

Hidden

MIRIAM HALAHMY

Holiday House / New York

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For the Halahmy family,
who told me their stories of Iraq

Remember me when I am gone away,
Gone far away into the silent land;
When you can no more hold me by the hand . . .
From "Remember" by Christina Rossetti



Do not wrong a stranger or oppress him;
remember you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Exodus 22:21



1. Hoodies on the High Street

School's out and I'm waiting for Kim when my phone bleeps. *Can't cum shppng. Gran sick. Soz.* So I'm stuck here on the High Street on my own, my best friend since forever sucked back into her superhuge family. I need a new top but I've got hardly any money left and Mum wants me home in one hour max, because since she broke her leg she expects me to do everything. Even clean the toilet.

"I'm not fifteen until May," I yelled at her earlier.

But she just said, "Save it. You'll find the bathroom cleaner under the sink."

"Might as well sell me into child slavery," I muttered, because since we've not been getting along, well not getting along even worse than usual because she broke her leg (which for the record wasn't my fault), it's just not worth winding her up. I try to think thoughts these days instead of actually saying them out loud, because you know how it is, everything you say out loud gets taken down and used as evidence, or recorded on cell phone and loaded onto YouTube, so everyone can view it. Well that's how it feels anyway.

I don't care about shopping anymore. It's not much fun by yourself. The shops are full of girls from school hanging out with their boyfriends and they're trying on the jewelry. Yes, the

boys I mean, they're trying on the bracelets and stuff and the girls are screaming and laughing.

"Let's face it, Alix Miller," I say to myself, "you haven't even got a boyfriend." It's the Spring Rave on Saturday night at school and I've got no one to go with, again.

I pull my hair band out and drag my hair back more tightly, wishing I had enough money for one of those sparkly vests that look great with shorts and black tights. I walk back to the bus stop feeling completely miserable. When I get near, there's a crazy commotion just in front of me. Some boys are hooting and jeering. I can't make out what they're saying at first but as I get nearer I hear them yell, "Paki, Taliban, terrorist!"

I see Samir, the foreign boy from school. The hoodies have got him jammed up against a wall and they've begun chanting, "Paki out, Taliban out. Out, out, out!" They're really pushing their voices and shoving their arms like football hooligans.

People are crossing the street to avoid them and muttering into their shopping bags. The wind gusts all the takeout rubbish around our feet and whips back one of the gang's hoods from his head. I recognize Terrence, Lindy Bellows's big brother, who's a real thug, and a horrible feeling sinks into the pit of my stomach. No wonder Samir looks totally scared to bits. Samir's a bit taller than me and his black hair spikes up over his head making him look even more scared. He's wearing an Arsenal football scarf and his face is sort of pulled in as though he's trying to disappear.

Remember what I said about YouTube? All those thoughts that I try to keep in? Well, suddenly I'm shouting, "Leave him alone, pick on someone your own size!"

The gang turns and Terrence snarls, "Shut it, Alix! Unless you want some." God! He knows my name. Uh-oh! I'm in train-

ing for the Junior County Marathon, so I'm poised to sprint away when a police car pulls up, just like on the telly, and three ginormous cops in stab vests leap out.

The gang disappears in seconds and I see Samir's back whizzing off, Arsenal scarf flying out behind him. A tatty wallet slips out of his back pocket and onto the pavement.

The crowd that's gathered on the other side of the street trickle over the road, now that it's safe, and surround the police, saying how dangerous the High Street has become.

One of the policemen asks the crowd, "Did you recognize any of them?"

A woman in a see-through plastic mac shrieks out like a parrot, "Terrence Bellows!" and everyone says, "Yes, yes, that's him."

"Terrence Bellows has a police record. He isn't allowed anywhere in the town center." The policeman frowns.

The crowd snorts like a herd of bulls, but I've already picked up the wallet and I'm running after Samir who's dodged off down the next street. He's pretty slow, maybe a smoker, because I've almost caught him up when he comes to a halt, pulls out a key, lets himself into a flat beside a Chinese takeout and slams the door shut. I'm left standing out in the street, the smell of sweet-and-sour making me really hungry, wondering if I should knock on the door or just give up and go home. But the thought of Misery Guts Mum slouched in front of the telly giving out orders all evening overwhelms me, and without another thought I rap loudly on the door.

Nothing. I rap again a bit more halfheartedly.

A Chinese woman comes out of the takeout and says, "Do bell, they not hear you." She has a tired, wrinkly sort of face and she's wearing bright red slippers on her feet. When I look

at the door again I can see a grubby bell with the wires hanging out of the side.

I press the bell and it rings somewhere above me and then I hear the thunder of feet coming down a long staircase. Someone rattles a chain and the door opens a sort of cautious crack. It's Samir and when he sees me he stares at me and I stare back.

"Girlfriend visit you," the Chinese lady pipes up and she lets out a peal of shrill laughter, which echoes around the street.

I feel my face go bright red and the door slams shut. More chain rattling, the door opens wide and, frowning at the Chinese lady, Samir says, "Come in."

I hesitate, thinking, Should I? What would Mum say? and even, What if they are terrorists? But then I think that's so crazy that I run up the stairs after Samir.

The smell of Chinese food fades and it's replaced with a strange smell, which I completely don't recognize. Samir pushes open a door and leads the way into the kitchen. It's very small and every surface is covered in cooking stuff: mixing bowls, wooden spoons and huge metal baking trays all smeared with a sticky-looking mixture.

I'm just wondering what it is when Samir says, "Auntie Selma's been making baklava."

For once I keep my mouth shut and just think in silence, Why does his auntie make balaclavas? Aren't they like ski masks that terrorists wear, and anyhow why would she make them in the kitchen while she's baking?



2. Suspicions

“Is this yours?” I ask, holding out the wallet.

Samir nods in a shy sort of way and mutters, “Thank you.” He puts the wallet in his pocket.

I don’t know what else to say. Samir only joined our class this term and I don’t really know him. I’m just wondering where he’s from and if I should ask when the door below us slams shut and footsteps echo on the stairs. Samir throws me a nervous look and I’m thinking, Is it too late to hide? when Samir-mark-II appears in the doorway. Same black hair, not quite so spiky, same dark eyes and dark skin but quite a bit taller and a few years older.

“This is Naazim, my brother,” says Samir.

Naazim fixes me with a suspicious stare and I can’t help thinking that if anyone looks like a terrorist, he does. He has this sort of smoldering look on his face you see on suspected bombers they show on TV and he’s wearing very greasy overalls. Car mechanic, I decide. But fortunately I manage to keep silent.

Naazim barks out, “Who you are?”

He has a strong accent and I’m wondering if he’s from Pakistan or maybe Afghanistan, when he snaps, “Where you live?”

I glance over at Samir for support but he’s fixed on his

brother so I shrug and start to explain about the gang. But then Samir catches my eye and something in his look makes me stop. He doesn't want Naazim to know about the bullies on the high street and his dark eyes have such a pleading look that I pull up short and instead mutter, "I'm Alix. I live on Hayling Island."

Naazim's face gets even darker and he starts rattling away to Samir in this totally foreign language. His voice is rising as he waves his hand about, which is also covered with grease, and he keeps shooting me poisonous looks. He's standing between me and the door so there's no way out and Samir can't get a word in edgewise. It's starting to get scary and I try to gauge whether I could slip past and race down the stairs. I can't help wondering if they go on like this all the time. Maybe they're planning their next attack on mainland Britain. The battery in my useless cell phone is probably too flat to call the police.

Naazim keeps going like a rocket and in the end I'm getting so tense I start to fiddle about with some lemon peel lying around on the counter. There's nothing I can do until Naazim lets me go, assuming of course that he will, and I'm just wondering what I should do if he doesn't when Samir says in English, "She's just leaving."

It's then I realize the difference.

Samir speaks really good English, with hardly any accent. In the end Naazim just grunts, "Samir must clean kitchen," and he's gone, leaving us alone.

I'm so relieved I let out a big sigh and throw Samir a look, expecting him to say something like, "Big brothers, what a waste of space." But he just stands there staring toward the door. I've never seen anyone keep so still.

It feels quite weird so I say, "I'd better go."

Samir nods and I follow him back downstairs again, but as

I go out the front door he calls out, "See you in school?" He has that sort of lost, pleading look in his eyes again, so I call back, "Okay," and sprint off to the bus stop, but I can't help feeling relieved I'm outside again.

Families can be so embarrassing, I think as the bus pulls out of town. I don't blame Samir for not spilling anything to his brother. Maybe Naazim is a bit of a bully himself.

I'm just deciding that Samir is the best at English in his family, that they all rely on him and so he doesn't want to tell them about the bullies and look weak in front of his brother, when someone halfway down the bus says out loud to no one in particular, "They want their heads examined."

I whip around in shock. What do they know?

Then I see Mrs. Saddler from our street nodding toward a windsurfer tacking across the choppy sea out in Langstone Harbor. I should have guessed. Mrs. Saddler's always complaining about something. Last week she told Mum I shouldn't be running around on the beach anymore. "She doesn't keep that dog of hers under proper control. I wouldn't let my Jeremy run about on the yacht club road unleashed."

She's such an old bat. She hasn't got a clue what I have to do to train for the marathon, and my dog, Trudy, loves to run with me, her daft spaniel ears flopping from side to side. Jeremy couldn't run to save his life.

My phone rings. It's Kim. Finally!

"Gran's okay," she says. To be honest I'd completely forgotten all about our shopping trip and why it was canceled. "So Mum's happy. She was really worried," Kim goes on.

"Great," I say, but I can't help feeling a bit jealous.

Kim has sisters, brothers, a mum and a dad, and that's just for starters. My dad skipped two years ago. Disappeared with

Gorgeous Gloria—Mum and me call her the Gremlin—and we haven't heard from him since. We moved into Grandpa's little cottage when Dad left but then Grandpa died last year and now it's just us two. And the broken leg of course.

My phone crackles and I say to Kim, "You'll never guess where I've been."

"Where?" she says.

"A suicide bomber's house!" I say.



3. Elephants

“Tell me everything,” gasps Kim.

Mrs. Saddler’s pushing off the bus in front of me so I say, “I’ll ring you later,” and click off.

Back home Mum starts the minute I get in. “Alexandra?” she yells from her usual position in front of the telly and she’s using the name.

“It’s Alix with an *i*,” I yell back. But she never listens. I’m named after Grandma so she refuses to shorten it.

“The supermarket delivery came,” Mum goes on. “I expected you hours ago.”

She sounds really grumpy; she’s probably been sitting watching the clock all afternoon.

I’m actually thirty-four minutes early but there’s no point arguing.

Mum’s been ordering the shopping online since she can’t drive with her broken leg. It happened when she got out of bed. She was just getting up and somehow she tripped and bam! By the time the ambulance came, I thought she might die just from screaming. It’s quite a bad break and she’s no good on crutches. She might even lose her office job, which is only temporary anyway.

I took on a newspaper route, even though I’ve got loads of

course work. Well, we've got to eat, haven't we? And Dad's not doing anything to help.

I put my head around the living room door and nearly faint from the heat. The log-effect gas fire is roaring and the room smells from dirty plates and apple cores on the coffee table. Mum's lounging around as usual with her leg up on the footstool.

Mum still sleeps in the living room, which is quite handy now she's broken her leg. Our cottage only has two bedrooms. I have the little one at the back, overlooking the sea. Mum has a bed, which turns into a sofa in the day, and she keeps all her clothes in my wardrobe. Of course she could move into the big front bedroom now that Grandpa has died, but she doesn't want to.

"When I'm ready," she keeps saying, and now of course that'll be months.

She could try a bit harder with the crutches, though, couldn't she, I think now as I glare at her from the doorway. She's wearing her baggiest jeans that she's ripped up the left side because of the plaster, but she's put safety pins all along the rip.

Mum was a punk when she was younger. She had the only Mohawk on Hayling Island. Green and pink. Tragic. But when she met Dad he made her shave it off. She still wears sort of punk fashion, with safety pins in her jeans and thick black boots, even though she's forty-one and beginning to go gray at the sides. "Joe Strummer's older than me," she always says when I point out a gray hair.

He's in the seventies punk band, The Clash, and actually, the music's pretty cool.

She's into spoken-word poetry and stuff like that. Before Dad left and Grandpa died she went out every Wednesday night

reading out her poetry in pubs. I went to see her once. Dad refused, said he wanted to watch something on the telly, but now I think he went out with the Gremlin. Mum looked really good, with blond highlights in her hair, which is darker than mine, and kohl around her eyes and her arty nail polish. They all clapped and cheered when she finished. I felt quite proud and she let me have a sip of her beer when the bartender wasn't looking.

But she seems to have forgotten all about that since she broke her leg.

"Everyone calls me Alix, even Grandpa did," I grumble to her now.

But Mum ignores it. "Just sort out the shopping," she snaps, "we'll have rolls and cheese for supper. My leg's been killing me all morning."

Another boring sandwich, I think, but she hears me. I forgot to flip the silent switch.

"Sor-ry," she shrieks. "I can't help not being a superstar TV chef!"

Kim's dad is a chef at a big hotel in Portsmouth. He makes the best steak and chips in the universe. And he makes sticky toffee pudding.

Mum grapples for the remote control and switches channels. As I go back to the kitchen I can hear the raucous laughter of some quiz show pouring through the cottage. I hate those programs.

Trudy's looking up at me with her gorgeous spaniel eyes, puzzled at the loud voices, and I whisper to her, "I have to do everything around here, it's so not fair." I bury my face in her soft coat and wonder how things got so bad. I never used to think about stuff like I do now.

Trudy starts to lick my face and it calms me like always. I give myself a proper doggy shake and then start sorting out the shopping. I'm putting the cans in the cupboard wondering where all this food comes from and I find myself thinking about Samir again. He can't have been born here, can he? Because his brother doesn't speak good English.

Then I pick up a packet of coffee and look at the label. I've never even thought about this before but did you know that coffee comes from Kenya? And the sugar's from Malawi. It's Fair Trade, which I think is meant to be good. There's a useful fact on the packet: Elephants run at 25 mph.

My top speed is 6 mph and I've only seen elephants in the zoo. Must be amazing seeing them out your bedroom window if you live in Africa. Maybe Samir used to ride elephants in his country, although he's not black, so is he from India?

I wander back into the living room holding the sugar packet and say to Mum, "Do they have elephants in India as well as Africa?"

But you know how with adults if you choose the wrong moment? Her face wrinkles with rage and she huffs, "I missed that answer! Can't you get on by yourself for one minute?!"

I feel like my blood is about to boil over. It's been a totally worthless day and now Mum hits the roof because I ask her a question about elephants!

So I yell back, "Didn't you know slavery was abolished two hundred years ago?!" Grabbing Trudy's leash I rip my coat off the peg and I'm down the path in a nanosecond, the front door slamming so hard it practically takes the windows out.

"I'm fed up!" I yell. Trudy looks at me but I don't care who else is listening. Some of the neighbors are out in their gardens

in the houses opposite, nattering over the fences, but they don't hear. They think I'm just a stupid kid anyway.

Better face up to it, Alix, I moan to myself as we tear down the yacht club road to the beach, you're on your own now. Mum's gone into free fall, hanging on to me like her parachute just failed; Grandpa's dead—God, I hate that word—and I've got to give up my silly baby fantasies that Dad's going to turn up bored with the Gremlin, begging us to take him back. He never even rings. Who's going to look after me? I can't even relight the boiler when it blows out in an east wind. "It's coming straight from Siberia," Grandpa used to say. He was a sailor and knew about winds. He also knew how to look after us.

We head past the Lifeboat Station and down onto the beach. When the tide goes out you can run for miles on the sand and I know everyone is supposed to worship the sun but summer just makes me hot and sweaty. I prefer winter. On gray days like today you can hardly see where the beach stops and the sea begins.

There's only about fifteen minutes of daylight left but there are still a few boats out on the sea. Their lights coming on like lonely fireflies make me feel even more miserable. I can't be bothered to run with Trudy anymore, so I just wander down to the old concrete pillbox. Sometimes teenagers hang around here, drinking beer and lighting fires on the beach when it gets dark. I've seen Lindy Bellows here with her brother and his gang, smoking joints probably. I keep well away.

But today it just stinks of wee.

Then my phone goes. I wrench it from my jacket pocket. It's Kim.

"Suicide bomber?" she squeals down the phone and for a second I can't think what she means.

Then I remember and start to tell her about Samir being bullied by the hoodies and my suspicions about Naazim and I must admit they sound really silly when I say them out loud.

“But did you actually see anything, like sticks of dynamite?” Kim says, beginning to laugh.

“Well no,” I say.

“Or videos of Osama Bin Laden hidden down the back of the sofa?”

She’s really warming up now and, of course, she’s my best friend so she knows me really well.

“Honest, Ali, you’re such a drama queen, Samir’s just some nobody in our year and Naazim is his boring brother.”

Kim always tries to keep my feet on the ground. She’s usually the one who stops me when I go into a real fury.

“Samir’s all right. He’s got nice eyes,” I say without thinking. There’s a pause and I’m wondering if the signal’s gone. Then Kim says, “Well, if you like that sort of thing.”

If you like that sort of thing? What does she mean?