

An Excerpt from *Saffron Dreams: A Novel*

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I decided to carry out the first task on my list when fall was about to lose its hue.

All around me were walls of fog; it was just as well. This year the trees of the mid-Hudson Valley were reluctant to shed their leaves. A few fallen ones—the glowing golds, the bloodlike reds, the brazen browns, and the somber yellows—crackled under my feet, crisp and lifeless but not without a voice. There is an old saying that it will be a bad winter if the trees decide to hold on to their leaves.

I wanted to take this journey myself. Unseen. Unchallenged. The air outside was thick, buttressed by my decision, sparse in joy but swollen with complexities. It comforted me; tingled the soles of my feet. The feeling of heaviness that had been lingering for days was gone. I would have danced had I not been on a mission. I delighted in how clean my insides felt like they had just been laundered and wrung dry, soapy smell suspended in air. Invisible molecules tickled my nostrils and I sneezed at the thought.

I stopped by a toy store, its shutters down, occupants fast asleep. As I pressed my nose against the window, I marveled at the simple joys of childhood. My breath came in short waves and misted the window, creating tiny smoky bubbles of all sizes and shapes. I imagined being a toy horse, galloping on bound legs, destination firmly defined, thrilled with providence in my naiveté.

The subway ride was a quiet time for reflection with very few early commuters. I got off as if floating on air, tightening my *hijab* or veil around the back of my head. It had to be hysteria, this feeling within of clean joy one minute and debilitating sorrow the next. A sharp change in the jet stream will channel numerous storm systems into the Atlantic, the meteorologist had predicted. One was raging within me as I walked westward from Canal to West Street. I felt a restless quest to outrun my fate, grind it beneath my feet.

Pier 34 was abandoned when I reached its southern tip. I faced it with a welcoming smile.

It had the lure of a mother's breast for me, the air throbbing in suckling anticipation. I leaned my protruding belly against the barrier that divided me from the deep stillness below. Another step and my body could easily plummet into the murky depths. I was afraid to touch my abdomen; I wanted to leave its resident out of this. He should never feel responsible for what I was about to do. My mind was full of the possibilities of what life would have been if the towers hadn't crashed.

The wounded skyline in the distance had its edges softened by the early morning fog. Even the air approached the buildings carefully, with reverence. So much was lost. A cool breeze was blowing, providing a hint of the approaching winter. For a brief sickening moment, I debated on which should go—the veil or me.

I slid the *hijab* from around my neck. The wind felt chilly on my bare head. It was a new sensation. *You can do anything you set your mind to, Arissa Illahi*, a voice from the past whispered to me.

In a few hours, it would be another normal day. Was there such a thing anymore? I appreciated the predawn quietness and looked down at the river with meditated concentration. They said that a new layer of sediment composed of ash and dust had formed a permanent footprint on the river bed after the towers had collapsed. Undisturbed, it has become a constant geological reminder of the tragedy, now etched in history.

The wind tore the veil from my hand, making my task easier. I grasped the cold railing with one hand and swatted at the fleeting piece of my life with the other as the wind picked up speed. It teasingly brought the veil closer to my face. I could have grabbed it. The veil sailed down toward the depths, its grave.

I did not feel a sense of betrayal as I walked away from the pier, letting the wind dance with my hair for the first time. I pulled a few strands out of my eyes and looked back. The sun had just started to peek at the horizon, bleeding its crimson hue. It was a matter of perspective—to an onlooker I had removed my veil, but from where I stood, I had merely shifted it from my head to my heart.

"Khuda Hafiz," I breathed.

Who was I bidding farewell to? I wondered: the age-old tradition or the husband I had kept alive in my heart?