

Haideh Salehi-Esfahani
The Woman in 14B

In the dim light of early morning, I walked up the boarding stairs of the aircraft. Inside, I strolled through the narrow walkway to find my aisle seat, 14C. On that Flydubai flight, I was leaving Mashhad, Iran for Dubai. Then, via a connecting Emirates Airline flight, back to my home in Seattle.

Passengers were streaming in, and I prayed no one would claim the other two seats next to mine so I could stretch out and get some sleep on the two-hour flight.

I started getting comfortable in my seat.

"Excuse me," someone said. I looked up. A thin, tall man wearing a long white robe, loose trousers, and a cloth with the cord around it on his head—the customary Arab male headcover—was standing next to me. He had a long face and a short, grey beard. He looked sixty-ish.

"Of course." I got up to give him room to enter the row to sit in the window seat. A short, plump woman in a black cloak of head-to-toe hijab followed him to the middle seat. So much for stretching out on those seats during the flight.

"Good morning," I said to the woman, my customary short greeting to establish a congenial short-term fellowship with a traveler sitting next to me. She turned and smiled. I could now see her round face, light skin tone, expressive dark eyes, and full lips. She had an additional headcover beneath her full black cloak, the traditional attire of Arab women. She looked in her thirties.

"She does not speak any English," said the man in the window seat. "Are you Iranian?"

I nodded in reply.

"You can talk to her in Farsi. I don't speak any Farsi, but she does." He then looked away from us.

I turned to the woman again, this time speaking in Farsi. "Did you stay in Mashhad during your trip?"

"Yes, we spent five days there," she replied in perfect Farsi.

I gave her a surprised smile. "Wow, you speak Farsi so well!"

"My family is from Bahrain. We have been living in Saudi Arabia, the city of Damman, for the last twenty years. We speak Farsi as well as Arabic." Her tone was soft, and she smiled back.

That explained it. Until 1971, Bahrain was a part of Iran. I wondered if she was among the many thousands of religious pilgrims who travel to Mashhad every year.

"Did you visit the Shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad?" I asked.

"Yes, of course. Our whole trip was a pilgrimage to visit Imam Reza." She lowered her gaze and head slightly, as a gesture of respect.

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/3

I nodded with a faint smile. Did I visit the Shrine on my visit to Mashhad, she asked.

Avoiding a long conversation or worse, a debate about faith, I simply replied, "No, I have a lot of family in Mashhad to visit, not much time for anything else."

We were silent for a few minutes. Then, suddenly, she had her face close to my ear like she was about to divulge the biggest secret, and whispered, "This man is not my husband! He is a family friend."

Traveling with a family friend? As far as I knew, this sounded inappropriate by the standards of gender separation in that part of the world. The only members of the opposite sex with whom a woman could travel without a chaperone would be her husband, father, brother, or son.

Attempting to hide my curiosity, I asked innocuously, "How did you two end up traveling together?"

"Before the trip, there were five of us—three women and two men—planning for our pilgrimage to Imam Reza's Shrine in Mashhad as a group. Except for him, everyone dropped out and we already had tickets...and..."

I could not hear the rest of her explanation as her voice turned to a murmur and got lost in the buzz noise of the airplane. Still, based on the bits of her account that I picked up, her story was not a convincing reason. Yet, I nodded. No further probing from me.

Silence for a minute. Then she blurted out, again whispering in my ear, "He wants me as his third wife. He already has two wives and five children. He likes me a lot and keeps pressuring me. I don't love him and don't want to marry him."

What? I had seen stories of polygamist men on TV, not in person! I looked past the woman, at her Saudi suitor in the window seat. When he had first arrived, I had noticed the high-end pressed attire he was wearing. Now I also noticed his expensive watch. He was holding a pen and seemed deep in thought, looking at his notebook, not paying any attention to us. He seemed wealthy enough to support a few wives and households.

Captivated by the woman's unsolicited confession, I wanted to know more.

"What does he do for a living?"

"He works in the Saudi oil and gas business. He is a manager."

"You are a lot younger than he is." I expressed the obvious.

"I am thirty-five and he is sixty-two. I am divorced. I have two kids, a girl and a boy who live with me and my parents." She spoke with a dignified poise.

"Aha, so you live with your parents? And I forgot to ask your name."

"Yes! And my name is Sabah."

"It is a beautiful name. What does it mean?" I asked.

"It means *morning* in Arabic," she replied with a sweet smile.

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/3

I told her my name.

"Nice to meet you," we uttered at the same time, grinning.

We turned away from each other and sat back in silence for a few minutes. I felt we were both taking stock of our encounter up to that point. That Sabah had decided to tell me her situation with the man sitting next to her was a bit unexpected, but not surprising. In my past travels in South Asia and the Middle East, I had experienced other instances where women I had met from traditional cultures would share their private thoughts and concerns with me on the go, a stranger they could confide in to unburden themselves of what they could not easily discuss with their families.

It was all quiet around us except for the sound of the airplane. We were thirty thousand feet up, now more than half an hour into our flight. The first rays of the rising sun were streaming through the window.

Sabah turned to look at her companion. He was looking out the window, away from her. She then turned to me and said in a measured yet nervous tone, "I need you to do me a favor, in the next few minutes. It is very important! Will you do it?"

This was a surprise. I felt a tinge of anxiety, borne out of uncertainty about the nature of her request and my orientation to want to please. Despite my apprehension, I kept a straight face. "What is it?"

"I met a man, a Kuwaiti gentleman, in the departure terminal at the airport two hours ago. We are so attracted to each other! It feels like love at first sight!" She uttered the words with a quiet intensity while looking down, as if she was afraid to see my reaction.

A budding romance. How wonderful and complicated for her, I thought. I was thrilled to be her confidant for a love story that started two hours prior, in the airport. A real-life soap opera about a developing love triangle! It was exciting to be privy to this drama. But... what did she want from me?

She lifted her head and gazed straight into my eyes, a searching look. Looking back at her, I kept an appearance a couple of notches cooler than my actual feelings, which were a mix of excitement and apprehension.

"How beautiful!" I said, breaking our awkward stare at each other. "Were you able to talk to him?"

"For just three minutes, while *he* was gone to the bathroom." She glanced back at the man sitting next to her.

The Saudi man shifted in his seat, turned, and looked in our direction. It was clear that he had no inkling of the subject of our conversation. But he noticed Sabah's black cloak on her shoulders, revealing her light grey headcover, worn beneath the full cloak. He muttered something in Arabic.

Sabah answered back, adding a dismissive smile and hand wave, as she slightly adjusted her hijab. I could see that she was not entirely under his command.

After their exchange, Sabah and I grew quiet. For a few seconds, I stared at the back of the seat in front of me, anxious about her request.

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/3

"What would you like me to do?" I finally asked her, trying to hide my unease.

"I want you to give him my phone number. *This* man came back from the bathroom before I could give it to him. He and his daughter are sitting about six rows right behind us."

A range of emotions passed through me. I was feeling apprehensive (what if the Saudi man finds out?) and eager to help (being a good Samaritan). There was also a powerful feeling of exhilaration. I had felt this sense of adventure on some of my travels in South and East Asia, such as a perilous trek to the base camp of a high mountain in Pakistan, and almost getting lost during a summer hike in Nepal, all while fighting hordes of creeping creatures on my clothes and body during the "leech season".

Here on the flight, communicating Sabah's phone number to her beau was a different sort of adventure, yet it felt thrilling all the same.

It did not take me long to decide. Two to one, eagerness and exhilaration won over my apprehension.

"OK, I'll do it," I said.

Her face lit up with a beaming smile. Then her expression changed.

"His daughter should not find out about this. She is very protective of her dad." Sabah sounded anxious.

My heart sank. This whole affair of passing Sabah's phone number was a lot more perilous than I had originally anticipated. The Saudi suitor aside, I also had to dodge the daughter of this Kuwaiti man. I was starting to regret having accepted Sabah's request.

"How do you know she is protective of her father?" I asked.

Sabah shifted slightly in her seat to get closer. "When her father and I were talking in the airport, she turned restless and tried to interrupt us. Then, when I left him and was walking away, I saw her quarrelling with him."

Immediately, my mind raced to a teenage girl I had noticed while circling the small departure terminal in Mashhad Airport over two hours earlier. A man sitting on a chair and a teenage girl standing over him, her hair tightly wrapped in a blue headcover long enough to cover her hair to her waist, waving her hands in the air, and protesting rather loudly in Arabic. She had seemed feisty.

Sabah and I both sat for a minute in silence. I was not sure what she was thinking, but my feelings could well be described with one word—*angst*. How was I going to give this Romeo his Juliet's number in a way that his daughter would not find out? We were now an hour into the flight; not a whole lot of time to figure this out.

I turned to look at the rows behind us. It was her, the quarrelling girl in the blue hijab from the departure terminal, and she looked as aggravated as before—looking straight in my direction! Her father was also looking at our row, with a longing gaze, as if hoping to lock eyes with Sabah once again.

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/3

I turned back around and noticed Sabah's opened hand. In it was a small piece of paper that looked like a chewing gum wrapper, wet with her sweat, and containing her phone number written in small print. My immediate reaction was not to accept the soggy thing; it looked gross. Before I could refuse the sweaty paper, however, it landed in my palm.

We both looked at each other and at the tiny paper in my hand. She then hesitantly spoke. "He doesn't even know my name."

Thinking fast, I suggested, "Perhaps you can write your number on a new piece of paper in a larger font and add your name too."

She nodded. We both looked for a sheet of paper in a hurry, mindful of the Saudi man. His face was turned away from us. He seemed half asleep. Sabah hastily pulled a boarding pass and pen from her purse, and wrote her name, phone number, and where she was from on the back of the boarding card, and gave it to me. I folded the paper and held it tightly.

We sat there in silence. It seemed that neither Sabah nor I had any idea how to pass the information to the Kuwaiti gentleman. Finally, nature called. Good thing, because sitting would not solve anything; to make any inroads in the search for a plan, I felt I had to move.

"I have to go to the bathroom," I said.

As I walked to the back of the plane, the Kuwaiti man and I glanced at each other. A single second perhaps, but the glance was profound. Like Sabah, he had dark eyes. He looked around forty years of age.

Inside the bathroom, I realized I had no pocket in which to put Sabah's note. The mini bathroom counter was wet. The bathroom floor looked worse. Darn it! I was excited, nervous, and now mad at myself for not thinking ahead to keep the invaluable piece of paper—a primary piece of data establishing connection between Sabah and her new man—safe. I finally decided to keep the piece of paper under my arm while I used the toilet and then washed my hands.

As I opened the bathroom door on my way out, a man was standing right in front of me. A friendly face, dark eyes, a familiar gaze... it was him, the Kuwaiti man! A rush of thoughts at the speed of light went through my head: Was he there for a reason? Did he know something about my connection with Sabah?

Looking straight at each other, on a reflex, I took the paper from under my arm. "Did you lose this?" I asked, smiling.

With a flash of joy in his eyes and a knowing smile, he grabbed the paper, and uttered a quick "thank you" and walked inside the bathroom.

Phew! Mission accomplished. I walked back and sat down, delighted at my achievement. Not to attract the attention of the Saudi man next to Sabah, we were both quiet for a few seconds.

Then, "I met him at the bathroom door. I gave him your information," I triumphantly announced in a whisper.

Her face turned in my direction, a broad smile on her lips. "Thank you," she said in a quiet yet happy voice.

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/3

"You're welcome," I replied.

At this point, I was certain that the perilous act of connecting the lovers via disbursing Sabah's phone number and keeping the Saudi man away from any suspicion was behind us; over and done. Sabah and I both relaxed and started talking about her life.

"So, you are divorced?" I asked.

"Yes, I divorced my husband five years ago. Shortly after my second child, my son was born."

"What happened?" Having observed Sabah's determination to follow her heart, I was curious about her previous relationship.

"He is a good man, but there was no warmth in our relationship. I wanted love and connection. He was a good provider for our family, but he was emotionally distant. After nine years of marriage, I decided I couldn't live with him anymore."

She spoke openly with a level of confidence that exuded a sense of control over her life. Although appearing in full hijab and living in a patriarchal society, it was clear that she was charting her own path. I would have never guessed her sense of agency from her appearance alone, nor that romance and a close emotional connection in a marriage were so central to her. No wonder she desired a connection with her Kuwaiti man.

"You know, my faith is what has sustained me through all the trials of my life," she uttered with an air of serenity and certainty that one expects from a true believer. I decided to not react, just listen.

She continued. "In my last pilgrimage to the Shrine of Imam Hossein in Karbala [Iraq], I brought back a jug of holy water. My son fell ill with a high fever for some days and doctors could not cure him. I washed his face with the holy water from the Shrine, and gave him a spoonful of it to drink. The next day he was well."

I took care not to roll my eyes, and instead gazed at her, trying to maintain a receptive smile.

The aroma of hot food, something apparently prepared with sauteed onions, took my attention away from Sabah. I noticed the food trolley parked right at my seat. Until that moment, I had been completely unaware of the food cart and the hostess serving meals. Sabah and her stories, the drama of giving her phone number to her man, and the effort to listen to her religious testimonials had consumed all my attention.

"May I see your boarding pass?" The flight attendant was looking at me.

"Of course!" I took my boarding card out of my coat pocket and presented it to the hostess.

The Saudi man must have been awakened by the smell of food. He sat upright in his seat and opened his tray table, ready to get his meal. He looked at Sabah, then pointed to her bag, and said something in Arabic. Sabah shifted in her seat, glancing at him and then at me in utter confusion.

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/3

"The Flydubai passengers who have upcoming connecting flights on Emirates Airlines receive meals. That is why they check our boarding cards," I explained to Sabah hastily in Farsi while her Saudi companion impatiently babbled something to her in Arabic at the same time.

The flight attendant patiently stood by, looking at the raucous set of passengers in our row jabbering in different languages. Meanwhile Sabah had turned away from her companion and was frantically searching her bag for their boarding passes.

Throwing stuff out of her bag, she retrieved one boarding card. We both glanced at the name on it—it was hers. Now, the hostess was waiting for the other boarding pass, and the Saudi man was demanding his pass, raising his voice with agitation.

In the flurry of Sabah removing the contents of her bag, the hostess waiting, and the Saudi man restlessly shifting in his seat, apparently looking for the boarding card somewhere around his and her seat, Sabah and I suddenly locked eyes with each other. She looked frantic and I felt frightened. We both remembered where the other boarding pass was.

Oh, my! It would be disastrous if the Saudi suitor found out where his boarding card was. I was panicking, and I could tell Sabah was desperate for a way out of the quandary. Then, she suddenly regained her poise, turned to the Saudi man, and in a reassuring voice, uttered something in Arabic. From her gesture I understood what she said: "You go ahead, I don't want any food."

The man suddenly went quiet. He seemed satisfied with her offer, or perhaps he was too hungry to pursue the matter of his missing boarding pass. He received her meal and started unpacking the flatware on his tray.

Of course, what a great solution! I thought to myself, feeling thoroughly relieved.

Sabah sat back. Ever so quietly, she took a deep breath. She then looked at me and smiled. I offered to share my meal with her, but she refused. She said she was not hungry. Perhaps her plane drama had killed her appetite. I, on the other hand, was thrilled about the success of the mission. Like someone who had completed a half-marathon, I felt euphoric. I started to relax, and I was hungry.

In the last half hour of the flight, we all sat quietly. Sabah and I exchanged brief chit-chats about her next leg of flight to Damman, Saudi Arabia, and my long flight to Seattle and the state of weather in our destinations.

As our plane taxied on the runway at Dubai Airport, Sabah turned to me and whispered in my ear, "I would love to hear from you, if you'd like to call me."

"OK, sure," I answered back with a smile, unsure of whether I really meant it.

The last moment that I spent with Sabah was on the bus after landing in Dubai Airport, on the way to the terminal. There, her Saudi suitor once again reminded her to pull her cloak over her head. With a dismissive air, she made a slight adjustment to her hijab cover. Just before we left the bus

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/3

to enter the Dubai Airport terminal, Sabah and I glanced at each other one last time. I noticed her beaming eyes and victorious smile.

Waiting for my connecting flight, I walked through the long terminal, oblivious to the glitz of goods in fancy duty-free shops. I wondered why I had yielded to Sabah's request to connect her with her Kuwaiti man. Helping Sabah was surely a part of it. Yet, the principal motive was the thrill of the act. As in my past travel adventures, it had delivered a sense of euphoria, a feeling of being fully alive.

Back in Seattle, I emptied out the pockets of the coat I had been wearing during the flights. A couple of tissues, a chap stick... and a tiny piece of paper. It was the gum wrapper containing Sabah's phone number. It was now dry.