

# Flight

Vicki Ramirez

OUT OF THE CORNER OF HER EYE, Leila watched a woman and her husband climb into the Peugeot taxi that Leila was taking from Oran to Algiers. The woman wrapped her black *haik* close against her full contours to avoid stepping on its hem. She smiled at Leila and her daughter Fatima, sprawled half on Leila's lap, half across the car seat. As Leila moved the child closer to give the couple room, the older woman's smile was clear, even with her face-veil covering her lips. Leila acknowledged the woman with a slight nod as she continued stroking her sleeping child's locks. Then the young mother faced away from the newly arrived passengers and closed her eyes.

Even if she had wanted to, Leila could not smile, her face tight and heavy at once. Grit scratched the corners of her eyes, and she knew that what she needed even more than food or a bath was sleep. Hours, days of dreamless slumber. The night before she had dozed in fits on the flight from London to Oran, but ugly dreams had haunted what little rest she got.

Leila shifted to avoid the sun, just risen above the Mediterranean. Like a crow folding a wing over itself against the night, she twisted away from the window to rest her chin in her *haik*'s black silk, the dust of travel streaked in its folds.

But she feared sleep. Dreams, jangling and vivid, threatened. Even

---

VICTORIA RAMIREZ, originally from New York, taught for almost a decade in England, Nigeria, Japan, and Algeria before entering her Ph.D. program at the State University of New York, Binghamton. Now an associate professor of English at Weber State University, she has published literary criticism (on such topics as African women writers), poetry, book and arts reviews, and interviews. She is writing a Revolutionary War novel set in southern New York.

worse, they were no less terrifying than her waking reality. Was it possible that five days ago they were all together in Salt Lake City? It seemed like years since Musa had informed her that he would be delayed a week in Salt Lake City and that Ismael, a Syrian who worked for him, would be accompanying her and Fatima to Saudi Arabia. Although Leila had not wanted to travel to Musa's adopted homeland and she did not know Ismael, she knew better than to object. Her husband had not even seen them off at the airport.

Wedging her back between the window and car seat, Leila tried clearing her head of all thought, but their journey across continents and days insinuated itself into her mind. The long flight from Salt Lake's airport to Newark International with half a day's layover. Then, the overnight flight to London. Leila so exhausted when she walked off the plane at Heathrow that she learned what it must be like to be drunk, struggling with her carry-on luggage and daughter, her words tangling themselves on her tongue. She made sure Fatima nibbled fruit and drank bottled water but could hardly keep from dozing when the three of them waited in line for boarding passes and carry-on inspection.

In London Ismael had directed the airport cabby to an Islington address, a flophouse at the end of an hour-long drive from the airport. The dingy neighborhood teemed with Africans and Middle Easterners, their unfamiliar languages booming up the rank stairwell. Leila was grateful for the bed and the toilet down the hall. Mother and child slept on the lumpy mattress, while Ismael laid chair cushions on the floor. But even four-year-old Fatima grasped the oddity of a man not her father sleeping in the same room with her and her mother.

Its seats now filled, the Peugeot nosed out of the taxi stand, negotiating crowds that wandered across the unpaved road feeding into the Oran-Algiers highway. Leila repositioned her daughter's head—how light it was!—to gaze dully out the window. Dun expanses, reminding her of late summer grass on mountainsides above Salt Lake City, rimmed the highway. Near the coast Leila glimpsed palms against an already sultry sky. She felt no hunger but recalled the food Ismael had brought them in the room: pastries and that bitter, weak tea the English drank with milk. Tucked under his arm was a daily dated September 11—her mother's birthday, Leila remembered with a jolt when she spied the date. Deep sad-

ness settled on her when she realized it had been five years since she'd felt her mother's arms around her.

Ismael stood abruptly after gulping food and tea, flicking pastry flakes from his trousers. He was going out to meet some people. No, he didn't know when he'd be back, but there was no cause for concern—their flight to Saudi Arabia wasn't until the next day. If they needed food, why, Leila could go out and buy some. The purse her husband had entrusted Ismael to carry, filled with documents and a thick fold of paper money, dangled in the air before falling onto the bed. "Hold this for now. I'd rather not travel around London with so much money."

Withdrawing two bills and grabbing his small pack with phone, papers, and PalmPilot, he hurried out the door and down the stairs. Leila heard the building's front door bang shut, and from the window she watched Ismael scurry down the street, as if late for an appointment.

He never returned.

It was early evening before she took Fatima out to buy fruit and meat. Because their own door didn't lock, Leila carried the purse in a deep pocket sewn inside her *haik*. She bought fried fish and potatoes reeking of vinegar. Mother and daughter dismally ate as they watched rain glaze the darkened street beneath their window. People entered and left the rooming house regularly; every time someone passed their room or the front door banged shut or feet pounded in the stairwell, she strained to hear if it was Ismael. Fatima said not a word about him as they lay in a night sickeningly bright with orange street lights. Through the slightly opened window, Leila was awakened more than once by slurred shouts.

The following day was gray and cool. Leila feared leaving the room and missing Ismael if he returned, but finally left him a note. She and Fatima bought bread, some good English cheese, and, at a green grocer's, unripe, overpriced dates. They waited a second day for Ismael. When he didn't return by early evening, Leila had to face the frightening prospect that he would not be coming back. He had left their travel papers on the dilapidated nightstand near the bed—but his passport and ticket were gone. Leila knew she and Fatima would be able to reach Riyadh, but she could find no information explaining where to go once they arrived. She had no way to contact her husband since he had flatly refused to let her have his cell phone number. It was a phone used only for his work, he insisted.

She and Fatima were stranded in London.

While the child slept, Leila gave in to dark fears, sobbing as softly as she could while biting her clenched fist so hard she left teeth marks. Outside the window here, and in New York, and in Salt Lake City—perhaps outside every window from which she was destined to view the world—Leila knew women walked about without veils, without male escorts, without fear and shame, able to reach their destinations. Here she was, alone with a child in a huge city where she did not speak the language. How to get help? How to contact Musa? Leila prayed to Allah for a knock on the door and when she opened it, there Musa would be.

Shivering in the growing darkness, her unfocused gaze reached beyond the window pane and the lowering sky. Musa had put them in this predicament, and yet, she was lying in bed crying that he save them? A burning tide of anger flooded her at the injustice of her situation.

Then a terrible clarity settled on her.

She had tickets, no? And she had money. Yes, making herself understood would be difficult, but at the airport she'd surely find someone who spoke Arabic. Or French. She would get the airline to exchange the Riyadh tickets for ones to Oran. After all, she was Algerian, and Oran was closer than Riyadh.

Leila blinked at the simple logic of her circumstances. As dusk settled, she brought their two suitcases and Fatima onto the street, dragging the luggage while the child clutched a doll. On the main avenue Leila hailed a cab and said one word: "Heathrow."

Speeding along the coastal highway, Leila groaned at the memory. Had it really been only two nights ago? Every sound, odor, sensation of exhaustion as she lugged their bags through the vast airport now haunted her, as if she had passed but a moment ago through the British Airways terminal. Still flitting across her closed eyes were confused flashes of the airline counter opening early that next morning, how the authorities had inspected her with suspicious, searching looks, even as a translator explained her predicament.

While the airline attendants discussed the problem in English, Leila considered escalating the situation—crying, perhaps even wailing. She was spared the need for public display by Fatima, who began droning over and over, "It hurts, Mama," as she pulled her ear. A frowning man identifying himself as a supervisor soon announced they should follow him. In a drab

room with a table but no chairs, the official asked Leila questions through an interpreter. His queries were quickly interrupted by a soft, high-pitched wail as Fatima cupped her ear. Seeing that the child was ill, the supervisor and a policeman stepped aside to talk in private.

In the end, the supervisor agreed to change their tickets and send her to Air France for the Oran flight. At the counter, Leila overheard some travelers who had listened as the attendants discussed her case. One elderly, elaborately coiffed woman glared at Leila's *haik* and face veil, commenting in loud French, "I hope she's not on our flight. After that New York business, I don't want to get on a plane with any Muslim murderers."

Her companion did not drop her voice to reply, "Surely this is the safest time to fly. Airport security will be at its best right now, not so? Anyway, it's those Arab men that are terrorists. She's got that child with her, poor thing." But others appeared to be examining Leila and Fatima. An elegantly dressed man scowled and hissed, "*Sale Arabe*"—"dirty Arab"—as he passed. Leila lacked the energy to care; she had given the child a dose of cough syrup to ease the throbbing ear, and soon they would be on the flight to Oran, and home.

Later Leila awoke with a start—the taxi's rhythmic thrumming had halted. They were parked at a market in El-Asnam, midway to Algiers. The older woman's husband was leaning forward, saying this was the best market in all of western Algeria to buy dates. Leila's eyes no longer felt swollen, but she was parched from the sun and heat. Fatima had just squirmed awake and was whimpering for a drink. The child appeared to look around, then collapsed back onto Leila's lap, already asleep. But her forehead was cool to the touch, and for the first time in several days, Leila briefly smiled.

Leila thanked Allah for the child's need to rest. Having to answer questions about where Fatima's father was, when they would see him again, or where they were going . . . no, this silence was far better. Fatima didn't even know her great-aunt Fouzia, toward whose home they were traveling.

Leila recalled the last time she had seen Fouzia, her mother's youngest sister. Smiling, rhythmically clapping with the rest of the women at Leila's wedding, Fouzia had kissed her niece lightly on both cheeks, whispering in French, "I love you," and "Good luck, Leila, eh?" Fouzia, who always wore her wiry hair as short as a schoolboy's, who had graduated from

university in France, who now taught English and French literature at a lycée in Algiers. All the women said she'd never marry: too old, too plain, much too educated. But Leila would dream of a life like Fouzia's in the White City, with its dazzling cafés and restaurants, with its *bon vivants* who sipped wine and argued about books. And those stylish outfits Fouzia wore that would never be covered by a *haik!*

Fouzia, with a high, lilting voice that sometimes broke into whispers, just like Leila's mother. But Fouzia's voice was less guttural, the Arabic tones tempered by the cadences of polished French. That voice had tempted a man no less than Nabile Bey of the old caliphate family. The Beys had ruled the coastal lands for the Ottomans before the French settled and annexed Algeria as part of France. Nabile had appreciated Fouzia's interest in his work on the Arabic roots of the European Renaissance, but he'd married her for her wit, her gracious heart, and her swift, bold mind.

Leila's thoughts wobbled toward the image of her mother, who was still desolate at the loss of her eldest daughter and her only grandchild. Leila conjured a scene just before her wedding when the women were preparing flat bread for the family meal, and old Tété started in.

Tété had lumbered over to where Leila was shelling almonds, calling the girl's arms "willow switches." All the women laughed as Tété encircled Leila's upper arm within thumb and forefinger. Everyone except her mother.

"Never mind, Tété. When I married your nephew, my arms were as slender as Leila's. He's never complained." Her mother stood rigid with hands on hips, arching one eyebrow in Tété's direction. Leila scooped up the shells into her skirt, heading for the rubbish bin outside the door. Little Yamina followed to help, lisping, "I heard Tété tell Mama he's wealthy, Leila. It's a good match." Leila snatched the lid from the child, banging it down, hissing at her to shut up.

After the meal, under the parlor's single light bulb, her mother's eyes fixed on her oldest daughter. "Some henna in your hair would be just the thing." Frowning as she lifted Leila's heavy plait, she held it this way and that. "Yes," she mused in utter sadness. "With those pale eyes like your father's and that creamy skin, you'll make a beautiful bride."

She'd been married to the forty-year-old Musa two months later. Her sister Mariam, and Saida, her best friend, told her after the wedding that

some said her father had gone soft in the head, marrying a daughter just sixteen to a man over twice her age.

As the white noontide sun began its slide down the western sky, Leila's vision darkened, eclipsed by a bitterness toward the old man that she'd blinked away for years. Musa, the demon? How could that be? All along it had been her father who ensured that her life would be empty of intimacy, of passion, of even the smallest portion of dignity. The old man had doted on his daughters Leila and Mariam, born to his second wife. How he had boasted of Leila's good grades in primary school and Mariam's clear singing voice! Much later Leila would hear of her mother's shock when her husband informed her of the betrothal the day before Musa's visit. Never could her mother have anticipated that her husband, on his own, would arrange a marriage for their daughter. The Egyptian did not even have to bribe the old man.

Leila fell at last into dream. Frantically searching the rooms of an old Oranian villa, she kept calling out Musa's name. Then the driver swerved to avoid a dead dog on the highway, jostling her awake.

Outside, the sun had crisped the grass and bushes, reminding her again of Utah. All those emerald lawns, but beyond the sprinklers, a brown land relieved only by scraggy weeds and sagebrush. She preferred Salt Lake City to their first home on suburban Long Island, where she'd given birth to Fatima. There, cars choked storefront-lined streets, housing tract after housing tract compressed into neighborhoods where your next-door neighbor was a stranger.

After Musa's company relocated him to Salt Lake City, Leila could again enjoy skies as vibrant as those over her mother's village, on the edge of the Sahara. The New York sky had been a cornflower wash lacking the crisp, metallic sharpness over deserts. In such high, thin air, Utah's Wasatch Mountains seemed close enough to squeeze. She delighted in standing on their apartment's veranda not far from the great temple, focusing on gnarled juniper trees that stuck out of distant crags.

*If only I could climb that high,* Leila thought, *I'd have a view of the valley like those birds, so still in their flight.*

At least Musa had loved his daughter and, for a brief time during the pregnancy and after Fatima's birth, seemed to dote on Leila. He'd dance to Egyptian music, wanting the baby to learn his cultural roots. Musa's attention had made Leila happy for the first and only time in her marriage.

But Leila's life soon slowed to a narrow routine, caring for Fatima, keeping house for Musa. Her only outings were to shop for household groceries with him. He forbade her to study English, meet other Arabic-speaking families, or become friends with women frequenting the local Islamic Center. She never would have met Amina, who with her Egyptian husband, Mahmoud, had two young sons, except that Musa realized Fatima needed playmates. It was through Amina that Leila heard about the other families in the Salt Lake area from North Africa and the Middle East.

Soft-spoken Amina was a careful listener, who always found something good to say about Musa. When Leila feared her husband would send her back to her father's home for breaking household rules, Amina rolled her eyes and insisted Musa loved her deeply. The problem was, he couldn't show it.

But that was before Leila foolishly confessed to him how she'd been slipping out of the apartment, after finding a key ring with spare apartment and mailbox keys. Leila began checking the mailbox herself, discovering that such correspondents as Saida, Fouzia, and even her mother, had not received letters which Musa claimed he had mailed. So began a phase of clandestine letter-writing.

Soon Leila began hiding coins left in Musa's pants pockets. One day, emboldened by the thought that, with no house phone, Musa wasn't likely to catch her gone, she wheeled Fatima in the stroller to buy napoleons at a local bakery. She had spied them on an earlier outing and nearly wept with nostalgia as she recalled how, at the end of Ramadan, she and her sister would saunter with their father down to Artaud's Patisserie. They would carry back pastries even as the call to prayer still echoed along the morning-blue byways.

To Leila's delight, the young shop girl in Salt Lake City used the same white-and-red string the baker's wife had tied the pastry box with in Oran, half a world away.

That night Leila planned to serve the napoleons to Musa after the potato stew she'd spent the afternoon preparing. It was a risk; he would know that she'd been out of the apartment, but perhaps more importantly, that she'd taken some of his money. As she chopped onions and potatoes, Leila considered options. She decided to defend her actions with a bold assertion: Despite Mahmoud's status as a graduate student living on a small stipend, Amina always had some money in her purse. Musa



was a supervisor at a company and surely could afford to give Leila a small allowance for shopping.

While she fried almonds in sweet butter for Musa's favorite dish, Leila realized she could not defend taking money by simply saying there was more than enough. Mentally searching through the chapters of the Qur'an, she alighted on "The Women," which outlined the rights of women and children, and men's duty toward them: "A man shall have a portion of what the parents and close relatives leave, and a woman shall have a portion of both as well . . . whether there is but a small amount or a vast portion."

Equal portions. Or from the same chapter: "Men shall have the benefit of what they earn, while women shall have the benefit of what they earn." True, she didn't earn a salary, but was not marriage an equal sharing? Was Fatima any less her husband's daughter because she—and not Musa—had given birth to the child?

That night Leila made sure to sit across from Musa while he ate. When he finished, she asked whether he wanted coffee with the napoleons. His wide-spaced eyes narrowed slightly, as if concentrating. "Where did you get pastries?"

She almost lied. She could have said Amina brought them, but instead confessed, "I went out today and bought them with change I found . . . on the bureau." The last words stuck in her throat.

Musa seemed to be pondering this when up he sprang in one violent motion, landing closer than an inch from her. Jabbing her chest with his forefinger, he warned through clenched teeth that it was the last time she would take Fatima out. He called her a stupid cow, insisting she knew it was forbidden to go out. He ranted about Fatima's safety, about the evil of America, about the godlessness of its people, about how these enemies of Allah-the-Wise would come to know the dialogue of bullets. Didn't she understand secrecy? Didn't she know, as the Qur'an counseled, that the hearts of freemen were the sepulchers of secrets?

Careful not to raise her voice, Leila pointed out that she was neither a freeman nor a keeper of secrets. But even if she did keep secrets, didn't he know the Qur'an said that one who keeps a secret always becomes two, since Allah is All-Knowing?

Musa coldly asked where she had heard that. "She Who Pleaded," Leila responded, and triumphantly started to fetch the Qur'an to show him.

But he grabbed her arm, spitting with anger. "A disobedient wife should be exiled from the bedroom, should be beaten until she complies.' That is what the Holy Book says. And, 'You who believe: obey Allah, his messenger, and those who are given authority in his name.' Don't make the mistake of disobeying, Leila. Justice will fall hard on you." Musa's face had darkened and she could feel his trembling.

Not for a moment did she believe it was an empty threat.

At Khemis-Miliana the highway bends seaward, toward Algiers. When Leila's eyes opened, she spied the woman seated next to her winking at Fatima, who stared back in silence. The child lifted herself up and sipped water from a bottle Leila held; from the woman's husband, she accepted two plump dates. Fatima was content to hold and gnaw them while Leila pondered the dream she had just awakened from, one she'd had before.

As pieces of the dream fit together, she realized it was the same nightmare that had followed her across the Atlantic to the rooming house in London: The golden angel atop the Latter-day Saints' temple somehow had become alive. She noticed the figure as she passed by, poised on tiptoe as if about to soar with its horn above the temple. Then Leila saw the angel's terrible eyes. All jubilation gone, it glared in her direction, an angel clearly bent on dispensing vengeance.

She did not want to ponder on whom, or for what reason.

The night before, as their Oran flight vaulted the blue Mediterranean haze, Leila's anger had given way to somber strategy. Her thoughts, dull from lack of sleep, formed and re-formed themselves into an escape plan. It would be *she* who would leave Musa. Sewn into the hem of her *haik* was the money—some bills she had taken from Musa's bureau and from his trouser pockets. There was also the small fortune Ismael had abandoned in London. She would return to her father's home, but not as a millstone dragging down her relatives with her and Fatima's dependency. No, she'd pay her own way. If her father allowed, perhaps she would finish her studies at the lyc ee. When Musa arrived—as surely he would—she would obey neither husband nor father. She vowed that this time she would decide both her own fate and her daughter's.

The moment Leila carried Fatima off the plane, she sought a money-changer. Just one of the bills she slipped from the bundle in her

pocket yielded enough dinar to feed and house them for a month. The money was powerful, even with the money-changer robbing her right before her eyes. Her resolve to abandon her life with Musa was still strong, for guilt had not had time to cause doubt. She hustled toward a metal cart for their luggage, then headed to the taxi stand outside the terminal.

In the predawn light, Oran dimly rose before her in one breathtaking moment, with such smells and sounds and rushing of cars that her throat ached.

After stowing the bags in a taxi, Leila and Fatima watched the tumult around them. The driver, his hair slicked back and a thin smudge of mustache on his lip, stood in front of the terminal with the other drivers, deep in conversation between canvassing for customers. As a newspaper vendor passed, Leila watched as the driver drew coins from his pocket for a paper he carried to the car, ready to leave.

He snapped on the interior light and sat for a long moment behind the wheel, then sought her eyes in the rear-view mirror. "What do you think of those crazy bastards, anyway?" When Leila, puzzled, met his gaze, he shook the paper at her. "Haven't you heard? Look on the front page." He shoved the daily back for her to read.

In the poor light she first noticed the photos of several men. One of them had Fatima's widespread eyes and that long, distinctive eyebrow crossing her forehead. Leila glanced from the photo of Musa to her daughter, and then to the headline: TERRORISTS BOMB AMERICA! The driver, hoping to have been the one to reveal such rare, exciting news, monitored Leila's face as she read of horrific events involving hijacked planes used as deadly missiles. Thousands were thought to be dead in the Twin Towers, a place Leila had once visited with Musa when they lived in New York. She dropped the paper into the front seat away from Fatima's curious eyes and turned to the window.

Her mind seemed to float upward like a child's balloon. It was Fatima's voice that anchored her. "Where are we going? To Grand-papa's?" Leila nodded, imagining her father's tall, now-gaunt form slowly take shape. She envisioned the flowing white beard and rich robes, conjured his high voice, raspy with age. She imagined Alhaji Mesbah smiling, beckoning her and Fatima onto his veranda. No! No, he was angry, sobbing; Leila knew he would have heard the news, would have been awaiting their shameful return. She was a widow now, and as

such, must return to her father's care. As head of the family, he would again be ruler of his daughter and her child.

The driver was edging his taxi into speeding traffic in front of the terminal. Leila leaned forward to breathlessly redirect him from the address of her father's seaside villa to the car park for taxis heading to Algiers. The driver shrugged, saying it would triple the fare. She clasped a handful of dinar from her pocket, thrusting the bills in his face. Muttering about the incessant capriciousness of the entire female race, the driver turned east at the next corner, taking Leila and Fatima to the Oran-Algiers taxis, just beyond the city line.

As they approached the outskirts of Algiers, she showed the driver an envelope with Fouzia's address. It was near the university; if Leila could wait until the other passengers got out at the Algiers car park, he'd drive her right to the door.

Inside the envelope was a well-worn photograph of the Bey's home, tinted the palest of mint hues. Bougainvillea and spiky cacti peeked from behind a black iron fence, its gate intricately wrought. Leila recognized the house as soon as the taxi turned into its narrow street. Set on the side of a hill, the home towered above the pavement. After haggling with the driver about the fare—Leila knew he was overcharging her—she dragged the bags just inside the gate and climbed the steps to Fouzia and Nabile's door. Her heart beat louder than waves battering the coast as she grasped the brass knocker, giving it three stout claps.

Reverberations shot through the entrance hall, straight into Nabile's study. Through an open window Leila heard him call, "Fouzia? Can you get that?" Her eyes, smarting from too much sorrow, winced as the late afternoon sun glinted like molten blood in the front windowpanes. She closed her eyes against fear for herself and Fatima. Fouzia pulled open the heavy door.

Both women stood motionless, like statuary frozen outside time and its consequences.

Fouzia found words first, throwing her arms around Leila and child, murmuring into her niece's ear, "Do you know?"

Leila could only nod as Fouzia gently lifted Fatima into her arms. She watched her aunt gaze into the girl's curious, shy eyes. Leila hoped Fouzia would not see the father in the daughter; instead, around the

mouth and chin were the features of Grandmama, now falling into childishness, Leila knew, faster than Fatima was climbing out of it.

With her free arm around Leila, Fouzia again kissed her niece's cheeks. Then Nabile was beside them, drawing all three into the house. He, too, kissed Leila on the cheeks and smiled at Fatima, who hid her face from him.

"Here you'll be safe," he said in French, so that Fatima could not understand. "We must get you both into hiding. I'm afraid, for a very long time."