

Free Spirit

This is the story of Lamia and Lana, twin sisters, identical in looks, but opposite in thought. Lamia, a fairly typical Saudi woman, was married at twenty. At thirty-two, she has four children, a Malaysian nanny to look after them and a Pakistani chauffeur to take her shopping. Lamia has never ventured into the workplace. She has a generous husband, however, so has never had to worry about making ends meet. Her mornings are mostly spent socialising with similarly settled young women, and her evenings relaxing at home with her family. Although Lamia is yet to be convinced of the merits of the veil, she abides by the law and dutifully shields herself in a black abaya cloak and hijab head covering each time she steps outside her home. Saudi law further dictates that she cannot drive her car or leave the country without her husband's permission.

Surely such rules are claustrophobic, but only if one stops to think about them, which Lamia rarely does. She focuses instead on the positives of her society - never having to worry about locking the front door for fear of burglary; never having to keep a close eye on the children as they play in the compound park for horror of paedophiles; never, for that matter, concerning herself with the thick gold bangles on her arms, which glitter and jingle day or night, as robbery is clearly out of the question. Lamia may not be independent, but she is safe. Besides, if ever she feels too constrained, a summer abroad in Europe or the US can always be arranged, and she returns with rejuvenated spirit and renewed faith in her ready-made, relaxed lifestyle, where even the most abhorrent of household chores may be delegated at affordable prices. Lamia, no doubt, is happy in her predictably consistent, if curtailed, world.

Not like her twin. Ironically, Lana is everything Lamia isn't. Fiercely independent and a total misfit in the Saudi environment, she feels entirely inhibited in the world where Lamia seems so securely fastened. At fifteen, she stole her cousin's ghutra - the Saudi male headgear - so she could test his brand new Ferrari on the even newer seaside marina drive. At seventeen, she dodged mutawas - the moral police - up and down escalators at a local mall to avoid sporting that dreaded abaya on a midsummer afternoon.

When several lectures and even a few bribes could not drum sense into the teenager's head, Lana's father decided that such rebellion would, if nothing more, jeopardise his own career and social standing. And so, at eighteen, Lana, unlike nearly all other Saudi girls whom she knew, was encouraged by her father to apply to universities abroad and head west. It was New York's Columbia University that was to be her new home.

Lana took to New York like a fish to water, her free spirit soaring higher than the skyscrapers. The neon

lights, the risqu billboards, the tattoos, the pierced bellybuttons all gave her the adrenaline rush she had so longed for in the somnolent Saudi sands. New York was energy. It was freedom. For Lana, it was instant karma. This was where she belonged.

Unbeknownst to her at the time, however, it was also dangerous. Twice in that first month, she was mugged. Upper Manhattan is not the safest of places and this was before former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani cracked down on crime. And while Lamia cried, concerned for her sister's safety in the big bad world, Lana remained untroubled, determined to learn the street-smarts necessary to make it in a thriving metropolis.

Fourteen years since she arrived on the island of Manhattan, Lana had accomplished quite a bit. With advanced degrees in economics and computer science, she had landed a lucrative and coveted position as an investment banker in Goldman Sachs' M&A group. Goldman had even agreed to sponsor her for an immigrant visa and thus she did not have to worry about returning home to Saudi Arabia once her H-1B work permit ran out. In fact, September 20 2001 was the date scheduled for her to officially take the citizenship oath for the US.

New York had been her home now for as far back as she could remember but this would be the final stamp of approval. It had been a long and tedious process but at least there was a method to becoming American if one so desired.

She thought of all the expatriates in her country, the Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Indians, Filipinos, British, American, Canadian, the list goes on. She had not interacted with them on a social level as in Saudi Arabia it was not customary for locals to mix with expatriates. The expectation was that foreign workers would provide the requisite services, earn commensurate wages, and eventually make their way back home. An immigration service simply did not exist. Yet another reason she liked America. It was accepting. It was tolerant. It was meritocratic and egalitarian. Lana had never felt so pro-American as she did now. The system had proved its worth to her and she considered herself part and parcel of it.

And then September 11 happened. On what would have been a perfectly normal workday, Lower Manhattan was set ablaze. The Twin Towers collapsed and body parts littered the ground as Lana and her officemates, horrified and dismayed, made their way through mid-town and finally to the Upper West Side, where she lived. In the tragic aftermath of this heinous incident, Lana, like other New Yorkers, was overcome with grief, waiting anxiously to hear from those she knew who were still missing.

But for Lana, much to her surprise, there was another angle to the tragedy. Atypical or not, she was

an Arab. And it did not take long before the Federal Bureau of Investigation paid her a visit. Actually, several visits. Jo and Tim from the Bureau became regulars at her apartment and were soon to inform her that her citizenship oath would be postponed until they were satisfied that she was not in any way connected with or sympathetic to Al Qaeda or the Taliban.

Lengthy interrogations ensued, detailing her every friend, foe, family member and financial transaction, essentially calling into question her existence since the day Lana landed in the land of the free. Was this the same America she had embraced so wholeheartedly in her escape from the shurta and the mutawa? Or did Big Brother watchdogs exist in every society, differing only in sophistication and subtlety?

This was a side of the US Lana could never have anticipated. Had she been too naive, even biased, in her assessment of the American commitment to freedom? Certainly she had read in history books of the McCarthy-era witch-hunts and the internment of Japanese-Americans during the Second World War, but had dismissed those episodes as dated. Instead, it was the impressive repertoire of freedom-loving legislation that had caught Lana's fancy, and which she hoped would be emulated the world over.

The First Amendment to the US Constitution, for instance, unequivocally guarantees freedom of expression, speech and religion. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act 1964, moreover, forbids discrimination on the basis of gender, religion, race or national origin. Those were the types of laws Lana dreamed would one day be imported into Saudi Arabia. But the gap seemed to be bridging in the opposite direction. The draconian and over-broad anti-terrorist legislation now pending before Congress proposed sweeping provisions under the guise of protecting 'homeland security', and provided a virtual carte blanche to the authorities to watch over the everyday lives of ordinary citizens. That freedom must be suppressed to guarantee freedom was an argument lost on Lana-style civil libertarians.

Lana felt angry. She felt defiant. But worst of all, she felt meek - miskeen, as they would say in Saudi Arabia. She dare not argue with Jo and Tim, or raise her voice, or appear in the least bit unreasonable, no matter how nonsensical a turn their line of questioning took. Why? Because she feared deportation. The truth was that no matter how comfortable she had been in her surroundings for the past fourteen years, this month she felt alien.

Strangely, she was reminded of an incident in Saudi Arabia where the sheer length of a man's hair had offended the custodians of public morality such that they instantly ordered him a haircut - right there, next to a shawarma stand in the middle of a bustling bazaar. They had turned to Lana next, who as usual was in some way or another lacking in her attire, but she had talked back, confronted them. Was it the foolishness of youth or the similarity of skin colour that had empowered her to react the way she did then? She was a Saudi; the long-haired man was not. If she stayed on in America would she tacitly accept second-rate status? Did she need to take the citizenship oath? Could she go back and re-adjust in Saudi society?

These were a new brand of questions, which Lana never thought she would ask herself. She thought of her

two best friends, a Peruvian and an Australian; of her officemates, a Lithuanian and a Taiwanese; and of her neighbours, a Tunisian married to a Nepalese. Didn't we live in an age when even intimate personal relationships often transcended cultural boundaries? Or was such internationalism confined to the cosmopolitan megacities of this world? Had she become the product of a secluded elitist subculture far removed from the realities of the provincial masses interested only in preserving their cultural homogeneity? It was hard to imagine how in this age of satellite television and Internet cafes, fear and paranoia could obliterate the importance of a different perspective. Shouldn't cultural exchange programmes be force-fed to the youth of today? Instead, all she heard from Lamia back home was the amount of student visas the US embassy had denied or how returning Saudi tourists recounted tales of undue harassment at immigration checkpoints.

Was there a way to curb this racial profiling, this rise in extremism on all sides, this polarisation of thought? Or were we doomed to fall victim to jingoism and overbearing nationalistic frenzy, euphemistically referred to as the 'clash of civilisations' by Samuel Huntington? How could anyone justify as jihad the gruesome murder in Pakistan of journalist Daniel Pearl? How could six million French vote for Le Pen? Had September 11 irreparably turned back the clock for inter-faith, inter-ethnic harmony? Or had mankind simply reached its saturation point for multiculturalism and could only regress henceforth?

Three months later, Lana received a chirpy call from Jo at the FBI saying her file had been cleared and she could re-schedule her citizenship oath without further delay. Did she still want to, though? Was it better to take US citizenship and sever all remaining ties with her country of birth? Would it simplify matters or complicate them further?

Hailing from one of the wealthiest nations, Lana was not your average economic immigrant, preferring to class herself as a social refugee. A liberated, radical Saudi woman - a lover of freedom, if you will. The events of the last few months had considerably eroded her belief in the American dream, but unfortunately she could not think of a better alternative either.

As she set her eyes on the Statue of Liberty, she felt a shred of optimism, remembering Frank Sinatra's tribute. 'New York, New York...If I can make it there, I'll make it anywhere,' he sang. It would be a pity if this nation went against the very grain of its being, she thought, if it ceased to be the melting pot, the global magnet for talent, no matter how diverse, which had catapulted it to superpower status.

Lana thought again of the US Constitution and the First Amendment and some of her earlier faith was renewed. Her decision was not free from doubt, however. Perhaps her trust in the American system was misplaced. Perhaps it would fail her. Perhaps it was better to be a Lamia - conventional, unquestioning and yielding to the fate geography deals us. Perhaps Lana and her children, if she got around to having any, would live to regret her decision to wander from the land her ancestors had called home. Only time will tell. For now, to paraphrase Sinatra, her 'vagabond shoes were longing to stray' as she took a chance on her adopted home.