

Humbug

written by

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FADE IN:

EXT. HIGHWAY - SYRIA - EVENING

Bent trees, scattered weeds, and patches of garbage line the rocky roadside. Amidst them stands a white sign with the words "استراحة" ("Pitstop") and "7 KM" scrawled on in black ink.

An old baby blue 2000's KIA sedan speeds past it down the highway.

INT. CAR - CONTINUOUS

In the back seat, HAYA (22, F) is sprawled in her spot, wearing tie-dye black-and-white jeans, an oversized baby blue sleeveless shirt, a black leather jacket, and combat boots. She is chewing gum.

A traditional Arabic song plays through the speakers.

In the driver's seat, EMAN (47) wears a floral blouse, jeans, and a white hijab. An electronic rosary wraps around her finger, her grip firm on the steering wheel. Her phone rests on her lap, face up. She keeps her eyes fixed on the road ahead.

Beside her, FARIDA (69) wears a black abaya and matching hijab. A glass rosary dangles from her hand, her other hand gripping the grab handle.

Eman and Farida quietly sing along, their voices blending with the song. The mood is light, familiar.

In the back, Haya watches them through half-lidded eyes. A faint smile tugs at her lips—brief, almost unconscious—before she turns to the window, her expression shifting to something more distant.

Eman lowers the music slightly.

EMAN

Did you pack the makdous after all?

Haya barely reacts. Eman steers the car toward a pitstop.

Eman peeks into the rearview mirror, her eyes sharp on Haya.

EMAN (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Haya!

Haya blinks, snapping back.

HAYA

What?

EMAN

The stuff that was on the table—did you pack it?

Haya pauses, her brow furrowing.

HAYA

What stuff?

Farida sighs, turning to Haya.

EMAN

(to Farida)

I told you she wouldn't take them. Didn't I tell you?

Farida sighs and turns to face Haya.

FARIDA

Why did you forget, sweetie? Those eggplants were really good. I asked Abu Rakan to pick the freshest ones from his farm. And I got you the peppers from our neighbor, Umm Mazen. Oh, speaking of which, I still haven't returned her serving dish from Eid...

HAYA

There are plenty of places in Germany that make makdous now.

A smile tugs at Farida's lips.

FARIDA

Yes, but mine is different.

Eman's phone rings—shattering the moment.

Eman glances at Haya again through the rearview mirror.

EMAN

Yes, there's nothing like it, but some people don't deserve it.

She answers, her voice shifting to something softer.

EMAN (CONT'D)

Hello... Can I call you later? I'm driving.

Pause.

EMAN (CONT'D)
No, we still need about an hour to
reach the airport.

The car slows to a halt.

Eman listens, her fingers toying with the electronic rosary.

EMAN (CONT'D)
Thank you.

Beat.

Eman smiles.

EMAN (CONT'D)
Okay, I will. take care.

Beat.

She hangs up, turning to grab her purse, stuffing the phone
inside.

Haya watches. Her suspicion sharpens.

HAYA
Who was that?

Eman meets her gaze.

The passenger door opens as Fardia struggles to exit the car
alone.

EMAN
(dryly)
My friend.

Haya's brow furrows.

HAYA
And what's your friend's name?

EMAN
Shirene.

HAYA
And what does Shirene want from
you?

Eman opens her mouth to respond—

A grunt from Farida pulls them both toward her. One leg out, the other tangled in the doorframe.

Eman sighs, already climbing out.

EMAN

Oh, Mama, how many times have I
told you not to try getting out by
yourself?!

Eman leaves the purse on the middle consol, turns, and climbs out of the car.

FARIDA

What, should I just sit here and
wait for your rusty joints to come
and help me?

Haya follows Eman out.

Eman's purse sits abandoned—the phone glowing with another notification.

Outside, footsteps crunch against gravel as Eman and Haya round the car.

HAYA

Alright, let's see what's going on.

Haya crouches beside Farida, inspecting the situation.

HAYA (CONT'D)

Oh. Good thing we stopped at the
pitstop.

FARIDA

What? Why?

HAYA

So we can get you some oil for your
rusty hip joints.

Haya looks up, grinning.

Farida gasps, swatting her arm.

FARIDA

Rusty, huh? You little—

Haya grabs Farida's leg, wiggling it dramatically.

HAYA

Listen closely... *creak creak*.

Farida pinches Haya's arm, making Haya laugh.

EMAN

Enough, you two. Go get her cane
from the back.

Haya walks over and pulls open the right backseat door and
grabs the cane—a sturdy silver metal rod with three sprouting
legs at the base.

Behind her, Farida mutters.

FARIDA

Rusty joints, she says...

Eman struggles to free her from the tight spot.

EMAN

Just drop it. Do you have to pee
that badly?

Haya's fingers linger on the cane—her eyes flicking toward
the middle console.

Eman and Farida are preoccupied.

FARIDA (O.S.)

Guess.

Haya hesitates, gaze locked on the phone. A thought forming.

EMAN (O.S.)

Well, how am I supposed to get you
out now? Let's see if there's a
mechanic inside.

Eman starts laughing.

Haya exhales. Then—swiftly, decisively—she snatches the
phone, shoving it into her jacket pocket.

Farida laughs, shaking her head.

FARIDA (O.S.)

Oh screw you and your daughter!

Eman chuckles, the sound light but frayed.

Haya closes the car door with a soft *thud*.

INT. SUPERMARKET - LATER

The modest supermarket has flickering fluorescent lights and shelves packed with dusty goods. A few people browse quietly, their movements slow and deliberate, their booming voices loud and succinct.

Haya stands in line, clutching a handful of snacks in her right hand. Haya glances over her shoulder and gives an awkward smile to the man waiting behind her.

Her gaze shifts to the shelves behind the counter, lined with neatly arranged cigarette packs. She fidgets, her fingers tapping the snacks nervously, as she contemplates. She catches herself staring and quickly redirects her attention. The line shuffles forward, and now she's second.

Eman's phone starts ringing in her jacket pocket.

Haya sighs, reaches into her pocket, and pulls out the phone. She looks around her. She hesitates, her thumb hovering over the screen.

The caller ID reads: "Shirene"

She glances at the cigarette packs again, cracks under the pressure.

She raises the phone to her ear.

The call connects. Haya freezes, her mouth going still. A warm, unmistakably masculine voice breaks the tension.

MAN (O.S.)
Hello... Are you alone now?

Haya's eyes widen. Her hand trembles as she quickly ends the call.

Beat.

The world around her dulls—muffled voices, the faint buzz of the lights, the distant clatter of the door and windows. All white noise.

Her fingers tighten around the phone in her other hand, the screen still glowing. She flips it over, pressing it into her palm like it might disappear.

She blinks hard, once, twice, as if trying to reset reality.

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. BATHROOM - LATER

Haya stands, still dazed. Her vision blurry, and every sound muffled.

The bathroom is in disrepair. Pale green paint peels from the walls, and mold creeps into the corners like a lingering shadow.

EMAN (O.S.)

(Muffled)

The bride never sat down. She danced the whole night like a washing machine on spin cycle.

FARIDA (O.S.)

Did you see how she kept looking at him? Like a cat who just found her dinner.

Farida and Eman stand at the cracked sinks, performing their wudu. Sleeves rolled back. Water splashes over their arms and faces.

Haya forces a smile, her grip tight around Eman's phone in her pocket. Her knuckles are white.

HAYA

Who are we talking about?

She edges closer to the sinks. Eman's purse sits close, a tempting distance away. One step. Maybe two.

Eman glances at Haya.

EMAN

(rubbing water over her
arms)

Auntie Firdous's son's wedding.

Eman turns back to Farida, bending down to take off her shoes and roll up her pant legs.

EMAN (CONT'D)

But honestly, they spent a fortune on that wedding, and in the end, they married into a family of nobodies.

Haya's fingers twitch. She shifts her weight, a small step closer to Eman's purse. The phone feels heavy, burning a hole through her pocket.

Eman straightens, wet hands slicking back a stray hair. Her gaze, sharp and knowing, lands on Haya.

EMAN (CONT'D)

Why aren't you making wudu?

Eman lifts her bare foot to the sink, balancing effortlessly

HAYA

I'll pray later at the airport,
don't worry about me.

Farida, her back slightly hunched, looks over her shoulder.

FARIDA

At the airport, habibti, you'll be too busy keeping track of your bags and making sure you don't miss your flight. Wouldn't it be better to pray here and save yourself the trouble?

EMAN

And you know, praying in congregation brings more reward.

Haya and Eman lock eyes through the mirror.

A pause. The air grows tight. Haya swallows, the sound loud in her own ears.

She sighs, rolls up her sleeves, and steps to the sink next to Eman. Cold water gushes over her hands, and she mimics the motions of wudu, but there's a stiffness to her actions. A disconnect.

Farida wets her hands, passing them over her feet with practiced ease.

FARIDA

At the very least, I expected the bride's mother to act with some dignity and get up to greet the guests.

FARIDA

And did you see how they swarmed the buffet? They devoured everything in sight and left us with nothing.

Eman slides her shoes back on and gently helps Farida with hers. The older woman grips her cane, her movements deliberate and slow.

Just as they finish, a faint PING echoes through the bathroom. It collides with the sound of a toilet flushing. Haya's breath catches. Eman's phone. Still in her pocket.

Haya's eyes widen, and she glances at Eman and Farida.

EMAN
Honestly, if I were dressed
up like her, I'd be too
embarrassed to even stand up.

EMAN
What do you expect from the
Akhres family?

FARIDA
A disgrace. Both for them and the
groom's family.

Eman pulls tissues from a crumpled pack, passing one to Farida. They start toward the door, their steps a soft shuffle against the worn tiles.

Haya turns her back to them, her pulse thrumming in her ears. She pulls out the phone, shielding the screen with her hand.

FARIDA (CONT'D)
Anyway, may God grant them
happiness.

Haya reads the text. Haya's face drains of colour. Her breathing quickens.

EMAN (O.S.)
Come on, Haya.

Haya shoves the phone deep into her pocket, her wet hands smudging her jeans. She straightens, wiping her face with the back of her hand. Her expression neutral. Blank. Only her eyes betray her—burning, confused, betrayed.

She steps forward, slipping into the shadow of her family.

CUT TO:

INT. PRAYER ROOM - LATER

The prayer room is small, its pale walls peeling. A shoe rack sits in the corner beside a few scattered chairs. The red prayer carpet, worn from years of use, stretches across the floor. A handful of women pray in quiet devotion, while others sit reading the Quran.

Farida sits on a chair, her cane rested against it. She is praying. Eman on her left. Haya on her right.

As Eman kneels, pressing her forehead to the carpet, Haya mirrors her movements, but her attention drifts. When she rises first, her gaze lingers on Eman, who follows suit.

The room is silent, save for the rhythmic whispers of prayer. Eman steals a quick glance at Haya as she bows. Haya catches her. They quickly look away.

A loud ringtone shatters the quiet.

Eman's phone blares from her purse near the shoe rack.

Women turn, eyes darting toward the sound.

Eman flushes. She hesitates. The phone keeps ringing.

Haya glances at her mother. Eman's jaw tightens.

Taking a breath, she breaks her prayer and rises hastily, striding toward the noise. She takes Haya's jacket. She grabs her phone. Eman turns to Haya, her eyes widen.

Haya exchanges a glance with Farida, who mutters prayers under her breath.

Haya exhales, shutting her eyes, trying to refocus.

Beat.

Eman slowly returns. Her body is stiff and her face pale. Clutching her phone, she tucks it back into her purse and resumes her spot. She briefly meets Haya's eyes—uncertainty and fear glimmering there—then lifts her hands and begins her prayer again, her fingers trembling ever so slightly.

Haya, still seated, turns her gaze downward. After a long moment, she straightens up and resumes her own prayer.

INT. PRAYER ROOM - LATER

Haya stands near the entrance, her prayer clothes removed, shoes in hand. She glances toward her grandmother.

Farida moves with quiet deliberation, her expression calm yet unreadable.

Haya kneels down to help put Farida's shoes on.

HAYA

Can I talk to you about something?

Haya rises.

FARIDA

Of course, my dear. Is something wrong?

Haya glances back into the room where her mother is just about finished with her prayer.

Haya opens her mouth to speak, but when she looks to Farida, she closes her mouth.

Farida's gaze sharpens, her lips pressing together. A knowing glint flickers in her eyes.

FARIDA (CONT'D)

Don't worry about your mother,
sweetheart. I'm looking out for
her.

Haya stills, a flicker of shock crossing her face before she exhales sharply.

She pats Haya's hand, her touch warm and grounding. Then, with a lightness that seems almost intentional, she takes Haya's hand in hers and starts walking.

FARIDA (CONT'D)

Come with me, let's buy something
sweet. I think my sugar is
dropping.

Haya lets herself be pulled along, casting one last glance at Eman as she rises from prayer.

INT. SUPERMARKET - LATER

Haya, Eman, and Farida stand in front of the juice aisle. Haya's eyes move over the bottles, her movements slow, deliberate.

Eman watches her out of the corner of her eye, feigning interest in the labels. The air between them is taut, like a wire stretched too thin. Farida, standing between them, senses it—her gaze flickering from one to the other.

Eman picks up two bottles of orange juice, comparing them. Farida, eager to break the tension, turns to the opposite shelf. Her face lights up. She lifts a **box of "Fifi Flakes"**, beaming.

FARIDA

Hayoush? You used to love these,
didn't you? How about I get you a
box?

Haya glances at the box, a flicker of recognition in her eyes. For a split second, she almost smiles—but it never fully forms. Instead, she looks away, reaching for a bottle of apple juice.

HAYA

No, thanks. I don't want any.

She turns and walks away without another word.

Farida watches her go, her hopeful expression faltering. She looks at Eman.

Eman doesn't answer. She just exhales sharply, glancing down at her phone.

Haya moves along the candy bars, her fingers grazing over them absently. Farida trails behind, unwilling to give up.

FARIDA

Okay, what do you want me to get you?

Haya doesn't look at her.

Farida's hopeful smile fades.

Eman, still a few steps behind, watches. Her expression tightens.

EMAN

Don't bother yourself. If she wants something, she'll find a way to slip it into her pocket.

Haya stiffens. Her jaw clenches.

She puts the biscuit back on the shelf and steps further down the aisle, widening the distance between them.

Eman watches her go. Then—her phone buzzes. She checks the screen, thumbs typing quickly.

Haya notices.

Her voice, when she speaks, is light—mocking.

HAYA

How's Sherine?

Eman freezes. She composes herself quickly, but a crack has appeared.

EMAN

She's fine.

Haya picks up a random chips bag. Haya's hand shakes as she prepares to speak. Still not looking at them.

HAYA

And did you end up wearing the red
lingerie?

She finally turns, her eyes locking with Eman's. The older woman's face pales. Her lips part, but no words come.

Eman looks back at Farida but only finds disappointment on her face, Her grip on the cane tightening.

Haya breaks the stare, moving toward the checkout counter. She places the items down.

Haya sees Eman and Farida approaching from the corner of her eye. Their footsteps are slow, measured.

The CLERK, a gruff man in his fifties, eyes her selection.

CLERK

Just these?

Haya sees Eman and Farida approach the counter out of the corner of her eye. Their footsteps measured, careful.

Beat.

Haya inhales and smiles.

HAYA

And a pack of Ashour, please.

CLERK

Of course.

The clerk turns, reaching for the cigarettes.

Haya looks down, satisfied.

EMAN

Leave out the Ashour, please.

The clerk hesitates, glancing between them. Haya doesn't move, her head slowly turning toward her mother.

Haya looks at Eman.

HAYA

Leave it out? No, pack it up for
me.

FARIDA

That's not proper, sweetheart. A
girl your age shouldn't start
smoking. Put it back, son.

Haya's expression hardens, a wall coming up.

HAYA

Who said I'm just starting now?

Eman quickly turns to face Haya fully.

EMAN

Oh, so you have no intention of respecting yourself?

Haya turns to face Eman.

HAYA

I do respect myself. Some people just don't deserve it.

Eman's face flushes, a mix of anger and hurt.

FARIDA

Enough, you two! You're embarrassing us in front of this young man. Let's just pay and go, so Haya can find a good seat on her flight.

Haya shoots a glance at Farida, her expression a mix of disappointment and disbelief.

Eman slaps the counter.

EMAN

(to the clerk)

Tell me something. If she were your daughter, would you let her smoke in front of you?

The Clerk, caught in the crossfire, fidgets.

EMAN (CONT'D)

Of course not. Because this is the kind of behavior girls with no proper upbringing engage in.

Haya's lips curl into a bitter smirk. She raises her eyebrows, a challenge.

HAYA

(to the Clerk)

And whose upbringing do you think that is?

Eman's expression darkens, her voice sharp.

EMAN

For your information, she's
not *my* upbringing, sweetheart.
She's the upbringing of Germany's
streets.

Haya lets out an exasperated sigh, throwing her arms up in frustration.

HAYA

The streets of Germany knew how to
take me in. You didn't.

Eman's voice rises, her anger evident.

EMAN

A few more hours and you'll be back
in Germany, so don't worry. Stay
comfortable there. And I'm not
paying for your cigarettes.

Silence. The clerk shifts his weight, uncomfortable.

Haya pulls out her wallet, her hands trembling. She slaps a few bills onto the counter.

She grabs the cigarettes and the bag of items, turning on her heel. She walks away, her shoulders squared, but the fragility of her movements betrays her.

Eman and Farida remain at the counter, a rift between them that feels insurmountable.

Farida hesitates, then follows Haya, her steps uncertain. Eman lingers, her hand still on the counter, eyes unfocused.

INT. CAR - CONTINUOUS

Haya climbs into the car, the sting of the confrontation still etched on her face. She slams the door, the echo filling the silence. Her chest rises and falls.

Through the window, Haya notices Farida struggling with the car door, her frail hands fumbling with the handle. The old woman shifts her weight, grunting as she tries to get into the seat.

Haya sighs, frustration giving way to duty. She opens the door and steps out, her movements sharp and deliberate.

Farida offers a grateful, tired smile. Haya gently holds her arm, guiding her into the seat.

FARIDA
May God bless you.

Haya responds with a tight-lipped smile. She closes the door softly, then circles back to the passenger seat, the silver cane in her hand. She slips in just as Eman approaches the car.

Eman opens the driver's door and gets in, her movements controlled, her expression still hard. She glances at Haya but says nothing.

Eman starts the car, the engine's hum filling the silence.

Farida looks between Haya and Eman.

Haya reaches into her pocket and pulls out a cigarette. She pops it between her lips and leans toward the window.

Eman watches, her expression tightening.

Haya retrieves a lighter, flicks it open. As she is about to ignite the cigarette, she notices Eman looking at her through the rearview mirror.

Haya hesitates, her eyes locked on her mother's.

Farida glances between them, saying nothing.

Haya exhales slowly, then lights the cigarette and takes a puff, smoke curling through the cabin.

Without a word, Eman adjusts the rearview mirror and eases the car onto the road.

Eman turns on the radio. An Arabic instrumental song playing.

Haya lowers the car window.

All three women sit in silence as Haya smokes, Eman drives and Farida drifts off to sleep.

THE END.