It was around 10 p.m., Noof recounts, when she was awoken by unusual sounds coming from downstairs. Initially, more intrigued than frightened, the curious six-year-old crept out of her room to investigate. Slowly, with the stealth of a cool breeze, she pushed the sitting room door ever so slightly ajar, just wide enough to peep inside. As Noof reminisces about what she witnessed that night, she seems to re-experience the original emotions. Her voice becomes a whisper and her eyes widen, expressing a compelling blend of fascination and horror.

There was a man. Tall, dark-skinned and very thin. By his dress, I could tell he was a mutawwa,1 kind of like a religious person.” The memory is a painful one but Noof is good at faking-brave, she conceals her hurt behind a diaphanous veil of defensive smiles.

“My two elder sisters were crying, sitting on either side of my mum and holding her arms. It was my mum, but it was like it wasn’t my mum. Her eyes were closed, and she was shaking, her voice was all weird and different. I couldn’t even understand what she was saying, it was like she was speaking a different language. The mutawwa was reciting the Quran in a low slow voice, holding a long wooden staff, one end of which was touching my mum’s head. She kept talking, and sometimes screaming, in that weird voice. And she was shaking, shaking uncontrollably. It was so scary. I was traumatized. Thankfully, my eldest sister noticed me peeping at the door, and took me back to bed. She told me everything was ok, and that mum just had a

1. mutawwa: A religious person in the UAE.
headache. I remember lying awake for what seemed like hours, worrying and listening, each new sound fueling further worry.

Today, as an adult, Noof understands exactly what had been going on that night. Her mother had been touched (malboos) by a jinni (an unseen supernatural creature, made from smokeless fire), and the mutawwā had been called in to help encourage the being to leave her alone. This was not the mutawwā’s last visit; in subsequent years, others would be consulted too. Most recently, Noof’s eldest sister went to see one for the first time, on account of her abnormally low and irritable mood.

The idea of the jinn is central to Islamic belief. Linguistically, the word is derived from the Arabic verb jann, which connotes something that is inaccessible to the senses, something unseen. This unseen aspect is also reflected in other derived nouns and phrases such as, jannah (paradise), jinn al-layl (the darkness of night), and janine (fetus—an unseen creature, albeit one concealed within the mother’s womb) (Ibn-Manzur, 2009). The jinn are described as sentient creatures (with intellect and emotion), and although typically concealed to our senses, they are said to coexist alongside humans. The jinn are mentioned extensively throughout the Quran, with an entire sura (chapter) in the holy book titled “Al-Jinn.” It is also proposed that the jinn occasionally interfere in the lives of humans, and this interference can potentially lead to abnormal states and behaviors.

It is important to stress however, that the jinn have never been the Arab-Islamic world’s only, or even dominant, explanation for abnormal psychological states. Mental health problems have also traditionally been explained in biological, psychological, and social (bio-psycho-social) terms. Ishaq ibn Imran, an Iraqi physician of the tenth century, for example, wrote an entire treatise on melancholia, a concept that would encompass today’s bipolar and major depressive disorders. This tenth-century manuscript, the oldest existing work entirely devoted to depression, is rooted in the Galenic humoral biology of the ancient world. For Ibn Imran, depression and mania were the result of excessive bodily fluids (humors). His work was translated into English and offers some fascinating psychological insights that correspond well with current cognitive models of major depressive disorder. On melancholy, he writes:

Melancholy affects the soul through fear and sadness . . . Sadness is defined by the loss of what one loves; fear is the expectation of misfortune. (Omrani, Holtzman, Akiskal, & Ghaemi, 2012)

This statement aligns with contemporary ideas about the role of loss—real or imagined—in depression. Similarly, linking fear and sadness accords