshness and adventure of new cities. She loved travelling to Egypt, and how she didn't have to wear a tobe in Cairo. She wore modern dresses and skirts and so did

Fatma, and they went shopping in the evenings for sandals.

'You would make a good ambassador's wife,' Fatma said slowly, looking into a future, a possibility.

'Well, I have other commitments,' Soraya whispered as coquettishly as she could, making herself sound like an actress in a film.

Fatma laughed. 'What did Halima say to the mother of our future ambassador? How did she reject the proposal without offending her?'

'Guess!'

'She told her: "Soraya has already been spoken for by her cousin Nur".'

Fatma said the most beautiful words in a normal voice, without a smile. All the joy was her younger sister's and the anticipation that, within a few minutes, he would be here, sitting by her side under the stars.

Motherless child, too young to remember maternal love and milky warmth, too young to remember the anguish and strangeness of death ... Fatma remembered and told Soraya, made a mother myth for her. Halima, the eldest, put herself in the role of a mother to the two of them. Fatma resisted at first and was often awkward, but Soraya was docile. She was the pampered baby, loved, as Halima later told her, because while the women wailed over their mother's deathbed, she stood with a bit of hard bread in her hand, nappy sagging, her hair unkempt and her eyes innocent and wide. Over the years Soraya heard the story of their mother's premature death from an asthma attack over and over again. In her mind she saw their house burning with grief and loss while she, little and soft, toddled unscorched, like an angel passing through Hell.

A mother is a home, a hearth, a getting together. A wife is company and pleasurable details; expenditure and social contacts. Soraya's father, Idris Abuzeid, the younger brother of Mahmoud, quickly reverted to being a bachelor again. He was the

agricultural expert, more comfortable in the countryside than in town. He was also responsible for the financial accounts of the family, a behind-the-scenes position that suited his reserved, untalkative personality. Unlike his flamboyant, visionary brother, Idris counted the pennies, knowing they would become pounds, which he valued not because of what they could purchase – he was austere by nature – but because the piling up, the stacking, the solidity of wealth, was in itself satisfying. He never allowed a tenant to get away with a late payment or a debtor to default. He disliked the English, not because they had invaded his country, but because of the effort required to understand their different language and customs. At the same time, he was in no hurry for them to leave, for he admired them, most of the time, not for the modernity they were establishing but for the business opportunities they brought with them. Prudent, some would say miserly, Idris calculated the cost of remarrying and decided to remain a widower. Sore? A little, like any man in his situation. Often lonely, too, but a good wife was expensive and, though he was a difficult, heavy-handed father, he did not want to saddle his daughters with half-brothers and half-sisters.

The result was a dry and hollow home, a house Soraya did not particularly like to spend time in. She became a nomad. At every family occasion: wedding, birth, illness or funeral she would pack up and move to where the company was. No Abuzeid family gathering was complete without her. She spent so much time at Halima's teeming, noisy house that her children grew jealous.

Her eldest son once pushed Soraya and said, 'You are not my sister. Get out of our house!'

Soraya did not cry. She pushed him back, strong in the knowledge that Halima would always take her side. Motherless child – but loved even more for it. A princess with glowing skin and beautiful features; that smile and liveliness which made her popular at school; the bubbling generosity that made her give time, energy and gifts to others. But no, she was not silly like

Fatma, who let them snatch her out of school and into the arms of the no-good Nassir, to be banished to Medani. *How I would have escaped marrying Nassir, had I been Fatma*, Soraya wrote in her diary, a present from her friend Nancy. She wrote in English, so that if anyone opened it they would not understand.

One. I would have insisted on finishing school and persuaded Sister Josephine to come home and speak to Father long before the engagement was made public and it was too late for him to back out.

Two. I would have refused to leave Father, Halima and the whole of Umdurman. I would have turned down Nassir on account of his work being so far away.

Three. I would have spoken to Nassir himself and told him I did not want him and challenged him that a gentleman would not marry a girl against her will. But is he a gentleman?

Four. I would have threatened to commit suicide.

Writing that last sentence conjured up anger and a deep sense of injustice. Number one and number two were her best option. Sister Josephine before, not after, an engagement announcement. But would she, on her own, have thought of Sister Josephine?

Sister Josephine, now in her late forties, lean and energetic, was formidable in her white habit, white clothes and black flat shoes. Wisps of auburn hair sometimes drifted from her habit, blowing away the rumour that all nuns were bald. When she had unexpectedly visited their house, Halima did not know where to seat her. A European woman requesting to meet their father? Should she be seated in the women's quarters or in the men's salon? Halima decided to treat her like an honorary man and that was the right thing to do, as everyone confirmed later.

Sister Josephine did not smile at Idris, but she had a soft spot for Muslim girls with rich fathers. Fatma and Soraya were easy to teach, and the generous donations made by the Abuzeid family to the school were essential for the nuns to pursue their mission of providing free education to the poorest of the Catholic community. On learning that Fatma had been pulled out of school to get married, Sister Josephine had taken the Bishop's

Ford Anglia and crossed the bridge to Umdurman. Despite the dramatic nature of that visit – she rarely left the convent and school grounds, and it was not easy to get the Bishop's car at such short notice – she was unable to save her student. Yet her strident, pleading voice, her protest, her confidence that she was right (which increased Fatma's misery) left a deep mark on Halima, Soraya and the other young girls in the neighbourhood. Halima, who had never been to school at all, vowed that her daughters would continue. Even Idris, ruffled and flattered by this visit, reluctantly and solemnly promised that Fatma would be the last girl in the Abuzeid family to drop out of school and get married. Soraya could safely, and with relish, complete her school education. She could, every day except Friday and Sunday, wear her beloved uniform, which suited her so well. She could write and make her handwriting beautiful, and she could look down to look at her book, and up to look at the board.

Although biology and chemistry were her favourite subjects, Soraya loved reading romantic novels in which the heroine was beautiful and high-spirited. She relished drama and action. Halima thought it insular to shut off the world and read.

'It's as if you are telling people you don't want to chat to them,' she said.

Idris shouted at her the day he saw her bent over his newspaper. He snatched it out of her hands, because newspapers were written for men. Her late mother had never read the newspaper; she was illiterate. Halima, who could read a little, never did and Fatma's favourite subject at school had been maths. But for Soraya, words on a page were seductive, free, inviting everyone, without distinction. She could not help it when she found words written down, taking them in, following them as if they were moving and she was in a trance, tagging along. A book was something to hide, the thick enchantment of it, the shame, almost. When everyone was asleep, she would creep indoors, into stifling, badly lit rooms, with cockroaches clicking, to open a book at a page she had marked and step into its pulsating pool of words.

Books were scarce and precious. Nur lent her books, English novels he bought from Alexandria and Cairo. He would talk about a book for so long that she would know the whole story before even starting to read it. She had never read an English novel that he hadn't previously read. He was her introduction, and it delighted her that he always remembered her. True, she could not read Shakespeare like him, for he went to the prestigious Victoria College in Alexandria, and in Sisters' School the Italian nuns did not teach Shakespeare, yet he would narrate to her all the plays, his enthusiasm infectious and appealing. Arabic novels were not much easier to get hold of. The colourful covers with heavy-featured, buxom women were enough provocation for the nuns, so that a great deal of stealth was needed to pass a novel from one girl to another. Soraya relished the times she visited Uncle Mahmoud's second wife, Nabilah, because of the shelf of books in her living room.

An Egyptian city lady, Nabilah was everything that Soraya considered modern. Nabilah's elegant clothes were modelled on the latest European fashions, and the way she held herself was like a cinema star, with her sweeping hair and formal manners. Soraya cherished childhood memories of Nabilah and Mahmoud's wedding in Cairo, the first and only white wedding she had ever attended. Whenever she visited Nabilah, she would pour over the wedding album or stare at the framed wedding photographs hanging on the wall. When the time came for her and Nur to get married, they would have the first white wedding evening Umdurman had ever seen. This was her dream, and it came alive and thickened in Nabilah's rooms, which were filled with flowers and ornaments, a gramophone and, even more delicious, books and magazines.

Once, Soraya had entered Nabilah's sitting room to find her walking straight and slow, with a big book balanced on the top of the head. Startled by Soraya's presence, the book fell with a thud on the floor and Nabilah refused to explain why she had been doing such an odd thing, even though Soraya asked her. Another

time, she had walked in to find her reading to her daughter, both their heads bowed over a children's book. A surge of jealousy filled Soraya, flushing through her like fever. It was a sight she had never seen before, remarkably foreign and modern, something she wanted there and then with a deep, sick hunger.

The motherless child wanted Nabilah to befriend her and patronise her like everyone else did. Instead, that second wife, that other woman, was aloof and unwelcoming. Soraya, to some extent proud and sensitive, could be thick-skinned when it suited her.

'Can I take this novel?' she would ask, already drawing it to her chest.

Nabilah would pause and a blush would touch her cheeks, but before she could reply, Soraya would be heading to the door, pretending that permission had been granted. She would clutch the precious, lovely work and dart through the door.

A month ago, during chemistry, which Sister Josephine taught, Soraya's eyes had looked at the board and seen a blur of white chalk. Straining made her eyes water, and by the end of the lesson she was sniffing into a handkerchief.

'Maybe you need spectacles,' Sister Josephine said casually, even though only two girls in the whole school wore spectacles and they were both ugly. 'Ask your father to take you to the doctor for an examination.'

'I don't want to wear spectacles, Sister.'

'Your eyesight will get worse and worse and then you will not be able to read at all!'

This alarmed Soraya. She brooded on the matter, squinted and tested her vision on faraway objects. She developed a fear of blindness. '*Ask your father to take you to the doctor for an examination*.' But her father did not talk to her; most of the time he did not look at her, and to ask him for something, anything was preposterous. She asked Halima instead, but Halima trivialised the issue.

'Spectacles will make you look ugly. It's all that reading that's bad for your eyes.'

Soraya nagged like only she knew how to nag, confident that Halima would give in as she always did, and so Halima asked Idris for permission but he said no. No going to a doctor for an eyesight examination, no girl of mine will wear spectacles like a man.

'So hush about it . . .' Halima patted Soraya's back when she cried '. . . or else he will rise up against school itself and keep you at home. Hush now.'

The stars above were blurred and milky, but not Nur's face. He sat next to her on the steps of the veranda, so that she was in the middle, with Fatma on her right. It was nice to sit like that, surrounded and held by people she loved, the two who were away most of the time. She knew what it felt like to miss them, had bright, clear memories of the childhood they shared and was confident that one day they would return to Umdurman. Eventually, Nur would finish his studies and return to join the family business. Eventually, Uncle Mahmoud would give up on Nassir's agricultural efforts and recall him to Umdurman.

'I have so much to tell you about the poetry reading last night,' said Nur. 'It was so crowded that they ran out of chairs and made us younger ones sit on the grass!'

'You are wandering off while your father is ill,' scolded Fatma, 'and I am the one being criticised for arriving late from Medani.'

'Aunty Waheeba gave her a few words,' Soraya explained to Nur.

Fatma mimicked her mother-in-law's voice, 'Did you and your man come from Medani on foot?'

Nur laughed. 'She is occupied these days with all the people coming and going. It would have been worse if she had all the time for you!'

Fatma made a face at him and then became serious. 'How is Uncle Mahmoud this evening?'

'He's fine, almost his normal self. I am expecting him any minute to tell me that I should not delay my travel any longer

and that I should set off for school. The autumn term has already started.'

Soraya tried to keep the disappointment to herself. Of course she wanted her uncle to get better, but it meant Nur would leave. It was nice that he had been delayed and it was exciting, too, that Fatma had come unplanned. Normal, day-to-day life could sometimes be boring and empty. She preferred the warmth of people around her, their voices and chatter.

'Tell us about the poetry reading.'

She smiled at Nur. How many times had he told her about discussion forums, poetry recitals and political lectures? He was her link to the outside world, that world that was not for girls.

'Abdallah Muhammad Zein read his new poem. It is the strongest of his work and the most melodious. I copied it down and memorised it last night. I couldn't sleep because his words were in my head. It's the time we're living in; everyone talking about self-determination and independence and then a poet says it in another way. Listen. *I am Umdurman*.'

'Who is Umdurman?' laughed Fatma.

'Shush and listen.' Soraya understood who Umdurman was.

'*I am Umdurman. I am the pearl that adorns my land. I am the one who nurtured you, and for you, my son, will ransom myself. I am Umdurman, the Nile watered me and sought my side. I am the one on the western bank and Gordon's head was my dowry. I am Umdurman, I am this nation. I am your tongue and your oasis . . .*'

The three of them were stirred by the patriotic sentiments that the poem aroused. Even though the ties of the family to Egypt were strong and, politically, Uncle Mahmoud supported the union with Egypt, the younger generation carried a strong sense of their Sudanese belonging. Their glittering future was here, here in this southern land where the potential was as huge and as mysterious as the darkness of its nights.

'It's a beautiful poem,' Soraya said.

She wanted to cry because Nur had heard the words from the poet's mouth and she hadn't, and because exciting, transforming

things would happen and she would only hear about them and not be part of them, she who wanted to be at the centre of everything.

'It should become a song,' Fatma said, 'and then it would be easy to memorise. Even children could memorise it.'

'It's beautiful,' Soraya repeated.

'I wish I had composed it myself,' said Nur.

Soraya smiled. 'If you had written it or someone else did, what does it matter? The important thing is that it exists.'

'But it isn't mine.'

She remembered how, when he was younger, before going to Victoria College, he had loved to sing. He would sing at every family occasion, memorising poems and popular tunes, his voice sweet and hopeful. But when he sang at a wedding outside the family, the wrath of his elders descended upon him. He was shaming the Abuzeid family, they said, standing in front of strangers like a common singer; next, the audience would be tipping him! Soraya remembered him crying, when, as a consequence, his father punished him and forbade him from going out. She remembered his confusion and broken spirit, crying the way boys cry, with a lot of pain and little noise.

She said, gently, now, 'You will write your own poem. And it will be even better.'

'Come on you two, let's go,' said Fatma, standing up.

'Wait, I have something to give Soraya.' He took out a bulky packet from his pocket and opened it.

Fatma laughed as Soraya reached out her hand for the pair of spectacles.

'Where did you get them from?' Her voice was withdrawn because of Fatma's laugh and because Nur had acknowledged the imperfection in her.

'I had them made for you. Of course, you need to be tested yourself and you need a prescription that is especially for you but this will help for the time being.' For the time being. Until they got married and she would be free of her father's conservative restrictions. 'Try them,' Nur said.

'No.'

'Why not? Yalla!' Fatma adjusted her tobe, impatient to leave the garden and go back to the hoash.

'Later,' said Soraya. 'When I am alone I will try them on.' She touched the thick black rims. Later, in front of a mirror, she would try them on.

'She doesn't want you to see her wearing them,' said Fatma.

'Keep quiet!' said Soraya.

'Soraya's pretty,' Nur said to Fatma. 'The prettiest girl.' Fatma folded her arms and raised her eyebrows. He looked at Soraya, who sat with her head bowed, spectacles on her lap. 'Nothing can take away from her prettiness. And actually, the glass of the spectacles is going to make her eyes look even wider.'

Soraya could not help but smile.

'Yalla, try them.' His voice was warm with encouragement. 'Give them to me.'

He put them on her, his fingers playfully pinching her earlobes and brushing against her hair. The new heaviness on her face and a grip on her nose; everything seemed a step away and yet so much clearer. On the peripheries, sideways down and up, the familiar fuzziness, but in the centre everything was in focus. She looked across the garden and saw the bougainvillea, the camphor tree and closer, on the veranda, bright and clear, the huge pots of flowers. She looked up, and the stars were distinct and piercing. Oh, how she had missed this clarity! She turned and looked at Nur. He had a cut on his chin from shaving but she knew that smile and glowing eyes; that pride in her.

She turned to look at Fatma and asked, 'How do I look?'

'Ugly,' said her sister, 'plain ugly.'

The three of them were laughing as they walked back to the hoash. They could hear Waheeba's voice call out.

'Nur! Nur, your teacher is here.'

'I can smell the fish.' Fatma started to quicken her pace. 'She's started frying and I'm not there to help her!'