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Tags: [language](#), [religion](#), [travel](#)  
Writer/s: Jane Goodall

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It was small. How small is small? When it comes to notebooks, I mean. Well, it fitted in the palm of my hand: a square, chunky little thing and, from the looks of it, brand new. Cute. It was covered in bright green silk, with a studded tab to keep it closed.

I opened it. The first page was covered in writing—regularly spaced and minute, the lines geometrically straight. But I couldn't read it. This wasn't my language and I didn't even recognise any of the letters except that some strokes looked like exclamation marks, appearing a couple of times on each line.

The train was doing a fair amount of rattling and bumping and I couldn't focus properly so I slipped it into my bag for later. I sat there thinking about it. I found it wedged down the side of the seat when I got on at Central, which meant that whoever lost it could have been going just about anywhere—changing trains, maybe. Changing directions. North. South. East. Not West. It was me that was going West, and the notebook owner had evidently got off to go another way. Perhaps on foot. What hope would there be of tracking them down, even if I were a professional detective?

What I should do, I thought, is give it in at the ticket office when I get off at Auburn. They'll send it to the lost property office and—then what? The chances of it meeting up again with its owner seemed a bit remote. Except, of course, that it might be precious to them, in which case they'd be trying to hunt it down. They? She. A man wouldn't write in a little green silk tablet that resembles a cosmetic purse, would he?

I pictured a woman my age arriving somewhere and looking in her handbag. Looking, then searching—taking all the things out, fighting off the moment of acceptance that yes, it was gone. I looked in my own bag and took it out again. Every single page was filled in with identical lines of writing. Arabic. With all those curves and dots, it must be Arabic.

The exclamation marks were at regular intervals and the letters around them were always the same. This was a repeating pattern—two words, maybe three, written over and over and over again, with exactly even pressure. At primary school I once had to write three hundred lines as a punishment. 'I must not drop rubbish in the playground.' By the time I got to the fiftieth line the words were sliding out of shape. After the hundredth, they were a drunken sprawl.

When I got off at Auburn the ticket office was closed. Actually I was a bit relieved because I didn't want to let the notebook go. At least, not before I found out what the words meant. I know a few people who speak Arabic. Sometimes they hang out at Sweets on Queen at this time of the evening, smoking shisha.

I don't smoke myself but I like going in amongst the sweet apple smoke and just sitting, letting my brain slow down in tune with everyone else's. Hanif was there, at a table on his own, plugged into the mouthpiece of the shisha with his eyes half closed. I took the seat opposite him, placing my feet between his sprawling legs, and he

nodded a greeting without taking the hose out of his mouth. When I put the notebook on the table he stared at it with a lazy half smile, as if he was enjoying the luminous green. I left it there while I ordered tea and baklava, then, seeing his eyes were widening and the coals on his hookah were dying out, I pushed the book towards him.

'What's that?' he asked.

'Something I found. Look inside.'

He eyed me suspiciously. 'Why? What's in there?'

'Writing. I want you to tell me what it says.'

I watched him take it in his big hand and unlatch the tab with his thumb. It looked all wrong in a man's hand, I thought, and for a second I wanted to stop him from opening it. Maybe there were secrets in there. Women's secrets.

But he was already staring at the writing. I tried to read the expression on his face but it seemed completely blank as he turned the pages, one by one, with a steady rhythm. Then he closed it, latched the tab and put it back on the table. He leaned forward, his face full of energy now, as if he'd suddenly become present.

'You found it? Where?'

'On the train.'

'When?'

'Just now. Why? What's the matter? What does it say in there?'

He signalled the waiter and asked for the shisha to be replenished.

'What does it say?' I opened the book myself and displayed the page of writing between us. 'What are these?' I pointed to the exclamation marks.

'That is alif,' he said. 'The first letter of the alphabet. You should take this to the mosque, this book.'

'Why? I don't go to the mosque. I'm not Moslem. You take it. But first you have to tell me what it says. Read it to me!'

'Allahu Akbar.'

I'd heard the words before but when I asked him what they meant he just repeated them.

The waiter arrived with new coals for the shisha and Hanif drew on the hose, then picked up the book and began to read it, slowly and quietly, page after page. 'Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar...'

I got up and left him there with the book in one hand and the hooka in the other, chanting to himself in a haze of apple smoke.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Jane Goodall.*