

I was only seven when this happened but it always feels like right now. My Tayta raises her blouse and shows me her stomach. It's so big it rests on her large thighs. Her skin is golden and soft, and sometimes, when she holds me close and kisses me, her body feels like a plastic bag filled with warm water. She only has a few teeth left and she smiles between them. Tayta's hands are like wood because she has arthritis. They're thick and brown and dry and she can hardly move them, except for when she's preparing *aa-jeen*, which is our word for dough. Tayta places both her hands under the base of her stomach and she lifts. She reveals to me eleven scars that look like train tracks running in different directions just below her belly button. She points to one and she says in Arabic, 'This is your father, Jibreel.' Then she points to another and says, 'Here is your Uncle Ehud.' Then she points to another and another and another, and she lists her other three sons; 'Osama, Ibrahim, and the youngest, Ali.' Then my Tayta points at two more scars and says, 'Here are the girls, Amina and Yasmine...' She hesitates before she names the scar that belongs to the third daughter. She says, 'This is Mariam.' Then my grandmother's smile withers and her few teeth look like they might fall out when she points at the final three scars and says, 'Here are Firaz, Hilal and Shahrazat...they died before we left Lebanon.'

Most of my Tayta's children still live with her in a house that belonged to my grandfather. His name was Bani Adam. Every day my father reminds me that it was my grandfather's house, he says, 'We are Baat Adam,' which means, 'We are The House of Adam'. The house is in Alexandria. People sometimes think because we're Arabs, that I mean the city in Egypt, but the Alexandria we're from is actually a suburb in Sydney's inner west. It has no

sides. It's joined on left and right to our neighbours' houses. This is normal in Alexandria. It's a small yellow-brick double-storey house across the road from Alexandria Park and Alexandria Oval. It's on Copeland Street. Next door, on the right-hand side, is a hair salon that belongs to an Aussie guy named Chuck. One minute up the road is Erskineville train station. Down behind us is my school, Alexandria Public School.

My siblings and I aren't allowed to go to school on our own. We wait for my mum or dad to pick us up. Sometimes we wait for hours. We aren't allowed to go to the corner shop that's a hundred metres down the road on our own either. Shady and Rima own the shop. They're the only other Arabs in Alexandria but they're not from The Tribe. They're Christian. That's the best we can hope for around here. I asked my dad once if I could go to Shady and Rima's by myself. 'Do you know what'll happen if someone took you?' he said. 'They'll play with your bum.' I laughed my heart out.

There's a yellow-brick fence as you enter through the rusted gate to the house. The gate is the same height as a regular door and it's painted dark orange. Three steps and you're at the front door. The door is made from old, thin wood, painted brown. When it opens, you'll find my mum and dad's room on the right-hand side of the corridor. I'm not allowed in there unless they are in there too. My dad says it's disrespectful to go into your parents' room. Sometimes he'll take a nap in the afternoon and I might go in and lie down next to him. I can't sleep though. There's too much light coming in from the window above his bed. I just lie there and stare at the three old wardrobes lined up in front of me. I used to think they were made entirely out of wood until I noticed them peeling at the corners. One time, after my dad fell asleep, I crept over and

peeled the plastic back just far enough so I could see what was underneath. I discovered a dry wood material that reminded me of cornflakes. Even the handles on the wardrobes are fakes. I used to think they were made of gold until they started peeling too. Inside the wardrobes are my mum's many dresses and my dad's few shirts and pants. Up the top is where Dad keeps The Holy Qur'an. Sometimes at night, when I get scared, Dad will rest it under my pillow to keep me safe. The Qur'an is so big that it elevates my head above my siblings. I wake up with a sore neck every time.

On the left-hand side of the corridor is my Uncle Ali's room. He's my dad's youngest brother. He's the biggest guy in our family. He's tall and broad-shouldered. Outside his room a cloth portrait of Elvis hangs in the corridor. I think Uncle Ali looks just like him, like Elvis. He has black hair that's always brushed back and a big jaw to support his goofy smile. The colour of Uncle Ali's skin is the same as Elvis's as well. When I call it brown, my dad corrects me. 'You mean olive,' he explains, 'because Elvis looks like a wog.' It's disrespectful to go into Uncle Ali's room too but sometimes I sneak in there anyway. It's the best room in the house because Uncle Ali doesn't have to share it with anybody. There's a single bed, a desk and a narrow wardrobe inside. The centre of the room is just an open space where I can lay out my Lego pieces and build for hours. There's also a big window in the room that lets in all the light from the street. On the other side is Alexandria Park, which is flat, so there's nothing to block the sun from getting in. On cold days I sneak into Uncle Ali's room just to lie down on the floor with the sun on my face. As I start to heat up I imagine where I really come from. Not here. I belong in the desert. I belong in the sand. I belong with the camels. Then Uncle Ali finds me and says, '*Laaa*, out.'