My Name is Ayah

اسمي الآية

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Chapter One

My sister’s nickname is Ayah. She is eight years old. This is a story about her and how she gave herself her name.

Ayah is a popular name in Arabic. It is found in the Quran, the most holy of all Muslim texts. Ayah means a sign. It can refer to a sign from God. It can also point to a direction we should all follow. I think it is a beautiful name, and I am very proud that my sister had the imagination and courage to name herself, and not just simply go by Ameenah, the name my parents gave her.
Ayah and I live in Alexandria, Egypt.

My name is Ahmed. I love how Alexandria kisses the sea, its ancient ruins and the monuments and the minarets that tower above all of its other buildings.

There are many things to see in Alexandria which is rich in architecture and history. In the harbor on the island of Pharos is the Qaitbay Castle, built in the 15th century on the same site as the Lighthouse of Alexandria, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

Alexandria is sometimes called the “pearl of the Mediterranean.” It was one of the greatest cities in Ancient history. It was founded by Alexander the Great in 331 BC. It is after him that the city is named. It was the home of the great Egyptian queen Cleopatra, and many of its ancient ruins survive today from the sphinx to the Roman general Pompey’s pillar. It was in Alexandria that the greatest library in the Ancient world was found.
Despite this, many of us living in Alexandria take the city for granted. We do not always value the city’s history, its land, its trees and plants and God’s creation as much as we should.

I love the city, its alleys and back streets, its shops and parks.

Alexandria has three main roads. Abo Qeer—filled with cars and shops lining the bottom of apartment buildings...
The road with the rusty old tram…

And the six-lane road that runs along the Mediterranean Sea and the city's beaches.

I know the city, its back alleys and streets, its parks and markets, mostly because of Ayah. Ever since she was little, she has insisted on being taken everywhere to learn about everything she could. She has always been a handful, asking questions about why things are...
the way they are and never getting enough answers. In particular, she has always loved to go to the beach.

That’s where it all started last summer.

We went to the beach with our parents and my friend Selim and his parents. While it was beautiful to look across the sand to the blue Mediterranean, and the sun felt so good with the sea breeze, the beach was a terrible mess full of trash and garbage. The honking cars made a terrible noise from the nearby highway. After awhile it would set your head spinning.

On the beach you could spot squashed bottles and old plastic toys. Broken glass was everywhere. If you weren’t careful, you could easily cut yourself by stepping on the wrong thing.

Ayah wasn’t going to put up with any of this. She said: “This place is a mess. This is our beach and our city, we need to do something about it.” Right then and there she began picking up the plastic bottles and bags, and pieces of broken glass that were spread everywhere. We tried to tell her to stop, that it was dirty and there was too much for anyone to be able clean-up by themselves.

“Then we will all just have to work together,” she said.

“Don’t look at me,” said Selim.

“I won’t waste my time arguing with you,” said Ayah. “I know lazy when I see it. And you aren’t going to be lazy if you want to be my friend.”

“But…,” Selim began.

“No buts, just do it!” said Ayah.
Secretly Selim liked Ayah a lot, and didn’t want to disappoint her, but he was proud and didn’t want to just give in to her. So he just kept quiet, while Ayah stormed off to the edge of the water.

As the surf rolled in, she began to carefully fish out up the biggest pieces of wood, the plastic bottles and cans and plastic bags. A lot of it was icky—actually just gross—covered in slime and who knows what. But Ayah was determined. She spent the whole morning at it. While doing her best to clean up the mess she would also hunt for the shells that washed up on the shore. She was tireless, and ignored us whenever we teased her as she trudged by with her arms full of junk for the trash.

It was on one of her trips late in the morning from the edge of the water to the trash cans near the road that Ayah stopped in front of us and bent down and picked up a beautiful shell.
كان سليم معجب بآية كثيرا في السر و لم يكن يريد أن يخذلها و لكنه كان معترض بنفسه و لا يريد أن يستلم لذا لاذ بالصمت، بينما غادرت آية المكان بغضب في اتجاه حافة مياه البحر.

عندما أتت الأمواج، بدأت بحذر بالتنقيط أكبر قطع الخشب و الزجاجات البلاستيكية و العلب و الأكياس البلاستيكية، و كثيرا منها كان لزجا -كانت أشياء مفقرة- مغطاة بالوحل و من يدري ماذا أخرى. لكن آية كانت مصممة فقد قضت طوال الصباح في التنقيط تلك الأشياء. و بينما كانت تبذل قصارى جهدها لتنظيف تلك الفوضى، كانت أيضا تلتقط الصدف الذي كان يطفو على الشاطئ. و لم تكل و كانت تتجاهلنا كلما حاولنا استفزازها و هي متشوظة بسبب ما كانت تحمله بين ذراعيها من مهملات نحو سلة المهملات.

كان آخر النهار في أثناء إحدى رحلاتها من الشاطئ إلى سلة المهملات بجانب الطريق عندما توقفت آية أمامنا و أنحت لتلتقط صدفة جميلة.
She held the shell in her hand, turning it every which way. She loved its shape and color, which was like hers--green in the sunshine and a soft hazel when it wasn’t so bright. This shell is like my eyes. It lets me see what is important.”

“You’re crazy!” said Selim.” Now you think shells can see.”

“No stupid,” said Ayah. “It’s a metaphor, its image, it’s a sign, its an ayah!

When she said this, I could not have been more proud of my sister, she was indeed a sign, but then she just threw a tantrum and bit of her magic disappeared as she started yelling at us saying: “Why don’t you two pick your lazy feet up and help me pick some of this garbage up? I’ve never seen two people so willing to just let things remain they way they are and not make any effort to change.”

أمسكت
بالصدفة تقلبها بين
يديها. أحببت شكلها و لونها الذي كان
مثل لونها أخضر في شعاع الشمس و بني فاتح عندما لا
تكون الشمس ساطعة. "لون هذه الصدفة يشبه لون عيناي، فهي تجعلني
أرى ما هو مهم.

قال سالم: "أنت مجنونة!" و الآن تعتقد أن الصدف يرى".

قالت آية: "لا أها الغبي"، إنها إستعارة، إنها رمزا، إنها علامة، إنها آية".

و عندما قالت هذا شعرت بشخر غير مسبوق بأختي، لقد كانت بحق علامة و لكنها انفجرت غاضبة و اختلفت
جزء من سحرها عندما صرخت قائلة: "لماذا لا تقومان أيها الكسال و تلتقطان القمامة؟ لم أرى شخصان مثلهما
مستعدادان لترك الأشياء كما هي و لا يبذلان اي جهد لتغيرها".

شعرت بغضب شديد نحو ما قالته و أصبحت متحفز للدفاع عن نفسي فقلت: "لماذا يجب علينا أن نفعل هذا؟
I felt really angry at what she said and got very defensive: “Why should we? We’re not the ones who threw it in the water and on the beach in the first place?” I said.

“Even if we clean it all up, Ameenah, it won’t last,” said Selim. Do you know how many people come to the beach everyday?

“It will, if everyone who came to the beach pitched in and helped a little, and didn’t make the mess to begin with” said Ayah.

And who is going to get them to do that,” I asked.

“I will,” she said.

“And why do you think you can change things?” asked Selim.

“Because Allah points us to all things that are great and good, and this beach and the beauty of the water and the sand and the sunset are part of his greatness.
Like the sun and the moon, and this shell. They are the signs of goodness that surround us—each is an ayah.

“The shell?” asked Selim clearly a little confused.

“You are as slow as a snail in how you think,” said Ayah. “This shell belongs here. It is connected to the beach and its sand and guides us to the water and what is in it and what washes ashore. Don’t you understand, it is an ayah. And I want to be like it—a guide—showing people how to take care of this place!”

Perhaps that’s what we should call you,” said Selim, slapping his hand on his thigh and laughing. “Ayah.”

“That is a very good idea,” she said, every so slightly superior. “From now on, my name is Ayah.”

Selim and I fell head over heels in laughter.

“What’s so funny,” she said.

“I thought you were Ameenah, not Ayah!” I said.

“From now on you will call me Ayah.”

“But your name is Ameenah,” said Selim.

“Not anymore,” said Ayah.

And no matter how much we tried, from that day forward, Ameenah would only answer to her new name.

And that is how my sister came to be called Ayah.
Chapter Two

Ayah’s chestnut hair and green eyes glistened in the sunlight streaming in from the kitchen window. It was the day after the trip to the beach—a crisp autumn afternoon. As we did our homework, Mama was cooking the evening meal. Actually, Ayah was not working on her homework, which is what we were supposed to be doing, but instead drawing a picture of the shell she had picked up the day before.

My poor mother was just trying to season the fish with herbs before Baba came home, when Ayah began nagging her.

“I need a verse from the Quran to go with my picture.”

“Not now,” Ameenah, said mother. I have to finish making dinner before your father gets here.
“Don’t call me Ameenah! My name is Ayah,” she said.

“Well you better let your father know then,” mother laughed. “Even though you’re a pest, I don’t think he wants a new daughter.”

“No really,” she said, I need a verse to go with my drawing for ‘show and tell’ at school tomorrow.

Mother realized that no one was going to get any peace until “Ayah” was taken care of.

Turning down the flame on the stove, she said: “Ahmed, set the table while I help your sister.”

“What about my homework?” I asked.

“You can do it later,” said Ayah. “This is important.”

I looked at her and rolled my eyes. Ayah stuck her tongue out at me in a flash so fast mother didn’t even see it.

Mama then took the Quran off the kitchen shelf. After thumbing through it for a few minutes, she said: “Here it is! 30:41—Mischief has appeared on land and sea because of the meed that the hands of men have earned, that Allah may give them a taste of some of their deeds: in order that they may turn back from Evil.

As I set the last fork on the table, Baba came through the front door.

“Asalamu alaikum!”

“Walaikum asalam,” the three of us answered together.
“Baba, Baba, Baba—guess what? Look!” Ayah said holding her picture up in front of him. Mama found me a wonderful quote from the Quran to go with it.

“Allah!” (Beautiful)

“Let’s eat first,” Mama interrupted.

Dinner was delicious. We dipped broiled snapper in tahini sauce. I had three servings of roasted potatoes. I would have had four, but Baba said if I ate anymore I would turn into a potato. As usual, after we cleared the table, Mama steeped tea. Ameenah then sprinkled dried mint leaves in the four cups.

Baba, known around the city as Captain Saeed, always had stories to tell. He was the big boss down at the local police station. He gave the different officers their assignments, he even dealt with criminals. Everybody we knew thought was great at his job, and people knew him everywhere in the city. He was always had great stories to tell us when we sipped tea together at the end of dinner.

“Where did you go today Baba?”

"بابا، بابا، بابا، خمن ماذا؟ أنظر! قالت آية و هي تحمل رسمتها أمامي؟ ماما وجدت لي آية رائعة من القرآن تحماشي معها.

"الله!"

"فلناكل أولًا، قاطعتها أمي.

كان العشاء لذيذا. كنا نغمس السمك المشوي في صلصة الطحين. تناولت البطاطس المشوية ثلاث مرات و كنت ستأكل الرابعة إلا أن أبي قال إذا أكلت أكثر من هذا سأتخلو إلى بطاطس. وكالمعتاد، و بعد أن قمنا بتنظيف المنضدة، كانت أمي تنقع الشاي. ثم قامت أمينة برش التوابل المجفف في الأكواب الأربعة.

يعرف أبي في المكان باسم كابتن سعيد، و كان لديه دائمًا قصص ليحكيها. كان رئيس وحدة البوليس المحلية و كان يوكل المهام لمختلف الضباط، حتى أنه تعامل بشكل مباشر مع الجرائم و كل من تعرفه يشهد له بالكفاءة و كانت الناس تعرفه في كل مكان في المدينة. و كان لديه الكثير من القصص يحكيها لنا بينما نحتسي الشاي في نهاية العشاء.

"أين كنت اليوم أبي؟"

أجاب أبي بينما كان يرتب على كتفي: "مدرسة النصر الثانوية".
“El Nasr high school,” he answered while patting my shoulder.

“Where you’ll be next year in high school!” Mama chuckled.

I was feeling both proud and excited. I couldn’t wait to enter high school. Just as I was about to ask Baba what was the school was like, Ayah said: “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Oh come on Ayah,” I said. “Give us a break, Baba’s going to tell us about my new school.”

“No,” said Ayah. “I’m really feeling ill,” she said.

“Ayah, if you don’t want to listen, just let Baba finish his story.”

“No…” she said, “I want to hear about the school as much as you, but I tell you, I really feel bad.”

I looked at her and realized it was true. It wasn’t her eyes that were just green, but her skin. Something was wrong. Mother felt her forehead.

“Saeed, she’s got a fever. The poor thing is burning up. We need to give her some medicine.”

Baba picked her up and gently carried her to her bedroom and put her to bed. I was upset, I didn’t mean to be mean to her, but I had not realized how sick she was.

Later that night, after we had all gone to bed, I woke and wanted to check that Ayah was OK, so I tiptoed to her bedroom and was startled to find her

ضحتك أمي ” حيث ستكون في العام الدراسي القادم.”

كنت أشعر بالفخر والإثارة معا. فلا أستطيع الانتظار للانطلاق بالمدرسة الثانوية. و عندما كنت على وشك سؤال أبي كيف كانت المدرسة، قالت آية: ” أعتقد أنى سأمرض.”

فقلت لها: “يا الله ، آية”! اعطيها هدمة، فآي سيحب لنا عن مدرستي الجديدة.”

”لا، قالت آية، “أشر فعلا إني مريضة.”

آية، إذا كنت لا تريدن سماع أبي، فقط دعيه يكمل قصته.”

”لا، قالت آية، ”أريد أن أسمع عن المدرسة مثلك غاماو لكنى كما أقول لك، أشر بالمرض فعلا.”

نظرت إليها وأدركت أن الأمر حقيقي. فلم تكن عينيها فقط الخضراوين بلجلدها أيضا، كان هناك أمرا سيئا. تحسست أمي جبينها.

” سعيد، آية مصابة بحمى، المسكينة حرارتها مرتفعة، ”

محتاج لإعطائها بعض الدواء.”

رفعها أبي و حملها برقة إلى جبرتها و وضعها على السرير. كنت حزيننا، فلم آكن أقصد أن أكون شرير معها، و لكنى لم أدرك كم كانت مريضة.

لاحقا في تلك الليلة بعد ما أتينا جميعا للنوم، نهضت و رغبت في الاطمئنان عليها، لذا مشيت على أطراف أصابع أحركتها و جففت لرؤيتها مستقيطة و كان تبدو أسوأ مما كانت عليه عندما ذهبت للنوم.

سألتها: “آية، ماذا بك؟”.

كانت أسنانها تسقط عندما قالت: ” أحمد ، أنا سعيدة بجنيتك، أشر بالضعف و معدنى تأملني بشدة. من فضلك أحضر أمي.
awake and looking even worse then when she went to bed.

“Ayah, what is wrong with you?” I asked.

“Ahmed. I’m so glad you came. I feel so weak, and my stomach hurts really bad. Please get Mama,” she asked me through gritted teeth.

By the time I to her side with Mama, it was clear that Ayah was very, very sick.

“Ya Allah!” exclaimed Mama.

“Should I get Baba?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Mama, “as quick as you can.”

Baba came right away. “She looks really ill,” he said.

“I know Saeed, we have to go to the hospital now!” said Mama.

“But it is not even fajr yet,” I said.

“I don’t care if the sun is up or not,” said Baba. “This is an emergency. She is burning up with fever.”

As Baba picked Ayah up and wrapped her in a blanket, she yelled, “Ouch—Baba—it is numb!” My legs are numb. I can’t feel them. I’m scared!”

And then Ayah did something she almost never does. She started to cry. And all of a sudden I was really scared. I ran to my room and got my things. On my way back I decided to stop in Ayah’s room. On her chest of drawers was the shell she got from the beach—Ayah’s “ayah.” I picked it up and put it my pocket, thinking it might be good luck.
Baba was already out the door of our apartment and out on the street in front of our car. We all crowded in. Mama was being brave for all of us, but you could see in her eyes how upset she was. I found myself holding the ayah in my pocket tightly with my hand.

At the hospital, the admitting nurse was really gruff with us. We had evidently interrupted her cigarette break. All she did was had Mama a clipboard and pointed us towards one of the empty rooms at the end of the hall. The hospital was kind of spooky. It wasn’t the clean white and antiseptic place that we read about in our schoolbooks. It was dark and smelled of people being ill and there were strange machines.
everywhere, I was a little afraid, and I was glad that Ayah had fallen asleep or she might have gotten scared.

A very nice nurse came in behind us.

“Just put her there,” she said pointing to the bed. Insha Allah she will be okay. She probably just needs some antibiotics and rest. She’s either got a bad case of the flu, or food poisoning from seafood. Has she been to the beach lately?”

“She goes to the beach all of the time. She picks junk up off the shore.”

“Ah…” said the nurse. That may be the problem.

“What do you mean?” said Mama.

“Well we can’t be sure until we run some tests, but the water along the beach is badly polluted, and we have a lot of people come in her who pick up microbes and parasites from the dirty water. They end up with serious infections and often have fevers as a result.”

“Is it serious?” asked Saeed.

“Well it can be,” said the nurse. Particularly if it isn’t treated. What is your daughter’s name?”

“Ameenah,” said my father.

“You better call her Ayah,” I said.

“Why?” asked the nurse.

“Because my sister is kind of special, she is like this shell,” I said and showed her the treasure in my pocket.

“A charm?” asked the nurse.

جاءت ورائنا ممرضة لطيفة للغاية.
قالت مشيرة إلى السرير: “فقط دعاها هناك. أن شاء الله سوف تكون بخير. قد تكون محتاجة فقط لبعض المضادات الحيوية والراحة. قد تكون تعرض لحالة شديدة أو تسمم من البكتيريا البحرية. هل ذهبت للشاطئ مؤخرًا؟”

“إنها تذهب للشاطئ طوال الوقت. فهي تنظف الشاطئ من المخلفات.”

“أه…” قال الممرضة. "قد يكون هذا هو سبب المشكلة." قالت أمي: "ماذا تعني؟".

فسألها سعيد: "هل الأمر خطير؟".
قالت الممرضة: "حسنا قد يكون ولا سيما إذا لم يتم المعالجة. ما اسم ابنتك؟".

"أمينة"، قال أبي.

فقلت: "من الأفضل أن تدعينها آية. فسألهة سعيد: "هل الأمر خطير؟".
قالت الممرضة: "حسنا قد يكون ولا سيما إذا لم يتم المعالجة. ما اسم ابنتك؟".

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فقلت: "من الأفضل أن تدعينها آية. فسألهة سعيد: "هل الأمر خطير؟".
قالت الممرضة: "ماذا".

"أن أخطي مميزة جدا، فهي كتلك الكنز" قلت هذا وأخرجت الكنز وأريتها الكنز في جيبي.

"فسألت الممرضة: "حلية؟"

And with this Mama said, “Enough.” Saeed, your due at work and Ahmed needs to get school. I’ll stay here and keep an eye on Ameenah. The two of you can come back in the afternoon.

“I’ll go,” I said, but only if I can leave Ayah her shell.”

“You can give it to her this afternoon,” said Baba. “I need to get you to school and myself to work.”
I really didn’t want to go to school, but I knew there was no point arguing. Ayah was probably going to sleep through the morning anyway.

It was late in the afternoon, when school finally let out and I walked over to the hospital with Selim.

“How sick is she?” asked Selim.

“She was in really bad shape this morning. When I talked to Mama on the phone this morning the doctors said she has ciguatera.

“Siguwhatta?” asked Selim.

“No, ciguatera, it a kind of poisoning that come from fish being infected in polluted waters,” I said.

الفصل الثالث

لم أكن أريد الذهاب للمدرسة و لكن كنت أعرف أن الجدل لن يجدي. كان من الأرجح أن تظل آية نائمة طوال النهار على أي حال.

كنا في نهاية فترة الظهيرة عندما أطلقت المدرسة صراحنا و مشيت للمشفى مع سليم.

سأل سليم: " كيف هي؟".

لقد كانت حقا في حالة سيئة هذا الصباح. عندما تحدث لأمي عبر الهاتف هذا الصباح قال الأطباء أنه تسمم السيغاتيرا.

فقلت: " لا السيغاتيرا، أنه نوع من التسمم يأتي من إصابة السمك بالتلوث في المياه الملوثة.

Chapter Three
“You mean it wasn’t from all the junk on the beach?” he said.

“No, it was the junk in the water, and bad things getting into the food chain with the fish.”

“Well aren’t you starting to sound like a scientist,” commented Selim sarcastically.

“And what’s wrong with that?” I said.

“Ignorance is bliss,” said Selim.

“Yeah, and that’s why Ayah’s sick. Don’t tell me that being stupid is good.”

“Are you calling me stupid?” asked Selim.

“No, but maybe a bit naïve and ignorant, like all of us.”

Selim laughed. That’s what I liked about him as a friend. He could laugh at himself, and be persuaded to change his mind when someone presented him a good argument.

All of a sudden we found ourselves at the entrance to the hospital. As we started going by the reception desk, the receptionist suddenly said: “Not so fast, where do you two think you’re going?”

“To see my sister, Ayah,” I said.

“Not now you’re not.” Said the receptionist.

“But…” started Selim.

“No buts,” said the receptionist. “Visiting hours are over for the afternoons. The patients need their rest. You can come back in the evening,” she said.
"But…"

"No buts, but you can sit there." And she pointed us to the chairs in the waiting area.

We had no choice so we took the chairs. It was really boring and Selim kept on wanting to mess around.

"If we don’t behave we’re going to get thrown out of here," I said.

"He’s right," said a familiar voice. It was the nurse who was in Ayah’s room earlier in the morning. "If you start fooling around, they will call security and have you thrown out. You may not be able to get back in the hospital."

"But I need to see Ayah," I said.

"That can’t happen until visiting hours start in a couple of hours. I’ll tell you what, why don’t you come with me. I have my dinner break. By the way, my name is Safa. What are your names?"

"I’m Selim, and he’s Ahmed," said Selim.

I think Selim liked Safa. I did. She was pretty and kind and we had nothing else to do.

"Where are we going to go?" I asked.

"First, we will look at something in the hospital and then let’s take a walk through the city."

"OK," said Selim.

Safa then led us down the hallway. "Let me show you the quarantined pediatric patients’ ward. We can’t go in their rooms, but we can look through the window."

و لكن... " لا يوجد لكن، يمكنكما الجلوس هناك" و أشارت إلى المقاعد في منطقة الإنتظار.

لم يكن لدينا أختيار فجلسنا. كان الأمر يبعث على الملل و ظل سليم محاولا التسكع.

فقلت: " إن لم نحسن التصرف فسيلقون بنا للخارج.

أنه محق", قاله صوت مشابه. لقد كان صوت الممرضة التي كانت في حجرة أيه مبكرا هذا الصباح.

إذا بدأت في التسكع سيتصلون بالأمن و يلقون بك في الخارج. و قد لا تتمكن من العودة للمشفى.

فقلت: "لكني محتاج لرؤية آية.".

أعتقد أن سليم أحب صفاء. فقد كانت جميلة و طيبة و لم يكن لدينا ما نفعله.

فقال سليم: " أنا سليم و هو أحمد".

أعتقد أن سليم أحب صفاء. فقد كانت جميلة و طيبة و لم يكن لدينا ما نفعله.

فسأتها: " إلى أين نحن ذاهبون؟"

حسنا، سوف نلقي نظرة على شئ في المشفى ثم سنقوم بجولة في المدينة؟

حسنا"، قال سليم.

أخذتنا صفاء إلى الحجر الصحي للأطفال. لا يمكننا الدخول إلى حجراتهم، ولكن يمكننا النظر من خلال النافذة."
“What’s pediatric mean?” I asked.

Safa laughed, “It’s just a fancy name for kids.”

“So we’re going to see the sick kids,” said Selim.

“Yes,” said Safa. Even though they’re sick they’ll be glad to see you. It get’s pretty boring for them being in the closed ward.”

By the time she said this, we were in front of a glass wall that looked into a ward full of kids about our age and some even younger. As they saw us come up to the glass a few of them waved at us. We waved back and they started talking to each other. We couldn’t hear a thing they were saying.

Safa held up her hand to her mouth and gave them a quiet sign. “It’s not good for them get too excited, but I have to say I don’t blame them, it’s awfully boring for them to be cooped up like that.”

The kids quickly calmed down. They evidently knew Safa really well, and either liked her a lot, or were scared of her.

“Those are my buddies in there, said Safa. Four by four rows of beds. Sixteen in all. They all have bio-concentration health problems. In other words, the same type of problem Ayah has.”

“What do you mean?” asked Selim.

“All of them are sick because of high concentrations of pollutants in our environment, particularly chemicals in water.”
"So is that why Ayah is sick?"

‘Sort of,’ said Safa. In Ameenah’s case it was probably in the fish she ate. We think she has ciguatera.”

“You mean you don’t know?” I asked,

“We don’t know for sure,” said Safa. Alexandria has hundreds of things wrong with its air, water and food and general health situation that could cause the symptoms.”

We started throwing all sorts of questions at Safa. “Why is Ayah sick and not us?” “Where did she get what she has?” ”Why are we letting all of these children get sick?”

Safa started laughing. “Whoaaa? One thing at a time. I’ll tell you what. I have about an hour before I have to be back on duty, and that’s when you can go see Ayah. Let’s take a walk.”

“A walk?” asked Selim.
“A field trip,” said Safa. Let’s do a little research together out in the field.”

This sure beat waiting around the reception room getting into trouble with Selim, so I said. “Sure!”

Selim and I followed Safa down the stairs and out the door, along the cracked sidewalk, along the boardwalk near the water. It was just a bit before sunset. The sun was reflecting shafts of gold off the clouds. The air smelled salty—crisp and clean. Ahead of us were three children with their mother. Safa told us to look as the woman thoughtlessly letting go of an empty potato chip bag her son had just finished. She did this right before the garbage can located on the sidewalk. Safa quietly pointed out what had happened. She ordered us to take in every detail.

That afternoon, I started to look at Alexandria differently for the first time. I started to care about it more and more. This was a beautiful place, but people often made it ugly. I wanted to feel the fresh breeze in my face. I wanted it not to be so dirty. Over the noise of the cars I found it hard to hear everything Safa had to say.

“It doesn’t have to be so polluted...” she said. Just then a car started blasting its horn, followed by another, and another. I never heard the rest of what she had to say. “The cats in the street are fine, but look at how unhealthy they are. They’re just eating garbage off the street.”

Across the street, a little boy bent down to pet one of the cats. “That’s not good,” Safa said to us. "The cat probably has fleas. Do you know..."
that's how plague used to be transmitted years ago?"

"You mean it doesn’t happen now?" I asked.

"Not so much, but that’s because we have gotten better about preventing disease. But there is still a lot of things that cat is carrying around that can make you sick. In fact, there’s a lot going on around here that isn’t good for you."

"Like what."

"What do you think?" said Safa.

"Well how about the smog?" I said.

"Yeah," said Safa. "It makes the sunset beautiful from the dust in the air, but just keep in mind all of that dust ends up in your lungs."

"Yucch," said Salim."

"Double yuck if you work in the hospital like me and see the kids come into the emergency room with asthma," said Safa.

"Would it go away?" asked Salim.

"It would decrease it. A lot of the kids I treat wouldn’t have to have an inhaler. They wouldn’t be sick so often," said Safa.

"So how would you stop it?" I asked.

"Get rid of a lot of the pollution from the factories, drive fewer gasoline cars, make sure things are so dusty by planting more plants around the town, get rid of the loose garbage" said Safa.

At that point it was getting more and more
more difficult to walk down the street.
All of sudden there were a lot of vendors on the street.

“Look at all the food!” said Selim.

“It looks good, doesn’t it?” said Safa.

“Sure,” I said, my mouth watering from the smell gyro-shawarma coming from a stall.

“Looks good,” said Safa, pointing to some pita bread being piled up with heaps of meat, onion and tomatoes.

“But I’m not sure its very safe.”

Why?” said Selim. “It looks fine to me.”

“I wonder when the vendor washed his hands last. Look at the flies around the stall. Look at the wet and rotting stuff on the ground. I think I would want to eat somewhere else.”

Selim and I both looked at what she was pointing out.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” I said.

“Me too,” said Selim.

“No, don’t get sick,” said Safa. “Get smart. Look for the food vendors who serve food with a plastic glove, or without flies everywhere. It just means using your head and being smart about things.”

“I’m getting tired,” said Salim.

“Me too, let’s go back to the hospital.”

“One last stop,” said Safa.

But I’m tired,” whined Salim.

“Too tired for ice cream?” she asked.
“Of course not,” said Selim.

So she took us to the Gelato Azza shop just down the street from Qait Bay.

I got a lemon gelato, Selim got mango and Safa had strawberry.

“This is the best,” said Selim.

“The very best,” I said.

“The very, very best “ said Safa as the sun was just about to set over the Castle.

After choosing our flavors, we sat on the stone fence bordering the Mediterranean and Qait Bay. Sailboats were everywhere on the water. Their white sails billowed in the wind, some looked like a bright sheet blowing on a laundry line, others were patched, like a street beggar’s shirt.

”Do you two know what this is?"

"Over a thousand years old," I added.

"Yes, yes. But why? Why was it built?" Safa asked us.

"To protect the city!"

"Yes! Exactly—sort of like the shell Ameenah asked you to return. Shells protect an animal living inside them. That’s why Ayah’s shell reminded me of how we are supposed to treat earth and especially our city."

"Wow, I never realized how careless we are! I never saw the city so dirty before. Actually, I don’t think I cared," Selim confessed.

"You know? I feel like my watan has tripped me and I’m face down on the ground. What can we do?" I asked.

"Don’t forget what you noticed today and keep thinking," Safa told us.
"Thinking?" asked Selim

“Yes. Wonder what went wrong and how to make it right—get it? Let’s go back. I bet your parents are looking all over for you!” said Safa.

The way back was of course noisy as Alexandria always is. The three of us didn’t talk much. Before we entered the hospital, I saw the potato chips bag the woman had tossed aside earlier. Now it was in the mud. I bent down and picked it up because that was what Ayah would have done. Safa and Selim turned to me and smiled. Both understood.

Each picked up some trash from in front of the hospital—Safa, an empty water bottle and Selim a faded newspaper.

Back in Ayah’s room, Mama and khalto Huda stood with the doctor. Safa waved good bye and we thanked her for the ice cream. We were relieved Mama didn’t ask us where we had been. She was distracted by the doctor and the order he was giving.
“Get this herbal blend,” he said to Mama. “It is not her primary medicine, but it will lessen the side effects of the pain killer,” said the doctor.

“And we can take her home after we get the herbs?” Mama asked.

“No, I’m sorry. She can’t leave the hospital yet. You can bring it tomorrow. That is when she’ll need it.” he answered.

So on our way home that evening, we passed by the attar. There was an herbalist every couple of blocks. They all had herbs that tickled my nose. There were all sorts of bright colored barrels filled to the brim with powders and leaves. They were every color under the sun yellow turmeric, red hibiscus to green mint and brown cloves. Flies were everywhere, buzzing like the electrical line above the tram.

“Mama, the flies… Can’t we go somewhere else for Ayah’s medicine?” I said.

“What are you talking about? They’re always here.” She said.

“Yes, is that healthy! The flies could be carrying some sort of illness or another…”

Mama interrupted me, “Habibi, are you okay?”

I realized she was right. This was how all the attars operated, with barrels out in the open, and on the street. But still I was uncomfortable. Things needed to be kept cleaner.

We got the herbs and left the attar.
"What was bothering you in there," said Mama.

“It’s just that I realized that Ayah is sick because we don’t always keep things as clean as we should. The flies bothered me. I don’t want her catching anything from them.”

“I understand said,” Mama. “But you have to accept a certain amount of dirt and risk in the world. It is a matter of degree.”

“But how much is too much,” I said. “Ayah’s sick because of the fish toxin ciguatera – that could have been avoided.”

Mama smiled, "I think you’re right," she said. We need to avoid the worst of things as much as possible. “All of us need to do better.”

“So we get the man at the attar to get rid of the flies.”

“Maybe,” said Mama. “Let’s worry mostly about things we can do ourselves. We can work on the herbalist a little later.”

“What can we do ourselves Mama? I don’t leave my food out in the open. And I don’t throw my garbage in the street!” I said.

“No dear, but you make a lot of garbage at home!” Mama said.

She was right, I used a lot of paper, threw out a lot of toys and things that could last longer or be put to other use.

Mama and I remained silent on the rest of our trip home. I carried Ayah’s bag of herbs in my hands.

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Chapter Four

Back home, Baba was just finishing cooking when we walked in. I decided to share my feelings, with both Mama and Baba. I thought, maybe that way, I would get more support from him.

As we ate our spaghetti, I said, “There are a lot of other kids with illnesses like Ayah’s. Ayah was right about cleaning up what we could.”

Mama and Baba looked at each other and then Baba said, “Ahmed, things have been changing very fast in Alexandria compared to when I was your age. There are more people, more buildings, more cars, and more garbage.”

This was not going to be easy I thought.

“Yes,” agreed Mama, “Not just here, في المنزل، كان أبي ينتهي من تحضير الطعام، عندما دخلت. قررت أن أشارك أبى وأمي مشاعري، فقرت أنه بهذه الطريقة قد أحصل منه على الدعم.

و عندما كنا نأكل " والاستيحي" قلت: " هناك كثير من الأطفال يعانون مما تعاني منه آية. لقد كانت آية محققة بشأن قيامنا بتنظيف ما نستطيعه.

نظر كل من أمي وأبي إلي بعضهما ثم قال أبي: " أحمد، تتغيرت الأشياء في الأسكندرية بشكل سريع جدا بالمقارنة بزمننا. كثرت الناس و كثرت المباني و السيارات و من ثمة المخلفات.

فكرت أن هذا لن يكون سهلا.

اتفقت أمي مع أبي قائلة: " نعم", " ليس هنا فقط و لكن في أماكن أخرى مثل ليبيا والمغرب و سوريا و فلسطين و لبنان و حتى إسرائيل. لذا بالطبع مرض
but in other places like Libya, Morocco, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon and even Israel. So of course people get sick. As long as you and your sister are healthy, we are grateful.”

“But she got sick!” I said.

“Alhamdulilah she is all right. Actually I am going to call to check on her right now.” Said Mama, getting up.

That night, while I was falling asleep, I thought, “Mama and Baba did teach us to be careful and not litter.” But after what I saw on my trip around the city with Selim and Safa, I felt that was not enough. I still don’t understand why some people have to suffer from the carelessness of others. I could only do so much though.

Thinking about all of these things kept me from getting to sleep until very late. I was tired and barely made it to school on time. Even so, I remembered my promise to return Ayah’s shell to the beach.

“Selim, I know we have homework, but can you come with me to the beach?” I asked.

“Why?”

“Because I promised Ayah that I would return the shell she had taken to draw. We have tomorrow off from school, so we can do homework then.” I told him.

“Sure. Once we take her shell back to the beach we go visit Ayah as well. Once we see her you can come to my house,” said Selim.

As we ran down the stairs of the school, I held Ayah’s shell tight in my hand. I held it tight wishing
that it would help me change things and make them better.

We ran down to the beach as fast as our feet would carry us. It felt so good. I was with my best friend Selim. I realized how important he was to me, especially with Ayah being so sick. The sun shined so bright on the bay that it blinded us, but it’s warmth felt good.

“Are you going to put the shell in the water or bury it in the sand?” asked Selim.

“She found it in the sand, so that is where she’d want it to go.” I said.

“Good point,” said Selim. “You know,” he continued, “isn’t it weird that Ayah’s the one trying to protect Nature and then Nature turns against her and makes her sick?”

سلام: “سليم، أعرف أن لدينا واجب منزلي، لكن هل يمكنك أن تأتي معي للشاطئ؟.

” هاذا؟”.

قلت له: “أنا وعدت آية أن أعيد الصدفة التي أخذتها لترسمها؛ لدينا أجازة من المدرسة غدا، و يمكننا عندها الانتهاء منه.”

بالتأكيد، و بعد أن نعيدها يمكننا أيضا زيارة آية، و بعد رؤيتها يمكننا أن نأتي معي للمنزل.

و عند نزولنا سلم المدرسة، أمسكت صدفة آية في يدي بقوة. أمسكتها بقوة تمنيت أنها قد تساعدني على تغيير الأشياء و جعلها أفضل.

هرعنا للشاطئ بأقصى ما يمكننا و كان شعورا طيبا, فقد كنت مع صديقي المفضل سليم. و أدركت أهميته في حياتي، و خصوصا مع مرض آية, كانت الشمس تسطع على الخليج بشكل حجب عنا الرؤية, لكن كان دفها محببا.
At first I was angry at what Selim said, but then I realized it might be true. If Nature is abused, it can bite back and hurt the very people who are on its side. I didn’t stay angry for long though. After all, Selim was my friend.

So, we dug a shallow hole with our hands and buried the shell.

I paused with Selim for a moment and said, “I hope Safa is still at the hospital.”

“Why?” he asked

“Well, other than you, her, and Ayah, I don’t know anyone else who cares about what’s happening to the beach and all of the kids get sick. I love Mama and...
Baba, but they just don’t get it!”

Selim nodded. I smiled to myself. He was finally getting it.

“I know what you mean,” Selim said. They see all the problems, but they don’t think about changing things.”

“I know,” I said. “They see all the dangers, but they think it is just the world way is—you know Allah’s will.

“Allah’s will?”

“Yeah, you know like fate,” I said.

“Inevitable,” said Selim.

“Not so,” I said. “We can change things. Let’s go see Ayah.”

When we got to Ayah’s room at the hospital, we found her asleep, just as we had left her the day before.

“I cannot imagine sleeping so long,” said Selim.

Just as he said this, a handsome, grey-haired man walked in the room. It was Dr. Waleed, Ayah’s physician. “You can’t imagine it?” he said. “She is fighting off a very serious infection. It is taking all her strength to get back to normal, and she needs her rest. Let’s let her sleep.”

Selim looked at the man and said, “And who are you?”

“Honestly Selim, this is Safa’s dad, Dr. Waleed!” I said.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Dr. Waleed. “But here, let’s talk more, down hall so Ayah can get her rest.”

Dr. Waleed lead us down the hall and
across the building to his office. The office was small with a huge window. There was a big comfortable chair which he plopped down on.

“You’re younger than I am,” he laughed, “so you get to sit on the blue carpet. My knees don’t bend as well as they used to.”

It was just before sunset, maghrib, the end of the day. Dr. Waleed said, "Let me tell you a story.”

“But…” said Selim.

“Hush,” said Dr. Waleed, “Close your eyes. Tight, tight, tight! And use all of your imagination” he said.

“No speaking, Selim. You too Ahmed. I want you think about what I am describing.”

He was quiet for just a moment. I could sense that Selim was about to fidget, when Dr. Waleed said, “I know you two like horses. So, pretend you’re riding your horses side by side--maybe you’re racing each other. Have you been to Baghdad? Of course not, but that’s where you are now! You know why? Because that’s where you are going to school. And you are on your way home, because you just finished writing two very important works of science. You wrote them on parchment, by moon light. You know what you wrote about Selim?
“What I wrote about?” said Selim.

“Yes, you wrote about all the different kinds of air that exist in our world—particularly harmful air, and how it spreads,” he said.

And what did Ahmed write about” asked Selim.

“He wrote about how cities and home should be built, so that they are beautiful and healthy places to live.”

“So what is my name,” I asked Dr. Waleed.

“Your name is Ibn Sina. You are a doctor and a philosopher and you lived a thousand years ago, You wrote The Book of Healing and you were known as the 'prince of physicians.'”

“Not bad,” said Selim. “So who am I?”
“You are Qusta Ibn Luqa. You were born in Baalbek, more than a hundred years before Ibn Sinâ. Like him, you are a great physician and healer.”

“A scientist?” asked Selim.

“Of course,” said Dr. Waleed. “The Arab world had many great scientists. In fact, we were mathematicians too.”

“Mathematicians?” I asked.

“Of course,” said Waleed. “Where do you think Arabic numbers came from? Norway? Did you know that numbers have angles in Arabic writing—one angle for each thing that is being counted?”

“What do you mean?” said Selim.

“Like this,” said Dr. Waleed. And then he proceeded to write down each number in the most beautiful and precise Arabic script I had ever seen.

“Wow!” Selim and I said. We looked at each other. “I had no idea,” I said.

Dr. Waleed just smiled, letting us take the information in.

“So how many scientists and doctors were there that long ago? Was there anybody named Selim?” asked Selim.

“Were any of them from Alexandria?” I asked.

“There were many! And of course some of them were from Alexandria,” he said.

“Actually, you two are on a trip way to Spain – on your way to Andalucía. Remember, we are using imaginations.”

“Where is that?” I asked.
“Well, Andalucía is in Spain, and Spain is in Europe. Long ago, it had some of the largest libraries in the world. It was diverse and beautifully ornamented with flowers and orange trees. The buildings were decorated with blue tiles. And Christian translators, Jewish scientists and Muslim mathematicians all worked together to learn more and bring benefit to society with their knowledge. So that is where you are going to have your teachers look over your work. Then it would get placed in the great libraries.

“Where can we read what we wrote?” asked Selim.

I was not sure if he was joking or serious.

“Excellent question!” exclaimed Dr. Waleed.

“And I have a secret to tell you Selim! Your father is the pharmacist at the hospital on Kamal Street?”

“Yes..” said Selim, a little confused. “How did you know?”

“HEL WAS NOT SURE IF HE WAS JOKEY OR SERIOUS.

“I have been studying and collecting all the books he could. Your father has one of the largest collections of historical book in all of Alexandria. Before you were born, he would travel almost anywhere to get a copy of an important or forgotten manuscript for his collection. You should ask him if he has copies of what you two wrote.”

Selim and I looked at each other. That could not be true. Selim’s dad never
even brought up the subject with us.

“Are you sure that’s my dad? Because I have no idea. And we don’t have as big a library as you’re talking about. The few shelves in the living room have some stories and pharmacy books.” Said Selim.

“Well, why don’t you ask, it won’t hurt. If I am right, come visit me here tomorrow!” Said Dr. Waleed.

As Selim and I got up to go home, we thanked Dr. Waleed profusely for all his time and teaching us things we never knew before.

Selim said, “You’re coming over Ahmed. There is no way I’m going to ask my dad about a secret library without you. He will think that I’ve lost my mind.”

“There’s no way your dad is going to show you a secret library without me! I want to be there if it is true.” I told him.

And though we thought it would be really absurd if Dr. Waleed was right, I think we were both hoping he was, because that would only mean one thing: adventure.

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جمع كل ما يستطيع من الكتب. يملك أبيك واحدة من أكبر مجموعات الكتب التاريخية في الإسكندرية. قبل أن تولد، كان يسافر أي مكان للحصول على نسخة من مخطوطة هامة أو منسية لمجموعته. يكفك سؤاله إذا كان يملك نسخة مما كنت تحلم به.

نظرنا إلى بعضنا البعض، هذا لا يمكن أن يكون صحيحا. لم يفتح والد سليم هذا الموضع معنا من قبل.

قال سليم: “هل أنت واثق من أنه والدي؟ لأنه ليس لدي ابتكار فكرة؟ ليس لدينا مكتبة بالحجم الذي تحدثت عنه. الرفوف القليلة الموجودة في غرفة المعيشة تحتوي على بعض القصص وكتب في علم الصيدلة.”

قال دكتور وليد: “حسنا، ما لا تأسله، فإن يضر الأمر أحدا. إذا كنت محقا، قد بزباري غدا!”

قمنا للذهاب و شكرنا دكتور وليد كثيرة لوقته وتعليمنا تلك الأشياء التي لم نكن نعرف عنها شيئا.

قال سليم: “سأأتي معي أحمد، لا سبيل في أن أسأل أبي عن هذا السر مفردي. سيظن أنني قد فقدت عقلي.”

قلت له: “لا سبيل في أن يريك والدك المكتبة بدوني. أريد أن يكون موجود إذا كان الأمر حقيقيا.”

و على الرغم من اعتقادنا أن سيعودا الأمر غريبا إذا كان دكتور وليد محقا، إلا أننا كنا نأمل أن يكون الأمر حقيقي، لأن هذا قد يعني أمرا واحدا - مغامرة.
When we got to Selim’s house, only his father was there. Selim’s father was always friendly. He was also always a little distracted, kind of like his mind was somewhere else. I always liked the way he smelled—a little bit like sweet musk, and sometimes a little bit like medicine, which must have come from his working as a pharmacist.

“Ahlan—welcome! You are very late!” said Selim’s dad.

“Baba, don’t you know? We were visiting Ayah,” said Selim, as he slipped off his shoes and left them by the door.

“There’s no school tomorrow, so we figured it would be okay,” I said.

“I guess so,” said Selim’s dad. I thought to myself, grown-ups always had to...
make sure they thought everything was all right. Selim’s dad was no different than my parents. Selim and I sat down together in his living room. A moment later his father came in with bowl of honeydew.

“Yummy,” Selim said.

“Thank you!” I said. I was famished!

I glanced at Selim. I wanted to ask about the books. I wanted to know about the scientists. I wanted to learn about Andalucia and history. I wanted to know what happened long ago and far away. So I waited, while we chatted about the weather and Ayah, and homework and school.

After awhile, I couldn’t hold myself back any longer and I blurted out.

“Amo, Selim and I have something we must to ask.”

“Yes habibi Ahmed, go on,” said Amo Zack.

“Today at the hospital, when we were waiting to visit Ayah, Dr. Waleed began to tell us a story, a story from history, of scientists, and great times. He said you may know more.”

“He said he was your teacher Baba!” said Selim.

A hush fell over the room. Amo Zack turned red. I got scared for a moment. I was not sure if he was angry or shy or just a little upset.

Then finally he said, “So he told you about the books.”

Selim and I looked at each other. What were we supposed to say?
“Yes,” he talked about your library.

“Well I suppose you are old enough to finally learn about it. Okay, get up, both of you,” said Amo Zack.

We jumped up and followed him. He lead us through the hallway, past Selim’s bedroom and down the back stairs of the villa.

“This is a secret, only very special books are kept down here. You tell no one about this without my permission. Come on,” he said leading us down two flights of stairs, into a hidden basement. Taking a special key out of the pocket he opened what looked like the door to a storage closet. What was inside was amazing. The room behind the door was beautiful. The walls were lined with books. There were glass cases everywhere, Examples of beautiful Arabic script and calligraphy were painted on the walls. There were
frames full beautiful handwriting and illuminated Arabic texts everywhere, 
There was a huge rosewood table in the middle of the room, surrounded by four 
mahogany chairs. In the corner was the deepest, most comfortable reading chair 
with a brass lights and table stacked with books and a demitasse coffee cup 
next to it.

It was wonderful, just the place for a scholar to hang and think.

“Why the glass cases?” I asked.

“It helps keep the humidity out; these books are old and rare – I try to take 
care of them best I can,” answered Selim's father. “You need to respect what 
is in here, not just books themselves, but the ideas that are contained within 
them. You can to stay here and look at them as long as you like. Just show 
my books the respect they deserve. Just don’t disturb the things in the glass 
cases. I’ll be upstairs—if you need anything just come up.”

As he shut the door behind him, Selim said, “Wow, I can’t believe he kept this a 
secret for so long, and that he trusts us.”

“I know, this is a very special privilege 
Selim. Your father takes such good care 
of these books, I’m scared to touch 
them! There isn’t a speck of dust on 
these shelves!”

“Yeah… I just don’t understand why he 
didn’t tell me before!” Selim answered.

“Maybe he thought we just needed to 
be old enough to appreciate them. How 
about we start reading and find out 
what’s here?
We began scanning the shelves. Selim said, “This Arabic script is hard to read. We never learned it at school!”

“I think we just need to patient,” I said. “Look here. These are different types of writing.”

“Different types of writing?” asked Selim.

“Yeah. Look here this is thulathi script and this riqa’a. You won’t learn that till after you master naskh. Thulathi is mostly used in titles, like on book or signs. It is more formal. Riqa’a is more concise and faster to write. Nnaskh is complicated to write, but the easiest to read.”

“Naskh is like what I read in my textbooks at school,” said Selim. I’ve seen these other types of writing, but I didn’t realize they were so different.”

“Well, there part of why Arabic writing and printing is so interesting. It’s almost like you wearing different types of clothes. You know, some clothes for the mosque, and other clothes for the beach or around the house.”

“Wow,” said Selim.

We continued looking at the different books.

“Look here,” I said, here’s a copy of al Khawarizmi’s book on mathematics.” I said. And look, here are some of Omar Khayam poetry books. Here’s one by al Shafi’ee. Look, this is one of my favorite poems. I opened the book and gently and flipped through its yellowed pages.
“Listen to this Selim:

(No one will attain all of knowledge)

(Not even if he tries for a thousand years.)

(The sea of knowledge is deep)

(So take only the best from everything.)

We searched and searched the books, but couldn’t find any of the books the books by the scientists Dr. Waleed had us imagine we were. Finally, Selim’s fathers called us saying:

“Ahmed’s mother is going to be worried if he doesn’t make it home soon, and your mother almost has dinner ready for Selim.”

“But the books!” Selim started to stammer.

“I’m happy you liked the books,” said his father, “but they will be there tomorrow and as long as we take proper care of them,” he said.

“Can we show them to Ayah?” I asked.

“Of course, as soon as she is well enough to come visit.”

And with this, we ended our exploration of the library.

أذننا في تصفح الكتب و لكننا لم نعثر على الكتب التي ألفهما العلماء الذين جعلنا دكتور وليد نتخيل أننا مثلهم. و أخيرا نادانا والد سليم قائلًا: "ستبدأ والدة أحمد في القلق أن لم تعاود المنزل سريعا و قامت و أوضكت و الدك على تجهيز العشاء لسليم. و لكن الكتب!، بدأ سليم في التلعثم.

قال والده: سعدت أنك أحببت الكتب، و لكن الكتب ستظل كما هي للغد و طالما حفظنا عليها".

سألت: "هل يمكن ليأن أنه تراهم؟": 

بالطبع، مجرد أن تفاعلي، يمكنها زيارتنا.

و بهذا أنهينا اكتشافنا للمكتبة.
Chapter Six

Around noon the next day, Mama received a phone call from the hospital. Safa was on the other line, she was letting us know that Ayah was awake and ready to go home.

“Ahmed, are you coming with us?” asked Baba.

I was the only one still in my pajamas. I would have just waited for Ayah to get home, but I remembered that I had to see Dr. Waleed.

“I’ll come, but can I call Selim? If it’s all right, I want him with me.” I told Mama and Baba. I wanted Selim to be there when I told Ayah about the library. Maybe we could even go to his house for a visit if Ayah wanted.

So Selim and I met up at the hospital.
My parents and his parents brought Ayah helium balloons and two stuffed animals to cheer her up. I smiled to myself knowing that I would be the one with her best surprise.

“Mama!” Ayah exclaimed as Mama walked through the door. Ayah grabbed Mama’s neck and gave her a huge hug. Then it was Baba’s turn, and finally came my hug.

“Sorry,” I whispered in her ear.

“For what?” she asked.

“I’ll tell you later. Selim is here too, and he is very excited to see you.”

And just then, Selim popped his head through the door.

“Ayah, welcome back!” Selim.

Dr. Waleed and Safa followed Selim into the room. I quietly walked up next to Dr. Waleed and said to him, “You were right. Selim’s father’s library was amazing.”

“I told you so. What are your plans?” asked Dr. Waleed.

“I want to take Ayah to the library. It’s magnificent. I never imagined something like that existed, and hidden away like it is in Selim’s house. I was amazed— totally surprised!” I told him. Then I added, “Thank you, we would not have known about it without you!”

Dr. Waleed put his hand gently on my shoulder. “Selim would have learned about it in time. But I am glad you got to discover together.”

I nodded quietly in agreement. Ayah was ready to go. Mama and Baba had
packed her things. I did not want to go home just yet though. I know Ayah didn't either, she was energetic, and tired of lying in a bed for a few days. She needed an adventure I thought. So Selim took care of it.

"Amo Saeed, please, please can Ayah and Ahmed come over to my house? I've already asked my parents. We have a surprise to share with her. Please! Just for a little bit?" said Selim.

I added my two cents in as well. “Please Mama and Baba, Ayah needs a change from the hospital, right?” I asked while nudging her.

"Yes!” Ayah chimed in.

"Fine, but only for one hour. And don’t make her too tired. We miss her too!” said Mama.

“Yes Mama,” I said as Selim picked up all of Ayah’s things and headed out of the hospital and out onto the street. When go just a block from Selim’s house, Ayah started skipping ahead of us. It was clear she was already getting back to her old self, as she made her way down the street, hop-scotching in her green dress over the weeds that grew out of the cracks in the sidewalk.

Selim’s parents welcomed us in the house. They were delighted to see that Ayah was so much better. Amo Zack knew exactly why we were there though, to show Ayah the secret library. He took Ayah's hand and led her past Selim's bedroom down the house’s back stairs.

"Where are we going? asked Ayah.

It's a surprise,” said Amo Zack.
We go to the door of the library and Selim opened it. We walked through the door and into the shelves and shelves of books and treasures.

“Oh my God!” Ayah exclaimed. “This is amazing!” she said as she slowly turned around taking in the entire room.

“This is why we wanted to come to Selim’s house.” I told her.

“We knew you would like it. We just found out about it yesterday,” said Selim.

“But this is your house,” Ayah said.

“Yeah, I know. But Baba wanted us to be old enough to understand that what is in here must be taken care of and respected. I guess now is that time.”

قال سليم: “كنا نعرف أنك سوف تحبينها. لقد اكتشفناها بالأمس فقط.”

قال آية: "و لكن هذا بيتك.

"نعم، أعرف، و لكن أراد أبي أن ينضج كفاية حتى نفهم أن ما فيها يجب أن نهتم به و نحترمه. أعتقد أن الوقت قد حان لهذا.

سألت آية: "ل لهذا فهذه كتب مهمة للغاية؟".

قلت: “بالفعل، هذه الكتب تعود للزمن الذي كان فيه الناس مثلك مهتمون بالبيئة. ألف هذه الكتب باحثون و علماء قضوا حياتهم كلها محاولين تحسين العالم.”

قال سليم: "لذا يجب أن يتم إحتراز تلك الكتب بالشكل الذي تستحقه.

ابتسم والد سليم قائلًا: "ما رأيك، آية؟".
“So these are really important books?” asked Ayah.

“Exactly, these are books from the time when people were more like you and cared about the environment. There are books written by great scholars and scientists who spent their whole lives trying to improve the world,” I said.

“So all these books must be given the respect they deserve,” said Selim.

Selim’s dad smiled. “What do you think Ayah?”

Her eyes shined bright as could be. She was very excited.

“Wow. I can’t believe I’m here! It’s like finding a huge treasure chest – its like that beautiful shell I found!” she said.

And then Ayah became very excited. One of the book in on a shelf in front of her had the name Rumi on it. He was a poet she had read in school.

Amo Zack saw that she was excited by the book and its title and said: “Let the beauty you seek be what you do.”

She nodded, “Rumi.”

“Exactly,” said Amo Zack. “Ahmed, I think your sister Ayah may have the makings of a scholar.”

“I would like to think poet, or may even better a person who saves things,” said Ayah.

“Like what?” asked Selim.

“Like our history, and our art and culture and things that are part of our day-to-day-lives.”
“You mean like our city, and its air and the water that washes in from the sea,” said Selim.

“Exactly, all that surrounds us, our history and the place we live.”

“Alexandria,” said Amo Zack.

“Alexandria,” we repeated.

And that is the story of how my sister Ameenah got her nick-name Ayah and how we began to make Alexandria and the world we lived in a better place.
About the Author

Noha Abdel-Mottaleb is an Environmental Engineering student at the University of Miami. Noha enjoys research, gardening, traveling, and reading when not doing homework. Her parents are natives of Alexandria and she has been attached to the city after visiting multiple times. Noha hopes to work on building sustainable environmental health ethics in communities when she graduates.

About the Translator

Radwa Yehia graduated with a B.A from the English Department at the University of Alexandria in 1999. She has also excelled at the Cervantes Institute, learning Spanish. In addition she mastered Italian translation and Russian translation. She received a Professional Written Translation Diploma in 2003 at the American University in Cairo. She was a Translation Expert at the Alexandria Court of Appeals in 2002. She has worked as a certified translator at the Embassy of Great Britain, and the Embassy of Lithuania. Currently she is a translator and consecutive interpreter at the Alexandria Governor’s Office.

About the Illustrator

Francesca Rosa Sternfeld is a teacher, writer, and visual artist. Originally from Salt Lake City, Utah, she spent two years living in Alexandria, Egypt teaching Modern Dance and English as a Second Language. She quickly fell in love with the colors, people, traditions, and history of Alexandria, and it has remained close to her heart. She hopes the illustrations in My Name is Ayah will help bring young readers close to the city’s unique spirit, and inspire them to do their part to preserve the natural and human beauty of one of the world’s greatest places.