Opening extract from

Haroun and the Sea of Stories

Written by

Salman Rushdie

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1

The Shah of Blah

There was once, in the country of Alifbay, a sad city, the saddest of cities, a city so ruinously sad that it had forgotten its name. It stood by a mournful sea full of glumfish, which were so miserable to eat that they made people belch with melancholy even though the skies were blue.

In the north of the sad city stood mighty factories in which (so I'm told) sadness was actually manufactured, packaged and sent all over the world, which never seemed to get enough of it. Black smoke poured out of the chimneys of the sadness factories and hung over the city like bad news.

And in the depths of the city, beyond an old zone of ruined buildings that looked like broken hearts, there lived a happy young fellow by the name of Haroun, the only child of the storyteller Rashid Khalifa, whose cheerfulness was famous throughout that unhappy metropolis, and whose never-ending stream of tall, short and winding tales had earned him not one but two nicknames. To his admirers he was Rashid the Ocean of Notions, as stuffed with cheery stories as the sea was full of glumfish; but to his jealous rivals he was the Shah of Blah. To his wife, Soraya, Rashid was for many years as loving a husband as anyone could wish for, and during these years Haroun grew up in a home in which, instead of misery and frowns, he had his father's ready laughter and his mother's sweet voice raised in song.

Then something went wrong. (Maybe the sadness of the city finally crept in through their windows.)

The day Soraya stopped singing, in the middle of a line, as

if someone had thrown a switch, Haroun guessed there was trouble brewing. But he never suspected how much.

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Rashid Khalifa was so busy making up and telling stories that he didn't notice that Soraya no longer sang; which probably made things worse. But then Rashid was a busy man, in constant demand, he was the Ocean of Notions, the famous Shah of Blah. And what with all his rehearsals and performances, Rashid was so often on stage that he lost track of what was going on in his own home. He sped around the city and the country telling stories, while Soraya stayed home, turning cloudy and even a little thunderous and brewing up quite a storm.

Haroun went with his father whenever he could, because the man was a magician, it couldn't be denied. He would climb up on to some little makeshift stage in a dead-end alley packed with raggedy children and toothless old-timers, all squatting in the dust; and once he got going even the city's many wandering cows would stop and cock their ears, and monkeys would jabber approvingly from rooftops and the parrots in the trees would imitate his voice.

Haroun often thought of his father as a Juggler, because his stories were really lots of different tales juggled together, and Rashid kept them going in a sort of dizzy whirl, and never made a mistake.

Where did all these stories come from? It seemed that all Rashid had to do was to part his lips in a plump red smile

and out would pop some brand-new saga, complete with sorcery, love-interest, princesses, wicked uncles, fat aunts, mustachioed gangsters in yellow check pants, fantastic locations, cowards, heroes, fights, and half a dozen catchy, hummable tunes. 'Everything comes from somewhere,' Haroun reasoned, 'so these stories can't simply come out of thin air . . . ?'

But whenever he asked his father this most important of questions, the Shah of Blah would narrow his (to tell the truth) slightly bulging eyes, and pat his wobbly stomach, and stick his thumb between his lips while he made ridiculous drinking noises, *glug glug glug*. Haroun hated it when his father acted this way. 'No, come on, where do they come from really?' he'd insist, and Rashid would wiggle his eyebrows mysteriously and make witchy fingers in the air.

'From the great Story Sea,' he'd reply. 'I drink the warm Story Waters and then I feel full of steam.'

Haroun found this statement intensely irritating. 'Where do you keep this hot water, then?' he argued craftily. 'In hot-water bottles, I suppose. Well, I've never seen any.'

'It comes out of an invisible Tap installed by one of the Water Genies,' said Rashid with a straight face. 'You have to be a subscriber.'

'And how do you become a subscriber?'

'Oh,' said the Shah of Blah, 'that's much Too Complicated To Explain.'

'Anyhow,' said Haroun grumpily, 'I've never seen a Water Genie, either.' Rashid shrugged. 'You're never up in time to see the milkman,' he pointed out, 'but you don't

mind drinking the milk. So now kindly desist from this Iffing and Butting and be happy with the stories you enjoy.' And that was the end of that.

Except that one day Haroun asked one question too many, and then all hell broke loose.

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The Khalifas lived in the downstairs part of a small concrete house with pink walls, lime-green windows and blue-painted balconies with squiggly metal railings, all of which made it look (in Haroun's view) more like a cake than a building. It wasn't a grand house, nothing like the skyscrapers where the super-rich folks lived; then again, it was nothing like the dwellings of the poor, either. The poor lived in tumbledown shacks made of old cardboard boxes and plastic sheeting, and these shacks were glued together by despair. And then there were the super-poor, who had no homes at all. They slept on pavements and in the doorways of shops, and had to pay rent to local gangsters for doing even that. So the truth is that Haroun was lucky; but luck has a way of running out without the slightest warning. One minute you've got a lucky star watching over you and the next instant it's done a bunk.

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In the sad city, people mostly had big families; but the poor children got sick and starved, while the rich kids overate and quarrelled over their parents' money. Still Haroun wanted to

know why his parents hadn't had more children, but the only answer he ever got from Rashid was no answer at all:

'There's more to you, young Haroun Khalifa, than meets the blinking eye.'

Well, what was *that* supposed to mean? 'We used up our full quota of child-stuff just in making you,' Rashid explained. 'It's all packed in there, enough for maybe four-five kiddies. Yes, sir, more to you than the blinking eye can see.'

Straight answers were beyond the powers of Rashid Khalifa, who would never take a short cut if there was a longer, twistier road available. Soraya gave Haroun a simpler reply. 'We tried,' she sadly said. 'This child business is not such an easy thing. Think of the poor Senguptas.'

The Senguptas lived upstairs. Mr Sengupta was a clerk at the offices of the City Corporation and he was as sticky-thin and whiny-voiced and mingy as his wife Oneeta was generous and loud and wobbly-fat. They had no children at all, and as a result Oneeta Sengupta paid more attention to Haroun than he really cared for. She brought him sweetmeats (which was fine), and ruffled his hair (which wasn't), and when she hugged him the great cascades of her flesh seemed to surround him completely, to his considerable alarm.

Mr Sengupta ignored Haroun, but was always talking to Soraya, which Haroun didn't like, particularly as the fellow would launch into criticisms of Rashid the storyteller whenever he thought Haroun wasn't listening. 'That husband of yours, excuse me if I mention,' he would start in his thin whiny voice. 'He's got his head stuck in the air and

his feet off the ground. What are all these stories? Life is not a storybook or joke shop. All this fun will come to no good. What's the use of stories that aren't even true?'

Haroun, listening hard outside the window, decided he did not care for Mr Sengupta, this man who hated stories and storytellers: he didn't care for him one little bit.

What's the use of stories that aren't even true? Haroun couldn't get the terrible question out of his head. However, there were people who thought Rashid's stories were useful. In those days it was almost election time, and the Grand Panjandrums of various political parties all came to Rashid, smiling their fat-cat smiles, to beg him to tell his stories at their rallies and nobody else's. It was well known that if you could get Rashid's magic tongue on your side then your troubles were over. Nobody ever believed anything a politico said, even though they pretended as hard as they could that they were telling the truth. (In fact, this was how everyone knew they were lying.) But everyone had complete faith in Rashid, because he always admitted that everything he told them was completely untrue and made up out of his own head. So the politicos needed Rashid to help them win the people's votes. They lined up outside his door with their shiny faces and fake smiles and bags of hard cash. Rashid could pick and choose.

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On the day that everything went wrong, Haroun was on his way home from school when he was caught in the first downpour of the rainy season.

Now, when the rains came to the sad city, life became a little easier to bear. There were delicious pomfret in the sea at that time of year, so people could have a break from the glumfish; and the air was cool and clean, because the rain washed away most of the black smoke billowing out of the sadness factories. Haroun Khalifa loved the feeling of getting soaked to the skin in the first rain of the year, so he skipped about and got a wonderful warm drenching, and opened his mouth to let the raindrops plop on to his tongue. He arrived home looking as wet and shiny as a pomfret in the sea.

Miss Oneeta was standing on her upstairs balcony, shaking like a jelly; and if it hadn't been raining, Haroun might have noticed that she was crying. He went indoors and found Rashid the storyteller looking as if he'd stuck his face out of the window, because his eyes and cheeks were soaking wet, even though his clothes were dry.

Haroun's mother, Soraya, had run off with Mr Sengupta.

At eleven a.m. precisely, she had sent Rashid into Haroun's room, telling him to search for some missing socks. A few seconds later, while he was busy with the hunt (Haroun was good at losing socks), Rashid heard the front door slam, and, an instant later, the sound of a car in the lane. He returned to the living room to find his wife gone, and a taxi speeding away around the corner. 'She must have planned it all very carefully,' he thought. The clock still stood at eleven o'clock exactly. Rashid picked up a hammer and smashed the clock to bits. Then he broke every other clock in the house, including the one on Haroun's bedside table.

The first thing Haroun said on hearing the news of his

mother's departure was, 'What did you have to break my clock for?'

Soraya had left a note full of all the nasty things Mr Sengupta used to say about Rashid: 'You are only interested in pleasure, but a proper man would know that life is a serious business. Your brain is full of make-believe, so there is no room in it for facts. Mr Sengupta has no imagination at all. This is okay by me.' There was a postscript. 'Tell Haroun I love him, but I can't help it, I have to do this now.'

Rainwater dripped on to the note from Haroun's hair. 'What to do, son,' Rashid pleaded piteously. 'Storytelling is the only work I know.'

When he heard his father sounding so pathetic, Haroun lost his temper and shouted: 'What's the point of it? *What's the use of stories that aren't even true?*'

Rashid hid his face in his hands and wept.

Haroun wanted to get those words back, to pull them out of his father's ears and shove them back into his own mouth; but of course he couldn't do that. And that was why he blamed himself when, soon afterwards and in the most embarrassing circumstances imaginable, an Unthinkable Thing happened:

Rashid Khalifa, the legendary Ocean of Notions, the fabled Shah of Blah, stood up in front of a huge audience, opened his mouth, and found that he had run out of stories to tell.

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After his mother left home, Haroun found that he couldn't keep his mind on anything for very long, or, to be precise, for more than eleven minutes at a time. Rashid took him to a movie to cheer him up, but after exactly eleven minutes Haroun's attention wandered, and when the film ended he had no idea how it all turned out, and had to ask Rashid if the good guys won in the end. The next day Haroun was playing goalie in a neighbourhood game of street hockey, and after pulling off a string of brilliant saves in the first eleven minutes he began to let in the softest, most foolish and most humiliating of goals. And so it went on: his mind was always wandering off somewhere and leaving his body behind. This created certain difficulties, because many interesting and some important things take longer than eleven minutes: meals, for example, and also mathematics examinations.

It was Oneeta Sengupta who put her finger on the trouble. She had started coming downstairs even more often than before, for instance to announce defiantly: 'No more Mrs Sengupta for me! From today, call me Miss Oneeta only!'—after which she smacked her forehead violently, and wailed: 'O! O! What is to become?'

When Rashid told Miss Oneeta about Haroun's wandering attention, however, she spoke firmly and with certainty. 'Eleven o'clock when his mother exited,' she declared. 'Now comes this problem of eleven minutes.

Cause is located in his pussy-collar-jee.' It took Rashid and Haroun a few moments to work out that she meant *psychology*. 'Owing to pussy-collar-jeecal sadness,' Miss Oneeta continued, 'the young master is stuck fast on his eleven number and cannot get to twelve.'

'That's not true,' Haroun protested; but in his heart he feared it might be. Was he stuck in time like a broken clock? Maybe the problem would never be solved unless and until Soraya returned to start the clocks up once again.

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Some days later Rashid Khalifa was invited to perform by politicos from the Town of G and the nearby Valley of K, which nestled in the Mountains of M. (I should explain that in the country of Alifbay many places were named after letters of the Alphabet. This led to much confusion, because there were only a limited number of letters and an almost unlimited number of places in need of names. As a result many places were obliged to share a single name. This meant that people's letters were always going to the wrong address. Such difficulties were made even worse by the way in which certain places, such as the sad city, forgot their names entirely. The employees of the national mail service had a lot to put up with, as you can imagine, so they could get a little excitable on occasion.)

'We should go,' Rashid said to Haroun, putting a brave face on things. 'In the Town of G and the Valley of K, the weather is still fine; whereas here the air is too weepy for words.'

It was true that it was raining so hard in the sad city that you could almost drown just by breathing in. Miss Oneeta, who just happened to have dropped in from upstairs, agreed sadly with Rashid. 'Tip-top plan,' she said. 'Yes, both of you, go; it will be like a little holiday, and no need to worry about me, sitting sitting all by myself.'

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'The Town of G is not so special,' Rashid told Haroun as the train carried them towards that very place. 'But the Valley of K! Now that is different. There are fields of gold and mountains of silver and in the middle of the Valley there is a beautiful Lake whose name, by the way, is Dull.'

'If it's so beautiful, why isn't it called Interesting?' Haroun argued; and Rashid, making a huge effort to be in a good mood, tried to put on his old witchy-fingers act. 'Ah—now—the *Interesting* Lake,' he said in his most mysterious voice. 'Now that's something else again. That's a Lake of Many Names, yes, sir, so it is.'

Rashid went on trying to sound happy. He told Haroun about the Luxury Class Houseboat waiting for them on the Dull Lake. He talked about the ruined fairy castle in the silver mountains, and about the pleasure gardens built by the ancient Emperors, which came right down to the edge of the Dull Lake: gardens with fountains and terraces and pavilions of pleasure, where the spirits of the ancient kings still flew about in the guise of hoopoe birds. But after exactly eleven minutes Haroun stopped listening; and Rashid stopped talking, too, and they stared silently out of

the window of the railway carriage at the unfolding boredom of the plains.

They were met at the Railway Station in the Town of G by two unsmiling men wearing gigantic mustachios and loud yellow check pants. 'They look like villains to me,' Haroun thought, but he kept his opinion to himself. The two men drove Rashid and Haroun straight to the political rally. They drove past buses that dripped people the way a sponge drips water, and arrived at a thick forest of human beings, a crowd of people sprouting in all directions like leaves on jungle trees. There were great bushes of children and rows of ladies arranged in lines, like flowers in a giant flower-bed. Rashid was deep in his own thoughts, and was nodding sadly to himself.

Then the thing happened, the Unthinkable Thing. Rashid went out on to the stage in front of that vast jungle of a crowd, and Haroun watched him from the wings—and the poor storyteller opened his mouth, and the crowd squealed in excitement—and now Rashid Khalifa, standing there with his mouth hanging open, found that it was as empty as his heart.

'Ark.' That was all that came out. The Shah of Blah sounded like a stupid crow. 'Ark, ark, ark.'

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After that they were shut up in a steaming hot office while the two men with the mustachios and loud yellow check pants shouted at Rashid and accused him of having taken a

bribe from their rivals, and suggested that they might cut off his tongue and other items also. —And Rashid, close to tears, kept repeating that he couldn't understand why he had dried up, and promising to make it up to them. 'In the Valley of K, I will be terrifico, magnifique,' he vowed.

'Better you are,' the mustachioed men shouted back. 'Or else, out comes that tongue from your lying throat.'

'So when does the plane leave for K?' Haroun butted in, hoping to calm things down. (The train, he knew, didn't go into the mountains.) The shouting men began to shout even more loudly. 'Plane? *Plane?* His papa's stories won't take off but the brat wants to fly! —No plane for you, mister and sonny. Catch a blasted bus.'

'My fault again,' Haroun thought wretchedly. 'I started all this off. *What's the use of stories that aren't even true.* I asked that question and it broke my father's heart. So it's up to me to put things right. Something has to be done.'

The only trouble was, he couldn't think of a single thing.