

There was once, in the country of Alifbay, a sad city, the saddest of cities, a city so ruinously sad that it had forgotten its name. It stood by a mournful sea full of glumfish, which were so miserable to eat that they made people belch with melancholy even though the skies were blue.

In the north of the sad city stood mighty factories in which (so I'm told) sadness was actually manufactured, packaged and sent all over the world, which never seemed to get enough of it. Black smoke poured out of the chimneys of the sadness factories and hung over the city like bad news.

And in the depths of the city, beyond an old zone of ruined buildings that looked like broken hearts, there lived a happy young fellow by the name of Haroun, the only child of the storyteller Rashid Khalifa, whose cheerfulness was famous throughout that unhappy metropolis, and whose never-ending stream of tall, short and winding tales had earned him not one but two nicknames. To his admirers he was Rashid the Ocean of Notions, as stuffed with cheery stories as the sea was full of glumfish; but to his jealous rivals he was the Shah of Blah. To his wife, Soraya, Rashid was for many years as loving a husband as anyone could wish for, and during these years Haroun grew up in a home in which, instead of misery and frowns, he had his father's ready laughter and his mother's sweet voice raised in song.

Then something went wrong. (Maybe the sadness of the city finally crept in through their windows.)

The day Soraya stopped singing, in the middle of a line, as

if someone had thrown a switch, Haroun guessed there was trouble brewing. But he never suspected how much.

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Rashid Khalifa was so busy making up and telling stories that he didn't notice that Soraya no longer sang; which probably made things worse. But then Rashid was a busy man, in constant demand, he was the Ocean of Notions, the famous Shah of Blah. And what with all his rehearsals and performances, Rashid was so often on stage that he lost track of what was going on in his own home. He sped around the city and the country telling stories, while Soraya stayed home, turning cloudy and even a little thunderous and brewing up quite a storm.

Haroun went with his father whenever he could, because the man was a magician, it couldn't be denied. He would climb up on to some little makeshift stage in a dead-end alley packed with raggedy children and toothless old-timers, all squatting in the dust; and once he got going even the city's many wandering cows would stop and cock their ears, and monkeys would jabber approvingly from rooftops and the parrots in the trees would imitate his voice.

Haroun often thought of his father as a juggler, because his stories were really lots of different tales juggled together, and Rashid kept them going in a sort of dizzy whirl, and never made a mistake.

Where did all these stories come from? It seemed that all Rashid had to do was to part his lips in a plump red smile

and out would pop some brand-new saga, complete with sorcery, love-interest, princesses, wicked uncles, fat aunts, mustachioed gangsters in yellow check pants, fantastic locations, cowards, heroes, fights, and half a dozen catchy, hummable tunes. 'Everything comes from somewhere,' Haroun reasoned, 'so these stories can't simply come out of thin air . . . ?'

But whenever he asked his father this most important of questions, the Shah of Blah would narrow his (to tell the truth) slightly bulging eyes, and pat his wobbly stomach, and stick his thumb between his lips while he made ridiculous drinking noises, *glug glug glug*. Haroun hated it when his father acted this way. 'No, come on, where do they come from really?' he'd insist, and Rashid would wiggle his eyebrows mysteriously and make witchy fingers in the air.

'From the great Story Sea,' he'd reply. 'I drink the warm Story Waters and then I feel full of steam.'

Haroun found this statement intensely irritating. 'Where do you keep this hot water, then?' he argued craftily. 'In hot-water bottles, I suppose. Well, I've never seen any.'

'It comes out of an invisible Tap installed by one of the Water Genies,' said Rashid with a straight face. 'You have to be a subscriber.'

'And how do you become a subscriber?'

'Oh,' said the Shah of Blah, 'that's much Too Complicated To Explain.'

'Anyway,' said Haroun grumpily, 'I've never seen a Water Genie, either.' Rashid shrugged. 'You're never up in time to see the milkman,' he pointed out, 'but you don't

mind drinking the milk. So now kindly desist from this Iffing and Butting and be happy with the stories you enjoy.' And that was the end of that.

Except that one day Haroun asked one question too many, and then all hell broke loose.

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The Khalifas lived in the downstairs part of a small concrete house with pink walls, lime-green windows and blue-painted balconies with squiggly metal railings, all of which made it look (in Haroun's view) more like a cake than a building. It wasn't a grand house, nothing like the skyscrapers where the super-rich folks lived; then again, it was nothing like the dwellings of the poor, either. The poor lived in tumbledown shacks made of old cardboard boxes and plastic sheeting, and these shacks were glued together by despair. And then there were the super-poor, who had no homes at all. They slept on pavements and in the doorways of shops, and had to pay rent to local gangsters for doing even that. So the truth is that Haroun was lucky; but luck has a way of running out without the slightest warning. One minute you've got a lucky star watching over you and the next instant it's done a bunk.

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In the sad city, people mostly had big families; but the poor children got sick and starved, while the rich kids overate and quarrelled over their parents' money. Still Haroun wanted to

know why his parents hadn't had more children, but the only answer he ever got from Rashid was no answer at all:

'There's more to you, young Haroun Khalifa, than meets the blinking eye.'

Well, what was *that* supposed to mean? 'We used up our full quota of child-stuff just in making you,' Rashid explained. 'It's all packed in there, enough for maybe four-five kiddies. Yes, sir, more to you than the blinking eye can see.'

Straight answers were beyond the powers of Rashid Khalifa, who would never take a short cut if there was a longer, twistier road available. Soraya gave Haroun a simpler reply. 'We tried,' she sadly said. 'This child business is not such an easy thing. Think of the poor Senguptas.'

The Senguptas lived upstairs. Mr Sengupta was a clerk at the offices of the City Corporation and he was as sticky-thin and whiny-voiced and mingy as his wife Oneeta was generous and loud and wobbly-fat. They had no children at all, and as a result Oneeta Sengupta paid more attention to Haroun than he really cared for. She brought him sweetmeats (which was fine), and ruffled his hair (which wasn't), and when she hugged him the great cascades of her flesh seemed to surround him completely, to his considerable alarm.

Mr Sengupta ignored Haroun, but was always talking to Soraya, which Haroun didn't like, particularly as the fellow would launch into criticisms of Rashid the storyteller whenever he thought Haroun wasn't listening. 'That husband of yours, excuse me if I mention,' he would start in his thin whiny voice. 'He's got his head stuck in the air and



his feet off the ground. What are all these stories? Life is not a storybook or joke shop. All this fun will come to no good. What's the use of stories that aren't even true?

Haroun, listening hard outside the window, decided he did not care for Mr Sengupta, this man who hated stories and storytellers: he didn't care for him one little bit.

What's the use of stories that aren't even true? Haroun couldn't get the terrible question out of his head. However, there were people who thought Rashid's stories were useful. In those days it was almost election time, and the Grand Panjandrums of various political parties all came to Rashid, smiling their fat-cat smiles, to beg him to tell his stories at their rallies and nobody else's. It was well known that if you could get Rashid's magic tongue on your side then your troubles were over. Nobody ever believed anything a politico said, even though they pretended as hard as they could that they were telling the truth. (In fact, this was how everyone knew they were lying.) But everyone had complete faith in Rashid, because he always admitted that everything he told them was completely untrue and made up out of his own head. So the politicos needed Rashid to help them win the people's votes. They lined up outside his door with their shiny faces and fake smiles and bags of hard cash. Rashid could pick and choose.

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On the day that everything went wrong, Haroun was on his way home from school when he was caught in the first downpour of the rainy season.

Now, when the rains came to the sad city, life became a little easier to bear. There were delicious pomfret in the sea at that time of year, so people could have a break from the glumfish; and the air was cool and clean, because the rain washed away most of the black smoke billowing out of the sadness factories. Haroun Khalifa loved the feeling of getting soaked to the skin in the first rain of the year, so he skipped about and got a wonderful warm drenching, and opened his mouth to let the raindrops plop on to his tongue. He arrived home looking as wet and shiny as a pomfret in the sea.

Miss Oneeta was standing on her upstairs balcony, shaking like a jelly; and if it hadn't been raining, Haroun might have noticed that she was crying. He went indoors and found Rashid the storyteller looking as if he'd stuck his face out of the window, because his eyes and cheeks were soaking wet, even though his clothes were dry.

Haroun's mother, Soraya, had run off with Mr Sengupta.

At eleven a.m. precisely, she had sent Rashid into Haroun's room, telling him to search for some missing socks. A few seconds later, while he was busy with the hunt (Haroun was good at losing socks), Rashid heard the front door slam, and, an instant later, the sound of a car in the lane. He returned to the living room to find his wife gone, and a taxi speeding away around the corner. 'She must have planned it all very carefully,' he thought. The clock still stood at eleven o'clock exactly. Rashid picked up a hammer and smashed the clock to bits. Then he broke every other clock in the house, including the one on Haroun's bedside table.

The first thing Haroun said on hearing the news of his

mother's departure was, 'What did you have to break my clock for?'

Soraya had left a note full of all the nasty things Mr Sengupta used to say about Rashid: 'You are only interested in pleasure, but a proper man would know that life is a serious business. Your brain is full of make-believe, so there is no room in it for facts. Mr Sengupta has no imagination at all. This is okay by me.' There was a postscript. 'Tell Haroun I love him, but I can't help it, I have to do this now.'

Rainwater dripped on to the note from Haroun's hair. 'What to do, son,' Rashid pleaded piteously. 'Storytelling is the only work I know.'

When he heard his father sounding so pathetic, Haroun lost his temper and shouted: 'What's the point of it? *What's the use of stories that aren't even true?*'

Rashid hid his face in his hands and wept.

Haroun wanted to get those words back, to pull them out of his father's ears and shove them back into his own mouth; but of course he couldn't do that. And that was why he blamed himself when, soon afterwards and in the most embarrassing circumstances imaginable, an Unthinkable Thing happened:

Rashid Khalifa, the legendary Ocean of Notions, the fabled Shah of Blah, stood up in front of a huge audience, opened his mouth, and found that he had run out of stories to tell.

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After his mother left home, Haroun found that he couldn't keep his mind on anything for very long, or, to be precise, for more than eleven minutes at a time. Rashid took him to a movie to cheer him up, but after exactly eleven minutes Haroun's attention wandered, and when the film ended he had no idea how it all turned out, and had to ask Rashid if the good guys won in the end. The next day Haroun was playing goalie in a neighbourhood game of street hockey, and after pulling off a string of brilliant saves in the first eleven minutes he began to let in the softest, most foolish and most humiliating of goals. And so it went on: his mind was always wandering off somewhere and leaving his body behind. This created certain difficulties, because many interesting and some important things take longer than eleven minutes: meals, for example, and also mathematics examinations.

It was Oneeta Sengupta who put her finger on the trouble. She had started coming downstairs even more often than before, for instance to announce defiantly: 'No more Mrs Sengupta for me! From today, call me Miss Oneeta only!'—after which she smacked her forehead violently, and wailed: 'O! O! What is to become?'

When Rashid told Miss Oneeta about Haroun's wandering attention, however, she spoke firmly and with certainty. 'Eleven o'clock when his mother exited,' she declared. 'Now comes this problem of eleven minutes.'

Cause is located in his pussy-collar-jee.' It took Rashid and Haroun a few moments to work out that she meant *psychology*. 'Owing to pussy-collar-jeeecal sadness,' Miss Oneeta continued, 'the young master is stuck fast on his eleven number and cannot get to twelve.'

'That's not true,' Haroun protested; but in his heart he feared it might be. Was he stuck in time like a broken clock? Maybe the problem would never be solved unless and until Soraya returned to start the clocks up once again.

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Some days later Rashid Khalifa was invited to perform by politicians from the Town of G and the nearby Valley of K, which nestled in the Mountains of M. (I should explain that in the country of Alifbay many places were named after letters of the Alphabet. This led to much confusion, because there were only a limited number of letters and an almost unlimited number of places in need of names. As a result many places were obliged to share a single name. This meant that people's letters were always going to the wrong address. Such difficulties were made even worse by the way in which certain places, such as the sad city, forgot their names entirely. The employees of the national mail service had a lot to put up with, as you can imagine, so they could get a little excitable on occasion.)

'We should go,' Rashid said to Haroun, putting a brave face on things. 'In the Town of G and the Valley of K, the weather is still fine; whereas here the air is too weepy for words.'

It was true that it was raining so hard in the sad city that you could almost drown just by breathing in. Miss Oneeta, who just happened to have dropped in from upstairs, agreed sadly with Rashid. 'Tip-top plan,' she said. 'Yes, both of you, go; it will be like a little holiday, and no need to worry about me, sitting sitting all by myself.'

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'The Town of G is not so special,' Rashid told Haroun as the train carried them towards that very place. 'But the Valley of K! Now that is different. There are fields of gold and mountains of silver and in the middle of the Valley there is a beautiful Lake whose name, by the way, is Dull.'

'If it's so beautiful, why isn't it called Interesting?' Haroun argued; and Rashid, making a huge effort to be in a good mood, tried to put on his old witchy-fingers act. 'Ah—now—the *Interesting* Lake,' he said in his most mysterious voice. 'Now that's something else again. That's a Lake of Many Names, yes, sir, so it is.'

Rashid went on trying to sound happy. He told Haroun about the Luxury Class Houseboat waiting for them on the Dull Lake. He talked about the ruined fairy castle in the silver mountains, and about the pleasure gardens built by the ancient Emperors, which came right down to the edge of the Dull Lake: gardens with fountains and terraces and pavilions of pleasure, where the spirits of the ancient kings still flew about in the guise of hoopoe birds. But after exactly eleven minutes Haroun stopped listening; and Rashid stopped talking, too, and they stared silently out of



the window of the railway carriage at the unfolding boredom of the plains.

They were met at the Railway Station in the Town of G by two unsmiling men wearing gigantic mustachios and loud yellow check pants. 'They look like villains to me,' Haroun thought, but he kept his opinion to himself. The two men drove Rashid and Haroun straight to the political rally. They drove past buses that dripped people the way a sponge drips water, and arrived at a thick forest of human beings, a crowd of people sprouting in all directions like leaves on jungle trees. There were great bushes of children and rows of ladies arranged in lines, like flowers in a giant flower-bed. Rashid was deep in his own thoughts, and was nodding sadly to himself.

Then the thing happened, the Unthinkable Thing. Rashid went out on to the stage in front of that vast jungle of a crowd, and Haroun watched him from the wings—and the poor storyteller opened his mouth, and the crowd squealed in excitement—and now Rashid Khalifa, standing there with his mouth hanging open, found that it was as empty as his heart.

'Ark.' That was all that came out. The Shah of Blah sounded like a stupid crow. 'Ark, ark, ark.'

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After that they were shut up in a steaming hot office while the two men with the mustachios and loud yellow check pants shouted at Rashid and accused him of having taken a

bribe from their rivals, and suggested that they might cut off his tongue and other items also. —And Rashid, close to tears, kept repeating that he couldn't understand why he had dried up, and promising to make it up to them. 'In the Valley of K, I will be terrifico, magnifique,' he vowed.

'Better you are,' the mustachioed men shouted back. 'Or else, out comes that tongue from your lying throat.'

'So when does the plane leave for K?' Haroun butted in, hoping to calm things down. (The train, he knew, didn't go into the mountains.) The shouting men began to shout even more loudly. 'Plane? *Plane?* His papa's stories won't take off but the brat wants to fly! —No plane for you, mister and sonny. Catch a blasted bus.'

'My fault again,' Haroun thought wretchedly. 'I started all this off. *What's the use of stories that aren't even true.* I asked that question and it broke my father's heart. So it's up to me to put things right. Something has to be done.'

The only trouble was, he couldn't think of a single thing.

# The Mail Coach



The two shouting men shoved Rashid and Haroun into the back seat of a beaten-up car with torn scarlet seats, and even though the car's cheap radio was playing movie music at top volume, the shouting men went on shouting about the unreliability of storytellers all the way to the rusting iron gates of the Bus Depot. Here Haroun and Rashid were dumped out of the car without ceremony or farewell.

'Expenses of the journey?' Rashid hopefully inquired, but the shouting men shouted, 'More cash demands! Cheek! Cheek of the chappie!' and drove away at high speed, forcing dogs and cows and women with baskets of fruit on their heads to dive out of the way. Loud music and rude words continued to pour out of the car as it zigzagged away into the distance.

Rashid didn't even bother to shake his fist. Haroun followed him towards the Ticket Office across a dusty courtyard with walls covered in strange warnings:

IF YOU TRY TO RUSH OR ZOOM  
YOU ARE SURE TO MEET YOUR DOOM

was one of them, and

ALL THE DANGEROUS OVERTAKERS  
END UP SAFE AT UNDERTAKER'S

was another, and also

LOOK OUT! SLOW DOWN! DON'T BE FUNNY!  
LIFE IS PRECIOUS! CARS COST MONEY!

'There should be one about not shouting at the passengers in the back seat,' Haroun muttered. Rashid went to buy a ticket.

There was a wrestling match at the ticket window instead of a queue, because everyone wanted to be first; and as most people were carrying chickens or children or other bulky items, the result was a free-for-all out of which feathers and toys and dislodged hats kept flying. And from time to time some dizzy fellow with ripped clothes would burst out of the mêlée, triumphantly waving a little scrap of paper: his ticket! Rashid, taking a deep breath, dived into the scrum.

Meanwhile, in the courtyard of the buses, small dust-clouds were rushing back and forth like little desert whirlwinds. Haroun realized that these clouds were full of human beings. There were simply too many passengers at the Bus Depot to fit into the available buses, and, anyhow, nobody knew which bus was leaving first; which made it possible for the drivers to play a mischievous game. One driver would start his engine, adjust his mirrors, and behave as if he were about to leave. At once a bunch of passengers would gather up their suitcases and bedrolls and parrots and transistor radios and rush towards him. Then he'd switch off his engine with an innocent smile; while on the far side of the courtyard, a different bus would start up, and the passengers would start running all over again.

'It's not fair,' Haroun said aloud.

'Correct,' a booming voice behind him answered, 'but but but you'll admit it's too much fun to watch.'

The owner of this voice turned out to be an enormous

fellow with a great quiff of hair standing straight up on his head, like a parrot's crest. His face, too, was extremely hairy; and the thought popped into Haroun's mind that all this hair was, well, somehow *feather-like*. 'Ridiculous idea,' he told himself. 'What on earth made me think of a thing like that? It's just plain nonsense, as anyone can see.'

Just then two separate dust-clouds of scurrying passengers collided in an explosion of umbrellas and milk-churns and rope sandals, and Haroun, without meaning to, began to laugh. 'You're a tip-top type,' boomed the fellow with the feathery hair. 'You see the funny side! An accident is truly a sad and cruel thing, but but but—crash! Wham! Spatoosh!—how it makes one giggle and hoot.' Here the giant stood and bowed. 'At your service,' he said. 'My goodname is Butt, driver of the Number One Super Express Mail Coach to the Valley of K.' Haroun thought he should bow, too. 'And my, as you say, goodname is Haroun.'

Then he had an idea, and added: 'If you mean what you say about being at my service, then in fact there is something you can do.'

'It was a figure of speech,' Mr Butt replied. 'But but but I will stand by it! A figure of speech is a shifty thing; it can be twisted or it can be straight. But Butt's a straight man, not a twister. What's your wish, my young mister?'

Rashid had often told Haroun about the beauty of the road from the Town of G to the Valley of K, a road that climbed like a serpent through the Pass of H towards the Tunnel of I (which was also known as J). There was snow by the roadside, and there were fabulous multicoloured birds

gliding in the gorges; and when the road emerged from the Tunnel (Rashid had said), then the traveller saw before him the most spectacular view on earth, a vista of the Valley of K with its golden fields and silver mountains and with the Dull Lake at its heart—a view spread out like a magic carpet, waiting for someone to come and take a ride. 'No man can be sad who looks upon that sight,' Rashid had said, 'but a blind man's blindness must feel twice as wretched then.' So what Haroun asked Mr Butt for was this: front-row seats in the Mail Coach all the way to the Dull Lake; and a guarantee that the Mail Coach would pass through the Tunnel of I (also known as J) before sunset, because otherwise the whole point would be lost.

'But but but,' Mr Butt protested, 'the hour is already late . . . ' Then, seeing Haroun's face begin to fall, he grinned broadly and clapped his hands. 'But but but so what?' he shouted. 'The beautiful view! To cheer up the sad dad! Before sunset! *No problem.*'

So when Rashid staggered out of the Ticket Office he found Haroun waiting on the steps of the Mail Coach, with the best seats reserved inside, and the motor running.

The other passengers, who were out of breath from their running, and who were covered in dust which their sweat was turning to mud, stared at Haroun with a mixture of jealousy and awe. Rashid was impressed, too. 'As I may have mentioned, young Haroun Khalifa: more to you than meets the blinking eye.'

'Yahoo!' yelled Mr Butt, who was as excitable as any mail service employee. 'Varoom!' he added, and jammed the

accelerator pedal right down against the floor.

The Mail Coach rocketed through the gates of the Bus Depot, narrowly missing a wall on which Haroun read this:

IF FROM SPEED YOU GET YOUR THRILL  
TAKE PRECAUTION—MAKE YOUR WILL

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Faster and faster went the Mail Coach; the passengers started to hoot and howl with excitement and fear. Through village after village Mr Butt drove, at top speed. Haroun observed that in each village a man carrying a large mailbag would be waiting by the bus stop in the village square, and that this man would look at first confused and then furious as the Mail Coach roared by him without even slowing down. Haroun could also see that at the rear of the Mail Coach there was a special area, separated from the passengers by a wire mesh partition, that was piled high with mailbags just like those held by the angry, fist-shaking men in the village squares. Mr Butt had apparently forgotten to deliver or collect the mail!

'Don't we need to stop for the letters?' Haroun finally leant forward to inquire. At the same moment Rashid the storyteller cried out, 'Do we need to go so blinking fast?'

Mr Butt managed to make the Mail Coach go even faster. "Need to stop?" he bellowed over his shoulder. "Need to go so quickly?" Well, my sirs, I'll tell you this: Need's a slippery snake, that's what it is. The boy here says that you,



sir, Need A View Before Sunset, and maybe it's so and maybe no. And some might say that the boy here Needs A Mother, and maybe it's so and maybe no. And it's been said of me that Butt Needs Speed, but but but it may be that my heart truly needs a Different Sort Of Thrill. O, Need's a funny fish: it makes people untruthful. They all suffer from it, but they will not always admit. Hurrah!' he added, pointing. 'The snow line! Icy patches ahead! Crumbling road surface! Hairpin bends! Danger of avalanches! *Full speed ahead!*'

He had simply decided not to stop for the mail in order to keep his promise to Haroun. 'No problem,' he shouted gaily. 'Everybody gets other people's correspondence anyhow in this country of so-many too-many places and so-few too-few names.' The Mail Coach rushed up into the Mountains of M, swinging around terrifying curves with a great squealing of tyres. The luggage (which was all tied down on the roof rack) began to shift about in a worrying way. The passengers (who all looked alike, now that their perspiration had finished turning the dust that covered them to mud) began to complain.

'My holdall!' yelled a mud-woman. 'Crazy buffalo! Looney tune! Desist from your speeding, or my possessions will be thrown to Kingdom Come!'

'It is we ourselves who will be thrown, madam,' a mud-man answered sharply. 'So less noise about your personal items, please.' He was interrupted angrily by a second mud-man: 'Have a care! It is my goodwife you are insulting!' Then a second mud-woman joined in: 'So what? For so

long she has been shouting-shouting in my husband's goodear, so why should not he lodge complaint? See her, the dirty skinnybones. Is she a woman or a muddy stick?'

'See here, this bend, what a tight one!' Mr Butt sang out. 'Here, two weeks ago, occurred a major disaster. Bus plunged into gully, all persons killed, sixty-seventy lives minimum. God! Too sad! If you desire I can stop for taking of photographs.'

'Yes, stop, stop,' the passengers begged (anything to make him slow down), but Mr Butt went even faster instead. 'Too late,' he yodelled gaily. 'Already it is far behind. Requests must be more promptly made if I am to comply.'

'I did it again,' Haroun was thinking. 'If we crash now, if we're smashed to bits or fried like potato chips in a burning wreck, it will be my fault this time, too.'

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Now they were high in the Mountains of M, and Haroun felt sure that the Mail Coach was speeding up as they got higher. They were so high that there were clouds in the gorges below them, and the mountainsides were covered in thick, dirty snow and the passengers were shivering with cold. The only sound to be heard in the Mail Coach was the chattering of teeth. Everyone had fallen into a scared and frozen silence, while Mr Butt was concentrating so hard on his high-speed driving that he had even stopped yelling 'Yahoo' and pointing out the sites of particularly gruesome accidents.

Haroun had the feeling that they were floating on a sea of silence, that a wave of silence was lifting them up, up, up towards the mountaintops. His mouth was dry and his tongue felt stiff and caked. Rashid couldn't make a sound either, not even *ark*. 'Any moment now,' Haroun was thinking—and he knew that something very similar must be in the mind of each passenger—'I am going to be wiped out, like a word on a blackboard, one swoosh of the duster and I'll be gone for good.'

Then he saw the cloud.

The Mail Coach was streaking along the side of a narrow ravine. Up ahead the road swung so sharply to the right that it seemed they must plunge over the edge. Roadside notices warned of the extra danger, in words so severe that they no longer rhymed. DRIVE LIKE HELL AND YOU WILL GET THERE was one, and also: BE DEAD SLOW OR BE DEAD. Just then a thick cloud, shot through with impossible, shifting colours, a cloud from a dream or a nightmare, hopped up from the gorge below them and plopped itself down on the road. They hit it just as they went round the bend, and in the sudden darkness Haroun heard Butt slamming on the brakes as hard as he could.

Noise returned: screams, the skidding of tyres. 'This is it,' Haroun thought—and then they were out of the cloud, in a place with smooth walls curving up around them, and rows of yellow lights set in the ceiling above.

'Tunnel,' Mr Butt announced. 'At the far end, Valley of K. Hours to sunset, one. Time in tunnel, some minutes only. One View coming up. Like I said: *no problem*.'

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They came out of the Tunnel of I, and Mr Butt stopped the Mail Coach so that everyone could enjoy the sight of the sun setting over the Valley of K, with its fields of gold (which really grew saffron) and its silver mountains (which were really covered in glistening, pure, white snow) and its Dull Lake (which didn't look dull at all). Rashid Khalifa hugged Haroun and said, 'Thanks for fixing this up, son, but I admit that for some time I thought we were all fixed good and proper, I mean done for, finito, *khattam-shud*.'

'Khattam-Shud,' Haroun frowned. 'What was that story you used to tell . . . ?'

Rashid spoke as if he were remembering an old, old dream.

'Khattam-Shud,' he said slowly, 'is the Arch-Enemy of all Stories, even of Language itself. He is the Prince of Silence and the Foe of Speech. And because everything ends, because dreams end, stories end, life ends, at the finish of everything we use his name. "It's finished," we tell one another, "it's over. Khattam-Shud: The End."'

'This place is already doing you good,' Haroun noted. 'No more *ark*. Your crazy stories are starting to come back.'

On the way down into the Valley, Mr Butt drove slowly and with extreme caution. 'But but but there is no Need for Speed now that my service has been performed,' he explained to the quivering mud-men and mud-women, who then all glared furiously at Haroun and Rashid.

As the light failed, they passed a sign that had originally

read WELCOME TO K; but somebody had daubed it with crude, irregular letters, so that it now said WELCOME TO KOSH-MAR.

'What's Kosh-Mar?' Haroun wanted to know.

'It's the work of some miscreant,' shrugged Mr Butt. 'Not every person in the Valley is happy, as you may find.'

'It's a word from the ancient tongue of Franj, which is no longer spoken in these parts,' Rashid explained. 'In those long-gone days the Valley, which is now simply K, had other names. One, if I remember correctly, was "Kache-Mer". Another was this "Kosh-Mar".'

'Do those names mean anything?' Haroun asked.

'All names mean something,' Rashid replied. 'Let me think. Yes, that was it. "Kache-Mer" can be translated as "the place that hides a Sea". But "Kosh-Mar" is a ruder name.'

'Come on,' urged Haroun. 'You can't stop there.'

'In the old tongue,' Rashid admitted, 'it was the word for "nightmare".'

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It was dark when the Mail Coach arrived at the Bus Depot in K. Haroun thanked Mr Butt and said goodbye. 'But but but I will be here to escort you home,' he replied. 'Best seats will be kept; no question. Come when you're ready—I will be steady—then we'll go! Varoom! *No problem.*'

Haroun had been afraid that more Shouting Men would be waiting for Rashid here, but K was a remote place and

news of the storyteller's disastrous performance in the Town of G had not travelled as fast as Mr Butt's Mail Coach. So they were greeted by the Boss himself, the Top Man in the ruling party of the Valley, the Candidate in the forthcoming elections, on whose behalf Rashid had agreed to appear. This Boss was a fellow so shiny-faced and smooth, dressed in white bush-shirt and trousers so starchily-clean and neat, that the scruffy little moustache straggling over his upper lip seemed to have been borrowed from someone else: it was far too tawdry for a gent as slick as this.

The slick gent greeted Rashid with a movie-star smile whose insincerity made Haroun feel ill. 'Esteemed Mr Rashid,' he said. 'An honour for us. A legend comes to town.' If Rashid were to flop in the Valley of K the way he had in the Town of G, Haroun thought, this gent would soon change his tune. But Rashid looked pleased by the flattery, and anything that cheered him up was worth putting up with for the present . . . 'The name,' the slick gent said, inclining his head slightly and clicking his heels together, 'is Buttoo.'

'Almost the same as the Mail Coach driver!' Haroun exclaimed, and the slick gent with the ratty moustache threw up his hands in horror. 'Not *at all* the same as any bus driver,' he shrieked. 'Suffering Moses! Do you know to whom you speak? Do I *look* the bus-driver type?'

'Well, excuse *me*,' Haroun began, but Mr Buttoo was marching away, nose in air. 'Respected Mr Rashid, to the lakeside,' he commanded over his shoulder. 'Bearers will bring your bags.'



During the five-minute walk to the shore of the Dull Lake, Haroun began to feel distinctly uneasy. Mr Buttoo and his party (which now included Rashid and Haroun) were permanently surrounded by exactly one hundred and one heavily armed soldiers; and such ordinary people as Haroun noticed on the street wore extremely hostile expressions. 'There's a bad feeling in this town,' he told himself. If you live in a sad city you know unhappiness when you run into it. You can smell it on the night air, when the fumes of cars and trucks have faded away and the moon makes everything look clearer. Rashid had come to the Valley because he remembered it as the most joyful of places, but it was plain that trouble had found its way up here now.

'How popular can this Buttoo be if he needs all these soldiers to protect him?' Haroun wondered. He tried to whisper to Rashid that perhaps the slick gent with the face-fuzz wasn't the right fellow to support in the election campaign, but there were always too many soldiers within earshot. And then they reached the Lake.

Waiting for them was a boat in the shape of a swan. 'Nothing but the best for distinguished Mr Rashid,' crooned snooty Mr Buttoo. 'Tonight you stay in the finest houseboat on the Lake, as my guest. I trust it will not prove too humble for a grandee as exalted as you.' He sounded polite, but he was really being insulting, Haroun understood. Why did Rashid put up with it? Haroun climbed into the swan-boat, feeling irritated. Oarsmen in army uniform began to row.

Haroun looked down into the water of the Dull Lake. It

seemed to be full of strange currents, criss-crossing in intricate patterns. Then the swan-boat passed what looked like a carpet floating on the water's surface. 'Floating Garden,' Rashid told Haroun. 'You weave lotus-roots together to make the carpet and then you can grow vegetables right here on the Lake.' His voice had a melancholy ring again, so Haroun murmured, 'Don't be sad.'

'Sad? Unhappy?' yelped Snooty Buttoo. 'Surely eminent Mr Rashid is not dissatisfied with the arrangements?' Rashid the storyteller had always been incapable of inventing stories about himself, so he answered truthfully: 'Sir, not so. This is an affair of the heart.'

*Why did you tell him that?* Haroun thought fiercely, but Snooty Buttoo was delighted by the revelation. 'Not to worry, unique Mr Rashid,' he cried tactlessly. 'She may have left you *but there are plenty more fish in the sea.*'

'Fish?' Haroun thought, in a rage. 'Did he say fish?' Was his mother a pomfret? Must she now be compared to a glumfish or a shark? Really, Rashid should bop this Buttoo right on his stuck-up nose!

The storyteller trailed a hand listlessly in the waters of the Dull Lake. 'Ah, but you must go a long, long way to find an Angel Fish,' he sighed.

As if in response to his words, the weather changed. A hot wind began to blow, and a mist rushed at them across the water. The next thing they knew they could see nothing at all.

'Never mind the Angel Fish,' Haroun thought. 'I can't even, just at the moment, find the tip of my nose.'