

Miracle

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An extract

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Chapter 1 – *Packed*

I peered through the spyhole. Candidate eight was all wrapped up and lugging an old-fashioned backpack that looked full to bursting.

I opened the door. ‘Nuri?’

She nodded.

‘I’m Ruben. Come on in.’

She looked me up and down, without making eye contact. I was probably doing the same, trying to size up who I was dealing with, as surreptitiously as possible. She was a head shorter than me, and I wasn’t the tallest of people myself. There were dark circles under her deep-brown eyes. But no matter how tired she looked, she seemed to be on high alert. She’d immediately noticed the three bolts on the front door.

‘It’s not a dangerous neighbourhood, but my grandfather likes to play things safe.’

‘He’s right.’ She had a warm, soft voice, which was a relief after the previous candidate’s shrill tones. She reminded me of the Lebanese singer I’d recently seen in concert. She’d stood there on the big stage, delicate and slight – until she started to sing, her voice just short of a whisper but so penetrating that the room instantly fell silent.

In the living room, Nuri chose the chair nearest the radiator. She planted the backpack between her feet but kept her coat on. With the first candidates, I’d made a bit of small talk first, but the introductions had become shorter and shorter. This time I jumped right in. ‘My grandfather, Emiel, is nearly eighty-five. He lives here on his own, and he could use some assistance. We were thinking of a student who could help him out a bit and live here in the house with him. Emiel asked me to talk to the candidates.’

Her long black hair crackled when she took off her hat. She clutched it with both hands. Maybe she was more nervous than she wanted to let on.

I picked up my notebook. ‘What are you studying?’

‘History, antiquity.’

‘I’d have liked to take some classes in that, too. You know, to do excavations.’

‘I want to teach.’

‘Here, or...?’ I hesitated but then asked, ‘Where are you actually from?’

‘I’ve been living here for a long time. And are you a student as well?’

I shook my head. 'I started biology, but I couldn't get a grip on the theory. So, I did a course in antique furniture restoration instead. I patched up that chair you're sitting on. My grandma got it from her grandmother.'

Nuri stroked the fabric of the seat. 'Nice job.'

'You think so?' As I scribbled on Emiel's list, I muttered silently to myself: *Stop it. You sound like a little kid who's after a pat on the head.*

We both fell silent. The previous students had asked right away if the Wi-Fi here was fast enough, if their room was big and comfortable, preferably with its own bathroom, and if they could have parties. My grandfather would appreciate the fact that Nuri didn't say much.

'What would I be expected to do?'

'Physically, Emiel's still in pretty good shape, but he forgets a lot. He draws crosses on his hand and then can't remember why. He puts his pills and correspondence in special places – and then he can't find them.' That was the light version of my grandfather's forgetfulness. The dangerous aspects, the way he sometimes went out alone and left the front door wide open when there were pots and pans on the stove, as well as flickering candles on the chest of drawers, and all the rest – well, I could tell her that later.

Nuri didn't look doubtful, as the other candidates had. She just nodded. 'Ok.'

'You can eat here for free. It'd be nice if you could help out with the cooking. I bring the groceries every Saturday and then cook for two days. I live nearby. My parents are further away, so they visit every three weeks. And they clean the place when they come.'

Nuri didn't ask, but I told her anyway. 'I live at my studio, but there's not enough room for two. Emiel doesn't want to move in with my parents, and he won't even discuss the idea of a serviced flat or a nursing home. So, a live-in student seemed like the best solution.'

'How does he feel about that?' Nuri was the first one to ask that question.

'He's willing to give it a chance.' I didn't add that we'd told my grandfather he had no choice if he wanted to stay living at home. I crossed my fingers under the table. Now for the tricky points. 'Emiel wants someone who's not going to have any visitors.'

'Not a problem. Does he get many visitors himself?'

'It's only my parents and me who ever come here. We don't have any other family. And Emiel's a bit of a funny one.'

Nuri raised her eyebrows.

I quickly added: 'Not in a bad way. Just more of a hermit.' I pointed at the framed photograph on the chest of drawers. 'My grandma died ten years ago, but he still chats with her every day.' Nuri's warm smile would probably disappear if I told her that Emiel usually talked to his wife in the dead of night, and not exactly in a whisper, and that he sometimes turned the whole flat upside down after those chats, with no idea what he was looking for.

I stood up. 'Will you come with me? I'll show you the room.'

Nuri followed me to the guestroom. She looked thoughtfully at the lock.

I turned the key. 'Emiel will respect your privacy. He's very fond of his own. What do you think? The room's kind of small.'

She put her hand on the old-fashioned radiator. 'But it's nice and warm.'

'My grandfather loves tropical temperatures. You'll have to share the bathroom, but Emiel doesn't spend much time in there. The television is a different story. He refuses to hand over the remote control.'

'I don't watch TV.'

‘He likes to have the newspaper read to him.’

She hesitated. ‘I’d rather not.’

I didn’t ask why. I was just glad that she hadn’t already backed out.

We walked out of the guestroom, and I opened the next door. ‘And this is Emiel’s junk room. He calls it his bunker.’

Nuri stared open-mouthed at the storage boxes that were stacked on top of one another, all the way up to the ceiling. The squirrel, the buzzard and the mole looked at us from a crowded shelf.

‘Are they real?’

‘Emiel stuffed them. He used to be a taxidermist. His old house was full of stuffed animals. Whenever I stayed there as a kid, it felt as if that buzzard was always staring at me. I thought it was waiting for me to fall asleep and then it would attack. My dad’s a taxidermist too, but he does pets.’

Nuri frowned. ‘What?’

‘He prepares dead pets for people who want to keep them close. My mum comes up with the rituals and the words. They run a funeral home for animals.’

Nuri clapped a hand over her mouth. ‘I can’t believe such a thing exists!’

‘That’s what Emiel says too. That’s why he doesn’t want to go and live with them – because they work at home. I think it’s kind of ridiculous as well, but it’s a big success.’ I was used to people reacting with surprise or disapproval when they heard what my parents did for a living, but I’d never seen anyone look quite as indignant about it as Nuri.

Nuri pointed at the buzzard: ‘Are those the only animals – or are there more of them in those boxes?’

‘I don’t think so. When Emiel moved house, he sold a lot of his stuffed animals. He wasn’t supposed to bring this many boxes either. We’re trying to get him to have a serious clear-out. But every time he puts a few things in a binbag during the daytime, he just takes them all back out again at night.’

‘At night?’

‘Or late in the evening.’

‘Is there anything else I’d have to do?’

‘Emiel has a wound on his ankle. It’s not healing well because he keeps scratching it all the time. I change the bandage every weekend, but more often would be good. He forgets about it, and he doesn’t want a home nurse.’

Nuri hesitated. ‘I don’t know...’

‘Maybe you could ask him not to scratch it and help him to fasten the bandage now and then? But no worries if you don’t want to.’

I already regretted mentioning the wound. Nuri was our last chance. Of the students who had responded to our advert, she was the only one who seemed to be considering moving into that tiny room in some antisocial old guy’s house. She was also the only one who might receive Emiel’s approval. I quickly ticked off the last few questions without asking them. I could always ask her later for a copy of her identity card and the details of an emergency contact person. Or not. ‘Okay, I think that’s everything.’

‘Good.’ She looked relieved. ‘I’d like to do it.’

‘I can help you move in next weekend.’

‘Everything I need is in my backpack. I could start now.’

I was taken aback. ‘You mean right away?’

‘That would be handy for me.’

It sounded like: 'I urgently need a place to live.' I paused. This was going much more quickly than I'd anticipated. But speed probably wasn't a bad thing. I knew my grandfather: if he had any time to think it over, he'd start to have doubts. 'I'll call Emiel. He's at the library, but he can be here in ten minutes. If he says yes, you can stay.'

'Anything else?'

I shook my head.

Nuri could tell there was more to it, but she seemed willing to put up with whatever it was – that was how badly she needed that room. But Emiel needed *her* as well. I was taking a risk by bringing in a person I knew so little about, but somehow I had the feeling that Nuri would take good care of my grandfather. My grandma whispered the same to me from her silver frame: 'The girl deserves a chance, Ruben. And I think you'd like to get to know her better, too.'

Grandma Lea was right. Nuri intrigued me. If she didn't get this job, she'd soon disappear from my life. I had to come up with a credible story that would reassure my parents. I could already hear my mum grumbling: 'We were supposed to be getting some idea of who we'd be inviting into Emiel's home. What do we know about this Nuri girl?'

Chapter 30 – *The Mosque of the Sick Children*

Nuri has told her story. Not really to me, but to my photograph, where Fatima has also found shelter. I think Fatima and I would get along. Living here together in this silver frame for a while has created a bond between us, and also the fact that we've given birth and nursed and cared for children, that we've left the Earth a little richer for our brief passage.

Grandmothers, no matter where they live, share a special kind of knowing: not the knowledge of the head but of the womb. We know a child is already drifting around before it pops out of a woman's body, before it moves about inside a round belly, before sperm swims to egg... It is in dreams that children are made, just as in dreams the dead fade away. Fatima and I are quietly flickering out, and yet that one question is still burning, the only one that matters at the end of the journey: 'Have we been good ancestors?'

Yesterday Nuri kissed Fatima more fiercely, sprinkling my photograph with tears, stammering bits and pieces of her story, stuttering and searching for words, over and over again. It reminded me of the times, long ago, when I used to practise at home what I was going to say in confession. Since then, I've been able to see Fatima before me: she is sitting on the floor, next to her daughter. They've wrapped their shawls around themselves, and each is rocking a feverish child. They give Nuri's little sisters cloths soaked in herbal tea to suck on, push a quarter of an aspirin between their chapped lips. Around them, other mothers, grandmothers, aunts and sisters are sitting, quietly humming and singing, the warm buzz of their chorus enveloping the sick children. There is no better medicine. Busy hands pass around bags of herbs and boxes of medicine, exchange amulets with holy words and candles.

In that place, they don't look straight into the flame, but they believe just as fervently that a candle can help. I think it's wonderful that those women don't just sit at home alone with their poorly mites, but that there's a small mosque for sick children next to the big mosque. A

place where women can sing and nurse together, where mothers and grandmothers can comfort one another. I'd feel comfortable there, too.

And then Nuri shows up. She does not join her family but retreats to the quietest corner of the sick children's mosque. Fatima looks at her first grandchild, her beautiful granddaughter, so different from the other girls in the family, so clever and brave and angry, so contrary and determined to find her own way in life and love, no matter what the cost. Fatima's eyes meet Nuri's. Fatima does not raise her hand, she does not wave, does not beckon. A young woman walks up to Nuri. Shawls discreetly open and close. A package changes hands. Fatima is not sure what is inside, but it has something to do with resistance against a regime that robs women like her granddaughter of their right to be who they are – she knows that much. Maybe there's one of those forbidden flags inside, the ones that have been causing such a commotion. The two young women disappear, one after the other. Fatima whispers to her daughter that she doesn't feel well, insists on going home. They gather their belongings.

The world turns upside down as men invade a space where no male has ever set foot. From a nearby roof, Nuri and her companions watch what is going on in the narrow alleyway by the entrance. Women and children are being herded along. Is that her youngest sister who stumbles? Is that her mother who doesn't get the chance to pick up her child? Is that her grandmother who is shoved into a van?

Nuri screams, but a hand immediately clamps over her mouth. Nuri bites, more hands rush to help, holding her in a firm grip. Nuri tries to tear herself away, hitting and kicking her own friends. She needs to go down there, to help her family, to swear to the police that her grandmother, mother and sisters have nothing whatsoever to do with the protests, and that it was she – and she alone – who defiled the mosque of the sick children, and that she, Nuri, is the one who should be arrested. They hold Nuri back with all their might. 'You can't help them!'

She is pulled across the rooftops to a safe house, where she sinks to the floor, exhausted, stunned, numb, distraught. As soon as she regains some strength, she tries to escape, but they watch her day and night. 'You can't fall into their clutches, Nuri. Everyone breaks under their interrogation. Then none of us will be safe, including your family.'

Later she hears that her youngest sister is in hospital, that her grandmother died in prison, that Fatima's body has not been released, that no one knows if or where she was buried. Her companions plead with her. 'Nuri, they're looking for you. You have to leave the country, as soon as possible.'

Fatima and I know what Nuri is unable to say: how unbearable it is to be alive when you should actually be dead. We know how someone falls apart when they haven't truly been able to say goodbye, the sort of goodbye when you ask sincerely for forgiveness – and forgiveness is granted.

Even after her death, Fatima continues to whisper to Nuri: 'Miss me, granddaughter. Miss us. But follow your own path.'

Grandmothers might be crumpled and confused, stumbling and stinking, half or completely wrecked, with one foot – or from head to toe – in the grave, but their gaze flies ahead, charged with hope: that their children's children will be allowed to be who they are.