

## Hope in a nutshell

Amy Dawn

*The Aegean and the Black Sea. Flotsam drifts between the sodden cracks of their knuckles. What pours from them is seven sacks of hazelnuts, a collared dove, the proboscis of a butterfly, children, polished gems. Anatolia. The fulcrum of exchange between East and West. I have an idea, the woman said. Let us start over. What is the history of this land, what was left unwritten? That very line and the stories that seep out upon these pavements marked with spit, hashish and dirty song. Life is restless and one can only feel that those seas that trace the shorelines of the lands we suckle into, from their depths to their surface, are connected. There is a reason why the Bosphorus has a throat. There is a reason why the women look onto dawn with new intent.*

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Smoke from Salman's cigarette snakes between them.

'How is the harvest this year?'

Salman wanted to meet Abu Khalid to talk business, but his eyes are on the bloated hand of the café owner. It is suspended in the village dust, points to the other side of the road. Abu Khalid follows it to see the upper vertebrae of an elderly woman uncurl. It tells him that someone is in town.

'Look.' Salman's words drift lighter than the smoke. 'Do you want me to take the crops this year?' To which Abu Khalid responds, his eyes still wandering, saying something about Rejeb, his song and the genetically modified trees.

The truck that blocks his view pulls away.

The woman throws down her rucksack, ties up her hair and walks around to the other side of her moped: a trick to shelter from staring faces. Her skinny arms are dashed with oil, her cotton trousers are torn around the ankles.

'Look.' Abu Khalid sniffs: 'A donkey.'

Salman turns to see the woman hooding her hair with a Kashmir scarf, a failing attempt to reduce the callings from the village. *Welcome, where you from?* They shout, but the woman is immune to the impractical attention.

'What do you think,' Salman asks. 'Russian?'

Abu Khalid keeps looking over as he helps himself to Salman's cigarettes and waves for another tea. 'English. I know from her nervousness.'

'I forgot you used to work with them.'

'Before, in Muğla.'

Salman draws back his cigarettes and opens the packet, but Abu Khalid had taken the last.

'Don't you think you could help the poor donkey?'

For a moment, Abu Khalid looks at Salman then lights the cigarette.

‘No. I will drink my tea.’

Salman watches Abu Khalid smoke, tries to see who he is beneath his leather skin.

*CLANG.*

The shock absorber is a dead limb hanging from the rear wheel.

The scarfed woman kicks her rucksack.

‘Abu, the donkey is crying.’

### **Germination**

The synths of the Human League. Charlie was scrolling his phone. Kim eyes him from the entrance while awaiting the security man to check her bag. She weaves through the murmuring crowd to joins him swaying there in his happy-go-him, him, holding a pint glass. Why does her stomach tighten when...

‘Hey.’

They hug.

‘How’s you?’

‘Yeah, just – You know.’

‘What’s up?’

‘Ah, work stuff.’

‘I feel you but hey –’

Charlie lifts his pint, like baby to the altar, ‘– free gig.’

‘Yeah.’ Kim winces a smile. ‘Nice of Nat to put us on the guestlist.’

Charlie returns a wide-eyed grin, swallowing a mouthful of beer.

‘Want a drink?’

‘Err.’

‘I’ll get you one.’

The Talking Heads. The room spirals into a general buzz. Kim remembers the darkness of the coffee she drank that morning, sees the milk curdling into shaven ribbons of skin. The smell of him and the coldness of his belt across her forehead. Don’t worry, it’s only a game.

The cheering crowd, the lights dim. Charlie hands Kim her alcohol beaker. Just in time, he says.



Hadia thinks back to the day she met Rejeb. It was a week after her mother’s death and the same day she confronted the village’s river of gossip. Madness, she had overheard, a death that was not the choice of Allah... But in that moment, Hadia decided that it was God and his believers that were mad. *He* is lie, she gasped, the source of your bitter loneliness.

Rejeb was stood by the spice stall. She was vulnerable in that moment and he was a stranger. And, with an accidental smile, a soldering iron melted rust. He told her about the hazel orchard, with eyes like amber. Good pay and beautiful nature, he said and after that, she forgot all about the red she saw and left confused, holding a small pot of the

most expensive saffron. Shortly after, she dropped all of the onions she had bought. They rolled across the dirt like prisoners escaping from her arms. Her mother was mad, I am half of her. She picked them up. And her country was doomed with internal conflict. The onions were bagged again, each a burden to her life. I will return Wednesday, Rejeb had told her, you can come with me. This echoed, through all of her thought, that she had only eight days do something with the onions and bury her mother.

On the ninth day.

‘This is where you will sleep.’ Rejeb pushes open the door to the pale, concrete barn and points to a rug beneath a red window frame. Hadia peers from it, sees white tents denting the hills like potholes of mud-snow.

‘They are workers?’ She Hadia, just hoping Rejeb would say something else.

‘Yes. Like you, Syrian.’

Hadia looks east and notices, between lines of the trees, black figures, dotted and rolling slowly upward, like Sisyphus’s boulder.

‘But they are from other farm.’ He adds, ‘there, bad conditions.’

They hear coughing from outside the barn.

‘Come.’ Rejeb gestures to Hadia to follow.

‘This is Giorgia.’

The woman is short and beautiful. Hadia greets her though she reserves her hand as Rejeb touches her shoulder.

‘Giorgia is Kurdish, originally. Soon she will travel South.’

Rejeb leaves and the essence of him hangs stupid in the air.

Hadia stands alone, hearing the pink bullfinches chatter and scream.



Jenny has this sweet but infuriating way of popping her head around the side of Kim’s desk.

‘So... How was the gig?’

‘Fine in the end.’ Kim continues to type.

‘And how was it, with Charlie?’

Kim clicks her mouse twice before giving up and reclining in her chair. ‘I mean, it was fine, really he does nothing wrong, I just get itchy around him – you know?’

‘Don’t need to visit a clinic, do you?’ Jenny laughs, spinning side to side in her chair.

‘No, it’s a gut feeling thing.’

‘Sure, I get it.’ Jenny twiddles the brown curl of hair that portraits her pouting lips. ‘I get it every morning. I ask myself, is this really my life: am I *really* an administrator for a toothpaste company? And then I pour a shot of brandy in my tea and everything’s fine.’

Jenny scoots her chair backward and began singing a song about brandy.

‘But, yeah, I don’t know.’ Kim shrugs, Jenny wheels back.

‘But Charlie seemed nice when I met him.’

‘He is, but... I think I just need to change.’ Kim slouches to a whisper. ‘And quit this job.’

‘Well, we agree on that.’

Kim stands, brushes biscuit crumbs off her trousers. ‘Coffee?’

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‘Sure. My mug...’

Kim holds two mugs, Jenny spins around, searching for hers.



The next morning. Hillside, purple sky. Rejeb notices Hadia leaving the barn.

‘My friend. Good morning.’

Rejeb and Ahmed, Abu Khalid has two sons. Ahmed stayed in Muğla after their mother died, to take over the old business. While Rejeb was brought north, to help his father plant the orchard and, since the war, recruit cheap labouring Syrians.

‘It was nice to talk yesterday.’

Yesterday evening, over food, Rejeb and Haida had spoken about their mothers, what losing them felt like and that had written some kind of invisible contract: you and I see the world the same.

Hadia returns his wishes for the day ahead.

‘Would you like to meet again, tonight? Abu is in the city; the house is free.’

Hadia says yes, knowing a heart is less to lose than a mother and, later that afternoon, after soup, tied up on the carpet, beside a set of drawers kisses his cheek in reply. The contract: signed. He too has the desire to harbour unspoken grief. His wave suffocates her. Is love so close to drowning? Unanchored from themselves, temporarily liminal, suppressing all remains above and below.

‘I travel South in two days, with Giorgia. But tomorrow, I will see you?’

Hadia agrees, a heart is less to lose.



Condensation is running down the kitchen window. The water in the saucepan boils over.

‘It’s not you, it’s just...’

Charlie turns off the hob.

‘It’s just you need to see a fucking counsellor.’

He stirs the pasta.

‘What?’

‘Where’s the salt?’

Kim points to a cupboard.

‘I mean you have a good job and good friends. Everything is fine except for what happened to you.’

Charlie turns to see Kim staring at her feet.

‘Look, Kim.’ He touches her waist. ‘Do what you want. Just don’t expect people to stick around.’

She mumbles. ‘I never did.’



The catkins are limp and hanging, dripping off the arms of the tombul trees. Abu Khalid stands, hands on his waist, praising Allah for the science of the genetic modification of hazel trees.

‘It was only last year this land was flooded.’

He pulls off a cob from the nearest branch, causing the fat collared-dove to escape in clumsiness. He gnaws at the unwrapped nut then throws it to the ground.

‘They’re nearly ripe.’

Hadia is hungry, a child hangs by a hook inside of her. She is perched on the logs beside the water tank, half-hearing Abu Khalid continue, she traces the outlines of her feet, shapes, she realises, that have become more familiar to her than the Harim Mountains.

‘It’s going to be a good season.’ Abu Khalid professes while she instead imagines a foetus as cellular driftwood, floating toward a waterfall, the mountain air blowing cold. Her stomach again rumbles. The faint heart beats in synchronicity.

‘Did you speak with Rejeb?’

Hadia flinches. ‘No.’

‘Strange. He rang me, said he will return next week and strange he said you were sick before he left.’

‘Yes, stomach problem. Everything is fine now.’

Abu Khalid steps forward. He kicks an empty, hessian sack with his foot.

‘May Allah soon give your health.’ He pulls another cob off a branch and throws it to the soil.

‘God willing.’

Hadia looks down while Abu Khalid climbs back upon his little red tractor and mutters, under his moustache, something more about the season.

Hadia tries to stand, though again this stirs ripples of nausea. She tries again, this time using the growing hazel trees as extra limbs.



Kim stares into the universe of her coffee. It is a greasy café that she is sat in. The windows are marked with fingerprints. She was seven. He was an ex-army medic. He left, due to trauma, to work as a child’s entertainer. He called it a game, behind the sweaty rumble of a ball pit, as he unzipped his orange trousers. Coward. She scrolls her phone: a blue Vespa, an old, rich school friend who went to Athens for a year abroad. Kim put it down. Why didn’t the police ask her what it felt like? She rips open another pathetic paper tube of sugar. And what did it even matter since his cells had rusted to the lining of her mouth? Church bells ring. This city is too comfortable. Hey, she types, her molars grinding the undissolved granules of sugar from the bottom of her mug. You still selling this? The bakery man puts away a sign. He is Turkish. This town is small. Kim tries to see his face but it is a white mask. The sick bastard. They have created a game they know how to win.

**Inflorescence**

The floorboards speak upon her arrival, the summer has dried them to bone. Crying, again, her child: a girl. A skinny body, fingertips, blue.

Abu Khalid realised Hadia was pregnant just before picking season began. He noticed her exhaustion and how her black skirt began to shorten and tent her legs. And so, the next morning, without explanation, he showed her to a large pile of hessian transport bags and told her to start fixing the holes. Your sewing will cover the rent, he said. Not the Doctor. Creaking. The thought of her daughter now dying was more unbearable than the child's birth. Hadia spent the morning trying to ease the baby's coughing, rocking her in the mid-Autumn sun. Fresh air will surely remedy what Hadia imagines is a chest infection from the fibres of the hessian sacks, or some disease from the moths that somehow know to chew at every new stitch her fingers sew before she again lays the work aside to try and feed her, maybe they have flown into her lungs... Hadia is crying while searching inside for a solution that even her motherhood does not know. She lies with her shivering baby in her arms, her own body fatigued and falling backward into darkness.

Her burning chest and a hard rain knocking the window. Hadia awakens. A hand around her neck feels that she is sweating and – Rejeb is not here and Abu cannot be allowed to know of the responsible father. She sits up, the plaster of the wall behind her is stale and moonlight illuminates the dust that arises from the blanket that she folds. Hot thyme. Her aunt gave it to her as a child when she was sick and so she hides her new-born in one of her scarfs and, her head down, through the rain, she crosses over the river of mud that streams toward Abu Khalid's barn.

The door is closed and the lights are off. She pulls off several branches of thyme from outside and pockets them. Hot water. She knocks again but hears nothing. She dashes toward the outhouse, on the off-chance that Abu is working late.

Hello. But the door doesn't open.

A woman, red hair.

'You know Abu Khalid?'

'Yes.'

'Where?'

'He left. Said he will be back tomorrow.'

The woman notices the small hand hanging from the scarf bundle.

Then she asks: 'But can I help?'

'Hot water. My baby, sick.'

Then the woman explodes, like a discovered clown.

'My God, yes – Come, get out of this rain.'

Hadia enters the outhouse and unwraps her baby whilst the woman begins pouring out water from a plastic container.

'You, English?'

'Yes.' The woman places a saucepan of water and lights a small gas cooker and then a cigarette. 'Well, Welsh. You know Wales?'

'Yes.' Hadia watches the embers of the cigarette dissolve onto the concrete.

'And, you? You're from here?'

'From Syria.'

'Wow.' The woman, blowing out smoke. 'I mean, sorry to hear that. Where in Syria?'

'Idlib. Came to work.'

'Picking hazelnuts?'

'Yes. But now no, with baby.'

More embers fell, Hadia covers her baby's face.

'You have family, in Syria?'

'Two sister. Mother, die.'

'Shit.' The woman sighs and tucks one side of her hair behind her ear. 'Sorry to hear that. Do you want some of this by the way?' The woman leans into the light of the cooker. The skin on her cheekbone is tight, glowing. She is younger than Hadia first saw. She offers her the cigarette that is pinched between her thumb and finger.

'It's, err, hashish.'

Hadia says nothing, noticing the rain easing its patter between the grooves of the roof. She looks down at her child. The woman senses her worry.

'What's wrong with her?' Two women stare at the sick baby.

'Cough. Shaking. Not feed.'

The red-haired woman repositions her legs on the cold of the floor. 'There isn't a doctor round here?'

'Doctors, in Ordu.'

'Not too far.' The woman takes another breath. 'You sure you don't want some of this?'

Hadia shakes her head once and the orange light dances back to the woman.

'From where – hashish?'

'Abu... Khalid He said he has a lot,' the woman laughs. 'Seems like there's too much of it around here.'

Hadia then asks what the woman is doing here on a hazelnut farm, as a foreigner, alone. to which her reply is in a language too fast for her to understand: words like escaping an old life, a dead romance, a broken moped and Abu Khalid being one of the many people to help her on her life changing trip to the East. The woman is young, Hadia concludes from it all, still seeking.

'And my job anyway, was terrible.'

The rain stops, the water is now boiling. Hadia pulls out the thyme in her pocket and looks down again to her baby. Her lips are curling inward, like molluscs.

'I go now.' Hadia thanks the woman, with her child in one arm and the saucepan in another.

'Come anytime.' The woman replied, 'I'll be here until my bike is fixed.'

'Your name?'

The woman smiles. 'Kim.'



Fog blankets the orchard: her shellfish lips now blue. Hadia has hardly slept, each cough that the child splutters tugs at her abdomen, sends her spiralling into starless nightmares of survival. She is barely feeding, wheezing only. Pneumonia. Inflammation of the lungs. Two days, Hadia remembers, have passed. She piles up the hessian bags that are still to be sewn and falls out, desperate, into dawn.

'Oh, hey.' Kim's face is puffy and her voice, hoarse. She rubs her eyes. 'Everything OK?'

'Today you leave?' Hadia throws up coils of words. 'You please take us to Ordu?'

Kim looks at the baby, notices her paleness in the residue of the morning.

'Look.' Kim looks around, 'Come in.'

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Kim lights the gas cooker and with a wobbling arm, pours water into a small pan.

'I can't leave. Abu Khalid is not returning my moped. I paid him the price to fix it but he's asking for more, a stupid amount. I don't know what to do.'

'You have no money?'

'Not the price he's asking, and anyway, I don't even know if he's fixed it. He won't let me see it.'

'You have no family that pay, no husband?'

Kim snorts. 'They just think I'm mad, haven't spoken to me since I left.'

The morning hangs stagnant: two women staring at the sick baby.

'How is she?'

'More sick. Skin, blue.'

'Shit.'

'Abu Khalid, where?'

'I don't know, actually. I heard the truck leaving last night, I don't think he came back. Tea?'

'Yes.'

'Sugar?'

'Yes.'

'I was thinking of contacting the police.' Kim continues, 'but what do I say, I am a tourist with no money?'

Hadia says nothing, watching the small bubbles in the saucepan rise.

'Isn't there someone else who can take us to Ordu or at least to a city?'

Nothing. The morning sun spills gold through the edges of the door and across the blankets.

'I have idea.' Hadia says. 'Open. Back window. We look for bike.'

'You know how to get in, to Abu Khalid's?'

'Yes.'

Kim nods, pouring the water.



Her bottom eyelids are curving upward like crescent moons. 'Ready?'

And with her cupped hands, Kim lifts Hadia up through the window and soon after Hadia unbolts the back door, which swings and almost hits a *saz* that hangs on the wall.

'Beautiful.' Kim is curious at how sensitively Abu Khalid has arranged the place and inspecting the hung, framed calligraphy. Anatolian rugs layer the floorboards of the entrance which smells of warm, of fig and incense.

'Ha – look at this.'

But Hadia has already been caught by a black and white photograph, dusty and half-hidden behind an Ottoman vase.

'A hilarious mullet.' Kim points to the golden frame hung above a set of oak drawers: Abu Khalid stood outside of a jewellery shop.

Kim then opens the door to another room that is furnished in equal style, eloquent and ornamented. 'Hey, Hadia...' Hadia?'

Kim returns to find Hadia kneeling.



'God, you OK?' She crouches with her and picks up the photograph beside her: a smiling couple, a woman and a taller suited man.

Hadia wails, a cry only of a human that feels they are falling through the earth. 'Father.' She moans. 'Abu Khalid son.'

Kim looks down again at the photograph to notice the embellishments on the woman's headdress, the white flower in the suit pocket of the man. Hadia crumples, yelling, this time, something about Giorgia.

'Wait here.'

Kim returns to what seems like Abu Khalid's bedroom and pull open each drawer. Where the fuck would this man keep his keys? She passes drawers of underwear and hunts again, through the first drawer littered only with letters and business receipts. Nothing. She drops to her knees and looks under the bed. Dust, a metal box. Surely not.

She reaches under, to drag it out. Heavy, dead weight She opens it and inhales the dirty amount. Jesus Christ. She returns to the underwear drawer, scrambling for pairs of socks then, in handfuls, stuffs them full and into her waistline.

'Ok Hadia, let's go.'

Hadia unfolds herself, her eyes red, holding up the photo as it explained her entire life. She spits something out to Kim in her mother tongue. Leave me.

'But... ' Kim pinches her eyebrows together, hearing the sound of an approaching engine. They exit the same way but this time it is Kim that almost knocks over the *saz*. They hurry around the side of the barn, Kim cautious to hold up the waistline of her trousers, as the midday sun throws greater delirium onto their alarm.



Sunsets are always a reason to stay. Magnetic oranges kaleidoscope, until tea green. The water is boiling, Kim searches for the cups.

'Honestly, Hadia, the box was full of them.'

Hadia reaches for the thyme, her mind only rattling with every moment that could have told her that Rejeb and Giorgia were married.

'Want to see what they look like?'

Hadia pauses. 'You have?'

Kim's grin replies.

'Forbidden!' As a teenager, Hadia was caught taking an entire plate of *maamoul* to her friends. Her mother forced her to write out the *surah* on stealing a hundred times.

Kim empties out just one of the stuffed socks on the floor between them. She explains her idea in selling them to pay for a doctor. Hadia rolls one between her fingers, taps it on her teeth. 'Zultana.'

'What?'

'Zultanit.'

'It's expensive?'

'Yes. From Ilbir only.'

'Where?' Kim sips her tea, staring at Hadia.

'South, where Abu Khalid born.'

A silence as the woman realise.

‘Why the hell does he need a farm if he has gemstones?’

‘Hazelnuts, legal. No, government, money.’

Kim quietens. ‘Tax.’

‘And, the father,’ Hadia feels again a charcoal pit inside her stomach, one that used to be on fire, ‘is Abu Khalid’s son and he works in the South, too?’

The baby begins to cough.

‘I think, yes.’

Hadia picks her up, as though she is the only thing left on the earth.

‘Me. I, stupid.’ She pats her back, to ease her coughing.

‘No, Hadia. This is not your fault.’ Kim takes over her tea. ‘You know, when I was seven years old, a man, a stranger, how should I put it? Well, he assaulted me, with sex, I mean and the worst part, is that for so many years after, I thought it was my fault. I thought it was my fault because I believed his disgusting game.’ Kim sips her tea. It burns her lips.

‘And I know it is different because...’ She takes another sip. ‘Because I was a child. But no matter how old we are, we just want to be loved. You just wanted Rejeb to love you.’

The two women stare at the ground.

‘Anyway, don’t worry,’ Kim uncovers the three other stuffed socks. ‘I’ll take the blame for this.’

Hadia looks over to see the six weighted men’s socks lying like murdered bodies.

### **Fruition**

*All of your dancing lights look pale, oh Sun,  
compared to my resistance and its fire.  
Your mad flames can’t tear my melody  
so long as my hands grasp this singing lyre.  
And when you flood the earth, remember this:  
my temple has no room for your cruel light  
I am to bury the past you revealed  
and live beneath the canopy of night. \**

There is something utopian about leaving in the night. Maybe it is knowing that by dawn, life would start over, everything familiar would have fallen away, even the scars that once could tell a story.

‘You know driving, Kim?’

They were lucky that Salman came to collect the first seven sacks of hazelnuts earlier that afternoon and by chance, mentioned to Kim that Abu Khalid had left again to the city for the night. They were also lucky that Salman left the keys in Abu Khalid’s tractor. There are some things that force a woman to leave in the night.

‘Well, my brother back home taught me the basics.’

Like an awkward passenger boat, Abu Khalid’s red rusted tractor hobbles across the potholes of the path, the headlights drawing with them a flitting bed of moths. On the top sits the three bodies, and behind it drags a trailer worth of fresh hazelnuts.

'Well, this isn't really the grand heist I imagined.' The engine is loud, churning in full gear, forcing them to shout.

'Ordu – Three weeks from here.'

They laugh, the two women in unspoken union, and the baby, a skeleton now, is falling asleep.

'Don't worry.' Kim smiles. 'It won't take long.'

The tractor eventually climbs onto main road and midnight trucks overtake them.

'So, have you thought of a name yet?'

Hadiya remains fixed on morning's horizon.

'Yes.' Although she knows she is already dead.

'Amal.' Hadia turns to Kim. 'Means hope.'

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\* Nazik al-Mala'ika, 'Revolt Against the Sun', 8 July 1946. Edited and translated from Arabic by Emily Drumsta from *The Selected Poetry of Nazik al-Mala'ika: A Bilingual Reader*, Saqi Books, London, 2020.