

## Excerpt from *Once in a Promised Land*

By

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The surge Jassim felt putting his foot on the accelerator duplicated itself internally; *he and the car were One*, a complex, powerful machine capable of racing on the Autobahn, of speeding to the scene of any disaster, of escaping the mundane. *Slow down, slow down*, whispered a voice. Eyes on the odometer and a distant whisper willing the needle to move left instead of right. As he drove, the pleading continued, an interloper trying to separate man and car. As the odometer crept left, the car slowed to the sluggish driving standards demanded by the city: roads made for 45 miles an hour, or more, were given a 35 mile an hour speed limit at best, sometimes even 30 in the center of the city.

Jassim could see up the gently curved road for a distance, and registered two figures on skateboards.

Tightness clenched his stomach. Jack Franks had unsettled him. Again. The cramping pulled his right foot up from the accelerator, pulled the needle left to 33, under the speed limit by two miles. The nagging persisted, a greedy squid yanking at his brain and stomach. *Perhaps it's not Jack Franks*. Jassim reviewed his day, searching for the lost item, the missing clue. *Have I forgotten something?* This thought swung back and forth through his mind as he approached the two skateboarders... *an appointment?*... both were tall, both wore dark clothes... *a birthday?*... the one in front had black hair and the one in back had no hair at all... *a phone call?* Skin went cold with panic. *Salwa had a miscarriage*. For the briefest moments he had forgotten, completely forgotten.

The distance between him and the figures ahead closed in short seconds. His chest tightened with dread, forcing his foot to ease off the accelerator even more, moved it over to pump the brake instead. The needle hovered at just under 30.

The boys rode along the side of the road, but not smoothly. The one in front swerved erratically. His head drooped forward as he glanced behind him, once, twice, and again, zigzagged, moved crookedly, swerving from the edge to a third of the way into the road, the distance between the two boys stretching and contracting. The second boy pushed off and rode tall, his arms by his side.

Jassim and his car approached, sweat occupying the space between his hands and the polished steering wheel, the first sign *that he and the car were not really One*. Registered in Jassim's brain were a car quite a distance away coming toward him in the opposite lane and a car some distance behind him, allowing him the room to pull left, which would give the boys the full five feet suggested for bike riders.

Closer and he could see them more clearly: the droopy one in front had his black hair in spikes and wore baggy black pants with what looked like thousands of safety pins along the legs. The other boy smiled as he rode. He also wore a black t-shirt and pants. *Salwa had a miscarriage*. Jassim's conscious and semi-conscious levels of thoughts were colliding, creating a heady, almost blinding panic. Deep breath. Hold it. Exhale. One more time. Two breaths.

Two breaths: the length of time it took for Jassim's life to swerve off of the Autobahn and onto an American frontage road.

Both boys moved faster than Jassim would have thought possible. Almost even with him, the stooped boy in front looked up at Jassim through reflecting blue sunglasses.

For time to come, Jassim would remember that face, the blue lenses becoming larger and larger in his memory. In the breath of a butterfly, the boy turned his head away again, not facing forward, but drooped over, as though his neck were made of rubber. He then pushed off and jumped, propelling himself straight into the front of Jassim's car. Jassim swerved left, felt a sickening thunk and watched as the boy flipped over the hood. The oncoming car in the other lane was suddenly in front of him and he had to swerve to avoid it. Movements he would review for a lifetime to come.

For three or four seconds sound stopped, only to return at full volume, filling Jassim's ears and stomach as he pulled the car to the shoulder, aware even at this awful moment of the smoothness and silence in the handling of his car. Turning around in his seat to look, his heart slammed against the shell of his body: the boy lay in a motionless heap, his friend was running toward him. A shaky hand reached for the door, the other took the keys, dropped them into a loose, roomy pocket and removed the cell phone that sat on his left hip. Trembling fingers, too large for the tiny keypad, pressed 911 as his body took lightning steps to the boy. Traffic stopped, people ran and shouted and Jassim's world spun and banged as he squatted next to the boy, dropped on his knees to

put his head to the boy's chest, fingers to his neck. The boy's eyes flickered at him for a second, (when did his sunglasses fall off?) pasting Jassim's face on his pupils to take with him wherever he was going.

"911 operator, your location please."

"I'm on River just east of Swan." East of Swan. Or west? "West of Swan. I've just hit a boy with my car and it seems that he is unconscious." He was not sure still if they were east or west of Swan.

"An emergency team will be right there. Is he breathing?"

The boy's chest was not moving, but his eyes had just been open so he must be breathing.

"Barely. Should I move him or do CPR?"

"No. Don't touch him. Don't move him. Ambulance is on its way. Just hold on, sir."

Jassim stroked the boy's head, knowing deep in his self, all the way down to his toes, that it was useless. "Hold on, young man. The paramedics are coming. Hold on. Try to breathe," he said to the slumped figure, more for his own comfort than for the boy's. Even before he slid his hand to the boy's neck again and felt nothing, he knew that he was gone, had left this world for good, and behind that thought was the knowledge that the boy had done it on purpose and used him.

It was then that Jassim registered the boy's friend and the other people and the chattering.

A woman's voice called, "Is he all right? Someone call 911!"

And a man's answered, "No. I already called them."

Circles of helplessness.

And the other boy's voice, "Shit. Oh Shit. Evan. Come on. Wake up. Shit. Shit."

He squatted on the other side of him.

"Don't move him at all," Jassim said, trying to be calm, trying to be reassuring.

The friend looked at him, absorbing his words, touching the boy's side. "Shit. Come on Evan. Don't die, Evan." The boy had no hair except for a tiny tuft at the base of his neck that Jassim thought looked obscene.

“It’s going to be all right,” Jassim said, pouring words he did not believe, trying to make that ultimate jump into American life, the one that promises a happy ending for everyone if you just believe it hard enough. The friend slumped in a pile on the other side of Evan shaking and crying. More people, more noise, the world’s banging escalated as Jassim kept talking to Evan, still patting his head, holding his hand, the way he would his own son if he had one. “Be strong for your friend.” Deep breaths, swimming breaths. Force calm calm calm. Let none of this be happening. *Dear God, let this be a nightmare.*

Jassim was aware of people and noise and sirens as he sat folded next to the figure, the shell. The boy was in his late teens, at best. He lay on his side, but his neck was at an impossible angle.

“Paramedics!” Jassim moved, or was moved, by the rushing people who came to clean up this American disaster. A woman touched his back as she took his place.

“He’s not breathing,” Jassim offered.

“Step back, sir,” she spoke firmly, commanding him away. The paramedic put her hand under the boy’s head very gently. “No pulse,” she called. At her side were two men, both dressed in blue, both with the same “Tucson Fire” stenciled in white on the back of their shirts. Jassim was stuck on this, on why the fire department and not an ambulance was here, (were ambulances privatized?). Rubber gloved hands touched the boy, held him firmly so that when they lifted him on the stretcher his bones would not change places.

“Excuse me, sir,” a voice next to him said. Jassim turned and found a police officer at his side. “Are you alright?”

“I think so. He’s dead, isn’t he?”

“Too early to determine. We’ll let those folks work their magic.”

“He’s a child.” Jassim was aware that these sentences belonged to a young person, uttered in the hope that some kind cartoon genie would hear them and come to change their order, change the events, undo what was done. The panic Jassim felt just before the accident was back and he felt his neck stiffen, his head throb, as though all the blood that had stopped was now pumping in super time. Police were everywhere and Jassim began to sway.

“Sir, I need to get a statement from you. Are you up to that or would you like to have the paramedics check you out first?” Jassim stared at the police officer, filtering his words and trying to make sense of them.

“Sir, let’s go this way and I’ll get your statement.” The officer gently but firmly placed his hand under his elbow, the way you would to an old person who might lose his balance. He guided Jassim through a maze of mayhem to a police car, opened the passenger door, and had him sit down. “Sir, my name is Officer Barkley. I need to see your license and registration.”

Jassim leaned right to pull his wallet from his left pocket. Slid his license out and handed it to Officer Barkley. “The registration is in the glove box.” The officer spoke into the microphone that came off his shoulder, read his license number into it and then spoke directly to him. “Sir, are you on any kind of medication?”

“No. I don’t use medicine.”

“Anything that would make it difficult for you to drive a car?”

“No.”

“Okay Mr. Haddad... did I say that right?”

“You did.”

“Okay Mr. Haddad, I need for you to tell me what happened.”

Jassim leaned his head forward and took two deep breaths, swimming breaths, before he recounted the details that promised to alter his life for good.

“I was driving east, as you can see, and slowed with the speed limit. I remember that, remember thinking that this is a 35 mile an hour zone. As I was driving I kept thinking that I had forgotten something, and that made me drive slower. I saw the two boys up ahead.” For all the years his tongue had been using English to communicate, he now found it difficult to work through, standing at the end of each sentence and translating it back to make sure he said what he had wanted to say. “Really how stupid, I mean, that’s what I thought. The one was doing loops, zigzags out into the road, as though this were a schoolyard and not a narrow two-lane road with curves and blind spots. When I got close to them, they were back by the edge and I pulled out at least five feet, you know how they say you should give a bike five feet? Well that’s what I tried to do, only as I was doing it, the one boy just came out, but he looked at me first, like he

planned to do it, or like he thought he would do something else like jump over the car only he ended up going right into it. And then there was a thud and I tried to swerve and I swerved back because there was a car coming and I pulled over and he was lying there and I called 911.” Jassim gasped a bit, having lost his breath in recounting his story.

“So you were into the other lane when you hit the boy?”

“I was halfway in the other lane when he jumped out toward me. I saw the car coming from in front, so I swerved back. I hit him when I was in the other lane. He came out far, diagonally toward my car.”

“So you hit him before you swerved back?”

“Yes. Here let me show you.” Jassim leaned over the dirt and with his finger traced two curvy parallel lines for the road. “These two curves are the hills.” He placed two small pebbles at one end of his diagram. “These are the boys. This is what they were doing before I was close to them.” Here Jassim held one pebble in each hand. The pebble in the back moved straight, but the one in the front looped into the road and back. “This is my car,” he said, picking up a small rock and making a faint line to show the divide between the lanes. “I drove like this. When I got about here I began to pull out.” The car rock was eight inches from the first pebble. He placed two other rocks at either end of the road. “These were the other cars that I saw. Neither was close to me. I pulled out and when I was almost parallel with the first boy,” here the rock and first pebble are at a slight diagonal from one another, “he looked straight at me.” Jassim drove the rock with his left hand and the front pebble with his right. “And he shot out like this.” The front pebble veered out toward the rock, which Jassim pulled further to the left. “What I don’t understand is how the car in front was suddenly here. That is when I swerved back.” Jassim pulled the rock over. “I wonder if maybe another car came from somewhere else.” Here Jassim did not trip over his words. It was simple, *a piece of cake*, to explain a physical event with the help of visual aids to keep from getting lost in the words.

Jassim sat up, but felt dizzy and leaned so his right side rested against the seat.

Officer Barkley had a notepad and his license out. “Your name is just as it is on your license: first name J-A-S-S-I-M, last name H-A-D-D-A-D.”

“Yes, Jassim Haddad.”

“Mr. Haddad, where were you coming from just now?”

“I go to the Fitness Bar to work out, to swim actually, and I was coming back. This is not my normal time to swim. Usually I go in the early hours of the morning, but the pool was closed” (something kept him from explaining to Officer Barkley why the pool was closed) “and my day was not going too well so I thought going for a swim might help. You know the body gets used to being treated a certain way, doing certain things, and then when you stop it is unsettled, off balance.”

“Why was your day not going well?”

Jassim rewound to the beginning of the day, wishing he could record over the events. A moment of caution kept him from going into detail, kept him from giving Officer Barkley details of his wife’s miscarriage. “I think it was just that unsettled feeling, that I needed to exercise.”

“Have you had a drink of alcohol today?”

“No, sir.”

“But you were upset when you were driving?”

“Just now? No. When I say my day was not going well, there were no disasters or major problems. My boss suggested we leave early so I thought I would go swimming.”

“Would you stand up for me, sir, with your arms out, and stand on one foot.”

“You’re joking.”

“No, sir. It’s standard procedure.”

Jassim stood, stretched his arms out and lifted one foot.

“Good. You can sit down again. Mr. Haddad, have you used any recreational drugs in the last 48 hours?”

“I don’t use recreational drugs. Am I going to be arrested?”

“Mr. Haddad, I need to check with the other officers who are processing the scene,” here Officer Barkley gestured to the huddle of police. “For now, sit tight. Do you want to call anyone to come and be with you or to drive you home?”

Jassim was aware that these two statements contradicted each other. Or in the one the mystery of the second was dissolved. No, he would not be arrested.

“No. I’m fine, thank you,” Jassim answered, as though Officer Barkley had asked him if he wanted an ice tea or soda.

“I’m going to have a paramedic come and check you out now and then I’ll come back. Why don’t you sit tight for a few more minutes?”

Jassim wrapped himself around the phrase ‘sit tight’, trying to attach a literal meaning to its figurative connotation. He folded himself up one more time, but he was not *sitting tight*, he was slouched and trying to breathe. Instead of facing the dirt and the desert, he turned himself to face forward, sank back in the passenger seat of Officer Barkley’s patrol car as though he were watching a film of emergency vehicles clustered together and busy figures bustling among them. The street had been closed off, more yellow tape to prevent contamination. Jassim counted six police officers, five fire fighters, and three people who were somehow involved. He also saw several people standing, watching, who seemed to have nothing to do with the accident. Perhaps they were friends or acquaintances or passengers of the other people the police were talking to. What other reason could they have for being there? Jassim tried to pick out Officer Barkley. He was taller than the other officers, bulkier. As he sat, a movie-goer, viewer, minus popcorn and a soda, one of the firefighters, a woman, walked toward the police car in which he sat, already another person.

“Are you okay, sir?” she asked in a large, safe voice. “I need to check you out, okay? You can stay sitting, but could you turn this way a bit?”

Jassim shifted and she lifted his arm, placed her thumb against his wrist. He tried to smile. “I think I’m okay. Probably not.” He felt fuddled again, as though his ability to speak had gone along with the boy to the hospital. “I’ve never really been at the scene of an accident before and you are very quick and professional.” These were words he did not need to say, and they disguised other ones, pleading-for-help words like, how do I undo this situation? and will my life be the same after this? How to ask a stranger such things? He decided to say nothing more.

“Thank you, sir, for taking the time to say that.” He saw that her eyes were greenish and in them were questions. “I’m going to feel for anything broken, listen to your heart, check your eyes. It’s all standard and it’s just to make sure that you’re not

hurt. Sometimes shock overrides pain.” She did as she said she would, in the order she said she would.

“Your vitals are fine, but are you sure you’re okay? Have you called someone to be with you?”

“No, I think I’m okay. The officer told me to *sit tight* for a few minutes, before I leave. I don’t want to tell my wife, don’t want to worry her.”

The paramedic placed objects in her bag and smiled at him as she worked. “Sir, if you don’t mind my saying, that’s what wives are for, for times like this. Trust me; it’s better to let them worry a little. It will make it easier for both of you in the long run if you tell her. This is no small thing what happened today.”

Jassim was intrigued by this woman who was so open, so *cut to the chase*. Here they had been talking for less than five minutes and she was already discussing intimate aspects of life. He had never talked to an American woman, this type of American woman, like this, not *up close and personal*. But she had misunderstood what he had said. Of course he planned to tell Salwa; he just didn’t need to call her to bring him home. Did he say *tell* or *call*? And *worry* was the wrong word too. *Bother* perhaps would have been better. No. What he should have said was “We have a complicated schedule and she will be on the other side of town at the real estate office because she’s just taken a second job and by the time she gets here she’ll be overcome with worry and it would just be easier for me to tell her when she comes home at her normal time.” That’s what he should have said because as with many American conversations, the words he spoke had not conveyed what he had intended for them. He could never decide if it was his English, his actual use of language, or if it was because people don’t really listen and instead put into the words they hear the words they expect to hear.

“Well, thank you again,” Jassim told her, hoping she would feel the thickness of his gratitude.

“You’re welcome. Take it easy, sir.”

“Okay, *will do*,” replied Jassim, trying to keep up with her jargon, when really what he felt was drowning; the very sensation that he had fought his entire life to control was now swallowing him, only it was not water that was taking his breath away, filling his lungs, instead it was air.

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At work Jassim entered Evan's name in the search box of the local paper's obituary page. Not even a blink and Evan Parker's face appeared on his computer screen, a small black and white rectangle, the same posed portrait that was glued to the cross marking the spot where Evan died. There was nothing particularly striking about him and as before, when he had knelt before the tiny cross, Jassim could not connect his face to the one that had stared at him through blue lenses before he jumped. For some reason it was that image and not the one of him lying unconscious on the street that had lingered in his mind.

Evan Ezekiel Parker (1985-2001)

"In loving memory of our son who left this world to be in a better one. Evan was full of life and will be missed by friends and family. He is survived by his mother Mary, and his sister Bethany of Tucson, his father Todd Parker of Tucson, and his grandparents....

Jassim got up and pulled the phone book, the white pages, off a top shelf. He looked at the thickness of the white, estimated where he thought Parker would fall, and opened the book. Three pages from the correct page. He found *M Parker* followed by an address and a phone number. This was something he needed to do in person, but how could he know for sure it was her? He could call, but what would he say? ("Hello. I am calling to find out if you are Mary Parker whose son Evan just died. I am the man who killed him and I want to come to your house and apologize.") Perhaps if he drove by her house he would know if this was the right M Parker, perhaps Evan's friend would just happen by at that exact moment. was there.

Jassim closed the phone book and put it back on the shelf. Sat down again at his desk to read about the stolen headwaters, but saw nothing, no words marched before him. Instead his mind tugged at the idea of going to Mary Parker's house. For several weeks in the early part of the new year, Jassim drove past 4165 E. Fifteenth Street looking for clues, hoping someone would emerge to let him know for sure that it was the right house.

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Jassim stepped up to the concrete stoop that, like the neighborhood, and really like the whole city, had too much sun on it: an exposed wound with skin seared back, clean, white bone and fresh tissue open to all the world's germs. Jassim, child of Jordan whose feet learned to walk on holy soil, was a beautiful cancerous growth in his pressed dress pants, Armani tie, olive skin, holding a bouquet of lilies to mourn the dead, penance for his enormous sin.

Heart thudding against the walls of his body forced a shudder. Too late to run away, doorbell already rung, nothing to do but wait.

The screen door was not flush with the frame, poked out a bit at the bottom, a little bent and not closed all the way. Had Evan Parker kicked it once in a rage? Had someone tried to break in? Jassim rang the bell again and heard a raspy "coming" from inside.

No evidence littered the front yard suggesting a teenage boy had lived there, nor that one had died recently. Was he standing in front of the wrong house?

The inside door swung open and a tinge of stale cigarette smoke greeted him.

"Yes?"

For a moment Jassim couldn't speak.

"Yes, may I help you?" The woman stood close to the screen, her face almost touching it, and stared at him.

Jassim had expected her to be in her late thirties or early forties, but looking at her through the screen he saw an older and more tired woman than he had expected, one with a thick pile of hair collected in a band and swung around her neck to rest on her left side, reaching all the way down to cover her breast. Jassim had spent a growing up lifetime around hair, mostly long, mostly thick, and often lustrous. In America, long hair seemed to be cut off by the time a woman reached thirty, at least among the women with whom he dealt. Among poorer women, women he came across at the grocery store, or saw crossing a street while he was sitting at a red light in his car, hair was maintained, a dowry not to be disposed of easily. "You're Mary Parker?"

"Yes."

"I...I...I'm sorry. I brought you these, for your son." He lifted the flowers. "I am so sorry about what happened to him." Jassim did not like the way his voice sounded.

Though his words came from a deep straggling sadness, they came out professionally packaged in a tidy little box.

“Thank you. That’s kind of you. Do I know you?”

“My name is Jassim Haddad.”

“Jassim? That sounds.... Oh my God... you’re the one who...” She stood behind the screen door, frozen for a second in time as her brain leaped over the name and what that name had brought her. Her body shifted, muscles woke up, head nodding ever so slightly.

“I did not come to upset you. I came to tell you in person that I am sorry. That it was an accident and that I am sorry, so very, very sorry. I cannot imagine what on God’s earth you must be going through. I wanted you to know that. I thought it might help.”

Her heavy words came out jagged. “Did you? Did you think I would feel better seeing the face of the rich prick who ran over my son?”

Jassim had prepared himself for this and held her gaze through the filter of the screen. “Yes, I did. I know that I would rather have a complete picture than an imaginary one. I know I would rather know it was an accident than something else, and I would want to know that from the person who did it, no matter how angry I was. I assumed you might feel the same. Forgive me if I am mistaken.”

Mary Parker did not look away, her head still nodding, as though she was searching for some answer, as if she stared deep enough she would find it.

Jassim forced his professional face, his controlled feelings. He pushed aside the gnawing that it was his fault a boy had not had the chance to become a man, turned away from the awareness that the woman behind the screen had probably aged ten years because of him.

“I am full of hate right now. I need to hate you.” She stared at him, her head still quivering slightly. “It sure took balls to come over here.”

The sun and situation was forcing sweat out of Jassim’s scalp. He lifted the flowers a bit, hoping she would open the door to take them so that he could be done with this most difficult situation.

“Life deals you some wild shit, excuse my language.” Mary Parker pushed the screen door open and Jassim held out his bouquet. For just a second, their eyes met in

plain, unfiltered space. Jassim felt it, almost an electric shock and he could see Mary jerk slightly, ever so slightly. Instead of taking the flowers, she stood back. “You might as well come in and have some coffee. I just made a fresh pot.”

Jassim had not plotted this as a possible scenario. “I couldn’t do that. I don’t want to upset you more. Please, take these.”

“Hey buddy, I am in suspension right now. I am floating. You couldn’t upset me more right now – you’ve done that already. Now it’s just a matter of getting through the day.”

Jassim hesitated before he walked in and stood just inside the door, still holding the heavy, fragrant bouquet, as she closed the door behind him, sealed out the sunshine. The living room was dark and thickly carpeted. Shadows of furniture punctuated the room, but it was so dark he couldn’t see much beyond that.

Mary Parker’s voice was soft, no stitch of anger now. “For a long time my brother was living with us and he slept here. I hung blackout curtains so the sun wouldn’t wake him but I never got around to taking them down. I don’t see any point in letting sun in now anyway. Come into the kitchen.”

Jassim followed her, with his head slightly bowed, as she took the few steps from the front door to the kitchen. She took the flowers from his hands and put them on the counter while he let his eyes readjust to the change. The kitchen was bright and cheerful with shiny cupboards, gleaming countertops, and country knickknacks decorating the shelves. In the center was a tiny, multi-colored Formica table.

“Have a seat. How do you like your coffee?”

“Black, please.”

“Black it is.” She gave him a red mug that did not match her own green mug and sat down across from him looking at the pack of cigarettes on the table. “I used to smoke a long time ago and I thought it would help now. It doesn’t. Just makes me dizzy and cough. Do you think you could throw them away for me? If I have them around I’ll smoke them and then God knows how many years I’ll have to spend quitting again, on top of everything else.” She pushed the pack of cigarettes toward him. “D’you mind?”

“Not at all.” Jassim kept the other words he wanted to say inside his mouth, the words that said “May I save your life to make up for your son’s life that I took?” and pulled the cigarettes closer to him.

“I used to drink too. Not so much, but pretty regularly and to the point where it got in the way of things. So I stopped that. Stopped smoking pot. All to be a good example for my kids.” She stopped and looked at him, her eyes blinking away the glassiness.

“You have other children?”

“Mmhm. I have a daughter. She’s having a hard time with this. Sleeps with me and cries a lot. Says she feels alone and scared and I feel pretty shitty for not being able to soothe her, to get out of my own grief enough to help her.”

“How old is she?”

“Fourteen. They’re 16 months apart. I remember when they were little thinking I would go crazy having two babies to take care of. At the same time it was the happiest period in my life, though I didn’t realize it then. It seems like yesterday. Don’t all parents say that, how quickly it goes? I just can’t believe he’s not here. Sometimes I wake up and forget – that’s when it’s the worst, in the mornings. Some days I can’t make it out of bed, can’t get past that.”

Jassim said nothing, just sat with his legs uncrossed at the too small table and watched the mother of the boy whose life he had taken and behind that thought sat another: this was the first time since he married Salwa that he had been alone in a house with a woman to whom he was not related by blood or by marriage.

“What was Evan like?”

Mary Parker sat back in her chair pushed away from the table and folded into herself, like she was trying to stay in a tiny space with no arms or fingers poking out. Hands wrapped around her coffee cup. She wore no rings. Her skin was unblemished and in spite of the tiredness and sadness scribbled all over it, Jassim enjoyed looking at her face, saw in it a warmth.

“Well, God keep him, he was an odd kid – good, but odd. He never liked to do what everyone else did, which I guess is how he came to hang out with all the punk kids – though all the punk kids act like each other, so how different is that?”

“Kids are kids.”

“Yeah, kids are kids. He liked games and imaginary things – whatever took him out of this world. I think the divorce really affected him. He needed his dad, not so much to keep him in line, but to teach him to be strong, not to be scared of the world.”

She leaned forward and pulled the pack of cigarettes back toward her. “One last one.” She offered one to Jassim, who put his hand up, watched her light the cigarette, drag the polluted air into her lungs and fight the cough. Her relief was perceptible, coating her face, pinning her together.

“Evan never really liked sports. At least not the kind you do in groups. He liked riding his bike, skateboarding, listening to that God-awful music of his. Bang, bang, bang. What do kids get out of that music? I was a kid once and I remember needing to get away from my parents and listening to rock and roll, but that music – it’s horrid, it’s just noise.”

“Did he like school?”

“Sometimes. It depended on the class, not the subject so much as the kids in the class and the way the teacher interacted with them. He enjoyed his geometry class. He wasn’t school smart so much as he was people smart. He could really see people for what they were, good or bad. I think that’s why he had so many problems with his dad. He could see the loser side of him and he didn’t like that – it scared him.”

Jassim’s brain fought the pictures of the accident, the heap on the asphalt. They sat in smoky silence. He drank his coffee and looked at her with all the waiting in the world in his eyes as she smoked her cigarette and rocked gently in her chair.

“I keep thinking about when he was little and how things were so hard for him. Each new school year he would cry for the first month or so, in the early grades he would even have temper tantrums – 6 or 7 years old and he was lying on the school lawn, kicking and screaming. I didn’t know how to help him and I never seemed to have enough time with him. I keep thinking that’s why, that’s why he liked that music, that’s why he couldn’t fit in. The worst is that I think I pushed him away and that maybe at the end he felt alone and that’s why he left, ‘cause he didn’t feel enough love or attachment to this world.” She inhaled deeply on her cigarette and sat staring at the memory.

Jassim's voice came out low and safe: "That's the worst part of parenthood – that we've no one else to blame so anything that goes wrong, any sadness they have, it may not be our fault they feel it, but it comes to be our fault for not being able to stop it." Jassim realized in his words that he was giving the impression that he had children, that he could identify with her.

She stared at him through the smoke. "It's true. I feel like I missed the boat with him. Somehow I should have done something different, but I didn't know what and there was never time to think about it because I was always working."

"You don't think it's possible that he was who he was, that no matter what you did, he was bound to come out the way he did?"

"No. I feel like I failed him. That's the worst part. I look back on so many situations where I failed him. It's my fault he was out with that boy that day, because somehow I didn't teach him enough responsibility or safety skills or common sense. What happened shouldn't have happened and it can't be undone and it will haunt me for the rest of my life."

"Me too." Jassim had not meant to say these words out loud and felt exposed. He had not come here with the intention of bearing his own soul, but simply to offer an apology.

"They told me, the police told me, that the guy who did it – you – did what he could to help him, that it was an accident. Even that asshole friend of his he was with said Evan just jumped out into the street, like he was trying to jump over your car. Still, I want to blame you, and I do."

"That's okay, Mary. Blame me. Like you, I keep looking back at what I could have done differently," but he did not go on. Could not say, not even in his mind, that he had been speeding just a few minutes earlier, that if he hadn't, he would not have reached Evan when he did, and that indeed he was guilty. Instead he said, "I will never forget that day, and again, I am so very sorry. Please know that. I also want to offer help, any help I can give you, financial or otherwise."

"That's kind of you. We're good. I think I can manage okay, but who knows, might take you up on that some day. Where are you from? India or something?"

The question caught him off guard, but his answer came out smooth and ready.  
“I’m from Jordan.”

“Jordan, where’s that exactly?”

“Between Israel, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia.”

Silence. She looked at her coffee and nodded her head in a rocking sort of rhythm.

“You’re Arabic?”

“Yes, I am an Arab.”

Silence. She continued staring into her coffee, rocking gently. “God is one twisted mother fucker.”

“Excuse me?”

She was laughing in an almost guffaw. “I’m sorry, but that is so fucked up. See, when 9/11 happened, Evan was freaked out, totally freaked out. It was weird because once he was a teenager, he didn’t lose it very often. But he did then, ranted and raved about how Arabic people should all be kicked out of this country, rounded up, herded up, and thrown out. I ignored it for awhile, thought he was just scared. We were all scared those people were going to blow us all up. Then he started talking about how he wished he could kill an Arab – my own son talking about killing someone! I sat him down and told him two wrongs don’t make a right, that most Arabic people don’t have anything to do with this. He wouldn’t listen – refused to. Talked like a bigot and I was so mad at him. I think he got it from his dad, who is a racist prick. That’s why I say that God is one fucked up bastard to have Evan die under the wheels of an Arabic person’s car.”

She started rocking a little more, but now he could see shaking in her shoulders and he knew she was going to cry.

“I should be going. I am sorry I have upset you more.”

“No, really, I’m always upset. I won’t say I’m glad you came, but maybe to know you are suffering too does help, and to have a face to put with it. You can show yourself out.”

“I’m leaving you my phone number in case you need anything, in case I can help you. Please, don’t hesitate to call.” Jassim took the envelope with the business card and \$500 he had prepared earlier from his shirt pocket and put it on the table, then stood up

and stopped next to her, put his hand on her shoulder. “Be strong. Your daughter needs you.”

She held herself and nodded. “Leave the cigarettes, okay?”

“If you wish.”

And Jassim left her with her grief, her cigarettes, and her empty, dark house, walked back into the brilliant, obscene, last day of January, and back to his car. A man stood in the front yard of the house across the street and stared at him. Jassim stared back, numb. Neither stare was friendly. Finally the man turned to busy himself with the house and Jassim turned away from the flags and the stickers; his blood sat heavy in his veins.

The nervousness that had given him the energy to come had all sifted out of him. What remained were heavy dark globs of sadness that made him deep tired, the kind of tired that could let you fall asleep in the street or in your car. He forced himself to turn the key, to drive back out of this unwelcoming American neighborhood that clearly blamed him personally for recent suffering, and back through the more liberal streets where fear and hatred was disguised more cleverly.

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They walked out together, a couple of people, not yet a Couple, not yet coupled, the decision about lunch still not made, still on Salwa’s shoulders. She let it fall behind her, dragged it along by the dainty heel of her shoe as they crossed the parking lot.

“How about I drive,” said Jake, erasing the possibility of a question, of choice, instead paving the road, adjusting the arrival time in his favor. She settled in (through the door he held open for her and shut behind her) to his car, which was shiny black on the outside and spotless tan on the inside (scratching at the back of her mind was the thought that maybe he had planned this down to the shiny clean interior).

Jake slid into his seat, closed his door and sealed them together in a vacuum bubble, sharing the same breath. “Are you okay, Salwa?”

“I’m fine, Jake.” She turned to look at him, at the fineness of his hair (was it as soft as it looked?), at the smoothness of his skin (like a child’s).

Instead of facing forward and starting the car and heading toward a restaurant, he turned to look at her, to allow his eyes one giant greedy gulp. “You are so beautiful. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone as beautiful as you, not close up, not true beauty.”

She felt his words seep through the pores of her skin, spread their way across her body. His simple American sentences had worked their way into tissue and organs and muscle and bone and spread, weakening her as they went. At the core of those words was desire now lodged in every one of her body’s cells. The real words, for they translated internally, were “You turn me on and I want you and I intend to have you.” (Heady plans for such a young man, but this is America and everything is possible.)

Their faces were inches apart, but the air in the car had become thick and he turned the key, started them on their freshly paved way. “I have an idea. Let’s take advantage of the beautiful day and get take-out food and go to a park and eat there.”

“That sounds nice.”

Mexican take-out food, mid-town park. The silence between them was now intimate as both of them walked with unhurried steps through the browning grass toward the most distant picnic table. At first they sat across from one another, but the expanse of the table seemed unnaturally large and Jake moved next to her. Not touching her, just closer.

He finished his food and fingered her hair, his touch reaching deep deep inside her, forcing an end to her eating, even as she told herself no, no, no. Knowing what was next, savoring the anticipation, she folded up her half-eaten lunch, sipped her soda, wiped her mouth, and turned her eyes to his.

“Salwa, may I kiss you?” he asked with the face of a boy.

She did not answer, just moved herself toward him, allowed him to envelop her entirely, consume her in one indiscreet gulp in the middle of an American park. Salwa folded into Jake, lost herself for minutes while the rest of the world shut down.

Relieved that they were in a park, that this could go no further, she stopped, leaned into him.

“My God but you are incredible,” he said and Salwa blushed, though her brain had come back and scolded her bilingually: *Really? What is so incredible? Do you*

really think you are the first woman he has kissed? *Come on. Who is he trying to impress?*

They each sat in their own time bubble, in their own fantasy of what this really meant. Salwa's eyes wandered in front of her across the way and snagged on a toddler boy in overalls climbing on the orange and blue jungle gym as his young, pregnant mother watched him, smiling and giggling.

The earth beneath Salwa rocked violently forward and she held on to Jake, tears falling in drips from her eyes.

"Salwa, what's wrong?" Jake's arm was around her, gentle and soothing and she folded into him as her sobbing convulsed out of her. He said nothing, just held her, rocking her ever so slightly.

"Oh God, I am sorry Jake. I don't know where that came from," but she couldn't stop.

"Salwa, is this because of us, because of this?"

And that question knocked it out of her, because her sobbing was so much greater than This, than Us. It was everything, culminating in the loss of a child that never was. It was plans lived and meaning nothing, hatred bubbling around her, real life, not a staged TV kiss. Her grief did not explain itself properly and came out as a confession instead.

"I had a miscarriage. My husband did not want a baby and I did. I stopped taking my birth control in spite of his wishes. When I got pregnant, I couldn't tell him, and then all of a sudden I was miscarrying and I couldn't tell him. I guess seeing that mother and her child playing over there undid me. I'm sorry Jake." *Sorry for telling you, for burdening you, not for what I did.* She hated her voice as she spoke, felt it came from somewhere else, some other body.

"So you never told him?" asked Jake, latching on to the least important of her words.

"Not at the time. One day I was crying and he came home early, so I told him then, but not the exact details."

"It doesn't sound to me like you have a very open relationship."

Salwa pulled away from this man who could be her lover, to defend the man who was her husband. "We do actually. But there is also respect. In not telling him about

being pregnant, by getting pregnant in the first place, in a way I lied to him. I chose what I wanted to do over what we together agreed to do. I couldn't tell him because I feared his disappointment and because I hated myself for doing it." These words were right, correct, true, and it was a relief to release them.

Jake stared at her, his eyes deflecting her honesty. "I guess. It just seems that when you are married, you should be able to tell your partner anything and everything."

Salwa's thoughts stretched to the girl in the clothes store who had called the security guard on her husband, and her rage duplicated. "Perhaps that is the American view. Perhaps Anything and Everything is not always necessary. Over time you realize things are not so simple. You are younger too. More idealistic perhaps."

Salwa's heart was beating fast and angry, her feelings of just a few minutes ago drowned by his stupid American themes, his romantic notion of husband and wife, his judgment.

"Salwa, do you love your husband?"

"I do love him. He is a good man, an honest man."

Jake thought, his arm still draped over Salwa, but his heart not as involved. She felt it, sensed the change in his touch. They sipped their sodas in silence with a haze around them. Salwa's anger at herself was enormous, and she tried to focus on what she knew to be true, what gave her peace. Silent words invoking God rolled around her mind, shielding her from Jake, protecting her.

"I'm sorry, Salwa. I didn't have the right to say that," came Jake's voice finally, more automatic than honest. "I guess I am young and I am idealistic and I do think that a man and a woman should be able to tell each other everything if they are married."

"And there is nothing wrong with that, nor is there anything wrong with accepting that not everything needs to be said. I chose not to tell him to protect him. Often when you do that the damage comes to you instead."

Jake was staring at her again, but this time she deflected him with the confidence of hundreds of years of civilization. "I think we should go now, Jake."

Back in her cubicle, fed full and cried empty, Salwa tried to focus, to put her entire being into her work. That was the American way after all, wasn't it? Let your soul get sucked out but work hard in the meantime.

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Salwa made no pretense toward working, just sat and stared at Past and Present, did not move when Jake leaned into her cubicle, though she felt a tingling in her palms, a vague shift in her bowels.

“Salwa,” his voice spilled softly onto the floor, bulldozed across the memory carpet through her shoes, up her legs, and settled just beneath her belly button.

“Jake.” A statement. An invitation. It was a matter of time, minutes, hours, days, Salwa knew, before they were intimate, a line at an amusement park ride with an undefined wait-time in anticipation of a few seconds of contained terror/pleasure and the probability of returning safely to earth minutes later. Alive but somehow changed. For one clear, thinking moment she could see that the words they shared or disagreed over did not matter, that her connection with Jake was deeply primal and already decided.

“I had an idea. I thought maybe you could come to my house for dinner. I made an awesome spinach lasagna yesterday.”

Hours.

“Sure. That would be nice.” She smiled.

“Really? That’d be great.”

When Jake left, she called Jassim’s cell number and left a message, promising to be home by ten, saying that she was having dinner with co-workers. Only the tip of a lie, an accidental plural.

The afternoon pattered along between customers and phone calls and glimpses of Something New. Salwa smiled and answered questions as though this was a day as normal as any other, as though she were not about to throw her faithfulness out of her customized American window.

At 5:30, Jake, messenger bag slung over his shoulder, came into her office. “I’ve balanced out and I’m going. Here’s the address.” He walked up to her desk, looking into her eyes, and handed her a piece of paper with a street number and directions. “Do you want to just come by when you’re done here?” His easy smile and physical confidence danced in front of her.

“I should be done by 6:30 or 7:00 at the latest.” The nervousness that had barely suggested itself before was growing inside her, squeezing sweat from her palms and twisting her intestines.

“Awesome. I’ll see you then.” He stood with his legs spread slightly apart, hands on his hips, and a smile at the corner of his mouth.

“*Inshallah.*”

“God willing?”

“Mhmm. *Inshallah.*”

Jake’s pose shifted left, the cockiness confused by her answer.

“Okay.” He left her office and she forced herself not to watch him go, did not glance at the paper he had handed her, instead turned her attention to the work before her. At 5:58 she collected her things and left the bank.

It occurred to her as she sat in her car that she could just drive home, could not do what she was about to do. No, Jake would have prepared dinner and be waiting for her and it was unlike her to leave someone waiting; she would have to tell him she was not coming and she didn’t have his phone number so she would have to go to his house and apologize in person for changing her mind and then go home.

Because she was just going to run in, apologize for not staying, and then go home, she did not feel nervous as she pulled up to the apartment building to which he had directed her. The complex was enormous, a series of identical two-story misshapen cubes painted different shades of brown to blend in with the desert, and set at odd angles to avoid the summer’s afternoon sunlight. She drove the prescribed 10 mph and followed the arrow and sign that said 1200-1240. Across from the cluster of buildings that contained #1216 was a tidy row of parking places with *visitor parking* painted on each of the curbs. She tucked herself into a perfect slot, sat for a moment so her heart could calm, and because she was just running in for a second, she left her bag in the car, half tucked under the passenger seat, locked the door and stepped onto the sidewalk.

“Good evening.”

Salwa turned her head toward the voice; a man stood next to a pick-up truck with its bed filled with branches and the logo of a landscaping company painted on the side.

Disconcerted. “Hello.”

“Sorry. I don’t mean to surprise you. I just say good evening.” The man was short, barely Salwa’s height, and stocky. His skin was chocolate dark and his face was broad. “I sorry. I tell everyone this. Don’t leave valuable things like purse and money in your car. There has been too many broken windows and robberies. Here is not a good idea.”

“Thanks.” A prick in her thinking told her to get her bag. A louder voice said to just keep going, that she was only staying for a minute, was not going inside. Salwa continued on her way, click click up thin slabs of stairs in which rocks were drowned in concrete. Salwa stood on the landing in front of the only door, and placed her finger on the button that would bring Jake to her, though it hesitated, the level-headed Salwa trying desperately to reel it in, to turn her around and rush her back down the click click stairs and back to her car tucked into lines and designated a visitor.

Too late. With the pling of the bell, the door opened and Jake stood with his easy open smile. “*Ahlan wa sahlán,*” he welcomed her barefoot and pushed her resolve down the stairs.

“Hi Jake. I can’t stay. I am sorry, but I can’t.”

Jake smiled. “I thought that might happen. Look, this whole thing is so weird. Come in for a few minutes, eat, and then go. Okay?” He stood aside, opening the mouth of his apartment so that she could come in.

She hesitated. Truthfully the minute he opened the door her resolve melted slid through the gaps between the stairs and landed dead on the concrete below. “Really, I should go.”

“Salwa, look, I understand that this isn’t right. But we enjoy each other’s company and I make a killer lasagna. So come eat, we’ll talk some, and then you can go home and we can do our best to return to normal. As friends.”

Against all that she knew to be right in the world, and well aware that *as friends* was one of those lines Americans tossed back and forth without meaning, she entered his apartment and stood, awkward, Out of Place, Visitor Parking, and looked around. A black leather couch faced an enormous television.

“Both hand-me-downs,” he said, following her gaze. “From my brother, the official adult in the family.”

Jazz tingled quietly out of giant speakers. (What was it about Americans and speakers and music?) The tidy living room faced out onto a massive pine tree. A dining area and a tiny kitchen clustered on one side and on the other side a narrow hallway stretched, she guessed, to the bathroom and bedroom. The small dining table was set with candles and one pink rose, none of which Salwa had expected.

“Let me get us something to drink. Wine?”

“No thank you, soda or sparkling water is fine.” Somehow in this small space, he seemed larger and more manly than he did at work. Not older, but stronger and more in control of things, of this situation.

“Salwa, relax. We are adults and you aren’t going to do anything you don’t want to. We’re eating lasagna and then you’re going home to your husband and I am going to study Arabic, which, by the way, is a very difficult language.”

“It is, but it is also logical.”

“Our teacher showed us a passage from the Quran today, the first one. He read it and it was so hypnotic. Someone in class brought up that in the Quran it says that when a man and a woman are alone, the Devil makes the third party. Do you believe that?” Jake filled a glass with crackling water and then added four ice cubes before she could say anything.

*What was the American obsession with ice cubes? And why did people always latch onto the tiniest and least important phrases?* “I believe that it is not difficult, especially in this country, to find yourself in a situation where it is too easy to do what you shouldn’t do.” *Like this one.*

“Eating a good lasagna dinner does not count as the Devil.” He handed her the glass and gestured toward a chair.

“Could I help you with something?”

“Nope. It’s all done and ready. Have a seat and prepare yourself.” She sat down and observed the table again, the white tablecloth (he did not strike her as someone who would own such a thing) the basket of bread (did male American college students own baskets?), the colorful salad in a wooden bowl with wooden servers, the rose, deep pink and fresh in a tiny crystal vase. Jake went into the kitchen and returned after a moment with a thick white plate on which sat a dripping rectangle of layers of pasta and spinach

and tomato parts. He placed it in front of her and then brought his own plate and sat down across from her.

“This looks very professional.”

“Before college I worked in an Italian restaurant, which is where I learned to make lasagna. It’s also where I got all this stuff.”

The Devil’s tension prickled them both, sent their conversation up and down steep hills so that dinner was not so relaxing (interrupted five times by the telephone, which Jake answered in the bedroom), not so pleasant, and really not so delicious. Salwa wondered why he thought his lasagna was “killer”. And relieved that now that she had eaten she could go home and resume her life.

“Coffee?”

“No thanks,” she said.

“Here, have some of these.” Jake held out a small plastic container with tiny seeds coated in pink and white and yellow.

“This is *shumur*! Sorry. I don’t know how you say that in English.”

“Is that what they are? I found them at the Arabic grocery store. It says ‘candy-coated fennel.’”

“I love these. Actually, I’ve only had them like this in Indian restaurants, but we use *shumur*, fennel, in some foods and the flavor is so distinct that one bite and I taste them.” The crack of fennel in her mouth brought back desserts only eaten during Ramadan, brought back Home in one tiny burst and then another, fireworks in her mouth that took away her breath.

The phone rang again and Jake put the container and lid on the table. “Sorry. I’ll just be a sec.” He picked up his cell from the counter and trotted a few steps to the bedroom. “This is Jake.” Pause. “Hey, how are you?” Formal voice. Pause. “Thank you. Listen, not now. You can come by tomorrow and pick it up.” Long pause. “Absolutely. First thing tomorrow.”

Salwa wandered around the tiny living room space, munching on fennel, reading the spines of books, and promising herself that she would leave as soon as Jake was off the phone. A small picture in a heavy silver frame on the wall adjacent to the hallway

caught her eye. It was Japanese, she guessed, and had a tiny, precise lined drawing of a woman kneeling beside a crane, gazing at it with such sadness, such longing.

Jake's voice appeared over her shoulder. "This is from a Japanese myth about a young woman who searches for happiness and each time she thinks she has found it, it escapes her. Happiness takes different forms that are represented by different animals in different pictures. My brother has the picture of wealth, which is perfect because he is a greedy bastard." Jake stood just behind her with his hands on his hips. "My sister has one and my parents have the rest of the series. This one has always been my favorite. The crane represents beauty. In her search for happiness, the woman loses her own beauty, which was one of the things that brought her happiness in the first place, but she didn't realize it until after she lost it. Of course the point of the myth is that happiness is not something that is found, it is something that one has. Within." *Within*. They stood gazing back to front, front to back.

Perhaps if there had been more time to think, she would have seen the irony this picture carried, would have applied it to her story, but in the flicker of an eye, his hands were on her shoulders, moving her hair to one side while his mouth kissed her neck, his body pressing into hers. His kisses turned her to face him so he could place them on her fennel flavored mouth, fill her, as his hands and arms contained her.

Her brain was silent, wiser than trying to argue with a downhill skier in mid-ride, was transforming cautionary words into accusatory aftermath. His kisses slowed, but she clung onto him, her mouth to his so that he continued, his hands pulling her closer to him. After a time, he nudged her toward the bedroom and lowered her to a double stack of futons, all the while kissing her.

Salwa's inner voice had grown weary, unwilling to battle, and so had turned off the light and gone to bed. Salwa, who at the moment of her birth was twice displaced from lands holier than this, allowed an American boy to nudge off her shoes with his toes, to unbutton her shirt and take it off, allowed him to unzip her skirt and place them both neatly on a chair next to the futons. To avoid wrinkles. Watched as he removed his own clothing in a heap, stood before her in underwear that reminded her of Jassim's bathing suit. He knelt on the floor and she allowed him between her legs while she sat at the edge of the futons, in her matching bra and panties, lacy and lovely, recently

purchased from Victoria's Secret and worn, coincidentally, for the first time today. She allowed his hands to run along the edge of her waistband, his fingers to sneak beneath the elastic, to remove her bra, to kiss her breasts with gentle whisper kisses, to prepare them for what was to come.

"You are beautiful, Salwa and I so want you," he said in a choked whisper and put his face into her stomach, pushed her gently back on the double stack of futons with his mouth and tongue and hands so that she vanished and became a part of him, an adored, desired, and moving part of this young American man, barely more than a boy. These were moments Salwa had not experienced before, never had she allowed herself to vanish under the shadow of another person. The delight she felt spread over her body, as though every square inch had been given extra senses for the occasion.

"Wait." Jake, now completely naked, completely ready, reached between the futons and removed a tidy square. Salwa watched as he ripped it open, covered himself with the single finger of a glove, protecting her from Possibility. He then lowered himself slowly and perfectly with such skill that at the end of those many frantic moments that rolled the evening into night, Salwa forgot where she was.

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Nipples pointing accusatorily at God. For offering temptation? Avoiding wasn't even a possibility, for she had sought it, had invited temptation into her office, to swivel around with her on her black vinyl ergonomically correct chair, and once invited it would be rude to run away from such a guest, improper to suggest that he leave immediately. No, she would make tea and cakes, and then coffee and some fruits before she allowed him to be on its way. She had not lost all matters in her upbringing. Hosting an invited guest was so simple, it was the uninvited ones that required an artistic flair and an ability to lie.

Salwa lay on her back on a double stack of futons, completely naked and absolutely lost. Just days earlier Jake had angered her with his immaturity. And here she was, in his bedroom, naked. She sat up and looked at herself in the mirrors that covered the closet doors. Is this what Jake had seen and said was beautiful? She searched for herself in this reflection, pleading for familiarity in the thick legs, wide hips, round breasts, simple face, nothing like the bodies and faces shown on American television.

She stood up and walked to the mirror so that they were face to face, almost touching. They stared at one another, stranger to stranger. One who loved silky pajamas and was outraged by injustice, the other who had allowed a baby to die within her and in compensation had let herself be entered by a man who was not her husband.

Once your dream is lived, what do you do?

She stood in front of the mirror, looking for her lost self, when Jake came back from yet another telephone call, his skin smooth like a boy's, with a few hairs on his chest, none on his shoulders or back.

He stood behind her and wrapped his arms around her, looked to their together reflection in the mirror. "Nice, don't you think?"

And she did. And she didn't. He held her, his left arm below her neck, his right hand playfully touching her right breast, taunting her nipple that ached with the attention. And then both of his hands moved to her stomach, kneading up and down. The palm of his hand rested against her abdomen while his fingers fiddled with the hair between her legs, stretched down beneath the hair and still they both watched their reflection as his hands and fingers moved on her body with familiarity and ownership.

"Do you see what happens to your body as you become excited? Look at it, how beautiful it is. His fingers toyed gently with the most private part of her self and she watched, intrigued by his openness, by her own ability to let it happen. He stepped back and pulled her down to the futons again. "Watch." She did as she was told, curious to see. Never had it occurred to her to want to watch herself making love, being made love to. But here she was watching a woman who looked vaguely familiar being licked and sucked and entered by a man she barely knew. She turned away to kiss him or look at him, but he would urge her back. "Watch yourself."

"I can't. I don't want to. I want to forget myself."

He lay her out flat on her back. "Then tell me when you like it." Again he kissed her breasts, teased them with his tongue and teeth and fingertips and his mouth moved further down her belly, his tongue dancing from her belly button to her hip bone to the top of her thigh. She knew what he was doing, could not seem to bring her voice along to make him stop. And she didn't want him to stop. Not ever. With his body between her legs, his tongue dancing within her, Salwa became someone new. And when his tongue

tired and he again reached between the futons, she thought she could live like this forever, floating in pleasure. She watched him as he worked within her, his body arching over hers, his face smiling and then contorted. Odd that the face of pleasure is not a happy one.

When he was done, he kissed her and lay next to her. "I am sorry, Salwa. This isn't what you wanted to do."

"It is and it isn't," she answered, folding into him. "I think I have become something else." Something bad.

"Life is fluid and changes. Sometimes those changes are not easy."

Salwa leaned up on her elbow. "Once you have done something like this, you cannot undo it. Just as you cannot un-say something. You can only wish."

Jake put his face to her chest, kissed her breast gently and while Salwa felt it all the way to her toes, she promised herself that she would not do this again, would not allow herself to be alone with Jake. Again. Ever. The Devil had come and now the Devil must go.

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9:30 and she had to leave, get out while she could.

"I need to shower before I go," she told him.

"I understand." But he didn't and he tried to come in with her.

"My husband (she couldn't say his name in this place) has a very keen sense of smell." Which was not true. It was she who had the keen sense of smell, who would smell Jake on her the whole way home and be disgusted.

He kissed her again, but she didn't feel it. Cinderella's time was almost up.

She locked herself in the bathroom and looked around. Towels in the tiny cupboard. She picked one from the bottom and smelled it. Sour. Sour something. This she wrapped around her hair, careful to include the strands at her neck. Then she turned on the water, the cold water, and got in. Scrubbed herself with water and did not touch the soap. Cleaned between her legs with her hands and water, washing away all evidence, all memory of Jake.

"It still shows," Jake said when she reappeared, walked to the chair where her clothes were draped, and dressed as though it were the most natural thing.

“A little make-up, some lotion.... Where did I put my bag?”

“You didn’t have it when you came. I remember that.”

Salwa re-wound and re-saw. Almost four hours ago and she had not planned to stay, had left her bag in the car. In Plain View. Her heart thumped. “Shit.”

“What’s the matter?”

“I left my bag in the car. I wasn’t going to stay.”

“I’m sure it will be fine. Your car’s locked and it’s too well lit for someone to break a window. I’ll walk you down, just to be sure.”

He picked up his crumpled jeans, slid into them naked. Put a t-shirt over his bare chest and they left the apartment Together, down the clickety stairs to her car.

She knew before they got there what had happened, saw that the car window was broken, knew her bag would be gone. And it was and it wasn’t. The car window was broken, but the bag was still on the seat.

“Did they take anything?” asked Jake, bouncing on his bare toes and seeming nervous.

Salwa opened her bag. Her phone and her wallet were still there. What was gone was the envelope of cash she had just withdrawn for the weekend. \$200.

“Just some money. I had cash, but my credit cards are still here. Thank God. My wallet’s still here.”

“They must have gotten scared away.”

“I should call the police.”

“It’ll just raise your insurance rates. Look, I know a guy who does glass. I’ll get your window fixed tomorrow and let’s skip calling the cops.”

“And for tonight?”

“We’ll tape it up. I’m off work tomorrow. I’ll come by the bank and take it over for you.”

“Why don’t I call the police? I have insurance.”

“Salwa, if you and your husband share a policy and you file a report, he is going to know you didn’t go to a restaurant for dinner.”

They swept out the glass and put a piece of cardboard in its place and Salwa drove home and into the garage hoping Jassim would not see it.