



Excerpt from

*Recognising Strangers*

by Jamilah Ahmed

**Shortlisted for the 2016 SI Leeds Literary Prize**

In the car Hamed was silent, his eyes darting left and right at the afternoon traffic. He drove fast, and ordinarily Leah would ask him to slow down. Not today though, the car swept along the highway, making elaborate curves across the tarmac. They drove past the office towers and luxury hotels that stalked the sky. When they reached the outskirts of the city, the houses were wide, and set in lush gardens that triumphed over the desert. Elaborate topiary sat beside electronic gates and flowers bloomed in the gardens, empty of people save for the occasional gardener patiently holding a hose of glittering water, to sustain this miracle of growth.

‘Now we are late. There will be no parking, and we need fresh spices for the weekend.’ Hamed tutted his ongoing irritation as he manoeuvred the car through the narrowing streets. When they reached the market, he parked in their usual spot, unmoved by this piece of luck. They climbed out, taking gulps of air untainted by tension and recrimination. Hamed stood over his children, behind him the sea glittered with sharp, white glints of light that sparked off the water. He spun keys and loose change in the pocket of his kendoora, ‘We will buy spices for the lunch, and show your Uncle Yousef we are good people, do you understand?’

Ameera nodded, knowing that the main effort would have to be seen to come from her. It seemed clear that the quality of spices shouldn’t affect how her behaviour was judged, but she said nothing. Along the coast, moored fishing

boats skipped over the waves, their sales finished for the day but Hamed had no time for the view. He took big strides, his mood signalled in the abrupt pace as he marched into the market. The family rushed along in his wake to keep up.

The spice market was a shaded, dusty maze of soft wicker baskets piled high with scented seeds and barks. Market traders sat propped against their wares, faded turbans wrapped around their heads, chewing seeds of their own specialty. They chatted easily to rival sellers, relaxed in the knowledge that customers had a loyalty to certain stalls. No jostling or weaving here, instead Hamed and his children wandered through the warren of baskets, the air thick with flavoured dustiness. Ameera began to feel soothed, drawing comfort from this familiar routine. They followed Hamed as he collected soft sticks of cinnamon and spiky cloves until they had the mix needed to make their family spice. Even he seemed to forget the drama in the perfumed haze.

Over the next few days the spices would roast in the sun on large steel platters. Leah and Ameera would sift them regularly, ensuring not a peppercorn or clove was left unturned. Finally they would be ready to be ground into a silky powder. There was something magical about the alchemy of spice making, the sustained intense heat that coaxed rich aromas from the cores of the hard, dusty globes and sticks.