

FARHANA ZIA

the  
**Garden**  
of my  
**Imaan**





**The Garden  
of My Imaan**

*For Apa  
and  
for my mother*

*With grateful thanks to Jennifer Unter, Kathy Landwehr, and Vicky Holifield*



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*A little girl threw a mango seed in dry, pebbly soil and walked away. "I will grow a mango tree," she announced.*

*"If you want the fruit," her mother said, "you must tend the seed."*

*So the girl went back. First she tilled the soil. Then she dug a hole and covered the seed with earth. She watered it every day and labored to keep the ground free of weeds and pests. One day a seedling poked its little head out. The girl planted pretty flowers around the sapling. Soon they blossomed and their perfume filled the air. Butterflies, birds, and bees came to nest and the garden grew and grew.*

*When the girl became a woman, she held her own daughter on her lap. "A garden bloomed in dry soil," she told her. "It was a garden of imaan."*

*"Imaan?" her daughter asked.*

*"It's our belief," the woman explained. "The seed lies, oh so quietly within, until one day it grows into a sprout and the sprout into a sapling and the sapling into a tree and the bud arrives next to uncurl one pretty petal at a time."*

*"And the mango? Tell me about the mango," the daughter begged.*

*The woman laughed. "Oh, it grew," she said. "And it was so soft and sweet, the golden juice dribbled like a golden river from arm to elbow!"*

**Badi Amma told this story to Amma, who told it to me.**





## Driving Camels

**T**here is a lake not far from my house, with a sandy beach on one end and spongy walking trails on the other. In the summer, Zayd and I go there to swim and *Amma*, our grandmother, tags along. When *Badi Amma* was stronger, she'd come too. Our great-grandmother loved to kick up the sand with her toes.

Our little beach is just about the only sandy place we have close by. As far as I know, there are no deserts to speak of in the Northeast, only mountains to the west, the ocean to the east, and a coastal plain in between. I remember all this because I made a travel brochure in fourth grade social studies class one year ago.

And so, when the crazy lady screamed at us about deserts, I didn't know what she was talking about, but she pretty much ruined our day.



That morning, Mom was really annoyed that I didn't get out of bed when she called me, but a storm had kept me



tossing and turning for most of the night and it was hard to wake up. Fifteen minutes later, I heard her arguing with Zayd too. By 9:30, we were on the road to Sunday school. By 9:45, we were stuck in traffic, still some distance away from the intersection where we normally turned left to go to the Islamic Center of Wilshire County.

“Sister Khan’s going to be mad,” I muttered. My Sunday school teacher already had a pretty bleak opinion of me. I had missed two classes so far. I didn’t know the verses of the holy Quran as well as my friends did. And worst of all, I didn’t fast on weekdays during the holy month of *Ramadan*, even though, according to her, I was old enough and sound of body and mind.

“We could’ve left the house a lot earlier if you’d gotten out of bed sooner,” Mom reminded me.

“Sundays should be for rest,” I grumbled. “Saturdays are taken up with soccer practice and math tutoring and weekdays are reserved for school. When do I ever get to rest?”

A car honked behind us and then several others followed its lead.

“Looks like the lights aren’t working right.” Mom craned her neck to see ahead of us. “Maybe the wind knocked the wires down last night.”

“There should be someone directing traffic,” I said. “Where’s the cop?”

“Sleeping in on Sunday,” my brother Zayd chimed in.

“We’re going to be really late.” I kept an eye on the dashboard clock, already trying to prepare myself for Sister

Khan's comments about punctuality and tardiness.

We inched our way forward and finally came to the intersection where the traffic light flashed red. Mom hesitated, waiting to see if someone would let us through.

I saw an opening in the oncoming traffic and yelled, "Go, Mom!"

She stepped on the gas and whipped the car into a left turn.

"Watch out!" I shouted. Our tires squealed as she shot into the intersection, toward a car that had appeared out of nowhere. Mom slammed on the brakes and we came to a jerky stop, narrowly avoiding a collision. The other car swerved around us.

"Do you want to kill someone?" the driver screamed out her window. "Go back to the desert, moron! Drive a camel!"

I could see her glaring angrily at us as she sped away.

Flustered, Mom tugged at her dupatta, which had started to slide off her head. "Sorry," she muttered to herself. "It was a stupid mistake."

Quietly, I eased my own scarf off my head.

My brother poked me on the shoulder. "What did she mean, 'Go back to the desert'? We're not from the desert, are we?"

"Just shut up, Zayd!" I snapped.

"And what did she mean, 'drive a camel'?" he persisted. "No one drives camels. They ride them, don't they?"

"Ignorant woman!" Mom shook her head. "She thinks we're Arabs."

"It was the hijab, wasn't it?" I asked.

Mom noticed me playing with my scarf in my lap.  
“What are you doing?”

“Nothing... I’ll put it back on in a sec.”

“Oh, Aliya!” Mom sounded exasperated.

Zayd piped up from the backseat. “Hey, Mom, did you ever do that?”

“Do what, Zayd?”

“Ride a camel?”

“No!” Mom said sharply.

“Did Amma or Badi Amma?”

Mom sighed and moved forward another car length.  
“Of course not, Zayd. Why would they do that?”

“I don’t know,” Zayd said. “It would be kind of fun to sit on top of the hump and go bumpity bump.”

“There are no camels in India, you idiot,” I pointed out.

“There are camels in Rajasthan, but that’s very much beside the point,” Mom said. “And besides, Rajasthan is one thousand miles from where Amma lived.”

“Why would that woman say that, Mom?” I asked.

“Because she’s an ignorant person who doesn’t know her geography and has no clue about things in general.” Mom’s brow creased with worry. “She clearly doesn’t know that Muslims come from all corners of the world. Just put it entirely out of your mind, okay?”

But that was hard to do. We drove the rest of the way in silence.



## Blue-eyed Boyfriend

**W**e were twenty minutes late and I knew I was in for it. Zayd and I sped up the stairs. As he ran toward the younger kids' classroom, I dashed into the door marked Religion 2.

"Assalam alaikum," Sister Khan called out. "Notice, people. We started thirty minutes ago."

"Twenty," I mumbled, making my way to the last row, where my friends Nafees, Sehr, Heba, and Amal sat.

"Reason, please?" asked Sister Khan.

"We were stuck in traffic," I said, sliding into my seat. Under my breath, I added, "That's what happens when you drive a camel."

"What?" Sehr looked confused.

I dug in my backpack for my notebook and pencil. "What's the assignment?"

"She wants a two-page essay on *The Five Essential Practices of Islam and Applications in Our Lives*," Heba whispered.

"Two pages? Are you serious?" I peeked into Nafees's notebook but she snapped it shut.

“I’m done!” she announced.

“That’s not two pages,” I said.

“No talking!” Sister Khan called out.

“What are you writing about?” I asked Heba, keeping my voice down.

“Ramadan. What else?”

I chewed on my pencil. I could fill up two pages with Badi Amma’s stories about her pilgrimage to Mecca, but I had a feeling Sister Khan might want something about daily prayers or charity instead. I started writing but Nafees was distracting me. She had opened her notebook again and was drawing hearts pierced with arrows and dripping blood. Then she scribbled a quick note, ripped the page out, and tossed it into Sehr’s lap.

Sehr read the note and turned to stare at Nafees as if she had just sprouted horns. Amal and Heba read it next and their jaws dropped. I pushed my assignment aside and grabbed the note from Amal.

*Guess what? I have a boyfriend! He has blue eyes and he is sooo cuuuute!!! My parents don’t know—if you tell, I’ll never speak to you again.*

I read it four times. Nafees had a boyfriend? She wasn’t even supposed to talk to boys! Her family had arrived from Pakistan a year ago and her parents were still trying to figure things out.

Nafees had told us about their shouting matches. “They

forbid dancing and they won't let me download any music," she'd complain. "If I switch on the car radio, they scream their heads off!" Her parents had made her wear hijab as soon as her period started and they were looking into an Islamic school for her as well. How could Nafees have a boyfriend?

But before I could get more details, Sister Khan rapped on her desk and told us to attend to our assignment.



After Religion 2, I had Arabic class, then Quranic reading. I wasn't very good at either, so I did my best to pay attention in class even though I was dying to hear more about Nafees's new boyfriend.

Finally it was time for lunch. We hurried to the social hall, pushing our way through crowds of kids pouring in from their classes.

"Are you going to tell us the rest or not?" I demanded. "We have exactly twenty-five minutes until midday prayers."

Nafees was more than happy to oblige. "His name is Marc, short for Marcus. He has the cutest ponytail."

"Marc?" Amal raised her eyebrows. "That's not even a Muslim name!"

"Your parents are going to have a fit," Heba declared. "How'd you—"

"We met in the grocery store. Isn't that romantic?"

“And?” I wanted to know more.

“And...he was eating potato chips and he said hi and I said hi back and—”

“He was eating *before* he paid for the chips?”

“Shut up, Sehr!” Nafees said.

“How do you do it?” I asked.

“Do what?”

“This.” I swept my hand in her direction. “The way you talk to people so easily. The way you make new friends all the time.”

I thought about Josh Clemens, the cute kid in Mr. Gallagher’s homeroom. His eyes were blue too.

Nafees snapped her fingers in my face. “Like this!” she said. “It’s easy.”

“You’re unbelievable!” I marveled.

“I just don’t know about all this.” Sehr was frowning. “What happens next?”

Nafees giggled. “I’ll keep you posted.”

I chewed on my lip, still trying to wrap my brain around what I just heard. “What’s the matter with you?” Sehr asked. “You seem sort of—”

“Nothing,” I replied quickly, turning back to my lunch. In a year or so, I’d be as old as Nafees and Amal. Maybe Josh would finally notice me and I could get a boyfriend too.

It was almost time for midday prayers, so I stuffed the last bite of my tuna sandwich into my mouth. I felt wildly jealous of Nafees. She had what I’d been wishing for: a real boyfriend. Josh, to be precise. I’d had a serious crush on him

since the middle of fourth grade, but we'd barely spoken more than two words to each other.

Amal cleared her throat. "I've got news too."

"What, now you have a boyfriend?" I asked.

"Ha, ha, very funny!"

"We're *waiting*," Sehr prompted.

"Well...it's not as exciting as having a boyfriend, but it's pretty important. I'm starting hijab."

She was right. The news of her decision to start covering herself wasn't as astounding as Nafees's, but it was still surprising. Amal's family was pretty liberal—the exact opposite of Nafees's.

"I don't understand," I said. "Why?"

"Because...you know," she whispered conspiratorially. "I've started my period, that's why."

"Really?" I squealed. "You have? How do you feel? Is it really different?"

Last year, I'd begged Mom to let me wear a bra. "What's the rush?" she'd said, eyeing the rolled-up T-shirt under my top with suspicion. "Your breasts will develop soon enough." I told her that Madison and Carly already had bras, so she gave in and let me get a plain white one. But there was nothing happening on the period front just yet, and there wasn't much I could do about it. Mom told me not to worry. Some girls just took a little longer. But I couldn't help wondering and wishing, especially since my friends were way ahead of me.

"Well, well!" Sehr said with a big smile. "Congratulations, Amal. You're a real woman now!"



"Your parents want you to do this?" I asked.

"They don't...not really," Amal admitted. "But I want to."

"What did your mom say?" Heba asked. "She can't be thrilled."

"She was surprised," Amal admitted. "She asked me if I was very, very sure."

"And are you?" Heba wondered.

"Sure, I'm sure." Amal's voice was strong and confident.

"But aren't you a little bit afraid?" I asked, thinking about the woman who had yelled at us that morning.

"Afraid? Of what?" she asked.

"Of what people might think? Of being teased?"

"No way!" Amal replied. "I'm not afraid to be a Muslim."

"But you can be one without needing to look like one, right?" I asked.

"Why do you worry so much what other people think?" Nafees demanded.

"I don't like to stick out," I said. "I can't help it."

"My older sister's been sticking out for two years without any problems," Sehr said. "She started wearing hijab when she was fourteen."

All this talk about hijab was making me uneasy. I turned to Nafees. "Tell us more about Marc."

"Not today." Nafees winked at me. "I want to keep the rest of him to myself for now."

"Eat up," Heba urged, biting into her Syrian bread and falafel sandwich. "There won't be lunch breaks once Ramadan starts."

We finished our lunch, threw away our trash, and left the social hall.



“Who’s excited to fast again this year?” Heba asked on our way to the prayer hall.

“What a silly question!” Amal said. “We all are!”

“I can’t wait for Eid,” Sehr said enthusiastically.

“Whoa! Let Ramadan start, will you? Let’s get through a month of fasting before we get excited about celebrating its end,” Nafees said.

“When exactly does Ramadan start, anyway?” I asked.

“The second week in November,” Amal said. “How could you not know that?”

“I haven’t been thinking about it yet,” I replied. “I suppose I’ll fast on weekends like last year— Hey, wait a minute! Isn’t Thanksgiving a couple of weeks later?”

Sehr ignored my question. “Only on weekends?” She sounded surprised. “Why?”

“Oh...school,” I stammered. “You know...”

“My little sister already fasts on school days and she’s only ten,” Sehr said.

Nafees pointed at me. “Let me guess. You don’t want to fast on school days because you don’t want to *stick out*, right? Fraydy cat!”

My cheeks felt hot. There were plenty of other legitimate reasons for not fasting on a school day—reasons that had

to do with PE and math and tests and focus and concentration. But I kept my mouth shut. Sehr would probably say my reasons were lame.

“Oh, leave her alone, Nafees,” Amal demanded. “Mind your own business!”

“All right!” Nafees said. “No need to be so sensitive.”

I mouthed a silent *thank you* to Amal.

“Don’t worry about it,” Amal said. “We all try to do our best and others should mind their own business.” She glared at Nafees.

We didn’t talk much after that. Quickly, we made ablutions in the *wudu* room to cleanse ourselves for prayer and removed our shoes before entering the prayer hall.



People were sitting on the floor waiting for midday prayers to begin, men in front and women in the back. The large room wasn’t as crowded as it would be on a celebration day like *Eid* and there were a lot of empty rows.

I joined Mom in the back of the room, where she sat chatting quietly with Amal’s mother. The women around us wore all sorts of clothing—*abayas*, *shalvar khameez*, *saris*, and even jeans. Everyone had their heads covered. Mom’s dupatta kept sliding off; while she talked, her fingers fiddled nervously with it.

Zayd and his friends sat in front of us. If *Baba* had been there, Zayd would have had to sit up front with the other

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men and boys, but our dad was in Detroit for business.

The strange events of the morning had left me feeling uneasy and jittery. But as I waited for the midday prayer to begin, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I relaxed all my muscles and tried to let my mind calm down.

At the stroke of one, the call to prayer sounded. The entire congregation stood up and waited for the *Imam* to lead us in worship. “*Allahu Akbar!*” Imam Malik declared. God is great! We bowed, kneeled, and prostrated together according to our tradition, placing our foreheads on the prayer mats in submission to God. We all recited the same words together.

I closed my eyes and added a little extra. *O merciful Allah, I prayed. Help me be less of a fraidy cat, please?*