



ALANA VALENTINE'S work for theatre engages with the authentic real-life stories and voices of Australian communities. Her Currency Press published play *Grounded* won three Australian Writer's Guild Awards in 2013 – in Youth and Community Theatre, the David Williamson Award for Excellence in Theatre Writing, and the Major AWGIE. In 2012, her play *Ear to the Edge of Time* won the International STAGE Script Competition for best new play about science and technology, judged by an esteemed panel of judges that included Nobel laureates and Pulitzer Prize winning authors. *Parramatta Girls* was nominated for two Helpmann Awards – Best New Australian Work and Best Play in 2007. It has been on the HSC syllabus for Drama since 2010 and is based on the testimony of former inmates of GTS, Parramatta. The play was remounted by Riverside Theatre in Parramatta in 2014. In 2015 her play about Afghan Australian women, *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah*, also published by Currency, will go onto the NSW English syllabus. In 2013 the Australia Council for the Arts awarded Alana a Creative Leadership Fellowship to investigate and write about how to gather research material from especially sensitive subjects, and she has written about this and her other plays in a memoir called *Writing the Real*. Alana is also the recipient of a NSW Premier's Award, a Queensland Premier's Award, two other AWGIE awards, a Churchill Fellowship and a Centenary of Federation medal.

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SHAFANA &  
AUNT SARRINAH

*soft revolution*

ALANA VALENTINE



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# Contents

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<i>Creating Identity in a Hostile World</i>	
<i>Christina Ho</i>	vii
<i>Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah: A Reflection</i>	
<i>Makiz Ansari</i>	xiii
SHAFANA AND AUNT SARRINAH: SOFT REVOLUTION	1

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## Creating Identity in a Hostile World

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As I'm writing this, Australia is embroiled in the latest round of the 'hijab debates'—those regular, often hysterical arguments over whether we should ban the hijab or burqa, whether Muslim women are enslaved by their religion, and whether 'Australian values' are being irreparably damaged by excessive multiculturalism.

In these debates, the hijab is typically reduced to a symbol of oppression, a garment that obliterates the individuality and free will of the Muslim woman, that signals her second-class status in relation to men, and that renders her a powerless victim of a barbaric religion. For the sake of equality and women's rights, we should ban the hijab—or so the argument goes.

Amongst these histrionics, *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah: Soft Revolution* is a quietly insightful intervention that portrays what the media headlines never can: the multiple meanings of the hijab for Muslim women. In contrast to the singular meaning given to the hijab in public debates, Alana Valentine's play powerfully shows that the hijab has many meanings: it is about faith, politics, liberation, identity, and each woman's personal history as a Muslim.

In contrast to the binary debate in the media, framed as a clash between Islam and the West, *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah* portrays the passionate debates within Islam between devout Muslims who may profoundly disagree. One woman's liberation is another's oppression. Shafana's 'superman cape' is Sarrinah's suffocating 'tent'. Shafana's religious ecstasy is, to Sarrinah, dangerous fanaticism. These debates are going on daily in kitchens, over meals, in local gatherings, between Muslims everywhere confronting difficult decisions. Yet in the national imaginary, Muslims are simply a monolithic bloc of trenchant opposition to 'Western values'.

And ironically the more 'hijab debates' we have in the public sphere, the less we actually hear about what ordinary Muslims in Australia might really think about the hijab, or any other issue that has been polarised between 'oppressive Islam' and 'enlightened West'. The more

‘hijab debates’ we have, the more Muslim communities are cornered into defending Islam, including the hijab, at all costs. The space for free and unfettered internal debate where Muslims explore the complexities, contradictions and nuances of their faith and identity is in danger of disappearing. In a climate in which Muslims feel under siege, any dissent from the ‘official line’—usually articulated by a conservative male religious leader—can be read as a betrayal of the community.

Muslim women, in particular, may feel unable to speak out about sexism or violence within their own community for fear of fuelling the already raging fire that brands Islam as oppressive, and Muslim men as barbaric. The result, then, can be a reductive hardening of Muslims’ own representation of themselves, and of Islam. The hijab, in particular, can be seen as a mark of Muslim authenticity, rendering unveiled women ‘less Islamic’. The Muslim feminist writer Shakira Hussein expresses it succinctly:

As someone who has spoken out against ‘anti-hijab’ voices such as Bronwyn Bishop and Leslie Cannold I face a dilemma: how do I defend women’s right to wear hijab, free from discrimination and harassment, without also reinforcing the position of hijab as a symbol of ‘real’ Muslim womanhood, which I have no desire to do?

(Hussein 2007: 5)

As *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah* eloquently shows, there will always be multiple interpretations of the hijab among Muslim women. Valentine gives us a glimpse of the fiercely contested meanings and powerful convictions that can painfully divide family members who nonetheless maintain a deep love for one another.

*Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah* also shows how the ‘hijab decision’ can never be just a personal expression of faith, even when that is what a woman desperately wishes. As Sarrinah tells Shafana, a veiled Muslim woman turns herself into a symbol, ‘an endless advertisement that says “Ask me”, “Accuse me”’. She will need a ready response for any number of questions about the Bali bombings, Middle Eastern wars, 9/11, the Taliban, honour killings and so on and on and on. In Australia it has been well documented by the Human Rights Commission and others that veiled women bore the brunt of attacks against Muslims

after 9/11, including having their hijabs ripped off their heads (HREOC 2004). The meanings of the veil are therefore not only multiple, but overwhelmingly beyond the control of the women who wear it. In this sense the ‘hijab debates’ have almost entirely hijacked the hijab itself, imposing external imperatives that preclude its interpretation as a pure act of personal faith.

It should be noted, however, that this is nothing new. The practice of veiling has always been somewhat overdetermined by the social context in which wearers find themselves. Since colonial days the veil has been constructed as a symbol of oppression. For British and French colonial governments in Egypt, Algeria, India and elsewhere, the veil indicated the backwardness of colonised peoples. Those who did not know ‘how to treat women properly’ were undeserving of self-governance—even though at this time women in Europe did not have the vote. And as Leila Ahmed documents in her superb history, *Women and Gender in Islam*, Lord Cromer, the British Consul-General of Egypt (1883–1907), who named the poor treatment of women as the foremost evidence of the ‘complete failure’ of Islam as a social system, was, back in Britain in 1919, a founding member and President of the Men’s League for Opposing Woman Suffrage (Ahmed 1992: 152–153).

Naturally, many Muslim women responded to such attacks on the hijab with a renewed commitment to it and, for some, veiling became an expression of political and national affiliations, including anti-colonial and anti-Western sentiments. In the twentieth century the ‘new veiling’ in the Islamic world can be traced to the 1967 and 1973 wars with Israel (MacLeod 1992: 541). Post-9/11, many women have again taken up the hijab as an expression of their identity and as a sign of solidarity with their fellow Muslims. For many, becoming visibly Muslim is a political statement as much as a religious one, a rejection of defensive strategies of assimilation or anonymity in favour of an active assertion of identity.

In this highly charged environment it is not surprising that it is Shafana rather than her aunt who makes the controversial decision to wear the hijab. One outcome of the post-9/11 era has been a generation of young Muslims who are particularly mobilised by their faith. Having grown up in the shadow of the War on Terror, Islam has not been a neutral part of young Muslims’ identities in the way that religion might

be for others. Being Muslim is something they have had to constantly explain and defend, and therefore work out clearly for themselves. In the process, there has been a well-documented ‘Islamic reassertion’ among many young Muslims around the world. Contrary to previous trends that have seen the children of migrants assimilate into the social and cultural life of mainstream society, in the face of racism and Islamophobia many young Muslims have embraced a religious identity that deliberately distinguishes itself from ‘mainstream’ practices and values.

The wearing of the hijab is one obvious manifestation of this religious reassertion. While Western ‘hijab debaters’ perpetrate moral panic about Muslim women being oppressed by conservative families and communities, in fact it is often a case of young women defying the wishes of their families in deciding to wear the hijab. Shafana’s experience mirrors the stories of young Muslim women around the world who depart from the practice of their unveiled mothers and aunts, and put on the hijab in the face of their opposition. Like so many other young Muslims in the post-9/11 era, Shafana turns to faith to create a strong sense of her own identity in a hostile world. She embraces that which would be used against her by others and redeploys it as a source of strength.

I have nothing but admiration for young women like Shafana, whose strength of conviction enables them to wear the hijab in full knowledge of the challenges this will bring to their daily lives. Alongside this admiration however is a deep sense of injustice that such a decision should have to become so difficult and so fraught with risk—not only to these young women’s personal safety and wellbeing, but to their most intimate relationships with loved ones. Wearing a hijab should not be a symbol of anything that a woman does not wish it to be. Especially in a multicultural society such as Australia, a decision to put on the hijab should be an act that is unremarkable and unremarked upon, just another expression of identity amongst thousands, from the wearing of crucifixes to Converse sneakers. It should not be subject to the kind of frenzied public debate we have witnessed in this country of late, the kind of debate that dramatically shrinks the opportunities for ordinary Shafanas and Sarinnahs to make personal choices with freedom and dignity.



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*Christina Ho*  
*Sydney, 2010*

Dr Christina Ho is a Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology, Sydney. She researches migration, multiculturalism and the politics of diversity, focusing particularly on the experiences of Muslim Australians and the Chinese diaspora. She is the co-editor of *Beyond the Hijab Debates: New Conversations on Gender, Race and Religion*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009.

## *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah: A Reflection*

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It was a profound experience to meet Alana Valentine for the first time. Her depth of understanding and receptiveness became a mirror for me to view the pages of my own story as I reflected over my inner spiritual journey through undulating terrains of life. That evening I began telling the story of a young Australian Muslim girl with an Afghan background.

Unfortunately the usual sensational coverage of Muslims makes us approach any media involvement with caution. But I trusted Alana's intention as an authentic attempt to understand my hybrid outer identity and the way my spiritual journey played out within my family. I became confident that Alana's approach (as well as that of the Alex Buzo Company) differed from the sensationalism of many others and therefore I saw an opportunity to voice an Australian Muslim's experience seldom heard. This, I hoped, might serve my fellow Australians as a genuine contribution towards better understanding.

At the same time, I found comfort in sharing a story which I hoped would resonate universally. This was a look at the inner life and its quest for higher realities. Cultural differences are usually visible, yet inner quests may not be. I wanted to share my inner journey with those who are willing to explore beyond the headscarf.

Nevertheless, in August 2009 I was not sure what to expect as I went to watch the production of *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah* with my aunt and some family members. I was unsure how it would turn out or how my aunt would receive it. Would it be confronting in any way? Mixed feelings and thoughts circled my mind as I made my way towards the Seymour Centre. The first play of the night, *Norm and Ahmed* put forth a gripping depiction of migrant experiences. When *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah* began after the interval, I began to see certain pages of my life unfold before me. Wow—there I was sitting on the chair and watching the conversation between a niece and her aunt who had conflicting approaches towards spiritual journeys; scenes still fresh on the screen of my memories. I saw the suffocating cultural hurt from the past and the stereotypes of the present that had coalesced to distance an aunt

from her niece. Fear of the unknown had alarmed Aunt Sarrinah who pleads with Shafana to stay away from her daughter.

What had come between the close family and disrupted this friendship was more than a piece of cloth. For the aunt it was a symbol—the reminder of dreaded experiences of the Afghan culture that wore the garb of Muslim identity and what it represented in her mind. This lacked in its essence the inner wisdom and spirit which Shafana discovered in her university years in Australia, a reality that is ever alive in my consciousness. Such ironies of culture and religion and the large grey zone between them had set off my quest for meaningful certitude on one hand, while on the other, the intellectual battle against the shock of September Eleven propelled me to explore the integrity of Islam as a faith system with an ability to instil in its followers inner peace. Watching the play reminded me such background and confirmed for me some poignant themes:

- At the outset there was a clear generational gap. I think that youth are too often perceived to have overriding emotions which take away from their foresight and ability to make positive choices in life. The play was an experiential confirmation of this feeling. The generational gaps can be deeper when it has an overlay of cultural gaps. Older people in migrant communities have received a different education and life experience to the younger people who have Australian education and a life experience concretely set in Australian time and space.
- Hearing Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah use some Persian words highlighted the strong role that language plays in the communication of ideas and self expression. This deepens the generational gap for the bi-lingual and multi-lingual. Certain concepts carry with it negative associations. *Chador*, the Persian word for headscarf, may have a spiritual meaning for Shafana. Yet to her Aunt Sarrinah it can be an expression of submissiveness to the patriarchal society where strength of muscles may rule over reason and be deemed superior.
- Human nature is not homogenous. Within the same family, unique understandings and appreciations can exist. For this reason, personal values can be relative, contingent on age, social conditioning and character disposition. The depiction of frustration between Shafana and her aunt captured something that was true in my own life.

During the interval, before *Shafana and Aunt Sarinnah* started, my aunt's facial expressions conveyed mixed messages. We did not talk about the play. I could only guess what was going through her mind. Was she able to see the zoomed-out picture and now understood me and my choices? Was her discomfort a personal one with me only or was she looking through me with other associations? Do we only view our choices in life through the prisms of extremism, rebelliousness and a defiance of family norms?

As the play progressed the expressions on my aunt took a clearer shape as I sensed a nod of approval. At the end I read the smile on her face as an assurance that she understood my choices in my own frame of reference. I was not rebelling against my family or culture; my actions were neither a political statement nor an outward demonstration of identity. They were more than all these things. They were about my own inner journey and reflection of my convictions as an independent Muslim woman.

I am glad and hopeful that my conversation with Alana Valentine that first evening has given rise to an Australian story seldom told.

*Makiz Ansari  
Sydney, 2010*

Makiz Ansari has been active in inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogue. She served as the Director and Education Co-ordinator for the Affinity Intercultural Foundation. Makiz is currently the Director and Education Co-ordinator at the Islamic Sciences and Research Academy of Australia.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This play is a work of fiction, but I hope that it echoes the stories and opinions told to me by a cross-section of Australian Muslim women. They include Katie el Hakim, Halme Kilciler, Houda El Ri Fain, Ilhelm, Fadila Zaney, Fatima, Raisa, Harima and Zowet from Cumberland House, Zuleyhe Seyfi Seyit, Lalia Daqiq, and, especially, Makiz Ansari, from the Affinity Intercultural Foundation. I also spoke to and thank Maha, Nuha, Amani, Nada and Fatima Mawas from the Muslim Womens' Association, Ruby Kargarian and several others who wish to remain anonymous. Thanks also to Sadaf Kohistani for her expert assistance with the written word Dari. The Literature Fund of the Australia Council provided me with an Established Writers Grant which facilitated a large part of the research on the project and the Sidney Myer Foundation generously provided funding to the Buzo Company to commission the play.

*Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah: Soft Revolution* was first produced by the Alex Buzo Company at the Seymour Centre, Sydney, on 5 August 2009, with the following cast:

SHAFANA  
SARRINAH

Sheridan Harbridge  
Camilla Ah Kin

Director, Arne Neeme  
Designer, Deirdre Burges  
Lighting, Tony Youlden

## **CHARACTERS**

SHAFANA

SARRINAH, her aunt

*SHAFANA is in a laboratory, surrounded by jars of creatures in preserving solution. She is rehearsing a speech, half to her aunt, half to the audience.*

SHAFANA: You get to a point, okay, why don't I be honest, you get to an age and you've absorbed so much and you've observed so much, that you think that you know, basically, what the world has to offer. You've seen it all. Or at least variations of it all. And it's not that you're tired or arrogant or lazy, although they're not the worst things you can be. It's a survival thing. If you're smart and if you've been through a lot, and who hasn't, you can at least congratulate yourself on your ability to vaguely see what might be coming next. To be able to predict situations and not be disorientated. Oh, you don't mind being pleasantly surprised. But you don't like to be caught entirely off guard. It's what separates successful people from other people, isn't it? Foresight. And you work at it too, at 'keeping up' and 'keeping in touch' because if you do, you're not going to be fooled. You've sussed out most probabilities so you're ahead of the game. Which is canny.

But there always comes a point where you lose it. Where a whole generation lose touch. They start to listen to what looks like the next thing. It sounds like the next thing and it acts like that next thing but it's not the next thing. The truly astonishing thing about what's coming next is that it's nothing like what this generation were like, old or young. It's utterly unfamiliar.

If you're a scientist you have to guard against false assumptions. You've all heard the cliché about having to recognise the veil of knowing and surrender to unknowing. But knowing or thinking you know the answers is only one veil. There are others, like physical barriers to seeing. We still don't know half of what is in the deep, deep oceans because they're veiled with darkness. But the creatures are there. Growing, changing, like nothing we've ever seen before. To be discovered. Like the future. Which is not just veiled by time but also by the eyes we're looking at it with. Yes?

What if I told you that in the future you might make a choice that today, right now, you would utterly deny. What if I told you that a change is coming, for you, that is so unbelievable that it would make you laugh out loud if I mentioned it.



SARRINAH *enters*.

But believe me, believe me, there are yet new worlds to be fathomed and new impossibilities to be revealed.

SARRINAH: Shafana.

SHAFANA: In the vast undersea there are vents which scientists call black smokers.

SARRINAH: Are you ready?

SHAFANA: Two thousand five hundred metres down, clouds of pluming black particles are belched into the sea, coughed out like clouds of choking fumes, and four hundred degrees Celsius hot.

SARRINAH: And I'm interested in this why?

SHAFANA: This is molten quartz, studded with iron, copper, zinc, nickel and hydrogen sulphide.

SARRINAH: If you said it was liquid chocolate, studded with sultanas, pistachio, and pieces of orange rind you'd get my attention faster.

SHAFANA: As this metallic cocktail shrieks out into the cold sea water, the ferric sulphide turns black and it appears as if, fantastically, gusts of glossy black air are puffing through the water.

SARRINAH: Just as great gusts of indifference will be glazing over the eyes of your tutorial participants.

SHAFANA: You told me I should use images, try to paint a picture when I give my presentations.

SARRINAH: You could turn the dial up a little more on your best David Attenborough.

SHAFANA: Now, through the miasma of this vaporious haze we have begun to find creatures.

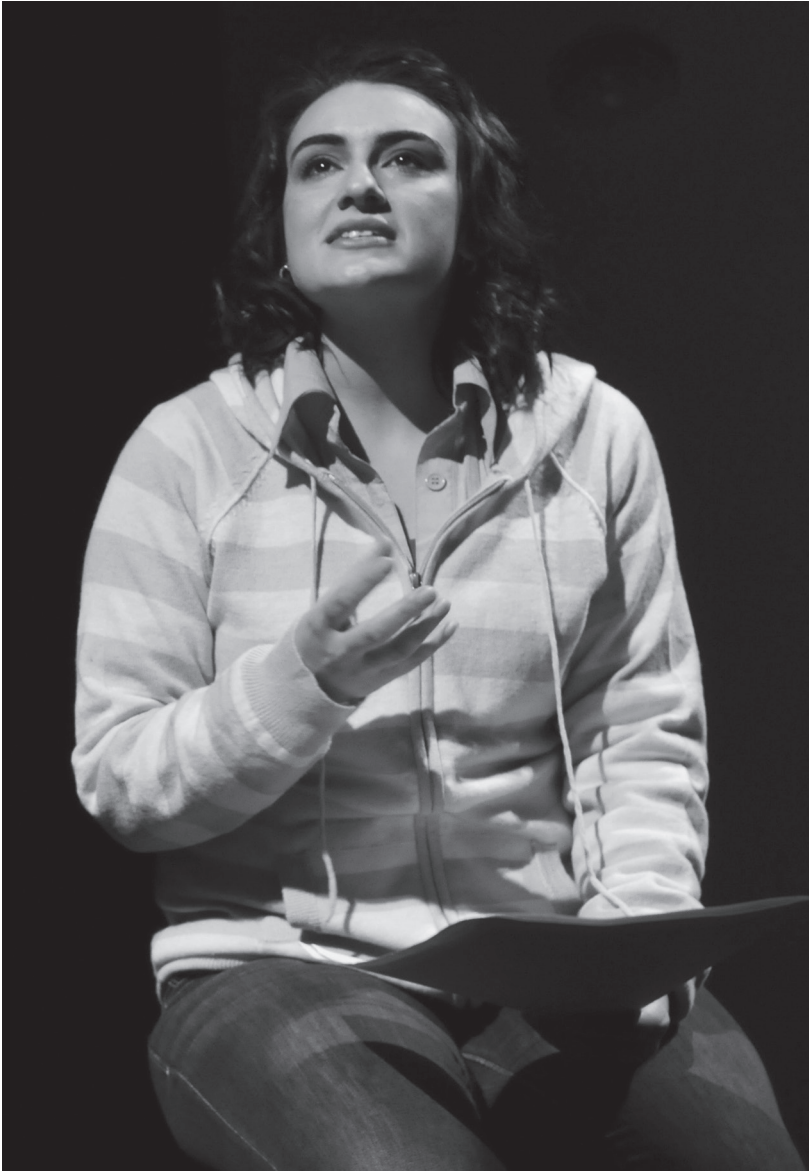
SARRINAH: Come on, leave your vaporious haze where it is and come with me.

SHAFANA: But I'm getting to the best bit.

SARRINAH: Go on then.

SHAFANA: *Riftia pachyptila*, a giant tube worm, fills out to its full length of one and a half metres in less than two years, without a mouth and without a gut. How can it grow if it does not eat in any observable way? It allows itself to be covered in bacteria, crawling with it, swarming with it, and is sustained by the hydrogen sulphide that they secrete. An enormous, snake-like worm that does not consume or excrete.

SARRINAH: So, no fun at a party.



*Sheridan Harbridge as Shafana in the 2009 Alex Buzo Company production in Sydney. (Photo: Heidrun Löhr)*

SHAFANA: But don't you think that's amazing?

SARRINAH: I think if you start your presentation with so many facts you're in danger of losing them.

SHAFANA: But how about you, don't *you* think that's incredible?

SARRINAH: A worm that does not eat or shit? Yeah. Why not. Whoopee.

Let's just all say worm poo, worm poo, worm poo in quick succession.

SHAFANA: For millions of small shrimp, daily life is an extreme sport, balanced as they are on the edge of a steaming hot, poisonous soup that threatens in an instant to consume, cook or toxify them. And yet they thrive in colonies of thousands and thousands.

SARRINAH: Life can perversely defy expectations.

SHAFANA: Yes. Exactly. These are creatures unknown to science, resistant to reason, oppositional to logic and there are, doubtless, many more to be found.

SARRINAH: Yes, but your fellow students don't care about that. The secret to a good tutorial presentation is to ease your listeners in gradually, talk to them about the people who set out to find these black smokers, the difficulties of funding their expedition, the dangers to them of going down to the ocean depths. Then once they are interested in the human story, then hit them with the facts.

SHAFANA: Why are you being so critical?

SARRINAH: You wanted me to give you feedback.

SHAFANA: I've just found the way to start.

SARRINAH: Of all the steps the first is the one that challenges us most.

SHAFANA: Is that an ancient Persian saying?

SARRINAH: No, it was on a flyer advertising my local gym.

SHAFANA: Oh, Aunt.

SARRINAH: Well it was.

SHAFANA: It's a difficult subject to explain.

SARRINAH: What's difficult? There are all these wormy little wrigglers swimming around unable to see anymore because they've all been blinded by the lights of investigating submarines.

*She closes her eyes and stumbles around the space.*

SHAFANA: They discovered species with white eyes suffered more damage than those with pink eyes.

SARRINAH: Fine. So you say in your tutorial that down there it's cook or be cooked.

SHAFANA: You think like an engineer.

SARRINAH: I am an engineer. I'm a doctor of engineering.

SHAFANA: I know that.

SARRINAH: Yes, but now you can believe it.

SHAFANA: Because it will say so on your ID card.

SARRINAH: Because it will say so on my ID card and until it does I am Sarrinah Obaidullah, Afghani migrant and nobody.

SHAFANA: No you're not.

SARRINAH: Believe me when I say that I am and that's why we need to get over there to get this done.

SHAFANA: I'm on a roll.

SARRINAH: You don't want to see your Aunt become a doctor?

SHAFANA: You're already that. You've been that for ten years.

SARRINAH: And you know very well that in Australia I have not been that.

SHAFANA: You got them to recognise your qualifications.

SARRINAH: But these have an Aussie flavour, Miss Worm Poo. [*Pause.*]

Come on. You said that you needed to get your student card renewed. We can do it at the same time.

SHAFANA: This is worth forty percent of my mark.

*Pause.*

SARRINAH: When is your tutorial presentation?

SHAFANA: Tomorrow afternoon.

SARRINAH: Well, this should only take ten minutes. All they have to do is take the photos and then laminate the cards. You'll be in and out of there.

SHAFANA: I think I'd rather keep going.

SARRINAH: You won't get another appointment for a week.

SHAFANA: I rang them. They can fit me in tomorrow.

SARRINAH: You rang them. When?

SHAFANA: Before.

*Pause.*

SARRINAH: Okay then. You've had your fun. I know you're teasing me.

SHAFANA: I'm not.

SARRINAH: I know you are. Because my faculty is on the opposite side of the campus. I had to walk all the way across and now I have to walk all the way back. You think I like walking? I hate walking in this heat.

I get hot. I won't have a drink of water because it's Ramadan and I am fasting. And unlike your slimy little tamale worms I don't want to spend my life coated in a near-death bouillabaisse of perspiration.

SHAFANA: I wanted you to hear my presentation.

SARRINAH: Incredible vents and impossible creatures.

*Pause.*

SHAFANA: I want to talk to you about something.

SARRINAH: What?

SHAFANA: The truly horrifying thing about what's coming next is that it's nothing like what this generation were like, old or young. It's utterly unfamiliar.

SARRINAH: Which is why we have Google.

SHAFANA: What?

SARRINAH: Search engines. Modern version of a crystal ball.

SHAFANA: That's not what I'm talking about.

SARRINAH: If it can't be found on Google you've got to wonder how relevant your vision really is.

*Pause.*

SHAFANA: Let me come round to your place to eat.

SARRINAH: When?

SHAFANA: Why, what, when? Could you be a little bit more understanding?

SARRINAH: Understanding? What's wrong?

SHAFANA: Nothing. I just want to have a meal and... you know... have a chat.

SARRINAH: Tell me right now what is wrong with you.

SHAFANA: Aunt. I'm fine.

SARRINAH: Does your mother know? [*Beat.*] Are you taking drugs?

SHAFANA: What? No.

SARRINAH: I see Muslims in the paper snorting cocaine.

SHAFANA: I'm not snorting cocaine.

SARRINAH: They could at least stick to opium. Support the Taliban's cash crop of choice.

SHAFANA: That's not funny.

SARRINAH: Not at all funny. But I know that you are not taking drugs. Like you are not having sex. [*Beat.*] Are you?

SHAFANA: Of course not.

SARRINAH: Are you scared of your sexuality?