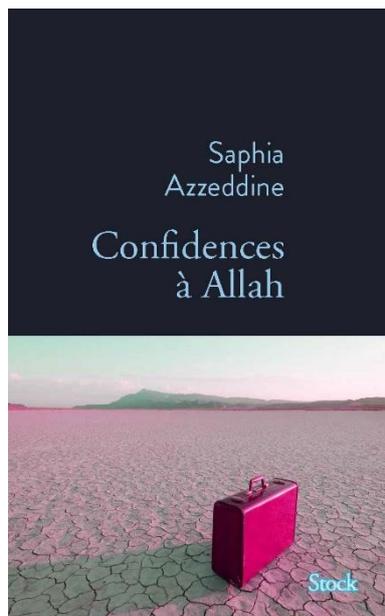


DEAR ALLAH sample material translated by Morag Young

**DEAR ALLAH**  
**by Saphia Azzeddine**  
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[...]

I don't think God exists. He's never done anything for me. This isn't an ultimatum - I wouldn't dare - but I just don't believe in You anymore. It's nothing personal but at some point you have to cut the crap. I don't think I've gone too far or asked for the moon. I just want something to happen in my life, to be at a crossroads at least once, to have to choose one way or the other. I've never had to choose anything. Everything has been forced on me.

You ignore me, Allah. It's not fair. You see, I can't even not believe in You anymore. Even when I don't believe in You anymore, You're still the one I tell. If that's not faith! People say: "Don't talk about your faith, let your faith speak for you". Well, my faith is losing its voice. It's got no arguments left. It's dying because of this pathetic life. It's switched off more often than it's switched on and nothing ever happens to revive it? They say we end up liking our torturers. Yes, my life is torture. You've put me here and I'm supposed to say thank you? You've got to agree that doesn't make sense. Sorry, maybe.

My belly's getting bigger. But everything's normal when I go to the toilet. I've still got hair down there so I'm still a virgin.

It's the afternoon. I'm out with my sheep. The bus for Belsouss goes past. I stand up straight. It's full to bursting.

A suitcase falls out.

Bang.

The bus doesn't stop.

Thank you, Allah. Oh, thank you!

I never stopped believing in You, You know that.

God, thank you Allah, really thank you!

I run towards the suitcase but my sheep follow me so I turn around and wave my stick at them. They stop. I run as fast as I can so that this can't not have happened.

The suitcase is the same shade of pink as a *Raibi* drink. That's a good sign. The bus becomes a little black spot in the distance. They haven't turned around so I get away as fast as I can just in case...

It's pink with wheels and *J'adore Dior* is written on the top. What a weird suitcase. It doesn't have any rope or sticky tape or a bunch of mint sticking out. It's not a suitcase from round here, that's obvious. I daydream about opening it but I want to make the moment last as long as possible. I don't want it to end. Even though what's inside the suitcase will provide me with lots of other moments...

I open it. Wow! It's pink and it really smells like America. In Tafafilt, "*mirikan*" has come to mean everything that's inaccessible. Really anything. It's shiny. There are clothes and a makeup bag with Mrs Clooney written on it. There's *mirikan* strawberry lip gloss, *mirikan* mango lip gloss and *mirikan* coconut lip gloss. For the first time, I realise how bad I stink. There are also jeans with shiny crystals on the back pockets, *mirikan* sequined tops, *mirikan* wedges and *mirikan* evening clutch bags. So, everything your basic prostitute needs. It definitely smells of *haram* but it's so nice!

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I hold the shiny jeans in front of me and, can you believe it, they're the right length. I go through the pockets and take out a ball of paper. Oh my God, these notes are worth 200 each. There are six of them. Oh my God. That's at least...at least...that's a lot of money!

Thank you, Allah. I feel bad about saying those things to You last time. I should have just been patient. I knew You would hear me and something would happen in my life. But this *mirikan* suitcase is beyond my wildest dreams. You deserve your 99 names, I swear.

And there are G-strings. Lacy fuchsia, black and red ones. There's even a G-string with pearls. I'm acting like I know what I'm doing but actually I don't have a clue. I look left. I look right. I take off my knickers and put on the pearl G-string. Ooh, that's really weird. It does actually go inside. I think you have to shave off all your hair like Algerian women do to wear this kind of thing but I don't care. I've got *mirikan* in my backside. The pearls rippling in my bottom feel strange. It's nice but hairs keep getting caught in the elastic and it's starting to hurt.

– Jbara! Jbara!

Shit, it's my father!

– You little idiot, go and help your mother. I'm hungry! Go on!

I hope he doesn't see my suitcase. I'd better go to him.

Oh my God, it really bloody hurts! It's pulling. I didn't think I had so much bottom.

I hurry along, stifling little cries of pain. My father shoves me and tells me I'm crazy. I hurry more.

– Sorry Dad, I'm going. Sorry.

I peel the turnips but all I can think about is my suitcase. What's happening to me is unbelievable.

– Have you said your prayers, daughter?

– Yes Mother, but not the *asr* one yet.

– Do them on time Jbara, otherwise it's *haram*.

There, that's an example. I know You couldn't have said such a thing Allah. What is it to You if we pray at the exact time? If we're really working, are we supposed to just stop and go and praise You?

– Go and pray Jbara, she tells me again.

You didn't ask for all that, I'm sure, but I do as I'm told because I have to. And since the *fkih* says that Paradise is to be found under the feet of mothers, when in doubt I'd sooner obey her. I get my rug which is rolled up behind my clothes and take myself off. But, as I get up I remember that I'm still wearing the blasted G-string. Pray with that? Well, I don't think that's right for example. But I don't have a choice. God is great. He'll understand.

Shit, I've messed up my boots again. I can't stop being sick. My belly's huge. What's happening to me, for God's sake? I must be pregnant.

I wanted something to happen in my life but not that. This is death for a girl like me. And not even brutal. Slow.

I'm on the ground. The dust from the ground is getting mixed up with my tears and my saliva. I can't really see what's happening anymore but I feel the pain, in my back and then in my legs. I protect my belly first and then my face. I don't know where he's going to strike so it hurts less - surprise makes it hurt less.

– You have brought dishonour on us, you little slut, you can't stay here! Get out right now, daughter of the devil, sinner!

My mother hides her face in her hands and cries, as usual. She doesn't try and stop it. She's crying to tell me that she loves me but she can't do anything. She asks him to stop really quietly, just one more time so that I see her do it because he won't stop. My father really overdoes it with his gestures and his words. He doubles his blows to please the *fkih*. He pays special attention to them to make a spectacle of it. To win points and ensure that he will pray for them. He swaggers about and screams out his anger. The *fkih* must approve right up to the final thrashing. I can already see in his face everything I've made them lose. He's getting ready to take them away to wash their honour and be redeemed with him.

I gather my things together, still begging them to keep me. My father gets agitated and covers his eyes, telling me he can't look at me anymore, he's going to go and pray and I must be gone by the time he comes back or he'll kill me. My mother puts her fingers in her ears and goes to hide in the bathroom. My brothers and sisters are all crying, except for Kada who's too old now not to do what Father tells him. I leave my home and make a detour to get my suitcase. I drag it to the edge of the road. The idea of sticking out my hand to ask the bus for the big city to stop terrifies me. I'm really sorry about my prayers now. It's actually better when nothing happens. I should know what I really want. Well, I don't. I wanted to see what somewhere looked like but actually I think it's going to piss me off.

The bus arrives. I hold out my hand. It slows down. The doors open. I climb in, leaving my suitcase on the road. I've seen people do that for such a long time. You have to leave your suitcase by the bus and a man comes to get it and puts it on the roof. No one gets in the bus with their suitcase. At least I don't look stupid. People will think I've taken the bus before. That I know what I'm doing. That makes me feel a little bit better. Then I pay for my ticket. To hide the fact I don't know how to count, I take the change the driver gives me and pretend to count up the coins with a little nod of my head. I go and sit down in the middle, next to an old lady who clears her throat and then swallows her phlegm. The bus moves off again.

I'm here in the bus. The people inside look like me. I would never have believed that. They stink like hell. It smells like poverty and mothballs in their mouths. That's what happens when your expectations are too high. I've filled this bus with all my fantasies for 15 years. I've dressed its female passengers in embroidered kaftans and its male passengers in 3-piece suits. For 15 years I've imagined it smelling like a wedding and in less than a minute I realise that it smells like me.

As I sit down, I wonder how a *mirikan* suitcase could have fallen off a bus like this. It's impossible. But it happened. So, it's Allah. I'd rather fill my head with questions without answers

than think about what is in my belly and who has banished me forever from a normal life in my own country.

The bus stops at Tendaba. The driver gets out to have a coffee. I decide to stay in my seat. I don't even know how to get a coffee.

A man comes up to me.

– Is the pink suitcase yours?

– Yes.

– How's that?

– How's what?

– How come you have a suitcase like that?

– What's it to do with you?

– Six months ago, some Americans got onto this bus because their 4x4 had got a puncture. They were rich and the girl never stopped complaining. She thought we didn't understand so she insulted us. But I speak a little *mirikan* and I didn't like what she was saying. So, I threw her suitcase off the bus.

– You threw it off? How?

– I travel on the roof and look after the luggage. I didn't think I'd see that one again. What are you doing? Where are you going?

– I don't know...I'll see...What do you want?

– Me? I don't want anything. Just to talk, that's all. Ok, see you.

– How come you speak *mirikan*?

– I used to live in France but I came back. I learnt some languages over there...

– Why did you come back?

– If you're going to be a servant, you may as well do it in your own country.

I really liked what he had to say. But I've never really spoken to a stranger before – well, not a *Miloud*, just some guy who wants to talk. So I decide to say:

– Goodbye.

He answers:

– Goodbye.

I ask him:

– And that's your job?

– Well, yeah.

– Ok, goodbye.

– Goodbye. By the way, my name's Khalid.

– Ok. Goodbye.

– Goodbye.

I was so pathetic. Really aggressive. I said goodbye 20 times like an idiot. And I was mean. For nothing as well. He was quite nice. That's how I was brought up though. We shout first then talk if it's worth it. Maybe I should have said thank you. No, he'll think I want something. Well, I'll see when I get off. But, I can't say goodbye again as I leave. See you soon? No, 'see you soon' is an invitation. I won't say anything, I'll just nod. I won't wave. People are so complicated.

Thank You, Allah, for punishing that bitch, Khloé. Life is strange sometimes. She must have gone off on one when she realised her suitcase was missing when she arrived. She must have had a

lot of choice words for us Arabs. She probably said we were dirty thieves. She must have insulted us and Khalid must have found it hilarious. She can say what she wants. Maybe we're not that great but at least we wash ourselves with water in the toilet. They do it with paper. They're so dirty they even have perfumed toilet paper. Whoever invented that must be really disgusting. Because shit with perfume stills smells like shit. So we win. It's not much but it balances things out a bit. Anyway, what am I going to do about this baby Allah?

Three hours later I arrive at Belsouss bus station. It's swarming with people. I've never seen so many. There are cars, motorbikes, bicycles, taxis, lorries, beggars, children running around, layers of dirt and grease on the ground - and there's me. I don't dare get off the bus. I wait until it empties out a bit and I watch what to do. I take a deep breath and get off. My suitcase is by the bus. Khalid must have left already. Good - that means I don't have to choose between saying goodbye and see you soon. Anyway, I still would have been pathetic.

So I choose a direction at random and follow the people who are being met by other people. I'd love to fall into the arms of someone who would take me to see other people in a house with a table covered with food. I'd really like someone to be waiting for me somewhere one day. To know what it means to be someone's surprise. To create an effect. For people to talk about me and say: "She's coming, let's get the pancakes ready." Well, I can't see myself asking Allah for anything else. I'm going to lay low for a while.

I'm hungry. Chickens are cooking in a window. The crispy skin smells good. They must add a sauce to caramelise it. I go into the restaurant. I don't know how I dare but I sit down at a table next to a family who seem happy. I know very well that I'm dressed like a hick and they think I shouldn't be there so I take my suitcase and slide it around so that it's in front of me and they can see it really clearly. And it works. Everyone looks at the suitcase and forgets about me a little bit. But behind my back they must think I stole it. That must be what they're saying. I think I'd say worse if I could see myself.

There are pictures of the dishes on the menu, thank God. I can't decide between chicken or chips but I see on the table next to me that they bring as much bread as you like if you order the *tajine* so you can mop up the sauce. So, I keep the chips as a dream for later and decide to fill my belly with bread. And my pockets too.

- You have to pay in advance here!

I didn't see her coming. So my suitcase camouflage wasn't completely successful. I get out a 20 and throw it at the stupid waitress. I even order a Pipsi. That ought to do it...

I can't believe I'm drinking this kind of thing, sitting on a stool with people walking in the street and cars sounding their horns. Other people are talking really intensely. They pull faces and burst out laughing or they frown and get angry. They greet one another, argue and say 'see you later'. Things are happening for all of them. Their lives are complicated, full of events and plans. Like a giant spider web where everyone is connected to each other. That's where I'd like to be. In that spider web and connected to something too. To be part of something.

What on earth am I going to do after I've finished?

A waiter wipes down my table before bringing me my food. It's just a token gesture because the smell from his grey cloth is worse wet than it would be dry. They are actually dirty in big cities. I always soaked my cloth in bleach.

- What's a girl like you doing here?

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I don't dwell on the 'like you'. 'Like you' means dirt poor and pathetic. And he's right, the bastard, that's what I am. It hurts so much to always be an outsider and never the one.

– There's no cleaning work here?

– Nah, he replies, looking at my big belly.

My belly's getting tighter. I'm doubled over. I'm gasping for air and breathing with all my might just to reach the place I found: a neighbourhood with beautiful big houses so that it can have the best chance. It's 3 o'clock in the morning and I started out a bit late. I won't make it so medium-sized houses will have to do. The city is dead. Stray cats and dogs run about without daring to approach me. They must be able to smell my pain and it reminds them of their own. I settle myself down onto the ground against the pavement of a deserted dark alley and I push like I saw my mother push. I push with all my might, screaming without making a sound so I don't waste energy. I push down from the top of my belly to the bottom to help it come out of me. I push and I cry at the same time because I blame it. I know I do. I cry with pain and hopelessness. Well, especially pain now. Fuck, it really hurts. Like a big triangle coming out of a little square. Or a little square coming out of a tiny circle. Or a tiny circle coming out of a microscopic I-don't-know-what. Something which makes no sense, something impossible and painful. I try not to think about it as much as I can until he or she is curled up in my hands and makes a little cry. A confident cry of life.

I'd got everything ready: new scissors, paper towel, cotton wool and 90° alcohol. I lay him down on a towel next to me. I don't want to touch him or feel her. I want it to stay an accident. I don't want it to turn into something personal which might make me smile. If I touch him, I know I won't give her away. I cut the cord. He cries. I wipe myself. She cries again. I wrap her up in a scarf, set him down next to me and rock her with one hand so that she isn't frightened. I stuff my vagina with several cotton wool balls, put on a really tight pair of knickers to hold everything in and get up as best I can without looking at him. Especially without looking at him. Something unexpected might happen.

I hold him with one hand. I squeeze my crotch with the other. I don't know how I'm managing not to cuddle her against me and whisper things in his ear. Tell him that it's going to be ok, that I'm going to work it all out and that I'm stronger with him. That I'm going to fight and do everything for her. That together we'll make it and nothing, even other people, will be able to stop me. That's what I'd like to believe before telling him. Because if it was possible, if there really was a small crack in the laws of my country or in the minds of its people, I swear that I'd slip into that crack and I wouldn't do this. I'd manage. But there isn't. So, I don't look at him. And I don't cuddle her.

A streetlamp shines on the avenue of medium-sized houses. There are several doors and choosing the right one becomes the most important decision of my life. In front of the first one is a Mercedes with silver rims and a fur steering wheel, flowers on the balcony and decorative tiles around the windows. But there's also a mountain of rubbish in the space next to the garage. I can see it clearly if I peer across. Showy slackers, I tell myself. The second house is very pretty, the facade is green, the grilles on the windows are made from black wrought iron and a large picture hangs above the entrance with a Koranic verse written in golden letters. It looks ideal and reassuring but I think the grilles on the windows are a shame. As if people weren't allowed to lean out to see what's going on next door. They can only look out to the front. The third house is made of cement and the wooden front door hasn't been varnished yet. But there are beautiful ceramic-looking tiles around the door. I can tell they don't want to waste money but have taste and decorate when they can without getting into debt to show off. But the cement and the untreated wooden door really aren't very pretty. It actually looks out of place in this development with people who have almost made it. A bike with stabilisers is lying in front of the house, as well as a football which needs pumping up and a half-full bowl of milk for stray cats. My eyes are helplessly drawn to the golden letters of the

beautiful picture and I decide to place my baby under their sparkle so that he gets a better start than me. Just as I drop to my knees to place him against the door, a thin lame cat goes to the ugly house and drinks all it can with its little tongue. It empties the bowl and licks it until it overturns. It starts playing with it, rolling it around with its little paws, turning it over, climbing on top of it. It's got its strength back and is using it all up immediately, the silly thing, but it looks ok. It looks better than when it arrived anyway. It's having fun on its own with an empty bowl at 3 o'clock in the morning while I'm trying to choose the best possible destiny for my baby. The best possible destiny for an illegitimate child who didn't ask for any of this and who'll pay for my mistakes. I can't hold it in anymore. I take him in my arms and cuddle her against me. My tears flow onto their cheeks. My nipples are running with milk. They're soaking my tunic. All I want to do is hold him against my breast and feed her so that they stop screaming but if I feel it, if our skin touches, I know it will kill me. It will kill us. I must do what I promised myself I would do: ring the bell and leave without looking back, don't turn around, lay her on the ground like I did with *Miloud* and give him a good kick so that she goes far, far away from what I'm doing. But I can't look away this time. My head won't turn away from everything that's happening. I see that I'm making a mistake - the best possible destiny is the other house. The ugly one. The one made of cement. With the untreated wooden door. And the windows without grilles. A thin, lame little baby needs a bowl of milk, a football and a bike with stabilisers. That's a better guarantee. That's what I want to believe. Someone who thinks about cats before painting their house and tiling their windows is clearly someone good. Someone who will not have the heart to give him away. Who will take her in their arms and love him for me. One more child to love won't make any difference to them. I pick up my baby again and go to place him in front of the other door. I ring the bell several times and I leave. I go far, far away where my head should be. He or she cries. I run. A door creaks. I hear the sound of voices, noise. I go further away. He or she cries less. I hear sounds dying away. She doesn't cry anymore. I cry.

[...]