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STORIES FROM THE DIASPORA



I

*I am the birds of October,
The flocks of migration
I am the first woman in the new country
Who will dare love me?¹*

Hawa got the wanders a lifetime before and took off from the Old Country. It was not unheard of in a time of famine that a girl like Hawa would head for the open city. She had been a silk girl from the age of eight and the sole breadwinner for her extended family. By the age of seventeen, she set out to convince her mother that she could earn a trunk of money if she moved to the New World. Hawa's mother remained silent, unable to conjure a life for Hawa outside the village. Hawa took that as consent and set out for the port of Trablous. Like many an emigree before, she endured the dankness of steerage, but looked to the porthole of her future.

Fresh off the boat, Hawa established herself in no time with the help of those who had come before. She peddled her wares selling silk stockings to cocky farmers' wives and itinerant sex workers. As she walked the roads and dirt tracks of the New England highway, she wondered if this was the same fine silk she had spun from the mulberry trees of her girlhood. She used to say peddling made her contemplative because she would walk for days without speaking to anyone. And when she did speak, she mastered the only phrase a street seller needed,

–Buy something lady.

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Those days came to an abrupt end when Hawa was caught picking apples from an orchard in an outlying district. She was hungry bordering on delirious having not eaten much for two days. When she spied a paradise of red apples, she did not think taking a pocketful would be grave. The white farmer who had stolen the land three generations before had been on the lookout for what he called "thieving blacks." Before Hawa could take a bite of the succulent fruit she had craved since leaving the village, the colossal brute grabbed her by the hair and flung her to the ground. He strung her up a tree branch by her thick long plaits. Hawa screamed and screamed but to no avail. She was left to hang by her hair for the rest of the day, eventually timing out from shock. It wasn't until an Aboriginal woman passed by that she was let down as gently as was possible. Hawa never peddled the dirt road again. She cut her hair and returned to the city to open a sly grog house.

She became wealthy in her own right and was able to send money back to the old country for decades. Everyone knew all about Hawa, but nobody passed judgement because she helped so many new arrivals. She picked up English in time becoming proficient in the vicissitude of Western ways. Street English, shopfront English, speak English. She learnt her lessons well. She had done her time in the New Country. She even bought Australian. But now it was enough. She imploded that red hot Gulf War January and she was not the only one. Racial explosions happened all over the city. Cousin Louie got the sack for talking back. Old Moussa became embroiled in a fight and had to be restrained. Even timid Tawfiq chased some redneck down the street with his industrial strength broom. And poor Ahmad, he couldn't be saved.

Those who smell the soil of Ahmad's grave will have musk scented breath for the rest of their life, but the catastrophe poured on me could night the day.²

Hawa had never before shown interest in the politics of the day. Now she brooded all night about *Pax Americana*. She listened to the radio and became depressed. Her demeanour underwent a dramatic change. She stooped more and more as each and every smart bomb was unleashed on the city of books. Soon she would be sweeping the floor with the hairs on her chin. She hadn't felt so defeated since the fall of

Granada. She started to wear black exclusively again. She had not worn her mourning attire since her only surviving brother had died a preventable death.

And only the host of mourners crying for their brothers saves me from myself.³

But Hawa's change was no less indicative of the bigger picture. Children became sullen and repositioned themselves in the overcrowded margins. Others responded with strategic withdrawal. Strangers came to speak of Saddam as if they knew him intimately.

-Who is Saddam, mama? Saladin asked his mother.

His teacher had kept calling him Saddam. Saladin first thought the teacher had got him confused with another migrant kid. After all, he knew, even at his age, that those not familiar with history might somehow make the mistake of confusing Saladin with Saddam. But Saladin indeed was a generous child. He had learnt to tolerate other kids' prejudice, but he drew the line with teachers.

-No Miss, Saladin gently protested. I am not Saddam. I am Saladin.

Saladin spelt his name out slowly to ensure that his teacher did not keep making the same mistake. She didn't seem interested. Saladin was made to sit by himself for the rest of the year.

Um Saladin cursed both the teacher and Saddam, exhausting her command in several languages. She implored her progeny to ignore the racism as much as was possible.

-A thousand curses cannot tear a robe.

Um Saladin felt especially compromised having impressed upon her children that one must always respect one's teachers. Saladin knew that his mother was angry. She only ever cursed on very special occasions.

For Hawa and those of her generation, the occasion of fin-de-siecle felt like a flashback to the fifties, though without the smart furniture and Frank Sinatra. The airwaves continued to pump up the volume in a call to arms to root out the enemy, with the suburbs becoming the inevitable battleground. It was time to stay inside and wait for the storm to pass before someone got seriously hurt in these foul tempered environs. The summer heat clawed away at people's reasonableness, leaving a raw state of nerves. Something would have to break soon.

But if you're not moved by this outrage, you might as well bathe in scent and kohl your eyes and wear the bridal dress.⁴

The storm erupted the moment Bassma got out of the car. A vicious simoom nearly blew off her veil from an unremitting grip. The maids of honour were absolutely no help, concerned only with their own collapsing bouffants. How were they expected to think of anyone else? George was looking decidedly unkempt in an apricot chiffon dress. She kept muttering expletives and was not at all in good humour on such a glorious day. She had wanted to attend the anti-war rally, but instead was left holding her sister's bouquet. No one had seen George in a dress since she was a girl. She was not happy either.



II

*and when we your
daughters say we are
about more than chickens and tea
you ask who do
we think we are
we're no better than
you and you are right⁵*

George was short for Georgette. The fourth of five girls, her father was slapped for his troubles, having exhaustingly failed to produce a son. She and her sisters belonged to the displaced generation, far enough removed to have lost functional language, but still obliged to practice living custom. George had recently commenced working with Habiba as a favour to her grandmother. Habiba and Teta had arrived on the same boat and remained sister-like friends over the course of a lifetime. After an unfortunate incident with a belly dancer, Habiba's frailty became more accentuated. She struggled to keep up with the demands of her popular eatery and was forced into retirement. George was not one to suffer post-immigrant ambition or feminist myth making, so she happily took over.

After a few tense intergenerational moments, George finally settled into Habiba's kitchen. Nothing had changed in the eating-house since Habiba first opened her doors to the *mahjar* five decades before. The paint from the murals on two walls was peeling away and in need of restoration. The torsos of Om Koulthum and Abdel Wahab appeared on one side in characteristic poses, while Fairouz and Zenoubia beamed from the other. Habiba used to sing to them. They were family to her.

In her new role, George was determined to preserve the community foundations Habiba had forged. In keeping with the times, she gave the place a makeover. She bought oversized plates and sexed up the menu. Though in solidarity with Habiba, she kept the sign on the front window banning belly dancers, but welcoming peddlers. She converted the upstairs into a club and was now ready to mess with tradition. Club Kishk was the perfect place for what she wanted to do with the next generation.

Kishk was to be the signature dish. It had been kept off the public menu for good reason. The elders were adamant that you didn't share *lu'mit 'um* with just anyone. Many would recount the howls of distaste when strangers had inadvertently ordered it. George decided to introduce variations of the dish as part of her repertoire.

It is clear that the whole story is structured by an implicit fear of the Anglo gaze and its imagined rejection of the migrants' food.⁶

Habiba had been a recognised connoisseur of *kishk*, making it the way everyone liked it. George had tried to extract the recipe when Habiba was of sound mind, but she was not one to give anything away. George was bewildered by Habiba's hesitation to pass on tradition. What sort of elder was she? George had worked hard to convince Habiba that she was worth her salt in the kitchen. She believed *kishk* to be the taste of the future.

*Multicultural bellies, full of tacos, felaful, and chow mein, are sometimes accompanied by monocultural minds.*⁷

Sadie was in no way convinced of this. There was long to go before the mainstream would appreciate its tart texture. George thought *kishk* should be marketed as a kind of postmodern porridge. She wanted to stake a claim before the celebrity chefs got their hands on it. She felt she was on the cusp of the latest craze. *Kishk* would be the next big thing. But talk has a taste like food and George got more than she bargained for.

Late one evening, a stranger in a white fedora came in and announced two decibels too loud that *kishk* was not Arab but Israeli. The elders, who had been sitting at the same tables for decades went into apoplexy. The young would not ordinarily have been bothered with the history of *kishk*, but this was about appropriation. Hayat didn't care to argue with the Israel lobby, but George, feeling fully Semitic since the first Gulf War, took the interloper on.

Having studied the polysemy of *kishk*, George was aware of the complexity of its odyssey. That *kishk* started out as *kashk* didn't especially worry her. After all, the Irani were her friends. She had grown up with *kishk shami*, experimented with *kishk mosuli*, perfected *kishk babli*, and learnt to love *kishk sa'idi*. As for *kishk yehudi*, that was a *kishk* too far.

-They might think they have commandeered falafel to their cause, but they aren't going to nick *kishk* as well, George countered.

Warda, a big-haired regular overheard the argument and thought the whole thing distasteful. After all, it was only food. But in the lives of the dispossessed, it wasn't that reducible. Warda decided to enter the fray and became more and more contrary as she argued the

point. She relished any opportunity to hector Palestinians. She blamed them for everything that happened in Lebanon. For her, the Christians in Lebanon were the Innocents. In her schema, Christians, or more specifically, Maronites, had nothing to do with the internecine atrocities, the political chicanery, the massacres and instability. According to the gospel of rightwing Christianity, Maronites were only trying to protect their holy fiefdoms from a hostile Islamic tsunami.

Warda came from a long line of Christian warlords. Her uncle, Sheikh Pierre, was a heavily decorated general in the Lebanese Forces. She proudly wore her crucifix cemented to his cedar. Buttressed by Maronite mythology, she was committed to her version of history. Her revisionism spoke for a whole constituency. Warda was the favourite of her uncle, and as the Aunties would say, the daughter of the house is one-eyed.

Sheikh Pierre had been a stalwart of the Guardians of the Cedar. He was a brave son of the mountain having famously killed a wake of women mourning one of his blood enemies. He sent hundreds of boys to their deaths convincing them that they were fighting a religious cause. The Sheikh had never seen battle himself, preferring the bluff of the red beret. He blew up churches when necessary. In Marounistan, anybody could be a traitor. He prided himself on getting rid of the Palestinian fighters, and any pesky local adversaries. He would boast that next he would crush the Shia. Keeping Lebanon prostrate was an article of faith.

But this day, Warda had drawn her sword in the wrong place. There had been a steadfast rule during Habiba's time that no one would bring the troubles into her domain. Whilst her eating-house had remained one of the few places that serviced quiet political discussion, she had always railed against chauvinist exclamation. George liked to think she could continue this tradition. The *kishk* dispute lasted less than the fasting month and was swift in its resolution. Warda and her Israeli friend were frog-marched out to the tune of coffee cups clacking and women ululating. It was like the long yearned-for liberation.

Patience is bitter but its fruit is sweet.



III

*War stripped of its passions, its phantasms, its finery, its veils, its violence, its images; war stripped bare by its technicians even, and then reclothed by them with all the artifices of electronics, as though with a second skin.*⁸

Hesham was getting ready to lock up the Hair Palace a little later than usual when he noticed the same unmarked car parked across the road he had noted two days earlier. Old Mabrouka was in for a trim, but as usual Hesham ended up giving her the works. She paid Hesham lavishly to take his time with getting her hair just so.

After the scent of Mabrouka dissolved into the humidity of the afternoon, Hesham lingered at the door trying to make out the faces of the two men watching his facade. He smelt trouble. He had a nose for it and was not about to sit back and wait until something untoward happened. He rang Sadie.

She arrived not much later. The new model Ford was still there. Sadie parked directly behind and eyeballed the two white men as she walked past. It was obviously the police. Sadie was tempted to approach them but thought better of courting trouble. Hesham was inclined to go and chat them up, though he knew he would be up for some summary offence. He needed to know why he was under surveillance. What was he to them?

The Aunties had always said after the incense is passed, there is no sitting on. The police were so conspicuous that before long, the whole street was watching them watch Hesham.

At first Hesham thought that they might have him confused with another man of Middle Eastern appearance. After all, it was common knowledge that everyone east of the Bosphorus was thought to look the same.

After a week of the stakeout, Hesham turned to alarm when the two detectives started taking pictures of everyone who entered and exited the Palace. Old and young alike were captured on film as they left with their once curly hair now flat and straightened. Suleyman who had been seen spending hours in Hesham's Palace every other day of the week, always came out looking different. To the police, this was nothing short of suspicious.

*Hair after all is an alterable sign.*⁹

Suleyman had the sort of determination only someone in his shoes would. His concentration was regularly interrupted by the inconvenience of eking out a living. He needed cash money fast, so swept the floors and washed the hair of the diaspora over Hesham's shiny alabaster basins. For Suleyman, it wasn't simply a case of the dogs bark, but the caravan must move on.

Hesham's nerves were on scissor's edge after a sizzling hot day. As the barrage of bombs blitzed Baghdad, he had stayed up all night smoking in front of the TV hoping that a collective consciousness of deep inhaling might avert the catastrophe. But it was already happening. On top of that, he was coping with the daily harassment of being Arab, contemplating one of the great mysteries of the suburbs, the police stakeout. Hesham considered himself a stoic character, but this summer he had enough. He became a chain-smoking fit of neuroses, having nipped a woman's neck earlier in the day as he cut into her luscious brown nape. As usual, Sadie took a late lunch and came with cigarettes in hand to the rescue.

Hesham was consumed by the scent of gloom.

-This is out and out harassment. It's intimidation. Soon no one will enter the Palace but bald men. I'll have to go back to driving taxis.

Sadie was less dark about it and proffered the clearest of options. Every knot has someone to undo.

-There has to be an explanation. Maybe it's time to go and confront them. They can't watch you forever.

Hesham was less sure, but more than that, he knew the fear and hysteria at work having listened to the diaspora as he caressed their stressed out hair.

-I'm not going out there. It's war and they hate Arabs. At the very least, they'll throw me into detention and God knows it'll ruin me.

Sadie had no real fear of ruin that she knew of, other than when the Aunties tried to arrange a marriage with a distant cousin behind her back Hesham was desperately not himself. He fumbled over his cigarettes. He lost his cool demeanour even though he had recently installed a new three-way air cooling system. He frowned more than he looked. It was as if the prayer beads had come unstrung.

For a minute in time, Hesham considered returning to the old country. Then he remembered his last visit and the dusk till dawn haggling about who would make the best *aroos* for him. He knew that he would rather not revisit that scenario any time soon.

The day after, Hesham had recovered enough to regret his uncharacteristic outburst, though he did worry that the troubles were having an effect on even his most thickened of skins.

*It is a war of excesses . . . a war of shedding . . . of liquidation and fire sale . . .*¹⁰

Hesham didn't have to wait long before the police launched an all-out-assault on the Palace. He handled it like a virtual Beirut. One minute he was spraying gossamer shine over Mervat's bountiful bun. The next, Detectives Harry Holden and Dick Hunter, accompanied by four from uniform, burst in like ghostbusters through the frosted glass swing doors.

Disembodied hair went flying and swivel chairs spun round with customers still attached to them. It was like there was no tomorrow. Hesham knew that this was the mother of all busts, but remained cool. After the hair finally settled, he ventured a question.

-Who's for a treatment then? How about you habibi?

Choosing the young buck with dead straight hair, he continued.

-If you'll take a seat, I'll be with you after I clean up the chaos you've created here.

With that, Hesham assured the women in dialectical humour that they would not be killed. Holden didn't like Hesham's tone, or the code switching. Nor did Hunter. They knew Hesham's type. Full of brown attitude and gay abandon. These two beefcakes were not going to take this sort of bilingual irony lying down, especially from a hairdresser. And a Lebanese at that.

Hunter was onto Hesham in seconds putting on the machismo while Holden started opening Hesham's private compartments. The four uniforms proceeded to turn everything upside down. They were searching for something, but as they would discover, there was not much to find.

The immaculately attired Mme. Samaki started to get up but was put down immediately by Hunter.

-OK old girl, just stay where you are. No need to panic. I don't want anybody to move or to touch anything.

Hunter swaggered his Texan-like stride across the salon, fondling the decorative argyle along the way as he continued.

-It won't do you any good to try to escape. Stay peaceful and no one will get hurt.

The spiel came easily. Hunter didn't have to think about what he was saying. After all, he had repeated the same banal lines day in and day out for the best part of a decade.

-This won't take long, we'll be gone before you can say . . . *shish-kebab*.

Hunter paused before he uttered the last word. *Shish-kebab* did not belong in the usual script. He had done a quick engine room search for a culturally specific word and came upon the only term he knew. As he enunciated the shish, Hunter sprayed Mme. Samaki's haute couture with tiny globules of spit.

The women in the salon eyed-balled Dick Hunter disdainfully. Why would anyone want to escape? And what was with the language? If they felt compelled to say anything, the first utterance would have

been *jahash*. The women of Hesham's Hair Palace were hardly impressed with Dick Hunter's imputation of criminality, though some of the *banaat* thought the ladies' activities verged on the unpardonable.

Mervat was hardly going to do a runner having led the Ladies Auxiliary to regional *ba'laweh* victory for the second year in a row. And Mme. Samaki was a model citizen having been popularly elected vice-president of the Ethnic Ladies Gratitude Society for the local region. And Mrs Shoucair, the local matchmaker, could barely walk on her own, let alone jump the chair and hobble it out of there.

Hesham stood in the middle of the bedlam priming his bravado. Hunter was onto him in a flash and the first thing he asked was if he was Muslim. Hesham shot right back.

-Alhamdulillah.

Hunter moved on to Suleyman and asked him his name. Suleyman looked worried, but he always looked like that and gave Hunter an answer. Next thing, the uniforms were escorting Suleyman out for interrogation.

There is a profound scorn in the kind of "clean" war which renders the other powerless without destroying its flesh, which makes it a point of honour to disarm and neutralise but not to kill.¹¹

Hesham was beginning to sense that the authorities imagined they were about to foil an international terrorist operation. Or maybe they figured the Hair Palace was a front for a drug smuggling ring. Perhaps this was some sort of sting. Hesham scratched hard for revelation.

Meanwhile, Holden returned to the front of the salon having ripped open every box he could get his white calloused hands onto. He pushed past Hesham and started to speak as if he were to camera.

-We know that some sort of scam is operating out of here, and sooner rather than later, the evidence will emerge.

Hesham was gob-smacked at the admission.

-You mean to tell me you watch me for a week then bust in and don't know what you are looking for? Who is going to pay for all the damage? I'm sure the Ombudsman will be interested to hear about this.

The hairs on the tip of Holden's nose bristled at the mention of the Ombudsman. He hated uppity migrants who utilised the system, so allowed himself the liberty of explaining the visit in plainer English.

-We have every reason to believe that certain individuals who work here are engaged in perceived strange activity. We have one suspect in custody, and others will follow. Do you understand me?

That was about as apparent as it got, but Hesham was none the wiser. He wanted to give Holden what for, but one of the women who manicured on Tuesdays told him to *uscut!* before they all got bundled into the wagon.

The police left as quickly as they had arrived with little more than hairballs in their plastic forensic bags and Suleyman in tow. And for all the mess, what did they find? A slather of shampoo and volumes of hair straightener, and enough henna to colour a village, all the usual accoutrements found in any suburban salon.

They weren't terrorists, they were hairdressers.



IV

*I wish death had swept us all away before you were buried and mourned.*¹²

Hayat moved quietly between massacres, sheltering little more than a sigh. She often fixed herself close to walls, to listen and not to talk. In times like these, she was silent to a fault. She would rarely make

eye contact. Sometimes in the mistaken belief that this was cultural, people thought it unavoidable.

The same people were always asking mundane questions. She lived in a regular Campsie street where family and other Mediterranean kin predominated. The Aunties would sit out on the balconies waiting for the next altercation. This street had been uniformly white a stone's throw from not that long ago. A street where only the shrill rump of Anglo diehard culture remained, and where fruit trees were disallowed in the communal space. With demographic change putting downward pressure on the nature strip, olive, pomegranate, fig and lemon trees flourished, as whites took flight to the Central Coast.

Loyalist proud, the patriots who lived at the entrance of the street stayed put. Stunned-looking gnomes dotted their neat green lawn, and pink city roses drooped heavy in strict isolation. Fearful folk darted around the yard like white ants preparing for the coming storm. They did not want to engage, so no one ever did, except in times of extreme illness and sudden death. The few who remained to protect the dry imperial soil from the menace of the Mediterranean tree did not count on the tenacity of clan to take root and bear fruit.

Conflict was never far from sight. The local council was inevitably called in to treat fecund footpath trees as contraband, as the cranky red-necked woman reported the ease in which the women in black took off with the spoils of the trees. It seemed the fruit pickers were a threat to social cohesion. One low ranking official ordered an inquiry into the legality of picking street fruit for personal use and an interim report was handed down to Council.

From the moment when a public authority, a State, this or that State power, gives itself or is recognised as having the right to control, monitor, ban exchanges that those doing the exchanging deem private, but that the State can intercept since these private exchanges cross public space and become available there, then every element of hospitality gets disrupted.¹³

The Council's report did little to curb the activity. Once it was established that summer was in full swing, the pickers came out with a vengeance. Those held hostile to change watched from behind closed screens as Mediterranean women scurried off with plastic bags full of forbidden fruit. When the Council tried to cut the trees back, all manner

of women came out on the street and tied themselves to the trunks with old bits of string. After a week of minor skirmishes with a congress of nonnas, tetas and yiyas, the Council quietly conceded defeat and left the trees to the mercy of the pickers.

In time, Hayat needed a break from all this; anywhere away from the suffocating strictures of living in the suburbs. She had heard of a little island, an underworld of interchange; a place where one could roam without anyone asking where you were from. To get there, she would have to travel a distance.

Hayat sojourned for a while, but by necessity of responsibility, felt compelled to return. This made her at once melancholic. She knew the game was up. She would eventually have to speak. The thought of it made her stomach turn like the sea caught in a shell of cold lingering sound. Blooded beyond the self, she had her connections of course, and it was to those she would invariably return.

The Aunties had said, what the wind brings the storm takes away.

Sea-lagged but thoughtful, Hayat ate salted fish for weeks thereafter. It never lasted long enough though. Nothing ever did but time. It was always plaguing her mind. Western standard time looping labyrinthine, forever dissipating her silences. She yielded to every waking minute. Be here. Be there. Be always there. That she was there was nothing short of a miracle.



V

*I want the aroma of coffee. I need five minutes. I want a five-minute truce for the sake of coffee. I have no personal wish other than to make a cup of coffee.*¹⁴

Post Desert Storm, Hesham's world turned upside down. From being a small-time hairdresser, he had graduated to urban hero when word got out about the bungled raid on the Palace. His salon had become a site of pilgrimage for the disaffected. People saw Hesham as

a symbol of latter-day migrant resistance. When he spoke on the news, it was as if he spoke for everybody. He was articulate, passionate and wasn't embarrassing. He exuded *arabitude* in his damnation of Western liberal hypocrisy. Then he sued the police for damages.

Hesham's diasporic life was nothing if not safe. In the Old Country he had struggled to find a place where he didn't have to sleep at night half awake. He had taken a degree in philosophy, then moved on to hairdressing. His salon set new trends almost immediately. But as he was finishing with al Ghazali, the world collapsed around him.

Monday morning there is a gathering of people around a Mercedes. The driver received several bullets in the head. His brains stick to the interior walls; matter adheres to matter.¹⁵

Death came down on the city leaving the chroniclers fleeing. People ran for their lives to avoid the shrapnel. Children disintegrated into limbs as bombs and bullets emptied their playgrounds. Hesham toughed it out for seven long years learning to make coffee like a Palestinian.

All the quarrels of the Arab world have their representatives here. They all participate in the carnage. The wretched and down-trodden are terrorised . . . a body seems to fall every second.¹⁶

Hesham thought he had mastered the art of living up until the Israeli incursion. During the siege, Hesham refused to leave. It was a gesture of defiance in the face of disaster. While the Israelis mercilessly bombarded the city with their hardware, everybody dashed to shelters which proved useless in the face of state-of-the-art weaponry.

Bullets crack and resonate in the amphitheatre that is Beirut. The location is perfect. The sound of the guns is echoed off the great stretched surface of the sea. Thunder mixes with the rhythmic sounds of war which purge Beirut.¹⁷

As the mortars rained down on Martyrs Square, Hesham was a man on the verge of a breakdown. Only when he thought the worst was over would another atrocity play itself out even more ferociously.

Israel's occupation of Beirut did not last long in relative terms. The invaders did not count on the determination of ordinary Beirutis or the underground resistance for that matter. But right-wing Christian Lebanese collusion with the Israeli military in the massacre of Palestinians in the camps of Sabra and Shatila was what would remain raw for eternity.

Enraged by the assassination of their man Gemayal, Lebanese Phalangists entered the refugee camps and in their usual display of violent sectarian frenzy, killed thousands under the watchful eye of the Israelis. Perched on top of the buildings surrounding the camps, the strongmen provided white phosphorus flares so the Phalangists could happily murder into the night.

Hesham could barely bring himself to cut hair after that September. The Israelis and their Lebanese collaborators had gutted the last remnants of sanity. Those who could flee took to the hills and then disappeared into the diaspora. Women who buried their children became living corpses. Poets killed themselves in the morning asking time-honoured questions.

*did her skin smell
of zaatar her hair
of exploded almonds¹⁸*

Hesham tried to remain steadfast, but his salon ended up as collateral damage. He was not there at the time having decided to take an unusually late coffee. Feeling an almighty explosion from the far corner of the cafe, he instinctively got under the table.

The most elementary fear of pain prevents me from participating in this battle. Kidnapping of passers-by and torture become daily events. Women stay at home more than ever.¹⁹

Hesham nursed interminable grief at having abandoned his city at a time when she needed him most. He wore it in his demeanour. He could no longer bear to watch the city collapse under the weight of this brutality. He decided to leave for Sydney.



VI

*inhaling strawberries through argelas
we've become a people of
living room politics and tobacco
stained teeth painfully
reminding each other
reciting quranic verse
and um kolthum scripture
oh how jasmine can
fill your head on a clear night and
mint tea dawned you to morning²⁰*

As soon as Hesham set foot in the New Country, he knew this was not the place he had imagined. It was full of hostility and unseasonably cool given it was the middle of summer. His accent did not help. Hesham had thought to re-immersing himself in the refuge of philosophy, but found the whole experience of migration so debilitating, he couldn't brook the idea of thinking about anything.

His return to the salon gave him cause to get on with living. As a hairdresser, he had accomplished much in Beirut. It seemed that hairdressers in the New Country really lacked an understanding of the complexities of diasporic hair. Hesham knew he had found his calling. Before too long, women from any number of villages heard of his skill and came to offer up their hair. Straight men naturally avoided him.

At the salon, girls and women learn to transform their bodies – through hair care, waxing, manicuring, pedicuring, facials, and so forth – into socially valued, culturally specific, and race-determining displays of femininity.²¹

Hesham's genius for identity transgression was talk of the town by the time he could afford to open his own salon. He had tried to get a loan guarantee from a distantly rich cousin who had made his fortune in the Gulf in the heady oil producing days of the seventies. But Fahd was somewhere in Texas chasing blondes and doing arms deals. Hesham had been unhappily working in the salon of Sheikh Pierre and could no longer tolerate the rank workplace conditions in which he had found himself. He was forced to go to the bank and pay interest like everyone else.

Hesham's newly opened Hair Palace fast became a site for hair straightening and a dynamic socialising agent. He built up a clientele not unlike the mix he had serviced in Beirut before the explosive cleavage shattered his city. From the glamour girls of the south to the matrons of the north, all sorts of styles and stacks walked in and out of Hesham's Hair Palace.

*Bad hair is hair that is perceived to be tightly curled, coarse, and kinky. Good hair is hair that is soft and silky, straight, wavy, or loosely curled.*²²

Every character and their kin came to visit Hesham at some point in the narrative. Hayat brought her Aunty in for a treatment. During Black September her hair turned white and she left it like that as a gesture of remembrance. George and Hesham naturally became friends, bonding over a mutual dislike of straight-gendered anything. And Sadie, well she was always there.

Sadie was legal counsel for Hesham when he took action against Sheikh Pierre, who owned a chain of hairdressing outlets across the city, employing newly-arrived migrants to maximise his profit margin. He paid a pittance and his workplace relations were pre-industrial. He was the darling of the small business fraternity and a generous donor to the dry side of conservative politics. He kept his staff fiercely casual so he didn't have to pay luxuries like sick leave and worker's compensation.

-Why should I have to pay for someone else's holiday?

Sheikh Pierre was the boss from last century. He would have employed children but they knew their rights in the New Country. It

didn't take long before Hesham was in dispute with Sheikh Pierre over unfair dismissal. Hesham stumbled upon the local community legal centre and met Sadie. She knew of Sheikh Pierre and Sons long before Hesham had come through her door. The union had tried to get the Sheikh once in the Industrial Commission, but he had contacts in the highest of places.

Meanwhile Sadie was busy working through a backlog of complaints from Gulf War casualties. She had taken up case after case of those who had been on the front line of the backlash and were litigating. There was the sixteen-year-old who was physically assaulted by a sneering body builder. Acting like Schwarzenegger's doppelganger, it took five grown women to pull the crack brute off poor Said. He sustained severe injuries including a broken arm and bruising to his kidneys. Not to mention his mental health. He didn't stand a chance against a pumped-up Aryan. Then there was the shock jock who barged into the mosque wearing jackboots and playing the national anthem on a tinny bugle. And the supervisor who ordered Fouad to shave off his beard or lose his career. Having done the right thing, he swore by his beard and was fired. They all sought out Sadie. Hesham had kept Fouad's beard well groomed, so it couldn't be because it was untidy. And there was the litany of complaints that fell through the cracks: denial of services, everything from rental accommodation to not insuring Arab businesses. But mostly, Sadie dealt with women. She had a dozen cases of unfairly dismissed women waiting at her door. They had refused to remove their scarves having been told they were in violation of the national dress code. The line was endless. Sadie had enough work to keep her busy at least till the beginning of the next Gulf War.



VII

*From the wealthy down to the fellah, the festivities are wonderful and bountiful: but what happens afterwards?*²³

Every occasion has its fracas and George's sister's wedding was no different. First Hemami tried to put salt on the bride's shoes, then the rains came. Hemami was always getting underfoot with her bag of salt, speaking in crypto-sentences. It was as if she only had memory for words, syntax lost to the forces of dislocation.

But this day Hemami was barely tolerated in the bedlam of bride worship. So she went outside to sprinkle salt on the patron saints instead. She uttered a prayer to Saint George and vanished into thin air. She had a habit of disappearing at a moment's notice. Sometimes she went missing for days. But she would always turn up at someone's house to remind this one or that one of their duty of care. She was always testing to see who had assimilated outside the village square. If Hemami was ever turned away, it always got back to the old country and there was hell to pay.

*She is the stranger; yet as the orphan, the widow, and the hungry, she is also the one who judges me on the basis of my responsibility to her.*²⁴

The wedding party eventually found Hemami at the house of the groom. She was sticking a piece of dough onto his back step to see if the marriage would endure. She would naturally inform the bride's family. Hemami knew her business and despite all the snide commentary, she remained indifferent to the slights and insults of the modern immigrant.

By the time the bridal crew arrived at the church, the storm had all but passed, but it left its mark. Dresses of rain stained crushed taffeta were hardly good fashion moments; neither was bridal hair all but frizzed over. George was joyful that this was the last of her sisters' weddings. She hated the vaudeville of marriage. But this was of little import considering what was about to pass. An obscure family feud threatened to wreak havoc on the unsuspecting groom. At the very moment the priest was about to perform the last blessing, in walked Um Charbel, disrupting the conjugal proceedings. She was livid. Her son had been cuckolded. She and the bride's mother had made a pact that their children would marry when they were both born. A broken engagement was not to be taken lightly. Pride demanded that the disaffected mother curse the bride. The priest fearing an internecine melee offered to dissolve the prior arrangement. But Um Charbel was

not to be denied. She threw spittle at the bride. George's sister immediately went into a catatonic state. Her face stretched upwards, her body stiffened downwards. The perplexed groom tried to lay his virtual wife gently on the altar steps, but she kept slipping away. No one could bring the frozen bride around even though just about everyone tried. Women ran from the church flagellating wildly. Hemami was called in, but even she couldn't shift the bride's freeze frame. The priest was furious. He didn't like cursing in his church. He decried the superstition that plagued his congregation. What about God? Where did blind faith fit in the new country? No one knew exactly how the bride came to, but Hemami was seen dragging Um Charbel by her rosary beads down the aisle. The bride finally woke once again, no thanks to Um Charbel and her son. The priest finished the service abruptly, refusing to bless the children after the ceremony. George's sister had no recollection of what went on at the altar.

The Granada Inn was the preferred place for weddings and other communal celebrations. Tribes of people would parade across the floor as clan scouted for spare tables to accommodate the always flourishing family. It was not uncommon that a few extras might drift in. There was not much you could do if cousin's cousin was visiting all the way from the old country.

George and Sadie's families came from neighbouring villages. Sadie's second cousin had married George's sister, so ipso facto they were now related. Hayat found a quiet place at a corner table away from the main action. She watched as clan greeted each other twice on the cheek. Eluding lips was the real trick to this. The air kissers were out with a vengeance this summer. Centuries of kissing customs had left women no alternative but to take culture into their own hands. Air kissing was more and more routine in these times, necessitated seemingly forever by the age-old dilemma, of greeting everyone without ever putting anyone's nose out of joint.

The more the room filled up, the louder everyone pitched conversation. Women walked almost convincingly in heels pumped so high that many a bouffant ended up in the chandelier. Men, suited in their black and browns, sometimes in safaris, wasted no time in breaking open bottles of Johnny Walker, pulling out bellies big to pontificate on the price of tomatoes. Alert children, escaping the aunty brigades of cheek pinching and soft skin biting, roared in fright across the space taking off with bonbonniere before anyone had a chance to recollect what rightly belonged to them.

The wedding was much like any other. The injudicious matchmaking behind the cover of the pink serviette always took precedence over and above the day's proceedings. George was always the most obvious target. She wore it like a badge of honour.

Instead of working within the frame of the new world woman, George chose to be *hassan sabi*, and ended up with the whole village on her back for her troubles. Unlike Sadie who managed to perfect the art of the dutiful daughter, George didn't give a fig what the Aunties demanded.

It is simply impossible to imagine an Arab wedding deprived of belly dancing. Belly dancing is the highlight of the wedding, though today it is usually performed by a professional dancer. Yet guests and relatives do not leave it at that; once everyone hears the music, they want to perform their own dance.²⁵

As Hesham was about to launch into his queer tales of Beirut, the music changed tempo and out came the white belly dancer. Women were almost uniform in their responses. Some grabbed their cigarettes and made a quick run for the exit. Others made a strategic grab for their lipsticks and headed to the toilet. The stoics who stayed in their seats gazed ahead trying not to encourage any more of a spectacle.

Sahara was oblivious to the cultural manoeuvring. As she dropped her lily-white hips to the floor and dangled her breasts for the men and the lights, she launched straight into the business that was belly dancing.

This was the time of night when the women would catch up and the *banaat* would sneak off for a quick snog far from the eyes of *amo*. But Samira was not going to have any focus-pulling at her cousin's daughter's wedding. She climbed up onto her chair and onto the table. She liked to disrupt the line between spectator and performer as culture naturally avowed. As plates of soggy tabouli and fridge-cold lamb's brains went crashing to the floor, women openly encouraged her, ululating wildly.

Though the smile remained on Sahara's face, her discomfort was plainly evident as she tried to get the attention of Farouk, the function centre manager. Samira was up on the table in performative glory, and Sahara was left on the floor looking amateur.

Children ran into the toilets and outside screaming,

-Yallah, Aunty Samira's on the table!

Women dropped their lipsticks and cigarettes quick to rush back and partake in the spectacle. Samira knew how to shake it up, but more importantly, when her sense of irony was intact, she knew how to upstage a belly dancer. By now the tables were crowded full of clan women dancing to the song that they knew better than any.

Meanwhile, Farouk was rushing from table to table trying to contain the orgy of women, but the oestrogen was pumping and he was in for the impossible. He made the fatal mistake of trying to get Samira down and when push came to shove, Farouk was the one who wore the last of the mezze.

Sahara retained her signature pose, though was on the verge of spitting the dummy. After the Arabs had their fun, she finished her routine, albeit awkwardly, but by then nobody was interested, except the pre-pubescent and the needlessly desperate. And we all belong to them.

Sahara was livid at her treatment at the hands of the Arab women. She believed she was targeted because she was Western. She felt vilified by slurs of rank orientalism. She was out of her depth in their critique of her profession. But this was not the first time she had come into conflict with the prefects of post-colonialism. She had got into almighty trouble for speaking about Arabic culture at an arts forum. In another incident, she was heckled by an angry mob of women at a multicultural convention. They told her to go back to her own culture. And at spring *carnivale*, she was made to feel decidedly unwelcome. She was affronted by their hostile reception. They seemed to have a withering contempt for all things Western.

Sahara presumed that if it weren't for belly dancers, Middle Eastern dance would be dead. Like Latin.

Speaking for oneself was all very well, but for Sahara, the far more important question to be posing was,

-Can the subaltern dance?

NOTES

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- ² Fatima bint Mohammed, in *Classical Poems By Arab Women*, ed. Abdullah Al-Udhari (London: Saqi Books, 1999): 64.
- ³ Khansa, in *Classical Poems By Arab Women*, ed. Abdullah Al-Udhari (London: Saqi Books, 1999): 60.
- ⁴ Afira Bint Abbad in *Classical Poems By Arab Women*, ed. Abdullah Al-Udhari (London: Saqi Books, 1999): 32.
- ⁵ Suheir Hammad, *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (New York and London: Harlem River Press, 1996): 72.
- ⁶ Ghassan Hage, "At Home in the Entrails of the West" in *Home/World: Space and Marginality in Western Sydney*, eds. Helen Grace, Ghassan Hage, Lesley Johnson, Julie Langsworth, and Michael Symonds (Sydney: Pluto Press, 1997): 112.
- ⁷ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994): 21.
- ⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. Paul Patton (Sydney: Power Publications, 1995): 64.
- ⁹ Ginetta E.B. Candelario, "Hair Race-ing: Dominican Beauty Culture and Identity Production," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, 1, no. 1 (Autumn 2000): 129.
- ¹⁰ Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, 33.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 40.
- ¹² bint Mohammed, in *Classical Poems By Arab Women*, 68.
- ¹³ Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000): 51.
- ¹⁴ Mahmoud Darwish, *Memory for Forgetfulness: August, Beirut, 1982* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995): 7.
- ¹⁵ Etel Adnan, *Sitt Marie Rose* (Sausalito, CA: Post-Apollo Press, 1982): 12.
- ¹⁶ Adnan, *Sitt Marie Rose*, 12.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.
- ¹⁸ Suheir Hammad, *Zaatar Diva* (New York: Cypher, 2005): 75.
- ¹⁹ Adnan, *Sitt Marie Rose*, 13.
- ²⁰ Hammad, *Born Palestinian, Born Black*, 32
- ²¹ Candelario, "Hair Race-ing: Dominican Beauty Culture and Identity Production," 135.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 137.

²³ Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (New York: The Orion Press: 1965), 84.

²⁴ Drucilla Cornell, "The 'Postmodern' Challenge to the Ideal of Community," in *The Philosophy of the Limit* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 53.

²⁵ Rosina-Fawzia Al-Rawi, *Grandmother's Secrets: The Ancient Rituals and Healing Power of Belly Dancing* (New York: Interlink Books, 2003), 147.