Bushra Khalfan

Dilshad: Hungry and Sated

دِلْشَاد (سيرة الجوع والشبع)

Translated by Alice Guthrie (English)

DILSHAD: HUNGRY AND SATED

[The novel is divided into sections narrated by different characters; in this sample we hear first from Dilshad, then from one of the women who raised him, Ma Halima]

Dilshad

Issa was working as a market porter, so he'd leave the neighbourhood at dawn and wouldn't be back until after the asr prayer. Hussein was a refuse collector, so he set off even earlier, before sunrise, to work his way around the far-off neighbourhoods deep in the valley, dragging his wood cart along behind him. He'd pick up the fish scraps and other trash people chucked behind their shacks and load it all onto the cart. Then he'd haul it off to some distant spot tucked away between the mountains, dump it there, and come home.

As for me, the youngest, Ma Halima entrusted me with delivering the milk to the rich people's houses. She used to buy raw cow's milk from the Banyan merchants and boil it up in a huge cauldron so she could sell it to the rich people of Muscat, over the other side of the wall, in Waljat.

I didn't take payment from our customers, though. That was down to Issa. Once a month he would call at each house in turn to collect the agreed number of baisas owed for the deliveries, since he was the biggest and the strongest and no one would dare attack him and steal the money. I was small and weak, and I would be singled out — or at least that was how Ma Halima explained it to me.

Noria was the same age as me, and the same height, and sometimes she would come along with me on my early morning milk round. We'd spend the journey along the valley from our neighbourhood to Waljat laughing and playing, sneaking in and out of the shacks and palm-frond shelters people lived in on each side of the path. When we got home, later in the morning, Noria's mother might send her to the wells high upstream to fetch water, or teach her how to make cheese balls, or how to embroider the traditional Baluchi way. Or she would sit her down and brush her long hair. As for me, I would do whatever Noria did: I'd go up to the wells with her and help her draw the water, or sit beside her in the shade of our shack to help roll the cheese into balls. When they were all done we would lay them out to dry in the sun and I'd sit vigil beside them while they dried, on guard

for a raid by the neighbourhood cats. I enjoyed untangling bundles of embroidery thread with her, too, and sorting them into colours. And sometimes, when Ma Halima sat Noria between her knees to delouse her hair then brush it out and rebraid it, I would just sit and watch.

Whenever I got bored of all that, I took myself off to the date palm grove. I'd go there all on my own, throw myself down on the clover and just lie watching the fronds swaying above me in the heat and wishing I had a few fresh ripe dates to eat. But I never once dared climb a palm tree and steal even a single date from one of the bunches, as the eyes of the date palm workers were everywhere, and their big strong hands reminded me of the woody bases of palm leaves, merciless paddles that wouldn't spare anyone they caught.

On the rare occasions that our hunger got even halfway sated we would spend a restless night, bloated with bilious gases. But I still thought of myself as strong; I was agile, and always keen to do what I was told. And since I was afraid of Ma Halima, I never mentioned my hunger. In any case I thought of the hunger pangs cramping my stomach as a natural part of life, like darkness or head lice or the smell of the rubbish dump. And the dizzy feeling that sometimes swept over me after a whole day without finding anything to eat seemed fun to me. It felt like walking does in dreams. Like I wasn't quite here and I wasn't quite there, I wasn't really anywhere. But when the hunger fumes rising to my head got so strong that the world started to fade away before my eyes, they brought on stomach pangs of a new intensity. These were the ones that set off my laughter and had me rolling around on the stoney valley ground, oblivious to the heat of the shingle beneath me.

On my way back home with the empty milk pots I would often find myself writhing on my back in the dry waterway, drowning in convulsion after bubbling convulsion of laughter, with no apparent trigger other than the sound of the metal pots scraping against each other. It was a sharp sound, similar to the sound my guts made when I was very hungry. Sometimes when I was at the date palm grove I would be knocked to the ground by my own laughter while I watched a dopey hornet endlessly beating its wings as it moved in and out of sight between the clover leaves.

Ma Halima was irritated by my laughter. She considered it an evil omen, especially if it went on longer than usual, or if I had eaten some dates in the morning, since she seemed to think hunger was the sole acceptable reason for laughing. But my laughter needed no cause. Things made me laugh easily, especially things that I didn't really understand, and even when Ma Halima whacked me between my shoulder blades for laughing when it wasn't appropriate, I would carry on. Her blows could actually make me laugh harder, even if at times my laughter was mixed with tears.

When I grew bigger I think I must have started eating more than three dates in the morning, so that my mothers asked me to move out of the shack. They said I'd grown as tall as a man now and

the shack wasn't big enough for me anymore. I looked over at Issa and Hussein, who were both staying put even though they were taller than me, and I left.

High up the hillside behind our neighbourhood lived a family known locally as 'the cave kids', since they had made their home in a cave. After my mother's death they descended from their cave and moved into her shack. I couldn't have got them out even if I'd tried, as there was four of them — two children, a mother and a father — and the father was twice my height. So I left them to it. I didn't even try to retrieve my mother's wooden trunk.

When I realised I had nowhere else to go I offered a pledge to Darmaadaas, the guard at the Banyan temple: I would guard the temple cows and muck out their pen in exchange for sleeping among them. He hesitated for a while, but then he agreed. I think that Ma Halima had put in a word with him for me.

The Banyan cow pen was on the edge of the Rawiya neighbourhood, a short distance from the Hindu temple, no more than a couple of hundred steps or so. Every morning Darmaadaas would pass by to check on the cows before turning to his chores inside the temple. He would clean the place, and present offerings to Visnu and Shiva, and check that the jasmine wreaths the visitors had hung around their necks hadn't wilted.

But even the cows made me laugh. It was their mooing, and the way their eyes stared me down with that disinterested languor. And Darmaadaas himself made me laugh, with his weird clothes. I couldn't understand how his dhoti was held on, or how he undid it, either. And it disturbed him, being laughed at, but he accepted me all the same. He warned me that my laughter might get me killed some day. But his words only made me laugh harder — as I pictured myself dying on account of my guffaws I laughed so hard I fell on the ground in the cow pen and rolled around in the dregs of their feed.

I didn't stop visiting Ma Halima's shack, or playing with Issa and Hussein and Nora, and Ma Halima didn't stop trying to drive me away. Except that cholera came, and took Noria, Hussein and Ma Zuleikha away with it.

People said it had come across the sea from India, and that the Sultan had forbidden anyone, sailors or passengers alike, from disembarking their ships, and banned anyone from entering or leaving Muscat. But cholera didn't care about any of that. It made its way right into our neighbourhood, even hidden away between the mountains like we were. It came for us, and for Muscat, it took what it wanted and then it was gone, leaving us to work on digging graves for Noria, Hussein and Ma Zuleikha, and cleansing the shack of their vomit.

I couldn't understand why we hadn't been taken. How it had left us behind, even though we were right there with the others, not only in the same neighbourhood but in the very same miserable shack, drinking from the same water as them and defecating like them in the outback at dawn?

I didn't understand why it had to take Noria, who traipsed around with me everywhere, and shared everything with me, and involved me in all her little chores.

I didn't understand why it had to take Ma Zuleikha, who told me strange stories about a distant country she called Land of the Brave Knights (or sometimes she'd call it Makran) and about Janjal Janjlaan, who had seven lions and seven brothers.

And I didn't understand why it had to take Hussein, who would put me on his back when I was little and leap boulder to boulder through the valley to the date palm grove and back, while I laughed, and when I was bigger taught me the art of sliding on the slippery mountain rocks as nimbly as a sheep without breaking a leg.

Why did the fever take them and leave Issa and Ma Halima crying for days on end? Why didn't it take me, the one with no mother to cry for him, no blood kin to miss him, and no friends except Darmaadaas and his cows?

I was choking on sorrow and the stink of dung, the Banyan cow pen closing in on me. But it was only a few days before Ma Halima came and asked me to move back into the shack, saying life had got unbearably small and tight, while her shack had got unbearably big and roomy. She said Issa needed a brother to lean on, someone to share his work, his hunger and his pain.

I wasn't as tall as Issa nor as strong, but my back bore colossal loads of dung from Darmaadaas's cows. The smell of it accompanied me wherever I went. Ma Halima would cover her mouth and nose with the edge of her wagaya whenever I entered her shack, and direct a torrent of swearwords at me. She told me I should be washing in Tawi al-Zabadi at least once a week. I wasn't all that keen on water, and I personally couldn't smell anything on myself that called for all that fuss; but I wanted to relieve Ma Halima's suffering, so I asked Issa if I could work with him as a market porter, and I left the cow pen and its odours to Darmaadaas.

Ma Halima

I was pregnant with Noria when Abdulrasul decided to go to Gwadar to visit his mother. He told me that he had seen her crying, in a dream, and he felt in his heart that she was ill. I pointed at my belly, but he ignored the gesture. When I begged him to stay he told me he wouldn't be gone long, and if he found everything was as it should be he'd come back for us and take us all back over there with

him, to the homeland, to Baluchistan. And that if things were bad, he'd bring his mother back here to live with us, in Muscat, right here in this shack.

I don't remember arriving in Muscat originally, but my mother does: it was her who told me how my father joined up with the Sultanate's army in the beginning of Sultan Turki bin Said's reign, and how the ship brought us from Gwadar to Muscat, and how a storm nearly overturned the ship and drowned everyone on board. Apparently I fell into a deep and peaceful sleep with the onset of the storm, and didn't cry at all until the wind finally dropped and the waves subsided, at which point my loud screams resumed.

My mother told me that before I was a year old my father had gone off to war for the Sultan. When he didn't come back she was obliged to remarry, like the rest of the women, and so she married Rajab Dadallah.

And so I found myself growing up in this shack with Rajab Dadallah and my mother Zuleikha, and then my mother bore me a brother and called him Ghulam.

Cholera broke out in Muscat just a few days after Abdulrasul left the country. People said it had come across the sea from Gwadar, and that it had killed almost all the Baluchis in Makran. So I knew Abdulrasul wouldn't be coming back.

Many people died in the neighbourhoods of Muscart, both inside and outside the city walls — but the dead in the neighbourhoods outside the walls were far more numerous than those within them. Many people I knew were lost: Doushambia Soumar and Ahmed Lal Bakhash, from the Zadjal neighbourhood, Nasrouh bint Said and Suleiman bin Mohamed from Rawayia, Sharifa Daloush, her son Lal Bakhsh and Mohamed Ghulam Hassan from Loughan, and Salim bin Nasir and Munira Hassan from Ajam neighbourhood. There were many many others I didn't know personally whose death I heard about. But cholera didn't reach our shack that time, and all of us were spared — except of course for the smell of vomit and diarrhea, which was to linger in the caves of Muscat's wadis and even in the mountains for many months to come.

I was a strong young woman. And the men I passed by on my way to draw water to visit nearby neighbourhoods said I was pretty, but I wasn't interested — not in the men I met on the road nor in those who came to ask for my hand in marriage.

My mother said that I needed a husband and my children needed a father, but I didn't believe any man could feel more affection for my children than their father had. I told her I'm raising my children myself, and supporting them on my own, and God is enough for me, I've no need for men.