

Zaleekha's Fingers

By Yacoub Al-Slaise

"Ladies, have some dates, they're from the palm we're sitting under" Umm Jassim said, handing a bowl to Umm Rashid and Umm Ali, who visited her everyday just before the Dhuhur Prayer, before the sun becomes its hottest of the day. They were sitting in the front yard, a few metres away from their chicken coop and their lone goat.

The front door opened and wooden slippers kicking the sand in big and quick footsteps were heard. The women hastily covered their heads and faces in fear that Bo Jassim had arrived from the souq. Behind the *daffas* that veiled their faces, a tall dark figure carrying a palm woven *Jifeer* came towards them.

"Salam alaikom, Weh! Why are you all hiding away from me?!"

"Zaleekha! We thought you were Bo Jassim!" Umm Jassim exclaimed. The women unveiled themselves as Umm Rashid pulled out some beautifully coloured dresses from her large *Jifeer* that sat beside her.

"Ladies, look at what I've brought you, these came straight from Bombay" Umm Rashid said "These just arrived yesterday with Bo Rashid's brother's dhow". The women excitedly had a look at the dresses which had the vibrant colours of exotic

spices and embroidered with gold coloured silk with beautiful flower patterns.

An orange dress caught the eye of Umm Jassim and she pulled it out of the jifeer to see its length and embroidery in detail. "This would look perfect on Hessa! Mashalla!" Umm Jassim said. "Where is she? Shouldn't she be back from school by now?" Umm Ali asked.

"She's in the new school the government built behind Shaikh Adel's mosque" Umm Jassim answered.

"And she comes home walking all the way from there? The poor thing!" Umm Ali said.

The Dhuhur call for prayer filled the skies, as the front door was opened by Hessa. In her hands, she carried more than a dozen red hard backed English exercise books that needed marking and had a tired look on her face.

"Salam alaikom, how is everyone?" Hessa said. "*Omrich Towee!*" Umm Jassim replied "We were just saying how this *Jalabiya* would look so mashalla beautiful on you! Please try it on and wake up little Salman. The ladies missed him today"

Hessa's face lit up as she shuffled quickly to see her little one and try on the new *Jalabiya*. Minutes later, she returned with Salman laying his head on her shoulder and sat down with the ladies.

“He's getting more gorgeous and delicious by the day!” Zaleekha exclaimed as she leaned forward to pinch Salman's red chubby cheek. Salman started to cry which turned his whole face red.

Hessa took him in her arms again and tried to calm him down. She noticed Zaleekha's long dark wrinkled fingers and her grubby Henna covered nails and quickly took a tissue and wiped Salman's cheek in fear of germs.

Zaleekha was the eldest of the ladies. Her parents came to Bahrain from Zanzibar and passed away when she hit puberty, and from that day she lived alone in the tiny house behind Bo Jassim's. Her hands and complexion were so dry and weary as if the lack of love and a husband in her life made her like a desert—without water and life.

“Hessa, you look like an angel in that Jalabiya. It's so perfect on you!” Zaleekha said in admiration “ Allah gave you such natural beauty, beautiful skin, long dark hair and defined eyes as if drawn by an artist.. Unlike some of us.. Who Allah did not bless..” as she pointed to herself with a frown of disgust and a taste of envy.

“Zaleekha, wouldn't this look wonderful on you mashalla?” Umm Rashid said handing a dark green *Jalabiya* to her.

“ I don't wear anything from Bombay, their women are too short!” Zaleekha snapped.

“At least, try this one on-for me”. Umm Rashid pleaded “I made sure that they found you a long one this time”.

Reluctantly, Zaleekha stood up and pressed the *Jalabiya* to her chest to see its fitting and length. All the ladies giggled as the 'long' *Jalabiya* barely covered her knees. With anger burning in her eyes, she threw the *Jalabiya* towards Umm Rashid and planted herself in front of the bowl of dates and started eating them. The giggles continued as Umm Rashid promised her to make another *Jalabiya* from the same material.

The ladies' conversation took many turns from machboos recipes to their husbands' latest outbursts. Zaleekha kept quiet during this and was more interested in eating the dates and made a pile of pits in front of her. Baby Salman came towards the pile and started playing with them. “Kikh! Stop playing with those Salman!” his mother shouted. Zaleekha took the pits from his hands and whispered “Be a nice boy, Salman, you're such a beautiful child. You're perfect in every way”. A tear formed under her eye and she kissed him on his cheek.

Hessa rushed to Salman and wiped his hands and cheeks as she grew more worried about Zaleekha's hygiene and her child's health. Umm Jassim noticed Hessa's looks towards Zaleekha as she knew all too well about Hessa's paranoia towards hygiene.

Umm Jassim left the yard and brought a bowl of water and coffee cups for the ladies. Zaleekha felt her fingers were sticky after eating so many dates and dipped her fingertips into the bowl of water to clean them. The coffee cups were also put in the bowl after they have had finished drinking their early afternoon coffee. It was coming near the time that the ladies should return to their houses and serve lunch for their hungry husbands and children. The ladies and Zaleekha said their goodbyes and carried away their jifeers.

Salman's cheeks were red after he played around the yard chasing the chickens from their coop and looked thirsty. His mother got up to bring a glass of water to him from the kitchen. Umm Jassim took the water bowl and placed it to Salman's lips for him to drink. He squinted as he tasted the used water but continued to drink from the bowl nonetheless.

Hessa returned to the yard with the glass of water to see that Salman was drinking from the used water bowl. She ran and pulled him away from his grandmother "What are you doing?!" Hessa cried " Don't you know that that bowl is full of germs that would harm my child. Don't you have any sense?!"

"Hessa, my dear didn't you see how Zaleekha was looking at Salman and didn't even say Allah once! No Mashalla nor Subhan Allah! I know her well, she is a very envious soul and has an evil eye!" Umm Jassim replied.

“And what does drinking my child dirty water have to do with this?” Hessa snapped. “ This water has the remains of the dates she ate and the coffee she drank. Drinking after ones drinks cures the evil eye and keeps you safe from harms way, my dear”.Umm Jassim said.

Hessa scoffed at what her mother in law just said and said.”What nonsense! All that is pure superstition! Modern science shows that germs can harm children and Zaleekha's fingers are the perfect breeding ground for germs! They're disgusting!”

“Ya habibti” Umm Jassim said quietly , trying to calm Hessa down “I'm sorry and I should of asked permission first.. but please read some verses from the Holy Quran on your child to keep him safe.”

“Inshalla Umm Jassim” Hessa said with a smile of an accepted apology.

It was nearly half past one and neither ladies of the house began preparing for lunch and time and their husbands' empty stomachs were against them. Umm Jassim took the stove out of the kitchen as she planned to cook fish with sweet rice that day and lit it .She then placed a pan filled with oil on the stove and left to spice the fish before frying it.

The oil sizzled and cracked in the absence of Umm Jassim and little Salman from the yard heard the noise from outside the kitchen and became curious. He came to a few feet away from the pan and watched the oil sizzle and dance out of the pan. His curiosity grew more and more at what was making the oil dance in such a way. He waddled slowly towards the pan and heard the crackling grow louder and louder. He reached out to hold the pan handle, where his mother pounced like a lioness and pushed Salman away from the pan and away from harm's way.

But, only for the hot oil to spill on her sleeve and alight, giving birth to a flame that ate through her new *Jalabiya* and the flesh underneath it. Hessa fell to the ground and screamed for help in pain and agony. Umm Jassim looked on in horror and filled a pot of water to distinguish the flame. Seconds later, Jassim charged through the front door and across the yard to the source of his wife's screaming and couldn't believe his eyes. He found an empty sack and blanketed Hessa's arm to choke the flame and its grasp on her sleeve.

Umm Jassim ran over to Hessa and held her tightly and read some verses from the Holy Quran to calm her down. The burn left a gaping hole in Hessa's orange *Jalabiya* and underneath it, Umm Jassim noticed the burn on Hessa's skin took a shocking form, it looked like four long fingers wrapped around her arm. She whispered to herself "Zaleekha's Fingers, Zaleekha's Fingers burned you".