**Manar of Hama**

**By Mohja Kahf**

**Note: The Hama massacre referred to in this story occurred in February 1982.**

The food here is terrible. The meat smells disgusting. There is no real bread, or coffee, or olives, or cheese. They have a nasty yellow kind of cheese and even the milk—Khalid says make cheese yourself if there is no cheese, but even the milk is tasteless. Even the eggs are pale-yolked. I don’t know what they eat in America. I have lost five kilos already in the months since we left Syria.

Khalid keeps saying you will get used to it, Manar, things will get better. But I don’t see how. Back home I was a smart, capable woman who could make her way around in the world. I am Manar Abdalqader Sharbakly of Hama. Whether I was in my hometown of Hama or in Khalid’s city, Damascus, it didn’t matter. The ground knew my feet. Here I get lost of Khalid isn’t with me on every little errand; the streets all look the same in this horrible little town. Back home I was top of my class. Here I am queen of the dunces. I have not been able to learn more than ten words of their miserable chaotic language. I think these people invented English as a sort of mind-torture for foreigners and newcomers.

My children can babble away in English by now and they look at their mother who cannot speak two words to the school secretary and I know they are embarrassed. They are already in another world, one I don’t understand. They do things that make the hair go white as if these were normal things to do. Boys talking to girls, girls talking to boys in school and sitting next to them. Even Khalid is shocked sometimes. I said what do you expect, putting them in American schools that mix up girls and boys. What do Americans care about modesty, they are the world leaders in immorality, this everyone knows. But we have no choice—there is a private Catholic school for girls only but we can’t afford it.

I have no one to talk to. There is one other Arab family in town, the engineer who invited Khalid to work in his company. This is how we got permission to enter the country. His wife is Palestinian but she was born in America and has forgotten her roots. She wears pants and knows only a choppy little Arabic and speaks to me out of her nostrils. Treats me as if I were an ignoramus. I look backward to her because I wear the kind of dress that, in our social circle back home and among people who have taste, is the dignified thing for a woman to wear. There, she and her pants would be seen for what they are: tasteless, ill-bred, and unbecoming.

When we left Syria months ago, my family had just been killed in the Hama massacre. Massacre, massacre, massacre, the Hama massacre, there I said it. It is real. It happened. Even if I am surrounded by people who have never heard of it. Hama: blank stares. Asad: blank stares. Syria: blank stares. A government that would gun down twenty thousand of its own citizens: blank stares and nervous shifting of eyes.

They have no idea that anyone in the world outside Sonora Falls, Illinois, exists. Except maybe the next town over, where the rival school team lives against whom they compete in that savage sport Americans play instead of soccer. The one where the object is for players to ram each other like made beasts. I do not want my son to start liking that game.

The most imaginative intellect in town is capable perhaps—on a good day when his mind is working remarkably—now I am laughing at myself, Manar girl, look at where you’ve ended up! It’s a wonder I haven’t lost my sanity—yes, an intelligent specimen on a clear day is capable of imagining Chicago. This is where we landed in America, the airport of Chicago. That is the farthest afield their minds will take them. I, Manar Abdalqader Sharbakly of Hama, am a ghost from a nonexistent place.

The week before I left this nonexistent place, we in Damascus waited, tense and starving for scraps of news from Hama—word from my parents, from friends, neighbors, anyone at all. No one was allowed in or out of the city. All month they had been committing murder in my beautiful Hama. Asad’s troops, shooting and killing, while the government denied everything, the newspapers printed nothing, the world said nothing. When it was over and we could finally get clear news, if was this: My mother, Fatima Rizkalla, my father, Abdalqader Sharbakly, my brothers Omar and Muhammad, my sister Omaima and her three children—all of them dead, the house rubble. My brother Adli, they say he escaped massacre but not prison. We have no news of him. No one knows and everyone is afraid to ask, for fear of drawing the attention of the authorities.

All that week I felt I was in a horrible dream. Surely someone was about to wake me, tell me it was all untrue. I would go to Hama, taking Khalid and the children to visit my family as usual, and we would find everyone there as usual, in the house where I grew up, the house of the Harbaklys in the Mouri Mosque neighborhood. Even now, months later, sometimes the feeling comes to me that none of this is really real: us here, in this foreign place, this life without the taste of life.

After the massacre there were soldiers everywhere and *mukhabarat* spying on people even more closely than usual, and sweeps and arrests. We were told to get out of Syria fast. Who told us: Khalid’s sister Lamees. She and Khalid haven’t spoken since the day she joined the Party. But she did come through this time; Lamees went to Khalid’s mother with the tip. In time for us to make the Jordan border station an hour or two ahead of the warrant with our travel ban.

So we left home. We could only take a few small bags because we couldn’t afford to draw the Syrian border officials’ attention with a lot of luggage. We left it all behind. We left behind the people and the landscape and all the things we knew, all that had ever given our life its taste.

In this country there is no squash, no eggplant. What they call squash is long and skinny. What they call eggplant is gigantic and seedy. They have skimpy orange carrots, not the fat purple kind you can hollow out and stuff. Most repulsive of all is the enormous slimy thing they call cucumber. Waxy outside, watery and seedy and tasteless inside, it simply cannot be eaten. I can’t find fresh mint. Mint! Let alone coriander. I look up the Enlish name for it in the *Mawrid*, but when I asked the girl at the grocery store she looked at me as if I had asked for something from the Land of Waq-Waq. There is no allspice, no sumac, no cardamom. So I cannot even make the food smell like food.\

Wait! Yesterday I smelled allspice. I confess, I followed the girl. She smelled like the incense from the mosque where the Mawlawi order holds their Circle of Remembrance. I was entranced, I was like a lunatic. I only recently dared go to the grocery store by myself, so scared am I of getting lost away from home and not being understood, yet when I smelled the allspice I dropped everything and followed. Here was a scent from home!

She got into a Volkswagen buggy painted in bizarre gypsy colors and drove right out of town, leaving the highway and cutting through farmland on dirt roads. I followed, not even knowing how I was going to get home. She stopped the car in the meadow and disappeared behind a camper.

I got out of my car and heard chanting. *La ilaha Illa allah, illa allah.* It sounded funny, not correctly pronounced, but I recognized the words. It was not the birds and it was not the wind rustling the trees. I cried out madly in love and pain! Like a crazy woman, I scrambled through tall grass toward that chanting, my long dress skimming up burrs and startling small furry animals.

There were nine or ten people standing in a circle, eyes closed. They were swinging their heads side to side like the Sufis back home and chanting *“la ilaha illa allah*” or something that sounded like it. But they could not be Sufis. Sufis would not have men and women circling each other’s waists. Sufis would not be wearing cut-off jeans. Never. Bare midriffs—long wide hair—beads and bandanas—these people must be gypsies. I, Manar Abdalqader Sharbakly of Hama, had walked into a den of gypsies! I backed away in terror, but someone came up behind me and touched my shoulder. A man—touching me!

“Hey, traveler, you’re like, welcome to join us,” he said, in such a sleepy voice I wondered if he was on drugs. He was wearing a headband across his forehead and no shirt. Like a ruffian. He must have noticed the expression on my face. “Hey, don’t be afraid,” he said. “We are all groovy beings in the divine wonderland.” Something like that; half his words I didn’t understand and the other half he mumbled.

By this time one or two of the others noticed me. A tall blond girl in a long willowy skirt—which I at first thought was the only modest garment in the lot until I saw that it was slit up to the thigh in three places—put her arm on mind. “Hello! You are welcome here, she said. “Wel-come,” she repeated, separating the syllables.

“Hey, she’s not retarded, Suzy, just foreign.”

“Hey, I now that, Baron. I was just trying to go slow, OK?”

“Thank you,” I finally achieved speech. “I want to go home. Home.”

“You don’t want to eat?” Suzy brought her fingertips together and to her mouth. “Eat? We have plenty of food.” A table was covered with plastic-lidded containers and covered pots.

God Almighty knows what kind of food these people have, I thought. Look at the way they are dressed—or undressed—and the dirt under their fingernails. But remembering the scent that made me follow the girl from the grocery, allspice in this barren land, I craned my head toward the table.

“We have three-bean salad, yogurt, apple crisp, some hummus—“

“Hummus?” Did she say hummus?

“Yes, hummus.” Suzy pointed. Yes indeed, there in a small chipped bowl was something grainier and thicker, but still reasonably close to hummus.

“Chapatti?” Suzy asked. I looked blank. She held out a round flat loaf, my first sighting of anything shaped like real bread since I came here. It’s Indian, she told me. It looked like *tandoori* bread to me, flaky and textured. I was almost delirious with hunger at the sight of it.

This was unreal. I had never done anything like this in my life. Come running across a meadow to total strangers. Sat down to eat with people whose families and faiths I do not know. I was very careful, taking only some hummus and yogurt with bread, not wanting to eat impure food. And a little bit of some roughly cut tomatoes and lettuce. I guess there is no danger in salad. We sat on the grass. Theirs was the kind of bread I know how to break and I became completely unselfconscious for the next few minutes as I used it to scoop up hummus. The tomatoes actually had flavor.

It was my first filling meal in this country.

“Very good taste,” I said, pointing to the tomatoes.

“Organic” Suzy replied. I asked what that meant. She said it meant they were grown naturally. How else can tomatoes be grown?

“You are Indian?” I asked. Because of the headband on the man with no shirt. I have never met American Indians before. We were taught in high school that the racist American government had nearly wiped out the original inhabitants of the land with campaigns of disease, war, and mass murder.

“Nah, we’re hippies,” Suzy said. “Although Baron here is one-quarter Lakota.”

“Where you from?” Baron asked.

When I said Syria, they didn’t look blank. “That borders on Turkey, doesn’t it?” said a black man with an Afro the size of my mother’s village. I had never seen a black man before, except on television. I was alarmed. He was called Frank.

“Next to Israel, right? Baron said. I blanched at the mention of Israel.

“Oh yes, and Egypt,” a dark-haired girl with a delicate silver nose-ring said. I recognized her as Allspice—the girl from the grocery.

“Ah, Egypt,” everyone said, nodding.

“I learned to dance in Egypt,” Allspice added, raising her bare arms in a supple motion. Great. I, Manar daughter of Shaykh Abdal Qader Sharbakly of the Hama Society of Learned Ulema, and his wife Fatime Rizkalla of the sparkling reputation, was sharing a meal with dancing girls and ruffians and, who knows, maybe even Jews from Israel.

Frank put his arm around Suzy and she leaned her head against his bare chest. I shuddered and remembered: the children would be home from school any minute. And I was in the Land of Waq-Waw, sitting in mixed company with men and women touching each other’s bodies. Sitting here eating hummus with orgiastic pseudo-Sufi hippies, which must be what people call gypsies in this country.

“I must go home now.” I stood up, putting my hand to my chest in a gesture of acknowledgment. “Thank you, thank you.”

“You’re welcome, you’re welcome,” they said.

“You come one day to my—“Before I knew what I was doing, I was invinting them to my house. It is the way you behave as a guest, drummed into me for too long for me to do anything about it. I prayed they didn’t’ take me seriously.

Suzy got up. “Do you know how to get home?”

I shrugged. Actually, I didn’t.

“Janice!” she called to the allspice girl. “hey, give me the keys to the bug. I’m gonna make sure she gets to town.” Janice tossed a key ring.

Suzy walked me to my car. Before I got in, I turned to her. I was dying to know. “You said: *la ilaha illa allah*,” I said. “This, from my faith.”

Suzy brightened. “Yeah! *La ilaha illa allah.*” She mangled it with her heavy accent.

“Then you are—are you—“ I was incredulous, but I uttered it. “Are you—Muslim? Are you Sufi?”

She laughed. “Yeah, Sufi,” she said.

A Sufi! Here, in Sonora Falls, Illinois!

“Also Buddhist. You know Buddhism?”

I nodded. But how could she be that idol-worshipping religion and Muslim too?

“We’re everything. Sufi, Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, Jewish—“Here I bristled and mistrusted again the moment. “Tao, Native, Pagan. All is good. All is love.”

No, it isn’t. All is not good. All is not love. I know this. My family would not be dead if all was love, my hometown would not be rubble. But Suzy drove to town in the wildly painted bug and I followed her until I spotted the grocery where I had found Allspice. “All is love! Goody-bye!” Suzy cried, waving, at the intersection where I recognized my way home.