THE FUN-FAIR
by Hanan Al Shaykh

Hanan Al Shaykh was born in Lebanon to a Muslim family, brought up in Beirut and educated in Cairo. She was a successful journalist in Cairo and in Beirut; she married a Christian Lebanese engineer and lived with him and their two children in the Arabian Gulf. Since 1982 they have lived in London because of the civil war. She has written three highly acclaimed novels, The Story of Zahra, Women of Sand and Myrrh, which was chosen by Publisher’s Weekly as one of the fifty best books of 1992, and, most recently, Beirut Blues. She is also the author of several collections of short stories.

My fiancé Farid insisted that I should go with him and his family to visit his grandmother’s grave on the eve of the feast. I’d always thought this custom was for old or lonely people who felt comfortable sitting with their dead relatives. They say there’s nothing like visiting a cemetery for curing depression. I hadn’t been aware of my own parents visiting family graves on special days, although once when I was little I prayed fervently that somebody I didn’t know in the family would die so that I could go inside one of the buildings people put up around their graves. I’d gone with our cook to her house overlooking the cemetery – an occasion which seems to have remained imprinted on my mind – and from then on I’d pictured the dead people living in those burial chambers, like us in our houses, only different perhaps like pharaohs. I thought they probably moved about without making any sound, or stayed in bed all the time.

In those days the tombs seemed strange to me, with their engraved cupolas the colour of sand. They stood among a few faded trees and mounds of sandy earth which were perfect for rolling down. The cats and dogs whose voices I could hear I was sure were the guardians of these tombs.

We called in at Farid’s parents’ house. As I made to reply to his father’s greeting his mother appeared from nowhere and asked me disapprovingly why I wasn’t wearing the diamond ear-rings.

“Diamonds for the cemetery?” I asked.

“Why not?” she nodded. “Everyone’s going to be there, I know, and they’ll say, why did he only give her a ring when they were engaged?”

Then she vanished and returned with a brooch of precious stones and came towards me to pin it on my dress. I took a step backwards, insisting as diplomatically as I could that I didn’t like brooches. Turning again towards her room she replied impatiently, “All right. Wear my marcasite ear-rings. But everybody will recognize them.”

I looked beseechingly at Farid and he said to her, “I don’t want her to wear any jewellery.”

Only then did she notice the bunch of white roses I was holding. She took them from me, smelling them and calling on the Prophet in her delight, then rushed to put them
in a vase with some other flowers. The price of them had made me hesitate, but they looked to me as if they were just waiting for someone to appreciate their fragrant beauty. I justified buying them on the grounds that they weren't for me, and that anyway from now on there was no need for me to feel a pang of conscience every time I bought something expensive, since I was going to marry a wealthy man. Farid told his mother that the flowers were for the grave. “What a shame. They’re lovely,” she replied, continuing to arrange them in the vase.

Farid signalled to me, and I understood that I shouldn’t pursue the subject of the flowers. I looked about me in an attempt to escape from my embarrassment at her behaviour and pretended to be interested in the content of the baskets by the door: pastries for the feast day, bread in unusual shapes and old clothes and shoes.

I sat next to my fiancé in the front of the car, with his mother and father and adolescent sister in the back. The eve of the feast was like the feast itself, the crowded streets throbbing with noise and excitement and everywhere the sound of fireworks exploding. I remembered how as children we would wander the streets all day at this time of year and ride the fairground swings, rushing to empty the peach-coloured sand from our socks and shoes as soon as we reached home. Every year when the feast came round, it felt as if we were celebrating it for the first time. My mother would prepare the tray of kunafa and would take it to the communal oven. Although we stood there for ages, our eyes fixed on the baker so that he would remember our tray, he always took it out late and the pastries would be rock-hard. All the same we ate them with noisy relish. I remembered the handbag I had especially for the feast, the socks I wore even at the height of summer, the shiny shoes, the hair ribbons. We used to visit all our relatives, including those who lived at a distance and were hardly related to us at all. We would knock on their doors and wish them well, not meaning what we said. We knew the uncle who said he had no change on him was lying and would sit for ages on his doorstep before we rushed off to the swings and the pickle-sellers, discussing the rumour that the feast was going to last a day or two longer this year for the children’s benefit.

People spent the whole of this feast-day eve in the cemetery. The children wore their brightest clothes. Amplified voices recited the Quran, and at the same time popular songs blared out from radios and cassette-recorders. There were women selling dates and palm leaves. One was smoking and the others shared a joke, their tattooed chins quivering with laughter. Fool beans and falafel, fruit juice and pickles of many varieties and colours were all on sale at the entrance to the cemetery. I thought I would have a display of pickles in jars like that in my own house.

Farid’s mother stopped at the first vendor she came to, a woman without a tooth in her head, and chose a large quantity of oranges, tangerines, and palm leaves. She haggled with her for some time, then gave her a sum of money and walked off. “Lady!
Lady!” the woman called after her. When she tried to ease herself up off the ground, I begged Farid to pay her what she was asking: “Poor thing, it’s a shame on a day like this.”

We hurried to catch up with Farid’s mother, elegant in spite of her plumpness, springing over the mud and earth and gravel like a gazelle. She carried her purchases, leaving the baskets to Farid, his father and sister, who looked increasingly morose. I found myself walking along beside her. She glanced at her watch and asked if I thought the sun would come out later, then lowering her voice she explained, “I want to go to the club. Have a swim and lie in the sun.”

I smiled at her. The noise was deafening. There was the clatter of saucepans and the raor of Primus stoves where the women had spread themselves out to cook in the narrow alleyways and the open spaces between the tombs. The shrieks of children mingled with the voices of the Quran reciters who moved from grave to grave and in and out of the tombs. In vain they tried to raise their voices and their audience – families wanting private recitations for their dead – had to give them all their attention to catch what they were saying. Most of the working reciters were elderly, despite the fact that there were young ones about, leaning against tombstones looking bored. I watched Farid’s mother darting from one to another, and all of them promising to find their way to her sooner or later, with the help of the cemetery caretaker. When one of the younger ones approached her offering his services, she pretended not to notice him. Angrily Farid asked her why she had snubbed him and she answered, “Old men have more merit in the eyes of the Lord.”

Perhaps she meant because the young faces didn’t bear the marks of grief and suffering as the old ones did.

We went into a courtyard with a little garden round it where there were graves with pink and white ornamental headstones. Farid said they belonged to his father’s grandfather and the grandfather’s two brothers who had asked to be buried in this garden, which looked green and moist as if someone had recently watered it. Then we crossed the courtyard into the main family tomb and found it crammed with members of the family, a Quran reciter and dishes of dates and cucumbers and tangerines. The grave itself was festooned with pal leaves. “Why are we sitting in here, right next to the grave?” I wondered.

I saw disappointment, then anger, on the face of my fiancé’s mother, which she was unable to conceal. “You must have spent the night here,” was her first comment to the assembled company. Nobody answered her, but to her amazement they stood up and greeted us, disregarding the recitation of the Quran: Farid’s three paternal aunts, his grandfather, the husbands of two of the aunts and their children. They made room for us on wooden chairs, disfigured by time and neglect, and we all sat down except for Farid’s mother who began spreading more palm leaves over the grave until it had almost vanished from sight. Then she took out pastries, bread, dates, cucumbers, tangerines
and glasses for tea. She put some pastries and dates in a bag and went up to the Quran reciter, thrusting the bag into his hands. He stopped in the middle of his recitation to mumble his thanks and handed the bag to a boy who was sitting at his feet counting out notes and coins before putting them in his pocket.

Fari’s mother asked him all of a sudden how much he took from each family. “Depends how much time they want,” the boy answered slyly.

“How much?” she insisted. “Last year, for example?” “Last year was last year,” he replied. Then, peering into the bag, he named an amount which made Farid’s mother gasp. “That’s the same as a check-up at the doctor’s,” she remarked. I met my fiancé’s eyes and we almost laughed aloud.

There was an uproar outside, then the caretaker appeared, accompanied by a sheikh. When they heard the recitation in progress, the sheikh tried to retreat, but Farid’s mother grabbed his hand and pulled him in. In spite of the family’s obvious disapproval she led him over to where her daughter was sitting, while he murmured, “I mustn’t poach from someone else.”

Impatiently she answered him, “Just relax. He’ll get his share and you’ll get yours.”

The sheikh obeyed and sat listening to his colleague, nodding his head with feeling, while the aunts’ faces registered annoyance. One of them sighed and another turned her face away. Farid’s mother declared, “It’s not a feast every day, and we want to be sure our dead go to heaven.”

Then she approached the caretaker, wishing him well, and counted out some money into his hand, enunciating the amount in an audible voice. “I hope this place isn’t opened up again as soon as our backs are turned?” she inquired sharply.

“What do I carry a weapon for?” countered the caretaker.

“No. You know what I mean,” she said. “We heard that the previous caretaker used to let our tomb as if it was a hotel.”

“That’s why he’s the previous caretaker. You know I don’t even let kids come through here.”

I thought that relief was at hand when from outside the smell of kebab and meatballs wafted in, making my nostrils twitch. The blind reciter rose to his feet and was led away by the boy, while the newcomer began chanting prayers. I looked around the room, at the faces, especially the aunts’. They shifted their gaze from me to Farid’s mother, to his sister and back again. When our eyes met we exchanged smiles, as if they knew what I was thinking and agreed: “It doesn’t matter that Farid’s mother’s difficult, and I don’t have any sort of relationship with her. Farid’s family all love him, even though he does exactly what she says.”

The reciter paused to clear his throat and immediately one of the aunts turned to me and said she hadn’t expected me to be so pretty in spite of the descriptions she’d heard and only an illness had kept her away from my engagement party. Another asked
if we’d found a flat and what area we were thinking of. I answered these questions in all
innocence at first, but from their expressions and the way Farid kept trying to catch my
eye, I felt that I must be on sensitive ground as far as his mother was concerned. Sure
enough, she interrupted and said there was no urgency about renting a place, her house
had big rooms and was Farid’s as much as it was hers.

When I replied to the aunts that we were planning a simple wedding, just the family,
Farid’s mother announced, as if she hadn’t heard a word I’d said, that we’d be holding it
in one of the big hotels. When I told them that my wedding dress was second-hand, and
had been worn first in the Twenties, she was quite unable to hide her alarm. It was then I
realized a state of war existed between Farid’s mother and the aunts and regretted ever
opening my mouth. From their loaded questions and the way they looked at one another
after each of my replies, I could tell that they were using me to attack her in her most
vulnerable spot. She protested, almost in a scream, “God forbid! You’re wearing a dress
that someone else has worn, to your wedding? That’s out of the question!”

“Is it white?” inquired one of the aunts, provoking Farid’s mother to still greater
anguish.

“White, black, what’s the difference?” she shouted. “It’s out of the question. Marisa
has to make it. I promised her. She’ll be upset.”

“Upset!” remarked one of them laughing, “She’s got more work that she can
handle. She’ll be delighted.”

“I know you’re jealous because Marisa’s going to make it,” screamed back Farid’s
mother.

For a moment I forgot where I was. The walls were grey and the visitors’ chairs
blocked out the tombstone and the palm leaves. We could have been in somebody’s
sitting room. Farid’s father and the third aunt’s husband interrupted the argument, coming
to stand behind their wives’ chairs. “The clothes. Aren’t you going to give them to the
caretaker?” asked Farid’s father, changing the subject.

His wife sighed, annoyed with herself. “I forgot all about them,” she replied. “Let’s
hope death forgets me!” Then she whispered something in his ear. When he didn’t make
any comment, she said, “Who’d like some tea?” She went over into a corner where there
was a Primus stove I hadn’t noticed before. As she pumped it, she asked, “What do you
think about building on to the tomb? Another room, a little kitchen, a bathroom?”

Nobody answered. They were all absorbed in their own private conversations. She
repeated, “We need to extend the tomb. Farid’s father agrees. What do you say?”

“Extend it!” scoffed one of the aunts. “To hear you talking anyone would think a
tomb was just like a flat or a house!”

“What I meant,” Farid’s mother corrected herself, “is that we should buy an old
abandoned tomb.”
Another aunt seized on her words: “And have our dead mixed up with other people’s? That’s madness!”

“I mean we should buy a plot of ground, even if it’s a little way off.”

The voices rose and fell. Farid’s cousin and sister whispered scornfully to each other. Farid brought me a glass of tea. Meanwhile, his mother continued to as querulously, at intervals, “What do you say?”

“What do we say?” answered one of the aunts at last. “Nobody’s in a position to lay out money on tombs and suchlike, that’s what we say.”

Farid’s mother drew a triumphant breath: “Farid’s got a marvellous job, thank God, and…”

I looked with embarrassment at Farid, who was shaking his head like someone who wanted help. He said sheepishly, “Why do you need to mention that?”

His mother must have felt from this response that he was siding with his aunts against her, but she went on, “I mean God’s made you rich enough to pay for the new tomb.”

She seemed to gain strength from his silence, and had the look of a cat when the mouse is finally cornered. But the spiteful looks of the other women snatched victory from her grasp. “We know your stories,” they seemed to say. “You want to tell your friends that you’ve got a big new tomb. A villa! A three-storey villa with marble stairs and wrought-iron gates!”

“Have you ever heard of anyone visiting the family tomb and sitting almost on top of the graves?” shouted Farid’s mother. “We must have a separate room to sit in.”

“We used to be able to use the one you gave the caretaker,” interrupted one of the aunts.

“At least there’s only him and his wife,” persisted Farid’s mother. “Surely that’s better than having a family taking it over, with children clambering over our tombstones like apes, and then not being able to get rid of them?”

“And what’s wrong with being buried in the garden?” continued the aunt in a superior tone. “You don’t have to be inside the room.”

“Your father’s grandfather liked the idea of being buried in the garden – that’s his business,” yelled Farid’s mother. “I and my family want to be buried inside.”

In a whisper, as if divulging a secret, Farid’s father said, “Listen to me. Land prices are going to soar. People are going to start living in these buildings on a regular basis. And anyway what’s wrong with our family having the very best?”

“I know,” answered his sister. “But is it reasonable to expect you to pay while we stand with our arms folded? You know, the children are at university and there are monthly payments to keep up with and all our other commitments…”

“I’m ready to fall in with anything,” said her husband.
His intervention seemed to irritate Farid’s mother and she snapped back at him, “In any case, your wife won’t be buried here. She’ll go with your family.”

His wife ignored her and said, “Look. Just look around. This tomb’s big. You couldn’t call this a small area.”

But Farid’s mother came back at her with a reply which unnerved me like a physical blow. All along I hadn’t believed that the family’s scheming and arguing over a peaceful grave in its midst could be serious. I told myself it must be a family joke, and anyway it had nothing to do with me, even Farid’s helping to pay.

Standing in the middle of the room, Farid’s mother declared, “No. It’s not as big as you imagine. There’s me, there’s my husband, and now Farid’s about to become two, and then there’ll be his children.”

Her words frightened me. Death wasn’t as distant as it had been. I didn’t think of it, like a child, as something that wouldn’t happen to me. Trying to make a joke, I said, “Should we be planning for our afterlife when we’re not yet married?”

“We’re saying prices are going to soar,” intervened Farid’s father, seizing on the same pretext as before.

I knew that all eyes were on me, especially the aunts’, begging me to save them from Farid’s mother’s claws. But I lacked the strength even to save myself and abandoned myself to the terrifying thought that one day I’d be here in this room underneath a tombstone like that, with one for Farid and each of my children. We’d all end up here and our children’s children would sit like us now, sipping tea, arguing, eating dates.

The raised voices of the men, joining in with the women now, brought me back to the present. Farid came to my rescue, taking my hands in his soothingly, and I mumbled, “It’s crazy to think about it now.”

I don’t know how Farid’s mother heard what I said; I hardly heard it myself, but she remarked smugly, “Our lives are in God’s hands.”

This angered me and, unconscious of what I was saying, like a child who wanted to contradict for the sake of contradicting, I replied, “I don’t want to be buried here.”

“You don’t have a choice,” she said. “When you become part of the family, that’s what you have to do. Even your own family wouldn’t agree to bury you with them.”

I felt as though she was already shoveling earth down on top of me. “No!” I screamed. “No!” I jumped up and rushed to the door. Farid’s mother paid no attention even when Farid took hold of me and said reprovingly to her, “Are you happy now?”

“She has to understand, my dear,” she said to him, “that whoever lives with us must die with us.”

I broke free and ran. He came after me. Outside in the cemetery’s main square I caught my breath and leant against a tombstone while I fastened my sandal. Children were playing with a ball there, disregarding the comments of their mothers and the older
women who sat resting from the labours of their cooking. “The dead must be trembling with anxiety down there,” remarked one.

I composed myself at last, perhaps at this spectacle of everyday life, or the glimpse of a bird abandoning itself to space, beautiful and oblivious to what was happening below. We stopped beside the car. I knew we would have to wait for his family. I felt I wanted to be free of his hand holding tightly on to mine. I turned my face away, contemplating the washing spread out to dry, the empty bowl resting against one grave, the cooking pot sitting on another, as if it was a table, and the owners of these objects going about their business – victims of the housing crisis, who had squatted in abandoned tombs, rented at the going rate, or simply occupied family tombs prematurely, and adapted them to suit their lives. I saw television and radio aerials in place; and yet Farid’s mother wanted a bigger space to house her graves.

When I saw Farid’s mother, father and sister appearing in the distance, I felt the breath being knocked out of me. So we were one family, living together, dying together?

Farid’s father must have told his wife to keep quiet, as she hadn’t uttered a word from the moment she entered the car. His sister tried to make peace with me, and told me about a friend of hers who was a social scientist and was doing a study of the people who lived alongside the dead. She said how the women would be trilling for joy at the birth of a baby, and would fall silent suddenly if they noticed a funeral procession approaching. Their noises of rejoicing would turn to keening, while the men rushed to find which tomb the music was coming from, or the news broadcast, so they could silence it. As soon as the funeral was over, life would return to normal.

But I remained silent. Surrounded by their loud voices, I felt like the ant I’d noticed on the floor of the tomb. It had moved uncertainly along, not knowing that any moment it could be trodden on and crushed to death. I realized I’d changed my mind about marriage, and I wanted to get out of the car straight away before I was suffocated by Farid’s mother. I had a vision of the aunts like three witches preparing to serve us all up to the Devil.

I thought I would tell Farid the reason I’d changed my mind about marrying him wasn’t to do with the tomb or where I would be buried. On the contrary, I’d loved all the commotion, and the cemetery itself was like a fun-fair. Anyway, I didn’t like being alone even while I was alive.

Then I decided against this last sentence. I was haunted by the scene of the family in the tomb, and their voices were still ringing in my ears. I resolved to try to like being alone, alive or dead.